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White Men See White Privilege More Clearly If They Have Experienced Social Disadvantages

6-7 minutes

Setbacks due to disability, class, sexual orientation or other demographics can illuminate white privilege

White men who have experienced disadvantages in their lives, based on class, disability, religion or sexual orientation, are more likely than other white men to recognize white privilege, research from Duke University's Fuqua School of Business shows.

The research, published in the journal [Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes](#), defines white privilege as economic and social advantages white people experience due to their race that racial minorities do not experience.

"Racial inequity can be described in different ways – it may offer advantages for some and disadvantages for others," said author [Ashleigh Shelby Rosette](#), a professor of management and organizations at Fuqua. "Few people would challenge that racial minorities encounter disadvantages, especially in the workplace. But considerable debate persists when considering white privilege. Our research examines whether previous experiences of disadvantage would facilitate increased recognition of white privilege among white men in work settings."

How white men face discrimination

More than 5,100 white men from the U.S. and U.K. participated in the research, which Rosette co-authored with Sean Fath at Cornell University and Anyi Ma at Tulane University. For the 10 studies described in the paper "[Self-Views of Disadvantage, Success and White Privilege](#)," participants were asked whether white people are inherently privileged in work settings because of their race. In addition, they were asked if they had experienced disadvantages at work related to religion, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status or disability, or to think of a time when they felt disadvantaged. Those who perceived disadvantages at work agreed to a greater degree that white people experience race-based privilege compared to white men who had not faced disadvantages.

The authors offered an example from U.S. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, who is a white man and is gay, recognizing white privilege based in light of disadvantages he faces as a gay man:

"While I do not have the experience of ever having been discriminated against because of the color of my skin... Standing here wearing this wedding ring in a way that couldn't have happened two elections ago lets me know just how deep my obligation is to help those whose rights are on the line every day."

"People tend not to see themselves as having only a single identity. Instead, they view themselves as multifaceted, representing multiple social groups that overlap and intersect," Rosette said. "It is experiencing disadvantage that facilitates empathy with the plight of racial minorities, which then leads to an increased recognition of white privilege."

Debate about white privilege

The concept of white privilege remains controversial among Americans. In fact, the authors note, [recent polling](#) indicates a majority of white people in the U.S. believe that as a group, white Americans face racism. A smaller subset of those Americans say they had personally experienced discrimination based on the fact they are white, the authors noted.

The authors refer to numerous examples in research that demonstrate racial inequity, but more specifically, white privilege: predominantly white school districts across the U.S. receive [\\$23 billion more funding](#) than predominantly non-white districts with the same number of students; white people seeking housing are shown more options than equally

qualified racial minorities; white buyers shopping for a new car are [quoted significantly lower prices at car dealerships](#); [average earnings for white employees are almost 27% higher than for Black U.S. workers](#); white men receive about [twice as many call-backs](#) in their job searches compared to equally qualified Black and Hispanic men; when occupying executive roles, white men have more [behavioral freedom](#) than racial minorities, are less likely to be blamed for poor performance, and are less likely to be viewed as less competent by superiors in the workplace because they [speak up about important social causes and issues](#).

White men hold power to enact change

Even faced with these statistics, many white people deny white privilege exists. Research has explained that for many people, acknowledging white privilege can be threatening to their self-esteem, Rosette said. Specifically, it would mean confronting the possibility that a portion of their success in life is not attributed to personal achievement, but may be shaped by advantages bestowed on them that are not granted to racial minorities, she said. When the right buffers are not in place, this can lower a person's self-regard, threaten their self-image and foster racial guilt, said Rosette, who has [published prior research](#) on ways to frame these conversations.

However, as fraught as the topic is, Rosette said, there are specific reasons organizations seeking to rectify racial disparities should address the topic of white privilege: with white men specifically occupying most positions of power, the extent to which white men recognize white privilege can have a direct impact on these efforts.

"Research suggests that increases in the acknowledgement of white privilege directly correlates with increasing support for policies that are designed to rectify racial inequity," Rosette said. "It is the recognition of racial inequity as white privilege – not as racial minority disadvantage – that is more likely to incite broad changes in social policy among those who sit atop the organizational hierarchies: white men."