

Identifying able-bodied and neurotypical privilege

Alagammai Chenthilnathan

Reviewed by: Amba Salelkar

Edited by: Rohini Lakshané

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What is this module about?	1
Whom is this module designed for?	2
What is able-bodied privilege?	2
What is neurotypical privilege?	2
Why should able-bodied/ neurodivergent privilege be identified?	3
Able-Bodied Privilege Checklist	3
Checklist for neurotypical privilege	4
Ableist language	4
How able-bodied privilege affects policy: Case study on internet accessibility	7
E-accessibility	7
Web content accessibility	8
In conclusion	9

What is this module about?

This learning module is meant to help the reader understand how having a body and mind that function in a manner that is commonly understood as normal creates privilege. It also is meant to help the reader understand the ways in which this privilege is deeply ingrained within ourselves. Additionally, this module proposes ways in which we can recognize this privilege and take steps to be more inclusive in our choice of words, phrases and expression and approaches.

Whom is this module designed for?

This module is designed for people producing information or knowledge that will be widely read, and people who are generally interested in the subject.

What is able-bodied privilege?

One definition is provided by [Disabled Feminists](#)¹:

‘The term able-bodied/abled privilege refers to the numerous benefits -- some hidden, many not -- that many societies and cultures accord to able-bodied and/or abled people.’

A group of Carleton University students who run a website called “[Challenge Ableism](#)”² explain it like this:

‘Able-bodied privilege assumes that everyone can see, walk, hear and talk, for example, constructing environments around these “non-negotiable” attributes.’

How do we assume what is ‘normal’ ability to think, walk, hear, see, or experience emotion? What can be termed ‘normal’ can be different for different people. A person’s normal is simply what they define it as, not what it is presumed to be. All environments must accommodate the varied needs of human beings.

What is neurotypical privilege?

The idea that everyone has the same neurology, or, in other words, that everyone has the ‘same kind of brain’, is also something which is being contested by several groups of persons with disabilities, particularly persons with autism. People who have brain functions - like thinking, or processing information, or understanding - which is like the majority of the population, are said to be neurotypical. Those who are different identify themselves as ‘neurodivergent’. Sarah Langston, associate editor at ‘The Scavenger’, describes it as the privilege of people with [‘no neural distinctions like bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, autism, Asperger’s syndrome, depression, attention deficit disorder and so on’](#)³. It is almost the same as able-bodied privilege, but with some added features such as an absence of the risk of infantilization and institutionalization that non-neurotypical people face.

¹ “Disability 101: What is Able-Bodied or Abled Privilege?”
<http://disabledfeminists.com/2009/11/20/disability-101-what-is-able-bodied-or-abled-privilege> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

² “What is able-bodied privilege”
<https://privilegeuncensored.wordpress.com/what-is-able-bodied-privilege-3> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

³ “Mental health is a privilege”
<http://www.thescavenger.net/health-sp-22786/health/390-mental-health-is-a-privilege-93567.html>
Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

Why should able-bodied and neurodivergent privilege be identified?

When the fact that some people are more privileged than others just because of their physical/mental condition goes unnoticed by people who enjoy that privilege, it curtails the opportunity for open interactions to make society more inclusive for everyone, irrespective of their abilities. Only when this privilege is identified can we work towards creating an accessible, inclusive and empowering atmosphere for everyone.

When an able-bodied person is unaware of their privilege over a disabled person, they may say things or do things which discriminate against the person with disability. This is called ableism. 'Ableism and other 'isms', are discrimination and prejudice acted upon other people because of perceived differences. [Ableism is when the perceived difference is disability](#)⁴.' Able-bodied privilege and ableism are closely connected. The former exists because of the prevalence of the latter in society. When people realize this, ableism will stop.

Able-Bodied Privilege Checklist

Disabled people have channelized their experiences into creating what is known as the Able-Bodied Privilege Checklist. The interesting thing about these is the fact that many of the pointers are so natural for able-bodied people that they don't spare a thought for how privileged they are to be able to do them! The following is a part of an example checklist by Canadian disability activist Melissa Graham⁵:

1. If I am in the company of people that make me uncomfortable, I can easily choose to move elsewhere.
2. I can easily find housing that is accessible to me, with no barriers to my mobility.
3. I can turn on the television and see people of my ability level widely and accurately represented.
4. I can do well in a challenging situation without being told what an inspiration I am.
5. If I ask to speak with someone "in charge", I can be relatively assured that the person will speak directly to me and not treat me like I am stupid.
6. As I grow up from childhood I will not feel that my body is inferior or undesirable, and that it should be "fixed", allowing me to feel confident in my current and future relationships.
7. When speaking with medical professionals, can expect them to understand how my body works, to answer my questions, and respect my decisions.
8. My neighbourhood allows me to move about on sidewalks, into stores, and into friends' homes without difficulty.
9. People do not tell me that my ability level means I should not have children. They will be happy for me when I become pregnant, and I can easily find supportive medical professionals and parents like me.

