White Privilege and the “Privilege Paradox”

White privilege is a concept that has fallen victim to its own connotations. The two-word term packs a double whammy that inspires pushback. 1) The word white creates discomfort among those who are not used to being defined or described by their race. And 2) the word privilege, especially for poor and rural white people, sounds like a word that doesn’t belong to them—like a word that suggests they have never struggled.

This defensiveness derails the conversation, which means, unfortunately, that defining white privilege must often begin with defining what it’s not. Otherwise, only the choir listens; the people you actually want to reach check out. White privilege is not the suggestion that white people have never struggled. Many white people do not enjoy the privileges that come with relative affluence, such as food security. Many do not experience the privileges that come with access, such as nearby hospitals.

And white privilege is not the assumption that everything a white person has accomplished is unearned; most white people who have reached a high level of success worked extremely hard to get there. Instead, white privilege should be viewed as a built-in advantage, separate from one’s level of income or effort.

Francis E. Kendall, author of Diversity in the Classroom and Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race, comes close to giving us an encompassing definition: “having greater access to power and resources than people of color [in the same situation] do.”

In some ways, white privilege is a simple, straightforward idea: there are inherent advantages that go with being white. In and of itself, this is an obviously true statement. For example, in 19 of 24 states studied African Americans are more likely to be pulled over, and, once pulled over, they are more likely to be searched despite the fact that they are no more likely to be carrying contraband. There are legitimate disputes over the police’s motivations—they say there are just going where the crime is happening—but there is no disputing the underlying fact that if you are white, you are just less likely to be pulled over or searched by the police. That is white privilege.
So, the problem with the phrase white privilege isn’t that it is wrong. The problem is that it sounds an awful lot like the statement “all whites are privileged.” That statement is wrong, and it produces enormous resentment among whites who struggle with unemployment, paying doctors’ bills and who can’t afford to send their children to college. It may be true that these folks are less likely to be pulled over on the highway, but this hardly means that they are living lives of privilege. This is sometimes referred to as the “Privilege Paradox.”

**The Seattle Times’s “Under Our Skin” Project:**

Discussions about race, inclusiveness and sensitivity clearly aren’t new. They can leave us feeling depleted and wondering whether anything has really changed. But we believe the personal reflections and stories from the people who participated in this project will inspire all of us to think and talk about these issues in a deeper way. For those who freeze up at the prospect of talking about race, we hope this project will help break the ice. For those who tend to take sides right away when the issue of race comes up, we hope Under Our Skin will challenge assumptions and build common ground.

**Comments about the White Privilege video:**

This video *frustrated* me because: I feel like blaming everything on white privilege creates the very divide we are trying to get rid of.

*– Summer, 17*

It saddens and angers me that white privilege is something that exists, and I am disgusted that people who don’t have white skin have to face problems or be put in different situations than people with white skin. Skin color does not define anyone, and I hate that this is a problem.

*– Carlie, 16*

This video *angered* me because: White privilege does not exist... Privilege exists, and any race can have it. The use of this term is offensive and racist towards people who identify as white. The insinuation is that because you are white that you have privilege, which simply is not true. If anything, privilege should be associated to people with money. Assigning privilege to a specific race is completely dishonest. Also, marginalizing the struggles of people who are not ethnically diverse is pretty arrogant.

*– Shawn, 41*
I am so tired of everyone placing blame on others for their discomfort, whether financial, educational, employment or even basic existence. Take responsibility for your life, problems, unique situations, appearance, etc. No one needs to conform to societal norms, they choose to because it makes them feel comfortable. If you don't like what life has given you, change your life. Try harder, become smarter, whatever it takes. But stop griping about how life hasn't been fair.

– Lari, 46

This video resonated with me because: I appreciated the nuanced conversation about White Privilege, that includes discussion about the contextual circumstances of some privilege. Income level, age, education, orientation, etc. all contribute to privilege in a given situation. At the same time, certain privileges -- skin color, for example, and gender -- have been embedded and internalized in our system for generations. We must all acknowledge this privilege in order to become more aware and able to be allies for change.

– The Rev. Joyce Parry Moore, 55

This video resonated with me because: I am a white male married to a Mexican for 12 years. Never thought about white privilege until I experienced first-hand how she is treated differently when she is with me than when she is on her own. Whether this is at a store or restaurant or even the ER. Very eye opening for me.

– Robert Samphire, 45

This video interested me because: I am white but was raised by a working-class single mother in a Latin American neighborhood. I had been harassed by cops, subjected to illegal strip searches in school, and spent years trying to get a decent blue-collar job in a world of diminishing opportunities for my class. I think the best way it made sense to me was understanding intersectionality, that none of my circumstances were BECAUSE I'm WHITE.

– LC Swan, 27

This video resonated with me because: "White privilege means you can just be". As a white woman, of course I've had resentment towards the term "white privilege" because my parents worked hard to have what they had and I've been taught to work for what I want to, as well. The above quote helped me better understand my resentment and just take a step back because it was easier for them to have those successes because they are white.

– Kristen, 22
Prayer for Social Justice (BCP p.823)

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart [and especially the hearts of the people of this land], that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.