



## Is “Privilege” a Dirty Word?

Glenn Sturm (VA), Diversity Committee Member

The word *privilege*, particularly as it relates to social equality and diversity, has become a polarizing word, but should it be? Privilege, in this context, is defined as unearned access to resources or benefits available to some people as a result of their advantaged social group identities. Often this takes the form of exclusion to barriers experienced by those belonging to social groups that are commonly the target of discrimination. It's also important that we talk about what privilege *isn't*, the existence of privilege does not mean that successes and failures are only due to privilege; it does not mean that work ethic isn't still a critical component. Instead, privilege means that Thomas, a white male, would likely experience fewer barriers in life than Ebony, a black female, even if they worked equally as hard in school and their careers. For instance, Thomas is less likely to be turned down for a job interview because the employer assumes he won't be smart enough given biases about his assumed race, nor will he likely be passed over for promotions because of biases about his leadership quality given his gender. Sadly, several studies have shown the impact these biases, often implicit/unconscious, can have. This includes a [Harvard study](#) where 1600 Black and Asian applicants had their resumes “whitened”, changing their name to one more commonly associated to a white individual, and removing any references to their race, resulting in the call-back rate for interviews more than doubling. [Princeton also conducted a study](#), in which 127 applications for a laboratory management position were sent to university professors. Applications were identical except for the name - half with traditionally male names, and a half with traditionally female names. Professors were asked to rate the competence, hireability, and merit for mentorship, along with a proposed starting salary. Male students were rated as significantly more competent, hireable, and deserving of mentoring, and offered a 14% higher starting salary. If we are to work towards a truly equitable society, the first step is to acknowledge that these inequalities and privileges exist; only then can we reduce or remove them altogether.