
Entitlement

From Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice by Paul Kivel

Having benefits and being part of the culture of power encourages a person to develop a sense of entitlement to special treatment. Entitlement is the sense you are owed certain rights, privileges, services or material goods because of who you are. In Western countries a person's race, class and gender strongly influence what they feel entitled to.

Of course, there are some entitlements we might all agree are legally or morally good. A right to a decent job, to food and housing, to free speech, to be able to vote — we might call these basic rights.

But I use entitlement here in a different way. When you don't expect to have to wait your turn or wait in line or take a number, when you do have to do these things and you see other people being served ahead of you, you may feel angry at these people who, even though they arrived earlier than you, you perceive as being given preference. In fact, it is simply your sense of entitlement being challenged.

When I was younger there were times when I would walk past a receptionist and into my office without saying anything to her. There were times when I did not acknowledge or talk with the people maintaining the building in which I went to school, or the people who cleaned my dorm room in college or my motel room when I traveled. When this behavior was pointed out to me and I began to notice it in myself, I realized I felt entitled to other people's services and assumed they existed to take care of my needs. At first I thought that to correct this I had to become friends with people who provided services for me. However, I soon realized what was required from me was not friendship, but acknowledgement of and respect for people who were contributing to my well-being and the well-being of the community. I needed to see them differently, as full human beings, rather than as support staff for my life and activities.

How does entitlement show itself? I have noticed it in the following ways. (I have put the word white in parentheses because although I think that it is usually white people exhibiting these behaviors, this is not always the case. There are certainly people of color, especially those with economic means, who do these things as well.)

(White) People cutting in line in front of others because they think their needs have a priority.

(White) Drivers cutting in front of other cars because they are in a hurry.

(White) People walking by or ignoring people like receptionists, maintenance staff or cleaning staff.

(White) People feeling OK about paying childcare workers, au pairs, gardeners, in-home attendants and other workers less than a living wage.

(White) People who become impatient when they don't receive the prompt service or the attention they feel entitled to and direct abusive comments at the staff who are dealing with them.



(White) People who leave a paltry tip or no tip at all when they can well afford to tip generously.

(White) People quickly judging the motives and behavior of people they don't know and holding their own group up for comparison.

(White) People taking up more time and attention than their fair share in conversations, classrooms, meetings and public events.

(White) People speaking for others, about others or using phrases like "we," "they" or "that group" rather than "I think," "I feel," "In my opinion."

(White) People using possessive adjectives in such phrases as "They are taking our jobs, invading our country, destroying our neighborhood, or disrupting our workplace."

I know I have often acted from a sense of entitlement, but because I grew up believing in equal opportunity and equal rights, I had to develop a rationale for my behavior. I had to explain to myself why I deserved better treatment, quicker access, prompter service and more airtime in meetings. As a result I have consciously or unconsciously told myself that I deserve preferential treatment because:

I am better educated

I have more experience

I am more rational

My time is more valuable

I worked hard to get to where I am

They probably don't need as much to live on

I don't actually have direct contact with them so I am not responsible

I need to get there on time

I have only just begun to see the sense of entitlement these excuses mask and the degree to which they are rationalizations for inequality and racism.

Besides lessening our own sense of entitlement, we can also challenge the behavior of those around us. In a public place we can ask people to wait their turn. In a meeting we can ask those who have spoken a lot not to speak again until everyone has had a turn. We can ask people to use "I" statements and not make generalizations about others. And we can challenge people's rationalizations for unequal and inadequate wages, benefits, tips and other forms of monetary compensation. In public discussions we can challenge people about their sense of entitlement to

jobs, education or housing when past policies of discrimination have given preference to white people or restricted access to people of color.

1.6. Entitlement

1. Look over the list of entitlements above and note the ones that you have felt at times.
2. What others would you add to the list?
3. Which rationalizations have you used to explain the preference you felt you deserved?
4. Has your sense of entitlement ever led you to ignore the needs or rights of others?
5. What impact does it have on others and on the community when you act out of a sense of personal entitlement?
6. How can you better notice the impact of entitlement on your family, work and school environments?



