

## Defining, Unpacking, and Contextualizing Class Privilege to Extend the Intersectional Scope of Privilege Studies

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to add to the repository of knowledge about unearned advantage by defining, delineating, and contextualizing class privilege. After reviewing McIntosh's (1988) seminal work on white privilege and male privilege, this work seeks to answer contemporary calls (McIntosh, 2012/2015) to extend the scope of privilege analyses into additional domains. A working definition of class privilege is developed by reviewing insights on how class was defined in classic social theory and adding the appendage *privilege*. The proceeding delineation of class privilege incorporates existing qualitative literature on impoverishment to amplify the voices of subaltern people who live without it. Finally, class privilege is contextualized by analyzing the key features of contemporary finance capitalism. This contextualizing is necessary in a world where an already wide and systemically created gap between rich and poor is further widening.

*Keywords:* class privilege, poverty, inequality, neoliberalism

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Long ago, it was said that "one half of the world does not know how the other half lives." That was true then. It did not know because it did not care. The half that was on top cared little for the struggles and less for the fate of those who were underneath. (Riis, 1890/2010, p. 3)

It is a common and warranted adage in the burgeoning field of privilege studies that unearned advantages too often go unnoticed (McIntosh, 1988; Kimmel & Ferber, 2014; Pease, 2010). Building upon McIntosh's (1988) foundational analyses of White privilege and male privilege, this paper has four primary aims. First, to posit a working definition of class privilege given that it is next to impossible to discuss a critical aspect of social and material inequality that has not been named and is thus not well understood. Second, to juxtapose the definition of class privilege to poverty as defined by Sen (1992) and The Royal Commission on the Status of Women (1977), given such a juxtaposition, heightens understanding of both phenomena. Third, to build upon the existing knowledge repository about unearned advantage and answer the call to "interrogate and analyze the specific features of particular forms of dominance" (Pease, 2010, xiii). By revisiting 20 select aspects of McIntosh's (1988) seminal knapsack of White privilege, incorporating first-person and micro-level insights from economically disenfranchised people, I seek to add a class-based perspective to McIntosh's foundational analyses of privilege. The fourth aim of this paper is to review the fundamental macro-level features of the economic system in which class privilege operates. In so doing, I will show how the systemic class privileges of some, and the impoverishment of others, are interdependent and insidiously interwoven into the macro-level structures of the way

advanced capitalism operates.

A central motif of this paper is to show that class, as a relevant category of analysis, was largely a *blind spot*—a hidden bias most people carry from a lifetime of exposure to cultural attitudes (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013)—in the seminal work of privilege studies. In contemporary privilege scholarship, subsequent calls to fill this void to understand class privilege are limited. This omission is particularly concerning in a world where "income inequality and class divisions have intensified" (Kendall, 2014, pp. 97–98) and the voices of those harmed by increasing inequality remain subjugated, unheard, and ignored.

The first section of this paper revisits McIntosh's (1988) classic work that laid the foundation for privilege studies and her contemporary (2012/2015) scholarship arguing the necessity of examining the multiple and intersecting forms of privilege and oppression. The second section offers a virtue-centered critique: Highlighting the multiple strengths of McIntosh's humane legacy but also positing a primary methodological limitation in that her otherwise thoughtful analyses of privilege did not incorporate the voices of "Others" facing oppression. The third section reviews how McIntosh's privilege analyses have, in only a limited way, been applied to class in subsequent scholarship (Pease, 2010; Kimmel & Ferber, 2014), analyzing various facets of privilege. The fourth section critically conceptualizes class, privilege, and class privilege, incorporating the well-established and longstanding strengths of how class was defined in both schools of thought emanating from classic social theory. The fifth section juxtaposes class privilege to poverty and argues that strategically contrasting the two concepts reveals a great deal about both phenomena.

The sixth section posits a caveat on class reductionism, given that privilege and oppression take multiple intersecting forms, and single-issue analyses are overly simplistic, intellectually passe, and incomplete. The seventh section of this paper revisits 20 select aspects of McIntosh's (1988) foundational knapsack of White privilege. I posit grounded, micro-level illustrations of class privilege in operation, detailing some of the daily living realities of the class privilege and poverty dichotomy. To do so, I incorporate the existing qualitative and ethnographic literature examining impoverishment to amplify the voices of subaltern people experiencing the particular scenarios McIntosh analyzed. The final section of this paper concisely details the macro-level features of the economic system that enables, legitimizes, and reproduces class privilege. In the contemporary world of corporate capitalism, where an already wide gap of income and wealth inequality has become even more astronomical, the necessity of understanding the big picture context of neoliberalism has never been greater.

### **A Review of McIntosh's Classic Work on White Privilege and Male Privilege**

Peggy McIntosh's scholarship is "ground-breaking and celebrated work" (Mullaly & West, 2018, p. 51) and is foundational for examining invisible and unearned privileges (Kimmel & Ferber, 2014; Pease, 2010). In "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies" (1988), McIntosh recounts that although she had often noticed throughout her academic career that few men sometimes acknowledge that women are disadvantaged in the curriculum, acknowledgments of male over-

privilege were virtually nonexistent. She argues that "these denials protect male privilege from being fully recognized, acknowledged, lessened, or ended" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 15). A parallel is then drawn to the phenomenon of invisible "[W]hite privilege that was similarly denied and protected" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 15).

McIntosh reflects on the advantages that she lives with and the disadvantages she avoids, given the color of her skin:

So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have [W]hite privilege. This paper is a partial record of my personal observations and not a scholarly analysis. It is based on my daily experiences within my particular circumstances. (McIntosh, 1988, p. 16)

McIntosh argues that there are several types or layers of denial at work in preventing recognition of men's over-privileged state. Drawing parallels to White privilege, she then posits illustrations of her advantages, examining "forty-six ordinary and daily ways in which I experience having [W]hite privilege by contrast with my African American colleagues in the same building" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 16).

The list is explicitly termed an *invisible knapsack of privilege* to reflect the reality that most people are oblivious to and in denial about its existence. The 46 items on the list, McIntosh (1988) states, detail "those conditions that I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographical location, though these other privileging factors are intricately intertwined" (p. 18). McIntosh writes,

Some privileges make me feel at home in the world. Others allow me to escape

the penalties or dangers which others suffer. Through some, I escape fear, anxiety, or a sense of not being welcome or real. Some keep me from having to hide, to be in disguise, to feel sick or crazy, to negotiate each transaction from the position of being an outsider or, within my group, a person who is suspected of having too close links with the dominant culture. Most keep me from having to be angry. (p. 22)

McIntosh (1988) explains why she felt it was important to reflect upon the invisible race-based advantages she lived with, in light of her frustrations with unacknowledged gender-based disadvantages:

After I realized, through faculty development work in women's studies, the extent to which men work from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious. Then I remembered the frequent charges from women of [C]olor that [W]hite women whom they encounter are oppressive. I began to understand why we are justly seen as oppressive, even when we don't see ourselves that way. At the very least, obliviousness of one's privileged state can make a person or group irritating to be with. I began to count the ways in which I enjoyed unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence, unable to see that it put me ahead in any way, or put my people ahead, over-rewarding us and yet also paradoxically damaging us, or that it should be changed. My schooling gave me no training seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended

on her individual moral will. (p. 17)

She further argues that White privilege is an elusive and fugitive subject: Literary silences on matters of privilege keep unearned advantages protected. *Recognizing unearned privilege* means rejecting the myth of meritocracy and realizing that "many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 21).

### Extending the Knapsack

McIntosh's contemporary works (2012/2015) build upon the classic foundations she laid out in her seminal piece (1988). She details a self-awareness activity, intended primarily for helping professionals, by which people reflect upon their unearned advantages and disadvantages:

Beginning with my previous work on [W]hite privilege, students can extend this analysis to other domains of privilege, including, for example, gender, class, sexuality, age, nationality, and physical ability, to name a few. The primary goals of this reflective exercise are to help clinicians understand how clients' lives are influenced by societal advantages and disadvantages ... and to increase empathy towards clients. (McIntosh, 2015, p. 232)

McIntosh (2012) argues that it is a necessary endeavor to continue critically reflecting on privilege given that

members of powerful groups do not realize that they are privileged because they don't have the social comparison information to recognize the discrimination they don't experience, the poverty they don't experience, the prejudice they don't experience, but

which members of subordinate groups do. (p. 197)

And notably, McIntosh (2012) argues, societal obliviousness of privilege is enabled by "ideology, media, and institutions as a whole [that] still deny that systems of privilege exist" (p. 194).

### A "Virtue-Centered" Critique of McIntosh

Wright (2015, vi) suggests that a *virtue-centered critique* tries "to figure out what is most useful and interesting rather than mainly to point out what is wrong with a particular theorist's work." McIntosh's (1988) classic work critically reflects upon unearned male and White privileges, duly noting that gender and race are not the only advantaging systems at work for the explicit purpose of recognizing the unrecognized daily living realities of those forms of unearned advantage. I contend that critically reflecting on particular forms of conferred advantage to create an awareness of, and empathy for, people disadvantaged by oppression is immanently useful and profoundly fascinating work.

