

The unearned benefits of a white male

While my talk will primarily focus on white male privilege, it could as well be on white, heterosexual, male, able-bodied, hearing, seeing privilege. Each of those lead to some unearned benefit over a person who does not identify with the particular characteristic. That person experiences some level of undeserved discrimination or disadvantage relative to me.

Borrowing from Joan Wiley's 2009 service, Privilege, where she cites Michael S. Kimmel, author of "Privilege", who states,

"Being white, or male, or heterosexual . . . Is like running with the wind at your back. It feels like just plain running, and we rarely, if ever, get a chance to see how we are sustained, supported and even propelled by that wind."

My decision to make this presentation stems from reading the book, *"Everyday white people confront racial & social injustice: 15 Stories."* (15 different authors)

The consistent theme throughout all the stories is that we must become aware of how we benefit from each of the prejudices and what the experience of the "other" is because of our privilege.

Listening and learning are the foundations of any effective social justice work.

I found it quite interesting that the more powerful of the 15 stories were those written by women and the most powerful was written by a Jewish woman. My understanding here is that being on both sides. . . privileged on some dimension(s) and subject to discrimination on another or others seems to help with awareness.

White males may have the toughest time being aware of the privilege they enjoy.

There are two notions that were discussed in several of the stories that I'd like you keep in mind throughout my presentation: structural and intersectional

... racial issues and other inequalities are not simply a result of individual behaviour but the consequences of deeply embedded structures, policies, practices and beliefs" I.e. Structural

... all prejudices are related. . .oppressive institutions (racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism etc,) are interconnected and can not be examined separately. I.e, intersectional.

It comes down to us and them; if you oppose one form of prejudice, you will be most effective if you oppose all forms.

I'm going to share a bit of my personal history that I think is relevant. I grew up in white working/middle class towns. Early on, I was mostly unaware of being "white" because there wasn't anything else. Later when related issues came up, both my parents claimed to not be prejudiced.

When I was 12, my mother hired a woman of colour to clean our house . . . My mother based her claim of not being prejudice on the fact that she treated Molly nicely, paid her well and gave her lunch.

My father based his claim of not being prejudiced on the fact that as coach, he always put the one black player on the football team and the one black player on the basketball team in to play for at least five minutes of every game.

So at some level, I was "taught" that one shouldn't be prejudiced or racist.

However, my father wore a "family" ring, a gold ring with a black stone that had a "J" carved in it. This ring was to be handed down to the first born son in each generation when the father died. I was the next in line for it, but when my former wife, Margaret and I adopted a black son, the ring was passed from my father to my uncle so it would not be passed to my black son.

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While sexism was not discussed or even part of my awareness growing up, I got a clear message from my older sister. She regularly threatened to beat me up if I was ever disrespectful of my girlfriends or girls in general. She was quite capable of doing so and I took her message seriously. It was also true that she was bright, articulate, talented and high achieving. Before her death from cancer at age 57, she was a dance instructor at Ball State University.

I believe I can claim to have lived up to her message in at least the more obvious ways. I can't claim to be free of any expressions of paternalism or patriarchy.

Given this background, what are the privileges I am now aware of?

- * I can drive (or walk) most anywhere and not expect to be stopped, searched or otherwise treated as suspicious by police.
- * --- in Ottawa, police stop Middle Eastern, black drivers 3.3 X more often than expected based on population.
- * ---in Halifax, young blacks are stopped 3X more often than expected
- *
- * I am able to walk down most streets in most towns at night without fear of being harassed, assaulted or raped.
- * I can go into any restaurant, bar, or store and expect to be served and treated with respect.
- * I can be at a party, or otherwise in close quarters with others and not be concerned that I will be grabbed or otherwise sexually touched.

Let me read you a very different experience from one of the 15 stories:
From "Knapsacks and Baggage" by Abby L. Ferber (a white Jewish woman).
Citing her own experience . .

"Gender inequality continued to become more and more visible for me when I went to college. I learned the language to describe the multiple experiences of attempted rape and frequent sexual harassment I experienced as a teenager. At the time, they just seemed like normal life occurrences--that was the way things were.

My first job was at a Burger King, where I worked for more than five years and was repeatedly groped by male employees every time I had to enter the walk-in cooler.

The saddest part of this was that while this behaviour made me uncomfortable, I did not see it as wrong. It never occurred to me to report it. I had internalized the message that it was simply normal for males to force themselves on women, and worse, that I should feel good about it because it was a sign of my attractiveness to men."

In 2014, stats by Canadian Women's Foundation noted that 43% of women indicated they had been sexually harassed by a co-worker.

