White privilege is now a regular part of the lexicon of racial and ethnic studies and is a popular concept in contemporary conversations on race and racism. Peggy McIntosh coined the term in 1988 when she wrote of 40 privileges that Whites receive but people of color do not. Since then, the concept of White privilege has been developed and used by many. In this chapter, the works of Robert Amico, Peggy McIntosh, Paula Rothenberg, and Tim Wise, all of whom undertake both a biographical and a scientific study of White privilege, are used.*

*Photo of Rothenberg unavailable.
Why This Theory

The study of racism often compares how people of color fare in relation to Whites on a host of indicators, such as education, employment, and pay. This comparative framework is common because inequalities become clear by comparing the group facing the problems—people of color—to the people who are deemed “normal”—Whites. This framework, however, often leads to a mistaken view of and/or singular focus on people of color “as the problem,” rather than Whites’ role in racism as the problem. Whites may be aware that racism, to some degree, exists but are unaware of how they benefit from that racism. The theory of White privilege, therefore, focuses on how Whites (1) participate in and perpetuate racism, intentionally or not, and (2) are oblivious to the benefits they receive because of racism. A greater goal of using this theory is helping Whites recognize their White privilege to help combat racism.¹

Like other contemporary racial theories, the theory of White privilege emerged after the 1960s Civil Rights Movement to explain how racism persists despite existing laws against racial discrimination. Whites began looking inward to dissect how they experience privilege throughout their lives, both in daily interactions and at significant life moments, such as buying a house or getting a job. This chapter relies on the work of four White scholars: Robert Amico, Peggy McIntosh, Paula Rothenberg, and Tim Wise, all of whom have analyzed their own White privilege and who have systematically studied how White privilege sustains racism.

Description of the Theory

White privilege answers this question: If people of color are encountering racism, what are Whites experiencing? White privilege explains the “other side of racism,” the benefits and resources given to Whites and that are denied to people of color. White privilege is a “relational concept. It positions one person or group over another person or group. It is a concept of racial domination that enables us to see this relationship from the perspective of those who benefit from such domination.”² White privilege permits insight into who benefits from racism and how they do so; only by looking holistically at both the discriminatory and the beneficial nature of racism can the problem be fully addressed. Within this theory, race is defined as “a socially constructed category for the purpose of controlling, dominating, and exploiting some for the benefit of others,”³ and racism is defined as “subordination of people of color by white people.”⁴

Often, Whites think racism is defined by individual hateful actions that come from “bad people” and do not recognize racism’s operation on the systemic and structural levels. White privilege theory, however, explains that racism against people of color and its corollary, White privilege, operate on
a systemic and structural level as well as the individual level. Thus, White privilege is given to all Whites, not just White, wealthy, heterosexual men as the stereotypical image of White privilege recipients. Whites of all different classes, sexes, genders, sexual orientations, religions, and other intersecting identities receive White privilege, albeit how and to what degree White privilege is experienced vary across these intersecting identities. Whites receive White privilege whether they desire it or not, and they benefit from it whether they acknowledge those benefits or not, as, unlike people of color, all Whites are “born to belonging.” These benefits cannot be given away, and good intentions don’t erase them, because White privilege is accorded not by an individual’s behavior or beliefs but because of the status of “White” in society, or what is often referred to as “Whiteness.”

**Whiteness**

To understand White privilege requires an explanation of the meaning behind “White” or what **Whiteness** represents. Whiteness is the power accorded to those deemed White. In the United States, Whiteness originated with plantation slavery, when “White” became synonymous with free and “Black” with slave. Policies in the United States then continued to place power, resources, opportunities, and achievements in the hands of Whites. Such practices and ideologies have given Whiteness special status, so that being “White” has been the way toward success. People from all racial and ethnic groups have fought to be identified as White, including Irish, Italians, Mexicans, Chinese, and Blacks who had a light enough skin tone that they could “pass” as White. For those who were denied White racial status, many sought White approval. George Lipsitz explains this “possessive investment in whiteness” in how “the power of whiteness depended not only on White hegemony over separate racialized groups, but also on manipulating racial outsiders to fight against one another, to compete with each other for white approval, and to seek the rewards and privileges of whiteness for themselves at the expense of other racialized populations.”