McIntosh's contemporary works duly implore further explorations of additional forms of conferred advantage. And all of her scholarship facilitates the understanding that "the study of power is not accurate unless it includes [analysis of] disadvantage and privilege" (McIntosh, 2012, p. 195). McIntosh's acclaimed works, then, are firmly grounded in virtue and are valuable and interesting—particularly in our contemporary era of "capitalistic and individualistic ethos" (McIntosh, 2012, p. 203). The ethos of competition and self-interest currently subordinate more humane notions of cooperation and collective interests. And McIntosh's exploration of

multiple forms of privilege and oppression, via by comparing and contrasting similarities, helps to lay the groundwork for a critically important realization:

Each form of oppression is part of a single, complex, inter-related, self-perpetuating system ... rest[ing] on a worldview that says we must constantly strive to be better than someone else. (Bishop, 2015, p. 9)

In terms of limitations, McIntosh's (1988, p. 16) method—"untutored ... personal observation" that is "not a scholarly analysis" but rather "based on my daily experiences within my particular circumstances"—is not, I contend, as compelling as it could have been. Mullaly and West (2018, xii) argue that in challenging oppression and confronting privilege, "We can [and should] supplement what we know from our experiences by studying the experiences, research, and writings of others." Had McIntosh incorporated relevant literature and presented qualitative first voice accounts of how oppression is lived out to supplement her otherwise thoughtful knapsack of White privilege, she could have made her strong arguments even stronger. Messner (2011, p. 3) argues, "a pedagogy of privilege should always be grounded in the standpoints of subordinated groups of people."

Further, McIntosh's admirable aim of highlighting conferred privilege and exposing unearned advantage could have been further realized, and concretely evidenced, had she taken a more scholarly approach that included a statistical and demographic analysis of what groups are (aggregately) over- and under-represented on important metrics like wealth, poverty, education level, income, unemployment, underemployment, health, mental health and

self-reported well-being (among several others). In short, there are several valid and reliable quantifiable metrics and evidence of how privilege translates into highly predictable aggregate patterns. And failure to incorporate such data into privilege studies is part of what allows "mainstream ideology, the media, and [social] institutions as a whole" to "still deny that systems of privilege exist" (McIntosh, 2012, p. 194).

### **McIntosh's Legacy of Privilege Analyses Applied to Class Within the Existing Literature**

McIntosh's work spawned further analyses of various facets of privilege. Editors Kimmel and Ferber (2014) produced a superlative piece, *Privilege: A Reader*, that opens with a reprint of McIntosh's classic (1988) content and proceeds to posit contributed chapters delving deeper into various sides of multiple forms of privilege (including race, gender, sexuality, disability, and religion). The chapter specifically devoted to analyzing class privilege, by Dianna Kendall, is aptly entitled, "Class: Still Alive and Reproducing in the United States."

Kendall's qualitative work shows that class privilege manifests and reproduces itself by upper-class boundary maintenance and elite child-rearing practices. Geographic boundary maintenance activities include residing in elite homes in remote neighborhoods that long-established elite families overwhelmingly occupy. A common child-rearing practice in these neighborhoods is to strategically ensure that children's friendships and social circles, including the schools they attend, are overwhelmingly limited only to other elitist children from wealthy old-guard families—who exist in a lifeworld where a sense of superiority is reinforced and unquestioned.

*Undoing Privilege: Unearned Advantage in a Divided World* (Pease, 2010) also posits analyses of multiple aspects of privilege: western global dominance and Eurocentrism, gender and patriarchy, racial formations and White supremacy, institutionalized heterosexuality and heterosexual privilege, and ableist relations and the embodiment of privilege. The chapter devoted explicitly to class is entitled "Political Economy and Class Elitism." Here, Pease (2010, p. 62) examines "how class privilege operates among those [educated middle-class professionals] who are positioned between labour and capital" and asks "how those who have some class privileges engage with their class positioning and classed subjectivity to act in a progressive way on class issues." It is duly noted that,

It is difficult to write about class in 2009. In the 1970s and 80s, class was at the center of analyses of social and economic inequalities. In the last twenty years or more, the debates about class have declined dramatically. Numerous academics have noted the marginalization of class in social theory across a range of academic disciplines. (Pease, 2010, p. 65)

And class, Pease (2010) notes, has also been marginalized outside of academia given that "the majority of people do not talk about class oppression or the class-based nature of North American society" (p. 66). This silence is part of what allows the myths of meritocracy and upward social mobility to persist and make it appear that privileges are justly earned and accessible to anyone willing to work hard. Middle-class professionals, Pease argues, are rarely concerned with recognizing or dispelling these myths as they benefit from them. The article concludes by arguing that "those of

us who are professional workers need to understand how we have internalized class into our psyches and address the role that we play in reproducing class-based oppression" (Pease, 2010, p. 85).

The luxury of obliviousness is a significant contributor to the reproduction of class privilege. Below, when I revisit 20 select aspects of McIntosh's knapsack of White privilege to examine some of the realities of class privilege (and oppression), my analyses will draw upon the existing literature. More specifically, I will highlight the subjugated voices of economically disenfranchised people given that, "We need to take seriously the question asked by Fine (2002, p. 20), 'Who is absent? Who is excluded? And who is refused and audience?'" (Lott & Bullock, 2007, p. 20). Prior to examining the lived realities of class privilege, a detailed definition of the term is warranted, given that "We need a more finely differentiated taxonomy of privilege" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 21).

### **Defining Class, Privilege, and Class Privilege**

Understanding class privilege necessitates a precise definition of the term "class" and clarity about what exactly is meant by the appendage "privilege":

Privilege studies call on scholars to be as careful and nuanced as possible in all of our uses of language, and they also call on us to devise new language adequate for the complexities of this area of observation and inquiry. (McIntosh, 2012, p. 201)

Longstanding definitions of class originate in classic social theory. Marx and Weber are the most notable theoreticians who defined and analyzed class. I believe

that devising a new language to articulate the contemporary realities of class privilege adequately necessitates incorporating the definitional strengths of classic theoretical work.

### **Defining Class**

#### ***Conceptualizing Class: Marx***

Marx deemed *classes* to be "categories of social actors defined by the property relations which generate exploitation" (Wright, 1994, p. 45). More specifically, *class*

refer[s] to groups whose "economic conditions of existence compel them to live separately from one another" and who have a "mode of life" different from each other. Marx links the existence of social class to the development of property relations in society and defines a class in terms of its relationship to the means of production. Class is also used in Marx to refer to a historical principle evident in the laws of economic development and the repetition of class relations throughout history. (Morrison, 1995, pp. 310–311)

In short, Marx felt that one's *class position* in a capitalist system<sup>1</sup> was defined either by ownership of the means of production or by non-ownership, thus compelling one to sell their labor in order to survive. Owners of the means of production (bourgeoisie) dominate non-owners (proletariat) given that they extract *surplus value* from their labor—what workers produce creates more value than what they receive in remuneration, and owners appropriate the difference.

The phrase *mode of life* (a way of living) is useful for distinguishing a critical

difference between classes. The relations of production in a capitalist system are relations of class domination. Some people possess the privilege of living in material opulence—without having to work—just by owning the means of production or revenue-generating assets or properties; others are forced to sell their labor to survive, and it is not uncommon for a sizeable portion of those people to receive poverty wages (Munger, 2002; Neuman, 1999). The wealth of the former is interdependent upon the impoverishment of the latter (Wright, 2000, p. 10). And notably, the repetition and reproduction of class relations throughout history is evident and made possible by laws of economic development.

Notwithstanding the merits of Marx's conceptualization of class—owning the means of production mattered in the early years of liberalism and still matters a great deal in the contemporary era of neoliberalism (Wright, 2000, p. 39)—there are also finite limits to Marx's definition given the complexities of class that transcend a simple dichotomy between ownership and non-ownership of the means of production. One limitation of Marx's classic conceptualization of class is that "many people do not seem to neatly fit this polarized image" (Wright, 2000, xiii) and "it does not provide us with an adequate conceptual framework for explaining many of the things we want class to explain" (Wright, 2000, p. 15).

