

# Developing Moral Intelligence

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## Empathy

Brené Brown – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>

### ***Intellectual Empathy: Critical Thinking for Social Justice***

Maureen Linker, University of Michigan Press, 2015

What is intellectual empathy? ...When we empathize, we imagine what it is like to feel what another person is feeling in a particular situation. Empathy is different in this way from sympathy, which is a feeling *for* a person without having to really understand what it is that person is actually experiencing. ...Empathy is not the same as actually walking in someone else's shoes or feeling another's pain, because we don't actually face the same circumstances a person faces when we empathize with her or him. Instead, we have to creatively imagine what it feels like by projecting ourselves into that person's situation. This is why a robust self-awareness helps us to empathize more effectively. We have to imagine being who we are in very different kinds of circumstances and then imagine how we would feel (13).

When we employ intellectual empathy in our reasoning about social differences, we are not so much interested in gathering information about other people and their respective beliefs as we are in *looking at the situations people face through their eyes*. This requires gathering reliable information, but it also requires critically and creatively imagining how that information is understood and processed by people whose experiences are different from our own, and perhaps most challenging, how we ourselves, with our particular social identities, are seen and understood by people whose social identities are different from our own (13-14).

Intellectual empathy combines five skills that when used together make us more effective at understanding the social inequalities that other people face as well as the systems and structures that maintain these differences. These five skills include:

- 1) Understanding the invisibility of privilege,
- 2) Knowing that social identity is intersectional,
- 3) Using the model of cooperative reasoning,
- 4) Applying the principles of conditional trust, and
- 5) Recognizing our mutual vulnerability (14).

### ***Skill #1: Understanding the invisibility of privilege***

**web of belief:** [The] interconnected system of beliefs within an individual's psychology...[that includes] concepts, schemata, and emotional and visceral associations as well as values, hopes and expectations (199). [Core beliefs lie at the center of the web and are difficult to revise because any change affects the structure of the entire web. That's why we tend to want to maintain the status quo—we don't want to reconsider everything we believe. This reluctance to change may result from a successful evolutionary strategy, in that understanding what matters most ("fire burns skin") improved survival rather than continual testing of such core beliefs. The point is that core beliefs are deeply integrated into our sense of self, which can be greatly threatened by change.]

**cognitive bias(es):** Habits of thinking and reasoning that may make it easier to take in and organize information but may nevertheless get in the way of adequately assessing evidence and considering alternative points of view. Cognitive biases often serve to preserve our existing web of belief rather than making it more flexible and open to new sources of information (194).

**confirmation bias:** A common cognitive bias whereby we seek out and pay attention to evidence that confirms our existing beliefs and ignore or discount evidence that disconfirms our existing beliefs. Confirmation bias is related to our tendency to be conservative with regard to significant changes in our belief systems (195). “The challenge...is how to maintain a coherent web [of belief] while still paying attention to information or experiences that may feel uncomfortable or unnecessary...Our tendency toward confirmation bias is a tendency to hold on not only to the content of our beliefs but also the emotions and expectations associated with those beliefs. And when it comes to our beliefs about social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, etc., the interaction between content and emotion is strong and sometimes volatile. For this reason, these are some of the most difficult beliefs for us to examine critically and empathetically” (38).

**social identity:** Those aspects of our self-identity that relate to our membership in social groups. Social identity is not strictly defined by an individual but comes about through the interactions that an individual has within a social system. Some aspects of our social identity correspond with the way we see ourselves, but others have to do with the way we are seen by others.

**privilege:** A position of social advantage based on aspects of our social identity that have nothing to do with merit or hard work but instead involve unearned social benefits based on a history of social injustice (198).

**invisibility of privilege:** The challenge of identifying social privilege when one is a recipient because of the way it is treated as “normal” or “just the way things are.” For example, the difficulty that a Christian may face in seeing that the nation’s participation in Christmas inordinately benefits Christians and marginalizes all those who are not Christian as well as those who celebrate other religious holidays (198). [Along with confirmation bias, the invisibility of privilege makes it hard for us to seek out evidence that might disconfirm our erroneous beliefs, such as social stereotypes.]

**EZ Pass:** Based on an actual type of highway, EZ Pass, that allows its holders to gain easy access in and out of stopping points, this is a metaphorical pass that makes it very easy for those with privilege to travel on the “road” to rights and opportunities while those with social disadvantages are slowed down and helped up [or held up?] (196).