Another defining aspect of Whiteness is the lack of awareness of race, of power, and of privilege; “to be an American and to be white is to be told a million different ways that the world is your oyster; it is to believe, because so many outward signs suggest it, that you can do anything and be anything your heart desires.” The constant and consistent valuing of Whiteness leads most Whites to understand this treatment as “normal,” and they are therefore unaware that their racial status is accoring them benefits. Yet the relationship between Whiteness and privilege is of a constitutive nature; “without racial privilege there is no whiteness, and without whiteness, there is no racial privilege. Being white means to be advantaged relative to people of color, and pretty much only that.” Thus, there are direct reinforcing links between “White,” “Whiteness,” and “White privilege.” White is the term used to identify a group of people who share phenotypical features understood as
“White,” Whiteness refers to the power given to Whites, and White privilege denotes the benefits that Whites receive because they are White.

**Facets of White Privilege**

Given that much of White privilege scholarship relies on an autobiographical, self-reflective approach, the theory has not been neatly constructed into components. However, there are clear themes in how Amico, McIntosh, Rothenberg, and Wise systematically analyze White privilege, or, as Rothenberg says, there is “a kind of anatomy of privilege in all its complexity.”

There are five main experiences that characterize White privilege: (1) opportunities received, (2) lack of authority enforcement, (3) a White ethnocentric curriculum, (4) racial segregation, and (5) a pattern of laws throughout time that benefit Whites. It should be noted, however, that though these five experiences help outline the theory of White privilege, they do not encapsulate all the varied and nuanced ways in which Whites experience their racial privilege.

**Opportunities Received**

A hallmark of White privilege is the “invisible” opportunities that Whites receive; these can be small, micro daily interactions or larger life-course markers that make it easier to move from one stage of life to another. For example, Wise reflects on how theater activities in school gave him a much-needed outlet in life, but his consistent assignment to key roles had more to do with the use of White roles rather than his acting ability. Rothenberg describes how her family's White network got her into private school and away from more poorly performing public schools. Her father's network also aided her acceptance into the University of Chicago, and her parents helped buy her house by providing the down payment. Without the White networks, a perception of worthiness, and her family's wealth, Rothenberg would have gone without these educational and housing opportunities that affected her entire life course.

Whites receive privilege via the opportunities open to them through their networks, wealth, and other resources, as well as their perceived worth. This assignment of value and respect to Whiteness connects to the second main area of privilege: lack of authority enforcement.

**Lack of Authority Enforcement**

White privilege theory notes how Whites are presumed to be innocent, or if they are found to be deviant, the penalty is either insignificant or nonexistent. Wise recounts numerous times when he did not get into trouble, even though he was clearly violating the law: drinking and doing drugs as a teenager and, even more severe, his fake identification business that helped him and his underage friends drink at bars. In another instance, a police officer chose to help Wise break into his car when he had locked himself out of it. Rather than the officer assuming Wise was illegally trying to break into a car,
his Whiteness accorded him virtue; “for whites, innocence was presumed until proven otherwise, while for blacks, the presumption of guilt was the default position.” Lack of authority enforcement is also a common theme among a list of privileges that McIntosh delineates: She can shop without being followed around; she can be sure her children’s teachers will tolerate them; she can be sure that if she is pulled over by a cop, it is not because of her race; and she can be late to a meeting without the tardiness reflecting on her race. McIntosh notes that several privileges allow her “to escape penalties or dangers that others suffer.”

White Ethnocentric Curriculum

White privilege also shapes what is considered knowledge or even epistemology. In an analysis of the major disciplines, such as history, philosophy, and science, the curriculum is Eurocentric, in that it focuses on the contributions and knowledge production of Whites. For example, Rothenberg had the following realization when she began teaching philosophy:

Implicit in my syllabus was the notion that wisdom was the special attribute of one race, one sex, and one class, and thus one particular way of thinking about the world and framing questions was the only model for intelligence and rationality. That this way of defining knowledge and framing questions made the experience and wisdom of most of the world’s people either invisible or irrelevant never occurred to me.