### ***Conceptualizing Class: Weber***

Morrison (1995) summarizes Max Weber's conceptualization of *social class*:

Groups who "share the same causal component of life chances." In this, [Weber] differentiated himself from Marx, who thought that social class was

defined by ownership of the means of production. Weber went beyond Marx by identifying two distinct categories of class. In the first category, the class situation is determined by the ownership of usable property, which creates life chances in the form of rents and returns on investments. In the second category, the class situation is determined by the kinds of skills and services that can be put up for sale in the market and which are the direct result of training and education. (pp. 340–341)

In Weber's own words,

We may speak of a *class* when (1) a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances, in so far as (2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and (3) is represented under conditions of the commodity of labor market ... These points refer to "the class situation." (Wright, 2000, p. 28)

Weber's definition of class is significant given that there is enormous variation of the monetary returns appropriated by those who share the common feature of selling their labor on the market. The possession of valued skills or expertise (for non-owners of the means of production) puts them in a "privileged appropriation location within exploitation relations" (Wright, 2000, p. 19). And the privileges of upper middle-class appropriation locations are increasing, quite drastically, relative to workers: In 1965, the CEO-to-worker pay ratio was 20:1. In 2018, it was 287:1.<sup>ii</sup>

Some workers command higher incomes, at least relative to workers without



valued skills or expertise: "The specific mechanism through which this appropriation takes place can be referred to as *loyalty rent* [emphasis added]" (Wright, 2000, p. 17).<sup>iii</sup> CEOs sell their labor but can receive extraordinarily large sums in remuneration. Further, they hold a great deal of power and control over the fate of frontline labour and thus occupy a contradictory class location in that they are subordinate to owners but still play a role in the exploitation of workers.

The social status that comes from specialized credentials, and the higher pay, also carries a symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and can facilitate distinctive material lifestyles that differentiate one from the typical working-class (Wright, 2000, p. 19). In short, skills and credentialed expertise can be seen "as an asset embodied in the labor power of people which enhances their power in labor markets and the labor process" (Wright, 2000, p. 19).

### ***The Commonalities in Marx and Weber's Classic Conceptualizations of Class***

Notwithstanding the differences mentioned above between Marx and Weber, "control over economic resources is central to both Marxist and Weberian class analysis" (Wright, 2000, p. 27). For Marx, that control lay in ownership of the means of production. For Weber, ownership of usable property creating a return in the form of rent, or return on investment, is one form of control over an economic resource. Further, ownership and control over specialized and credentialed labor power are valuable economic resources and can be considered a hallmark of Weberian class analysis.

Wright (2000) posits an inventory of the commonalities between Marx and Weber's views on class:

- Both transcend simple gradational notions of class that consider only the material conditions of life. As important as those material conditions are, "Both Marx and Weberian class analysis define classes relationally, i.e., a given class location is defined by virtue of the social relations which link it to other class locations" (Wright, 2000, p. 27).
- Both theorists emphasize the concept of class "with the relationship between people and economically relevant assets or resources" (Wright, 2000, p. 27). What Marx termed the means of production and what Weber called market capacities were both about similar phenomena.
- Further,
  - Both traditions see the causal relevance of class as operating, at least in part, via the ways that these relationships shape material interests of actors. Ownership of the means of production or ownership of one's own labor power is explanatory of social action because these property rights shape the strategic alternatives people face in pursuing their material well-being: "What you have determines what you get, and what you have determines what you have to do to get what you get." (Wright, 2000, p. 28)
- Finally, "at their core, both class concepts involve the causal connection between (a) social relations to resources and (b) material interests via (c) the way resources shape strategies for acquiring income" (Wright, 2000, p.

28).

Understanding the conceptualizations of class grounded in classic social theory becomes even more relevant for understanding the contemporary world of advanced capitalism when adding the appendage "privilege" to the term "class."

### Defining Privilege

Kruks (2005) traces the origin of the word "privilege" to the term *privelegium* derived from two Latin words, *privus* (meaning "private") and *legis* (meaning "law") (Taiwo, 2017, p. 17). Notably, the genesis of the term *privelegium* explicitly denotes that only certain groups have access (private) and that formal laws (*legis*) enforce the existing order. Laws and edicts play a crucial role in creating, sustaining, and increasing privilege. Glasbeek (2017) argues that in the contemporary era of neoliberalism, class privileges have become further entrenched in laws and policies—ultimately giving more to those who already have the most.

### Defining Class Privilege

*Class privilege*, then, is a powerful (and often insidious) form of self-reproducing and legally sanctioned financial, material, social and relational advantage that affect one's opportunities for income, well-being, social standing, and life chances. Ownership and control over economically relevant assets (such as the means of production, revenue-generating properties, credentialed market capacities) are the foundations of class in a class-divided society. Class-based advantages exist in widely varying degrees; they shape living conditions, realistic choices, opportunities, hope, impact how others perceive people, and how they perceive themselves.

It is (aggregately) well established that class positions exert enormous influence on critically important measures like social capital, health, mental health, education, and well-being. The wealthy are given advantages and privileges, not due to ineluctable differences, and often not because they earned them in any meaningful sense of the word "earned." Their advantage, their privileged treatment, is created and structurally supported by a legal system that pretends that our social relations are not class-divided, and that law does not intend to favour one class over all others. Unlike most other privileges, then, class privilege is specifically and pointedly created by law. The purpose is to maintain and perpetuate capitalist relations of production, which, in turn, intends to allow one class to exercise power over all others even though everything in our political and legal discourse says we eschew such an approach.

### Class Privilege Juxtaposed to Poverty

There is a consensus in the burgeoning field of privilege studies that privilege is the flipside of oppression, and both phenomena are "two sides of the same coin" (Mullaly & West, 2018, xi). I believe that the definition of class privilege posited above becomes clearer and more meaningful when it is juxtaposed to what it can be most distinguished from: poverty. If poverty, as Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen (1992) astutely claims, is not just a matter of low well-being but also the inability to pursue well-being precisely because of the lack of economic means, then class privilege can be seen as the polar opposite of poverty. On many essential aggregate measures and life outcomes, including the longevity of life itself (Case & Deaton, 2020), class privilege not only facilitates well-being—it helps maintain and reproduce it.

A second and equally thoughtful definition of poverty that is even more descriptive and graphic was posited by The Royal Commission on the Status of Women of Canada (1977, p. 311):

*Poverty* [emphasis added] is to be without sufficient money, but it is also to have little hope for better things. It is a feeling that one is unable to control one's destiny, that one is powerless in a society that respects power. The poor have very limited access to means of making known their situation and their needs. To be poor is to feel apathy, alienation from society, entrapment, hopelessness, and to believe that whatever you do will not turn out successfully. (as cited in Chappell, 2014, pp. 237–238)

Again, contrasting the freedoms of class privilege with unfreedoms of poverty teaches us a great deal about both concepts. Class privilege, then, is not just about having an abundance of money—it is also about having realistic hope for even better things. It is a feeling that one controls one's destiny and has power (and money) in a society that respects both. The wealthy have the means to make known their situation and needs. To possess class privilege is generally conducive to feeling hope, connection to a society that has treated one well, freedom, and the belief that whatever one does will turn out successfully.

### **A Crucial Caveat on Class Reductionism**

Audre Lorde once said, "There is no [such] thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives." Privilege and oppression take multiple forms. Zoning in on just one form of oppression—while failing to see that everyone has multiple aspects to their

identity—is not only overly simplistic and intellectually passe; class reductionism (or any single-issue analysis) does a tremendous injustice to the people hurt by multiple forms of inequality.

All racial minorities are virtually, or perhaps wholly, guaranteed to have their lives adversely impacted by racism. But the way racism manifests itself and the options, protections, and resources that people have to deal with it vary based on class position (among other factors).

To illustrate: When the Toronto Raptors won the NBA championship in 2019, and team President and General Manager Masai Ujiri was walking on to the court to celebrate with the team that he built, a security guard stopped and pushed him while he was attempting to reach for his identification. That security guard later filed a frivolous lawsuit against Ujiri, claiming that he was assaulted, and the Alameda County Sheriff's Office released this patently dishonest statement, "We 100% stand by our original statement that was released that Mr. Ujiri is the aggressor in this incident. Don't be quick to judge based off of what lawyers are saying." Video footage of the incident in question shows, clearly, that Masai Ujiri was not the aggressor.<sup>iv</sup>

To his everlasting credit, Masai Ujiri was informed and compassionate enough to recognize how the racism he faced (as real and terrible as it was) is partially mediated by his class privilege:

What saddens me most about this ordeal is that the only reason why I am getting the justice I deserve in this moment is because of my success. Because I'm the President of an NBA team, I had access to resources that ensured I could demand

and fight for my justice. So many of my brothers and sisters haven't had, don't have, and won't have the same access to resources that assured my justice. (Ujiri, 2019)

Ujiri seemed aware that the brutal taste of racism he experienced from law enforcement would likely have been more severe—and perhaps disabling or fatal—had he lived in a different socioeconomic lifeworld.

Like Anne Bishop (2015, p. 10), "I regain hope every time I see someone reach out past the boundaries of their own oppression to understand and support someone else's struggle."

