Examining “Reverse Discrimination” through the Lens of White Privilege

Historically, the sociology of race and ethnic relations has dedicated itself to the study of “the Other.” While past research in the social sciences has implied, both overtly and covertly, that minority groups are “the problem,” the study of whiteness makes problematic the identities and behaviors of the dominant group (Doane 2003). Moreover, scholarship that purports to study race relations is inadequate as long as the focus is exclusively on people of color as victims, leaving the topic of white privilege uninterrogated.

One of the ways that white privilege manifests in contemporary discourse is within the debate over affirmative action. As one of the most successful policies to address racial inequality in employment and education, affirmative action has also witnessed increasing hostility and resistance by whites, charging that the policy is discriminating against whites. While the empirical evidence of “reverse discrimination” is weak, its uncritical acceptance and political significance cannot be overlooked. It is important to point out the discursive ways that “reverse discrimination” attempts to, on one hand defend and maintain white privilege, while on the other hand cast whites as victims.

**Defining White Privilege**

Due to the fact that whiteness is portrayed as invisible and non-racial in media, in the classroom, and in everyday interactions, many people are resistant to the topic of white privilege altogether. Doane (2003) points out that the central component of the sociology of whiteness is
the idea of white racial invisibility, that “whites have a lower degree of self-awareness about race and their own racial identity than members of other racial-ethnic groups” (p.7). But Kimmel (2009) adds that this “invisibility is political” and that it is a privilege to have one’s race, gender, and class status be the norm against which everything else is measured against (xvi). Peggy McIntosh (1989) analogizes the invisibility of white privilege to the invisibility of male privilege. She defines white privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious…white privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and black checks” (p.4). The question then becomes: why is it so difficult for whites to see their privilege? Applebaum (2003) draws attention to how privilege is rendered invisible because dominant group members are systematically taught to see themselves as individuals, rather than members of a group. Undoubtedly, capitalism promotes individualistic thinking which tells us that our privileges are a purely a result of individual merit. George Lipsitz (1998) argues that there is a “possessive investment in whiteness” which speaks to the social and cultural forces that encourage whites to “expend time and energy on the creation and re-creation of whiteness” (p. viii). While not all whites are able to access white privilege equally due to differences in class and gender, all social actors regarded as white receive systemic privileges. Furthermore, white privilege is not something that can be abolished by simply renouncing privilege. McIntosh’s analogy of white privilege as a knapsack misleadingly implies that it is something that can simply be taken off. Applebaum (2003) states that “it is just another expression of privilege to think that one can part with or divest oneself from one’s dominant social location and what it bestows on one.” So the question then becomes: Is simply learning about white privilege and confronting one’s individual
prejudices enough to solve racism? Andersen (2003) illustrates that simply unlearning prejudice and racism, while advances in the struggle for eliminating racial inequality, “is likely to do little to unseat the apparatus of racial power” (p.30). So, white privilege is more than white skin privilege, it is rooted in the capitalist social structure which buttresses the material disparities between racial groups.

**The social construction of whiteness**

And so, what exactly is “whiteness”? To understand whiteness, we first need to define race. In academia, there is a general consensus that race is a socially constructed concept contingent upon social and material circumstances. Race is also an ideology which was set up to “legitimize dispossession, enslavement, and marginalization and to neutralize opposition to elites by creating a basis for forging cross-class alliances within the dominant group” (Doane, 2003:9). The racial category of “black,” for example, evolved with slavery. By the 17th century, African slaves who were Ibo, Yoruba, Fulani, etc., were suddenly homogenized under the label of “black” (Omi and Winant 1986). The racial category of “white” appeared around 1680 after England had colonized the eastern states (Omi and Winant 1986). Explaining whiteness, Shome (1999) writes: “Whiteness is not just about bodies and skin color, but rather more about the discursive practices that, because of colonialism and neocolonialism, privilege and sustain the global dominance of white imperial subjects and Eurocentric worldviews” (p. 108). Despite the fact that race is socially constructed, this does not mean that it is insignificant. The constructs of race have very real consequences as Cornel West demonstrates: “Categories are constructed, scars and bruises are felt within human bodies, some of which end up in coffins. Death is not a construct” (Klor de Alva, Shorris, and West 1997:485).

During the 19th century, the racial category of “white” became contested with the influx
of immigrants from Southern Europe, Ireland, as well as people of Jewish heritage. Within the historiography of whiteness, some scholars have made the argument that some European immigrants mentioned above became “fully white” over time. Analyzing the case of Italian immigrants in Chicago from 1890-1945, Guglielmo (2003) argues that while there was undoubtedly racial prejudice and discrimination, Italians were nevertheless largely accepted as white by most people and social institutions and further reaped the benefits of white privilege. This was evidenced by Italians’ ability to naturalize as U.S. citizens, work at particular jobs, live in certain neighborhoods, and patronize a variety of stores and services. It is important to revisit this stage where whiteness was contested because it continues to bare significance in explaining present day racial inequality. One way that white privilege is presently denied is by invoking the argument that Italians, for example, were initially discriminated against and managed to pull themselves up by the bootstraps and gain success. The logic of this argument then goes to say that African-Americans simply did not have the motivation to similarly pull themselves up out of poverty. This romanticized version of history neglects the role that white privilege played in the success of Italians and other European immigrants. Contrary to the widely held beliefs that various European immigrants became white over time, Guglielmo (2003) proves that they were actually granted “whiteness on arrival” which ultimately proved to be their “single most powerful asset” which bestowed countless advantages over Blacks and Native Americans in virtually every aspect of life (p.61).

