

## What is Privilege?

***Privileges are unearned benefits that people receive due to their social groups, characteristics, or identities.***

### How can Privilege Contribute to Inequitable Services?

***Privilege can make it hard to notice how our everyday practices might exclude people.***

A person's position within a system, and their own personal and communal history of experiencing unfair treatment can often determine the extent to which someone notices—or overlooks—unfair policies and practices.

An example of this is the strict “no touch” policies in many counselling and social care settings, which were created by sighted people to prevent abuse by practitioners. Because of the policy makers' sighted privilege, the needs of blind and [Deafblind](#) people were not considered. Due to these policies, [blind](#) and Deafblind people are often denied their requests for physical comfort contact (e.g., gentle hand squeeze, hand to the shoulder, etc.).

This means that blind and Deafblind people do not receive the same quality of care as sighted people, because services refuse to provide them with a tactile substitute for the body language cues that many sighted practitioners use to communicate their support, empathy, and attentive listening.

### How can Privilege Affect my Perceptions?

***Privilege often takes the form of assuming that something isn't a problem for anyone, just because it hasn't been a problem for you.***

For example, if you are a sighted person, then you might not be aware that physical touch has an essential role in the lives of many [blind](#) people. When sighted people say “I'm over here” or point to an object and say “it is over there!”, expecting blind people to know where it is, this is a common example of sighted privilege.

Tactile contact is so vital for the social wellbeing of Deafblind people that two Deafblind women, [aj\\_granda](#) and [Jelica Nuccio](#), have been leading the [ProTactile Movement](#) to increase options for Deafblind people to have reciprocal, tactile-based one-on-one and group communications and to build Deafblind communities.

# PRIVILEGE, POWER, & OPPRESSION

***This information is focused on supporting LGBTQ+ people through a perspective of anti-oppression.***



**A QLIFE GUIDE  
FOR HEALTH AND  
SOCIAL CARE  
PRACTITIONERS,  
SERVICE PROVIDERS,  
AND FOLKS WHO  
CARE**

### Contact QLife

Health professionals wanting to know more can contact [ask@qlife.org.au](mailto:ask@qlife.org.au)

QLife is available 365 days a year, 3pm - midnight. call 1800 184 527 | webchat [www.qlife.org.au](http://www.qlife.org.au)

This tip sheet was developed by [Dr Gávi Ansara](#) (he/him), who gratefully acknowledges the Boonwurrung People of the Kulin Nations on whose unceded Country he completed this work. QLife has adapted this content to align with our current style, including use of "LGBTIQ+". The author prefers other language and invites readers to learn more [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). This tip sheet is influenced by the author's multiple intersecting lived experiences of marginalisation and oppression and his solidarity with people and communities in areas where he has privilege. His positioning reflection is available [here](#).

NOTE: This QGuide is part 1 of 2. To learn what you can do about the issues discussed here, please check out part 2 on Anti-Oppressive Practice.

June 2023



# PRIVILEGE, POWER, & OPPRESSION

Basic comforts we might take for granted can also be forms of privilege. For example, consider your own life today. Did you have access to an indoor toilet? Clean tap water to wash your hands at home? Safe drinking water at home?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, then you have **privilege**. Were you aware that worldwide...

- [in 2020, almost half of the total human population did not have access to safely managed toileting facilities?](#)
- [more than 1 in every 4 people did not have access to handwashing facilities with soap and water at home?](#)
- this lack of access [leads to the death of more than 800,000 people every year?](#)

## Cis Privilege and Bathrooms

In colonial Anglo and European societies, the first public gender-segregated toilets and changing facilities were in Paris, France, in 1793. Gender-segregated public toilets became widespread law by the 1920s. These spaces were created to address a problem known as the “urinary leash”: Public facilities were only for cis men, which meant that cis women’s access to travel and public spaces was severely restricted.

Due to cis privilege, the cis people trying to reduce these access barriers did not consider the needs of non-binary and binary trans people and other people with marginalised forms of gender diversity.

Instead of removing the urinary leash for all people, the cis-centric solution at the time did not address the safety risks that occur when cis patrons police gender-segregated spaces, the lack of equitable options for non-binary people, or the complexities of navigating gendered spaces when other people’s casual misgendering can result in privacy violations and physical violence.

## Does Having Privilege make me "Bad" or Guilty?

No, having privilege doesn’t mean you’re bad or that you’ve done something wrong. Having privilege means you have...

- choice about how to respond to being given these unearned benefits
- an opportunity to challenge the denial of these benefits to other people
- an ethical responsibility for how you use your privilege

## What is Power?

The term [power](#) refers to how control, influence, and decision-making authority work between people, between groups, and across society.

For example, sighted people are given greater control, influence, and decision-making authority than blind and Deafblind people to set policies that affect all people in counselling and social care settings.