Critical theorists who share a deep visceral commitment to ameliorating any type of systemic inequality are well served to heed Bishop's (2015) humane and compelling words of wisdom:

When I see people competing, claiming their own oppression as the "worst," or attacking the gains made by other oppressed groups, I see us all running on a treadmill. As long as we try to end our oppression by rising above others, we are reinforcing each other's oppression and eventually our own. We are fighting over who has more value, who has less instead of asking why we must be valued as more or less. We are investing energy in the source of all our oppressions, which is competition itself. (p. 9)

Below, I analyze some unanalyzed features of class privilege by revisiting 20 select aspects of McIntosh's foundational knapsack, given that the class-based aspects of privilege were a blind spot (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013) in the seminal work of privilege studies. That said, I am convinced

that White privilege and male privilege are clearly prevalent and institutionalized features of the world we live in—and this is concretely evidenced by, among other indicators, the demographics of both extreme wealth and poverty. My analyses, then, seek to supplement and build upon, not detract from, McIntosh's work. Thus, while examining the forthcoming illustrations of class privilege, the reader is explicitly asked to keep in mind that both privilege and oppression exist in multiple intersecting forms.

### **Revisiting the Knapsack: Unpacking Class-Privilege**

While McIntosh's (1988) invisible knapsack of White privileges was compelling, Khan (2001, p. 7) argues, "If we add class to the mix [in examining privilege], we see something quite different." Because "a pedagogy of privilege should always be grounded in the standpoints of subordinated groups of people" (Messner, 2011, p. 3), my illuminations of class privilege take place via contrast: By strategically positing first voice accounts taken primarily from qualitative and ethnographic scholarship detailing the daily living realities of impoverishment. The forthcoming illustrations collectively show that having access to economically relevant resources can provide self-perpetuating freedoms, choices, social status, and opportunities that people living in poverty go without.

#### **1. Moving or relocating to an area that one would want to live.**

In a market system, housing is distributed primarily based on the ability to pay. The more money one has, the more housing options one will be able to access. There is

freedom in owning a home in a healthy, safe, and desirable neighborhood. There is unfreedom in being homeless or renting in an unhealthy, unsafe, and undesirable community corroded by poverty. For example, having the financial resources to relocate where and when one wants provides freedom and choices in work, educational, vocational, and social opportunities.

Having less money means having fewer housing options (Layton, 2000). Waiting lists for social housing are several years, and low-cost housing units are becoming scarcer in the age of government austerity (Neysmith, Bezanson, & O'Connell, 2005, p. 141). Some people can work full time their entire adult life and still struggle to afford rent—and have the prospect of owning their own home undercut by insufficient wages (Goode & Maskovsky, 2001). Rapidly rising property costs further entrench the wealth of those who already own property. The realities of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2009) mean that the inequality gap has widened, and there are more people with less money. Yet, homelessness in mainstream political consciousness is attributed mainly to the moral and character deficiencies of the poor (Hurtig, 1999, pp. 46–53).

The need to move for some people is prompted by the reality that they can no longer pay their rent. In order to relocate and rent elsewhere, first and last month's rent is often required—on top of other moving costs beyond some peoples' reach. One respondent living in poverty and

with a disability was unable to move away from a cockroach-infested unit because they had no transportation, and their current location was within walking distance to needed medical services (Neysmith, Bezanson, & O'Connell, 2005, p. 131). Another respondent in the same study reported, "I want to move, but I can't find a good, suitable place where my kids can be ok, and I don't have to worry about [her son] crawling on the ground and picking up cockroaches" (p. 133).

Class privileged people typically have the material resources—and thus freedom—to avoid or leave undesirable living conditions. Poor peoples' lack of material resources typically translates into unfreedom. They exist and remain in unhealthy circumstances—perhaps even have their living conditions deteriorate if they must deal with a disinterested landlord or face eviction for being unable to pay rent.

## **2. Avoiding those one has been trained to mistrust.**

The establishment of upper-class homes in elite neighborhoods, sometimes within gated communities, affords class privileged people the boundary maintenance capacity to distance themselves from underprivileged people (Kendall, 2014, pp. 97–105) who are deemed untrustworthy and potentially dangerous. "We are schooled to recognize and be wary of people who are members of subordinate groups" (Mullaly & West, 2018, p. 40). Given that the privileged and underprivileged have differential

access to quality schools and workplaces, class privilege often entails the power to (largely) avoid spending much time with underprivileged people.

It has been argued that class distinctions entail different "economic conditions of existence [that] compel [people from different classes] to live separately from one another" (Morrison, 1995, pp. 310–311). A different form of social distancing has always been in vogue among the elite long before the current COVID-19 pandemic. Class privilege can facilitate preferences about social proximity and whom one spends time with, whereas poverty limits options. Mullaly and West feel that privileged people utilize distancing and avoidance mechanisms, in part because "if they were to get too close to [underprivileged] people, they would find it more difficult to maintain the denial and illusion [of meritocracy] and would have to deal with the troubles that surround privilege and oppression" (Mullaly & West, 2018, p. 51).

### 3. "Treatment / Social interaction in neighborhood of residence."

The neighborhood one lives in and the neighbors one interacts with are likely to be influenced by class privileges that facilitate or debilitate the friendliness of a locale. One's social class position can, and does, exert a significant influence on how one is likely to be treated in social interactions—and wealthy neighborhoods are not burdened by the material deprivations and

accompanying toxic stressors that impoverished communities live with. An overlooked aspect of the seminal research that prompted tenuous theorizing about the culture of poverty is articulated by Oliver Lafarge, "Above all, where hunger and discomfort rule, there is little spare energy for the gentler, warmer, less utilitarian emotions and little chance for active happiness" (Lafarge in Lewis, 1959, ix).

Happy neighborhoods will, naturally, have more pleasant interactions and fewer unpleasant exchanges. A National Bureau of Economic Research study found:

When we compare the average characteristics of the most and least happy urban communities, we find a number of large matching differences in census-based variables. In particular, in the happiest quintile of urban neighborhoods, incomes are higher, unemployment is lower, fewer people spend more than 30% of their incomes on housing. (Helliwell, Shiplett, & Barrington-Lee, 2018, p. 18)

John Heliwell, the lead author of the study, argues that "The physical environment has a big effect on the friendliness of a place."<sup>v</sup>

Those "living comfortably in suburbia, miles from the epicenters of hardship" (Abramsky, 2013, p. 3) can avoid being the brunt of both poor-bashing and the accompanying politics of exclusion (Swanson, 2001) by virtue of their class privilege. In research examining

welfare reform in Ontario from the perspective of those most directly impacted, one respondent on social assistance reported that she was told, "Every person [in her neighborhood] on welfare should be forced to account for every piece of toilet paper that they use" (Bratton, 2010, p. 177). Another respondent in the same study advised that when people find out you are on welfare, "You are treated like you are the lowest form of human being on earth because you need assistance" (Bratton, 2010, p. 186). While McIntosh perceptively noted that her White privilege often makes her feel at home in the world, for some, class-based unfreedoms of social exclusion make it impossible to feel at home in a world where they are homeless.

#### **4. Shopping without fear of harassment or scrutiny.**

In a consumer society (Bauman, 2000), shopping is essential. One's identity—as good or bad, law-abiding or criminal—is affected by one's perceived social class and the social status brought about by consumption and one's appearance. It matters, then, that at one end of class privilege, some people can shop anywhere and purchase virtually anything anytime they want.

The experience of shopping is also different between the classes. Extremely wealthy people are not likely to be followed by undercover building security or store detectives. On the contrary, if it became necessary, wealthy persons could hire personal security to ensure that no one steals from, follows, or

harasses them.

For the economically disenfranchised, poverty can severely limit or completely take away one's capacity to shop. Some people are "too cash strapped to go to malls" (Abramsky, 2013, p. 4). A woman I interviewed on social assistance reported that she dreads days nearing the end of the month, where there is no money to shop for even necessities (Bratton, 2010, p. 191). Similarly, a focus group of social assistance recipients in Niagara Falls described their circumstances to create "[a]n understanding of poverty from those who are poor" (Baker-Collins, 2005, p. 19). The group unanimously concurred, "The end of the month is described as 'you've lost it, not enough to buy bread and milk, nerves are gone'" (Baker-Collins, 2005, p. 19).

In terms of being followed by store security, a respondent in Neysmith et al. (2005, p. 136) reported that when she looks "dreary" and goes to the store, "People are watching me because they probably think I am going to steal something." If one has the appearance of being poor, they are not likely to be exempt from the excessive scrutiny of law enforcement (Hester & Eglin, 1992; Homan, 2007). For example, when exiting a retail store and the greeter requests to see the purchase receipt. It is more likely that a person who appears poor to be stopped than a person who appears confident and financially secure.

## 5. Being stigmatized by the media.

Television stations and newspapers are owned and operated by a select few media empires (Winseck, 2008). And the media portrayals of poor people are generally negative (Rose & Baumgartner, 2013). According to Sears (2014), "the media . . . tend to portray the current government and corporate policies [even when they further entrench unearned class privilege and concurrently exacerbate poverty] as self-evident truths that only the irrational could challenge" (p. 2). Corporate media delivered a relatively predominant message and disseminated it throughout the popular culture in neoliberalism:

hard work + intelligence + persistence = *wealth*, while

laziness + stupidity + quitting too easily = *poverty*.