## ***Skill #2: Knowing that social identity is intersectional***

**intersectionality:** A term first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw to identify the ways that systems of privilege, oppression, and domination work together to forge our complex social identities. ...Intersectionality provides significant insight into the complex ways that our privilege and oppression are mutually constituted (197). [Crenshaw uses a 1977 legal case to demonstrate this concept.] The case involved five plaintiffs, all black women, who claimed that the seniority system at General Motors was discriminatory not to blacks generally or to women generally but to the intersection: black women. Because General Motors had hired and promoted black men as well as white women, the court ruled that there was no evidence of racial or gender discrimination. Yet as Crenshaw points out, “The paradigm of sex discrimination tends to be based on the experiences of white women; the model of race discrimination tends to be based on the experiences of the most privileged blacks. Notions of what constitutes race and sex discrimination are, as a result, narrowly tailored to embrace only a small set of circumstances, none of which include discrimination against Black women” (60).

The primary point is that our identities include many traits and circumstances, both privilege and oppression, and multiple intersections across social differences such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc. Therefore, we can examine our identities to find connections and potential coalitions across different social groups.

**victim-culprit dichotomy:** The limited roles that seem to be the only available options when discussing and arguing issues of social difference. Those who are socially disadvantaged are assumed to occupy the victim role, and those who are socially privileged are assumed to occupy the culprit role. However, each of these roles may feel alien to those to whom they are ascribed. One can recognize one’s social disadvantage without identifying as a victim, just as one can be socially privileged without feeling like a culprit.

**blame filter:** A tendency for someone who faces social marginalization to blame whole groups of privileged people for [her, his or their] particular marginalization without considering the actual complexity of the groups, including intersectional aspects of group identity. For example, women blaming “all men” or “most men” for sexism or gender bias without considering how race, class, ethnicity, or sexual orientation play a role in male privilege. (For a corollary tendency of those with social privilege, see *guilt filter*) (193).

**guilt filter:** Like the related blame filter, the guilt filter is a tendency for those who have identified their social privilege to feel guilty and responsible for those whose identity may include social disadvantage or a history of oppression. The problem with the guilt filter, as with the blame filter, is that it fails to account for the complex and intersectional aspects of social identity. In addition, the guilt filter can mask a rescue tendency that those with social privilege may adopt toward those with social disadvantage, thereby reaffirming social injustices. The white person who fails to take into account the expertise of a black [person], for instance, and instead seeks to provide help or assistance while recognizing [his, her or their] own lack of expertise may be operating with a guilt filter (196). “White guilt...can become a badge of honor for white people who despite their good intentions can wind up obscuring the experiences of people of color and reframing them as experiences of victimization or powerlessness” (70).

“Relaxing the guilt and blame filters, moving past culprit and victim dichotomies, and understanding the intersectional aspects of our own identities will provide us with a way to embrace coalition building across our differences. Acknowledging that we have a social system that unjustly bestows EZ Passes on some people in some contexts and puts up roadblocks for others, is a necessary first step to thinking critically and empathically about social differences” (76)

## **White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack**

Peggy McIntosh, Wellesley College, 1988: <https://www.wcwoonline.org/Publications-by-title/white-privilege-and-male-privilege-a-personal-account-of-coming-to-see-correspondences-through-work-in-women-s-studies-2>

...In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.

...As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage. I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see **white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks.**

...Disapproving of the systems won't be enough to change them. I was taught to think that racism could end if white individuals changed their attitude. But a "white" skin in the United States opens many doors for whites whether or not we approve of the way dominance has been conferred on us. Individual acts can palliate but cannot end, these problems.

...It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already.

I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions that I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographic location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can tell, my African American coworkers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place and line of work cannot count on most of these conditions.

[Excerpts from McIntosh's list of white privileges]:

1. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area that I can afford and in which I would want to live.
2. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
3. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
4. When I am told about our national heritage or about civilization, I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
5. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
6. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
7. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
8. I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes or not answer letters without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
9. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
10. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
11. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
12. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color, who constitute the worlds' majority, without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
13. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
14. I can be sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge" I will be facing a person of my race.
15. If a traffic cop pulls me over, or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
16. I can go home from most meetings or organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
17. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.
18. I can choose public accommodations without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
19. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help my race will not work against me.
20. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in flesh color that more or less matches my skin.

...We usually think of privilege as being a favored state, whether earned or conferred by birth or luck. Yet some of the conditions I have described here work systematically to over-empower certain groups. Such privilege simply confers dominance because of one's race or sex.

### **OVERCOMING BIAS**

Vernā Myers: How to overcome our biases? Walk boldly toward them

[https://www.ted.com/talks/verna\\_myers\\_how\\_to\\_overcome\\_our\\_biases\\_walk\\_boldly\\_toward\\_them/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/verna_myers_how_to_overcome_our_biases_walk_boldly_toward_them/transcript?language=en)

### **STRONGLY RECOMMENDED BY DR. BAKER**

Bryan Stevenson: We need to talk about an injustice

[https://www.ted.com/talks/bryan\\_stevenson\\_we\\_need\\_to\\_talk\\_about\\_an\\_injustice](https://www.ted.com/talks/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice)