

Racism and White Privilege in the U.S.

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The Invention of Race

1 Race is a term that was created to categorize people into different social groups based on physical traits like skin color, facial features, and genetic heritage. Race is a powerful social construct—an idea that has meaning because people agree that it does—that can determine who gets benefits and advantages in society. The idea of "race" as it is used today began to take shape in the early days of the United States. As European settlers began to establish colonies in North America, the need for a system to categorize people and justify the exploitation and mistreatment of certain groups led to the invention of race to separate and define people. As a result, people started wrongly believing that white people were inherently superior to others. In essence, the idea of race supports the false belief that people who look a certain way are more likely to exhibit certain personality traits or behaviors. This prejudice—an unfair opinion or belief about a person or group based on race, sex, religion, or other identifying factors—helped support slavery and racism, creating unfair systems that still affect society today.

Bias vs. Racism

2 Racism is different from **bias**, which refers to a conscious or unconscious prejudice against an individual or group based on some aspect of their identity. In simple terms, racial bias is a belief, while racism happens when that belief leads to harmful actions or systems. For example, someone might unconsciously or consciously believe that people of color are more likely to commit crimes or be dangerous. That's biased. If a person feels nervous or unsafe when they see a Black person who appears angry, that's biased. These biases can lead to racist actions, ranging from minor behaviors to more serious offenses. For instance:

- A person crosses the street to avoid crossing paths with a group of young Black men.
- A person calls 911 to report the presence of a person of color, even though the person of color is not engaged in illegal activity.
- A jury finds a person of color guilty of a violent crime despite not having enough evidence.

3 Racism and white privilege are both connected to race, but they are not the same thing. Racism involves unfair treatment and systems that disadvantage people of color based on racial identity. It is a social system that methodically devalues and disempowers people who are regarded as inferior by a dominant group due to their race.

4 White privilege, on the other hand, refers to the unearned advantages that white people experience simply because of their skin color. In general, a **privilege** refers to a special right or advantage granted or available only to a particular person or group. White privilege, then, can be thought of as a collection of unseen, unconscious benefits held exclusively by white people. But it is also a more complex concept that is both a result of racism and a factor that contributes to its continuation, as well as a present-day influence on systemic decisions. Understanding white privilege in this way highlights systems of inequality that affect people's daily lives in ways that are often overlooked or taken for granted. To truly recognize white privilege, it is necessary to understand its history and the continued power it has in society today.

Defining White Privilege

5 White privilege is *not* the suggestion that white people do not struggle, or that they simply have everything handed to them. For instance, just because a person is white does not mean they are wealthy or always enjoy the privileges that money can provide, such as food security, access to health care, or access to quality education.

6 Furthermore, white privilege does not imply that white people's accomplishments are unearned; most white people still have to work very hard to achieve high levels of success. Rather than viewing white privilege as strictly related to a person's income or social status, it should be thought of as a built-in advantage. In other words, it is as if white people sometimes have a "head start" in terms of their access to power or resources when compared to people of color in the same situations.

Whiteness as the Default

7 White privilege entails the expectation that society caters to the needs of white people by default. Examples of this can include seemingly harmless, everyday conveniences:

- The bandages in a first-aid kit are "flesh-colored," but they only match a person's flesh tone if they have white skin.
- The hair care aisle contains products that tend to cater to thin, straight hair, while products that cater to dense, curly hair tend to be located in the smaller, separate "ethnic hair care" section.
- The grocery store tends to stock food options that represent white people's cultural traditions, while food items from other cultures can be much more difficult to find or much more expensive.

8 While these examples may seem trivial, there is something deeper beneath the surface. Why do public spaces seem to cater goods and services toward one particular race over another? If specific goods and services that serve non-white people are sectioned off and relegated to smaller, less available spaces, it begs the question of why those people's needs are less valued by society.

9 In this sense, white privilege means that a white person's needs can be easily met because they are considered "normal" or the "default." By contrast, a person of color navigates the world with the expectation that their needs are on the margins, which can have physical, social, and psychological consequences.

White Privilege and Benefit of the Doubt

10 White privilege also exists in many other sectors of society. For instance, white people are more likely to see positive examples of people who look like them in media portrayals: on the news, on TV shows, and in movies. In business or personal interactions, they are more likely to be treated as individuals regardless of whether they succeed or fail at something, rather than having their failures attributed to their race or having their successes attributed to being exceptions from their race. They are more likely to be believed, to be given second chances, and to be assumed innocent rather than guilty. In other words, they are more often humanized and granted the benefit of the doubt.

11 By contrast, without this privilege, people of color face the consequences of racial profiling, stereotypes, and a lack of compassion for their struggles. In this context, white privilege often manifests in the following ways:

- White people are less likely to be considered "suspicious" and therefore less likely to be followed around a store by an employee or searched by law enforcement while behaving lawfully.
- White people are more likely to be trusted financially, such as being allowed to take out a large loan or make an expensive purchase on credit.
- If a white person is accused of a crime, they are more likely to be presumed innocent or to receive a lesser sentence if found guilty.

