

## **SOME THOUGHTS ON UNEARNED PRIVILEGE**

**What is it ?** When one group's culture, values and ways of interpreting the world gets built into the fabric of institutions or a society.

### **What is the challenge ?**

- To shift from an individual view to a systemic / institutional view. "I am tired of hearing that White people have privilege. I am not going to feel guilty or be blamed for what has happened in the past. The playing field has been levelled. Race has nothing to do with it anymore".
- Privilege, particularly White and/or male privilege, is difficult to see for those who were born with access to power and resource; but it is very visible for those to whom privilege was not granted.
- Many people with privilege don't feel powerful or as if they have privilege that others do not.
- People with privilege view their reality as the conditions of daily experience for everyone and therefore do not view themselves as privileged. As a result most people with unearned privilege go through life unaware that they have unearned privilege or that it matters.

### **Understanding white privilege**

- Within South Africa especially, the creation of a system in which race plays a central part – one that codifies the superiority of the white race over all others – was in no way accidental or haphazard.
- This system was not based on each individual white person's intention to harm but on a racial group's determination to preserve what they believe is rightfully theirs.
- Despite this distinction it is important for each White person to understand that, as a result and irrespective of personal intent, the impact is the same – you have privilege and others do not.
- The privilege is bestowed upon birth – you can't not get the privilege and you can't give it away.
- What you can and must do is bring work daily to bring our privilege to our conscious mind so that we can fully appreciate and understand the system in which we are living.

### **So what is this white privilege?**

- The freedom not to notice our lack of knowledge about people of colour. While people of colour have to understand and comply to the "white system", those who are white can live their lives without any or very little knowledge of the experiences of people with colour.
- For people of colour, eliminating racism is of vital importance – it is a fight to be seen as opposed to being invisible. For others it is an interesting intellectual exercise from which they can be emotionally removed.
- White privilege is the ability to make decisions that affect everyone without taking others (or even considering to take others) into account. The "come-be-part-of-what-we are doing (because we fully believe our way is right)" syndrome.
- White privilege allows white people not to see race in themselves and to be angry and those who do. "I am tired of talking about race / diversity".
- White privilege discounts the worth of an individual of colour's reality / views / comments. "Black people need to lighten up and not take things so seriously" or "You always focus on race"

- White people believe they have automatic rights – to be heard, respected, appreciated. They are internally empowered as opposed to internally oppressed. White people grow up without their racial supremacy being explicitly taught, but also not being questioned.
- Using white privilege to define the parameters of “appropriate” conversation and communication
  - Requesting a “safe” environment to talk about race
  - Establishing the expectation in terms of accent in the workplace
  - Setting up information rules of communication in the organisation and then failing to apply the rules to all (speaking Afrikaans vs other languages)
  - Maintaining institutions that run by “White culture” rules but acting as though (and believing) that the rules are universally held
- Privilege of writing and teaching history from their perspective and then taking that as the only truth.
- White people use their experiences and realities as the referent for everyone. They believe that people of all colours come to the table having been dealt the same hand of cards. “I worked hard you know !”
- White people can disconnect themselves from any reality of people of colour that make them uncomfortable, because privilege allows them to believe that people basically get what they deserve and work for. “We want a level playing field with no advantages for anyone. Decisions should be made on merit”
- People with unearned privilege have been taught to see disadvantage, but not to accept that it corollary aspect is privilege. “I accept that you were disadvantaged, but I earned where I am, I have not been privileged”.

#### **Some final thoughts to consider**

- The pressure to avoid dealing with unearned privilege is great; because once we do we have to give up the myth of meritocracy.
- Privilege and disadvantage/oppression can intersect, but they don’t negate each other.
- Privilege prescribes what is “normal” or “standard” or “expected”.
- Privilege does not mean that you did not work hard.
- The ultimate unearned privilege is the privilege to acknowledge that you have unearned privilege but to ignore what it means.
- Admitting to unearned privilege does not mean you are a fraud with no claim on or contribution to your success – it means you face a choice on what to do with your privilege and success.

Sources:

Francis E Kendall (PhD); *Understanding white privilege*.

Sian Ferguson; *What is privilege?*

John Fobanjong; *Understanding the Backlash Against Affirmative Action*.