

Exploring Whiteness and Privilege

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One topic that is sometimes left out of diversity discussions is the subject of "whiteness"—what does it mean to be "white"? In this program we'll explore the concepts of whiteness and privilege and focus on how this information can be put to use.

Question: How does "We the people" become "the beloved community"?

Privilege, particularly white or male privilege, is hard to see for those of us who were born with access to power and resources. It is very visible for those to whom privilege was not granted. Furthermore, the subject is extremely difficult to talk about because many white people don't feel powerful or as if they have privileges that others do not. It is sort of like asking fish to notice water or birds to discuss air. For those who have privileges based on race or gender or class or physical ability or sexual orientation or age, it just is—it's normal. (Understanding White Privilege by Frances E. Kendall) http://www.alumni.berkeley.edu/Students/Leadership/Online_LRC/Diversity_Center/Understanding_White_Priveledge.asp

and

Being white means never having to think about it. James Baldwin said that many years ago, and it's perhaps the truest thing ever said about race in America. That's why I get looks of bewilderment whenever I ask, as I do when lecturing to a mostly white audience: "what do you like about being white?" Never having contemplated the question, folks take a while to come up with anything. (Membership Has Its Privileges by Tim Wise) http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/16_04/Memb164.shtml

Making Privilege Visible (Kimmel, 2002)

To be white or straight, or male, or middle class is to be simultaneously ubiquitous and invisible. You're everywhere you look, you're the standard against which everyone else is measured. You're like water, like air. People will tell you they went to see a "woman doctor," or they will say they went to see "the doctor." People will tell you they have a "gay colleague" or they'll tell you about "a colleague." A white person will be happy to tell you about a "black friend," but when that same person simply mentions a "friend," everyone will assume the person is white. Any college course that doesn't have the word "woman" or "gay" or "minority" in the title is, de facto, a course about men, heterosexuals, and white people. But we call those courses "literature," "history," or "political science."

What is privilege? (Wildman & Davis, 2002)

What then is privilege? We all recognize its most blatant forms, "Men only admitted to this club." "We will not allow African Americans into that school." Blatant exercises of privilege certainly exist, but they are not what most people think of as our way of life. They are only the tip of the iceberg, however. When we try to look at privilege we see several elements. First, the characteristics of the privileged group define the societal norm, often benefiting those in the privileged group. Second, privileged group members can rely on their privilege and avoid objecting to oppression. Both the conflation of privilege with the societal norm and the implicit option to ignore oppression mean that privilege is rarely seen by the holder of the privilege.

The Privileging of the Dominant Group (Goodman, 2001)

Oppression involves both systematic disadvantage and advantage. Most discussions of social injustice focus on the subjugation of oppressed groups—the ways in which they are discriminated against, marginalized, exploited, manipulated, demeaned, and physically and emotionally attacked. Less attention is given to the other part of the dynamic—the privileging of the dominant group.

Systems of Privilege (Wildman & Davis, 2002)

Although different privileges bestow common characteristics (membership in the norm, the ability to choose whether to object to the power system, and the invisibility of its benefit), the form of a privilege may vary according to the power relationship that produces it. White privilege derives from the race power system of white supremacy. Male privilege and heterosexual privilege result from the gender hierarchy. Class privilege derives from an economic wealth-based hierarchy.

Privilege Systems (Goodman, 2001)

Social oppression creates privilege systems—benefits or unearned advantages systematically afforded people from dominant groups simply because of their social group membership...Privileges do not need to be desired—we get them whether we want them or not and whether we are aware of them or not. Privileges can be both material and psychological. They can include concrete benefits as well as psychological freedoms; often, these are interrelated.

Vision, Privilege, and the Limits of Tolerance (Cris Cullinan)

Three presumptions about the dominant culture--innocence, worthiness, and competence--perpetuate privileges for this cultural group, which often go unnoticed by members of the culture.

Presumption of innocence: I know that I have dominant culture privilege because I get the presumption of innocence. When something goes wrong around me, people do not look to me first, or even second, as a probable cause of the problem.

Presumption of worthiness: A second presumption often enjoyed by those who are members of the privileged in the dominant culture is that of worthiness. By the "presumption of worthiness," I mean the presumption that I am worthy, deserving and good enough to receive attention, services, respect, and the benefit of the doubt. This presumption can operate in many different contexts. As a white, upper middle class, heterosexual who does not have a visible disability, I will be taken at face value as a good candidate for a bank loan, a desired applicant for a job, a sought-after buyer of a house, and a customer who should be served as soon as possible. This presumption is strengthened if I am with my partner, who is a similarly privileged white man.

Presumption of competence: The last presumption given to members of the dominant culture is the presumption of competence. In all of the jobs I have ever had, I was always treated as if I was competent, and then given the autonomy, encouragement, and feedback to prove it. In nearly all of the experiences I ever had or continue to have as a student, I walk in and I am given the presumption of competence.

Male Privilege (Goodman, 2001)

Men have the privilege of being able to move about with less thought, worry, and constraint. (For men facing other forms of oppression—racism, classism, heterosexism, or ableism—the privilege of safety may be significantly limited.)