From "Herizons": Winter 2017

Justice Robin Camp asked a sexual assault victim why she couldn't just keep her knees together to avoid the assault. (Canadian Justice Council has unanimously recommended that he be removed from the bench). That public and official acknowledgement that his comments were out of line and reflect a systemic bias is good news, but that it happened at all is appalling and supports my point.

More "good" news . . .

The head of the RCMP has apologized to female members who have been sexually harassed by their colleagues and superiors. 100 million dollars has been set aside to cover the sexual harassment claims of approximately 1,000 female members of the RCMP.

Continuing with privileges:

- * throughout my life, I applied for universities, graduate school and jobs fully expecting that only my past achievements would be considered, not my skin colour, gender or other personal characteristic.
- * I have sat on numerous boards and have been quite clear that I was there for my skills and opinions and not because I met some racial or gender based quota . . . And therefore I could expect to be heard and to be allowed to speak.

* However, on the other side . . .

a University of Northwestern Pritzker School of Law study found that:

In 1990 when one of 9 supreme court judges was a woman (11%), 35.7% of the interruptions occurred when she was speaking;

In 2002, when 2 of the 9 justices were women (22%), 45.3% of the interruptions occurred when they were speaking, and

In 2015, when 3 of the 9 justices were women (1/3), 65.9% of the interruptions occurred when one of them was speaking.

*In further support of the notion of male privilege, I borrow again from Joan Wiley's presentation. She says "I've also had several interesting conversations with transgender men who observe that since transitioning, they have experienced more privileges, including being taken more seriously than when they present as women.

* I believe I could run for a government office and if I won, expect to be heard.

* While I might be criticized for my opinions and votes, I would not expect to be threatened with sexual violence, imprisonment or murder . . . But note the following from an article by Penny Mitchell in the Herizons Magazine I referred to earlier.

- * Rachel Notley, NDP Premier of Alberta has been subject to countless online taunts and social media attacks that are sexual and violent in nature - - including a not so subtle reference to the disposal method preferred by serial killer Robert Pickton.
- * Alberta legislature member Sandra Jansen dropped out of the race for the leadership of the Alberta Progressive conservative Party. Why?? She'd been relentlessly harassed on social media on the phone and even at political gatherings by male opponents. The bullies lobbed sexually threatening slogans her way because she dared to throw her hat in to the ring and take on leading PCP contender Jason Kenny. After she crossed the floor she was attacked with thinly veiled threats by opponents who referred to her as "dead meat," a "traitorous bitch" and a "useless tit."
- * Less violent sexists criticize what female politicians wear, or they say the women are too emotional or, in Hillary Clinton's case, not emotional enough.
- * Hate politics rely on intimidation, fear and hatred of the other, whether the other is female, brown-skinned or a member of a religious minority.
- * Former Manitoba Liberal leader Rana Bokhari recently spoke about the racist and sexist attacks she was subjected to in Manitoba's April election. Bokhari, a woman of colour, was accustomed to patronizing comments and sexual come-ons in the course of her work. But then came the penis photo, aggressive sexual harassment and death threats - - death threats because she had the audacity to claim public space as a minority woman.

And a couple of final notes on the issue,

- * a Brock study found that bright girls hide their intelligence for fear of being unpopular/unattractive to boys! Of course that could affect their achievement and subsequent success in school or job applications.

- * Recent reports have identified the fact that an Alberta school system's "Women's Study course teaches how to dress, put on make-up, cook and serve dinners! (It is being challenged but, exists at the moment. It is true that in the early 1950's, I learned to cook, clean and do laundry in a home-economics course. But it wasn't called women's studies and both boys and girls were required to take it.

In my current life, I "help" in the kitchen; I usually cook two meals a week; I often soo-chef when Carol is cooking something that involves a lot of slicing and dicing; and I do a fair bit of kitchen clean up. But note that I started this paragraph with "I help". Carol is doing her job . . . I help.

Moving toward a conclusion, I want to end with what is perhaps a lighter but still pertinent look at male privilege.

Video Tracey Ullman - Mugged (2 minutes)

I hope this lighter look helps men realize the impact of being told that what you were wearing was responsible for an assault against you.

And to conclude:

Be aware.

Remember "structural and intersectional".

Listen and learn from those with less privilege;

join and support groups that work to balance privilege; . . . look for groups that are led by members of the oppressed group;

consider intervening when you observe instances of discrimination,

and also remember that what one member of a discriminated group tells you of their experience does not necessarily represent all members of that group. Each person's experience is unique.

Comments and discussion