

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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Why and How Facing Your Privilege Can Be Liberating

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Abstract

Because we live within highly individualized modern cultures, we often do not see the structural dimension of privilege. Having our privilege pointed out often sounds like being told we are a terrible person. Conversations about privilege become highly charged and often ineffective, but something better is possible. It starts with recognizing and naming that since privilege is structural, not individual, it has nothing to do with goodness or badness. The key is to focus on two distinctions: systems as distinct from individuals and *having* privilege as independent of *choosing* how to engage with it. This paper identifies four negative ways of engaging with privilege—Denial/Invisibility, Guilt/Shame, Defensiveness, and Entitlement; and four positive ways of engaging with privilege—Owning privilege, Learning about privilege, Opening to feedback, and Stewarding privilege. Shifting to the positive path liberates us from the unnecessary discomfort of seeing a systemic issue as an individual failing. Instead, facing the reality that our privilege is at the expense of other people invites a generative and useful discomfort. My hope is that we can find our way to collective awakening with only the necessary and unavoidable discomfort, and not more.

Keywords: facing privilege, shame, feedback, defensiveness, liberation, white fragility

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“Having wealth is unjustified, but the Rockefellers justify it by doing good. I had to cut through all this and understand that there is no rational justification for my family having the amount of money that it has, and that the only honest thing to say in defense of it is that we like having the money and the present social system allows us to keep it.” – Steven Rockefeller (1983)

There is no way around it: Facing our own privilege is uncomfortable. Even while I was writing this piece, a friend told me, in so many words: “I am ashamed of being a man, and I am ashamed of being White.” He is far from alone in this discomfort. Because we live within modern, capitalist cultures that are highly individualized, we often do not see the structural dimension. Many of us then struggle to separate out privilege from attitude. In this context, having our privilege pointed out to us often sounds as if we are being told that we are bad people. This makes conversations about privilege highly charged and often ineffective. After some years of working with people in support of facing their privilege, I have come to believe that something better is possible. We can frame things in a way that shows the reality of structures of privilege and minimizes any unnecessary challenge.

It starts with recognizing and explaining that because privilege is structural and not individual, it has nothing to do with goodness or badness. It is plainly a factual reality about life. The key is to focus on two distinctions: (a) systems as distinct from individuals, and (b) *having* privilege as independent of *choosing* how to engage with it. Since these distinctions tend to be obscured, I have found that people often experience relief when they tease apart these two aspects of privilege.

Understanding Privilege

When I talk of privilege, I am referring to forms of access to resources that result from legal or social norms having to do with membership in a group, independently of any particular action, inaction, or even awareness on the part of the people who have that access of the existence of the disparity, the potential benefits to them, or the costs to others.

Privilege is societally given, not chosen, and is independent of attitude or belief system. Believing in equality among the races in the United States, for example, does not cancel out the privilege of a White person. At the same time, having structural privilege often leads to certain behaviors through socialization, normative models, and the tendency to justify privilege that has existed in human societies since social stratification started around the time of agriculture.

Although there are forms of privilege that can be acquired (wealth and education are key examples), most of us acquire most of the privilege that we have before we are even born. Moreover, we do not have much choice about whether or not to have the privilege. If I came from an extremely wealthy family, for example, I could conceivably give away my entire fortune without erasing the way the privilege I was born into affects who I am. I would still be far more likely than someone who grew up in poverty to have levels of education and manners of behavior, thought, and attitude that would help me land a decent job or give me the capacity to create a successful business. And this, once again, would put me in a position of greater material wealth than others. In addition, as Assata Richards, a community organizer in Houston, said, “What privilege means is that effort and

activity have different returns for different people based on the privilege structures in our society” (personal communication, 2016). Hard work, the cornerstone of the belief in a meritocratic society, does not guarantee anything and only works at all, insofar as systems of privilege allow it to do so.

We cannot run away from having privilege once we have it. The only choice we have, I believe, is how to engage with the privilege we possess. Below I identify four negative ways of engaging with privilege and four positive ways of engaging with privilege.

