

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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Privilege

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Abstract

This essay is a discussion of the author's identity crisis which rose primarily from the recognizing of their economic privilege. It grapples with the idea that one's personality could be entirely different depending on whether we recognize our privilege. Lastly, it asserts that once we are able to recognize our privilege, we must do better with it.

Keywords: economic privilege, minimalist lifestyle, recognizing entitlement, identity crisis

Nimmi Mathews has lived in Chicago, Mumbai, and Bangalore, before moving to Florida to pursue a dual degree in Behavioral Neuroscience and Biology at Nova Southeastern University. She has a keen interest in the medical sciences, but also in philosophy, political science and law. As a daughter of immigrants, she always invests in recognizing her parents' struggles as well as her privilege. She views herself as a minimalist, but a recent examination of the origins of her lifestyle resulted in a conversation about whether her economic modesty is entirely innate.

One of the foremost debates in psychology is whether human behavior is a product of genes or the environment. Can behavior be attributed solely to our genetic disposition? Or does one's environment or situational factors also dictate behavior? These questions surrounded the recent identity crisis I experienced in my first week at the university. It severely affected my view of my lifestyle and habits, as well as my own personality. I was born a millennium baby in the year 2000, in Chicago, Illinois. In July 2005, my family moved back to India, and that is where I spent the next 13 years of my life. Irrespective of the country I was living in, I was raised in quite an economically modest fashion. I wasn't starved of anything I wanted, but I also learned about compromise and saving, which knowledge has stuck with me throughout my life. Eventually, I came to reject excessive resource consumption and was content with a simple, minimalist lifestyle. Through years of self-reflection, I concluded that, although mostly the result of my upbringing, this contentment was, in some part, innate.

About a week ago, I was spending some "downtime" with my suitemates after a long day of classes. The four of us were sitting on Annabelle's maroon futon with pepperoni pizza crusts and garlic bread laid out in front of us. We were discussing the possibility of spending the weekend at the Blue Spring State Park in Fort Lauderdale to swim with the manatees that visit the park during the winter. I was suddenly struck with the idea that we should visit my house on Fort Myers Beach after the midterms, and my suggestion was received very well. As we frantically searched for our midterm schedules to pick a suitable date, Annabelle said in passing, "It's so cool that you have a 'summer' house!"

Deja vu suddenly overcame me. I was transported back to the year 2016, to my high school in Bangalore, India. I was sitting in my math teacher's small, cramped office where we had our usual lectures since we were only six students taking that class. My friend Priyansha was laughing, her dimpled cheeks bobbing up and down, as she told Sir Deepak, our teacher, about how I had a house in Florida. He was already aware of the fact that my dad lived in a house in Chicago, but this was new information to him. He raised an eyebrow and said, "So you have a summer house? Like the Hamptons?" Although he was obviously pulling my leg, I felt my face flush. I thought to myself, "I'm not a celebrity. They're the ones that own houses in the Hamptons!"

Back to the night, I was spending with my suitemates: After I retired to my room at nearly midnight, I lay in bed with Annabelle's words ringing in my ears. I decided to count the number of houses my family-owned. After several seconds of silence, I realized the answer was seven—seven houses for a family of three children: four in Chicago, two in Florida, and one back home in India. I was suddenly plunged into a set of extremely confusing questions. Was this what the average American possessed? Or was I just never made aware of the actual volume of wealth my parents had as two practicing physicians in the United States? Was being completely oblivious to this somehow a contributor to my personality?

