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Doing (and undoing) privilege: evaluating how public policy drives health inequities

Ashley Schram^a , Amy Carrad^a , Belinda Townsend^a , Patrick Harris^b , Fran Baum^c ,
Lucie Rychetnik^d , Steven Allender^e , Melanie Pescud^f , Nicholas Frank^a , Megan Arthur^a  and
Sharon Friel^a 

^aSchool of Regulation and Global Governance, Australian National University, Acton, Australia; ^bCentre for Health Equity and Training, Research and Evaluation (CHETRE), Liverpool Hospital, University of New South Wales, Liverpool, Australia; ^cStretton Health Equity & School of Social Science, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia; ^dLeeder Centre for Health Policy, Economics and Data, Faculty of Medicine and Health, University of Sydney, Newtown, Australia; ^eInstitute for Health Transformation, Deakin University, Geelong, Australia; ^fSchool of Allied Health, University of Western Australia, Crawley, Australia

ABSTRACT

In an era marked by persistent health inequities, this commentary moves beyond the conventional focus on disadvantage and individual-level interventions to present novel conceptual and analytical thinking that illuminates the role of structurally entrenched advantage. We present a multi-level conceptualisation of privilege through which the structural drivers of health inequities can be examined and the reciprocal relationship between privilege and public policy explored, shedding light on how these forces shape and reinforce one another. Building on that foundation, we propose an innovative research agenda that scrutinises the ideas, mechanisms, and outcomes of resource accumulation and distribution in public policy. We aim to lay the groundwork for developing and evaluating policy interventions through a new lens to address the root causes of inequities in health, paving the way for more equitable and healthy societies.

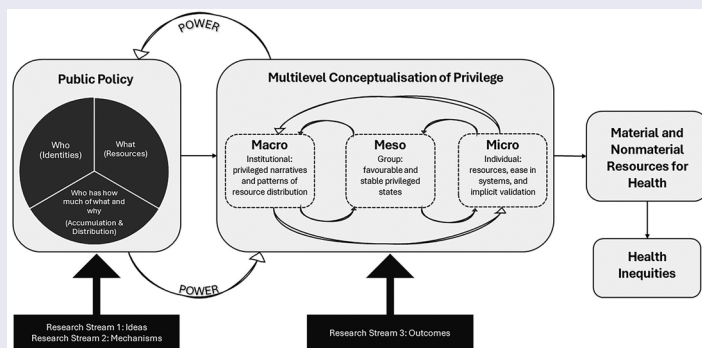
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GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



Public policies, whether intentionally or unintentionally, create and maintain social and economic structures that differentially allocate resources and opportunities across population groups (Phelan et al., 2010; Reeves, 2018). For instance, housing policies can reinforce residential segregation for certain communities, thus concentrating poverty and limiting access to quality education, employment opportunities, and wealth creation (Rothstein, 2017). Similarly, education policies that tie school funding to local property taxes can exacerbate inequities in educational quality and outcomes between affluent and low-income areas (Darling-Hammond, 2018). Structural inequities, shaped by policy decisions that advantage some over others, accumulate over time and across generations, resulting in deeply entrenched patterns of socioeconomic advantage and disadvantage (Hansen, 2014; van de Werfhorst, 2002; Wiedner & Schaeffer, 2020). These advantages are a crucial precursor to the accumulation of material (e.g. nutritious food, quality housing, health insurance) and non-material (e.g. social support, job control, esteem) resources. In this way, the inequitable distribution of socioeconomic advantage manifests in health inequities – unfair and avoidable differences in health outcomes (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008).