12 Conversely, people of color are more likely to be racially profiled. An example of how this manifests is that people of color are arrested for drug offenses at higher rates despite using drugs at a similar rate to white people. Some people do not survive these stereotypes. In 2017, people of color who were unarmed and not attacking anyone were more likely to be killed by police. Those who do survive instances of racial profiling—be they subtle or violent—do not escape unaffected. They often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, which can in turn affect their friends, families, and immediate communities.

13 It is supposedly an American ideal to assume that a person is innocent before they are proven guilty, but this privilege is not often granted to people of color. Similarly, it is supposedly a human ideal to extend compassion toward another person because they are a human being, but this privilege is often denied to people of color.

14 White people do not "earn" this disproportionate access to compassion and fairness. They receive it as the byproduct of systemic racism and bias. Even if they are not aware of it in their daily lives as they walk along the streets, this privilege is the result of conscious choices made long ago and those that are still being made today.

Systemic Racism and White Privilege

15 Some people argue that white privilege is not just about unconscious bias, but also about the conscious choices made by white people to maintain their power. In other words, these privileges are not the result of individual effort, but of systemic racial inequality that has been built into American society over time.

16 Systemic racism refers to the ways in which racial prejudice is built into the policies, practices, and structures of institutions like schools, businesses, and the legal system. It creates disadvantages for people of color by treating them unfairly or denying them equal opportunities. For example, factors such as racial profiling, disparities in sentencing, and unequal access to quality legal representation contribute to the disproportionate incarceration rates of Black and Latinx/Hispanic populations in the United States.

17 As another example, when white business leaders choose not to hire many people of color, they create more economic opportunities for themselves, keeping the power imbalance intact. This ability to control the system is a form of white privilege, and it continues today. In many areas—like government, business, and education—white people still make decisions (such as laws, hiring practices, and disciplinary actions) that reinforce this cycle.

18 The perpetuation of this cycle can also be seen in the ability to accumulate wealth—a privilege created by overt, systemic racism in both the public and private sectors. This ability relies largely on inheritance—wealth passed from one generation to the next. And that wealth often comes in the form of inherited homes with value. When white families are able to accumulate wealth because of their earning power or home value, they are more likely to support their children into early adulthood, helping with expenses such as college education, first cars, and first homes. The cycle continues.

19 This is a privilege denied to many families of color, a denial that started with the work of public leaders and property managers. After World War II, racist zoning laws segregated towns and cities with sizable populations of people of color—from Baltimore to Birmingham, from New York to St. Louis, from Louisville to Oklahoma City, to Chicago, to Austin, and in cities beyond and in between.

20 As a result, people of color were not able to raise their children and invest their money in neighborhoods with "high home values." The cycle continues today, with approximately 25 percent of Black Americans who live in poverty living in high-poverty neighborhoods. Meanwhile, only about 7 percent of impoverished white Americans live in high-poverty neighborhoods.

- 21 The inequities compound. To this day, more than 80 percent of poor Black students attend a high-poverty school, where suspension rates are often higher, and resources are often more limited. Once out of school, obstacles remain. Economic forgiveness and trust still have racial divides. In a University of Wisconsin study, 17 percent of white job applicants with criminal histories got calls back from an employer; only 5 percent of Black applicants with criminal histories got calls back.
- 22 In this context, white privilege means not having to overcome a history of laws that explicitly target racial minorities to keep them out of neighborhoods and deny them access to wealth, services, and opportunities. The past and present context of wealth inequality serves as but one example of the injustices—the unfair treatment and violations of rights—that Black communities endure because of systemic racism.

Conclusion

- 23 Even if not every white person directly participates in the unfair treatment that can result from judging someone based on their race, their biases, as well as the fact that they are not normally subjected to the same type of mistreatment, lead many white people to remain silent when they witness racism. In this way, silence itself becomes a form of privilege and a powerful part of the problem. This is why historically, many white people have acted as **bystanders** in the face of injustice. A bystander is a person who observes unacceptable behavior but does not take action to stop or prevent it. The very choice of whether to take action or remain silent is an inherent part of white privilege because it is not an option that is available to those who are associated with certain characteristics because of their race—they are already involved, whether they choose to be or not, because of how others automatically perceive them.
- 24 White privilege is not just the power to find what you need in a store or to move through the world without your race defining your interactions. It's not just the subconscious comfort of living in a world that caters to your needs by default. It's also the power to remain silent as a bystander in the face of racial inequity. It's the power to weigh the need for protest or confrontation against the discomfort or inconvenience of speaking up. It's getting to choose when and where you want to take a stand. It's knowing that you and your humanity are safe.
- 25 The complex truth is that white privilege works both ways: it is unconsciously enjoyed by some, but also consciously upheld by others. It exists both visibly and in deeper, hidden ways in American society. It can feel invisible to those who benefit from it, but it can also be used intentionally as a tool of power. The impact of white privilege depends on who holds it.