



# RESTORATIVE RESOLUTIONS

## Handout 1

### The Role of Privilege

For many members of the majority culture (i.e., those who identify as White) in the United States, being made aware of one's classification as linked to privilege is likely not a common or welcomed experience. Indeed, many people have never been asked or required to reflect on their own privileged status, and in regards to racial identity, doing so might feel uncomfortable or even discordant with the common narrative regarding social and political changes over the years. For example, White Americans may attach the concepts of progress toward equality or being "color blind" as mitigating privilege. As a result, many White Americans either may not be aware of or may avoid considering how simply being White confers special status or experiences, potentially to the detriment of others. While many Americans may not view themselves as privileged because of their economic or social status, the advantage of being in the majority racial group is real, even if often hidden.

Consider simple life activities such as shopping in a store without the fear of being followed or buying or renting a home in an area that you can afford without consideration of your race. This fundamental disconnect might both motivate and exacerbate the racial/cultural divide in the United States due to a lack of awareness of how privilege contributes to the realities of racism. Peggy McIntosh (1990), in her essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack", wrote, "I realized that I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but also had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, White privilege, which puts me at an advantage." Importantly, although privilege is often associated only with wealth and/or economic status, it applies far more broadly. Privilege can be assigned to populations within a group, such as athletes, individuals perceived as attractive, individuals who attain higher levels of education, or membership in certain religious groups. Loosely defined, privilege includes the following aspects.

Unearned advantages that are highly valued but restricted to certain groups. Unearned advantages are those that someone receives by identifying or being born into a specific group. It is important to note that the groups who have received these advantages have not earned them due to their own hard work but rather their affiliation (e.g., being born into a wealthy family provides privileges that others do not have, such as accessing education as well as mental health and medical services; White Americans are more likely to walk into a mall without the suspicion of stealing). Equally important to note is the reality that while some benefit from unearned advantages, others are victims of unearned disadvantage. Unearned entitlements are things of value that all people should have; however, they are often restricted to certain groups because of the values of the majority culture that influence political and social decisions. The example below illustrates this concept.

Example: John (a boy) is perceived to understand science better than Jane (a girl). Although John and Jane are both in the same science class and have the same grades on their assignments and exams, because he's a boy, John's perceived superior understanding of science can become advantageous if he (rather than Jane) is encouraged to join science clubs. Over time, John's participation in various science clubs may lead to receiving better grades in science and improve his chances of being accepted into more rigorous and competitive classes and programs in the future.



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Privilege oppresses certain groups. As explained by Wildman and Davis (1995), Members of the privileged group gain many benefits by their affiliation with the dominant side of the power system. Privileged advantage in societal relationships benefits the holder of privilege, who may receive deference, special knowledge, or a higher comfort level to guide societal interaction. Privilege is not visible to its holder; it is merely there, a part of the world, a way of life, simply the way things are. Others have a lack, an absence, a deficiency.

Privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of group membership and not based on what a person or group has done or failed to do (Johnson, 2006). For those who routinely benefit from privilege, the challenge is to not quickly deny its existence. It is important to recognize that privilege is a part of the reality that helps some while it impedes others' experiences. For example, although being female or a person of color does not necessarily directly determine an outcome, these characteristics can easily and quickly make these individuals less likely to be hired, recognized, or rewarded in a variety of situations.

Privilege is problematic (a) when it skews our personal interactions and judgments and (b) when it contributes to or blinds us to systemic barriers for those who do not possess a certain privilege, thereby creating or perpetuating inequity. In American culture, certain groups have the privilege of operating within settings—through no effort on their part—that are more conducive for their success, while others—through no fault of their own—find themselves in settings that make success more difficult (Miranda, Boland, & Hemmeler, 2009). Again, this concept refers to any advantage that is unearned, exclusive, and socially conferred. For example, with White privilege, White people are generally assumed to be law abiding until they show that they are not. On the other hand, people of color, in particular African Americans and Latinos, are routinely assumed to be criminals or potential criminals until they show that they are not (Johnson, 2006).

*Excerpt from “Understanding Race and Privilege”, National Association of School Psychologists:  
<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/diversity-and-social-justice/social-justice/understanding-race-and-privilege>*