⁴ "Ability privilege versus Ableism: What's the difference"

<https://www.inclusionsystem.ca/2014/11/26/ability-privilege-versus-ableism-whats-the-difference>

Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

⁵ "The invisible backpack of able bodied privilege checklist"

<https://exposingableism.wordpress.com/2009/10/12/the-invisible-backpack-of-able-bodied-privilege-checklist> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

10. I can be reasonably sure that my ability level will not discourage employers from hiring me.
11. I can choose to share my life with someone without it being seen as a disadvantage to them.
12. If people like me have been discriminated against in history, I can expect to learn about it in school, and how that discrimination was overcome.
13. All people like me are seen as living lives that are worth living.

Checklist for neurotypical privilege

A [checklist for neurotypical privilege](#) has been developed by autistic persons which clarifies the differences⁶.

There is a pattern that emerges here. All these privileges can be categorized into six groups:

1. Accessibility
2. Personal freedom
3. Respect and dignity
4. Employment rights
5. Family and relationship rights
6. Representation

In a diverse and inclusive society, these six privileges must become the fundamental rights of all.

Ableist language

A lot of words are associated with or derived from references to disability. These are most commonly used as insults, expressions of frustration or even intensifiers to underscore a point. This is ableist language. The use of ableist language often goes unnoticed. It has become a major part of today's slang, but this is a problem. Able-bodied privilege is emphasized further by the use of disability-related words as adjectives. A person's identity cannot be used as an insult or as a tool for getting a point across. Doing so is highly disrespectful and discriminatory. Disability is an identity belonging to people with impairments who face physical/social barriers that prevent them from leading lives like non-disabled people. When it is used so dismissively with negative connotations, it worsens the stigma that is already associated with disability. Statements like 'the economy is crippled by debt' create an image that disability is something to be feared and avoided, as observed by Rachel Cohen-Rottenberg.

Rachel's thoughts on ableist language sums up the harrowing effect that these words have on disabled people:

⁶ "Checklist of neurotypical privilege: new draft"

<http://aspergersquare8.blogspot.com/2009/08/checklist-of-neurotypical-privilege-new.html> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

‘When a critique of language that makes reference to disability is not welcome, it is nearly inevitable that, as a disabled person, I am not welcome either’⁷.

She addresses the objections that people have to critiques of ableist language. The following explanation is based on her arguments as a disabled person and as an activist⁸ with some additions:

1. The words people use may seem harmless, but they are not. Language is the framework through which humans make sense of the world, and words form a crucial part of language. Repeated use of ableist words normalizes them, erasing the associated pain. When these abusive words become an everyday staple, attitudes towards disability harden and disability rights will not be accorded their due importance.
2. A counter-argument is that words such as “stupid” and “moron” are no longer used to mean what they initially did (derogatory terms to describe mentally disabled people). Even if this is so, one should remember how much discrimination and indignity these words are loaded with. Using ‘stupid’ as a tool to joke disrespects the suffering of disabled people in the past, suffering that was induced by the word and the attitudes that came along with it. When such memories are not honoured, there is every danger of society repeating its past mistakes.
3. Bodies cannot and absolutely should not be used as metaphors because they belong to people, who possess the rights to determine how they are used.

‘In the same way that a stranger should not appropriate your body for his commentary, you should not appropriate my disabled body — which is, after all, mine and not yours — for your political writing or social commentary.’

4. The socio-political consequences of ableist language are huge. ‘If you routinely use disability slurs, you are adding to a narrative that says that disabled people are wrong, broken, dangerous, pitiful, and tragic.

’This is problematic as it shifts the blame to those who have been oppressed because of their impairments. It does not take into account the numerous barriers that restrict them and make them ‘disabled’. Ableist language is the easy way out, absolving society of its responsibility to create an inclusive atmosphere for all.

5. Another counter-argument runs this way: What is wrong in using ableist language to describe non-disability ideas/ non-disabled people? Rachel turns this argument on its head in her response: ‘So why associate something with a disability when it’s what non-disabled people do every single day of the week?’