It is common for scapegoating attacks to be towards the poor in the media (Baxter, 1997, p. 40). A recent illustration can be seen in a typical *Toronto Sun* media headline: "You'll be footing the bill for freeloaders with Guaranteed Annual Income" (Lilley, 2018). Rose and Baumgartner (2013) have shown:

Media discussion of poverty has shifted from arguments that focus on the structural causes of poverty [during the early years of the welfare state] or the social costs of having large numbers of poor to portrayals of the poor as cheaters and chiselers and of

welfare programs doing more harm than good. As the frames have shifted, policies have followed. (p. 22)

Neoliberal austerity policies have followed and have legitimized the widening of what was an already massive gap between society's "haves" and "have nots." Poor people cannot help but be exposed to what is written about them. One respondent in *Telling Tales: Living the Effects of Public Policy* explained:

Why should I listen to something that is going to be bashing me? It's like buying the Sun paper. Why am I going to buy a paper that is going to give me more concern, anxiety? I just don't. Things that drive me nuts; I just try to cut myself off from it. (Neysmith et al., 2005, p. 155)

## 6. Participating in extracurricular activities and accessing curricular material.

The parents' class position influences the extracurricular activities and materials, such as books, vacations, and community experiences that children can access. In a study using in-depth naturalistic observation and interviews with the middle class, working-class, and low-income families, Lareau (2011) established that there are "largely invisible but powerful ways that parents' social class impacts childrens' life experiences" (p. 3).

There are extracurricular events and endeavors that middle and



upper-class children are likely to participate in that poor kids typically miss out on. These disadvantages do more than provide well-funded children with a comparatively more eventful childhood. There is a "concerted cultivation" at work, building the "cultural repertoires" (Lareau, 2001, pp. 4–7) of privileged children that function to transmit educational, social, and career success—and thus intergenerational class privilege. And yet, class privileged researchers utilize methods that patently fail to account for the daily living realities of class privilege and oppression. Consequently, these are the same persons who attribute academic success to the supposedly admirable qualities of self-discipline and grit of the student (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005).

The phenomenon Sen (1992) termed *capability deprivation* occurs when children are deprived of basic material living standards that restrict their range of options about how to live and when they do not have access to capability-enhancing materials and experiences available to middle and upper-class children. A specific illustration can be seen in the class-based pattern of book-ownership because the number of books in the home is reliably related to household income (Schutz, Ursprung, & Woessmann, 2008, pp. 287–288). According to the children in grades 4 and 5 at a North Bay, Ontario, Canada school, a bothersome aspect of their poverty is not being able to buy books at schoolbook fairs (Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition, 1998,

p. 107). Not surprisingly, "the relationship between household income and books at home [does] not vary significantly across countries" (Hannum & Xie, 2016, p. 464).

## 7. Having one's voice heard.

A class privileged person interacting among a group of poor people is apt to feel, and likely be perceived as, superior. Their voice and views are very likely to be heard. In part, this is because (a) *overconfidence*—"the extent to which people hold inaccurate and overly positive perceptions of themselves beyond what reality can justify" (Moore & Healy, 2008, as cited in Belmi et al., 2019, p. 2)—is more prevalent among the upper classes, and (b) overconfidence can function to confer social advantage among the upper classes "by making them appear competent in the eyes of others" (Belmi et al., 2019, p. 4).

Conversely, a poor person within a group of class privileged people is likely to be treated as inferior, and when trying to communicate, their words go unheard, be misinterpreted, and views discredited. Long time anti-poverty activist Sheila Baxter (1997) recounts aspects of her grass-roots advocacy work being unduly criticized, misconstrued, and silenced despite her experiential knowledge of impoverishment that her upper middle-class critics, and purported allies, lacked:

I have so many memories of speaking and being [mis]interpreted. [Wealthier] people say things like, "What

Sheila is trying to say is" or "What Sheila means to say is" or "What Sheila meant was" When I speak from my working-class perspective, I know what I say, and I know what I mean. (viii)

In a world of so-called experts and professionals, it is not uncommon for poorer people to be spoken over during conversation or given condescending feedback—regardless of credibility on a topic or issue.

#### **8. Securing products and services in bookstores, grocery markets, and hair salons.**

The quality and quantity of books, food, and hair maintenance available to people are widened by wealth and narrowed by impoverishment. Books are unlikely to be a priority for someone struggling to pay for the necessities of life, and even if a poor person does opt to enter a book shop, they cannot count on writings from their class being represented.

Writings from middle and upper-class authors are in abundance at most bookstores, and class-privileged readers can own their own personal library. The voices of the poor are usually subjugated (Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition, 1998) or sometimes entirely nonexistent in most published writings. As Baxter (1997) notes, "We, the non-academic working-class poor, don't have many books that speak our true voices. Often when someone like me writes, our thoughts are reconstructed by

others who feel that [formal] education brings the authority to interpret our meaning" (vii).

The important experiential education one receives by living in poverty is considered unimportant. Homan (2007, p. 3) argues that in analyzing poverty, "Most of what has been said or written has come from those who have never personally experienced the negative effects of classism and the social injustice of poverty."

A wealthy person has more food choices for at least three reasons: First, because with reliable transportation, they can access more supermarkets (and drive their groceries home instead of being limited by what they can carry); second, because they have the resources to buy better quality and more quantity of food; and third, they can more easily afford countless cooking tools, devices, and storage. At the top end of class privilege, people can hire personal chefs.

In terms of finding desirable and appropriate food, it should be noted that the drastic increase in food bank usage is a powerful indicator that there are more people, about four million across Canada, who are struggling to find the resources to eat sufficiently ([www.foodbankscanada.ca](http://www.foodbankscanada.ca)). Inadequate income plays a pivotal role in food insecurity (Smilek et al., 2001) and the healthiness of one's diet:

There are socioeconomic gradients in diet such that those

who are better off consume healthier diets than the less well to do. The available evidence suggests that income affects food intake both directly and indirectly through the dispositions associated with particular class locations. (Power, 2005, p. 37)

A neglected aspect of impoverishment is the effect it tends to have on diet, and thus health, "Food price becomes the most important consideration in food choice when income is restricted, often leading to the selection of foods that are higher in sugar and fat because they are among the least expensive sources of dietary energy" (Taylor, Evers, & McKenna, 2005, p. 21).

The misguided perception that poverty is not a problem in developed countries because obesity exists among the poor is oblivious to the daily living realities of impoverishment. Some people cannot "buy food anywhere other than dollar stores" (Abramsky, 2013, p. 4). Others are limited to what is given to them at food banks, which in many cases are high in fat and simple carbohydrates.

A respondent in Neysmith, Bezanson, and O'Connell (2005, p. 134) detailed her experience, "Sometimes the children miss a meal, and it's not all the time that I can cook healthy. To cook healthy, like a meal with vegetables, is expensive." Similarly, a woman that I once interviewed detailed a harsh reality of welfare checks being

insufficient:

Nearing the end of the month, there are some days when you just have to get your body used to skipping meals. It is not good for me, and there are days when I feel lifeless, like there is nothing in me anymore. And I just lie in bed because getting up burns energy I know I am not going to have. (Bratton, 2010, p. 190)

Money also provides more access to high-end salons, better quality hair products, and skilled hairstylists. Hair maintenance is a relevant issue because it can limit employment opportunities. An overlooked aspect of class privilege is that one will not lose out on a job opportunity because they could not afford a haircut going into an interview.

Poverty can mean that one does not have money for a haircut. This reality is clearly lost on some people, even those paid to help the poor purportedly. Capponi (1999, p. 42) reports that she encountered a man who was told by his welfare worker that he needed to cut his hair or be cut off social assistance for non-compliance. The worker was oblivious to the fact that the man had no money for a haircut and presumed that his appearance was attributable to irresponsible non-compliance as opposed to economic deprivation.

The differential access to books, foods, and hair maintenance translates into differential life chances because reading ability, health, and a marketable appearance are all affected.

## 9. Appearing financially reliable.

The ability to appear financially reliable is a class-privilege-related matter. The economic status of people at both ends of the socioeconomic stratum is judged by the style, cleanliness, and quality of their clothing and appearance. Buying a new Armani suit and having it tailored before an elite job interview sends the message to elite employers: "I am one of you" and increases one's chances of being hired. At the other end of the socioeconomic stratum, appearing economically deprived is almost certain to disqualify one from elite employment and is likely to be a barrier for acquiring even working-class jobs. Employers tend not to hire anyone with rotting teeth because this is often deemed a sure sign of long-term impoverishment and a physical marker of individual failure (Homan, 2007).

