

One Cheer for Privilege Language

Amanda Udis-Kessler, May 19, 2015; updated June 12, 2022

I've been involved in an interesting FaceBook conversation about whether "privilege" language ("white privilege," "male privilege," "straight privilege," etc.) has lost its usefulness (and perhaps whether it ever had any). Certain criticisms posed of this way of looking at inequality seem accurate to me but I'm not sure those criticisms make "privilege" language and lists of privileges that go with being [white](#) or [male](#) or [heterosexual](#) or [wealthy](#) useless.

But, to be fair, let's start with some of the concerns:

- Privilege language focuses on the individual with privilege. It is often couched as a series of "I" statements that, however technically accurate, does not inherently involve an analysis of structural, cultural, and interpersonal inequality. If we can discuss privilege without discussing power and social structures something's definitely wrong.
- Privilege language involves a simplistic distinction between privileged and oppressed, as though we were not all a mix of valued and devalued identities, some of which are privileged and some of which are not. I'm not sure this is the only way to use privilege language but it does seem to lend itself to a degree of simplification that is not ideal.
- Privilege language implies that those with privilege in a particular area are inherently unaware of their privilege and may therefore imply that those on the devalued side of the equation are inherently aware of both the inequality they face and the social and historical aspects of that inequality. By this argument anyone in a devalued group has full intellectual access to the context of their circumstances and surely also has a complex analysis of the situations in which they find themselves. Empirical reality indicates that neither of these assumptions are necessarily true. People with privilege (say, white privilege) can be aware of that privilege and struggle to keep that awareness front and center in their minds, and members of devalued groups can have a sense that something's wrong in society but may not have a complex analysis of what it is. In fact, as we see in the writings of BIPOC conservatives who deny systematic racism, a devalued identity might lead to identifying closely with the valued group's analysis even if it devalues one's own group further.
- Privilege language once again centers the privileged group which is almost always already at the center of attention. It allows well-intentioned people who belong to valued and powerful groups to focus more on themselves and less on those who belong to devalued and powerless (or less powerful) groups. This may be a particular problem for college students, who are often at a developmental stage where a certain degree of self-involvement is common. Privilege language is the (again, well-intended) use of #crimingwhilewhite to demonstrate that white people who break laws are simply treated better than people of color who break none. No one can doubt the earnestness of the #crimingwhilewhite writers but given the impacts of racism on people of color should we white people really be examining our own experiences right now? Wouldn't it be better for us to expend our energy teaching ourselves about historic and current racism as it affects people from BIPOC communities?
- It's not clear how useful privilege language and privilege lists are for anti-inequality activists and educators. Okay, so I can review a list of privileges that I have as a white person or an upper-middle-class person, or I can suggest that my heterosexual and/or male friends review straight privilege and male privilege lists. So what? What then? What should I do with my

privilege(s)? Especially given the other limitations of privilege language above, is it really worth continued usage by people with privilege, or by anyone?

I would say yes, but cautiously so. Used appropriately, in ways that address the above concerns, privilege language can be a tool to engage people with privilege and get us caught up in the educational process that will eventually lead us to accept and struggle to address not just our privilege but our power, not just how valued we are but how devalued others are and how the two matters are related. Privilege language is entrance language; it allows people who don't know better to enter into understanding and conversation and activism. If that walk does not continue past the gate of privilege language it's not much of a gate. But for some people it might be the only gate through which they can first step to make sense of reality and its many forms of inequality. (Please note that I am speaking only about the United States of America in this post. While many of these points might be translatable to inequality elsewhere around the world the translating would require knowledge of those locations and circumstances that I do not claim to have.)

So that said here's how I think we should be using privilege language to maximize its usefulness:

- Since privilege language is so individualistic its use should lead into consideration of how inequality works more broadly and how individual individuals with their individual privilege fit into larger-scale inequality. Mention of the fact that men are much less likely to get raped than women should quickly be redirected to a discussion of male violence and how it serves male desires for power and control. Are these desires biological? No, they are a result of our society and many others being structured patriarchally. Rape turns out to be the tip of the iceberg, both in terms of male violence against women (and other men) and in terms of cultural expectations about maleness, masculinity, and power/control. Mention of the fact that whites are less likely than people from BIPOC communities to be followed in stores by security officers should lead immediately to a discussion of the ways white society has rendered bodies of color dangerous and criminal. That discussion, which involves history, sociology, and psychology at least, could lead in a wide variety of directions (Who gets called a thug and why? Whose interests are served by a criminal justice system that elects to punish poor people and indeed all people of color disproportionately?); many of these directions might productively address cultural and structural aspects of racism that go well beyond an interpersonal interaction in a store.
- Lists of privileges are both useful and limited in their singularity. Focusing on one kind of inequality at a time is pedagogically helpful in many cases. But we need not stop there. A discussion of privilege lists addressing different types of privilege (white privilege, male privilege, heterosexual privilege, able-bodied privilege, religious privilege, and so on) could raise questions about similarities and differences across the lists. Almost immediately most people will notice that privileged bodies (of all sorts) are bodies that are not troublesome, not disgusting or dangerous or threatening, not disciplined to the same extent as devalued bodies. For someone who has never thought about the concept of inequality as it is housed in our physical bodies, a short comparison of privilege lists is not a bad way to start the conversation. Similarly, reading across privilege lists brings into sharp focus the affirmatively positive treatment received by people with all sorts of privilege: the assumptions of good intentions, the desire that one succeed or thrive, the willingness to help out. This may be a local, small-scale effect of inequality but it ripples out beyond individual