⁷ “Doing Social Justice: 10 Reasons to Give Up Ableist Language”

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/rachel-cohenrottenberg/doing-social-justice-thou_b_5476271.html

Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

⁸ “Doing Social Justice: Thoughts on Ableist language and Why It Matters”

<http://www.disabilityandrepresentation.com/2013/09/14/ableist-language> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

6. Some ableist language also leads to misunderstanding of actual conditions. For example, someone who keeps changing their views often is called ‘schizo’ with reference to schizophrenia. However, this is not the experience of people who have been diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Writers like those on the website ‘The Body is Not an Apology’ acknowledge the difficulty to change⁹:

‘Changing the way we speak is really tough. Words are the fabric of our thoughts. Just as we cannot shape a new society without fully deconstructing the old, we cannot liberate our minds without dismantling the ways we think and communicate.’

There are comprehensive lists available online of alternative words to use in place of common ableist terms such as ‘crazy’. It is amazing to find out just how many other words exist that don’t oppress a certain group of people! Some terms have become so fancy that the abundance of the English language has been forgotten.

List of ableist terms and alternatives from various online resources and author’s experiences:

- ❖ Use of ‘stupid’ or ‘retarded’ to mean frustrating or confusing: frustrating, irritating, annoying, obnoxious
- ❖ Use of ‘crazy’ to mean intense: intense, amazing, awesome, fascinating
- ❖ Use of ‘lame’ as a negative adjective: bad, awful, uncool, passé.
- ❖ Use of ‘crazy’ or ‘insane’ to emphasize the positive/negative: really, very, considerably, significantly, quite
- ❖ Use of ‘crazy’ to mean unreasonable or absurd: unreasonable, absurd, ridiculous, outrageous
- ❖ Use of ‘psycho’, ‘psychotic’ or ‘sociopath’ to denote someone with a dangerous character: threatening, menacing, dangerous, evil, wicked
- ❖ Use of ‘retarded’ or ‘autistic’ to refer to abnormal behaviour: silly, nonsensical, illogical, dorky, weird
- ❖ Use of ‘crazy’ to mean something that difficult to understand or comprehend: bizarre, overwhelming, daunting, unfathomable, incomprehensible
- ❖ Alternative words to ‘stupid’¹⁰: vacuous, ignorant, imprudent, imperceptive, misinformed, naive

Some of these terms, for example, psychosis, or autistic, when used in a diagnostic context for instance, are valid terms. The context of the use is extremely important to consider.

Also see: [40 alternatives to commonly used ableist phrases](#).

⁹ “Stupid” is an Ableist Slur: Breaking Down Defenses Around Ableist Language & Liberating Our Words
<https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/stupid-is-an-ableist-slur-breaking-down-defenses-around-ableist-language-liberating-our-words> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

¹⁰ “Alternatives to Stupid”
<https://anagnori.tumblr.com/post/71020734063/alternatives-to-saying-stupid> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

How able-bodied privilege affects policy: Case study on internet accessibility

One vital able-bodied privilege that has to be recognized and is absent in the checklists is the accessibility of print and online information. The right to information legislations don't cater to disabled people if the information is not present in accessible formats. Nor do sources of knowledge and information such as Wikipedia if they are designed entirely with the able-bodied and neurotypical person in mind. For the purpose of this learning module for Wikimedians, we will focus on internet accessibility.

E-accessibility

The Centre for Internet and Society¹¹, India lists assistive technologies that (based on specific impairments) ensure web accessibility:

1. **Visual impairment** (People who are blind, or have some degree of impaired sight, or low vision):
 - a. Screen readers in mobile devices convert text into synthesized speech.
 - b. Screen magnifiers can enable people with low vision to magnify a part of the screen.
 - c. Tactile markers on keyboards aid on-screen navigation, and audible cues for alerts can support maintenance, e.g., for low battery.
2. **Hearing impairment** (People who are deaf, or hard of hearing):
 - a. Subtitling technology for videos, now widely available, offers text information.
 - b. Vibrating alerts in mobile devices
 - c. Visual/ tactile cues in keyboards, such as blinking lights when a certain button has been pressedaptioning/ subtitles for videos are some of the support measures.
3. **Motor impairment** (People who are amputees, or who have limitations in the use of their arms or legs, or some part thereof): Motor-impaired people can navigate a keyboard via devices, such as
 - a. A mouth stick, which is held in the mouth and used to type on the keyboard.
 - b. A head wand, which is strapped to the head. The user moves their head to type.
 - c. Switch¹², especially people with extremely limited mobility or severe learning difficulties. Some examples of switches and their working can be viewed here:¹³
 - d. Adaptive keyboards, which may have raised spaces in between keys or come equipped with word-completion technology.
4. **Cognitive impairment** (People who have trouble remembering, learning new things, concentrating, or making decisions that affect their everyday life):

¹¹ "Accessibility" <https://cis-india.org/telecom/knowledge-repository-on-internet-access/accessibility> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

¹² "Introduction to Switch Access" <https://www.bltn.org/switch/about.htm> Last visited on 8 November, 2018.

