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**WAKEUP! WAKEUP! WAKEUP!**

## White Privilege

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In critical race theory, white privilege is a way of conceptualizing racial inequalities that focuses as much on the advantages that white people accrue from society as on the disadvantages that people of color experience. Most such theories focus on American and European societal condition, since inequality between whites and non-whites is a long-standing feature of these academic areas. White privilege differs from conditions of overt racism or prejudice, in which a dominant group actively seeks to oppress or suppress other racial groups for its own advantage. Instead, theories of white privilege suggest that whites view their social, cultural, and economic experiences as a norm that everyone should experience, rather than as an advantaged position that must be maintained at the expense of others. This normative assumption implicitly constrains discussions of racial inequality within the dominant discourse: such explanations are limited to factors specific to disadvantaged racial groups — who are viewed as having failed to achieve the norm — and solutions focus on what can be done to help those groups achieve the 'normal' standards experienced by whites.

In essence, theories of white privilege assert that discourses on racial inequality do not truly discuss differences between white and non-white social status, but only discuss the failure of non-white groups to achieve normal social status, effectively turning race into an issue that does not involve whites. In this sense, it is similar to confirmation biases and the fundamental attribution error in social psychology.

The general claim of theories of white privilege is that racial inequity cannot be resolved solely by looking at the life conditions of disadvantaged groups. They suggest that solutions to problems of racial inequality can only be achieved by explicitly discussing the implicit advantages that whites as a group hold in society.

## Overview



Scholars within the legal studies field of critical race theory, such as Cheryl Harris and George Lipsitz, have argued that "whiteness" has historically been treated more as a form of property than as a racial characteristic: In other words, as an object which has intrinsic value that must be protected by social and legal institutions. Laws and mores concerning race (from apartheid and Jim Crow constructions that legally separate different races to social prejudices against interracial relationships or mixed communities) serve the purpose of retaining certain advantages and privileges for whites. Because of this, academic and societal ideas about race have tended to focus solely on the disadvantages suffered by racial minorities, overlooking the advantageous effects that accrue to whites.

Within an educational context, Dan J. Pence and J. Arthur Fields observe resistance to the idea that white privilege of this type exists, and suggest this resistance stems from a tendency to see inequality as a black or Latino issue. One report noted that white students

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often react to in-class discussions about white privilege with a continuum of behaviors ranging from outright hostility to a "wall of silence." A pair of studies on a broader population by Branscombe et al. found that framing racial issues in terms of white privilege as opposed to non-white disadvantages can produce a greater degree of racially biased responses from whites who have higher levels of racial identification. Branscombe et al. demonstrate that framing racial inequality in terms of the privileges of whites increased levels of guilt among white respondents. Those with high racial identification were more likely to give responses, which concurred with modern racist attitudes than those with low racial identification. According to the studies' authors, these findings suggest that representing inequality in terms of out-group disadvantage allows privileged group members to avoid the negative implications of inequality.

Heidi A. Zetzer categorizes white privilege as an "institutional and individual manifestation of racism, however indirectly or unintentionally." Zetzer argues

the indirectness of white privilege is what makes it so prevalent. If people are not educated about white privilege, it is unlikely that they will take note of it. Whites who are aware of it suffer under the stigma of benefiting from an unfair system. Zetzer asks "How can I see myself as a just person when I willingly participate in a system that is inherently

unfair?" The guilt formed by this opinion creates a spirit of inactivity in solving the problem. "White guilt", as Zetzer deems it, is an impediment to change. Zetzer argues that honest and multicultural dialogue is the first way to build alliances, which can then "transform people and systems and turn intention into action,"



## White privilege in the United States

### History

*In his 1935 [Black Reconstruction in America](#), W. E. B. Du Bois first described the "psychological wages" of whiteness:*

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them. White schoolhouses were the best in the community, and conspicuously placed, and they cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much per capita as the colored schools. The newspapers specialized on news that flattered the poor whites and almost utterly ignored the Negro except in crime and ridicule.

This concept was later taken up by David Roediger in his 1999 book, [The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class](#). Theorists associated with the journal [Race Traitor](#), such as editor Noel Ignatiev, argue that whiteness (as a marker of a social status within the United States) is conferred upon people in exchange for an expectation of loyalty to an oppressive social order. This loyalty has taken a variety of forms over time: suppression of slave rebellions, support of whites-only unions, and promotion for police brutality. Like currency, the value of this privilege depends on the reliability of a white appearance as a marker for social consent. These theorists argue that with enough "counterfeit whites" resisting racism and capitalism, the privilege of whiteness will be withdrawn and prompt an era of social redefinition. Without such a period, they argue, progress towards social justice is impossible.

The theory of White privilege in America may be seen as having its roots in the system of legalized discrimination that existed for much of American history. In her book, *Privilege Revealed: How Invisible Preference Undermines America*, Stephanie M. Wildman writes that many Americans who advocate a merit-based, race-free worldview do not acknowledge the systems of privilege which have benefited them. For example, many Americans rely on a social or financial inheritance from previous generations, an inheritance unlikely to be forthcoming if one's ancestors were slaves. Whites were sometimes afforded opportunities and benefits that were unavailable to others. In the middle of the 20th century, the government subsidized white homeownership through the Federal Housing Administration, but not homeownership of other minorities. Some social scientists also suggest that the historical processes of suburbanization and decentralization are instances of white privilege that have contributed to contemporary patterns of environmental racism.

