

Got Privilege?

One of the most difficult topics in anti-racism work is white privilege. And the most vexing aspect of white privilege is that so many white people don't see it.

A white person who is poor, has struggled to pay for basic needs, or is homeless may reject the idea that they experience any special privileges compared with, for example, a well-paid Black professional or celebrity.

But white privilege involves far more than individual financial outcomes. To examine white privilege we need to look at group outcomes, and how a false hierarchy of skin color in America determines access not only to money and well-paying jobs, but to human needs for housing, healthcare, education, access to justice and even basic civic freedoms.

White or light skin is a passport to an array of advantages, regardless of one's wealth or social status. A white person is more likely than a person of color to get the benefit of the doubt or be presumed innocent in a sticky situation; is more likely to be assumed trustworthy; and more likely to enjoy invisibility in going about their daily business.

People of color are more likely than white people of any socio-economic status to be surveilled and treated with suspicion by store personnel or service providers, to be stopped by the police, to be treated violently by the police during a stop, and to be arrested and convicted for crimes they didn't commit. (<https://ejournal.org/news/study-shows-race-is-substantial-factor-in-wrongful-convictions/>).

Black children are viewed with a suspicion white children do not experience. In a classroom a white child might be seen as "tired," and needing rest, where a black child exhibiting the same cranky behavior is harshly disciplined as "a troublemaker."
(<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2014/03/black-boys-older>)

Lenders favor white applicants over applicants of color who have the same financial profile – not just once in a while, but most of the time.
(<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/white-men-overwhelmingly-favored-for-loans-poll-shows>).

Doctors are likely to dismiss what people of color say about their health, and many still believe falsely that people of color feel less pain than whites
(<https://www.aamc.org/news/how-we-fail-black-patients-pain>).

President John F. Kennedy a month before his assassination in 1963 gave a speech at Amherst College, saying that "Privilege is here, and with privilege goes responsibility." He highlighted the important role of those who criticize our society, who often sail against the current of their time, and who are motivated by a concern for justice.

(<https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/amherst-college-19631026>)

While Kennedy said that artists are often the ones who take on this dangerous task, he spoke before the civil rights movement burst into full flower, with people in all walks of life risking their lives to dismantle racism and white supremacy.

Things haven't changed that much since 1963. By acknowledging that white privilege still exists, exploring its history, and questioning its legitimacy, white people can sail against the current of the time, as Kennedy said, and use privilege to fight for equitable access to the fundamentals of a level playing field, like housing, education, healthcare, employment – and the presumption of innocence when going about one's daily life.