In a documentary about the hidden homeless—*It Was a Wonderful Life* (Ohayon, 1993)—a former pharmacist reports that she is no longer employable in her profession because she no longer has the means to iron her clothes, straighten her hair, or shower regularly given that she resides in her car. In addition to appearance affecting employment status and hiring decisions, businesses also use dress codes (in part) to screen out customers who do not appear financially reliable (Capponi, 1999, p. 41). All of this adds to the issues in the illustration before this: Without access to proper hygiene and necessary attire, destitute people

cannot even get past the front door of a bank, retail store, or hair salon.

## 10. Protecting one's young children from people who may not like them.

Class is one factor, among several, that influences what children are likely to require protection from being disliked, rejected, and bullied by their peers. Having access to class privilege can provide parents with some capacity to protect their children from social exclusion. Healthy kids with the coolest toys, electronics, clothes, and sporting equipment that enable them to participate in their active lifestyles are more likely to experience formative years of safety and social inclusion. The parents of privileged children can host more appealing birthday parties that build their children's social networks. They can also send more desirable gifts to parties that their children are invited to.

However, some parents do not have the resources or living space to throw even a modest party for their children. A respondent in Ali et al. (2018) "remembered from childhood how no one wanted to play with children from low-income neighborhoods and how such children were bullied" (p. 316).

Teenagers and children from low-income families can encounter challenges in interpersonal relationships that privileged children typically do not face. One mother described her daughter's experience:

It is very hard to hide the fact that you have no money. To have friends my age who are not on assistance, like to meet new people and for them to come into my house and to see only dollar store stuff. Their kids all have cell phones, and they all know right away when they come in that I am poor and that my daughter is poor. And it has such a negative effect on my daughter. She was like, "You know, Mom, I can't date any guys that come from wealthy families." I was like, "Why?" And she said, "Cause we're poor." You know, but it certainly is a huge blow, huge, to her self-esteem that I can't really have friends. It is hard to make friends with other families because it is so obvious that we have nothing, and people judge you for that—they do. (Bratton, 2010, p. 179)

Parents themselves can have their social life constrained by impoverishment, even if they are resourceful and determined enough to access the limited social activities that are free. One respondent in Neysmith, Bezanson, and O'Connell (2005) explained,

Like the choir [a social activity that did not cost money] and everything, it keeps me active, and it keeps my mind going, and I feel like I am not vegetating. But I have no friendships from any of these things that I do because I can't go out and socialize afterward because it takes money to be able to do those things. (p. 30)

For parents and children alike, class privilege can expand social opportunities that can help protect them from social exclusion.

### **11. Needing to educate children about systemic prejudice to keep them safe.**

A neglected aspect of class privilege is the impact it has on safety. "Increasingly, wealthy privileged people find themselves living in gated communities complete with private security companies to protect their property and their lives" (Mullaly & West, 2018, p. 36). The children living in those gated communities are undoubtedly much safer than children living in urban ghettos. Underprivileged parents cannot afford to purchase physical safety for their kids. Rylko-Bauer and Farmer (2016) argue:

Structural violence is the violence of injustice and inequity—"embedded in ubiquitous social structures [and] normalized by stable institutions and regular experience" (Winter & Leighton, 2001, p. 99). By structures, we mean social relations arrangements—economic, political, legal, religious, or cultural—that shape how individuals and groups interact within a social system. These include broad-scale cultural and political-economic structures such as ...neoliberalism, as well as poverty. These structures are violent because they result in avoidable deaths, illness, and

injury: and they reproduce violence by marginalizing people and communities, constraining their capabilities and agency, assaulting their dignity, and sustaining inequalities. (p. 47)

In Ontario, 89% of children involved with child protection authorities live in families struggling to pay for the necessities of life (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2013). According to Wedeles (2015), "Children from families with low incomes are at five times greater risk for abuse and neglect when compared to their upper socioeconomic status peers" (p. 3). The exact causal role of socioeconomic status on child welfare outcomes is not clear, and increased surveillance of marginalized populations occurs in child welfare (Swift, 1995). But it should also be noted that the perpetual stress of poverty can become too much for some parents. DiAngelo (2006, p. 51) writes, "If we got sick, our Mother [*sic*] would beat us, screaming that we could not get sick because she could not afford to take us to the doctor."

Children's physical safety is very much impacted by ascribed socioeconomic factors over which they have no control. Children in low-income urban settings "are confronted with the constant challenge of population density and associated problems, including housing that is either inadequate or unaffordable, crowding, limited access to resources, and high rates of crime" (Black & Krishnakumar, 1998, p. 635).

Educating children about the reasoning behind all of this—systemic classism—poses significant challenges, like opposing other systemic forms of prejudice and bigotry. The common cultural phenomena of dislike, prejudice, and bigotry towards the poor, and its flipside of favorable prejudice (Allport, 1954, p. 6) and reverence for those with wealth, have not even been named in public discourse. Media outlets owned by wealthy people do not use the word classism. People who hold blatantly classist views are rarely seen as classist. Many people are convinced that almost all rich people are highly driven go-getters who have earned everything they have and that most poor people have a "well-deserved reputation" (Allport, 1954, p. 87) because they genuinely are unmotivated freeloaders who cannot defer gratification.

## 12. Receiving differential treatment at school and work.

How teachers and employers treat people, and the norms at schools and workplaces, are influenced by, among other factors, class-based judgments. Students from poorer homes are judged and may even have disciplinary action taken against them because of the quality of their clothing. One mother reported that she was called to pick up her son from school because of an emerging hole in his jeans (Levins & Lunberg, 2018). Parents themselves can experience differential treatment from their children's teachers, "unlike a low-income mother, one who is more affluent can look

forward to respectful treatment in her children's school" (Lott & Bullock, 2007, p. 6).

DiAngelo writes about her childhood experiences of impoverishment, regular evictions, and living with relatives or in her parents' car, where it was difficult to maintain hygiene. "My teacher once held my hands up to my fourth-grade class as an example of poor hygiene and with the class as [my] audience, told me to go home and tell my mother to wash me" (2006, p. 51).

Homan (2007) argues that "Class shapes educational opportunity and experience. [This is because] teachers are mostly from middle-class backgrounds and therefore relate better with students like themselves" (p. 38). It should not be surprising, then, that the academic failure of youth in low-income neighborhoods is "often associated with living in those neighborhoods" (Ainsworth, 2002, p. 117).

As far as treatment in the workforce, some employers have class-based biases as it was found that people get turned down for jobs just because they are on social assistance (Swanson, 2001, p. 83). A young man that I encountered as a respondent in my doctoral research (Bratton, 2010) described a job interview:

I went to the local McDonald's. I was dressed nice, you know. I took my resume with me. I filled out their application, and I got an interview. So, I went in for the interview to flip hamburgers or

clean, or whatever, and I thought that it was going pretty good. Then they asked me what I was presently doing, and I told them that I was trying to get off welfare. Well, it was a mistake to tell them that. At the end of the interview, the manager looked at me and said, "I am sorry, Mr. Taggart [pseudonym], I cannot hire you." And I go, "What do you mean? Why can't you hire me?" He said that I was not qualified to flip their hamburgers. I asked him why, and he just said, "I am sorry, I cannot hire you." (p. 182)

With despondency, this young man expanded on his story and reported that the manager who interviewed him:

[He] wouldn't tell me why [I was not getting the job], but he didn't have to because I could tell from the moment, I told him that I was on welfare that there just would not be a job for me. I went back and got my grade 12 because I wanted to work, but it was not quite that simple. (Bratton, 2010, pp. 182–183)

### **13. Sharing political opinions and receiving validation.**

When class-privileged people, right-wing "think tanks," and the business press criticize the government by complaining about taxes (Himelfarb & Himelfarb, 2013), their opposition to taxation usually receives widespread support and is turned into government policy. McKenzie and Wharf (2010) argue

that "while the rhetoric of government often holds that the challenges are dealt with in ways that benefit all citizens, our view is that the grand issues are often, if not usually, resolved in favour of wealthy and powerful individuals" (ix).

Suppose a poor person or an anti-poverty advocacy group complains about social welfare spending cuts or taxation policy in general. In that case, they have pejoratively been deemed as a "special interest group ... who [is] selfishly exaggerating the proportions of the problem and making excuses for those who abuse the social services that hard-working 'taxpayers' are expected to pay for" (Capponi, 1999, x). The terms "socialist" or "nanny state" (Partanen, 2016) are frequently invoked as pejorative labels to discredit and "other" the people and policies promoting anti-poverty work and distributive justice. Poor people are not likely to garner much support in scrutinizing how the government treats them. But the reverse is not true, "politicians at all levels [often successfully] assure taxpayers that they are being taken advantage of and that poverty [and] homelessness ... are just a lifestyle choice made by those who chose not to pull their weight in society" (Capponi, 1999, p. ix).

