



## Rachel Frey

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# White Privilege

## A Guide for White People

In the current political climate, the idea of "white privilege" has become a topic of interest, especially as groups like "Black Lives Matter" and white supremacist groups have gained publicity. There has been a lot of debate as to whether or not "white privilege" actually exists or if it's a narrative of victimization created by minorities in order to gain "special treatment." However, if you look at who's in charge in this country versus the targets of racism, systemic oppression, and hate speech, it's fairly evident that some form of white privilege still exists in America today.

If you are a person who has white privilege of any form, addressing it can be difficult for many reasons, the main one being that acknowledgment of privilege, especially privilege that you feel as though you have not actively taken advantage of, feels wrong. Acknowledgement of white privilege for people who have never been exposed to this could feel like a lie, especially if that specific individual has been disadvantaged in other areas of life (socioeconomically, educationally, or in terms of body size, for instance). When being educated about white privilege, it's easy for white individuals to claim that they have taken no part in this system of privilege because they have worked for everything in their life. The accusation of systemic privilege may feel like a personal insult and attack against their character if this acknowledgement of white privilege is framed incorrectly.

The term "white privilege" has the power to polarize audiences. The term "privilege" can create defensiveness. However, there is a large misconception that needs to be addressed; "white privilege" does not mean that you are privileged because you are white. It means that your life hasn't been made more difficult because of the color of your skin. Although the phrase "white privilege" does not perfectly capture this, likely because of warping in the media, the phrase has caused myriad problems in the discourse surrounding it. In situations such as these, it's important to educate about white privilege accurately and to break down the idea that having white privilege discredits the work or individual struggle someone has gone through. To say that white privilege does not exist because white people still struggle shows a distinct lack of understanding of the greater issues of structural racial bias and other intersectional issues that the country may be facing.

The first, and possibly most important, step in coming to terms with white privilege is to recognize it. As Peggy McIntosh states, "Describing white privilege makes one newly accountable" ("White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack"). Once you have knowledge of how you have been advantaged in this society solely based on the color of your skin, there is no going back. Even if you feel you have not actively participated in white privilege, after you have gained knowledge of this system, it is undeniable that you have benefited from this system. Having simply benefited from this system is not in and of itself the only issue. Having knowledge of this system of white privilege but refusing to acknowledge how it may have affected

this society is the problem. Realizing that we can participate in conversations about white privilege while being white and acknowledging that you have benefited from these systems is the only way to begin to come to terms with it. It's also the only way to realize that having benefited from a prejudiced system that has been in place since the beginning of this country does not make you a bad person or make your accomplishments any less real or admirable. What makes you admirable if you are a white person is realizing how this system may have overly advantaged you and disadvantaged others.

The second step in beginning to combat white privilege is to acknowledge that these kinds of conversations are uncomfortable and complicated but are necessary to have. In her article, "When Feminism is White Supremacy in Heels," Rachel Elizabeth Cargle focuses mainly on how white women who claim to be feminists perpetuate a system of white supremacy by policing black women specifically. In one section, she writes, "[white women] start to explain why race is hard for them to talk about, what they think would be a better solution to the topic at hand, and perhaps that women of color can do to make it more palatable." Here's the problem with that: this topic isn't supposed to be "palatable." Very little in this world that needs to be fixed has been easy to talk about. But change won't happen if these conversations don't occur. Understanding that these conversations are difficult to have, especially when they feel like a personal attack, but having them anyway shows a true concern for and acknowledgment of the real problems at hand. Surrendering your ego and realizing that white privilege has affected you but realizing that your past privilege does not affect how you will use your privilege in the future is key.

After having recognize how white privilege has affected your life if you are white you can begin to look for ways it continues to impact your life as well as the lives around you. You can begin by taking into account some of the daily effects of white privilege, such as the ones McIntosh has identified: "I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented," "I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race," and "I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race." Training yourself to realize how white privilege touches your life even in the most minute ways is integral to realizing how deeply rooted this system is. This also comes in recognizing what racial biases you might have and actively combating them. Understanding your own racial biases (both overt and implicit) and understanding where they come from (socialization, personal experience) can not only help you understand the challenges that marginalized people face but should also reveal the societal expectations and biases already in place.

The best way to use your white privilege if you are white is to help others. Take Kamira Trent for example. In a viral video that surfaced, Trent (a white woman) was seen defending two Hispanic women from another white woman who was harassing

them for speaking Spanish to each other (Horton). Trent used her privilege as a white woman to speak up against another white woman, probably recognizing that she could do so without fear for her own personal safety, considering how unlikely it would be for Dwire (the harasser) to become physical with her. She also could have felt certain that the store employees would behave civilly, so she was in little danger. She also probably took into consideration that, if Dwire would listen to anyone, it would probably be another white woman. She is a fantastic example of how people are using their privilege to fight injustice for other people in everyday situations.

While it is a difficult subject to tackle, the only way to address systems of racially based advantage is to continue to have these conversations. Recognizing your structural places of privilege and learning to surrender your ego in order to benefit those who are systematically disadvantaged is a necessary first step in beginning to solve these issues. We must foster a refusal to diminish the struggles marginalized and oppressed groups have faced and to have uncomfortable conversations where the solutions and answers may not be clear to combat structural inequalities and privilege. Learning to recognize how white privilege affects all of us and equipping ourselves with knowledge of how to use privilege to other's advantage will help spread awareness and activism. This is how we learn and grow. This is how we fight systemic oppression. This is how we change the world. This is how to use our privilege if we have it and to fight for those who do not.

## Works Cited

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