

Disentangling privilege from merit: a crucial step for true inclusion at work



At some point during the popular podcast series “How I Built This”, the host Guy Raz asks his guests who are all successful entrepreneurs: “Was your success down to luck or your skills?” Most entrepreneurs attribute their success to a bit of both, luck and skill. We usually think of luck as coming to us arbitrarily and being evenly distributed across individuals. In reality, however, what makes us lucky very often depends on where we grew up, which school we went to, or which skin colour we have etc.. In short, luck is not pure chance but depends on our privilege. Creating an awareness of individuals’ privilege — and factoring in privilege or a lack thereof — in the recruiting and retaining of talent in the workplace is hence imperative for achieving true diversity and inclusion at work.

Why privilege?

A lack of privilege has been shown to have persistent effects on one’s professional life from early schooling, through to university and the workplace.

Pupils who live in persistent poverty in England are 18.1 months of learning behind their peers by the time they finish their secondary education, with black pupils being even more behind ([Education Policy Institute 2020](#)). Only one in eight people from a working class background achieve an undergraduate degree as compared to half of people from professional and managerial backgrounds ([Friedman and Laurison 2019](#)). Individuals who attended private schools earn 7% to 9% more a year than equally qualified state school graduates from low socioeconomic status, and this effect persists up to five years after graduation ([Institute for Fiscal Studies 2018](#)).

Despite education being regarded as a route to social mobility and as a great equaliser in society ([Crawford and Vignoles 2014](#)), it seemingly fails to remove the impact of socioeconomic background on labour market success. Holding skills, ability and talent constant, this means that less privileged individuals face more obstacles on the way to the top.

In past literature, diversity in the workplace has often been defined quite narrowly, focusing on objective and readily observable individual characteristics, such as gender or race ([Roberson 2019](#)). Privilege, a special advantage enjoyed by a group or an individual is often invisible to those that have it ([McIntosh 1988](#)). It is hence important to account for privilege as one determinant of career achievements in addition to ability and luck.

The illusion of a meritocratic workplace

In 2010, [Castilla and Bernard](#) coined the term “the paradox of meritocracy in organisations” and find that organisations that emphasised merit-based reward systems in reality favoured men over women as compared to companies that did not. The authors argue that an increased focus on meritocracy in society has led to the justification of rewards based on merit thereby turning a blind eye to discrimination or privilege at work. The ideal of meritocracy is often misguided and what is valued in the workplace is not necessarily based on ability and skills but rather on signals such as a strong handshake or the appropriate attire. It is hence crucial to understand the mechanisms of privilege and disentangle true merit from empty signals that are known to the privileged in-group only.

Due to the inequality that privilege can create, it is surprising that it is rarely mentioned in describing career success. [Rosette & Thompson](#) (2005) explain why privileges at work are more likely to be perceived to be based on achievements. First, many cultures emphasise meritocracy as the system of workplace advancement. In such a system, achievements are the focus of workplace hierarchies, and unearned privilege is ignored. Though advancements based on true merit may be the goal in such cultures, it fails to take into account the role of unconsciously unearned privileges. The reason merit is emphasised is largely based on a desire for equity. This desire is based on the Just World Hypothesis ([Lerner 1980](#)), which states that people want to believe that social systems are fair and just and that individuals are rewarded on the basis of what they deserve. Thus, people may be unwilling to accept the role that unearned privileges play in receiving merit in the workplace, as this can jeopardise their ideal world view.

Unearned privilege explained

As research has attempted to uncover the phenomenon of unearned privilege in the workplace, two main theories have evolved, which describe the psychological factors underpinning the ‘privilege effect’.

According to Expectation States Theory ([Berger et al. 1972](#); [Webster & Driskell 1978](#)), unearned privileges are awarded on the basis of expectations of one’s performance. In the absence of relevant and objective performance information, diffuse characteristics become salient in performance judgements. Diffuse characteristics are attributes that an individual cannot control, such as class, race, or gender. While they are unrelated to actual performance they confer status. In this way, performance is judged based on arbitrarily perceived status, and individuals belonging to the socially desirable demographic groups reap the benefits. Although this theory states that such privileges are formed when information on merit is unknown, these privileges create unfair advantages or disadvantages that can persist throughout an individual’s career.

Status Construction Theory ([Ridgeway, 1991, 2000, 2001](#)) extends expectation research by explaining how beliefs about one’s status can spread through a social process to form widely held beliefs about an individual’s status in the workplace. In this way, expectations inform on interaction patterns in the workplace and further perpetuate the advantages or disadvantages one is given from their status. These advantages include having greater influence and levels of participation ([Berger et al. 1972](#)), and over time can lead to greater workplace achievements. This effect is exacerbated when the unearned aspect of one’s privilege is muffled by resulting achievements.

Disentangling how much of success is due to ability and how much due to an initial bestowment of privilege in the form of, for example, money or connectedness, is difficult. Testing to what extent “success breeds success”, [van de Rijt et al.](#) (2014) randomly allocated money to projects such as small businesses on the crowdfunding website Kickstarter.com. They find that this arbitrary initial endowment of wealth increased subsequent rates of success as compared to equally skilled control groups, showing that having a monetary “head start” alone can preserve success.

Taking the first step: creating awareness of privilege

In creating a more equitable workplace where true ability and talent is emphasised, a key first step is to create awareness of the role of unearned privileges.

While the invisibility of privilege from the perspective of the privileged can sometimes simply be equated to ignorance, it is often also simply a lack of awareness. As an able-bodied individual, for example, one might find it hard to think of some of the obstacles that individuals with disabilities face. Creating sensitivity around those issues can be a first step in tackling privilege.

In creating awareness, it is crucial to choose programmes that have been tested to positively and *sustainably* change attitudes and behaviours. [Chang et al. \(2019\)](#), for example, find that online diversity training has a positive effect on attitudes and behaviours toward women and racial minorities but only if those are not one-off interventions. Hence, creating awareness through programmes like unconscious bias trainings may only be a first step of full privilege removal.

In her TED talk on luck, Amy Hunter further highlights the importance of removing cognitive dissonance; that is when an individual holds contradictory opinions from observed evidence. An example of this goes back to the study of meritocracy where individuals justify apparent inequalities at the workplace with reference to talent instead ([McCoy and Major 2007](#)). Hunter argues that we need to create a connectedness and kinship across individuals of different backgrounds to remove such cognitive dissonances and to create an awareness of what it really means not to be as privileged.

Taking a second step: translating awareness to change

Although awareness of privilege is key to progressing to a more equitable organisational system, awareness of one's privilege alone has been found to be insufficient for prompting intentions to make a change ([Ancis & Szymanski 2001](#)). While some people might be inspired to fight inequalities, others might be happy with the status quo and its associated benefits.

Indeed, research on the impact of framing on reducing prejudice ([Powell et al. 2005](#)) highlights that individual differences may impact what technique is most effective. They find that framing privilege as an in-group advantage rather than an out-group disadvantage results in higher levels of guilt and lower prejudice towards out-groups. However, though this technique might see success for those who view inequality as a bad thing, when people consider inequalities as "legitimised" it can further increase prejudices.

To remove privilege from rewards assessments, future research is needed to study the heterogeneous responses across individuals to different interventions. That way we can take a more tailored approach to promoting behaviours which encourage equal opportunities for all and think about additional steps to remove biases that privilege creates in the labour market.



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