

THE EQUIANO PROJECT

WHITE PRIVILEGE

INTRODUCTION

The idea of white privilege is that white people, as members of an ethnic majority group, enjoy unearned advantages over non-white groups within society.

The argument became prominent following a 1989 essay by the American academic Peggy McIntosh. The existence of white privilege is used to explain the racial disparities in life outcomes between racial groups.

The reduction of white privilege is prescribed as one possible means for lessening those disparities. Critics of the idea claim that it is a divisive argument that misdiagnoses the cause of racial disparities at the expense of increasing racial tensions, while also glossing over instances of disparity in which non-white groups outperform whites.

ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF "WHITE PRIVILEGE"

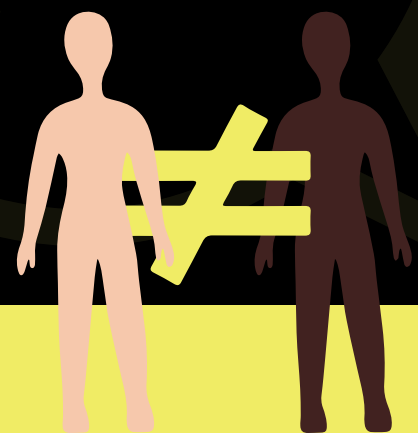
The white privilege argument holds that white people in Western countries possess unearned advantages that non-white groups do not. Therefore, white privilege is also framed as a set of positive advantages.

White people are not inconvenienced, impeded or discriminated against on the basis of their race. While a white person's life might be hard, it is a privilege that their skin colour has not contributed to their hardships.

As members of the majority culture, white people gravitate towards people like themselves and are included in social networks that non-white people are not.

The most contentious version holds that white people are guilty of ignoring the hardships of non-white groups while enjoying the privileged position of being the beneficiaries of a status quo rigged in their favour.

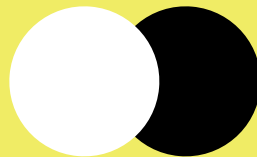
The existence of white privilege is used as an explanation for continued racial disparities in



societies where racial discrimination is illegal and overt racism is taboo. Most Western societies were racist societies in the past and the legacies of slavery, discriminatory laws and imperial policies influence our racial disparities. White people benefitted from these outcomes at the time and subsequent generations have inherited these benefits. For example, white people in the US have considerably more generational wealth (e.g. inheritance) than black people. Historical structural racism matters, even if societies now prohibit racial discrimination, and it is a privilege to be born as the recipient of these benefits.

“White privilege” is said to take the form of being part of the in-group and having access to social networks. Non-white groups are said to be underrepresented in the arts, media, politics, company boardrooms and so on because they are rejected in favour of people who look like the majority white group. Humans suffer from “affinity bias”—we treat people we see as ourselves better than others—and one of our principal affinities, so the argument goes, is our race. Non-white people are limited in their opportunities because they are not participants in “white culture,” and are hence subject to an invisible barrier by self-selecting white people.

One potentially productive means for improving the lives of ethnic minorities is for white people to “check” or give up their privilege. Even if a white person does not hold racist attitudes themselves, they still benefit from a society structured to aid people like them. At its most banal, checking one’s privilege can just mean learning more about other peoples’ cultures and different life experiences, and ensuring that the white majority does not act in biased ways against ethnic minorities. More radical ideas include white people accepting that, as mentioned by Ibram X. Kendi’s, “the only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination” in favour of minorities against privileged white people.



CRITICISMS OF THE “WHITE PRIVILEGE” ARGUMENT

Criticising the concept of white privilege does not entail denying that racial discrimination exists in the UK but it is to argue that the concept might not be helpful. It is not a privilege to be treated fairly but a right that we all share as humans. To describe not being racially discriminated against as a privilege implies the situation would be improved if white people lost this privilege and were discriminated against.

The white privilege explanation of racial disparities has been criticised for providing a monocausal explanation for racial disparities that ignores the complexity of our socio-economic reality. All “white” people are supposedly privileged, irrespective of their class and geographical location. This groups together people with very different lives in a category that might only be applicable to some of them. There are major differences and disparities within the white population and having white skin does not provide protection from social and economic woes. Conversely, some critics reject





the characterisation of all ethnic minorities as helpless victims who are unavoidably oppressed by white society and who can only be helped if white people change their behaviour.

The white privilege claim is challenged by the existence of racial disparities in which non-white groups outperform the white majority group. In the UK,

for example, Britons of Indian and Chinese backgrounds outperform all other groups in terms of several key economic measures, such as levels of income. Similarly, the joint worst performing group in Britain's schools are white boys on free school meals (sometimes described as white working class boys), who are also the group least likely to attend university. The focus on "white privilege" detracts attention from how certain non-white racial groups have succeeded while also abandoning underprivileged white Britons to their fate. However, critics would counter this by saying groups can succeed in spite of racism. Therefore, the economic and social advancement of some non-white groups doesn't mean it isn't easier for white people more broadly.

From a more traditional Marxist perspective, the concept of "white privilege" illustrates our shift away from feeling solidarity with others in terms of class and towards race and culture.

The white privilege argument is accused of undermining social cohesion. The emphasis is placed on our racial identities at the expense of our shared identities, while society is framed as characterised by the competing interests of homogenous racial groups. The claim that white people are hoarding social advantages might discourage ethnic minorities from participating in society to their fullest.

Another possible unintended consequence of stressing white privilege is increasing the sense of alienation felt by many white people who are not well-off and who might balk at being told they are privileged. This might even lead to a strengthened sense of common identity amongst white people, further fracturing society into racial groups viewed as being in competition.

The proponents and critics of "white privilege" often attribute dubious motivations to the other side. These arguments are rarely edifying. Critics of "white privilege" are described, for example, as suffering from "white fragility," or the inability to acknowledge that as a white person they benefit from a society that is structurally weighted in their favour. This criticism is divisive and most likely self-defeating, as accusing people of fragility is not going to encourage most people to change their behaviour. By contrast, proponents of "white privilege" are criticised as being part of an educated elite detached from the socio-economic challenges experienced by most people and who are merely signally that they are morally superior whilst doing little to improve the material lives of disadvantaged people.

Written by Robin Mills. Edited by The Equiano Project.

© 2022 The Equiano Project. All rights reserved.

