

# An Introduction to Privilege

## ***What is privilege?***

“Privilege” refers to unearned advantages that certain groups in our society have based solely upon the fact that they belong to that group. If you are a part of a “privileged” group it means that you have access, opportunity, and power that is denied to other groups. Privilege often comes from those things we are born with—our race, our gender, our class background, whether we have a disability, etc. We call these traits our “social identities.”

## ***Most people who have privilege do not think of themselves as being advantaged.***

In fact, we might not think about our privileged identities much at all. Instead, we tend to believe that success is determined by how hard we work, not by the hand we were dealt. Unfortunately, where we end up in life is not only based on work ethic, it is also based on how much privilege we have.

For example, in the United States white women get paid 78 cents for every dollar white men make for the same job. For Black women, it is 65 cents and for Latina women 58 cents. The reason men get paid more is not because they work harder or because they are smarter, it is because they are a part of a privileged group. They have “male privilege.” This does not mean that men don’t work hard. Of course they do! But it does mean that their income is not entirely about their hard work. It is also a reflection of living in an unjust society that gives men privilege and oppresses women based on something outside of their control.

## ***Privilege also greatly influences who does well in our schools.***

For example, students from middle-class families are more likely to speak, dress, and behave in ways that are in line with the expectations of schools. In fact, I bet your school rules were written by a group of middle-class people! This means that middle-class students are less likely to get in trouble with their teachers and that their teachers are more likely to see them as “good students” with “caring parents.” These students have “class privilege.”

Similarly, white people are more likely to see their history and experiences represented in school curriculum. When students learn about who built, discovered, and contributed to our country, the people they learn about are usually white. This is not because white people

contributed *more* to our country or to the world (in fact, the labor of enslaved Africans, Chinese railroad workers, and Latinx farm workers built much of our country's infrastructure on land stolen from the Indigenous people of this continent, and was the foundation of the U.S. economic system). Instead, we learn more about white people because those in charge of what will be taught have historically been white. White people have "white privilege."

If we pay attention, we can notice examples of privilege every day in things like the mismatch between the rates of white and Black drug usage and who is more likely to be incarcerated for drug offenses; or in male teachers being more likely to be tapped as "principal material" and given mentorship and opportunities to advance.

As Allan Johnson writes:

*"...privilege generally allows people to assume a certain level of acceptance, inclusion, and respect in the world...[It] increases the odds of having things your own way, of being able to...determine the rules and standards and how they are applied. [It gives you] the authority to make judgments about others and have those judgments stick [and become stereotypes]....To have privilege is to be allowed to move through your life without being marked as an outsider," or seen as one of 'those people.'"*

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