

# **Profit and Loss:**

## **The Ups and Downs of White Privilege**

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What does it mean to be white in the United States? It's a question that is rarely asked, especially by those of us who are classified as white in this culture. After all, when one is a member of the dominant majority, one rarely is forced to contemplate one's racial identity.

We aren't burdened with scores of negative stereotypes about our group, the way people of color typically are, and as such we rarely have to contemplate the ways in which our racial identity might be seen as an indicator of unintelligence, criminality, or laziness: all of which are common perceptions about blacks and Latinos according to public opinion polls. So when we apply for a job or a loan, or seek out an apartment to rent, or go shopping in an upscale mall, or drive through mostly white neighborhoods, we can do so without worrying that our race might mark us in negative ways in the eyes of employers, bankers, landlords, store clerks, and police.

For people of color however, these everyday experiences can prove far more complicated. Blacks, for example, are twice as likely to have their cars stopped and searched for drugs, even though whites, when searched, are twice as likely to actually have drugs in our possession.

Whites are nearly 60 percent more likely than blacks to receive a mortgage loan, even when their credit rating, collateral and incomes are comparable. Black males with college degrees are more likely to be unemployed than white males with only a high school diploma; and when educational credentials and years of job experience are the same between whites and blacks, whites earn, on average between 10-25 percent more than African Americans. That's what is meant by the term white privilege: the advantages, benefits of the doubt and immunities extended to those of us who are white, all of which provide real material and psychological dividends.

However, white privilege is not just about the accumulated advantages brought about by a history of slavery and segregation. Though these

accumulated benefits are real -- indeed the current white baby-boom generation is in the process of inheriting between \$7-10 trillion in property assets that were originally obtained by their families under conditions of formal apartheid -- the biggest problem with white privilege is that it continues to be generated today, even without the snowball effect of past injustice.

So, for example, a recent study found that job applicants with typically "white sounding names" are 50 percent more likely to be called back for an interview than those with typically "black sounding names," even when all other qualifications and credentials are the same.

While we often speak of racism in terms of the harms done to blacks, Latinos and other persons of color, let us then recognize that for every black or brown victim of such discrimination there are several white beneficiaries: people who did get the loan, who did get the job, who didn't get racially-profiled. White privilege at its most basic level is the privilege of having one less thing to worry about in one's daily life. Don't get it twisted: everyone has challenges in life, and few people are born with massive wealth. But for those of us who are white, in spite of our personal travails in life (which of course people of color have too), dealing with the stigma of race is not an issue.

Whites are typically presumed competent until proven otherwise, we aren't asked to speak for our entire group, and rarely are we in environments where we are likely to feel out of place, unlike people of color who often are in such settings, in mostly white colleges or in the workplace. For people of color race is that one extra burden, and it's far from a minimal one to bear.

Think about it: best-selling books get written claiming that blacks are genetically or culturally inferior to whites, all because people of color generally do worse on standardized tests and in school than whites (facts which are hardly independent of racism and discriminatory treatment in schools). But when was the last time whites were negatively stigmatized as a group this way, all because of the actions of some white people? Whites are, for example, more likely to use drugs, drink heavily, commit serial murder, or engage in child molestation than blacks according to data from the Department of Justice and several private studies. But do we as whites therefore get profiled or treated as likely addicts, drunk drivers or pederasts by law enforcement? Of course not.

Or think of terrorism. After 9/11, Arabs have been routinely pulled aside for

special searches at airports, and most folks think such treatment is no big deal. But why weren't white men profiled as terrorists after Oklahoma City, or after the dozens of abortion clinic bombings, arsons and even shootings that have been committed by white men?

That white privilege is a problem for those without it is obvious. But the irony is that even those of us who benefit from it in relative terms, also pay a price for its receipt. On the one hand, whites benefit from discrimination in the job market against people of color, in that we have access to more jobs at better wages. But in absolute terms the cost of this privilege is enormous. Economist Andrew Brimmer has estimated that discrimination against African Americans alone costs the economy of the U.S. over \$240 billion each year because it artificially restricts black labor productivity and output. That's money that is then unavailable not only to the black workers themselves, but to the economy on which we all depend: money that can't be used to build schools, create jobs, provide health care coverage or for any other purpose.

Even disparate treatment in the justice system, which in relative terms works to our benefit, has a blowback effect on the white community. We may think little of the growth of prison incarceration, as it snares far fewer of us in its web. But considering that the prisons warehousing black and brown bodies compete for the same dollars needed to build schools for everyone, the impact is far from negligible.

In California, for example, since 1980 over twenty new prisons have been opened, compared to only two four-year colleges, thanks to a massive shifting of public monies away from schools and towards "corrections." The effect has been to restrict the space available for people of color and whites to receive a quality education. In other words, the privileges are real, but the consequences of a system that bestows such privileges are detrimental to most everyone.

At the end of the day this is why white privilege must not only be acknowledged but ultimately eradicated. Doing anything less will leave in place a system of injustice that betrays the promise of America.