Experiencing privilege at ethnic, gender and senior intersections

Atewologun, D. & Sealy, R.

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Structured Abstract

Purpose: In management studies, assumptions surround the fixed, categorical and binary nature of male, ethnic and other privileges. Compared to white, middle-class men, 'Others' are typically assumed not to experience privilege. We counter this assumption by applying intersectionality to examine privilege's juxtaposition with disadvantage. We offer an elaborated conceptualisation of organisational privilege and insight into the agency employed by individuals traditionally perceived as non-privileged.

Approach: Using diaries and interviews, we analyse twenty micro-episodes from four senior minority ethnic women and men's accounts of intersecting ethnic, gender and senior identities. We identify how privilege plays out at the juxtaposition of (male gender and hierarchical) advantage with (female gender and ethnic) disadvantage.

Findings: The fluidity of privilege is revealed through contextual, contested and conferred dimensions. Additionally, privilege is experienced in everyday micro-level encounters and we illustrate how 'sometimes privileged' individuals manage their identities at intersections.

Research Limitations: This in-depth analysis draws on a small sample of unique British minority ethnic individuals to illustrate dimensions of privilege.

Practical and social implications: It is often challenging to discuss privilege. However, our focus on atypical wielders of power challenges binary assumptions of privilege. This can provide a common platform for dominant and non-dominant group members to share how societal and organisational privileges differentially impact groups. This inclusive approach could reduce dominant group members' psychological and emotional resistance to social justice.

Originality: Through bridging privilege and intersectionality perspectives, we offer a complex and nuanced perspective that contrasts against prevalent conceptions of privilege as invisible and uncontested.

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Introduction

Diversity and inequality research are linked to issues of privilege, power and dominance. However, attention to the disadvantaged renders those in the centre invisible, and privileged (Collinson & Hearn, 1994). Such privilege, while usually unacknowledged, is systematically conferred (McIntosh, 1989). White privilege, the most widely theorised type of privilege, is the notion that whites accrue advantages by virtue of being constructed as whites (Black & Stone, 2005; Leonardo, 2004). Typically, critical race and whiteness studies polarise discussions of privilege and disadvantage. Attention to privileged, organisational members of white ethnic, male gender, middle class and heterosexual categories, fosters binary assumptions about privilege. For this special issue, we challenge such taken-for-granted assumptions. We offer an additional perspective on societal and workplace privileges. We argue that examining privilege at its juxtaposition with disadvantage raises its visibility and salience. We suggest this facilitates conscious attention to privilege, helping develop its form and substance. Arguably, the more forms of privilege are recognised and named, the closer we get to understanding and challenging it. Through our data, we reveal how context and interpersonal encounters become relevant for understanding privilege. We extend examinations of privilege by adopting an intersectional lens, demonstrating its dynamic, multifaceted nature as reflected in the experiences of 'sometimes privileged' non-dominant social group members. Through micro-level analyses, we demonstrate the effort deployed by individuals and the potential psychological impact on them during experiences of privilege. Practically, this study constitutes part of applied psychology's contribution to social challenges (as recommended by Lukaszewski & Stine, 2012), offering a perspective on privilege that advances collective reflection of everyone's relative (rather than absolute) societal and organisational power and/or disadvantage.

First, we discuss conceptualisations of privilege beyond binary categories of advantage and disadvantage. Then, we adopt an intersectional lens to frame our focus on the juxtaposition of multiple (differentially privileged) identities in senior minority ethnic individuals. Following in-depth analysis of four intersectional identity-heightening encounters, we offer a fluid and nuanced perspective of privilege. We show how privilege is contextual, conferred and contested at the nexus of disadvantage and advantage, evoking dynamic responses from individuals in their conscious attempts to manage it.

Privilege beyond binary categories of dis/advantage

The invisibility of gendered ethnic privilege is the normative position, yet to be problematized in many organisational studies (Rossing, 2012). When privileged whiteness is unnamed or ignored, the norms, values and assumptions accompanying whiteness go unquestioned and the ways of whiteness are empowered (Grimes, 2002). Examining white ethnic privilege entails making it visible, challenging its "taken-for-grantedness" (Steyn & Conway, 2010: 285). However, part of the psychological challenge of accepting personal privilege and power stems from the binary approach of contrasting the 'haves' against the 'have nots'. As Harkins et al. (2010: 145) point out, "very few people in society feel privileged and powerful". Ethnic privilege scholars are increasingly encouraged to see whiteness beyond an "unconditional, universal and equally experienced location of privilege and power" (Twine & Gallagher, 2008:7). Whiteness is relational and fluid (Garner, 2006), as other forms of privilege and power. For example, the Irish have only in recent times come to be identified as 'white' in America (Warren & Twine, 1997), Brazilians 'whiten up' to be more closely affiliated with privilege (Twine, 1998), and Mexican-Americans differentially identify as white or Hispanic, in tandem with differing political beliefs (Basler, 2008). We draw inspiration from these authors, proposing less rigid boundaries between categorisations of privilege. We view ethnic, gender and other privileges as complex and sometimes visible, especially in the context of disadvantage. An analytical framework to facilitate this juxtaposition approach is intersectionality.

