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# Understanding White Privilege

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This may be one of the most misrepresented and misunderstood terms used in contemporary debates on race and racism. White privilege does *not* mean that whiteness necessarily brings more wealth, power, or 'luck' to white people. Privilege, in this context, simply means 'unearned advantage'. It is important to explore this to understand the impact which these unearned advantages can have on people who do not share these, and for us to understand our own personal relationship to these. Understanding white privilege and understanding how we relate to this individually is vital to developing a decolonised and anti-racist university, as we seek to create structures and practices which are inclusive to all.

## Activity:

Take a moment to think about three things which define you.

## Reflection:

What did you think of? Physical attributes, hobbies, family, possessions, cultural attributes, location?

These are unique to you and what another person may choose is likely to be completely different, based on their life experiences and stage of life they are at.



These things are part of your reality. Your reality frames who you are. It is your starting point for making judgements and decisions. Whether you judge something as 'normal', 'usual', 'fair' or 'equitable' starts with your own assessment of this. When we take what we have for granted, expect others to conform to these standards, and judge what is and what isn't of worth (also known as merit) by these standards, this can lead to **privilege**.

## What is privilege?

Privilege is a comparative term, designating a relative, rather than an absolute, form of advantage. Even white people from working-class backgrounds can benefit, as compared to people of colour from all social classes, from white privilege. We all have aspects of privilege. These are different from person to person, can be related to a protected characteristic (defined in the Equality Act 2010 as: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation) or something else such as class or family connections. Just because you have a certain characteristic which is the majority in your society, it doesn't automatically mean that you as a whole are necessarily privileged, but what it does mean is that that particular characteristic is unlikely to present a barrier to you in your day to day life - an experience not shared universally by others. What is important is that we recognise the opportunities that we have, and understand that others may not have these opportunities.

It's easy for us to think everybody has access to the same opportunities, and it's sometimes difficult to understand why others can't participate or feel unable to participate in an activity, work or social situation in the same way that we do.

Dr Gurnam Singh produced the following graphic, demonstrating the difference between white supremacy, indifference, awareness and allyship:


White Supremacy	White Indifference
	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Accepts, and in some cases promotes, theories designed to justify white dominance and racial hierarchy typically associated with 'scientific racism'.</li> <li>▪ Fear/loathing/exoticisation of the non-white other which may be overt or covert.</li> <li>▪ Characterised by the 'white gaze'.</li> <li>▪ Belief that we live in a meritocracy.</li> <li>▪ Uncritical/favourable view of empire and colonialism – the white man's burden.</li> <li>▪ Subscribes to scientific racism.</li> <li>▪ *Black underachievement is seen to be due to their dysfunctionality/pathology.</li> <li>▪ Whiteness and its proxies' function as badges of honour.</li> <li>▪ White privilege is rationalised as the natural order.</li> <li>▪ Onus on Black people to accept their place.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Passionate defender of western universalism, academic freedom and the right to offend.</li> <li>▪ Belief in meritocracy but also recognises that some (deserving) disadvantaged people need help.</li> <li>▪ Characterised by refusal to take a serious look at racism and views anti-racist initiatives as ideological endeavours linked to culture wars and political correctness.</li> <li>▪ Self-concept is based on being rational and moral, which results in avoidance of responsibility for discriminatory behaviour.</li> <li>▪ Willing to 'tolerate'/'fetishize'/'pity the 'non-white' other'.</li> <li>▪ Happy to make tokenistic gestures, but total refusal to accept one's own complicity in the (re)production of racism.</li> <li>▪ Whiteness is denied, so it functions as an absent/invisible/mythical norm leaving white privilege intact.</li> <li>▪ Onus on Black people to build up their 'resilience'.</li> </ul>

White Awareness	White Allyship
	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Belief that racism is real and that it is a product of 'prejudice plus power'.</li> <li>▪ Characterised by a desire to critically reflect.</li> <li>▪ Functions like a mental illness that only white people have (Katz) hence focus on 'discovering' unconscious bias and cognitive distortions.</li> <li>▪ Desire to engage with 'Black' issues and people, but only in limited spaces (committees, training events).</li> <li>▪ This may be as a result of feeling guilty of historic racism and/or a desire to make some amends.</li> <li>▪ White privilege is recognised and becomes a source of shame and embarrassment.</li> <li>▪ Most activity however restricted to self-development and deployment of politically correct language.</li> <li>▪ Onus on white people to overcome unconscious bias.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Racism is a complex interaction between structural, ideological institutional and behavioural processes, but it can be overcome.</li> <li>▪ Characterised by the desire to take responsibility for change, which is not restricted to behaviour alone.</li> <li>▪ Focus on paradigm shifts and concrete interventions.</li> <li>▪ Dynamic and creative solutions through co-creation.</li> <li>▪ Rejection of deficit models and acceptance of the link between white privilege and educational outcomes.</li> <li>▪ Share power, privilege, risk and vulnerability.</li> <li>▪ Actively divesting from histories, systems and structures that reproduce racism.</li> <li>▪ Onus on white people to build sustained partnerships with Black people.</li> </ul>

Note: \*The term 'Black' here is used to denote all those people who are positioned outside of whiteness and as a result experience racial disadvantage. The degree of racial disadvantage will vary as a result of other factors primarily associated with gender, class, ethnicity. © Gurnam Singh, 14th July 2022

### A few examples:

Racialised policing – a problem common to majority-white societies, and to which intense attention has been drawn by the Black Lives Matter movement in recent years – provides an example. An individual's perceived whiteness will not be a reason, in a majority-white society, for police to stop-and-search, or otherwise unduly harass them. Black people, and other racially minoritised people, on the other hand, routinely report being harassed by police in such societies, despite having committed no offence – often



'driving while Black' seems to be sufficient grounds for such police harassment. And class does not necessarily insulate people of colour from this racial 'profiling' and discrimination.