lives. If people expect the best of me, they may help me give my best. Maybe my best will cure a disease or solve an environmental problem or help people attain greater peace in their lives. My best, along with the bests of all the others with privilege, can make a larger positive difference in the world. Realizing this leads me then to wonder: how much healthier, more joyful, more loving a place might the world be if devalued people were strongly encouraged to give their best and were supported fully in doing so.

- One more point about the singularity of privilege lists. Since so many of us have a mix of valued and devalued identities, when we read multiple privilege lists, we may be forced to acknowledge the truth of privilege we have when we see it lined up next to the privileges we don't have, about which we may well already know. As a queer person I know that there are a number of states in which I have no legal recourse against being fired from a job because of my sexuality and I will nod approval when I see this item mentioned on a heterosexual privilege list. But then how can I respond when I see that as a white person, I am more likely to get a job than an equally qualified person from a BIPOC community? If I'm going to be honest with myself, I need to see the relationship between the two situations, which means confronting my privilege.

Having privilege does not necessarily mean being unaware of the privilege (if, for example, I care about inequality and have educated myself about these matters) but it's also true that nothing about my privilege particularly predisposes me to think of myself as having privilege. (Here, I must disagree at least partially with the critique leveled above.) If this is the case it should also be the case that if I see a list of my privileges and recognize the list as describing empirical reality, I may be forced to confront my privilege in a way I have not done before. Of course, I might resist or resent what I'm seeing, but for at least some of us this concept and these lists push us to understand our own lives in new ways and may prepare us for even more substantive analyses. Moreover, as someone who is simultaneously privileged and devalued, I may be able to see that people who share my devaluation but not my privilege could be in worst straits than I am. As a white queer woman, I face certain potential dangers and indignities but these may be much worse for a black transwoman, something I can come to understand better through a study of relevant statistics and life stories, and through conversations with transwomen of color in which I listen to and believe their accounts of their own lives.

Privilege language does indeed recenter people who are already usually at the center of attention, which is part of what makes privilege language so incomplete. But privilege language lifted up next to and in the context of the structures and cultures of devaluation can make for a reasonable point of comparison. Should I be spending more time understanding how segregation and entrenched poverty led to the police violence in Ferguson and Baltimore than I spend on how privileged I am as a white person? Of course. But if I want a systematic account of how inequality works, how structure and culture and interpersonal dynamics and intrapersonal dynamics interact, and of what my life has to do with the life of a poor person of color, privilege language can be a piece of the toolkit. It is not unimportant or irrelevant for me to be able to place myself as a white person into this larger context, not to shine a special light on myself or on white people (though problematizing whiteness more generally is productive, I think) but to understand the interdependence of inequality both up close and at its depths. My daily life is not unrelated to the lives of people of color or poor people (or men or heterosexuals or...). The ways in which I benefit are not at all unrelated to the ways others suffer, and the same is true in

reverse. The deepest possible understanding of any form of inequality, or indeed all forms of inequality as they intersect, enables us to see ourselves as pieces of the picture in our complexity and our contradictions, in our benefits and our pains. Privilege language used modestly can be part of this process.

Finally, there's the "so what? what then?" questions: what do we do with our privilege? Here are some starting points: We can use our privilege to challenge inequality locally, speaking up when we see any situation of inequality-based treatment in which we are in the privileged group. Part of privilege, after all, is being taken more seriously than the devalued group. We can acknowledge the reality of our privilege, educate ourselves on the history and current circumstances of the inequality in question (a never-ending but necessary process), then put our time, money and energy to work joining or supporting organizations led by people of color or poor people (or pick the relevant group or groups here) working for justice as they define what that struggle should look like. We can write letters to the editor and vote and get out the vote and find other ways to make a difference in our own world. We can come to understand the relationship between privilege and power and learn how white power and male power and heterosexual power and other kinds of power have fostered and facilitated inequality, and we can work with others to determine where we might have power and where we might be able to influence those with power. I realize that this point raises more questions than it answers but hopefully I have demonstrated that there are actions one can take that follow, at least in part, from the acknowledgment of privilege as a reality.

All of that said, I offer up one cheer for privilege language. It's problematic, for sure, but has its uses in understanding and responding to the blight of social inequality in our society if handled with care and in the context of the larger and more complex analyses that may ultimately allow us to make more of a difference in actually mitigating the inequality within and around us.