

WHAT IS PRIVILEGE?

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines privilege as *a special advantage, immunity, permission, right or benefit granted to or enjoyed by an individual, class, or caste.*

In the context of relations between social groups, privilege is a consequence of social hierarchies and power dynamics. Privilege is not a right or a deserved entitlement; it is an arbitrary advantage or benefit enjoyed by an individual or a group, based upon prejudicial and/or discriminatory norms, attitudes and practices.

The “normalization of privilege” implies that members of society are judged, and succeed or fail, measured against characteristics that are held by those who are privileged. The privileged characteristic becomes the norm. Those who stand outside these norms as regarded as “alternative” or “the other.”

Thus, when examining privilege we find that it consists of the following elements:

- ♦ the characteristics of the privileged group **define the societal norm**, often benefiting those in the privileged group.
- ♦ due to conflicting privilege with the societal norms and the implicit choice to ignore oppression, privilege is **often not recognized** by the holder of privilege.
- ♦ members of privileged groups **may opt out of struggles against oppression** if they choose.

Privilege exists and operates in various forms, shaped by the societal power relations from which it results. Since we are all players in these power systems, we all enjoy some form of privilege. By being critically conscious of our privileges and responsible for how we exercise it, we can position ourselves as allies in the movements for social justice.¹

FROM PRIVILEGE TO ALLYSHIP

*An ally is a member of the “dominant” or “majority” group who questions or rejects the dominant ideology and works against oppression through support of, and as an advocate, with or for, the oppressed population.*²

¹ “What is Privilege?” Adapted from Wildman, S. M., & Davis, A. D. “Language and Silence: Making Systems of Privilege Visible.” *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice: An Anthology on Racism, Antisemitism, Sexism, Heterosexism, Ableism, and Classism.* Ed. Marianne Adams et al. New York: Routledge, 2000. 50-60.

² Definition adapted from Washington, J. & Evans, N. J. “Becoming an Ally.” *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice: An Anthology on Racism, Antisemitism, Sexism, Heterosexism, Ableism, and Classism.* Ed. Marianne Adams et al. New York: Routledge, 2000. 312-318.

Growing up in this world, we have all been subject to a process of socialization which compels us to act in role-specific ways. We have been socialized into a range of roles from domination to subordination. This affects us all in negative, painful ways. Learning to become an ally is the first-step towards interrupting this oppressive cycle of socialization. The following steps are an effective means to becoming an ally:

Awareness

Living with awareness implies developing a critical consciousness of the world around us. It involves developing the ability to notice and pay attention to various aspects of our daily lives, including our language, our behavior, and even our thoughts. Such awareness can be gained through self-examine of one’s privilege, respectful and non-intrusive conversations with members of marginalized groups, and various forms of self-education.

Analysis

This requires that we not only notice what is going on in the world around us, but also that we think critically about it. It means that we must develop to capacity to determine what needs to be in a given situation.

Education

We must educate ourselves about the histories and experiences of target groups within the context of the society which we inhabit. This includes educating ourselves about the culture and norms of target groups, and learning about how laws, policies, and practices may adversely affect, or be used to the benefit of, target groups.

Interrupting Behavior

We must develop the skills to interrupt prejudiced remarks or actions by communicating our knowledge and analyses of given issues and situations, and to initiate awareness-raising.

Taking Action

Commitment to action comes from the recognition that only through participation in movements for social change can we achieve the goal of liberating ourselves from cycles of oppression. Taking action means deciding what needs to be done, and then making sure that the action is taken.³

³ Above steps adapted from Washington, J. & Evans, N. J. , *supra* note 2. and Love, B. J. “Developing a Liberatory Consciousness.” *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice: An Anthology on Racism, Antisemitism, Sexism, Heterosexism, Ableism, and Classism.* Ed. Marianne Adams et al. New York: Routledge, 2000. 470-474

SAFE SPACE

Safe spaces are spaces that are created of, by and for members of marginalized or underrepresented social groupings who share common (or similar) histories and experiences, and/or are routinely subjected to and similarly impacted by socioeconomic, cultural, political and other societal hierarchies and oppression. Safe spaces are generally identity and/or issue-experience based.

Social groupings are a consequence of societal constructs such as race, class, gender identity and expression, sexuality, ability, etc. Marginalized or underrepresented social groups are those that are alternates to or lie outside of the established social “norm.” As a result, members of such groups are routinely subject to different forms of prejudice and oppression, such as societal, systemic, institutional, intergroup, interpersonal and personal.

