# DO WHAT I SAY NOT WHAT I DO: INCREASING THE REPRESENTATION OF MINORITIES IN THE CONSTRUCTION SECTOR

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The minorities are still underrepresented in the Swedish construction sector despite initiatives launched to answer a growing demand for workforce. Whereas many studies have focused on the minorities, we propose here to look at how the majorities maintain their dominance in the case of a civil engineering education. To do so, we build on the concept of privilege accounting for the dynamics which marginalize some while benefitting others. Drawing on a mixed method approach, the empirical material of this qualitative research includes the reviewing of 120 individual assignments of MSc students in construction management, 16 interviews of these students, and the authors' teaching experience. The preliminary results show a blindness towards one's own privilege, and an overfocus on the differences attributed to the minorities. The paper contributes to a wider understanding of the social dynamic of discrimination within sector.

Keywords: diversity management; minorities; civil engineering education; privilege

## INTRODUCTION

On the advent of a predicted shortage of qualified workers, building industries are opening to diverse minorities which so far have been underrepresented within them (Haakestad and Friberg 2020, Jurisic *et al.,* 2021). Taking the gender work division in Sweden as an example, the proportion of women among is around 5.2% among site managers (SCB 2018). Masculine ideologies seem to pervade the totality of norms, beliefs and assumptions that serve to enact specific images of, e.g., leadership work roles (Styhre 2011), or a "macho" culture (Åstrand 2021), rather than building on an assessment of skills and competences (Arditi *et al.,* 2013). The situation has improved for women with university degrees, as they have a significantly higher level (39.4%) of education compared to the men in the industry (including both architects and civil engineers) (Olofsdotter and Rasmusson 2016, Åstrand 2021). However, they tend to be employed in headquarters and planning offices, having the highest share in administrative tasks (Olofsdotter and Rasmusson 2016, Åstrand 2021).

On another note, while the representation of foreign companies contracted in Sweden is increasing, the number of foreigners employed in the industry is more difficult to estimate. There is an important share of posted workers - averaging 12,900 workers a

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month, - but as they are employed by subcontractors, they are not listed in the national employment survey (Ahlstrand 2022). Similarly, whereas foreigners are well-represented among blue-collar workers (Thörnqvist and Bernhardsson 2015), their participation as managers has been identified to be limited (Byrne *et al.,* 2005). Moreover, studies show that there are stigmatisation and segregation against foreigners, mostly non-Europeans, in both the national labour market and the housing market (see, e.g., Ahmed and Hammarstedt 2008, Arai and Skogman Thoursie 2009, and Ahlstrand 2022).

So, in the Swedish supposedly equalitarian society, there is still evidence of discrimination, and despite numerous relevant initiatives (e.g., for increasing the representation of women in managerial positions), minorities' participation has not grown significantly over time (Arditi *et al.,* 2013, Johansson *et al.,* 2021). Moreover, when these minorities are reaching managerial positions, they still may face stigmatisation and discrimination (Conway *et al.,* 2018, Ahlstrand 2022). So, once again, we propose to reopen the black box of minorities' integration in the construction sector and hopefully contribute to reducing the discrimination against them. To do so, we build on the concept of privilege, which enables us to look at not only the way minorities are stigmatised, but also at how the experience of privilege shapes the life of "majorities" - therefore accounting for the dynamics which, by creating inequality, marginalize some while benefitting others. The concept of privilege aims at making the advantages (i.e., small or large benefits) granted to dominant groups more visible in order to be able to contribute to defining a policy of integration (Kimmel 2017). In the present paper, we aim at understanding how majority groups contribute to maintaining certain privileges. Focusing on a master's education program in construction management, the overreaching purpose of our study is to create awareness among future practitioners, as many perceptions and embodiments of privilege in engineering education are perpetuated in the sector itself.

Moreover, according to Billmoria and Lang, (20012) there is a leaking pipe leading to engineering professions where minorities victims of discrimination are slowing dropping out at the different levels of their education and career, and which accounts for the strong homogeneity of the sector. So, we also expect to be able to further provide solutions towards the diverse and equitable development of our education and avoid the pipe from leaking. Drawing on a mixed method approach, the empirical material of this qualitative research consists of the review of 120 individual assignments of MSc students in Construction Management (where they assessed their own performance and collaboration ability in group work), interviews with 16 of these students, and the authors' own teaching experience.

It should be noted that due to the delimited scope of this paper, we simplify the categorisation of minorities, e.g., we conventionally use a binary understanding of gender. However, we are fully aware that such traditional notions like gender binarism are increasingly being challenged in scholarship and social representation (Kosciesza 2022). Nonetheless, it might be helpful to characterise these socially constructed relationships in the manner described above, to identify some of their features and be able to dismantle them (Goodman 2021). Besides, we are aware that many of the accounts we have collected tend to be individualised and personalised processes which, in fact, should be understood to reveal social and structural inequalities (Kimmel 2017). Finally, second-generation immigrants are also segregated in Sweden. It even appears very clearly in the classroom that these students are keeping (or have been kept) to themselves. However, it is impossible to

document the importance of the phenomenon, as all differentiation of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or religion would be considered as an act of discrimination punished by the Discrimination Act (2008, amended in 2014). As such, we are facing a situation of segregation which we cannot properly describe, measure, or assess.

