

Power and the responsibility of privilege

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PRIVILEGE is controversial and poorly understood, often bringing up feelings of defensiveness to those who possess it. Privilege is power, and it is complex. It cannot be simplified to surface level discussions about jobs and representation in the media. It's something I speak about passionately because it is the primary contributing factor in systemic oppression, whether it is based on race, gender, ability, sexuality, or anything else.

Merriam-Webster defines privilege as "the advantage that wealthy and powerful people have over other people in a society."

Privilege (and, consequently, oppression) are both public and private. Systemic privilege is the reality that stereotypical assumptions of racialized groups (in our community, often Muslim or indigenous people) represent the entire group, while the Ku Klux Klan does not represent all white people. It is the lack of people of colour, non-heterosexual, and gender variant people in the media. It is the higher rates of pover-



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Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism Advisory Committee produces this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

ty, homelessness, and addiction in groups who experience oppression.

To further expand on the complexity of privilege, it is important to understand that it is possible for an individual to experience privilege in some ways and oppression in others. For example, a white woman may experience racial privilege but gendered oppression.

Privilege is about opportunities. Those who enjoy privilege also enjoy opportunities that may not be available to those who are marginalized.

An interesting way this is often described is a classroom activity. Imagine a classroom with rows of students in randomly assigned seats. The teacher instructs each student to throw a crumpled up piece of paper into a garbage can at the front of the room. The students at the front are far more likely to successfully throw their paper into the can, and students in subsequent rows become less and less likely to successfully make the shot.

But the most interesting thing about privilege is that it is almost entirely out of our control. We don't choose our race, class, biological sex, ability level or sexual orientation — and this is precisely why we needn't feel guilty or ashamed of the privilege we possess. It is not a choice. However, I believe it is the collective responsibility of our community to ensure that our actions don't further marginalize those who experience oppression.

There are two important things I wish for everyone reading this article to do: First, identify your social location, and understand in what areas you experience both privilege and oppression. Once you've done

that, research. Listen to stories of those who are oppressed in ways you are not. Share stories about your own oppression. Enter conversations with those who are different with an open mind and a willingness to learn.

This will not only provide opportunities to learn from one another, but can create a feeling of community collectiveness and togetherness — something our city currently lacks in many ways.

One of the most commonly asked questions during discussions about power, privilege, and oppression is, "Am I supposed to feel guilty about my privilege?" The answer is no, you need not be ashamed of your privilege, however you are not exempt from the duties that come with it. So, in closing, with the most appropriate use of the Spider Man quote, "With great power comes great responsibility" — use yours wisely.

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