- ♦ Safe spaces offer members of marginalized or underrepresented groups the **ability “to be”**, in a context outside of the established norm and away from societal prejudice and oppression.
- ♦ These spaces serve as means of **self-education**, where members may learn about those aspects of their histories and cultures that have been invisibilized by the dominant culture or mainstream society.
- ♦ They provide **personal and emotional support** by allowing members to share their stories with those who share common or similar histories and experiences.
- ♦ Safe spaces are also **spaces of resistance and empowerment**, through which members can participate in the study of and in conversations about oppression, prejudice and social justice, without fear of backlash.
- ♦ While access to safe spaces is restricted based upon identity and/or experience, these spaces are neither exclusive, exclusionary nor divisive. Conversations that occur within these spaces are instrumental in empowering underrepresented groups to develop their own voice which is crucial to **facilitating constructive dialogue between marginalized and dominant groups.**
- ♦ The existence of safe spaces within mainstream society disrupts systems of privilege whereby dominant groups enjoy unlimited access to space, community and knowledge as well as **challenges dominant groups to recognize and reflect upon their privilege.**
- ♦ In order to learn more, one should **attend open workshops, trainings and presentations** that may be organized by members of safe spaces.

DEFINITIONS

CULTURAL RACISM: Those aspects of society that overtly and covertly attribute value and normality to white people and Whiteness, devalue, stereotype, and label people of color as “other” different, less than or render them invisible.

HETEROSEXUAL PRIVILEGE: The benefits and advantages heterosexuals receive in a heterosexist culture, including, but not limited to, marriage, job security, tax breaks, parental rights, visitation rights and inheritance rights.

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM: The network of institutional structures, policies, and practices that create advantages and benefits for white people, and discrimination, oppression, and disadvantage for people from marginalized racial groups.

PREJUDICE: A set of negative personal beliefs about a social group that leads individuals to prejudge people from that group, or the group in general, regardless of individual differences among members of that target group.

OPPRESSION: A systemic social phenomenon based on the perceived and real difference among social groups that involve ideological domination, institutional control, and the promulgation of the oppressor’s ideology, logic system, and culture to the oppressed group. The result is the exploitation of one social group by another for the benefit of the oppressor group.

RACISM: The systemic subordination of members of marginalized racial groups who have relatively little social power by members of a dominant racial group. This subordination is supported by the actions of individuals, cultural norms and values, and institutional structures and practices of society.

WHITE PRIVILEGE: The concrete benefits of access to resources and social rewards, and the power to shape the norms and values of society which white people receive, unconsciously or consciously, by virtue of their skin color, in a racist society.⁴

⁴ Definitions adapted from *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*. Ed. Adams, Bell & Griffin.

⁵ “Qualities of an Ally” adapted from Western Michigan “Safe on Campus” Program by Gregory M. Weight; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Transgender Community Office, University of Delaware, March 2000; and Southwest Institute for Cross-Cultural Relationships.

QUALITIES OF AN ALLY

1. Recognizes one’s own privilege as a member of the agents group.
2. Has worked to develop an understanding of a target group and the needs of this group.
3. Chooses to align with the target group and respond to their needs.
4. Believes that it is in one’s self-interest of be an ally.
5. Is committed to personal growth (in spite of the possible discomfort or pain) required to promote social change.
6. Expects support from other allies.
7. Is able to acknowledge and articulate, without guilt or apology, how oppressive patterns operate.
8. Expects to make mistakes, but does not use it as an excuse for inaction.
9. Knows that one has a clear responsibility to fight oppression whether or not persons in the target chose to respond.
10. Assumes that people in a targeted group are already communicating in the best and most comfortable way
11. Does not expect members of the targeted group to educate them.
12. Assumes that the target group consists of survivors (not victims) and that they have a long history of resistance.
13. Does not attempt to convince target group that one is on their side. Shows support through actions, not words.
14. Does not expect gratitude from people in the target group and remembers that being an ally is a matter of choice.
15. Creates a comfortable setting. Is conscious of concepts such as cultural imperialism and cultural appropriation.
16. Confronts oppressive jokes, slurs, and actions, Knows that silence may communicate condoning of an oppressive statement.⁵

Privilege, Allyship, & Safe Space



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Changes on issues of justice, equity and fairness come after resistance, denial and pain have all been worked through. This work is a journey; there is no endpoint.

This pamphlet provides information to help dismantle systems of oppression and join the movement for social justice.



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