CONTACT Ashley Schram  ashley.schram@anu.edu.au

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Increased scholarly attention is being paid to structural forms of discrimination and their negative health implications (Bailey et al., 2017; Phelan & Link, 2015). This important body of research has predominantly focused on disadvantage and poor health among marginalised groups (Williams et al., 2019). However, some scholars have noted that this emphasis on disadvantage may be a barrier to transformative change by overlooking the reciprocal process of unearned advantage or privilege (Nixon, 2019). Hamilton and Hamilton (2024) further observe that while some progress has been made in drawing attention to and attempting to address (but by no means successfully resolve) racial- and gender-based privilege, there has been little to no appetite for redressing elite privilege. Moreover, despite increasing awareness of structural determinants of health, research aimed at developing and evaluating social interventions to address structural inequities – as opposed to interventions targeting ‘at risk’ or marginalised communities and individuals – is still in its infancy (Brown et al., 2019).

This paper aims to advance conceptual and analytical thinking for the study of structural drivers of entrenched advantage and the role of public policy in perpetuating that advantage. It is our hope that progressing this field of study will offer a balance to the focus on disadvantaged communities and individuals. To achieve this, the paper has three primary objectives: (1) develop a conceptualisation of privilege for health equity and public policy studies; (2) elucidate the connection between public policy and privilege; and (3) propose an approach for researching these connections.

Conceptualising privilege for health equity and public policy studies

Our conceptual framework is informed by a range of literature examining privilege and advantage. While acknowledging the foundational contributions of key scholars in the fields of privilege and intersectionality (McIntosh, 2003; Crenshaw, 2013); we drew primarily on literature exploring class privilege and elites (Grusky, 2019; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2024; Khan, 2012; Savage, 2015). These bodies of work were selected for their explicit focus on how advantage is systematically produced and maintained through social structures and institutions, rather than individual-level analyses or emphases on disadvantaged populations. It was also informed through targeted consultations with academic experts and stakeholders. These included in-depth discussions with leading scholars in the study of privilege, elites, wealth inequalities, and social mobility from disciplines such as political science, sociology, and economics. As well as discussions with policymakers from health and treasury engaged with these issues. We offer here the following multi-level conceptualisation of privilege:

1. at a macro level, privilege is a systemic phenomenon that operates through institutional practices, including public policy, which inadvertently, or intentionally, create or reinforce dominant cultural narratives and patterns of resource accumulation and distribution;
2. at a meso level, privilege is a favourable and stable state ascribed to select social groups (e.g. white privilege, male privilege, class privilege); and
3. at a micro level, privilege manifests as the concentration of resources and opportunities among individuals, reduced barriers to navigating social, economic, and political systems, and implicit social and cultural validation for some as a result of the intersection of macro and meso practices.

Additionally, we understand privilege as a self-reinforcing cycle entwined with the concept of power. That is, the advantages associated with privilege produce disproportionate representation in the development of ideas and institutions, which in turn and over time, perpetuate and amplify existing inequities (Skinner-Dorkenoo et al., 2023). While power and privilege are often used interchangeably, we suggest that they are conceptually distinct – power being more about influence (e.g. directing public policy), and privilege as the advantages derived from that influence (e.g. attendance at elite private schools) – but mutually constitutive. Furthermore, while we situate privileged populations at the top end of the social gradient, we recognise that there is also a gradient within privileged populations that ranges from routine affluence to the extreme elite. We might think of this subset of the gradient as moving from the ‘have-lots’ to the ‘have-super-yachts’ (Osno, 2022).

By framing privilege as a multi-level systemic phenomenon, it brings greater attention to the broader societal structures and institutional practices that drive the concentration of advantage for some, and in turn, our ability to systematically study these spaces as sites of intervention. Moreover, it encourages explicit investigation into the complex interplay between institutional policies, group-level ascriptions, and individual experiences of privilege, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how these factors work in unison and collectively impact health inequities.