'Intersectionality' expands simplistic categorical assumptions about identity, by forcing us to acknowledge the simultaneous nature of multiple group membership. For instance, "race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences" (Crenshaw, 1989:139). Intersectionality acknowledges that multiple categories of difference, identity and dis/advantage such as ethnicity, gender, social class and sexuality, depend on each other for meaning and consequence. Intersectionality moves us beyond dichotomous or additive language like 'double jeopardy' (e.g. Berdahl & Moore, 2006) to more nuanced and complex conceptualisations of multiple, juxtaposed identity positions. Dichotomous assumptions of privilege are increasingly challenged outside organisation studies (e.g. Robinson, 1999), however its multifaceted nature remains under-theorised (Black & Stone, 2005; Levin-Rasky, 2011). Although psychology's practical contribution to management is wide-ranging, its traditional focus on individual differences, linear models and positivist enquiry may lead to an under-appreciation of how cultural, historical and structural contexts complicate behaviour, beliefs and emotions (Cole, 2009; Frazier, 2012). Social constructionist and feminist psychological influences (e.g. Warner, 2008) compel acknowledgement of social category complexities, challenging typical single variable/measurement approaches to investigating demographic differences. This study aims to provide empirical evidence that through simultaneous social category positions, organisational members move in and out of privilege.

Intersections draw attention to both the position and the positioning of individuals – position refers to the multiple categories with which one is identified and positioning refers to drawing on multiple identities to construct oneself and engage with others. This construction occurs in the context of the matrix of domination which has few 'pure' victims or oppressors (Collins, 2000). Intersectional locations can be simultaneously reinforcing and contradictory with regards to social position and social positioning (Levine-Rasky, 2011). Meanings associated with various race/ethnicity/class/gender/sexuality combinations influence individuals' social position and positioning. Thus, we propose simultaneous considerations of dis/advantaged identities for insight into privilege in organisations. For example, white immigrants' ethnic invisibility allows them to be perceived as American, whilst individuals of other ethnicities are seen as outsiders (Bell, Kwesiga & Berry, 2010). Also, despite their perceived minority ethnic status, skilled migrants from developing countries mobilize capital in their efforts to undertake an international career (Al Ariss & Syed, 2011; Al Ariss, Vassilopoulou, Ozbilgin & Game, 2012). Such capital (e.g. qualifications, financial resources and networks) indicates privilege attained from migrants' countries of origin. Additionally, white ethnicity may be privileged in many contexts, but in certain client relationships, communities and professions, whiteness may be a less significant privilege marker, compared to social class, able-bodiedness and gender.

While intersectionality research historically emphasised multiple disadvantaged identities (e.g. Collins, 1986; Bell, 1990; Davidson, 1997; Acker, 2006), we contest that majority or minority ethnicity may be privileged to a greater or lesser extent, when considered in conjunction with other salient identities. Our argument parallels recent scholars' calls for developing diversity research by examining how capitals (e.g. power and resources) are distributed in order to understand how privilege and disadvantage play out within and across various socio-demographic categories (Tatli & Ozbilgin, 2012a). Based on the limited theorisation of privilege in historically-disadvantaged groups, we adopt a broad perspective on organisational privilege and power, in terms of social identity group (e.g. male over female gender; white over minority ethnicity), hierarchical position and professional status. We also draw on whiteness psychology scholars' perspectives on enacting privilege (consciously or subconsciously) as 'identity politics', via "attitudes and behaviour chosen to further one's access to status, wealth, relative well-being, or any other form of material or social capital" (Knowles & Marshburn, 2010:134). Overall, we are encouraged by recent whiteness scholars (e.g. Twine & Gallagher, 2008) to examine how privilege expands and contracts from the perspective of 'sometimes privileged' senior minority ethnic women and men.

Next, we bridge the constructs of intersectionality and privilege by focusing on how multiple, differentially privileged identities constitute each other in senior minority ethnic professionals' experiences.

