

# BARRIERS TO INCLUSION

## What is Privilege?

Privilege refers to the concept that certain people experience certain privileges simply because of a particular aspect of their identity (for example, they are white, or male, or heterosexual) – privileges that are often overlooked. In her 1988 article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” Peggy McIntosh begins to spell out what those privileges are, from “I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group,” to “I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to ‘the person in charge,’ I will be facing a person of my race.”

Privilege is not necessarily something that individual people seek out. Instead, it is something that shapes and is shaped by American society. It provides often invisible benefits to people of one status that people of another status cannot access. Many of the privileges that McIntosh identifies are privileges that white people may not even think about – indeed, McIntosh herself describes each item on her list as something she forgot about repeatedly, even after forming her list.

White privilege is not the only form of privilege that exists – privilege comes into play whenever one particular condition is considered to be the “normal” condition. Other forms of privilege that enter the workplace include class privilege, heterosexual privilege, male privilege, and able-bodied privilege. Nearly everyone experiences privilege in some form.

## What can I do?

### *As an individual*

- Educate yourself on privilege and the ways to recognize it.
- Be aware of your language – when you refer to an “average” or “normal” person, are you referring to someone in the majority over someone not in the majority?
- Use your privilege to share your power.
- When you see privilege in action, call attention to it.
- Listen. Be supportive of colleagues bringing different perspectives.

### *As an Executive Board member*

- Educate yourself on privilege and the ways to recognize it.
- Be careful about assumptions you might make – especially about what is normal, and about the ways your staff might experience different phenomena differently.
- Make sure that your charter communications are inclusive of all.



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## What is Stereotype Threat?

When individuals are concerned that their performance might reinforce a negative stereotype about their identity, their performance tends to suffer. For example, women do worse on math tests when reminded of the stereotype that women are bad at math.

This is an unconscious reaction known as “stereotype threat,” a term coined in 1995 by Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson, leaders in the field of social psychology. Over the years they have conducted 300+ research experiments. Although primarily studied in academic settings, there is some research that reveals how negative stereotypes hinder workplace diversity. When an individual is in a demographic minority – that is, being the “only one” – research shows that this underrepresented status can lead to the individual experiencing stereotype threat. For example, if there is only one Latina employee in a group, she may fear reinforcing negative stereotypes, representing her entire culture, and being judged or perceived on the basis of her ethnicity rather than her actual performance. The long-term impact and exposure to stereotype threat in the workplace and how people respond are still being examined.

Although people experiencing it may not realize that how they are feeling is as a result of stereotype threat, the following have been associated with the reaction and thus can have an impact on work performance:

- Anxiety
- Distraction
- Loss of motivation
- Lowered expectations
- Reduced self-control
- Reduced memory
- Reduced creativity, flexibility, and speed
- Increased pressure

Stereotype threat can affect people of any race, religion, orientation, etc., because all of us, regardless of who we are, at some point can be perceived by others with at least one negative stereotype.



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## What can I do?

### *As an individual*

- Educate yourself about stereotype threat, and spend some time reflecting on the concept.
- Discuss with trusted peers.
- Look for positive role models within your stereotyped group.

### *As an Executive Board member*

- Make it clear that you think of your charter members as complex people with many different attributes and qualities.
- Recognize your charter members for who they are as members of the team, and the work that they are doing.
- When you refer to your expectations, explicitly state that you believe your staff is capable of meeting your high standards.

**Source:** MIT Human Resources