¹³ "Types of Input Switch" <https://www.bltn.org/hardware/switches.htm> Last visited on 9 November, 2018.

- a. Predictive text
- b. External prompting or reminders¹⁴

Web content accessibility

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines¹⁵ (WCAG 2.0) state that web content must be (1) perceivable (2) operable (3) understandable and (4) robust.

Images can be made accessible by including descriptions. Software can be used to convey that decorative images should be skipped. All forms should have accurate labels that communicate the information to be filled out, for making them accessible to screen-reader users, who cannot guess this by the placement of tabs, *et cetera*, the way visual users do. Colour should be avoided as a tool to communicate information because people with visual impairment find it difficult to differentiate between colours. In case the use of colour is necessary, high contrast colours should be used. Websites should be mostly navigable by keyboard to support people with motor impairments.

In conclusion

Identification of able-bodied privilege should act as a catalyst for making society more inclusive and accessible for disabled people. Wikipedia is an encyclopedia that is used widely as a source of knowledge and information by people of all ages and with different identities. Wikipedia also aims to be the encyclopedia that houses the sum of all human knowledge. It would be a good practice for Wikipedians to be inclusive, accessible and most importantly, to think about how they present information. If ableist language is prevalent in Wikipedia articles, then their audience are likely to learn from and reproduce the same language, causing a domino effect. Language that is dehumanising, disrespectful or simply unmindful of disability alienates persons with disabilities, many of who may wish to contribute to Wikipedia and seek information from it.

To quote a famous and viral poster campaign launched by the University of San Francisco,

“Becoming aware of privilege should not be viewed as a burden or source of guilt, but rather, an opportunity to learn and be responsible so the we may work toward a more just and inclusive world.”

¹⁴ You can find examples here: <https://www.abilityhub.com/cognitive/index.htm> Last visited on 8 November, 2018.

¹⁵ “Web Content Accessibility Guidelines - Overview”
<https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag> Last visited on 1 November, 2018.

Becoming aware of **privilege**

should not be viewed as a burden
or source of guilt,
but rather,

an opportunity

to learn and be responsible
so that we may work toward
a more just and inclusive world.

CHECK YOUR PRIVILEGE:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> WHITE | <input type="checkbox"/> CISGENDER* |
| <input type="checkbox"/> MALE | <input type="checkbox"/> ABLE-BODIED |
| <input type="checkbox"/> CLASS | <input type="checkbox"/> HETEROSEXUAL |
| <input type="checkbox"/> CHRISTIAN | |

*CISGENDER: a description for a person whose gender identity, gender expression and biological sex all align

privilege: unearned access to social power based on membership in a dominant social group

Developed at the University of San Francisco by Dr. Walker (Psychology), Dr. Poole (School of Management, Marketing), Professor Murray (Design), and Student Life. Original poster designs by Camille Esposito, Ray Choi, Veronica Cabanayan and Cat Bagg.



“Becoming aware of privilege”. Source:

https://myusf.usfca.edu/sites/default/files/privilege_becomingaware_template_0.pdf [PDF]

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Image description for screen readers: A poster with solid, light blue background with the words in red and black colour: “Becoming aware of privilege should not be viewed as a burden or source of guilt, but rather, an opportunity to learn and be responsible so the we may work toward a more just and inclusive world.” The words “Check your privilege” in bold red font followed by checkboxes for the words in all capitals: White, Male, Class, Christian, Cisgender, Able-bodied, and Heterosexual. Small print: *CISGENDER: a description for a person whose gender identity, gender expression and biological sex all align. New column and larger print: privilege: unearned access to social power based on membership in a dominant social group. Small print: Developed at the University of San Francisco by Dr. Walker (Psychology), Dr. Poole (School of Management, Marketing), Professor Murray (Design), and Student Life. Original poster designs by Camille Esposito, Ray Choi, Veronica Cabanayan and Cat Bagg. Icons for the Creative Commons license CC-BY-SA.*

[Editor’s note: The checkbox for “Christian” in the image above is to be viewed in light of the fact that the poster was created by the University of San Francisco in USA, a [Jesuit Catholic institution](#).]