Privilege and intersections in organisations

Privilege in organisations exists in various forms. Seniority indicates one's privileged location in a hierarchy (Peiro & Melia, 2003). Additionally, the professions (e.g. accountancy, law, medicine and consultancy) are assumed to wield wealth, status and power in society, and senior professionals are assumed to be part of the dominant societal elite (Portwood & Fielding, 1981). Thus, 'being senior' within a profession denotes organisational privilege and power, in contrast to female gender and minority ethnicity (Peiro & Melia, 2003). Our assumption is individuals' experiences of privilege will reflect their social identity (ethnicity and/or gender) group status intertwined with their position within the organisational status hierarchy.

Organisational indicators of seniority and hierarchical privilege such as 'manager' and 'leader' have implications for diversity. The juxtaposition of organisational privilege and social disadvantage is typified by studies on women in management. For example, the 'think manager, think male' phenomenon remains pervasive (Schein, 2007). Admittedly, studies of the few women in senior management investigates individuals privileged by senior status. However on-going struggles revealed by senior female research participants in their underclass positions compared to male counterparts, can be presented as "knowledge from below" (Calas & Smircich, 2009: 6), although we recognise that 'below' is a relative term. Thus, the intersection of multiple identities influences experiences of privilege (Harkins et al, 2010). However, minority ethnic experiences of privilege are not well-understood and we are unaware of organisational examinations of this fluid aspect of privilege associated with intersecting identities. We therefore examine privilege at minority ethnic, gender and senior intersections. The question guiding our inquiry was: How do experiences at the intersection of ethnic, gender and senior status help us challenge binary assumptions of privilege/disadvantage?

Methodology

Volunteers were sought for a UK study on 'identities of senior black, Asian and minority ethnic (BME) professionals' from a major government civil service department ('Govt Plc') and a global professional services firm ('PSF'). We acknowledge that 'ethnicity' has no universal fixed meaning and is shaped by national context (Tatli et al 2012), sector and organisational cultures. All respondents self-identified as 'BME' and self-nominated for the study. To facilitate micro-level analyses of experiences of privilege, respondents were asked to keep daily journals on workplace encounters that raised the salience of their intersecting ethnic, gender and senior identities. We adopted a critical incident technique-like approach, appropriate for in-depth elicitation of processes, behaviours, interpretation and responses to phenomena of interest (Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011). Journals were kept for between three and four weeks and incidents explored further in interviews. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes, were audiotaped and professionally transcribed.

We adopted an individual constructivist epistemological stance to examine experiences of privilege. This perspective favours individuals' feelings, thoughts and experiences as the focus of investigation, while remaining cognisant of the fluidity of construction and the role of shifting context in individual meaning-making (Young & Collin, 2004). Thus, we privileged respondents' mental representation of their experiences. Additionally, this approach acknowledges that researcher and researched are jointly represented in knowledge creation, engaging in intersubjective meaning-making.

Access was negotiated and data collected by the first author, a woman of African heritage. This was likely facilitated by the first author's minority ethnicity intersecting with researcher privilege, granting her perceived authority to investigate personal experiences of successful 'Outsiders'. The second author, a white woman, was involved in analysis and cognisant of her responsibility as an academic to question the 'master narratives' concerning power and privilege of gender, race and class (Harkins et al, 2010). Through reflexively engaging with the data, both authors acknowledged ambiguities of privilege and disadvantage, questioned assumed neutrality, and legitimacy of the 'status quo', seeking to make visible the invisibility of privilege often unnoticed in organisational research (Lewis & Simpson, 2010). We paid heed to shifting insider/outsider status, fitting with others' experiences of researching others with shared and dissimilar identities (e.g. Lupton, 2000; Egharevba , 2001).

We drew on 20 identity-salient episodes elicited from two Senior Civil Servants (an Indian woman and a man of mixed African/English heritage) and two male Professional Services managers (of Indian and African-Caribbean backgrounds). The sample size, though small, offers rich, in-depth, contextual and meaningful data for exploring privilege in an under-studied group.

We adopted an abductive analytical strategy, in which observations from experience as well as the data stimulate the production of explanatory positions (Locke, Golden-Biddle & Feldman, 2004). We engaged iteratively in data immersion, analysis, peer review and literature review. The cyclical and spiral process of in-depth analyses and continuous comparison of the 20 episodes fits with a constructivist epistemology (Blaikie, 2007). We generated pattern codes (explanatory or inferential codes identifying an emergent theme, configuration or explanation, Miles & Huberman, 1994) to answer the question, 'What is the broad way to describe what is going on here concerning privilege?'. We adopted an 'intersectional sensibility' (e.g. Healy, Bradley & Forson, 2011), paying attention to visible and unspoken gender, ethnicity and/or senior/professional privileges in respondents' accounts. The purpose of this analysis was not to disaggregate identities but to reveal how respondents constructed privilege (as senior individuals, and/or men) at its intersection with disadvantage (as minority ethnic individuals and/or women).