Engaging with Privilege: The Negative Path

Although I catalog below four distinct ways of engaging with privilege, in actual reality, they are often intertwined and blend into each other. I still find value in understanding, and supporting others in understanding, the differences between them and how they contribute to the perpetuation of systems of privilege.

Denial or invisibility

One of the ways that systems of privilege continue to be transferred from generation to generation is by making the existence of the privilege invisible. What is rendered invisible is both the gap between the experiences of those with privilege and those without it, and the relationship between the two. In the context of a commitment to equality and meritocracy, the latter in particular is obscured. It is easy for many to think that if others applied themselves, then they, too, could attain wealth. Or, seeing how some few darker-skinned individuals have “made it” economically or politically, to extrapolate to

a claim that there is no more racism and that claims to the contrary are based on personal lack of taking responsibility, or lack of willingness to accept the results of fair play.

Denial contributes to systems of privilege by reducing the chances of people having conscious choice about what to do with their privilege.

Guilt or shame

In the same way that lack of systemic perspective can easily lead to denial, so guilt and shame can emerge from the blending of privilege and attitude. Many people find it nearly impossible not to equate their own access to privilege with a sense of personal badness, a moral failure, when opening up to hearing about the reality of structures of privilege that benefit some at the expense and suffering of so many others. For example, in some segments of the population people experience shame if they inherit large amounts of money and others in their communities are struggling, so they end up hiding the fact of their wealth.

This association of tragedy with moral judgment is directly an outcome of a culture steeped in right/wrong thinking, rather than focused on human needs and how best to attend to them.

Guilt and shame contribute to the continuation of privilege because they are paralyzing feelings that keep us spinning within them rather than mobilizing us to take action, individually or collectively.

Defensiveness

Because of how vulnerable to judgment and self-judgment we are, and how easy it can then be to hear blame and judgment regardless of whether it is there,

defensiveness is almost a “natural” response as a way to counteract the possibility of shame and guilt. If I can “prove,” at least to myself, that I am a good person, then I do not have to look more closely at the privilege, or listen to what others are telling me.

This is why in so many conversations related to privilege, those with privilege focus attention on their intentions and on being misunderstood, while those without the privilege try, often unsuccessfully, to focus attention on the effect of the privilege or of behaviors, often unconscious, that emerge from having the privilege.

Defensiveness contributes to the existing system by keeping the focus on the individual level, and specifically, on the person with privilege. Meanwhile, the attempts of those without the privilege to call attention to it, to open up a conversation, to mobilize to take action, or in any other way to create change, go unattended.

Entitlement

In a world structured around scarcity, everyone is scared to lose. In a stunning piece of research, many multimillionaires were asked if they have “enough.” Most said “no.” On average and across the range of wealth in the sample, they said that having 25% more than they had would be enough. After the initial shock of finding out this information, I am no longer surprised. When we do not trust that our needs can be met in and of themselves; we are pushed to come up with justifications for why we deserve what we have, and hold on to it as tightly as possible.

When a friend of mine and her two sisters confronted their three brothers after

discovering a trust in the family that distributed money to all living males whenever someone died, their brothers uniformly stated, simply, that they were not the ones who set it up. With that, they were satisfied to keep the money instead of seeing that they each could divide it with one sister and then all would have access to it regardless of what the trust says.

The sense of entitlement contributes to the persistence of privilege in direct ways by keeping those who have the privilege from being able to be creative in their use of it.

Engaging with Privilege: The Positive Path

For each of the negative ways of engaging with privilege, I have found a positive way that moves the person engaging it into more freedom and choice. In addition, if enough people engaged in the ways I describe below, perhaps a larger shift would become possible.

Owning the privilege

Time and time again I notice just how simple and strong it is to own and acknowledge my privilege where I have it, and to do so without guilt and shame. When I do it, there is almost invariably deep and sometimes overwhelming sorrow. Sorrow, as big as it can be, is soft. It joins with life rather than fights against it through denial. Once denial is traversed, recognizing what is true releases energy that was blocked in the hiding, and makes it available for connection and for choice.

