

Use Your Everyday Privilege to Help Others

By [Dolly Chugh](#)

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I often forget I am straight. I just don't think about it much. When asked what I did this weekend, or when setting family photos on my desk at work, I have no reason to wonder if what I say will make someone uncomfortable, or lead to a "joke" at my expense, or cause a co-worker to suddenly think I am attracted to them. Our culture is set up for straight people like me to be ourselves with very little thought. But for some gay colleagues, a simple question about the weekend or a decision of how to decorate the workspace carries significant stress—how to act, who to trust, what to share. A recent [study](#) found that 46% of LGBTQ employees are closeted in the workplace, for reasons ranging from fear of losing their job to being stereotyped. Unlike me, a non-straight person is unlikely to have the privilege of going an entire day without remembering their sexual orientation.

This privilege of being able to forget part of who you are is not unique to straight people. Each of us have some part of our identity which requires little attention to protecting oneself from danger, discrimination, or doltish humor. For example, in America, if you are white or Christian or able-bodied or straight or English-speaking, these particular identities are easy to forget. It is just an ordinary way of being. *Ordinary privilege* is ordinary because it blends in with the norms and people around us, and thus, is easily forgotten.

Just about every person in America has one form of this ordinary privilege or another. This is nothing to be ashamed of, or deny, even though it can often feel like an accusation. Ordinary privilege is actually an opportunity. Research repeatedly confirms that those with ordinary privilege have the power to speak up on behalf of those without it, and have particularly effective influence when they do. For so many of us looking for an opportunity to fight bigotry and bias in the workplace or in our broader culture, we may be missing the opportunity staring back at us in the mirror: using the ordinary nature of who we are as a source of extraordinary power.

For example, psychologists Heather Rasinski and Alexander Czopp looked at [how people perceive confrontations](#) about a racially-biased comment. They found white observers were more persuaded by white confronters than by black confronters and rated the black confronters as more rude. Whiteness gave the person more legitimacy than blackness when speaking up on racial bias.

Similarly, scholars David Hekman, Stefanie Johnson, Maw-Der Foo, and Wei Yang [studied](#) what happens to people who try to advocate for diversity in the workplace. Those who were female and nonwhite were rated worse by their bosses than their non-diversity-advocating female and nonwhite counterparts. White and male executives saw no difference in their ratings, whether or not they advocated for diversity. They found the same pattern with hiring decisions. If a white male manager hired someone who looked like him (or someone who did not), it had no impact either way on his performance ratings. But, if a nonwhite male manager hired someone who looked like him, he took a hit for it. In other words, ordinary privilege—that part of our identities which we think less about—is also the place where we wield outsized influence on behalf of others.

This influence even exists online, as political scientist Kevin Munger showed through a clever [experiment](#) on Twitter, focused on people using the n-word in a harassing way towards others online. Using bots with either black or white identities, he tweeted at the harassers, “Hey man, just remember that there are real people who are hurt when you harass them with that kind of language.” This mild tweet from a “white” bot who appeared to have 500 followers led to a reduction in the racist online harassment in the seven day period following the tweet, whereas the same tweet from a “black” bot with the same number of followers had little effect (interestingly, only anonymous n-word users were affected; those using what appeared to be a real name and photo were unaffected by the confrontation). If this is the effect a mild tweet from a stranger can have, we have to wonder about the potential impact of our own ordinary privilege.

To use your ordinary privilege, here are some things you can do:

- First, figure out the parts of your identity that you think about least. Once you’ve pinpointed them, you’ve identified your ordinary privilege.
- Second, start learning what people who lack that ordinary privilege encounter as challenges at work, at school and in their communities. You can use the Internet as a good starting point for first-person accounts.
- Third, look for opportunities to speak and act. Confronting people is only one of many ways we can use our ordinary privilege. Instead, we can ask questions, raise issues, and add perspectives that are not organically emerging in discussions at work. We can introduce data, invite people into conversations, and create buzz around ideas. We can amplify the views of people not being heard at meetings, and bring back conversations when someone is interrupted. We can give credit for people’s work and spread the word about their talent. We can notice when bias is playing out around us, and name it when it happens.
- Fourth, be thoughtful about moments when you may inadvertently speak over the group you mean to support. It is not unusual to accidentally center ourselves instead of the people to whom we are trying to be an ally, but it is costly. When it happens, step aside or step back, and learn from those whose lives are directly affected by the issue, rather than presenting ourselves as the experts. Take *their* lead while using *your* ordinary privilege.

What we think about least may be the place from which we can do the most good. Each of us has some form of ordinary privilege, and that’s good news, because that means almost all of us have more influence than we may realize.

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