Findings

We consider not asking directly for experiences of privilege or disadvantage a design strength. Rather, enquiring about encounters that raise the salience of intersecting senior, gender and ethnic identities revealed the multifaceted nature of privilege experienced by senior minority ethnic women and men. In contrast to the traditional perspective on privilege as unconscious (McIntosh, 1989), our data reveal that senior minority ethnic individuals are hyper-aware of privilege, and offer insight into their responses to experiences of privilege. Their accounts reveal privilege as contextual, conferred and contested.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Privilege is contextual

An aspect of privilege evident in the data is its contextual nature; privilege is experienced in relation to socio-demographic location. The first quote in Table 1 refers to an episode recounted by Rani, a 40-year old Indian female Senior Civil Servant (SCS) in Govt Plc. As top professionals charged with running the State, SCSs are in privileged powerful positions. Rani's experience of the privilege of being an SCS interplayed with the intersection between professional, ethnic and gender identities. Rani described attending a Senior Civil Service development event, starting with her initial impressions on entering the training room.

From an intersectional perspective, Rani's identity as a senior minority ethnic woman became salient on entering the privileged space in relation to ethnic, gender and age distribution. Articulating the cognitive process of "*proportional assessment*" suggests she mindfully positioned herself within the socio-demographic topography of this privileged landscape. Rani evaluated her colleagues against multiple socio-demographic characteristics, suggesting cognisance of the hallowed and powerful Civil Service positions traditionally reserved for older, white men (Puwar, 2004). Additionally, Rani appeared to consider 'how much' of an elite this made her, making self-comparisons against her non-majority peers.

> *I'm one in a minority, but how big is that minority? Am I one in three or am I one in several hundred? I was curious to know…what the numbers were... what their background was. ..I made a point to speak to all the non-white people…They were all specialists - Lawyers or Accountants ... I was…pleased to know that I was the only generalist there. If you're a specialist, you'd probably come in at a higher grade to start with, and you jump grades and you get promoted on the basis of your skill set; …as a generalist, I get judged on a much wider range of things, so it's not just my skill set, it will also be …does my face fit?...So my sense of achievement is more.*

Compared to her minority ethnic peers, Rani appraised her success against wider, more demanding criteria. She believed she had fought harder to earn her place in the Senior Civil Service by countering cultural norms and prevailing over societal biases. She contrasted apparently objective criteria for assessing 'specialists' against perceived subjective criteria for assessing 'generalists'. Ironically, the privilege accorded specialists (promoted against defined and valued skill sets) juxtaposed with minority identity, devalued its worth. Success as a female Indian SCS went beyond mere professional expertise. Counter to assumptions of unearned and unconscious privilege, this suggests a heightened sense of entitlement and pride in her privileged Senior Civil Service status. We recognise that, alternatively, Rani's comments may be interpreted as contributing to a narrative of hardship, challenges and the unlikelihood of success as a generalist minority ethnic SCS[1] . The data reveal that, however, rather than communicate a sense of injustice about the different competency standards, Rani's construction was such that she appeared to relish being a member of a small minority (an Indian generalist) within the Service:

> *I came out with a really good buzz because it really brought home to me what being a Senior Civil Servant is all about …* (Regarding) *the sub-set situation- I felt…a bit prouder that I was one of the few people there who'd crawled their way up.*

The traditional notion of unearned advantage associated with privilege (McIntosh, 1989) may be incongruent with successful senior minority individuals' experiences. The sense of having earned a place in privileged spaces is prevalent in gender and ethnic studies in organisations (Bell, 1990; Bell & Nkomo, 2001). Social privilege is often associated with enhanced self-worth and belief in personal superiority (Black & Stone, 2005), reflected by Rani's construction of progression in the Service. Our data further demonstrate the construction of privilege through self-categorisation against others at the intersection of advantage and disadvantage.

Privilege is conferred

In addition to being dependent on cultural and socio-demographic context, privilege at the juxtaposition of dis/advantage has a relational dimension. Privilege may be conferred by others with whom one shares common (albeit minority) identities in the sense of honour or right bestowed from one individual to another (Table 1). We illustrate this with an encounter between two professional

[1] We thank one of our reviewers for noting this.

Indian men on a trans-Atlantic flight in the privileged space of business class. Ehsan (a 34 year-old Indian male senior manager in Professional Services Firm), observing his seating companion was "*Indian, clearly*", took the opportunity to make a connection, drawing on their apparent shared identities**.** Ehsan did this by asking a *"very simple"* question.