Learning about privilege

When I came to the United States in 1983 from Israel, I knew absolutely nothing about privilege. I was aware of racism,

which made absolutely no sense to me as a foreigner and an immigrant. It took some years before I was exposed to people and groups that were looking deeply at social differences and their effect. Then, in 1991, I took a course on race and ethnicity in the United States as part of graduate studies in sociology and wrote a paper about racism in the women's movement, which was an accelerated immersion in the topic. Since then, it has been a steady experience of learning more and more about the historical roots of race privilege in the United States, and I intend to keep learning for as long as I am able to read and speak with others.

In some ways, it is easier for me, an outsider, than for a White person born in the United States to approach the topic. I do not carry the weight of guilt that growing up White in this country leads so many into. It is not my ancestors or the structures created by them that have established what is happening. Similarly, I learned about the extent of the dispossession of Palestinians that was part of establishing the state of Israel when living far away, once again making my task easier than it is for those living right there, facing the reality in the most visceral way. So I may be limited in my ability to imagine what it is like for people born with privilege and living in its direct context to try to grapple with it.

I can only say that I have seen many times how learning about the history of privilege and its structural nature relieves people from the suffering of guilt and shame. I suspect this is because the personal element becomes less pronounced as the magnitude of the larger issues is exposed.

In addition, learning about any particular privilege any of us has, within the particular society or culture we live in, gives us an entryway into understanding the particular

ways we may unwittingly reinforce structures of privilege in our most mundane actions. That, too, increases choice and reduces the chances of inadvertently acting in harmful ways. I cannot imagine that not being liberating.

Opening to receive feedback

Perhaps the most difficult discipline of engaging with privilege is that of choosing to do whatever it takes internally to be relaxed and open to hear feedback from a person who does not have the particular privilege that one has. Much of my learning about the topic of privilege, especially as it relates to race relations in the United States, came through friends and students who were willing to speak truth to me across lines of power difference, sometimes two (both race and my position as a leader). This is very hard work. And I know its value and necessity. When I am the person with privilege, I am much less likely than the person without the privilege to notice the dynamics of power. Because of that, and especially in times of conflict, I would almost always want me as the person with privilege to commit to hearing and opening to all feedback even when I am utterly convinced that whatever upset the impacted person is experiencing is based on misunderstanding my intentions. Why? Because focusing on my intentions before focusing on the effect of my actions reinforces the structures of privilege. I have compassion for the many times I do not succeed, because I know the strength of my need, anyone's need, to be seen and understood. And this compassion is not about getting me off the hook, only about motivating me more fully. I am always committed to this, even when I am not successful. I want to get better and better at holding gently my need to be seen, breathing with it, and letting go of having it met, at

least for a while, while I make myself available to those who do not have the privilege that I have.

The freedom that comes with this willingness is the freedom of choice about my own needs. One of the core practices of inner freedom that I am aware of is precisely the capacity to live in peace with unmet needs, because it is when our needs are not met that we are most likely to lose choice without an active practice. Being able to sit with unmet needs means generating more choice, more capacity for freedom and nonviolence.

Stewarding privilege for the benefit of all

The last of the four positive ways of engaging with privilege that I have found is a deep and conscious shift from possessing to stewarding my privilege. Instead of automatically and reflexively assuming that the privilege is “mine” and the benefit of having it goes to me, this change in attitude puts me in a position of seeing the privilege as belonging to the whole and seeing me as its steward for the benefit of all. A whole new vista of possibilities opens up when this shift begins.

