

Questions and Answers about the “Coin Model of Privilege and Critical Allyship”¹

Created by Stephanie Nixon and Meron Gidey

Question 1: What is the Coin Model of Privilege and Critical Allyship?

Answer 1: The coin model is a tool for translating foundational ideas about anti-oppression. The metaphor of a coin is used to explain how historic systems of inequality (e.g., racism, settler colonialism, heterosexism, ableism) provide unearned advantage (i.e., privilege) to some and unearned disadvantage (i.e., oppression) to others. The coin model uses an intersectional approach to describe how multiple coins intersect and interact to create complex arrangements of advantage and disadvantage, which result in inequities.

Question 2: What’s new and what’s not new in the Coin Model of Privilege and Critical Allyship?

Answer 2: Using the metaphor of a coin to translate ideas about privilege and anti-oppression is new. However, the ideas that are being translated through this metaphor are not new. These understandings of how power operates in society derive from a genealogy of Black and Indigenous thinkers, and the author of the coin model article credits the present-day carriers of this wisdom with helping her to understand these concepts.

Question 3: What is the point of the Coin Model of Privilege and Critical Allyship?

Answer 3: One of the main ways that systems of inequality ensure the status quo is by people in positions of privilege remaining oblivious to their complicity in reproducing them. The coin model supports people to become less oblivious

¹ English: ‘The coin model of privilege and critical allyship: Implications for health’. 2019. BMC Public Health 19,1637

about their positions of privilege, which opens new possibilities for action to interrupt, resist and dismantle these harmful structures.

Question 4: Is the coin model only about health?

Answer 4: Systems of inequality powerfully shape health outcomes, and the coin model article was written for a health audience. However, these structures influence equity throughout society, and so the ideas are transferable beyond health.

Question 5: What does the coin represent in this metaphor?

Answer 5: The coin represents a social structure or system of inequality (e.g., heterosexism, ableism, racism) that maintains and reproduces inequality by operating at the institutional, interpersonal, and internal levels. These coins' structure society, and the institutions and people within it. There is not one coin for all privilege and oppression; rather, there are many specific coins that will matter more or less according to context and history. These systems of inequality intersect with each other to create complex arrangements of advantage or disadvantage.

Question 6: What does the top of the coin represent?

Answer 6: People find themselves "on top of the coin" if who they happen to be aligns with the norms of that coin (i.e., system of inequality). This way of being is taken as the right, ideal, or default norm in society, to which others are expected to assimilate. This position gives people on the top of the coin unearned advantage, also called privilege in the coin model. This advantage is unearned because it is unlinked to merit or behaviour and produced instead by one lucking into alignment with an historic structure of domination. Examples: people who are straight are on the top of the coin of heterosexism; people who are able-bodied are on the top of the coin of ableism; and people who are white are on the top of the coin of racism. Often people on the top of the coin are unaware of this position and the related unearned advantage. Coming to understand one's position on the top of a coin is a prerequisite for being able to practice critical allyship in solidarity with others to dismantle the coin.

Question 7: What does the bottom of the coin represent?

Answer 7: People find themselves “on the bottom of the coin” if who they happen to be does not align with the norms of the coin. This position gives people on the bottom of the coin unearned disadvantage, which is called oppression in the coin model. This disadvantage is unearned because it is unlinked to merit or behaviour and produced instead by one’s alignment with an historic structure of domination. Examples: people who are not straight are on the bottom of the coin of heterosexism; people who are disabled are on the bottom of the coin of ableism; and people who are not white are on the bottom of the coin of racism. While it is common to be unaware of one’s position on the top of coins, people are typically well aware of their position on the bottom of a coin and possess an understanding of the system of equality because of their frame of reference that people on the top of that same coin will never have. People on the bottom of coins are the historic leaders of movements to dismantle those coins.

Question 8: Is the goal to move people from the bottom of the coin to the top?

Answer 8: No, because both positions are unfair. The goal is to dismantle the coin, or system inequality, producing these unfair positions.

Question 9: Can people be on the top of some coins and the bottom of other coins at the same time?

Question 9: Yes, this is all of us. The combination of our position on the top and bottom of coins will produce unique arrangements of advantage and disadvantage. This understanding is aligned with the idea of intersectionality, which was developed by Black scholars, Kimberle Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins. An intersectional framework helps us understand that the effects of privilege and oppression that people experience from different systems of inequality cannot be understood using a mathematical approach whereby they are additive or can cancel each other out.

Question 10: What is critical allyship?

Answer 10: Critical allyship is the orientation for action for people who find themselves on the top of a coin that they wish to dismantle. Critical allyship

is an ongoing practice or orientation, and not an identity. Practicing critical allyship means rejecting an orientation of saving, fixing or helping people on the bottom of the coin. Rather, it means embracing the following commitments:

1. I see and understand my own role in upholding systems of oppression that create inequities.
2. I learn from the expertise of, give credit to, and work in solidarity with, people on the bottom of the coin to help me address inequities.
3. This includes working to help build insight and mobilize action among people in positions of privilege.
4. I mobilize in collective action under the leadership of and with accountability to people on the bottom of the coin to dismantle systems of inequality.

Question 11: Are coins only harmful to people on the bottom of the coin?

Answer 11: No, systems of inequality are harmful to everyone, albeit in different ways. While the oppression faced by people on the bottom of the coin is an important focus of the coin model, people on the top of the coin also suffer. One reason is because systems of inequality exclude and limit the talents and contributions on people on the bottom of the coin, which impoverishes society as a whole. Another reason is because the 'top of coin' identities aligned with these historic systems of inequality typically reflect narrow and limited expressions of humanity.