She eventually came to realize that “we have privileged the distorted perspective of an infinitesimal fraction of the world’s population.” Amico, too, as a professor of philosophy, came to realize that philosophy was primarily a White discipline that ignored the contributions of others and saw “the blind spots in [his] education that favor whiteness.” And McIntosh notes, “I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.” The White ethnocentric curriculum shows how Whites are taught from day one that White culture and knowledge are not only most significant but also correct.

Racial Segregation

White privilege is able to maintain itself through the residential and social isolation of Whites from people of color. Upon recognition of their White privilege, these scholars recognized that they had spent their lives largely in White spaces. It did not occur to them to question why people of color were absent in their neighborhoods, schools, clubs, jobs, and even the media. McIntosh notes such privilege in this way: “I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time” because Whites have created isolated spaces in any number of professional and social circles. Wise notes how he had Black friends in middle school, but by high school, racial segregation had taken hold, and his friendship circle became
largely composed of Whites. Rothenberg, in retrospect, realizes that there were no Blacks in her school or in her parents’ segregated country club. As an adult, Rothenberg analyzes how “well-intentioned white liberals,” knowingly or not, reinforce this segregated color line, for even when they desire to move into a diverse neighborhood, they often choose to send their children to private schools instead of the local public school. By the time most White children get to college, they are not aware of how their racial segregation has become a norm, so, intentionally or not, they continue on with a life of White racial isolation.

Pattern of Laws

White privilege is not just a manifestation of contemporary culture; it is embedded in the structure and institutions of society. White privilege has been repeatedly enforced through policies and laws, beginning with plantation slavery and the genocide of the indigenous and continuing through today. Noting laws and policies such as the internment of Japanese people in the United States during World War II and the denial of citizenship to various communities of color throughout U.S. history, Rothenberg states that White skin privilege is part of the very fabric of the nation. Wise refers to the highly restrictive immigration law of the Naturalization Act of 1790, discriminatory housing and mortgage polices, and the lack of enforcement of the Fair Housing Act. Amico also addresses racist practices, such as restrictive immigration laws, the genocide of indigenous tribes, and the oppressive use of Chinese immigrant labor to build railroads. And although not directly alluding to laws, McIntosh notes how the history of the United States speaks to the experiences of Whites in a positive manner: “When I am told about our national heritage or about ‘civilization,’ I am shown that people of my color [Whites] made it what it is.” She points out that she “can remain oblivious to the language and customs of persons of color who constituted the world’s majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.” White privilege has been enshrined not just in ideology but in the very laws that created and sustain the United States.

Confronting and Accepting White Privilege

When presented with White privilege, Whites often become hesitant to accept the information or develop White guilt. In the first regard, a primary reason Whites express hesitation is because they believe in the myth of meritocracy—that only those who work hard are appropriately rewarded—but White privilege exposes the falsity of this ideology. If Whites accept that they were given some systematic benefits in their life because of Whiteness, they must also believe that their life’s accomplishments were aided by White privilege. Acceptance of this fact often leads to conflict with one’s identity as White.

In addition to the myth of meritocracy, Amico outlines seven additional reasons why Whites generally have a hard time accepting the existence of White privilege: (1) the master narrative of U.S. history, (2) the myth of race,
(3) residential segregation, (4) individualism, (5) obliviousness, (6) racial identity development and cultural competencies, and (7) an individual's own racism. Amico says that these reasons can be compounded by four emotions: (1) a feeling of being threatened; (2) family loyalty; (3) fear, shame, and guilt; and (4) feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness.26 There is a series of reasons and emotions, often overlapping and intersecting, that hinder Whites' recognition of their privilege, which is only evidence of the strength of privilege to obscure the truth.