> *I said 'Are you going away from home, or are you going home?' And he said, 'You know, I don't know, you tell me'. So I started asking him, 'Well where do you come from, where were you born and raised?' So we had a little discussion - where his family, and where all his children were and where his house was, etc. This was five minutes, and then it got into the whole 'Where do you get your Bollywood films… fresh coriander…from?.'*

This exchange indicates affinity and shared understanding fast-tracked between two travel companions. The opening question "*Are you going away from home, or are you going home?*" also reveals assumptions likely to feature in privileged immigrants' discourse. Wealthy (i.e. privileged) migrants are more likely to engage in regular cross-cultural travel with multiple homes, having the freedom to go in and out, a right or privilege not afforded many around the world (Choules, 2006). Following his opening question, Ehsan and his companion fell into easy conversation, covering topics that form part of this privileged migrant discourse. Their connection fast-tracked conversation to heightened levels of openness and disclosure, demonstrating homophily (Ibarra, 1992).

> *I… felt a sense of belonging, you know, talking to somebody I've never met before and we share so much in common. Even though we're probably thirty years apart in age, we were born in different decades in different countries.*

Further discussions revealed more about the power and influence wielded by Ehsan's companion, who disclosed the social and professional networks to which he belonged with senior board members of Ehsan's client organisations. Ehsan's professional privilege is inherent in his high-status advisory and financial management role. Ehsan is an 'agent of global capital' (Portwood & Fielding, 1981:756), and in his elite position, wields considerable influence and power as a business and government adviser. Learning more about his travel companion led Ehsan to conclude "*this is another senior Indian man in business*". Reference to "*another*" reflects the affinity of shared intersecting identities – drawing on senior status, ethnicity and gender. Privilege was conferred on Ehsan as confidential information was disclosed about other powerful, elite structures, involving leaders of multinational Asian corporations, whom his companion knew "*on first-name terms*". In this chance encounter, privilege, in the form of elite club admittance, was conferred on Ehsan facilitated by their common identities. This *"unofficial"* network was even more exclusive than the familiar '(white) old boys' network'. It is likely that, rather than a simply essentialised 'Indian' connection, the privilege conferred emerged from the combined 'senior Indian male' identity both shared. Ehsan referred to "*senior Indian business men***"** and the senior *"guys"* on the executive boards they knew (Table 1). It seems unlikely that the affinity expressed would have occurred between an Indian man and woman under similar circumstances. Discussing offspring also suggests heterosexual assumptions may have formed bases for interaction. Implicit assumptions of (heterosexual) gender homogeneity at the top of organisations are prevalent (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004). Ehsan's experience suggests that today, minority ethnic male privilege parallels observed trends and inherent assumptions in majority privilege recorded twenty years ago – "professions in England today are expected to both experts *and gentlemen*" (Portwood & Fielding, 1981:760; italics added).

Privilege is contested

The third dimension of privilege experienced by senior minority ethnic women and men is its contested nature. In contrast to privilege assumed or conferred through shared in-group status,

privilege can also be challenged and contested. To illustrate, we consider Jamal, the first black internally promoted Director at PSF, and Steve (of black/white biracial ethnicity), a Senior Civil Servant. Comparative analysis of their experiences offered useful insight into the contested nature of minority ethnic privilege at the top of organisational hierarchies. Steve's encounter was with a Senior Partner of an accountancy firm and his clients, executive directors of a publicly-quoted company. Jamal's encounter was with Managing Partners of a global law firm. Perhaps the 'high stakes' nature of these encounters exacerbated tensions, resulting in clients' raised anxiety about trusting multi-million pound transactions to individuals who they may (perhaps subconsciously) perceive as subordinate out-group members unlikely to wield significant power. Consequently, this perhaps increased the likelihood that they would directly or indirectly challenge the senior minority ethnic men.

As the quote in Table 1 illustrates, Jamal "*knew straightaway*" that the clients' querying his experience and seniority was a competence test he had to face due to his skin colour. We can never really know why his clients asked questions, however, Jamal constructed this as contesting his intersecting identities as a senior black man. Steve experienced a similar, but more subtle challenge. Steve noted indirect and non-verbal cues, the implications of which altered through the meeting. In response to his introduction as "*Steve, Head of (…) function*", he commented, "*you can just see the surprise in their faces, they just can't hide it*". Then, he contrasted what he perceived as an initial "*perfunctory handshak*e" against the "*firm*" one he received at the end of the meeting. Steve described observing one meeting companion change his seated position from a slouched, relaxed posture (interpreted as a sign of not being taken seriously) to a rigidly upright one as the meeting implications became increasingly grave (this Steve interpreted as recognition that he was indeed a force to be reckoned with). However, this challenge to their privileged status (i.e. professional expertise and organisational power) was relished by the men. They saw it as an opportunity to disprove others' false assumptions, and, additionally, show who was 'really' in charge. Their quotes conjure images of game-playing *(*Jamal: *"you've just given me a level playing field to prove … that you'll be eating out of my hand";* Steve: *"it* (will become) *clear who actually has the upper hand").* In contesting the challenges to their privileged identities, Steve and Jamal drew on the status inherent in their competence (Steve: "*Numbers are my thing*"; Jamal: "*One of my skills is I'm good at cleaning up everybody else's' mess… I'm completely confident in what I do*"). Bolstered by this, they went on to demonstrate their expertise.

