

Reflecting on Identity Privilege

If you've moved in any social justice circles, or even if you haven't, you've probably come across the concepts of privilege and oppression. The idea that some people are innately advantaged over others just because of who they are.

You may be thinking, duh? Perhaps it's obvious to you, but for many this idea of axes of advantage and disadvantage can often appear quite abstract, particularly if we are not aware of any immediate effects on our lives. Some of those effects are so deeply entrenched in our culture that we don't even notice them.

It takes hard work to actively dismantle the harmful dichotomies and systemic oppression that we have been shaped by but it is essential if we are to build strong, resilient and compassionate communities. First, we need to begin by acknowledging and 'checking' our own privilege.

This reading will help you reflect on identity privilege, what it means and how we can move forward. It has been divided into the following sections for ease of reference.

Understanding Privilege

Our relationship to Privilege

You are privileged.

What's your reaction to that statement? Your initial, knee jerk reaction? Sit with that feeling for a moment, let it fill you up. Really examine what's driving that emotion.

Quite possibly, you don't see yourself as a privileged person. Many of us do not actually feel privileged. We may have jobs we don't like, be in financial situations which are less than ideal, and/or we may be being mistreated and undermined by people around us.

It's completely valid if you hear an 'accusation' of privilege and feel defensive, confused, even angry. How can we be privileged when our lives are so uncomfortable and when so many things are out of our control?

The answer is that these things are relative. We all experience privilege within the context of our own experiences. It's not always possible to see the ways you are advantaged because that would mean understanding something hidden, a series of challenges and hindrances that are invisible to us, unless we take a special effort to put ourselves in others' shoes.

A right-handed person, for example, is privileged in that most equipment is made for them. They do not have to drag their hand through the ink when they write. They are likely to go through their daily lives feeling as if the hand they use most is irrelevant. They simply write, cook, drive and live

their daily lives feeling as if the hand they use most is irrelevant.

A left-handed person conversely has the trouble of needing specially made tools and equipment to be made or purchased for them at additional cost. They must drag their hand through the ink when they write. As children they may have been chastised for doing ordinary activities in the way that feels right for their body.

A right-handed person may not think about their dominant hand because they don't have to. This is what it means to be privileged. It's about what you don't have to put up with. So, by extension the right-handed person might not place any importance in being right-handed. They may not consider it a part of their identity. This is because it's an example of a majority identity.

Most privileged identities are typical of the majority of people. They are seen as the 'default' people belonging to these dominant groups then, are never really forced to examine their place in the world and they grow up blind to the advantages they have over others.

Don't Put Me In A Box: The Labels of Privilege

Our identities are very complex things. How you feel about yourself, what you consider defines you, or how your loved ones would describe is a closer representation of your true self. We certainly place greater stock on some parts of ourselves than others. We may be more comfortable with some parts of ourselves than others. We may have identities like 'parent', 'artist', 'animal lover', but these are labels we choose; labels we gain through patterns of behaviour and thereby don't carry the weight of prescribed privilege.

This is not what we mean when we discuss issues of identity privilege. Identity privilege is any unearned benefit or advantage one receives in society by nature of their identity. Something you have just from the lottery of birth. Some examples are: Race, religious heritage, gender identity, sexual orientation, class/wealth, ability or citizenship status.

Identity privilege is connected to the way you are viewed by the people around you and your position in society. The privilege is related to the label on the box you have been put in that gives you a greater status or that allows you to access more opportunities than others.

If we accept this concept of privilege, then it follows logically that there is a flipside. Those who are diametrically opposed to the privileged identity are systematically oppressed instead. They are saddled with an unfair disadvantage due to something they cannot control.

The Lottery of Birth

It can be very easy to see the ways in which we are oppressed. Many of us are far readier to examine these than to face up to how we may be unfairly privileged over others since this can often carry with it many difficult emotions of anger, and guilt.

Consider these hypothetical people:

- Samuel and Fiona are comfortable walking down the street holding hands, they have no reason to fear retribution when they kiss each other. **How might this be different for a homosexual couple?**
- Hayley uses the women's public toilets without hesitation. **If Hayley was a trans woman, why might she have more trouble doing this?**
- Daniel is confident the police exist to protect him and will treat him with respect. **If Daniel was black, would this be the case?**
- Martha never worries about whether she is going to be able to enter a building. **If Martha was a full-time wheelchair user, she probably would. Why?**
- Brian is unafraid to walk home by himself at night. **Do you think his sister Mia would feel the same? Why?**
- Tina has been given a parking fine. She considers this only a minor inconvenience. **Why do you think this might be?**

What have you identified when considering the above scenarios and questions?

Why don't you try and do the same exercise with yourself - it can be effective to compare notes with others and discuss your different experiences.

Power structures

Now that we understand the idea of identity privilege it's important to examine how our society is set up to favour some identities over others. This favouritism is connected to the mechanisms and structure of oppression, and the allocation of power and how it is wielded.

Majority identities hold the power by virtue of their privileged position. They serve as the measure of what is normal, real and correct. Much of their power links to their ability to define reality, and this happens on every level of society.

