

Barriers to Inclusion: Privilege

What is it?

Privilege refers to the concept that certain people experience certain privileges simply because of a particular aspect of their identity (for example, they are white, or male, or heterosexual) – privileges that are often overlooked. In her 1988 article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” Peggy McIntosh begins to spell out what those privileges are, from “I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group,” to “I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to ‘the person in charge,’ I will be facing a person of my race.”

Privilege is not necessarily something that individual people seek out. Instead, it is something that shapes and is shaped by American society. It provides often invisible benefits to people of one status that people of another status cannot access. Many of the privileges that McIntosh identifies are privileges that white people may not even think about – indeed, McIntosh herself describes each item on her list as something she forgot about repeatedly, even after forming her list.

White privilege is not the only form of privilege that exists – privilege comes into play whenever one particular condition is considered to be the “normal” condition. Other forms of privilege that enter the workplace include class privilege, heterosexual privilege, male privilege, and able-bodied privilege. Nearly everyone experiences privilege in some form.

What can I do?

As an individual...

- Educate yourself on privilege and the ways to recognize it.
- Be aware of your language – when you refer to an “average” or “normal” person, are you referring to someone in the majority or someone not in the majority?
- Use your privilege to share your power. When you see privilege in action, call attention to it.
- Listen. Be supportive of colleagues bringing different perspectives.

As a manager...

- Educate yourself on privilege and the ways to recognize it.
- Be careful about assumptions you might make – especially about what is normal, and about the ways your staff might experience different phenomena differently.
- When making hiring or assignment decisions, be aware of the ways that privilege operates. Seek out diverse candidates.
- Make sure that your office communications are inclusive of all – that your images are diverse, that you alternate use of he and she when writing, etc.

Where can I learn more?

- *6 Action Items for White People in the Workplace & Beyond* by Amanda Gelender (<https://medium.com/@agelender/6-action-items-for-white-people-in-the-workplace-beyond-ecf87271e89a#.z6crqb3ky>)
- *White Anti-Racist Activism: A Personal Roadmap* by Jennifer R. Holladay (excerpt available at: <http://www.tolerance.org/article/racism-and-white-privilege>)
- *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* by Peggy McIntosh (<http://nationalseedproject.org/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack>)