

Dear Educators: “Privilege” Is Theory, Not Fact

The idea of “privilege” has been a growing fad on college campuses over the past decade. While discussions of “white privilege,” “male privilege,” “heterosexual privilege,” and “able-bodied privilege” were once relegated to a few liberal arts classrooms, these discussions have seeped into the mainstream of campus life. Just this week, Campus Reform [reported](#) on a “Christian Privilege” bulletin board placed in a residence hall at Appalachian State University. There was no bulletin board offering an alternative perspective nor was there an opportunity to debate the validity of the board’s claims in an academic forum. The board was simply presented as “fact.” These kinds of displays are the very definition of dogmatism, indoctrination, and academic dishonesty.

To be clear, I have no problem with privilege being discussed on campuses and believe that privilege is a reasonable explanation for some situations. As a college instructor and supporter of academic freedom, I staunchly advocate for robust debates about a multitude of controversial issues. However, my problem with the “fad of privilege” is that legitimate concerns over group disparities have devolved into *ad hominem* attacks and cliché demands to “check your privilege.” None of these approaches are helpful in finding solutions and do not reach the level of serious scholarly inquiry.

As a person who has taught and written on the idea of privilege, I believe I have discovered what went wrong. In short, “privilege” is a theory that colleges have been teaching as fact. A fact is something that everyone can observe: it is concrete. For example, on average,

women work in jobs that traditionally pay less. A theory, on the other hand, is an explanation for that observation and theories can vary and are abstract. One explanation for this example could be “male privilege systemically forces women into low paying jobs.” Another explanation could be “women chose jobs with shorter hours and more flexibility because they value spending time with family over money.” Both theories are valid and should be debated in the classroom.

However, many educators simply expect students to accept privilege as a fact from day one. So, if you’re really intelligent and white, then you must accept that some of your educational success was due to “white privilege.” If you have a great job and are male, then you must accept that during the interview you benefited from “male privilege.” There is no discussion about study habits, discipline, or earning advantages through hard work. Rather, privileges are unearned and treated as the *only* explanation for group disparities instead of being treated as *one possible* explanation among a host of others. This approach is uncritical and forces students to simply parrot a professor’s beliefs instead of thinking for themselves.

Therefore, when I teach about the *theory of privilege*, I have students move through the following three questions in an attempt to help them arrive at their own conclusions as to whether they believe privilege exists. First, what are the disparities between groups? For example, whites graduate from college at a rate of approximately 62%. Blacks graduate from college at a rate of approximately 40%. [These numbers are quantifiable facts](#) that everyone can observe and agree on. The second question is where people begin to disagree.

Second, I ask students, “Why do these disparities

exist?" To the constant purveyors of "privilege as fact," this is where the conversation becomes uncritical and dogmatic because the only justification for any disparity among race, gender, sexuality, or any other demographic is "privilege." However, many other valid theories account for such disparities without implying privilege. In a serious classroom that aims to challenge its students and engage in rigorous scholarship, these alternative theories will be presented and discussed. In the previous example, we might ask: Do whites graduate college at a higher rate than blacks because of pervasive white privilege on college campuses or because of [mismatch theory](#) (the idea that affirmative action places black students in the wrong educational institutions)? Both theories have legitimate reasons to be presented in a classroom, and even if an instructor is convinced that privilege is the only answer he should not feel intimidated to present all possible explanations. Instructors should trust their students enough to present all explanations instead of omitting some theories because they do not conform to the privilege mantra. If an argument is sound and robust enough, it will persuade students. They should be able to decide for themselves what arguments they deem to be most compelling.

Finally, I ask my students, "How do we fix the disparity?" If students are convinced that the disparity is caused by privilege, then the only way to fix the problem is through systemic change. To address the disparity between white and black graduation rates, some solutions might include hiring more diversity officers, overhauling the resource centers, and implementing a more Afro-centric education model because the curriculum is founded in white supremacy. However, if the disparity is caused by something other than privilege, then colleges can overhaul as many departments as they'd like

and still not close the graduation gap between white and black students.

And this is why educators must avoid the “privilege is fact” mantra.

If educators always teach privilege as fact and never explore other possible explanations for disparities, then there is a very good chance that they will misdiagnose some problems and therefore never implement workable solutions. My assumption is that all educators want to close the egregious graduation gap between white and black students. Therefore, if mismatch theory offers a better diagnosis and solution than “white privilege,” wouldn’t you want to know and wouldn’t you want to give your students the opportunity to study it? If educators teach privilege as fact most of the time (which it is not, by standard scientific definition), then students are simply ingesting uncritical dogmas instead of hearing all theoretical explanations and reaching their own conclusions. Privilege as fact only serves to stifle debate by negating all other explanations. However, “privilege as theory” allows privilege to be discussed alongside every other possible explanatory theory for group disparities. Through robust debate, the best theories will rise to the top, group disparities will be properly diagnosed, and workable solutions can be implemented.

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