Some historians and authors, including Noel Ignatiev and Karen Brodtkin, discuss the historical trajectory from exclusion to acceptance of Irish and Jewish émigrés in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in terms of white privilege. At the end of the 20th century two sources saw a system of advantage to white people in areas such as housing, salaries, access to employment (especially to positions of power), access to education, even life expectancy.

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Sociologists in the American Mosaic Project report widespread belief in the United States that "prejudice and discrimination (in favor of whites) create a form of white privilege." According to their 2003 poll, this view was affirmed by 59% of white respondents, 83% of Blacks, and 84% of Hispanics.

## Wealth

According to Roderick Harrison "wealth is a measure of cumulative advantage or disadvantage" and "the fact that black and Hispanic wealth is a fraction of white wealth also reflects a history of discrimination". Whites have historically had more opportunities to accumulate wealth. Some of the institutions of wealth creation amongst American citizens were open exclusively to whites. Similar differentials applied to the Social Security Act (which excluded agricultural and domestic workers, sectors that then included most black workers), rewards to military officers, and the educational benefits offered to returning soldiers after World War II. An analyst of the phenomenon, Thomas Shapiro, professor of law and social policy at Brandeis University argues, "The wealth gap is not

just a story of merit and achievement, it's also a story of the historical legacy of race in the United States."



Over the past 40 years there has been less formal discrimination in America; the inequality in wealth between racial groups however, is still extant. Wealthy whites were able to pass along their wealth in the form of inheritances and transformative assets (inherited wealth which lifts a family beyond their own achievements) which continually give advantage to white Americans. Pre-existing disparities in wealth are exacerbated by tax policies that reward investment over waged income, subsidize mortgages, and subsidize private sector developers.

Thomas Shapiro argues that wealth is passed along from generation to generation, giving whites a better "starting point" in life than other races. According to Shapiro, many whites receive financial assistance from their parents allowing them to live beyond their income. This, in turn, enables them to buy houses and major assets, which aid in the accumulation of wealth. Since houses in white neighborhoods appreciate faster, even African Americans who are able to overcome their "starting point" are unlikely to accumulate wealth as fast as whites are. Shapiro asserts this is a continual cycle from which whites consistently benefit. These benefits also have effects on schooling and other life opportunities.

## Justice

A 2002 Department of Justice survey found that, although the likelihood of being stopped by police did not differ significantly between white drivers and other races, black or Latino drivers were three times more likely to be searched than white drivers were. Young white offenders are likely to receive lighter punishments than minorities in America. Black youth arrested for drug possession for the first time are incarcerated at a rate that is forty-eight times greater than the rate for white youth. Incarceration rates are much higher among blacks and Hispanics than among whites. In 2007, the incarceration rate was 4,618 per 100,000 for black men and 1,747 per 100,000 for Hispanic men, compared to 773 per 100,000 for white men.

Author and activist Peggy McIntosh posits that white people in the United States can be sure that race is not a factor when they are audited by the IRS.

## Employment and economics

Racialized employment networks can benefit whites at the expense of blacks. In a study published in 2003, sociologist Deirdre A. Royster compared black and white males who graduated from the same school with the same skills. In looking at their success with

school-work transition and working experiences, she found that white graduates were more often employed in skilled trades, earned more, held higher status positions, received more promotions and experienced shorter periods of unemployment. Since all other factors were similar, the differences in employment experiences were attributed to race. Royster concluded that the primary cause of these racial differences was due to social networking. The concept of "who you know" seemed just as important to these graduates as "what you know."

Since older white males predominantly control blue-collar trades, they are more likely to offer varying forms of assistance to those in their social network, often other whites. Assistance can be anything from job vacancy information, referrals, direct job recruitment, formal and informal training, and vouching behavior and leniency in supervision. This assistance disproportionately available to whites is an advantage that often puts black men at a disadvantage in the employment sector, "these ideologies provide a contemporary deathblow to working-class black men's chances of establishing a foothold in the traditional trades."

This concept is similar to the theory created by Mark Granovetter, which analyzes the importance of social networking and interpersonal ties with his paper "The Strength of Weak Ties", and his other economic sociology work.

Other research shows that there is a correlation between a person's name and his or her likelihood of receiving a call back for a job interview. Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan found in field experiment in Boston and Chicago that people with "white-sounding" names are 50% more likely to receive a call back than people with "black-sounding" names, despite equal résumé quality between the two racial groups. White Americans are more likely than black Americans to have their business loan applications approved, even when other factors such as credit records are comparable.

Black and Latino college graduates are less likely than white graduates to end up in a management position even when other factors such as age, experience, and academic records are similar.