Heterosexual Privilege (Goodman, 2001)

Heterosexuals can freely display public affection, talk openly about their partner, have their relationship publicly acknowledged and celebrated, and be protected from discrimination. They don't need to worry whether it's all right to bring their partner to events (and then whether they can dance together); whether they'll lose their job if they're out; whether they'll be accepted by their neighbors, or whether their partner will be considered as family under hospital guidelines and thus be able to visit or make medical decisions.

Able-Bodied Privilege (Goodman, 2001)

Able-bodied people do not have to think about access to buildings—for education, cultural events, employment, or socializing; about travel—around one's own town, vacation areas, or conference sites; or about needing assistance to do basic daily tasks. They do not fear that people will assume them to be less intelligent or less productive solely because of a (possibly irrelevant) disability.

Class Privilege (Goodman, 2001)

People with class privilege have access to the best medical care; to leisure and vacations; to good housing, food, and clothing; and to governmental financial advantages (e.g., tax breaks, write-offs for mortgages). They feel entitled to be treated respectfully, to be taken seriously, and to have opportunities to use their talents. They can choose work that may be meaningful, though not well compensated, knowing they have a safety net—other marketable skills, opportunities for education, or financial resources. They can use connections to get jobs or to be admitted to college.

Class Privilege (Kimmel, 2002)

Class, however, does not (appear to be based on characteristics present at birth). In fact, class seems to feel exactly the opposite--as a status that one was not born with but that one has earned. Class is less visible than the other dimensions because while our objective position in an economic order depends on empirically measurable criteria (income, occupation, education), class as an everyday experience rests on other people's evaluation of our presentation of self... Class can be concealed and class feels like something we have earned all by ourselves. Therefore class privilege may be the one set of privileges we are least interested in examining because they feel like they are ours by right, not by birth.

Just as all forms of inequality are not the same, all forms of privilege are not the same.
(Kimmel, 2002)

Why Don't Dominant Groups See Privilege as a Problem? (Johnson, 2001)

- They don't know privilege exists in the first place. They're oblivious.
- They don't have to. Privilege insulates them from its consequences.
- They think privilege is just a personal problem. Individuals get what they deserve.
- They want to hang on to their privilege.
- They are prejudiced.
- They're afraid...of blame, of guilt, of rejection by their own group if they acknowledge privilege, of loss.

What Strategies Do People with Privilege Use to Get Themselves Off the Hook? (Johnson, 2001)

- Deny and minimize.
- Blame the victim.
- Call it something else.
- Claim everyone prefers the status quo.
- Claim that if it's not intended, it doesn't count.
- Profess to be "one of the good ones."
- Claim the status of victim by being "sick and tired" of hearing about privilege, power, and discrimination.

Retaining Benefits, Avoiding Responsibility--A list of tactics to avoid responsibility (Kivel, 2002)

Denial--Today we are using the tactic of denial when we say, "It's a level playing field," "Discrimination is a thing of the past," or "This is a land of equal opportunity."

Minimization--Today we continue to minimize racism by saying, "Personal achievement mostly depends on personal ability," "Racism isn't prevalent anymore," or (about slavery) "There were a lot of kind slave owners."

Blame--Today we blame people of color for racism by saying, "Look at the way they act," "If they weren't so angry..." or "They are immoral, lazy, dumb, or unambitious."

Redefinition--Today we redefine racism as a mutual problem by saying, "This country is just a big melting pot," "Anybody can be prejudiced," or "People of color attack white people too."

It was unintentional--Today we continue to claim racism is unintentional by saying, "Discrimination may happen, but most people are well intentioned." "She probably didn't mean it like that." "It was only a joke."

It's over now--Today we claim racism is all over by saying, "Slavery was over a long time ago." "The days of land grabbing are long gone." "That was before the civil rights era." "There aren't any Indians left."

It's only a few people--Today we continue to use this tactic when we say, "Housing and job discrimination are the result of a few bigoted people." "The Far Right is behind the scapegoating of immigrants." "It's only neo-Nazis and Skinheads who do that sort of thing."

Counterattack--Some white people are counterattacking today by saying, "Political correctness rules the universities." "We just want our rights too." "They want special status." "They're taking away our jobs."

Competing victimization --Some of the things we say when we claim to be victims include: "White males have rights too." "I have it just as bad as anybody." "White people are under attack."

Some Final Thoughts (Kimmel, 2002)

It's difficult and often unpleasant to acknowledge that all the good things that have happened to you are not simply the result of your hard work and talent and motivation but the result of something over which you had no power.

This realization, in turn, often leaves us feeling powerless, impotent. We can become mired in guilt. Some people argue that guilt is a negative emotion, and that we shouldn't have to feel guilty for the things that happened generations--even centuries--ago.

Yet guilt may be an appropriate, even necessary feeling--for a while...If our guilt does not freeze us in abjection, it can motivate us to transform the circumstances that made us feel guilty in the first place, to make connections between our experiences and others' and to become and remain accountable to the struggles for equality and justice around the world. Guilt can politicize us. (Perhaps that's why we often resist it?)...