Connecting public policy and privilege

Hamilton and Hamilton argue that privilege studies should focus more on ‘the social practice and process by which advantages and benefits are conferred on those with wealth and influence’ (2024, p. 5). We propose that public policy is an important macro-level arena where these practices and processes of constructing privilege unfold. To establish the connections between public policy and privilege, we unpack two reciprocal mechanisms: how privilege enables access to power and influence to shape public policy, and how public policy, in turn, affects the distribution of socioeconomic advantages

associated with privilege. Acknowledging that public policy can be messy and contradictory, we recognise two opposing movements within each of these mechanisms: the ‘doing’ of privilege – perpetuating existing patterns of advantage; and the ‘undoing’ of privilege – disrupting and rebalancing existing patterns of advantage.

From privilege to power over public policy

A growing body of evidence has demonstrated how power is deployed across public policy processes to influence action, or lack thereof, on health equity (Friel et al., 2021; Townsend et al., 2020). Harris et al. (2020, p. 548) note that ‘articulating the architecture of power within policy institutions is an important step in understanding the policy dynamics, actions, and decisions that create or maintain health inequities, and to taking action to disrupt those dynamics in the interests of health equity’. Here we identify an important set of dynamics, that of entrenched advantage or privilege.

The power of those with privilege to influence public policy manifests in various interconnected ways, including their ability to mobilise resources, form coalitions, and engage in lobbying activities that sway policy decisions in their favour (Hacker & Pierson, 2010). Privileged groups often occupy key decision-making positions in government and society, or are brought in through consultancy roles (Anaf & Baum, 2024), allowing them to directly shape policy rules and mandates (Domhoff, 2019). Moreover, these groups can set the narratives that inform policy debates and frame issues in ways that align with their interests (Béland, 2009). This concentration of power in the hands of the advantaged can lead to policy outcomes that reinforce existing advantages and perpetuate inequities (Gilens & Page, 2014).

Institutional theories posit that ideas and rules, once embedded within organisational structures and societal frameworks, develop a form of self-reinforcing power (Scott, 2008). Established norms and practices become resistant to change and exert significant influence over future decision-making and policy trajectories (Blanco et al., 2022; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013). These institutionalised ideas and rules can acquire a path-dependent quality, shaping subsequent institutional developments and perpetuating existing power dynamics within social and political systems (Pierson, 2000).

From public policy to privilege

The doing and undoing of privilege can occur across all stages of the policy cycle, varying in visibility and overtness. Legislation, for example, can be highly visible and overt, such as the infamous Jim Crow laws in the United States, which explicitly mandated racial segregation in public spaces (Edwards & Thompson, 2010). Still visible but less overt, many countries have historically invested in industries (e.g. construction, mining) dominated by male labour, indirectly privileging the male workforce and their economic contributions (De Henau et al., 2016). Alternatively, public policy may shape privilege in more hidden ways – such as the biased implementation of COVID regulations that allowed some populations to buy or negotiate their way out of lockdowns and border closure measures (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2024). Alternatively, public policies, such as the introduction of measures to tax wealth (Saez & Zucman, 2022) or gender-neutral parental leave (Earle et al., 2023) may have the effect of undoing privilege.

We propose three interrelated pathways via which public policy shapes privilege:

1. constructing group and sectoral identities;
2. constructing resource value; and
3. constructing rules and values for accumulation and distribution.

These pathways form the foundation for how public policies shape ‘the who’, ‘the what’, ‘the who has how much of what’, and ‘why’ in society. Informed by significant scholarly works related to concepts of resource accumulation and distribution (Brenner, 2006; Harvey, 2020; Piketty, 2014), for the purposes of advancing a research agenda we define accumulation as the process by which resources are concentrated over time by individuals, groups, or entities within society; underpinned by the legally or socially recognised rights of possession and authority over resources. Conversely, we think of distribution as the pattern of resource dispersal across society. Accumulation and distribution are two sides of the same coin and both concern questions of equity and fairness.

The following section suggests how to operationalise the conceptual thinking advanced here to inform research of public policy as a structural site for the doing and undoing of privilege.

