

Critical Thinking Activity

Standpoint Epistemology and Ignorance

1. According to the *achievement thesis* in standpoint epistemology, the relevant epistemic privilege had by socially marginalized agents needs to be acquired, through struggle (Toole 2019). It is not given. However, there is a competing idea, the *automatic epistemic privilege thesis*, according to which socially marginalized agents automatically have better evidence about the relevant subject matter (e.g., justice, racism, sexism, classism, ableism) than their non-marginalized counterparts (Wylie 2003).

Do you think that the achievement thesis is plausible? Explain why you do or why you do not. Or do you think that the automatic privilege thesis is plausible?

2. **[Group discussion—no writing necessary]** Next, read the passage below about an event concerning the governor of Virginia, Ralph Northam, who's yearbook revealed a picture of him in blackface next to a man wearing a Ku Klux Klan hood. Discuss in small groups, with reference to this case, whether people can be culpable (i.e., held accountable, deserving of blame) for any instance of white ignorance perpetrated by them.

During his gubernatorial run in 2017, Northam said, the subject of "blackfacing," as he called it, came up in a conversation with his campaign assistant. "He really did a good job of communicating to me why that's so offensive," Northam claimed.

I don't believe that a 59-year-old white man who grew up in rural Virginia in the 1960s and 1970s didn't know that wearing blackface is offensive.

It's not just white privilege that sustains white supremacy. It's also the privilege of ignorance.

Given the number of photos in the [Eastern Virginia Medical School's 1984 yearbook](#) that feature Northam's classmates in blackface, I can't imagine that racist clowning wasn't a regular part of their experiences. You don't black up your face or dress as a Klansman without recognizing the shock it will evoke. It's a racist horror played as a joke for white people.

"In the place and time when I grew up, many actions that we rightfully recognize as abhorrent today, were commonplace," Northam said. Of course, to black people they were always abhorrent, which is exactly why racists engaged in them. Still, there's always another white person wearing blackface who, in the midst of outrage and condemnation, will use ignorance as a defense.

Excerpt [Renée Graham "Blackface and the privilege of white ignorance | Boston Globe Feb. 4th 2019.](#)

3. **[Group writing activity]** According to standpoint epistemology, women and other marginalized and disadvantaged groups are in unique epistemic positions, positions of **social disadvantage** but also **epistemic advantage** (e.g., the unique epistemic position people of color are in with respect to white racist behavior, or women with respect to rape culture, or warehouse workers with respect to living hand-to-mouth and bad bosses).

According to Alison Wylie (2003), “unless standpoints provide special warrant for the knowledge produced by those who occupy them, standpoint theory devolves into a corrosive (now solipsistic) relativism. Talk of better and worse knowledge can make no sense unless we have a firm grip on notions of truth and objectivity that are robust enough to anchor epistemic justification; standpoint theorists have evoked, but failed to deliver, epistemic foundations” (Wylie 2003, 30).

What is Wylie's objection?	
Do you agree with Wylie's objection? Either explain why you do or why you do not:	