Examining our privilege may be uncomfortable at first, but it can also be energizing, motivating, and engaging...

Examining those arenas in which we are privileged as well as those arenas in which we are not privileged will enable us to understand our society more fully, and engage us in the long historical process of change.

SELECTED WEB RESOURCES

White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack by Peggy McIntosh

<http://seamonkey.ed.asu.edu/~mcisaac/emc598ge/Unpacking.html>

Classic article on the topic of white privilege. This excerpted essay is reprinted from the Winter 1990 issue of "Independent School."

Vision, Privilege, and the Limits of Tolerance by Cris Cullinan

<http://www.eastern.edu/publications/emme/1999spring/cullinan.html>

Article by Cris Cullinan of the University of Oregon. From the "Electronic Magazine of Multicultural Education," Vol. 1, No. 2, September 1999.

Understanding White Privilege by Frances E. Kendall

http://www.alumni.berkeley.edu/Students/Leadership/Online_LRC/Diversity_Center/Understanding_White_Priveledge.asp

Article by a leading educator in the area of privilege.

Membership Has Its Privileges by Tim Wise

http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/16_04/Memb164.shtml

Article by Tim Wise. From "Rethinking Schools Online: An Urban Education Resource," Volume 16 No. 4-Summer 2002.

The Benefits of Being White Exercise by Paul Kivel

<http://www.starhawk.org/activism/benefits-white.html>

Exercise on white privilege that could be used in a classroom setting.

Teaching About Whiteness by Gregory Jay

<http://www.uwm.edu/~gjay/Whiteness/Teachwhiteness.html>

Suggestions for teaching about whiteness from a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Includes discussion questions and suggested activities.

More Thoughts on Why the System of White Privilege is Wrong by Robert Jensen

<http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~rjensen/freelance/whitefolo.htm>

Follow-up essay to "White Privilege Shapes the U.S." From "The Capitol Times," Vol. 2 No. 42, Austin, Texas, Published September 16, 1999

How We Are White By Gary Howard from the Southern Poverty Law Journal, "Teaching Tolerance"

<http://www.enidlee.com/white.htm>

Essay from the author of the book We Can't Teach What We Don't Know.

White Like Me by Ellen Barry

http://www.bostonphoenix.com/alt1/archive/styles/97/07/10/WHITE_LIKE_ME.html

First of an eight-part series of essays on what it means to be white. Includes links to the subsequent articles.

BOOKS & ARTICLES

Adams, M., Bell, L., & Griffin, P. (Eds.) (1997). Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook. New York: Routledge.

Adams, M., Blumenfeld, W., Castaneda, R., Hackman, H., Peters, M., & Zúñiga, X. (Eds.) (2000). Readings for diversity and social justice: An anthology on racism, antisemitism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and classism. New York: Routledge.

Goodman, D. (2001). Promoting diversity and social justice: Educating people from privileged groups. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hitchcock, J. (2001). Unraveling the white cocoon. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Johnson, A. (2001). Privilege, power, and difference. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Kimmel, M. (2002). Toward a pedagogy of the oppressor. Tikkun, 17 (6), 42-48.

Kivel, P. (2002). Uprooting racism: How White people can work for racial justice. (2nd ed.) Gabriola Island, BC Canada: New Society.

Schoem, D., & Hurtado, S. (Eds.). (2001). Intergroup dialogue: Deliberative democracy in school, college, community, and workplace. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Wildman, S. M., & Davis, A. D. (2002). Making systems of privilege visible. In P. S. Rothenberg (Ed.), White privilege: Essential readings on the other side of racism, 89-95. New York: Worth.

Wise, T. (2002). Membership has its privileges: Thoughts on acknowledging and challenging whiteness. In P. S. Rothenberg (Ed.), White privilege: Essential readings on the other side of racism, 107-110. New York: Worth.

Assessing the Culture of Power in Your Organization (material taken verbatim from cited source)

Kivel, P. (2004). The Culture of Power. In F. W. Hale, Jr. (Eds.), *What Makes Racial Diversity Work in Higher Education* (pp. 25-31). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

What does the culture of power look like in your organization? What does it look like in your office or area where you work? In your school or classroom? In your living room or living space? In your congregation? Where you shop for clothes? In agencies whose services you use?

The following questions can be used to identify cultures of power based on gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, age, race, language, physical ability, immigrant status, or education:

1. Who is in authority?
2. Who has credibility? Whose words and ideas are listened to with most attention and respect?
3. Who is treated with full respect?
4. Whose experience is valued?
5. Whose voices are heard?
6. Who has access to or is given important information?
7. Who talks most at meetings?
8. Whose ideas are given importance?
9. Who is assigned to or expected to take on background roles?
10. How is the space designed? Who has physical access?
11. What is on the walls?
12. What languages are used? Which are acceptable?
13. What music and food are available? Who provides them?
14. How much are different people paid? How are prices determined?
15. Who cleans up?
16. Who makes decisions?

(A variation of this chapter is available at the following website. It downloads as a PDF file.
<http://www.paulkivel.com/articles/culturepower.pdf>)