



The Right Hand of Privilege

solely based on being a member of certain social identity groups. Some of us strongly resist the idea that we have *unearned privilege*.

“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.”

Part of the challenge in grasping the concept of unearned privilege is to shift from an individual view to a group and systemic level of seeing the world. For example, Peggy MacIntosh, in her article *White Privilege: Unpacking the Knapsack of White Privilege*, identified 42 ways in which systems in the U.S. provide White people with unearned privileges. Judith Katz has written an article that focuses on a different social identity group, heterosexuals. In *Heterosexual Privilege*, she outlines a list of unearned privileges that are afforded to people who are heterosexual. These articles have helped many to understand how they receive benefits in life, partially through a system that gives them unearned privileges based on their social identity group.

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

Many of us struggle to understand the concept of *privilege*, the idea that some individuals receive unearned advantages in life

identifying ways in which systems that have been created in the past and present advantage certain groups while simultaneously disadvantaging other groups.

Let us take an example that doesn’t 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 that we live in a right-handed world. Look at the systems that have been created to support the successful functioning of the group called the right-handed people.

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

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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 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 called the Left-handed store in San Diego, Ca. When was the last time you walked in to your local Wal-Mart, Target, or department store and thought about the fact that you were in a right-handed store?



How many of you, who are right-handed, wake up in the morning thinking that you live in a world that affords you all this privilege everyday? Privilege that you may not think about, that you didn't work or ask for, that 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?

One of the ways in which unearned privilege occurs is when one group's culture, values, and ways of interpreting the world gets 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 the right-handed cultural standard, for example. Because of this institutionalized support for the culture, members of that group are able to think about themselves as individuals only. There is no need to define or identify with their group identity, or *groupness*, because it is the standard. They are not different. They are normal.

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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 mitts and desks designed for left-handed people. They are called left-handed desks or left-handed mitts, as opposed to the right-handed desks and mitts which are just called desks and mitts.

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.

This culturally-based definition of normal then gets extended to everyone and everything.

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 say,

"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."

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.

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