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IBARW: A primer on privilege: what it is and what it isn't.

august 11th, 2007

I'd like to thank [bugger](#) for reading this for me in its draft form, making helpful suggestions, and titling this for me.

I want to talk about privilege today, because it's fundamental to most modern discussions of racism. And sexism, and ableism, and lookism, and classism, and dot dot dot. And because I've seen some pretty odd definitions of privilege out there. The standard resource on privilege is [White Privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack](#). But I think that resource is clearly not working for some people based on some very defensive reactions I've seen, so I'm going to be presumptuous and try on my own.



[brown_betty](#)

Privilege is not: About you. Privilege is not your fault. Privilege is not anything you've done, or thought, or said. It may have *allowed* you to do, or think, or say things, but it's not those things, and it's not *because* of those things. Privilege is not about taking advantage, or cheating, although privilege may make this easier. Privilege is not negated. I can't balance my white privilege against my female disadvantage and come out neutral. Privilege is not something you can be exempt from by having had a difficult life. **Privilege is not inherently bad.** It really isn't.

Privilege is: About how society accommodates you. It's about advantages you have that *you think are normal*. It's about you being normal, and others being the deviation from normal. It's about fate dealing from the bottom of the deck on your behalf.

Almost everyone who is reading this had *some form of privilege*. If you are a member of three marginalized groups, in ill health, and poor, you're still able to access and use the internet, both demonstrating and conferring privilege.

Some privileges are easy to demonstrate: Can you go into a random restaurant and order food? That's not something that those with food allergies, diabetics, celiacs, or a range of other conditions can count on. It's not something people whose religious convictions include following Kosher, Halal or other faith-based dietary restrictions (there are Christians, Buddhists and others to whom this applies) can count on in western society either.

Some privileges are harder to demonstrate: If you get a job, to what extent was that based on the way you look, your gender, your accent, your connections? How can you tell?

How privilege is bad for the privileged: Privilege makes you blind. Privilege is a big bag of stuff you're not forced to think about. If you're white, have you ever wondered to what extent those who find you sexually attractive do so because of your race? Have you ever wondered why a certain colour is called "flesh-tone?" Have you ever worried that the way you act might cause someone to judge your entire race? If the answer to any of those question is yes: here is your cookie, and don't say I've never done anything for you. If the answer is no, this is your opportunity to change that.

Why acknowledging privilege is a necessary pre-requisite to talking about race: Because the privileged and the un-privileged live on the same planet, but in two different worlds. If you don't begin by acknowledging your privilege, then the chasm between is too vast to traverse. There can't be productive conversation between a person who thinks they've gotten where they are on their own merits, and someone who *knows that they would never have been given the opportunity to compete on the basis of their merits*. If you've ever tried to describe to a man what it feels like to live under the threat of sexual assault and had him respond by suggesting pepper spray, a male escort, or self-defense classes, then you know in part what this is like.

What you can do about your privilege: This one is harder, but the first and fundamental thing we can do is to be aware we have it. Please don't try to come up with reasons why you are an exception: why your white privilege "didn't help you" in X situation. First, you're embarrassing me, and second, you're missing the point.

When I was in high school, we played a game we called Asshole, or to be polite, Donkey, which was a basic discard card game. The twist was that after each round, when the next round's cards were dealt, the loser had to give their two highest cards to the winner, who could give any two cards to the loser. Obviously, this set-up disadvantaged the loser, and benefited the winner. But even with that advantage, the loser could still win the next round, and the winner could still lose. *That doesn't mean there was a level playing field.*

Be aware of the things you can do because you're privileged. Be aware of their impact. Be aware of the things other people can't do because they lack that privilege. Own your privilege.

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[2007-08-11 10:43 pm \(UTC\)](#)

Privilege is not negated. I can't balance my white privilege against my female disadvantage and come out neutral.

A poor man, a rich woman, and a middle class "disabled" man have very different experiences of their white privilege, even if they are all white. Just as I can't know how much my privilege has influenced many situations in my life, an observer can't either. (And I'm not trying to put words in your mouth here- I know you didn't make any claims of that sort.)