Comparative analysis of these episodes also offers insight into how client-professional role relationships may determine how privilege may be contested in BME individuals' experiences. Jamal, as consultant and 'expert' was openly challenged by his clients to prove his capability. On the other hand, Steve, a government agent and a symbol of compliance and enforcement, perceived *relief* from the meeting associates on seeing him.

> *You can actually see they think they're going to have a fairly easy ride…They start off with this 'let's pull the wool over salesman' patter.*

Jamal's comment "*they were really giving me a hard time*" and Steve's "*they think they're going to have a fairly easy ride*" were opposite sentiments with the same outcome; the nature in which privilege was contested differed in each encounter. For Steve, relief was interpreted as reaction to the perception that he was 'insufficiently senior' to constitute a real threat; Jamal was however interrogated to assess if he was 'sufficiently senior'. This prompted a desire to dispel credibility concerns and engage his clients.

> *So I said to them, 'No, I'm not the most senior person in the practice, but I'm best qualified to solve your problem here today...This is your problem, this is how I'm going to solve it, this is the time we've got to solve it in. Do you have a problem with that?'*

In contrast, Steve appeared to be able to contest through further game-playing, facilitated by his perceptions of his companions' lowered expectations. He began by saying:

> *It may well be because I'm totally ignorant which is not unlikely, and I've got the wrong end of the stick which has been known to happen before, but can you please treat me like an idiot and talk me through this?*

Steve's approach to contesting was self-deprecation, deliberately adopting a non-privileged demeanour which he described as a "*bumbling fool*". Black professional men sometimes play the role of 'office clown' to minimise the perceived threat others may have of them in the professional workplace (Atewologun & Singh, 2010). Following this routine, Steve described how he then suddenly changed from "*bumbling fool*" to someone who "*actually knows what I'm talking about*".

> *Then I ask a question which has picked up on something they said…and all of a sudden … I'm on the front foot…and they suddenly start concentrating on the meeting … whether I'm black, white, green or yellow suddenly goes out of the window…it becomes clear that I'm going to really pull your business to pieces … I'm going to ask questions that your wife may never even ask you about the way you're running your business…Their countenance changes, they suddenly realise they are not in here for a ride anymore.*

Steve placed himself "*on the front foot"* by demonstrating his professional status through technical expertise. The impact on his associates appeared to be new appreciation of his power to potentially cause serious damage to their business. Additionally, the manner in which privilege was contested appeared to be influenced by gender and heterosexual norms. Steve's comment about the client's wife implicitly assumes that CEOs and CFOs will be heterosexual men. Steve's reference to the closing handshake also supports this.

> *The first handshake is just a perfunctory handshake. At the end of it, it's usually a proper, firm handshake like 'I'm here with a man,' whereas before it's 'Oh well, you are the secretary' attitude.*

The association between the firm handshake acknowledging 'manhood' contrasts with the weak, perfunctory handshake for being *"a secretary"*. This suggests successful admittance into (white) senior male privileged spaces from which secretaries and 'even' (white) wives are excluded.

Utilising an intersectionality framework reveals the contextual, conferred and contested nature of privilege and individual responses at the juxtaposition of gender, ethnic and senior status. These findings present a multi-faceted and dynamic perspective on privilege to counter binary assumptions prevalent in the literature.

Discussion

Racial and gender privileges highlight that whites and men accrue systematic advantages (e.g. Leonardo, 2004). Less attention has been paid to changeable aspects of privilege. However, over time and across context, professional and personal privilege is developed, attained and secured in various ways (Portwood & Fielding, 1981; Choules, 2006). Similarly, less visible and conscious privileges, such as whiteness, are beginning to be seen this way (Steyn & Conway, 2010). Examining privilege at its juxtaposition with disadvantage raises its visibility and salience. We believe this facilitates conscious attention to privilege, helping develop its form and substance. Recognising and naming complex forms of privilege takes us closer to understanding and challenging it. In our data, we revealed how context and interpersonal encounters become relevant for understanding

privilege, through noting socio-demographic context, forging affinity through shared intersecting identities at the top of corporate life, or contesting direct and subtle credibility challenges from clients. The data also suggest that the contextual, conferred and contested dimensions of privilege are not necessarily exclusive to discrete encounters and may occur simultaneously, perhaps catalytically. For example, the business class context probably enabled Ehsan and his companion to make implicit assumptions of each other's relatively privileged professional/economic status, expediting conferred privilege.

