

The Inclusive OFFICE

PAN your privilege

Last month, “The Inclusive Office” introduced the concept of cultural competemility: the integration of cultural competence and cultural humility that help us to understand and effectively interact with people across cultures through acknowledging our internal biases, educating ourselves about other cultures and listening to and learning from others’ lived experiences.

I introduced the three steps to practicing cultural competemility, the first of which is gaining an awareness of our own culture, world view and lived experiences — or, to put it simply, acknowledging your privilege. This is frequently a stumbling block. We can define privilege easily, but we struggle to identify and acknowledge its effects in society and even more in our own lives.

An August 4, 2010 post to the Feministe blog provides a helpful metaphor for privilege:

“My mother was always very proud of the fact that her house didn’t smell of smoke, but the first time I returned to college after break and opened my suitcase, I realized I couldn’t take my laundry home. I had to bring dirty laundry back to college and wash it there, or it reeked. And three months after my mother finally quit smoking, she replaced all the carpets and had the house repainted — because of course it did smell of smoke. She just hadn’t noticed because she was used to it.

“Privilege is like smoke. When



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we’re living with it, you don’t notice it. It’s in the air. It’s all around us, invisible, ubiquitous. We don’t notice the privilege we share with others; we only notice what surprises our senses and our brains ...”

Merriam-Webster defines privilege as “a right or immunity granted as a peculiar benefit, advantage, or favor.”

The key word in this definition is granted — advantages not earned, but rather bestowed. The National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ) defines privilege as “[u]nearned access to resources (social power) that are only readily available to some people because of their social group membership; an advantage, or immunity granted to or enjoyed by one societal group above and beyond the common advantage of all other groups.”

As plus-size fashion blogger Stephanie Yeboah had to remind the Twitterverse, “Being called privileged is not an insult. It simply means that society treats you better than another group of people. It means there are systematic procedures in place that keep you above others based on how you look, how much you’re worth and other factors.”

Privilege inherently creates two

groups: those with the advantage and those without. Those without are typically classified as “target” or “oppressed” identities. NCCJ defines these identities as “[s]ocial groups that are negatively valued, considered to be inferior, abnormal, or dependent and given limited access to resources and social power.” Those with are “agent” or “privileged” identities, “[s]ocial groups that are positively valued considered superior, independent, or ‘normal’ and have access to resources and power.” A person holds multiple identities, which can place them simultaneously in both classes of identities.

We do not like to think of it this way, but the basic characteristics that compose who we are come with institutionalized and systemic advantages and disadvantages:

- Our race — white privilege is the unearned access, resources and social status systematically granted to white people at the expense of people of color.
- Our biological sex — male privilege is the unearned access, resources and social status systematically granted to men at the expense of women.
- Our gender and gender expression — cisgender people at the expense of trans people or anyone who identifies or presents out of the false gender binary.
- Our sexual orientation — straight people at the expense of LGBTQIA+ people.

- Our religion — Christians at the expense of other religious and non-religious individuals, cultures and institutions.

- Our physical and mental health — the physically, psychologically, cognitively and intellectually able at the expense of people with a disability.

This is by no means a complete list of privileged identities, and I encourage everyone to do their homework on this issue. Do some further reading at <https://nccj.org/what-privilege>, grab a group and work through The MSW@USC Diversity Toolkit, or take the time to watch the University of Arizona's Social Justice: Privilege and Oppression presentation.

I am not going to make a call for action to combat privilege today, but I will in the future. The first step to solving a problem is acknowledging and identifying it. So I am asking you to Pay Attention Now (PAN)! According to the University of Arizona's Social Justice: Privilege and

Oppression, PAN-ing is “intentionally observing and noticing behaviors, comments, feelings, patterns of treatment, etc.” which will “increase our ability to notice the patterns of treatment and experiences” of the target or oppressed groups and the agent or privileged groups.

This is an easy exercise to begin increasing your awareness of your own privilege and that (or the lack of that) of others. Look around the courtroom whenever you are there — what's the gender breakdown of the lawyers? Is there racial diversity? Lawyers of different ages? Lawyers of different physical abilities?

Think about how you got into the courtroom; would that have been difficult if you struggled with mobility? What about the judge? How often are you appearing before non-male judges? Or judges of color? What about the security personnel in the courts? What about local law enforcement? Observe the makeup of CLE panels. If your office collects

demographic data about your clients, investigate that. Is your clientele generally homogenous?

As you are PAN-ing, you are going to notice significant differences in how people with certain identities are treated. If you want to take the next step, consider why the observations you are making might be happening and what about your environments allows this to happen. Being privileged is not an insult, but it is a responsibility, and acknowledging and identifying the breadth of the effects of privilege is the first step in accepting that responsibility.

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