When Whites do accept White privilege and realize that they are the recipients, a second outcome of confronting White privilege is White guilt. Whites feel guilt for the unfair advantages given to them and recognize that their opportunities and accomplishments are, at least in part, due to the unearned and unmerited bias afforded to those who are seen as White. A step further in the understanding of White privilege reveals that the unearned opportunities given to a White person also means that unmerited disadvantages were given to a person of color. When Whites come to grips with the years, decades, and centuries of benefits given to Whites and the corollary discrimination faced by people of color, guilt arises from being a member of the “White race,” often because there is no clear way to rid oneself of these privileges.27 However, as discussed later, the objective of White privilege theory is not to encourage Whites to feel guilty but to have this revelation lead to combating racism. Furthermore, White privilege theory posits that Whites can experience personal benefits from confronting their privilege. White privilege can keep Whites from having authentic relationships with people of color, can keep Whites ignorant about history, and can keep them from recognizing how they may be perpetuating a racist system. Therefore, confronting one’s White privilege can lead to empowerment, confidence, healing, and community building.

How to Challenge Racism

To fix White privilege, Whites need to accept that it exists, that racism is structural and real, and that Whites have the agency to do something about it. Part of this effort can include a call for curricula to become much more diverse; knowledge and education in the United States are still largely Eurocentric, and a targeted effort to include the history, knowledge, and perspectives of people of color is needed. On the micro level, Amico suggests that Whites ask themselves a series of questions: What happens when they encounter people who are “different”? How has White privilege kept them isolated from others? When were they first aware that they were a member of an ethnic group?28 Such questions can help White people interrogate how their race and privilege have played roles in their lives. Once individuals realize that they have White privilege, they can use that privilege to intervene. For example, they can use it to educate other Whites about their privilege or address a racist incident when it occurs. It can also be used...
to support organizations and policies that work for racial justice. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, part of the intent of this theory is to get Whites to become active antiracists. In fact, Amico argues that acknowledging White privilege means nothing without action:

All my learning—about white privilege, systems of privilege, the history of white supremacy in American culture, the separate worlds of white people and people of color, the internalized white supremacy in myself, and so forth—is all for naught if it does not translate into action; action to change myself, my behavior, my worldview; action to dismantle systems of privilege, action to promote social justice and real community.²⁹

The recognition of privilege can help challenge racism, but, as Wise suggests, there also can be dire consequences to Whites if they do not confront this privilege, because Whiteness presents unrealistic expectations of success:

It strikes me that unless we get a hold of this, unless we begin to address the way that privilege can set up those who have it for a fall … we’ll be creating more addicts, more people who turn to self-injury, suicide, eating disorders, or other forms of self-negation, all because they failed to live up to some idealized type that they’d been told was theirs to achieve.³⁰

In this vein, White privilege is hurting Whites because they are given unreal and corrupted expectations of achievement and status. Thus,

**By the Numbers**

- Fifty-six percent of Whites—compared to 73% of Asians, 69% of Blacks, and 61% of Hispanics—say that being White helps a little to a lot in a person’s ability to get ahead in the United States.
- White workers are more likely than Blacks and Latinos to have a good job, even when educational attainment is the same; 75% of Whites with a bachelor’s degree or higher are likely to have a good job, compared to 68% of Blacks and 65% of Latinos with the same educational credentials. *
- Between 2009 and 2015, 27% of White students admitted to Harvard were legacies, the children of faculty or staff or children of parents who have donated or plan to donate money to Harvard. The acceptance rate for all legacies was 34%, compared to Harvard’s acceptance rate of 4.89%.

_Sources: Arcidiacono, Kinsler, and Ransom (2019); Carnevale et al. (2019); Horowitz, Brown, and Cox (2019)._
challenging White privilege is good not only for addressing racism but also for cultivating healthier environments for Whites.

Evaluation

Methodological Benefits

White privilege is an analysis of racism that uses the perspective of Whites, which is a particularly powerful methodological approach. Whites have long been analyzing racism via studies on communities of color, so for Whites to look inward has provided novel insights. The overall method of these scholars is to be brutally honest about their personal lives and to invite people to see how transparency about White privilege can be liberating. This approach is engaging and can be particularly successful in getting Whites to think about White privilege in a manner that does not immediately put them on the defensive.