Fluid and dynamic perspectives on privilege shift focus from disadvantaged individuals' active struggles against oppression versus advantaged people's passive maintenance of privilege. The data shed light on 'sometimes privileged' individuals' dynamic responses to experiences of privilege and their potential complicity in this. Rani's shifting perceptions of her privileged position were contingent on others' status. She constructed her elite minority ethnic status in relation to demographic distribution and organisational cultural assumptions of professional worth. For Ehsan, privilege (accessing sensitive business information) was conferred by a travel companion with whom he shared disadvantaged (minority ethnic) and advantaged (male gender and senior) identities. Considering Steve and Jamal, their professional elite status and organizational hierarchical privilege was contested but actively reclaimed. Respondents' effort in maintaining a sense of personal significance at intersections aligns with other research on oppositional identities. Like men who do 'women's work' (Lupton, 2000), the juxtaposition of privileged with disadvantaged identities prompts identity work, effort to construct meaning regarding who they are and what they do. Similarly, black middle class individuals engage in identity work, in response to their class privilege being "fragile and subject to interrogation" (Rollock, et al 2011: 1085). Additionally, our data indicate tactics for surviving or even thriving at these intersections - reframing achievements despite unfair, differential standards as triumph (Rani), responding to credibility challenges through game playing (Jamal and Steve) and gaining access to ultra-exclusive networks (Ehsan).

The data also indicate the significance of micro-level analyses for understanding nuanced practices of privilege. Privilege was evaluated, negotiated, earned and fought for in subtle ways. Respectively, Rani and Ehsan construed meaning from visibly absent or present socio-demographic cues. Steve and Jamal noticed direct and indirect behavioural cues signalling privilege being contested. Attuning to non-verbal emotional recognition appears to be a valuable skill for non-dominant, lower status group members (Bommer, Pesta & Storrud-Barnes, 2011). Perhaps subtleties of fluid privileges can be examined fruitfully from the perspectives of less privileged individuals.

Respondents' identity work effort and heightened attention to subtleties in constructing and sustaining privilege is in contrast to more static perspectives on privilege. It is also notable that respondents did not explicitly name their privilege in their accounts of identity-salient encounters. Respondents were acutely aware of their subordinate identities, but less articulate about their dominant or privileged ones, reflecting individuals' discomfort in seeing and naming personal privileges (Ely, 1995). This paints a complex picture of privilege, as a phenomenon to be grappled with in the context of disadvantage.

Although privilege is often deemed unearned and unconscious (McIntosh, 1989; Choules, 2006), there are accepted exceptions to this. For example, professionals are often considered privileged, in their asymmetrical access to power, wealth and status (Portwood & Fielding, 1981). For these individuals, privilege can be conscious and earned, given the effort and resources required to qualify and practice. Similarly, we posit that senior minority ethnic men and women experience privilege and engage with it somewhat consciously. However, it is likely that the inability to avoid benefitting from one's privilege (often attributed to whiteness) also applies to minority ethnic individuals, depending on other identities. Class privilege may have bolstered Rani's sense of entitlement to the Senior Civil Service; Jamal and Steve's male gender may have reinforced their confidence to

challenge associates' misplaced assumptions; Ehsan's gender, ethnicity and elite profession enabled access to powerful clients. According to Black & Stone (2005) the consequences of social privilege include exaggerated self-worth and belief in personal superiority, however those positioned at the intersection of privileged and oppressed status may also suffer from negative well-being (e.g. uncertainty, anger, mistrust). Undeniably, some minority ethnic individuals may not 'feel' privileged, yet, be privileged due to the intersection of their identities in a particular place in time. However, the evidence suggests that respondents' pride and self-confidence were bolstered at this juxtaposition. Rani and Ehsan were proud of their exclusive status within a minority group and Jamal and Steve relished the opportunity to prove their worth when their privileged positions as experts were contested. Perhaps privileged minority ethnic individuals experience a temporary sense of superiority. It is unclear whether this will make it easier or more difficult for those at the intersection of privilege and disadvantage to work towards social justice in organisations.