Individual beliefs and values align with this idea of reality, which is skewed in favour of the dominant identity. These beliefs and values are reinforced on an interpersonal level through actions, language and our interactions with others, and then on an institutional level through our political system, which shapes public policy, the legal and education system, and the workplace. The media, which is shaped by our power structures and which reinforces them, also informs collective ideas about who or what is 'right', who or what is 'attractive' and who or what is 'dangerous'. These ideas are therefore integrated into our individual belief systems as we grow, and help to create a self-perpetuating and self-propagating system, which builds and sustains itself from one generation to the next.

We can see then, looking at history, how things can change drastically when people begin to question the collective ideas they have been raised with.

The Face Of Oppression

Oppression can take many forms, and can lead to people being scrutinized, marginalized and isolated throughout their lives. Oppression gives life to prejudices, which often form as a means of justifying oppressive structures: women are oppressed by the patriarchal and sexist structures in society, people of colour are oppressed by white supremacy and racist structures.

An important point is this oppression happens at all levels, as we have just seen, reinforced by societal norms, institutional biases, interpersonal interactions and individual beliefs. Even more important: we are all complicit. Some of us may be more complicit than others, but we can all be oppressors, just as we can all be oppressed.

This is a tough pill to swallow. It's one step beyond telling people they are privileged, to tell them they are also automatically then, oppressors or members of an oppressive group.

Most white people, for example, don't see themselves as racist. They see racism as a prejudice leading to hateful, violent actions, which horrifies them as they would never do that, they resent being slandered as a racist.

Now while it's true violent attacks are one manifestation of racism, there is so much else that goes unseen beneath the surface. The violent attacks are only made possible by the structures of power that support them. If white people grow up seeing people of colour as alien, even as dangerous or as 'less than' then they begin to treat them that way. Either subtle undermining or direct bullying may take place right into adulthood as people act on their beliefs, and then the laws, the public institutions that are built and maintained by the same people that have unknowingly racist beliefs propagate discriminatory practice - this may not be as overt (i.e. Jim Crow laws) anymore but rather covert (disproportionate incarceration of black offenders) - and these ideals and re-disseminated via the media.

Black author Scott Woods sums it up:

“The problem is that white people see racism as conscious hate, when racism is bigger than that. Racism is a complex system of social and political levers and pulleys set up generations ago to continue working on the behalf of whites at other people's expense, whether whites know/like it or not. Racism is an insidious cultural disease. It is so insidious that it doesn't care if you are a white person who likes Black people; it's still going to find a way to infect how you deal with people who don't look like you.*

Yes, racism looks like hate, but hate is just one manifestation. Privilege is another. Access is another. Ignorance is another. Apathy is another, and so on. So, while I agree with people who say no one is born racist, it remains a powerful system that we're immediately born into. It's like being born into air: you take it in as soon as you breathe.

It's not a cold that you can get over. There is no anti-racist certification class. It's

a set of socioeconomic traps and cultural values that are fired up every time we interact with the world. It is a thing you have to keep scooping out of the boat of your life to keep from drowning in it. I know it's hard work, but it's the price you pay for owning everything."

Draw a racist. What do they look like? What are they doing? Why are they the way they are?

The intention of this is to examine the 'racist' label critically, we may have an idea of what a racist person is, what they look like, what they do but consigning racism to a limited caricature prevents us from examining real systemic racism. The 'racist' label is limited. A better way of looking at it is that we are all 'racist' to a certain degree as we are unknowingly raised with racist ideals in a fundamentally racist society. Some people may be more overtly racist than others but we are all complicit.

Talking about oppression as an individual act prevents us from fully understanding the problem and prevents us from self-improvement as we are constantly looking for a mythical responsible party to which we can ascribe all the blame. This behaviour locks the whole thing into place.

We are all crew

There are two important things to bear in mind when thinking about this:

1. This system is no one's fault.
2. This system harms everyone.

In this article we say society favours some identities over others rather than society favours some people over others and there's a reason for that seemingly pedantic use of language. Because even those who seem to benefit rarely benefit holistically as a human person. A privileged person is locked into their position as much as an oppressed person. They are expected to conform to a certain standard, display certain characteristics and do their part to keep the status quo. Those who deviate can often be harshly punished as if in alignment with those they should be pitted against.

People may have a lot of power, but this is not deliberate, and they don't have to work very hard to maintain it. We are all assigned platforms, positions in society which we did not choose. Unearned doesn't simply denote that we don't deserve something, but that we cannot be held accountable for having it.

What matters is our actions going forward. We cannot change the past, but we can continually challenge our attitudes and refuse to participate in a system of sustained inequality.

What Can We Do?

We can push for diversity. Diversity is important, particularly where groups are concerned with transformative community engagement. If these groups are too homogeneous then they can quite

naturally end up serving only the needs of their dominant identities. A lack of diversity can cause issues to be forgotten and it is harder to reach those who may feel they are not represented. These divisions can be ruinous. How can we possibly work together with people we don't trust? Or people we don't really respect?

We need to understand the power structures that exist in society and our roles within them so we can do the continuous and introspective work of dismantling them and coming together as equals, valuing one another. We must build the capacity to listen and consolidate our feelings. This is the key to preparing ourselves to be part of a regenerative culture.