These scholars also tend to take a life-course perspective, thereby showing how White privilege operates from childhood through adulthood, from minor daily interactions to major life chances, and from personal family matters to professional lives. If the analysis had centered on only a certain part of life, there would have been many more opportunities to deny the all-encompassing nature of White privilege. Taking this holistic approach to analyzing White privilege from the perspective of a White person who has experienced it gives unique and powerful insights into the “other side of racism.”

Methodological Limitations

Amico, McIntosh, Rothenberg, and Wise all note that it is time for White people to take a look at themselves and how their lives have benefited from racism. Rothenberg says that her book Invisible Privilege “grows out of a deeply felt need to reflect in a more personal way on what it means to be a privileged white woman coming to terms with that privilege.”31 Wise realizes that, on some level, he had not been honest with himself concerning his relationship to race/racism: “My racial identity had shaped me from the womb forward. I had not been in control of my own narrative. It wasn’t just race that was a social construct. So was I.”32 McIntosh notes that her self-reflection came about after her frustration “with men who would not recognize male privilege.” She continues, “I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life.”33 And throughout his book Exploring White Privilege, Amico uses personal vignettes that provide real-life examples that effectively expose White privilege in a personal manner. Although on some level this approach is effective by connecting with people through real-life personal examples, there's no systematic analysis of data or clear way to analyze whether these reflections are
honest, reliable, or generalizable. This method of analysis makes it difficult to replicate to evaluate its applicability. In addition, because most of the information is personal, it is just that—information relative to the individual who experienced it; however, this can be mitigated by providing contextualizing information. For example, sometimes the reflections are complemented by information on racist laws, racial statistics, or information from other sources that confirms these personal reflections. Amico in particular offers important macro-level data on White privilege, which is complemented by personal anecdotes, rather than the other way around.

**Theoretical Benefits**

White privilege fills a significant gap in the analysis of racism. Prior to this concept, the majority of theories on racism focused on the discrimination people of color received. White privilege successfully moves the focus of the problem to the perpetuation of Whiteness and how Whites, knowingly or unknowingly, participate in and benefit from racism. Moreover, White privilege does not reduce racism to a problem of individuals or a “few bad apples” but pushes Whites to see that racism is a society-wide problem. This theoretical approach of White privilege puts the responsibility squarely on all Whites to recognize that meritocracy is a myth and that ending racism requires White participation. Amico calls upon Whites to confront their “internalized sense of racial superiority,” because if Whites are not a part of the solution, they are a part of the problem.  

Another theoretical benefit is that these scholars analyze how White privilege varies in relation to other intersecting identities, such as class, gender, and religion, but is not negated by them. Wise comes from a relatively poor Jewish background but clearly argues that these other marginalized identities did not make him immune to receiving White privilege. For example, as a child, Wise angrily stood up to a teacher who told him to listen to a Christian group, and as he reflects on his audacity in confronting the teacher, he notes:

> It was white privilege that made the difference, far more so than some inherent courage on my part … it was predicated on the privilege that allowed even a lower-income white kid like myself to feel certain enough about my rights so as to challenge those who would abuse them … it was equally about the way that even Jews, with our historically inconsistent and situationally contingent whiteness, can still access the powers of our skin in ways that make a difference.  

Wise recognizes that he was oppressed in relation to his class and religious status, but his Whiteness still prevailed in providing the confidence of knowing he could stand up to a teacher without the threat of significant consequences. Rothenberg addresses how being a woman and an Orthodox Jew created barriers for her, while simultaneously White
privilege mitigated some of those barriers and provided unique opportunities in other ways. The intersectional approach that details oppression received in one area (class, gender, etc.) along with the simultaneous experience of White privilege counters the potential criticism that Whites who have other intersecting oppressed identities do not receive any White privilege.

Theoretical Limitations

The White privilege theory centers Whiteness in the discussions of how racism is perpetuated by Whites; this explanation is of theoretical import but can also run the risk of, ironically, putting Whites at the center of the conversation. Academia is largely a White enterprise, and knowledge that is validated historically has and continues to come largely through White producers. White privilege scholarship has been largely produced by White scholars, and therefore these White scholars become more validated to speak on racism because of the White privilege they have. Certainly, White privilege scholars recognize this conundrum; Tim Wise is known for addressing this issue during his talks when he notes that he gets large speaking engagements partially due to his White privilege. But White privilege theory needs to be careful not to reify the very problem that it aims to analyze and deconstruct.