Connecting public policy and privilege: three streams of research

Our research approach, detailed below, focuses on three streams – ideas, mechanisms, and outcomes, drawing from established methods in policy analysis and evaluation. It emphasises the tradition of exploring narratives and framing (Fischer & Forester, 1993), the turn to mechanisms to understand how and why interventions work (Pawson & Tilley, 1997), and the longstanding role of outcomes in evidence-based policymaking processes (Davies & Nutley, 2000).

Ideas about identity, resources, accumulation and distribution

We propose a first stream of research focused on studying ideas that are central to the construction of privilege in public policy, specifically examining concepts of identity, resource value, and principles of accumulation and distribution. The way a policy forms, reinforces, or challenges different identities can reveal mechanisms through which privilege is assigned or denied. Research shows that deficit narratives in public policy often focus on what individuals or communities lack, emphasising deficiencies and dysfunctions rather than strengths or potential (Brown, 2019; Gorski, 2011). In contrast, narratives of privilege may be non-existent or more subtle to discern.

Public policies may construct or reinforce favourable identities for certain groups, such as men or white people, through both explicit and implicit framing and language. For instance, labour policies may prioritise traditionally male-dominated industries (e.g. manufacturing, technology), implicitly casting men as economic drivers. Similarly, education policies may emphasise Western history and literature, positioning white cultural perspectives as the standard and relegating other viewpoints as alternative. Policies may reinforce favourable constructions of identities that underpin current patterns of accumulation. For example, policies promoting privatisation may frame markets and private sector management as inherently more efficient and responsive than public sector alternatives. This framing not only solidifies a positive market identity but may also justify wealth accumulation in top-level management positions. These effects require critical analysis to identify and address the status quo.

Examining what resources policies elevate and why may offer further insight into the foundations of privilege. For instance, the types of human capital (e.g. technical skills, soft skills) that are valued can shape who has access to high-paying jobs and influential positions. Conversely, the undervaluation of care work, often performed by women, contributes to gender-based economic disparities (World Health Organization, 2024). Similarly, policies emphasising economic growth over environmental conservation prioritise short-term economic gains over long-term sustainability, often benefiting certain industries and communities while disadvantaging others (Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010).

Finally, analysing ideas that underpin principles of accumulation and distribution is crucial for understanding how policies allocate resources and opportunities and reflect deeper societal values and power structures. For instance, the presence (or absence) of inheritance tax policies may reveal societal attitudes towards intergenerational wealth transfer and economic mobility. More subtly, reinforcing and deepening systems of privatisation of public resources reflects and reinforces societal values that prioritise individual ownership and commodification over collective or universal forms of resource management. These signal a particular view of economic development and social organisation that can exacerbate existing inequities in wealth and influence. By critically examining the ideas above, we can uncover how policy language, framing, and underlying ideologies shape distributive decisions and perpetuate or challenge existing socioeconomic arrangements.

Mechanisms for accumulation and distribution

The second research stream we propose focuses on examining the mechanisms of accumulation and distribution embedded in public policies. By mechanisms, we refer to the policy structures, practices, and resource flows that governments adopt to achieve their policy objectives. This ranges from the introduction of legislative changes, organisational restructuring, budget allocations, and decision-making processes, to training programs, certification requirements, and reporting mechanisms. These elements are interconnected and crucial in shaping how resources and opportunities are accumulated and distributed within a society.

For example, the composition of governance boards responsible for policy implementation can profoundly influence patterns of accumulation, as board members' perspectives and priorities influence strategic decisions and resource allocation. Whether decision-making processes are centralised or participatory, visible or hidden, may similarly affect how resources are allocated. The effects of mechanisms contained within public policies may also be more direct, such as tax policies guiding progressive tax brackets or public subsidies for private education and healthcare.

Additionally, this research stream should assess alignment between a policy's stated principles or goals and its mechanisms, since ideas about addressing the inequitable distribution of resources may be articulated in policy discussions without corresponding mechanisms to effect such change (Fisher et al., 2017). Discrepancies between these elements can highlight structural advantages that perpetuate privilege. Researchers should also explore policy silences (Yanow, 1992) – deliberate or inadvertent omission of certain issues, groups, or topics within the policy. These omissions can be as informative as explicit mechanisms in revealing how privilege operates.