#### **14. Getting to talk to 'the person in charge.'**

When middle and upper-class people talk to "the person in charge," they can be reasonably sure that they will be facing someone of their class.

When one lives in poverty, they can be almost positive that they will face a person of a different class if they get to talk to a person in charge.

One respondent on social assistance I interviewed reported that when she got a parking ticket, she went to the (then) mayor's office to explain that she was completely broke and could not pay the ticket. This woman was reportedly permitted to express her concern to the mayor, who was, indeed, from a different social class. The mayor's response reportedly was, "How can somebody on welfare afford a car anyway?" (Bratton, 2010, p. 188). The ticket was not reduced or waived.

#### **15. Ignoring or dismissing the input of others.**

Upper middle-class people can, and often do, ignore the perspectives of poor people. The head of a social work agency that I am familiar with once stated that he was committed to hearing from everyone and working to make the organization he headed anti-oppressive and inclusive. And to his credit, when two Aboriginal women at this agency asked to speak to staff about their life and family experiences dealing with racial and gender inequality, provisions were made for this to happen. Powerful accounts were given about the lived realities of racial and gender inequality. On this occasion, the agency was making progressive strides to "walk the walk" in terms of anti-oppressive work by hearing the standpoints of the oppressed.



But this inclusion did not extend so far as to hear the perspectives of an impoverished adolescent the agency was purportedly serving. This often-transient teenager told their worker how they felt jaded that the organization employing his social worker had the resources for a luxurious new building, while at the same time, many of the people the agency was allegedly serving were not having their basic needs met. The worker promised to relay this message to the head of the organization and attempt to arrange a meeting to give voice to this young person's views.

The worker emailed the agency's executive director to discuss the perspectives and life circumstances informing the views of this adolescent. The reply email from the highest level of senior management stated that the organization's board of directors strategically made decisions striking a fair balance between having a nice building—but not too nice—and added that youth often tend to see things in overly simplistic, black and white, terms. The senior management had nothing to fear in ignoring the perspectives of a lower-class child, but the request to meet was not even acknowledged, let alone accommodated.

Tronto (1993, pp. 120–121) describes *privileged irresponsibility* as occurring when "those who are relatively privileged are granted by that privilege the opportunity simply to ignore certain forms of hardship that they do not face." The "luxury of obliviousness" (Mullaly & West, 2018, p. 50) is an integral part of

privilege. This illustration is emblematic of a much larger societal trend: The voices and perspectives of poor people are being ignored because they are deemed unworthy of serious attention by people who believe they know what is best.

#### **16. Having ascribed class-based inequality that deeply impacts employment prospects, for multiple reasons, ignored by affirmative action.**

Ascribed class is an important factor in occupational achievement (Crompton, 1998; Goyder & Curtis, 1977; Willis, 1977)—and has been for a long time (Porter, 1965; Helms-Hays & Curtis, 1998). Yet, the disadvantaging employment barriers of class are typically excluded in affirmative action legislation. This is even though several reasons being poor can undercut one's capacity to secure and maintain employment. First, if one loses the lottery of birth and is deprived of adequate nutrition and stimulation during their earliest formative years, these disadvantaging realities can, in some cases, impact the wiring of the brain (McCain & Mustard, 1999) and lead to extreme capability deprivation that is not likely ever to be undone. Even though "how economies create and distribute wealth affects early childhood, and early child development affects the health and competence of populations throughout the life cycle" (McCain & Mustard, 1999 p. 45), the disadvantages of class oppression are absent in most affirmative action or employment equity legislation. Second, a minimum material

standard of living—food, clothing, shelter, and transportation—is a prerequisite of healthy functioning that enables one to secure, get to, and maintain employment. Third, one's social capital is very much related to class and significantly influences occupational attainment. Elite students from elite families have easier access to elite jobs because, among several other advantaging factors, they are more likely to have elite connections and advocates directly on (or indirectly influencing) the inside of elite hiring committees (Rivera, 2015). Working-class kids tend to get working-class jobs because their lifeworld, within and beyond school, strongly propels them in that direction (Willis, 1977). And poor people, arguably, have it even worse and can be turned away from jobs by employers because they are poor (Swanson, 2001; Homan, 2007).

Most job postings mentioning employment equity properly have statements including sex, gender, sexual orientation, disability, Indigenous, and racial minority status. While affirmative action legitimately exists to ensure that diversity is obtained and maintained in schools and workplaces and aims to help disadvantaged people by (at least partially) leveling the proverbial playing field, the disadvantages of class—no matter how extreme—are not considered worthy of inclusion in most employment equity legislation. Class-based inequality is not even an enigmatic after-thought in employment equity legislation: "Poverty profiling in hiring practices

is socially accepted, and because it is socially accepted, nobody sees it as a problem" (Homan, 2007, p. 35).

### **17. Being late for or missing a meeting or appointment.**

A wealthy person late for a meeting is not likely to have their lateness reflect on their class. But the same cannot be said for a poor person. A woman on social assistance that I once interviewed advised that although she usually is punctual, on one occasion, she was five minutes late for a meeting with her welfare worker, and because of this, "[The welfare worker] yelled at [her] and asked how [she] ever expected to keep a job.' [She] told her that [she] already [has] a job, and that is why [she was] late" (Bratton, 2010, p. 186).

Similarly, in an article titled "'They Don't Come In!' Stories Told, Lessons Taught About Poor Families in Therapy" Kazdin (1996, pp. 572–582) explores the all-too-common phenomenon of how even well-intentioned helping professionals typically respond when a poor client misses an appointment. The missed appointment is often seen as evidence of a lack of interest in self-betterment and an illustration of personal shortcomings. In one example Kazdin gives to illustrate the large gap between privileged perception and underprivileged realities: If the client has no functional phone to be reached at, the transportation barriers that precluded attending an appointment will almost certainly remain lost on the therapist—and the attributions

for the absence are likely to remain unfair misattributions. If one is poor, "people judge you and look down on you" (Homan, 2007, p. 14), and any bad moment a person has—even if it is quite anomalous (such as tardiness to a therapy appointment)—can be interpreted as a character flaw or moral failing (Sayer, 2005).

### **18. Using public accommodations.**

Enjoying and accessing public accommodations, such as hotels, theaters, restaurants, and amusement parks, is a class privilege matter. Both middle and upper-class privilege includes spending time away from home and at public and private places of entertainment and leisure. They have more flexibility and options regarding travel accommodations and length of stay. Whether going to a recreational facility in the neighborhood or booking a bed and breakfast for a weekend, those are privileges not available to everyone. And it is not the money that gives them these privileges per se; they are simply given access to places because of appearance, social capital, family dowery, work perks, and other possible unearned variables.

Middle-class privilege can, and often does, involve stress relieving—and rejuvenating—family get-a-ways to public vacation resorts. Elite upper-class privilege can involve private ownership of a public accommodation resort—and having private ownership of this valuable asset further entrench one's class privilege without the burden of having to work.

In contrast, "the poorest of the poor [can be found] under freeway ramps and bridges" (Abramsky, 2013, p. 4).

### **19. Accessing quality medical care and legal services.**

The quality of legal and medical help that one has access to is, very much, a matter of class privilege. Those with money and employers who offer a good benefits package can easily receive reputable legal representation and adequate medical coverage. But those without the necessary finances or employment benefits can, at best, get lesser quality assistance or, at worst, go completely without legal aid or medical care.

Impoverishment means that one is more likely to encounter the law (Hester & Eglin, 1992) and live with poor health (Raphael, 2007).

Homan (2007, p. 39) argues that "Nowhere is the power differential and the evidence of classism more obvious than in our justice system." While everyone is purportedly equal under the law, this myth is not valid:

For the same criminal behaviour, the poor are more likely to be arrested; if arrested, they are more likely to be charged; if charged, more likely to be convicted; if convicted, more likely to be sentenced to prison; and if sentenced, more likely to be given longer prison terms than members of the middle and upper classes. (National Council of Welfare, 2000, p. 1)

In addition, wealthy people can post bail while awaiting a trial. Poor people remain incarcerated.

Poor people are also more likely to live in poor health and thus require medical supports that they have less access to. Research has repeatedly shown a strong association between poverty and ill health (O'Connor & Olsen, 1998, p. 164; Social Planning Council of Toronto, 1999, p. 7; Raphael, 2007, pp. 205–237). In fact, according to health officer Dr. John Millar:

We have reached a point where we can think of poverty and low income the way in the past we have thought of smoking; it's as causally related to poor health as smoking is to lung cancer. It's that solid. (Capponi, 1997, p. 42)

Part of the reason both privilege and poverty tend to be self-perpetuating is that they profoundly impact health and well-being.