We contribute to literature by revealing the constantly shifting nature of privilege, using an intersectionality framework. Studying ethnic and gender privilege, or lack thereof, typically veers between increasing women's and black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals' visibility on one hand, and questioning male dominance and white ethnicity invisibility on the other. However, given individuals' multiple identities, we move in and out of privilege (Choules, 2006). We revealed how experiences at the intersection of ethnic, gender and senior status take us beyond binary perspectives of privilege and disadvantage, demonstrating the different power configurations that individuals generally perceived as less privileged may bring to certain interactions. Attention to context facilitates unearthing 'unexpected' effects of intersections (Tatli & Ozbilgin, 2012b). Additionally, dominant identities and associated normative assumptions (e.g. of masculinity and heterosexuality) exist simultaneously with disadvantage. Our findings extend prior work by offering a more complex perspective of privilege. With intersecting identities, privilege is multi-dimensional, experienced as contextual, conferred and contested. It evokes a dynamic response as individuals seek to manage its mutability. The study supports other research on fluid privileges but also offers alternative perspectives on this construct. Additionally, it fills a gap in understanding minority individuals' experiences of privilege by revealing how senior minority ethnic individuals construct themselves at the intersection of advantage and disadvantage.

Conclusion

In this study we offer a fluid and nuanced perspective of privilege using intersectionality as a lens. This contextualised understanding, drawing on minority ethnic individuals' experiences is contrasted against prevalent conceptions of privilege as invisible and uncontested. Going beyond binary assumptions, our empirical data presents privilege as fluid and changeable. We contribute a conceptualisation of privilege as contextual, conferred and contested. It evokes dynamic responses from individuals located at intersections seeking to manage it by engaging effort such as tuning into subtle cues that signal or challenge privilege. We highlighted the micro-level nature of these experiences, considering the psychological and professional implications of this.

One limitation of our study is the small number of episodes reported and analysed. Additionally, the episodes may be atypical for British minority ethnic individuals, the majority of whom are less structurally advantaged. However, we do not seek to generalise through representative sampling. Our in-depth analysis of atypical 'particular cases' offers a learning opportunity (Buchanan, 1999) concerning privilege, intersections and minority ethnicity in organisations. Another limitation is that episodes were perhaps unusual and therefore memorable. This is a limitation of the well-established critical incident technique method; we sought to mitigate this by using daily journal entries, rather than solely relying on recall. Also, we have under-played class, education and other major structural privileges. However, intersectional analyses may always be partial, due to multiple

boundaries (Healy et al 2010). Additionally we accept that, as scholars, we can comment on these issues, a privilege others cannot exercise. Despite these limitations, we believe the data give insight into the complexity of privilege, offering an alternative to the notion of it being embodied in white ethnicity and male gender.

Implications for future research, practice and society

This study responds to Lukaszewski and Stone's (2012) call for raising applied psychology's profile in social change, fostering inclusion and utilising the potential of non-dominant groups. We contribute to psychological inquiry by adopting a 'diversity science' approach, demonstrating sensitivity to how socio-cultural context influences intergroup relations (Plaut, 2010). Our data offer insight into settings that signal belonging or exclusion and also indicate the effort and micro-level strategies engaged by senior minority ethnic individuals in response. It is difficult to talk about privilege and the asymmetrical distribution of power, resources and rewards sustaining it (Ely, 1995; Johnson, 2006; Leonardo, 2004). Drawing on Grimes (2002), respondents' individual narratives may help majority and minority group members reflect on implicit normative assumptions regarding merit and privilege. Such narratives may raise dominant group members' awareness of minority colleagues' subtle experiences at the intersection of privileged and less privileged status, with a view to challenging inappropriate behaviours. Also, privileged members of historically-disadvantaged groups may benefit from reflecting on their asymmetrical access to organisational power and its implications for social justice. Introducing conversations about privilege may advance diversity discourse in organisations. Acknowledging we are all likely to experience privilege and disadvantage at some time or the other may reduce the tendency to think diversity relates to 'others', i.e. 'women and minorities'. This provides a common platform for dominant and non-dominant groups to discuss privilege, disadvantage and their differential impact on social groups. Such self-examination offers insight into how minority groups may collude in sustaining their disadvantage but also reduce white guilt (Ely, 1995).

In this paper the need for more complex understanding of what constitutes privilege and non-binary assumptions are highlighted and addressed. We contribute to understanding privilege in organisations by illustrating how its fluidity at ethnic, gender and senior status intersections influences relationships and processes at work. By applying intersectionality to examine privilege's juxtaposition with disadvantage, we offer an elaborated conceptualisation of privilege in organisations and insight into the agency employed by individuals traditionally perceived as non-privileged.

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