There have been prominent examples, in both the USA and the UK, for instance, of very wealthy – and sometimes famous – Black people being stopped and questioned by police while driving expensive vehicles, or attempting to gain access to certain spaces, because the police officers involved found this situation inherently 'suspicious'. White privilege is the privilege of not having to be concerned that the way in which you are racialized will be the specific cause or motive for unequal treatment, in majority-white societies. White people – especially poorer white people – may experience intense social and economic inequalities and stresses, and suffer oppression at the hands of the state or other social groups and organisations, to a similar extent as people of colour, but their Whiteness will not be the cause of that mistreatment, in these societies.

### **Further your understanding:**

It is recommended you listen to/watch [the video](#) by Dr Ben Whitham, a former Senior Lecturer in International Politics and Fair Outcomes Champion at DMU.


### **What can you do?**

What's important is that we don't let our privilege and the opportunities we have bias and define our expectations of others, and we share our privileges where possible. We can mitigate against our privilege by thinking about and consulting other groups when we design something new, for example, through our Improving Outcomes Assessment process. We can also actively use our privileges for good, to help others who may not share the same privileges.

### **Five ways in which we could do this include:**

- 1 Identify your own privileges – reflect on times when you have enjoyed more fortune than others, and think about why this may have been. Perhaps work through [this resource from 'Better Allies' on 50 potential privileges in the workplace](#).
- 2 Learn about how others who don't share your privileges navigate the world. What challenges and barriers do they face? Listen to others' experiences and never assume
- 3 Think about how you can actively help to remove those challenges and barriers. You could speak, act, mentor, raise issues, present data, add differing perspectives. You can ensure correct credit is given for work and act as a 'sponsor' or a 'champion' for individuals. If everybody does this for their own privileges, it will break down barriers for those areas in which you have less privilege.
- 4 Think about who your 'captive audience' is. How can you use your position to start to spread the message, and eliminate some of those barriers identified?
- 5 Consider bias (both conscious and unconscious, further outlined in the [introduction to bias training](#)). Do you do any of these, for example, do you perpetuate in and out groups, speak over other people in meetings or present your view point first in a meeting where you are one of the most senior members? Actively think about this in meetings and let those who enjoy less privilege take a lead, before you present your views.

Dr Muna Abdi produced the following graphic on the following page, which contains further advice on being an ally:



## Advice for being an ally

Dr Muna Abdi shares some of the ways you can show up and stand up as an ally. Follow her on Twitter @Muna\_Abdi\_PhD

### 1 Own your privilege

Recognise the power, privilege and resources you have and think about how you can use it to support the work of those who are 'othered'.

### 2 Talk about the uncomfortable

And that sometimes means talking about how you are complicit in an oppressive system. Don't talk about other people's trauma, you cannot know it... but you can talk about the effects of a system.

### 3 Be strategic in your activism

Being an ally is more than just joining protests and marches... it is using your institutional power to change structures and systems. If you are in a position to do so, do so. Actions Speak Louder

### 4 Figure out WHERE and HOW you can do the most good

Everyone can do something. Whether it is pushing out messages on Twitter and on Facebook or meeting with institutional leads to push for change. The cacophony of all of us doing work together will lead to systemic change.

### 5 Start where you are

Take concrete steps- small ones, like steps on a ladder. Ask people what they need...Stand/sit with those who've been doing the work longer than you... Listen...Ask more questions...then talk.

### 6 Ask yourself: what do I want the future to look like?

We need to spend more time thinking/ talking about potential solutions.

### 7 Do your research

You can't be an effective ally if you don't know what the issues are. And you can't help deconstruct systems without first understanding how they were built. Read. Listen. Read. Listen. Read.

### 8 Resist the white saviour complex

Your role is not to "fix" communities of colour. It is not your job to swoop down and take action on their behalf without knowing what the community needs to begin with. It might be easy to succumb to the desire to do things that seem good for others because they make you feel good, but it's important to resist that urge and re-examine how to help.

### 9 Start with your own circle

Call out friends and family on their racism and microaggressions, even (especially) when it's uncomfortable. They'll likely be more open to listening to you, and it will give you the opportunity to effect real change.

### 10 Be brave

These things are not always comfortable. But commit to pushing past the point of comfort to take effective and impactful action to change things...even if that action is messy or risks the loss of your own privileged/powerful status.

Learn . Listen . Check yourself . Take action . Be brave .



## Further resources:

To learn more about privilege, the power it has, and how you can use the privileges you have to help others, the following TEDx talk by Tiffany Jana is recommended: <https://youtu.be/N0acvkHliZs>

Let's Talk About Race and Racism Resources - <https://blogs.city.ac.uk/race/resources-hub/inclusive-leadership/white-privilege-and-white-fragility-resources/>

The Tackling Racism Diagnostic Tool - <https://www.uws.ac.uk/media/7320/advance-he-the-tackling-racism-diagnostic-tool.pdf>

Dr Gurnam Singh - From Cultural Dominance to Cultural Humility: Where do you fit in?: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iiKZV2N\\_AudzuPyOLIFVTA0liXyg-OF9/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iiKZV2N_AudzuPyOLIFVTA0liXyg-OF9/view?usp=sharing)

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