## **20. Attending higher education and contributing to course content.**

There are class elitist biases in the privileged world of academia (Pease, 2010, ix). Class privileged people are far more likely to pursue post-secondary education as young adults and even more likely to create the curriculum later in life. People raised on a low income are less likely to attend higher education. Ainsworth's (2002) research on academic outcomes found:

Children who live in advantaged neighborhoods are more likely to

be exposed to helpful social networks or adults who can provide positive resources, information, and opportunities that may be educationally beneficial. Alternatively, individuals in impoverished neighborhoods may be disadvantaged by smaller social networks and less beneficial networks than those in advantaged neighborhoods due to the social position of partners, parents, siblings, and friends. (Ainsworth, 2002, p. 120)

Those inside academia are more likely to develop the curriculum, so it is even more unlikely that low-income persons will contribute to course content or teach at a college or university. Unfortunately, affirmative action in faculty hiring practices and student recruitment typically does not acknowledge, let alone act upon, class-based disadvantage. The daily living realities of poor peoples' lives continue to be downplayed or completely omitted in many academic courses and institutions. This is a troubling irony given that the inequitable world students are purportedly learning about is becoming even more unequal. This is why Lott and Bullock (2007, p. 8) argue for "More research and theoretical attention to the significance of social class [to be given]."

The preceding re-analysis of McIntosh's knapsack of White privilege and male privilege—through the lens of class, utilizing qualitative and ethnographic micro-level illustrations—is intended to be a small step forward in meeting Lott and Bullock's warranted call to understand the significance of social class better. Given that micro-level

experiences invariably occur within macro-level contexts, in the final section of this paper, I will briefly describe some of the features of the economic system in which class privilege operates.

### A Class Analysis of Class Privilege in the Context of Contemporary Capitalism

The class which has the power to rob upon a large scale also has the power to control the government and legalize their robbery.

—Eugene V. Debs, *Unknown*

One of the central features of capitalism is that it facilitates, legitimizes, and reproduces the private accumulation of socially produced wealth. And contemporary neoliberal finance capitalism has been duly described as capitalism with its gloves off. During the global COVID-19 pandemic, a world record was obliterated as the economy went into lockdown and millions were thrown out of work. Already the world's richest man, Jeff Bezos increased his net worth by an astonishing 13 billion dollars—in just one day—following an 8% spike in Amazon stock.<sup>vi</sup> This anomalous day should be contextualized within the equally important realization that on just a typical day in 2020, the wealthiest man on earth has had his net worth increase by an average of \$311 million (Stopera, 2020). Bezos's company is worth one trillion dollars, pays no federal tax, while many frontline Amazon warehouse employees have to utilize food stamps to supplement their insufficient wages (Weill, 2018).

Sayer (2016, p. 3) argues that "the time is ripe for examining where the wealth of the rich comes from." How is it possible for anyone to become 13 billion dollars richer in just one day? Or, for that matter, \$311 million richer every day? Accurately,

answering these questions necessitates understanding capitalism's fundamentals: The economic system in which class privilege operates is legitimized and reproduced. In examining the basics of how capitalism operates, it is important to stress that there is nothing random or accidental about class privilege. It is a planned outcome, a *sine qua non* in a class divided polity, especially one that pivots around the private accumulation of socially produced wealth.<sup>vii</sup>

While a comprehensive review of capitalism is beyond the scope of this paper, a concise summation of how this economic system operates is a prerequisite of a fulsome macro-level understanding of class privilege. According to economist Jim Stanford, "capitalism has particular features and forces that need to be identified" (2015, p. 6). Among the most central facts about capitalism:

- Most people have to work for others in return for a wage or salary.
- A small proportion of society owns the bulk of wealth and uses that wealth to generate still more wealth.
- Competition between companies, each trying to maximize its profits, forces them to behave in particular, sometimes perverse ways (Stanford, 2015, p. 6).

A brief analysis of each of these central facts is warranted given that they are all relevant to the illustration at hand, and more importantly, to the general trend of an ever-widening gap between rich and poor.

First, Jeff Bezos has so much partially because Amazon workers on the frontline are paid so little, certainly not in proportion to what they contribute to the company.

According to Carroll (2002), capitalism's "dirty secret" is that its social relations enable the "dominant class to appropriate an economic surplus produced by subordinates." Class privilege is inherently hard-wired into the economic system that allows owners (and shareholders) to extract surplus value from workers. And class privileges are further entrenched when neoliberal policies not only allow the wealthy to take more by ensuring that most labor occurs in an insidiously exploitive way to make a profit but also keep more by continuing to lower (and even eliminate) taxes.

Second, Bezos's wealth created more wealth by purchasing more stock in his own company, so his capital could create more capital. This is a central feature of contemporary finance capitalism and could, perhaps, be considered the very acme of class privilege in an economic system where: "What you have [largely] determines what you get, and what you have determines what you have to do to get what you get" (Wright, 2000, p. 28). And notably, when the properties and assets that wealthy people own increase in value, this is another form of unearned income that allows class privileged people to get richer via what Sayer (2016, pp. 97–103) calls *asset inflation*. According to *Business Insider* (2019), some of Bezos more notable assets: a 5.3-acre home in Medina, Washington valued at \$25 million; a townhome in Washington DC, valued at \$23 million; a mansion in Beverly Hills valued at \$25 million; three apartments in New York City valued at \$17 million; *The Washington Post* (purchased in 2013 for \$250 million); and a \$65 million Gulf Stream jet. In an era where property values and housing prices are skyrocketing, the phenomenon of class privilege exacerbates because the wealthy increase their wealth without having to do

anything. The poor see their perpetual rental costs rise and hope forever becoming a property owner dwindle.

Finally, not taking sufficient measures to duly protect Amazon workers from the dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sainato, 2020) because sufficient safety measures could compromise profit can be considered a quintessential example of a company behaving inhumanly and perversely. Glasbeek (2017) shows how class privileged laws often shelter corporations and shareholders from liability when frontline workers are harmed. Chomsky (1999) argues that profits are routinely prioritized over people in the neoliberal global order.

According to Wright (1994, p. 19):

At the core of class analysis is a specific way of thinking about the problem of economic inequalities: inequalities among people are seen not mainly as the consequence of their individual attributes (intelligence, education, motivation, etc.) but of the way the system of production is organized around mechanisms of exploitation.

The flipside of Wright's (1994, pp. 37–43) claim that "poverty is a result of the properties of the social system," class privilege is the diametric, and interdependent, outcome of that same strategically planned system:

The amassing of wealth at one pole and the deprivation and misery at the other, far from being the egregious fallacy which bourgeois social science has long held it to be, has, in fact, turned out to be one of the best founded of all [conflict theory's] insights into the capitalist system. (Braverman, 1974/1998, p.

xxvii)

### Conclusion

Charles Dicken's famous quote that "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," is as apropos in today's world of neoliberalism as it was when those words were first penned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Zoning in on class as a largely overlooked category of analysis in privilege studies, while concurrently avoiding the analytical and moral pitfalls of one-dimensional class reductionism, is long overdue. In virtually all advanced capitalist countries, social, economic, and taxation policies have ultimately translated into a reverse-Robin Hood phenomenon: "taking from the poor to give to the rich." The available data on income and wealth distribution over the last 30 to 40 years makes this unequivocally clear (Salverda et al., 2016; Nolan et al., 2016). And yet class remains largely flattened as a category of analysis within privilege studies, particularly academia in general and everyday culture.

Strategically defining class privilege and juxtaposing the definition to poverty, then, is essential given that the multiple and self-reproducing advantages of having unearned wealth have not been named and thus are not well understood in a world of rapidly growing inequality. Delineating class privilege by amplifying the voices—and recognizing the capability deprivation—of subaltern people who live without it—can help counter the harsh reality that injustice often survives by stealth when the luxury of obliviousness is facilitated by continued silence. Contextualizing class privilege matters because it is essential to understand the macro-level contexts that frame experiences and ultimately create, legitimize, and reproduce the micro-level lived realities of class privilege and

oppression. And it is clear that in the context of contemporary neoliberalism, the class privileges of some are directly tied to the impoverishment of others. We must come to recognize that the invisibility of class privilege and the structural arrangements that leave so many behind go hand in hand.

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<sup>i</sup> Marx also noted a class of petty bourgeoisie, who were neither exploiters or exploited, given that they own and utilize the means of production but do not employ others in the process of doing so (Wright, 2000, p. 14).

<sup>ii</sup> [Berniesanders.com](http://Berniesanders.com)

<sup>iii</sup> By 10:09 a.m. on January 2nd, the top 100 CEO's in Canada will have earned as much money as the typical worker will earn all year. <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publica.../reports/fail-safe>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpbQZRVe1g>

<sup>v</sup> <https://ca.news.yahoo.com/vancouver-toronto-named-candadas-unhappiest-181016636.html>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.vladtv.com/article/264038/jeff-bezos-increased-his-net-worth-by-12-billion-in-one-day-sets-new?page=2>

<sup>vii</sup> The critically important insight that class privilege is not random or accidental, but rather a planned outcome, is owed to Dr. Harry Glasbeek (personal communication, n.d.).