Outcomes of accumulation and distribution

Here, we propose a third stream of research focused on revealing and monitoring the outcomes of accumulation and distribution. Describing and monitoring the distribution of socioeconomic advantage in society is required to understand whether structural interventions to undo privilege, such as those through public policy, are having the intended effects. Tracking monetary indicators, such as income and wealth, is essential for measuring economic distribution over time. These metrics offer tangible insights into whether interventions are successfully redistributing resources and opportunities. For example,

monitoring shifts in household wages and wealth distribution can reveal the effects of policy changes on accumulation and distribution.

However, privilege includes a range of social advantages and experiences not captured by economic indicators alone (Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2024; Khan, 2012; Savage et al., 2013). Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital (Bourdieu, 2018) – identifying four forms of capital: economic, social, cultural, and symbolic – may provide a useful framework for developing more nuanced indicators and a more comprehensive measurement of privilege. Economic capital refers to financial assets, social capital pertains to the connections and networks that facilitate opportunities and signal social positioning, cultural capital includes knowledge, skills, and educational credentials, and symbolic capital involves recognition and prestige that enhance social standing. Research informed by this approach may also have the benefit of detecting whether different forms of capital are sensitive to different types of policy interventions.

Conclusion

Understanding and addressing the ways in which privilege is created and maintained through public policy, can better inform policy interventions that tackle the fundamental causes of health inequity. Here we advance several conceptual innovations to support this: (1) a deliberate shift in analytical focus to examine advantage alongside disadvantage, moving beyond traditional deficit-focused approaches; (2) a novel conceptualisation of privilege that explicitly incorporates structural dimensions, enhancing the field's capacity for meaningful policy analysis; (3) a theoretical delineation between power and privilege for analytical purposes; and (4) the introduction of privilege as a gradient to capture a more nuanced perspective of the variation within privileged populations. Our proposed research agenda, focusing on ideas, mechanisms, and outcomes of accumulation and distribution in public policy, offers a systematic approach to investigating these complex dynamics. This agenda encourages researchers to delve into the narratives that shape policy, the concrete mechanisms through which policies operate, and the multidimensional outcomes that result from these processes. Ultimately, this paper lays the groundwork for a more comprehensive and nuanced approach to health equity and policy research.

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Our research team comprises white, European-descent scholars with English as a primary language, situated within academic institutions that reflect a position of structural privilege. While heterogeneity exists within our team's experiences of gender, socioeconomic background, and geographical location, we explicitly acknowledge our collective positioning. Our emphasis in this project is on 'studying up and across' – that is, focusing on groups who occupy similar or more powerful positions in society. We view this work as a direct response to scholarly calls for privileged individuals and groups to critically engage with, analyse, and actively work to reduce systemic inequities by redressing the unearned advantages of the privileged.

Author contributions

AS, AC, BT, PH, SF, FB, SA, LR, MA, and NF contributed to the conception of the paper. AC conducted data curation. All authors contributed to the formal analysis. AS, BT, PH, SF, FB, SA, MP, and LR contributed to funding acquisition. AS and AC conducted validation. AS wrote the original draft. All authors performed critical review and editing of the manuscript's intellectual content and approved the final version to be published.







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ORCID

Ashley Schram  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5231-6291>
Amy Carrad  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6202-0539>
Belinda Townsend  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2480-2820>
Patrick Harris  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4649-4013>
Fran Baum  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2294-1368>
Lucie Rychetnik  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6855-2897>
Steven Allender  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4842-3294>
Melanie Pescud  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9073-3093>

Nicholas Frank  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6385-698X>

Megan Arthur  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6632-388X>

Sharon Friel  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8345-5435>

Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable – no new data generated.

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