

What is Privilege?

By Anne Emerson

When I was young, newly arrived in the U.S. and fresh out of Oxford, my father-in-law found me a job as a teller in a Savings and Loan. It was the only real job I was offered. I think the S&L took me on as a favor to their good customer, but when I aced the teller training program, they were impressed. Should I have refused that job – the kind of job a High School graduate takes in England – and insisted on something better? How would I do that to my new father-in-law, even if I could have foreseen what happened later?

After a year working as a teller in the S&L's brand new, flagship branch, with (almost) irreproachable technical skills – highly accurate, cooperative, finding extra work rather than chit-chatting during downtime – I received a mediocre performance review (“She is not enthusiastic enough for this customer service job”) and a career plan that I deemed too slow (a year as a head teller, followed by a year or two in new accounts, learning all aspects of branch banking, and then perhaps to manage a branch). If there was anything beyond that, no-one was looking that far ahead.

I decided to apply to graduate school for a Masters in economics, so that I might look like mid to upper management material in two years, rather than in five or ten years, and also be qualified to work in the type of organization that might address some of the economic challenges of Middle Eastern countries. (My B.A., and later, my M.A. from Oxford also, was in Middle Eastern Studies.)

The academic environment suited me, and my fellow students were more welcoming and friendly than my co-workers at the S&L. But home and academia were in conflict. My husband had one life, and I had another. For example, he was not happy to arrive home from work one day and find a few of my fellow students in his home. In those days, I was not accustomed to asking for help or talking things through. I withdrew from department activities rather than find another way to resolve home/school tensions. Only one professor seemed to see me as an individual rather than as one of many students. When he suggested I apply for the Ph.D. program and go for a “terminal” degree rather than a Masters, it seemed like a good idea at the time.

A year or two later, I was sitting in a class on Labor Economics, and the professor (not the same one mentioned above) said, “Data show that women, on average, do not earn enough to earn back the cost of getting a Ph.D.” I thought, “If I had any sense, I would get up and walk out now.” But I did not, and neither did any of the other women in the class. Why did we not? Clearly, human psychology is not just about money. For me, partly, it was inertia. I was on that track, so I stayed on it. Partly, it was about achieving at a high level, once the idea had been put into my head. Partly, it was ignorance. What did that professor really mean?

As I realized later, he did not merely mean, “You won't earn the same money a man might earn, with your same qualification.” He meant, “Society puts you in a different category of human being from a man. Society has different expectations for you.” Perhaps, from his point of view, he was sharing information. Understanding discrimination is one aspect of Labor Economics, and it was a legitimate topic to discuss within the context of the class. Perhaps even he did not fully understand what he was saying.

By the time I graduated, I had two children and I could understand the point of view that saw women as wives and mothers, not primarily career-focused. I wanted it all – home and career. I resented a world that would not accommodate both, not just for women but also for men. But, if I could not persuade those closest to me of this point of view, how could I persuade the wider world? I became a part-time instructor in the adult education business department of a small college, and, later, an office manager and financial administrator.

Would I have done better, given these realities, to have stayed at the S&L, done low-level jobs, and risen through the ranks the old-fashioned way? Would the organization that knew me have accommodated my home life and given me a rewarding part-time job? Or, would I have encountered the glass ceiling at branch

manager and quit? At one time, a friend of mine whose husband did not want her to work, had offered to introduce me to her rewarding volunteer career with the local symphony. (Those types of “careers” are falling away, as women today can do well in paying jobs. That is perhaps not a good thing. I’m not saying we put women back into that box; only that we need to think hard about how to get that kind of work done, in today’s world.)

So, what is “entitlement”? Did I expect too much? Was I the spoiled rich kid that people sometimes took me for, because I went to a name school? My parents were not rich; what part of a rich-people culture did I absorb, because I rubbed shoulders with people whose parents were indeed wealthy? I don’t know. It probably depends somewhat on what education is, what it is for, who gets to enjoy it, and whether it opens doors for people in an inequitable way. Here is what I think, regardless of whether or not I deserved my excellent education:

If everyone is like I was, and wants to jump into a career at middle and upper levels, who will do the lower-level jobs? Or the dirty jobs? Or the thankless jobs? If education is the key to being able to avoid those types of jobs, why does the culture encourage educational opportunity for everyone? Here are some potential downsides to the “education” culture:

- Mutual disparagement between those with less lofty ambitions, or different talents, than those who happen to enjoy education and do well at it.
- Fear of high standards, because it is “discriminatory.” Loss of linkage between effort, reward, and interpersonal consideration, as pieces of paper replace long-run relationships, in the job market.
- Failure to recognize and appreciate skill and talent in people who did not have opportunities and who remain stuck in low-level jobs against their preference. Loss of a lifetime path upward for them.
- The “Great Resignation.” If there is no hope of betterment, why would anyone do the kinds of jobs that (almost) no-one wants?