One practice that I have supported quite a number of people in undertaking is thinking proactively about what resources we have, how we are using them now, and how we might want to use them for the benefit of all. So far, people have loved this activity, and have felt inspired and lighter after doing it. Going through this simple activity myself is what led me to begin offering a series of free conference calls on the very topic of Facing Privilege, and then to doubling their number to twice a month. It was immediately after a grand jury decided not to press charges against Darren Wilson after he killed Mike Brown in

Ferguson, Missouri. Like many, I was profoundly disturbed about this outcome. I already had the frame of using my privilege for the benefit of all, and I didn’t know what I could do in that instance, when I so wanted to do *something*. Upon reflection, I realized that one of my privileges, an acquired one, is access to a small platform and a small following, and that I could use *that* privilege to do the work of moving, however minutely, in the direction of dismantling the system of privilege. I could open up conversations about privilege that would be loving and fierce.

I have never looked back. These conversations are some of my most cherished moments of every month. The quality of connection, the risk taking, and the commitment to challenging all of us with love keep growing. I also notice continued deepening of my own internal willingness to engage, to challenge myself and others, to reach across divides, to make messes by trying to offer support, to name things that others may not feel up to looking at, and to put myself overall in more and more uncomfortable positions.

Necessary and Unnecessary Discomfort

The willingness to experience discomfort is essential for shifting from the negative to the positive ways of engaging with privilege. The positive path does not eliminate discomfort. Indeed, I do not know any way in which any of us in a position of privilege can wake up to it without experiencing discomfort. The question for me is not whether or not there will be discomfort, only what kind of discomfort.

My way of understanding the deepest source of the discomfort emerges from my faith in the human spirit. I believe that we are all born with an innate capacity for care

and from it with the desire to contribute to life around us. Because of that, the way we usually explain to ourselves implicitly why we have privilege is by denying that we have the privilege and at the same time thinking that we deserve it. Both ends of this illogical position combine to provide some ease in relation to our fundamental care. To suddenly recognize that there really is no reason for us to have it other than that's how society is structured puts us face-to-face with the reality that our privilege is at the expense of other people. This spells a moral contradiction that I see as the root of the challenge of facing privilege.

We cannot protect ourselves and others from this discomfort because the existence of systems of privilege is, indeed, at odds with our basic inclination to care for everyone's needs. This discomfort, the anguish of truly seeing how much of what provides comfort, ease, material resources, access, and more to some is at cost to others, does not go away. It cannot go away as long as the systems we have in place are what they are. Nothing else would bring an end to the excruciating and growing disparities that exist in the world in terms of access to resources of all kinds. That anguish, when faced fully, becomes a source of energy fueling work for transformation. I find it generative and useful.

The unnecessary discomfort stems from making a systemic issue appear to be an individual failing. When the word *privilege* is either used or heard as a statement about the moral character of the person with the privilege, it tends to bring about shame and defensiveness, both of which interfere with learning.

Given that many of us want to make the reality of systems of privilege known, I find it important to remind myself that we

become more effective the less shaming and the fiercer tenderness we can bring to the topic. Then we can find ways of supporting all of us in staying present as we look at the untold suffering that exists in the world because of massive differences in power, so that we can truly come together and create change.

There are no guarantees, because anything that anyone says, no matter how skillful, can still be filtered through the experiences of the listener into something that is far from the original intention. My hope is that we can find a way to do this collective awakening with only the necessary and unavoidable discomfort, and not more. This, to me, is one of the core tasks facing us if we are to still find a way to turn around the march towards destruction that's only been accelerating in my lifetime.

Because of how easy it is to fall into self-blame and shame, I am actively excited about focusing on how much liberation *for self* there can be in engaging with privilege. I have no hope of transforming the world if people engage with privilege out of obligation. Instead, I want both to remember and to effectively show others that having unexamined privilege and unconscious or reactive ways of using it is at cost to all, not only those without privilege. The cost is drastically different, and still it affects us all.

In this context, I experience dedicating my resources for the benefit of all as the most liberatory of all the positive ways of engaging with privilege. It challenges the heart of the system: a privileged person's ability to protect themselves from discomfort. By willingly taking on discomfort, I begin to free myself from attachment to the privilege. As I do that, more and more, I live in more integrity and less fear at the very same time as

contributing to others and to transforming
the systems of privilege, even if minutely.
Less separation all around.

References

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