## Housing

Discrimination in housing policies was formalized in 1934 under the Federal Housing Act, which provided government credit to private lending for home buyers. Within the Act, the Federal Housing Agency had the authority to channel all the money to white home buyers instead of minorities. The FHA also channeled money away from inner-city neighborhoods after World War II and instead placed it in the hands of white home buyers who would move into segregated suburbs. These practices and others, intensified attitudes of segregation and inequality.



But "most white families have acquired their net worth from the appreciation of property that they secured under conditions of special privilege in a discriminatory housing market." This net worth accumulation assists in placing whites in conditions that are more favorable to receive low interest loans, mortgages and financial assistance in the housing market.



Chip Smith paints a quick picture of some additional ways he views whites as privileged:

- Whites are offered more choices; 60%–90% of housing units shown to whites are not brought to the attention of blacks.
- 72.1% of whites own their own home opposed to 48.1% for African Americans
- 46% of whites had help from their family in making down payments on homes compared to 12% for African Americans
- Whites are half as likely to be turned down for a mortgage or home improvement loan
- Whites pay on average a 8.12% interest rate on their mortgage, lower than the 8.44% African Americans pay on average
- The median home equity for whites is \$58,000 compared to \$40,000 for African Americans

## Education

According to Wildman, education policies in the US have contributed to the construction and reinforcement of white privilege. Wildman argues that even schools that appear to be integrated often segregate students based on abilities. This can increase white students' initial educational advantage, magnifying the "unequal classroom experience of African American students" and minorities.

It is argued that the material that black and other minority children are tested on in school is often culturally biased, not taking into consideration dialect and other differences between populations. Williams and Rivers (1972b) showed that test instructions in Standard English disadvantaged the black child and that if the language of the test is put in familiar labels without training or coaching, the child's performances on the tests increase significantly. According to Cadzen a child's language development should be evaluated in terms of his progress toward the norms for his particular speech community. Other studies using sentence repetition tasks found that, at both third and fifth grades, white subjects repeated Standard English sentences significantly more accurately than black subjects, while black subjects repeated nonstandard English sentences significantly more accurately than white subjects.

According to Janet E. Helms, traditional psychological and academic assessment is based on skills that are considered important within white, western, middle-class culture, but which may not be salient or valued within African-American culture. When tests' stimuli are more culturally pertinent to the experiences of African Americans, performance improves. However, white privilege critics argue that in K-12 education, students' academic progress is measured on nation-wide standardized tests which reflect national standards.

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Educational inequality is also a consequence of housing. Since most states determine school funding based on property taxes, schools in wealthier neighborhoods receive more funding per student. As home values in white neighborhoods are higher than minority neighborhoods, local schools receive more funding via property taxes. This will ensure better technology in predominantly white schools, smaller class sizes and better quality teachers, giving white students opportunities for a better education. The vast majority of schools placed on academic probation as part of district accountability efforts are majority African-American and low-income. However, Congress enacted the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 to address such school performance disparities. That act provides for a large increase in federal school aid to address property tax disparities and gives parents the right to switch schools if their neighborhood school fails to progress to meet national performance standards.

Inequalities in wealth and housing allow a higher proportion of white parents the option to move to better school districts or afford to put their children in private schools if they don't approve of the neighborhood's schools.

Minority students are less likely to be placed in honors classes, even when justified by test scores. Visible minority students are more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled from school, even though rates of serious school rule violations do not differ significantly by race. Adult education specialist Elaine Manglitz argues the educational system in America has deeply-entrenched biases in favor of the white majority in evaluation, curricula, and power relations.

Conservative scholar and opponent of affirmative action programs, Shelby Steele at the Hoover Institution, believe that the effects of white privilege are exaggerated. Steele argues that irresponsibility is a larger problem for blacks, who may incorrectly blame their personal failures on white oppression. He also argues that there are many "minority privileges": "If I'm a black high school student today... there are white American



institutions, universities, hovering over me to offer me opportunities: Almost every institution has a diversity committee...There is a hunger in this society to do right racially, to not be racist."



Beverly Daniel Tatum writes that most white people do not think to describe themselves as "white" when listing descriptive terms about themselves, whereas people of color usually use racial or ethnic identity descriptors. Tatum suggests this is because the elements of one's identity that are congruent with the dominant culture are so normalized and reflected back at one that one is apt to take such traits for granted. This is not the case for identity aspects of those who are defined as "other" by the dominant culture, whether it be on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or other microcultural aspects. The true reasons behind this occurrence are unknown, but may also be due to many different unspoken psychological effects on minorities and majorities alike, whether it be pride, shame, or an environmental stimulation such as a rally. Tatum writes that dominant microcultures (in this case, white people) set the parameters in which "subordinate" microcultures operate. Subordinate groups are often labeled as substandard in significant ways: e.g., blacks have historically been characterized as less intelligent than whites. Subordinates are also defined as being innately incapable of being able to perform the preferred roles in society.

Alik Shahadah claims that the image of Africa imposed on the world are those created and controlled by white forces and that globalization is therefore in his view not only an imposition of products but also of ideas and ideals, at the expense of the broader human diversity.

The use of skin whitening treatments by people of color has been linked to the benefits of white privilege. According to several theorists, the relationship between white privilege and skin whitening is explained by colorism and colonial mentality.

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