

My name is Elizabeth Wynn, I'm the Equality and Diversity Manager at the Babraham Institute, and today I'm going to be talking about perspective and privilege. Privilege has unfortunately become a bit of a loaded term, people find it off putting. Which is a real shame because it's a very useful concept for understanding systemic inequality. So today I'm going to be talking about the concept, the development of that, the origin of it, what privilege really is and then a little bit at the end on how you can use privilege in a beneficial way.

The American sociologist W E B DuBois wrote in the 1930s about something he called a psychological wage. Here's a quote from him: "It must be remembered that the white group of labourers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white." DuBois isn't using the term privilege here, but he's very clearly describing an idea of people getting an unearned benefit based on their membership in a specific social group.

This idea was further developed in the 1960s in America during the civil rights movement and the term white privilege was used. At that time, though it was mostly used to talk about specific and tangible legal advantages that white people had when discrimination on the basis of race was not illegal. The civil rights movement had lots of victories, including making discrimination on the basis of race illegal; however, that didn't result in racism disappearing and the idea of white privilege continued to evolve.

In 1988 Peggy McIntosh wrote a seminal essay called White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack. Here's a quote from the beginning of that: "I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group... that racism is something that puts others at a disadvantage, but I had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage."

McIntosh is a feminist scholar and she was coming at this from her experiences with men, and them not being able to see the advantages that they gained simply by fact of being men. And she realised through conversations she had with her colleagues of colour, her Black colleagues, that she had privilege on the basis of her race, simply because of the fact that she was white. And she wrote this essay, which is still very relevant, very useful. I do highly recommend reading it.

And in it she reflected on what privileges she might have that she wouldn't be aware of. She came up with a list, lots of examples. And she likened it to this invisible weightless knapsack which was full of things like maps and passports and cheque books that she was completely unaware of but that helped her navigate the world much easier.

So since the 80s, the idea of privilege has continued to be studied and developed and if you see a definition of privilege now it will probably be something along these lines. Privilege is unearned benefits or advantages based on membership in a social group.

Privilege is a result of power imbalances that are embedded in society. Historically it was, as we saw, first used to talk about power imbalances based on ethnicity or race. However, there are loads of different categories where the same types of power imbalances apply. For example, white versus non-white we talked about, male versus female, heterosexual versus gay or lesbian. These are just a few examples of the categories in which power imbalances occur.

And as McIntosh pointed out, it's really important to understand that it's like a seesaw. When one group is disadvantaged, another group is advantaged. It's not like there's a default setting. It's not like white is default and Black is disadvantaged. There's variations in these, people exist in in these

categories and when there's imbalance one group is advantaged another is disadvantaged. And the thing is, because these categories occur across a whole spectrum of aspects, most of us, in fact all of us, will have privilege in certain aspects of our lives and disadvantage in other aspects.

If you want to learn more about that idea, I recommend looking up intersectionality. And in fact a few weeks ago I did a talk, Introduction to Intersectionality, which does give a brief introduction to that topic. But that's entirely about the idea that we exist in multiple categories.

It's important to understand that having, that being disadvantaged in one category doesn't negate the advantage you gain from another category. In fact, one I think key misunderstanding about privilege and one of the main reasons that people can sometimes reject the idea, is because privilege is multifaceted. A person can experience hardship or discrimination or work hard and still benefit from privilege.

If you're more of a visual person, this cartoon that I have here illustrates this really well I think. There is a white man and a Black woman both preparing to run a foot race and he's saying, "What's the matter? It's the same distance!" And he's correct. They both have to travel that distance to reach that goal. They're not going to reach it if they don't do anything. However, his track has a few standard running hurdles, whereas hers has obstacles like landmines, barbed wire, a crocodile. So it's the same distance, but it's not the same race.

And this cartoon leads really nicely into the idea of perspective. I titled this talk Perspective and Privilege. That's partly because I wanted to put privilege second because, as we said, that can be off putting and scary. But also, being able to understand the limitations of our own perspective is a key part of understanding how privilege works.

I think this is a really great way of thinking about privilege, from campaign from the University of San Francisco: If you don't have to think about it, it's a privilege. In the previous example, that cartoon, it was clear that the man couldn't perceive the obstacles in the woman's pathway.

To further develop this idea, all of our experiences and perception of the world are shaped by unique aspects of our lives and our personality, things like our age, our ethnicity, our gender. All sorts of aspects. And that means all of us have a unique perspective. And while we can't understand truly anyone else's perspective, one thing about privilege, as Macintosh pointed out, it's a feature of privilege, not a bug, that people with privilege are taught not to see the advantages that that confers on them.

Here are a couple of examples from different areas. Previously we've just talked about white privilege mostly, so some examples.

- College was an expectation for me growing up.
- I can hold my partner's hand in public without fear of being harassed.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
- If I get a promotion no one will think it's because of my gender.
- People in positions of authority are likely to look like me.

You probably identify with one or more of those statements and maybe it is something that you were aware of, that you've thought about, that you know is a privilege. But maybe you haven't before. And that's not to say you're a bad person if you never realised that. This is a really good example of the limitations of our own perspectives and how our privilege deliberately blinds us to certain aspects of society.

I said at the beginning that I was for the final part of this, I'm going to talk about what you can do with your privilege. Again, quoting the University of San Francisco, because they said it so well: Becoming aware of privilege should not be viewed as a burden or source of guilt, but rather an opportunity to learn and be responsible so that we may work toward a more just and inclusive world.

So that's my first bit of advice to change or adjust your mind-set. The only way to not feel guilty or defensive about privilege, about talking about or thinking about that idea, is to make a deliberate choice to approach it with a positive and active mind-set. Getting defensive about privilege or ignoring the realities of it isn't helpful in any way. So my first piece of advice is to get into the right mind-set for this.

My second piece of advice is to educate yourself and others. This can be a hard bit of a personal work because as we said privilege is by its very nature invisible. So how are you meant to know where your privilege is? And the only thing you can do is start to educate yourself. I gave a couple of examples of the types of privilege that may exist that may be relevant for you. That's a good starting place. If you just start googling privilege you can find a lot of resources out there to help you learn about it.

And in terms of educating others, that doesn't need to be in a confrontational way that's going to put them on the defensive. It could be something as simple as sharing what you've learned with other people or pointing out examples when you see them in the media. Just to start those conversations and help other people get on that journey.

Finally, use your privilege to help others. It's an unfortunate fact that people with privilege are taken more seriously than people without. For example, when men talk about sexism they are believed more often than when women talk about sexism. It's very frustrating, but it is a fact. So something you can do if you have privilege in an area is to bring it up and to help other people.

And this doesn't just need to look like speaking up. Another really important thing you can do with your privilege is to amplify other people's voices. So if you have a platform where you can invite people to speak, invite people who are disadvantaged to speak. Give them that space to speak for themselves.

Those were some really quick tips to start you thinking about privilege and how you can use it to create that more just and inclusive world.

Thank you very much for attending.