Another drawback of White privilege theory is the conflation of macro-level systemic issues and micro-level individual experiences of privilege. For example, White privilege examples include the micro-level, individual experience of a White person who is not followed around in a store and the macro-level, systemic problem of the disproportionate incarceration of people of color. Of course, the macro level and micro level are interconnected, but White privilege attempts both to represent an individual experience that is a consequence of a system and to represent the system itself. White privilege can be used to articulate micro- and macro-level Whiteness, but White privilege does not theorize systemic racism well. strmic-pawl addresses this theoretical limitation of White privilege and argues that systemic racism is better conceptualized through the framework of White supremacy (see Chapter 3 on White supremacy).

Conclusion

White privilege turned the focus of racism to bring attention to how Whites both actively and passively benefit from racism. Moreover, the importance of critically analyzing the pathologies of Whiteness as a negative consequence of racism pushes the conversation forward on how racism is detrimental to all. The theory of White privilege continues to be used, both in theoretical terms and in practice, in popular media, on educational campuses, and in racial training programs.
REFLECT AND DISCUSS

1. How is White privilege the “other side” of racism?

2. How are White privilege and Whiteness connected? How do White people, as individuals, fit into this equation?

3. How does White privilege vary in important manners—yet also remain prevalent—across class status and gender identity?

Diagram 2.1 White Privilege

KEY TERMS

Race: “A socially constructed category for the purpose of controlling, dominating, and exploiting some for the benefit of others.”

Racism: “Subordination of people of color by white people.”

White(ness): “Inequality and privilege are the only real components of whiteness. Without racial privilege there is no whiteness, and without whiteness, there is no racial privilege. Being white means being advantaged to people of color, and pretty much only that.”
White privilege: “A form of domination; hence it is a relational concept. It positions one person or group over another person or group. It is a concept of racial domination that enables us to see this relationship from the perspective of those who benefit from such domination.”

“I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.”

KEY PEOPLE

Robert Amico (1947–): Amico is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at St. Bonaventure University in New York. His book *The Problem of Criterion* won the 1995 Choice Award for Outstanding Academic Book. His current research is on racism and social justice; in addition to writing *Exploring White Privilege* (2016), he also edited *Antiracist Teaching* (2015). Twitter @rpmico

Peggy McIntosh (1934–): McIntosh was the former associate director of the Wellesley Centers for Women (of Wellesley College in Massachusetts) and was the founder of the National SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) Project. She was also cofounder of the Rocky Mountain Women’s Institute. McIntosh is widely recognized for coining the term White privilege in the 1988 paper “White Privilege and Male Privilege.”

Paula Rothenberg (1943–2018): Rothenberg was a Senior Fellow at the Murphy Institute at CUNY (City University of New York). She previously served for 7 years as the director of the New Jersey Project on Inclusive Scholarship, Curriculum, and Teaching at William Paterson University in New Jersey, where she was also Professor of Philosophy. Rothenberg published eight books that address social inequality and social justice. www.paularothenberg.com

Tim Wise (1968–): Wise is known for his public approach to his publications, having given talks in every state in the United States and at more than 1,000 college and high school campuses. Wise self-identities as an antiracist essayist, author, and educator and is the author of seven books. Wise is one of five people who were interviewed for a video exhibition on race relations in America. The video is featured at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. www.timwise.org; Twitter @speakouttimwise

WORKS CITED AND FURTHER READING


See also White Privilege Conference (www.whiteprivilegeconference.com) and the corollary journal, Understanding and Dismantling Privilege (http://www.wpcjournal.com).

NOTES

* A “good job” is defined by one that pays family-sustaining earnings.
7. Ibid. (3).
9. Ibid. (179, emphasis in original).
17. Ibid. (122).
20. Ibid. (3).
22. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid. (69).
29. Ibid. (86).
33. McIntosh (1988:3).
34. Amico (2016:30).
42. McIntosh (1988:2).