This confusion got progressively worse as I was made more aware of how wrong I was. Certain aspects of everyday conversations were so unfamiliar to me. A friend mentioned how she had put aside time to research the possibility of student loans for college. Knowing I had an educational

fund, I did not ever need to worry. Essentially, the program allows parents to put away some amount of money that can only be used for their children's education, or if unused, rolled over to their grandchildren. Since my parents invested in stocks, the value of the funds appreciated rapidly over time. My suitemate mentioned that had she not received a full-ride scholarship, she would not have been able to afford Nova. This thought had never even crossed my mind. Although during my senior year I searched and applied for merit-based scholarships, it was never a necessity, but rather my attempt to alleviate the burden on my parents, even if that burden is minimal compared to many other families. While Nova's undergraduate tuition is about \$30 thousand per year, give or take, a university like Columbia's is a whopping \$53 thousand per year. Even when I had considered applying to Columbia University, my parents merely said that it was a "tad bit expensive." When I didn't get into a school in Mumbai that offered the International Baccalaureate curriculum, my parents moved all the way to Bangalore so I could attend the second school on my list. Someone else mentioned how they shared their car with their parents. Four out of five members of my family have a car no older than a 2014 Acura model. Another friend remarked that I was "boujee" because I preferred to go grocery shopping at Whole Foods rather than Walmart.

I began to remember certain instances from my past that reinforced this disparity. While my mum, my siblings, and I lived in India, my dad stayed behind in Chicago to work. Every other month or so, he would fly in to see us. He could afford to take a "vacation" every other month. While this certainly involves covering the cost of plane tickets, it also means that my father was obviously not working paycheck to

paycheck the way many individuals in the United States do to support their families, or he did not have to compromise in other areas to be able to visit us halfway across the world. In contrast, I recently read in a book called *Always Eat Left Handed* (2013) that the author, Rohit Bhargava, had to forgo the option of buying a new car to take a vacation with his family.

Fortunately, this privilege was never abused. For as long as I could remember, my siblings and I had actively tried to pay for the things we wanted. This summer, I watched my sister juggle spending mornings attending a physics class and nights writing essays for merit-based scholarships because she wanted to pay to go to Thailand and Laos with an organization known as Growth International Volunteer Excursions (GIVE) for community service. The cost of attendance itself was \$3,000, flight tickets not included. I never wanted my parents to pay my entire undergraduate tuition since I was aware that they'd pay for a major chunk of medical school tuition, which on average, amounts to about \$50 thousand a year. Having received scholarships from Nova, I now focus my energy on maintaining my GPA for the next four years. I spend days debating whether I should join the Army to pay for medical school. I wonder if I had been fully aware of my parents' wealth, would it be any different? Would I be placing the financial burden of college and graduate school entirely on my parents, knowing full well that they could pay for it?

My identity crisis took root in this confusion and bloomed. Was this aspect of my personality—being economically resourceful and minimalist—because I was completely out of touch with my family's financial standing? Had I been raised differently, would I be an entirely different person? Someone I disliked? Would she

have the same personal values, goals, and ambitions as I? Here's where the psychology debate can be addressed. There's something about being a psychology student: We can't stop diagnosing ourselves! I was forced to ask myself if what I had assumed was innate was a result of my environment, and if that had varied, would I have? It made me wonder if my assumption about being innately economically modest was entirely wrong.

These questions are still very much unresolved and have made me start to ponder over a variety of everyday actions. I think about whether the students who have perfect grades and are from a lower-income background are far more deserving of the merit-based scholarships that I received. I also question if the \$150 I spent to watch The Weeknd, an R&B artist, in concert would have been of better use in buying toys to donate to a children's hospital. In fact, my identity crisis has somehow already spread into my future as well. I now wonder if I should ask my suitemates to pay me back for the cab that we share when we go out, or if I should pay for the majority of the common items in our bathroom.

If there's one thing I've learned from this identity crisis it's that I don't always recognize the privilege I have. Although there is currently no solution to my confusion, I'm choosing to consciously make the decision to accept that this is the personality I have, and will continue to have, and there's nothing I could possibly do to change it. This is what I would like readers to take away from this as well: Once you recognize your privilege, do better with it. I refuse to allow my economic advantage to control how hard I work to get into graduate school, to get a job, to get a promotion, or to be successful. Instead, this is driven by my innate desire to make

something of myself, and I will never be ashamed of that.