

# Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society

## White Privilege

Contributors: Kathleen J. Fitzgerald

Editors: Richard T. Schaefer

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The current era of scholarship about race has moved beyond just focusing on racial “minorities” to include Whites and their role in race relations. By definition, if there is a “race problem,” there must be more than one group involved. This shift in viewpoint has focused on what is termed the “other side of racism”: White privilege. *White privilege* refers to the series of advantages that come to White Americans in their daily lives because, typically, they have been free of the labeling, stereotyping, and discrimination, past and present, that people of color experience. If there are racial groups that face discrimination, there must be a group (or groups) that benefit from such a social arrangement, by this reasoning. This entry looks at the perspectives put forward by scholars in the area of White privilege.

Why has it taken scholars so long to focus on what they call “the other side of racism”? Some have [p. 1404 ↓ ] asserted that academics themselves are subject to prejudices and biases. A significant part of the explanation, however, may pertain to the fact that privilege, by design, is invisible. Many White people do not recognize the existence, much less the benefits and privilege, of being White.

Peggy McIntosh, one of the prominent academic theorists in this area, argues that White privilege is an “invisible knapsack” of unearned privileges that remain invisible, despite conferring advantage. White people are taught to not question this social system, which bestows benefits upon them. To question this system, she contends, is to acknowledge at a minimum that the privileged really do not live in a meritocracy.

## Understanding Privilege

How do scholars describe race privilege in U.S. society? First, they point out that society has a racial hierarchy, such that racial minorities are systematically disadvantaged, while Whites are systematically advantaged. However, that racial hierarchy coexists with multiple other hierarchies, most significantly those based upon class, sex, sexual orientation, and age, to name but a few. Within all status hierarchies, there are dominant and subordinate groups, advantaged and disadvantaged groups. Thus, an impoverished White woman, hearing her existence described as “privileged,” may find that difficult to see. The disadvantages associated with her social class and her

gender are much more obvious to her, and, indeed, privilege is somewhat relative. Researchers note that people can be oppressors within one status hierarchy, while in others they may be disadvantaged. And more than likely, most people are both at some time or another. White privilege is not always intentional, according to this research perspective; most White people do not think of themselves as being oppressive.

Second, scholars of White privilege note that White privilege shares some similarities with but is still different from *White racism*. With White privilege, White people are *unconscious* beneficiaries of this status hierarchy. White racism may refer not only to White people who are explicitly racist in their thoughts or behaviors but also to societal power relations and to an institutionalized system of privilege and oppression. In this view, privilege is part of that racist system, whether or not the beneficiaries acknowledge it to be so.

Third, in order to understand White privilege, racial theorists suggest that the privileged must examine both themselves and social institutions, from the media to religious organizations to educational institutions. The influence of this one aspect of power, White privilege, should not be underestimated. Scholars in this field urge those who are White to ask themselves in what ways being White has advantaged them. How has privilege been bestowed upon them?

Fourth, scholars of White privilege point out that membership in a privileged group has its costs. Privilege carries with it intense emotional and psychological costs for individuals, in this view, because it actually warps a person's sense of reality and values. For instance, when a White person is not hired or promoted, he or she may claim that this is the result of affirmative action rather than considering his or her actual strengths and weaknesses. Race shapes the lives and experiences of people whether they are oppressed or privileged by their racial status, in this view.

White privilege also has collective costs, according to this research perspective. Privilege grants White communities a sense of entitlement that distorts reality. Consider how collective entitlement pertains to school funding debates. A vast disparity in school funding, often along racial lines, has been documented. In Jonathan Kozol's eye-opening book, *Savage Inequalities*, White students at a wealthy suburban public high school in upstate New York insisted that they were entitled to their educational

advantages and that distributing equivalent funds to an impoverished, predominantly Black school in East St. Louis would more than likely be a waste.

## Creation of Privilege

To understand race privilege, researchers have documented the process many immigrant groups go through to establish themselves as “White,” a process that goes beyond altering the racial designation of a group. Rather, it is a process that grants them access to privilege; thus, whiteness is a sought-after, coveted status. Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Greek immigrants have not always been considered White in American society. Therefore, the formation of the White working class is racialized. For immigrants, becoming White is intricately wed to their inclusion in the working class, thus establishing their “Americanness.”

Researchers in White privilege offer a strategy that White people may use in eradicating privilege. First, they must honestly assess how privilege plays itself out in their lives, for instance, by noting that representations of Jesus as a White man are probably not based on [p. 1405 ↓] geographical and historical accuracy. Researchers in this area would argue that White privilege was operating, for example, when young, White, ex-military males were not racially profiled, and not automatically suspect, after Timothy McVeigh bombed the Murray Federal Building in Oklahoma in 1995. In contrast, many men who have attributes of Arab or Muslim appearance have been profiled since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. White privilege means that Whites are more likely to share the same racial status with teachers, supervisors, and employers because people in authority situations are more likely to be White. White privilege means that White social and culture perspectives are defined as the norms. Fundamentally, White people are privileged not to be forced to think about race, as people of color so often are.

Kathleen J.Fitzgerald

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*See also*

- [Affirmative Action in the Workplace](#)
- [Critical Race Theory](#)
- [Haole](#)
- [Irish Americans](#)
- [Privilege](#)
- [Racism](#)
- [Whiteness](#)
- [Whiteness and Masculinity](#)

### Further Readings

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