



CANADA'S CENTRE
FOR DIGITAL AND
MEDIA LITERACY

FORMS of PRIVILEGE

Diversity in Media, Privilege in the Media

<http://mediasmarts.ca/diversity-media/privilege-media/forms-privilege>

Social justice activists and writers have built on Peggy McIntosh's original essay on privilege in 1988, by adding to and modifying the original list to highlight how privilege is not merely about race or gender, but that it is a series of interrelated hierarchies and power dynamics that touch all facets of social life: race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, education, gender identity, age, physical ability, passing, etc. These categories will be further discussed below.

One thing to keep in mind when looking at how privilege operates is that privilege, discrimination, and social groups all operate within interrelated hierarchies of power, dominance, and exclusion. Just because someone is privileged in one way doesn't mean they may not be underprivileged in another (and vice-versa). It is therefore important to be aware of the various groups to which one belongs in order to be able to question our own participation in a system of discrimination and privilege.

There are many different kinds of privilege that exist but regardless of how groups are divided, the privileged group is the one that is commonly treated as the baseline against which the others are judged or compared – it is seen as “ordinary”. Consider some of the following kinds of privilege:

Ability: Being able-bodied and without mental disability. Actors with disabilities frequently find themselves passed up for roles even if those roles are for characters with the same disability. Moreover, while fully enabled actors are often cast in roles as disabled characters, actors with a disability are almost never asked to play enabled characters. Individuals who are mentally enabled never find their status used as a justification for criminal behaviour in film and television, but we often see mental illness portrayed in exactly such a light.

Class: Class can be understood both in terms of *economic status* and *social class*, both of which provide privilege. Social class can determine access to opportunities, to participation in politics, and opens up particular educational and vocational doors more easily. From a social and media standpoint, consider how different social classes are represented. It is also important to note that the majority of the media are created by and for a specific social class. How are certain jobs portrayed in the media compared to others?

Education: Access to higher education confers with it a number of privileges as well. Educational privilege opens a number of doors to higher paying careers (which links it to social class privilege). Educational privilege can also confer unearned credibility on an individual: For instance, many television and radio show hosts append the prefix “Dr.” to their name in order to use a PhD. to suggest they can offer medical or psychiatric advice.

Gender: Male-identified, masculine individuals still hold a level of privilege over people of other genders. Another word for the systemic operation of male privilege is “patriarchy”. In the media, we still see male authority superseding others. Men continue to be overrepresented in leadership roles and as news commentators. Men, their stories, and their perspectives continue to be vastly overrepresented in video games, film, and television programs, both onscreen and behind the scenes.

Gender Identity: While often linked to sexual orientation and gender privilege, this is the privilege that comes with having a gender identity (how one identifies and express oneself in gendered terms) that conforms to the gender identity that was assigned at birth and to societal and cultural expectations of such a gender identity. In terms of media representation, it is extremely rare to find representations of individuals whose gender identity does not conform to cultural expectations. In the rare instances that such characters are portrayed, their gender-nonconformity is typically used to elicit fear, apprehension, or laughter, or may be portrayed as a kind of mental illness.

Passing: Passing is the ability to appear to belong to another group. The ability to pass is itself a privilege because it allows an individual to claim the advantages of a more privileged group. In the media, passing becomes easier for certain groups than for others and certain types of passing are particularly celebrated: Consider, for instance, how a straight, white, mentally and physically enabled man is often congratulated for his “courage” in playing a gay man or a person with a mental disability in a film or television. At the same time, we rarely see many accolades when a queer-identified individual plays straight and there are rare instances in which a person with an apparent disability plays a character who is fully enabled. Race-bending (changing the race of a character for a film or television adaptation), whitewashing (making characters of ambiguous or unstated ethnicity white), blackface, “cripface”, and a variety of other practices all help to illustrate how passing becomes a privilege in the media. If one considers that in Hollywood 82 per cent of lead roles are for characters of Caucasian ethnicity, we can see how tangible a privilege passing can be.

Racial: In the West, racial privilege is usually equated with white privilege since power, money, and influence tends to be concentrated among Caucasians in Western Europe and North America. Racial privilege is institutionalized racism: a system that is structured

to privilege one group over others. In the media, consider how race plays into determining character types and roles.

Religious: Religious privilege comes with being a member of the dominant religion in a culture – to have one’s own religious practices and observances recognized as the norm. In North America and much of Europe, Christian faiths hold privilege over most others. In the media, religious privilege translates to a normalizing of one’s tenets of faith while alternative faiths are often portrayed as novel, strange, or even overly mystical.

Sexuality: Heterosexual privilege includes the assumption that everyone is heterosexual which forces Queer people to be constantly undergoing a coming out process in their daily lives. In the media, we rarely see lead characters who are Queer-identified unless the character’s sexuality is pivotal to the plot. Conversely, heterosexual characters enact their sexuality constantly (the presence of things like wedding rings, photos of children, discussions about one’s spouse in various media are all indications of a character’s sexuality, but are hardly ever noticed by the audience. This is not the case if the character is in a same-sex relationship) but it goes unnoticed because of its privileged status. Sexuality privilege also includes sexual practices and sexual history – the media often associates a woman’s worth with her sexual history through the hypersexualization of women, but also by relating a girl’s self-worth to her chastity and the public disparagement of women who are sexually active. This links sexuality privilege to gender privilege as well.
