

By Steven Jones, Ph.D.

The Right Hand of Privilege

Resisting Unearned Privilege

Many of us struggle to understand the concept of *privilege*, the idea that some individuals receive unearned advantages in life solely based on being a member of certain social identity groups. Some of us strongly resist the idea we have *unearned privilege*. In the United States many people are taught to work hard for the things you want and you will be able to get them. We are taught individual effort and

determination
will take you
very far in life.
These are
wonderful
values and
often hold true

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for many people. However, for some people, individual effort with a wind of unearned privilege behind their sails gets them further along in their journey. Others often experience unearned disadvantages which create a wind in the opposite direction at worst or no wind at all at best. These winds of disadvantage and

the winds of unearned privilege are often invisible to some people and very visible to others.

A few common reactions to having privilege are:

“Privilege. As a man, I don’t have any privilege. I’m just an individual who works hard everyday to make ends meet. This is America. Everyone gets the same opportunities. If women don’t make gender an issue, there is none.”

“I am tired of hearing that White people have privilege. I am not going to feel guilty or be blamed for what has happened in the past. The playing field has been leveled. Race has nothing to do with it anymore.”

“I don’t go around flaunting being heterosexual. Why do they have to put their sexuality in your face?”

Adjusting Our View of the World

In order to grasp the concept of unearned privilege we are required to adjust from an individual view of seeing the world. We are challenged to understand the world from the group or systemic level.

Tools for Understanding Privilege

Two additional articles written to help us adjust to viewing the world from a group or systemic level have been written by Peggy MacIntosh and Dr. Judith Katz. *White Privilege: Unpacking the Knapsack of White Privilege*, by Peggy MacIntosh, identifies 42 ways in which systems in the U.S. provide White people with unearned privileges. Judith Katz's article focuses on a different social identity group, heterosexuals. In *Heterosexual Privilege*, she outlines a list of unearned privileges which are afforded to people who are heterosexual. These articles have helped many to understand how they receive benefits in life partially as a result of being White or Heterosexual.

Although difficult, it is important to engage in exploring the concept of unearned privilege. Understanding unearned privilege is not about blaming people for the past. It is about identifying ways in which systems that have been created in the

past and present provide advantage to certain groups while simultaneously posing disadvantage to other groups.

Understanding unearned privilege is not about blaming people for the past.

Let us take an example which might not have as much historical baggage for most people. I would like to pose the question: Do we live in a right-handed or left-handed world? My answer is we live in a right-handed world. Look at the systems which have been created to support the successful functioning of the group called the right-handed people.

Right-handed Systems in Society

We shake with our right hands. We pledge with our right hand. We salute with our right hand. We take legal and governmental oaths with our right hand. School desks are set up for right-handed people. Most baseball mitts are designed for right-

handed
people.
When
computers
first came
out, the
mouse was



set up on the right-hand side. Cars are set up for right-handed people to drive comfortably. Notebooks and three-ring binders are designed for right-handed people to write comfortably. Guns are designed for right-handers to shoot. Appliances open to the right, making it easy for right-handers to open. Punch ladles are designed for right-handed people. Most coffee mugs are designed for right-handed people to pick up and see the picture or words. If a left-handed person picks up the same mug, there is nothing there to see!

I recently went into a store which caters entirely to left-handed people. The store is called *Southpaw Shoppe* located at Seaport Village in San Diego, Ca. I went with a friend of

mine who is left-handed. She got very excited because everything in the store was made for her. When was the last time you walked into your local Wal-Mart, Target, or department store and thought about the fact that everything was set up for you because you were a right-handed person in a right-handed store?

“My People Rule...”

How many of you, who are right-handed, wake up in the morning thinking “my people rule...” Do you realize you live in a world which affords you all this privilege everyday? Privilege you may not think about, you didn’t work or ask for, and you did not earn. How many of you think you are advantaged in life on a daily basis because you are right-handed? How aware are you of being a part of a social identity group in power called the right-handed people?

Culture Becomes the Invisible Standard

One of the ways in which unearned privilege occurs is when one group's culture,

The culturally-based definition of normal is then extended to everyone and everything.

values and ways of interpreting the world get built into the fabric of institutions within a society and are then made invisible. The group's culture is made invisible by being called the *standard*. Instead of being called the right-handed cultural standard, it is simply called the standard. Because of this institutionalized support for the culture, members of that group are able to think about themselves only as individuals. There is no need to define or identify with other right-handers. Their *groupness* is the standard. They are not different. They are normal.

This culturally-based definition of normal is then extended to everyone and everything. It proceeds that

anything that is not normal is *special*, *different*, or *abnormal*. For example, there are baseball mitts and desks designed for left-handed people. They are called left-handed desks or left-handed baseball mitts. Compare this to the right-handed desks and mitts which are simply called desks and baseball mitts.

The Experience of the Left

Even though being left-handed has some positive aspects, most left-handed people have negative experiences associated with their dominant hand. We have heard stories of people having their hands painfully tied behind their back so they could learn to use their right hand. People have been hit on their hand with a ruler when they were younger every time they used their left hand. Many have been told that their child's life would be easier if they just learned to use their right hand. Some have been teased about being a south-paw or a lefty.

Shut Up and Quit Being So Sensitive!

How many of us right-handed people would be upset if left-handed people started to complain about being discriminated against? How many of us would tell them to shut up and quit being so sensitive? How many of us would let them know there is no real problem because we don't see one?

How many of us would tell them,

“As a right-handed person, I don't have any privilege. I'm just an individual who works hard everyday to make ends meet. This is America. Everyone gets the same opportunities. If left-handed people don't make this an issue, there is none.”

After some time went by and the left-handed people continued to bring up the issue of right-handed unearned privilege, how many of us would say,

“I am tired of hearing that right-handed people have privilege. I am not going to feel guilty or be blamed for what has happened in the past. The playing field has been leveled. Being left-handed has nothing to do with it anymore.”

“I don't go around flaunting being right-handed. Why do they have to put being left-handed in your face?”

A Level Playing Field

We do not have to feel guilty or blamed. By becoming more aware of the ways in which we receive unearned privilege, we can become a part of creating teams, work environments, organizations, and a society which strive to create a playing field that is truly level for all.

The Global Leader*SHIFT* ThoughtPapers are a series of white papers dedicated to defining critical concepts, skills and actions necessary to lead effectively as we shift into a new global reality.

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