**White Privilege is Dead?: Deconstructing the myth of “reverse discrimination”**

The language society uses to describe a social problem is just as revealing as the ideas they express. The phrase “reverse discrimination” or “reverse racism” to describe how
affirmative action affects whites has been fully adopted into the American lexicon. Pincus (2003) explains why this term is so problematic: “It inflames passions, exaggerates the negative impact of affirmative action on whites, and promotes a conservative and erroneous view of race and gender relations in the United States” (p.79). The concept of “reverse discrimination” is deserving of scrutiny because it is a powerful rhetorical tool that negates the ongoing reality of white privilege. Additionally, as Doane (2003) points out, casting whites as victims “provides a strong basis for countermobilization and the defense of white privilege” (p.17).

The topic of “reverse discrimination” first appeared in the 1970s with the lawsuit Regents of the University of California v Bakke in 1978. Alan Bakke, a white student, was denied admissions into the University of California at Davis medical school and sued because he alleged it was because he was white. In effort to create diversity in the student body, the university had specifically reserved sixteen out of 100 spaces for minority students. The case was eventually taken to the U.S. Supreme Court and the justices ruled 5-4 in favor of Bakke, granting him admissions into the medical school.

Notions of white victimhood, particularly white male victimhood, defy reality because white males have consistently possessed the highest income and educational levels in the U.S. In 1996 when debates on affirmative action were heated and “reverse discrimination” was commonly alleged, white males held about 75 percent of the highest earning occupations with 95 percent being at the very top, despite the fact that they only constituted about 30 percent of the population (Staples 1996). Another important aspect that helps sustain the myth of “reverse discrimination” is the socialization of white males to entitlement. Staples (1996) explains: “Underling this belief is the assumption that white males are entitled to 100 percent of the high paying occupations, as they had prior to 1965, because they are intellectually superior to people
of color and women” (p. 3).

So reverse discrimination is a myth that has gained credence through a variety of mechanisms. According to Pincus (2003b) the percentage of whites who claim that they have actually experienced employment discrimination due to race is drastically lower than other racial groups. To put this in perspective, there are more men charging sex discrimination than whites charging race discrimination. Even though whites aren’t discriminated against as often as other racial groups, Pincus states that “between two-thirds and three-fourths of whites believe that whites, as a group, are hurt by affirmative action” (p.4).

While the most outspoken opponents of affirmative action are thought to be white males, white women have also been involved in the promotion of “reverse discrimination.” Indeed, there is a social perception that white women, being ascribed as more passive and empathic than men, are incapable of promoting racism. However, contrary to this belief, Hughes and Tuch (2003) concluded that there are few differences in the racial beliefs between white women and white men. One of the differences they discovered was that white women were more slightly likely than white men to support affirmative action in college admissions, but not for employment. Explaining the mutual rejection for affirmative action in employment, Hughes and Tuch (2003) explain that “this suggests that white women and white men may view African Americans’ presence in the labor force in much the same way: as a threat to the privileged status that whites traditionally have enjoyed” (p.395).

When formulating opinions on affirmative actions, whites are forced to consider their location within the racial hierarchy. In a qualitative study of whites’ attitudes toward affirmative action, Gallagher (2004) discovered that both supporters and opponents were “linked explicitly by a struggle to understand, define, or defend, being white and the extent to which white
privilege still exists” (p.2). So a person’s understanding of white privilege or lack thereof is instrumental in determining whether s/he will fall victim to the illusion that affirmative action discriminates against whites.

**Conclusion**

As a concept in the discussion of racial inequality in the U.S., white privilege continues to be a neglected area of consideration. Within the debate on affirmative action, opponents who promote the false notion that it is “reverse discrimination” proves that white privilege is not only alive and well, but also that it is a concept that is avidly denied despite the mounting evidence of racial disparities in all areas of social life. Additionally, the widespread acceptance of “reverse discrimination,” despite a lack of empirical evidence, should be deeply concerning for all those who claim to be anti-racist. There must be a greater understanding of the material realities surrounding white privilege and how it subverts reality in order to maintain the material benefits accrued to whites. The lack of understanding about the dynamics of white privilege thwarts the progress of increasing racial consciousness, which is a necessary pre-requisite in the struggle to abolish racism.
Work Cited:


Sociological Association Conference.