***Although many people describe power as if it were a physical object that can be held or lost, or assume it means power over other people, that’s not the whole story.***

## What are Power Dynamics?

Power can work in complex and subtle ways. Thinking about power as a dynamic acknowledges that:

- multiple people can share and exchange authority in complex ways
- more than one group can hold authority at the same time
- the way authority is spread between people can shift and change over time
- power and control are often expressed in cycles and patterns, not just one-off incidents
- power can be distributed through processes and systems
- dynamics of power can affect how people think, behave, and relate to each other
- power can be expressed through social relations between people and between groups
- social relations between two people can reflect power relations between groups

## Consensual Power Dynamics in Relationships

When talking about power, it is important to note that some power dynamics are consensual. For example, in a non-abusive Dominant/submissive (D/s) relationship, power dynamics are negotiated and agreed upon consensually by the parties. Consent is what distinguishes this relationship type from a [coercive control abuse](#) situation. Some defining characteristics of consent in a D/s context include:

- decisions are mutually negotiated in advance between Dominants and submissives
- submissives are given adequate time to consider their own needs, feelings, and comfort
- Dominants listen to and respect submissives' feelings, limits, and boundaries
- authority transfer / power exchange agreements are reviewed and updated regularly by mutual consent, not treated as substitutes for explicit ongoing consent
- Dominants do not confuse the submissive’s silence or failure to object with actual consent
- when submissives set boundaries, Dominants do not pressure them to change their mind
- Dominants make sure submissives have a safe word/signal they can use to stop at any time
- Dominants pay close attention to shifts in the submissive’s body language, breathing, and behaviour that might indicate harm or signal withdrawal of consent, instead of relying solely on safe words/signals to ensure they have the submissive’s ongoing consent
- if submissives use a safe word/signal, or if there are any indications of harm or withdrawal of consent, Dominants stop, check in, and provide immediate care

This tip sheet was developed by [Dr Gávi Ansara](#) (he/him), who gratefully acknowledges the Boonwurrung People of the Kulin Nations on whose unceded Country he completed this work. QLife has adapted this content to align with our current style, including use of "LGBTIQ+". The author prefers other language and invites readers to learn more [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). This tip sheet is influenced by the author's multiple intersecting lived experiences of marginalisation and oppression and his solidarity with people and communities in areas where he has privilege. His positioning reflection is available [here](#).

NOTE: This QGuide is part 1 of 2. To learn what you can do about the issues discussed here, please check out part 2 on Anti-Oppressive Practice.



# PRIVILEGE, POWER, & OPPRESSION

## What is Oppression?

Some power dynamics are **non-consensual**. This means that people are subjected to other people's authority or to imposed hierarchies without their consent, and often without their knowledge. These non-consensual power dynamic constitute **oppression**.

## What is Systemic Oppression?

**Systemic oppression** describes situations where unfair power dynamics are supported by systems, even when a situation might appear on the surface to be a one-time action or judgment by one specific person.

Everyday attitudes, assumptions, policies, practices, laws, and unwritten social rules form an interconnected and often invisible web of social influence.

***These deeply rooted systems of oppression affect our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in complex ways that we can take for granted as "just how the world works".***

Oppressive attitudes and practices that seem "natural" or "how our brains work" are typically learned and reinforced throughout our lives.

## Why is Systemic Oppression Difficult to Discuss?

Gaps in our collective language resources can make it harder for people who have been oppressed to make sense of and share our own experiences. For this reason,

***marginalised people and communities often need to create our own language to describe systemic oppression.***

For example, in 1970, leading psychiatrist Dr Chester M. Pierce coined the term **microaggression** to describe invalidating and insulting statements made toward him and other African American people. Casual comments and behaviour by well-intentioned people can also be microaggressions.

A person may believe they are making an original or even complimentary observation, but the person they are describing has heard it many times before and is familiar with the hidden stereotypes or negative biases underlying this observation. Many marginalised communities find this concept useful.

By recognising oppression as systemic, we can notice historic patterns of mistreatment embedded in [dominant cultural beliefs](#), practices, and rules.

## Why Haven't I Already Learned Language to Discuss this Stuff?

Unfortunately, when marginalised people and communities create our own language to fill gaps, our knowledge and words are often treated as less credible than words dominant groups use about us without our consent.

When marginalised people try to discuss unfairness or systemic oppression, they are often subjected to **tone policing**. The Oxford English Dictionary defines tone policing as "the action or practice of criticising the angry or emotional manner in which a person has expressed a point of view, rather than addressing the substance of the point itself."

Tone policing is a common tactic used by people and groups with systemic privilege to silence or dismiss marginalised people's concerns, such as telling a marginalised person to "calm down" when they express anger at unfair treatment, instead of addressing unfair treatment as the problem.

## What can I do about Privilege, Power Dynamics, and Systems of Oppression?

If you want to know what you can do to help, that's great! Part 2 of this 2-part set of QGuides focuses on **Anti-Oppressive Practice**, an approach that provides practical strategies for dealing with privilege, power dynamics, and systems of oppression.

## Some Resources and Further Reading

Stolen Generations: <https://healingfoundation.org.au/stolen-generations/>

The microaggressions blog: <https://www.microaggressions.com>

Bhakuni, H., & Abimbola, S. (2021). Epistemic injustice in academic global health. *The Lancet Global Health*, 9(10), e1465-e1470. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2214109X21003016>

Farmer, P. E., Nizeye, B., Stulac, S., & Keshavjee, S. (2006). Structural violence and clinical medicine. *PLoS medicine*, 3(10), e449. <https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.0030449>

Táíwò, O. (2020). Being-in-the-room privilege: Elite capture and epistemic deference. *The Philosopher*, 108(4), 61-70. <https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/post/being-in-the-room-privilege-elite-capture-and-epistemic-deference>

This tip sheet was developed by [Dr Gávi Ansara](#) (he/him), who gratefully acknowledges the Boonwurrung People of the Kulin Nations on whose unceded Country he completed this work. QLife has adapted this content to align with our current style, including use of "LGBTIQ+". The author prefers other language and invites readers to learn more [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). This tip sheet is influenced by the author's multiple intersecting lived experiences of marginalisation and oppression and his solidarity with people and communities in areas where he has privilege. His positioning reflection is available [here](#).

NOTE: This QGuide is part 1 of 2. To learn what you can do about the issues discussed here, please check out part 2 on Anti-Oppressive Practice.