This introduction is followed by the research method, a literature review on the concept of privilege, the empirical focus on the aforementioned master's education program, a discussion offering critical insights, and the conclusions.

**Theoretical Framework**

When discussing discrimination, we tend to focus on the problematised groups, but rarely mention the contrasting groups, i.e., the ones advantaged and legitimated as they are assumed to be "normal" (Pratto and Stewart 2012). In this paper we are discussing discrimination though the lens of privilege. Instead of thinking about inequality from the perspective of the ones who are hurt by it, we turn our attention to the ones who are benefitting from it (Kimmel, 2018, p. 7). The concept of privilege is multidimensional and has been used to refer to preferences for, and access to, certain people, places, or things in society (Goodmann 2011). Privilege can be defined as unearned benefits awarded to those having an internal, perceived, and/or expressed identity that matches cultural expectations (Case *et al.,* 2012).

Privilege as an unearned asset or status is based on social identities, which translate into advantages, opportunities, benefits, or access to societal resources for those to whom it is assigned (Ferber 2003, McIntosh 1998, Kimmel 2018). Social identities are based on membership in various social groups consisting of people sharing a range of physical, cultural, and social characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, gender, age, disability, and class (Cudd 2005, Goodman 2011). When individuals or groups benefit from institutional practices such as rules, laws, expectations, behaviours, or norms that harm others, they are said to have privilege (Cudd 2005, Taiwo 2018). Moreover, privilege can be influenced by the degree to which an individual's appearance and behaviours conform to socially endorsed ways of being (Blumenfeld and Jaekel 2012, Ferber 2012).

These privileged identities are the "mythical" norm against which all others in society are judged (Lorde 1984). Goffman (1963) described the non-privileged group as spoiled identities or stigma, felt and or enacted, where the stigma resides in the relation between the attribute and its audience (representing the "normal" or dominant group). Being stigmatised, meaning non fitting with the expected "normal", not only frames the present interaction, but can also condition future relationships and contribute to creating a career where one is continuously stigmatised (Goffman 1963). At the same time, different contexts create different "normalities", and the attribution of privilege is therefore a dynamic process (Kimmel 2013).

The term "dominant group" not only reflects that the group in mention gets unearned privileges and has greater social power, but also sets the social norms by producing and spreading values, images, and experiences of the dominant culture (Goodman 2011). Research on gender privilege has underlined that this often remains invisible to the privileged themselves, as they see it as legitimate entitlement and consequently neglect that others are denied the very same opportunities (Flood and Pease 2005, Galea 2018). Perpetuating this distribution of privilege can also actively happen within education, by legitimising the assumptions, values, and norms of the dominant group - and in doing so, education contributes to rendering privilege invisible (Carnevale *et al.,* 2013). Thus, making it visible can be seen as a major strategy for

critique and change (Kimmel 2018) - also in the context of Swedish engineering education and, by extension, to the industry sector itself.

## METHOD

This paper builds on an interpretive qualitative study combining elements of autoethnography, action research, and content analysis. Autoethnography is utilized to gain insights and qualitative results through self-observation and self-reflection - also implemented in the construction academia and industry (Grosse 2019). It is hereby deployed to draw on the authors' own experiences (teaching in the master's program for, respectively, more than nine and three years). Moreover, the authors utilize action research in the context of higher education (Gibbs *et al.,* 2017) to reflect the intent of enacting research to benefit the students' learning, not harming them, and ultimately leading to knowledge co-production with them (Gibbs *et al.,* 2017). Finally, content analysis (Donald 2022) was deployed for reviewing 120 individual assignments of first-year master's students that self-assessed their performance and collaboration in group work, as well as for analysing the interviews held with 16 of those students. The students' sample for the interviews consists of 11 international students, seven females and four males, and five local students, two females and three males. The students' citations mobilised for this paper are excerpts from their assessment and the interviews.

All participants were informed about the goal of the study, the recording of the interviews and the anonymity of their contribution. The interviews were transcribed and analysed according to the themes developed in iteration with the theoretical framework on privilege. To carry out our analysis, we have followed the five-steps model of qualitative analysis suggested by Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003): Knowing the data by getting over it several times; identifying key questions or topics to organise the analysis; categorising information by themes and features; identifying patterns and connections within and between categories; and interpreting by attaching meaning and significance to the analysis. The results and interpretations of the different methods of gathering data have been triangulated and discussed between the two authors and with some our colleagues of the diversity management group.

In the context of our methodology for the empirical part, we recognise our study's limitations due to the apparent diversity in the students' individual characters and dispositions, the relatively small sample size, and the differences between the periods in which our material was collected. However, we argue that these limitations can also be understood as strengths in our study, as they reflect a strong contextualisation which avoids claims for unbased generalisation.

### Empirical Part

The education under scrutiny is a master's programme in design and construction project management, which aims at preparing technically qualified engineering students to face the challenges met by the sector - such as production, quality, sustainability, digitalisation. Building on the complementarity of different disciplines, the programme has the ambition to provide future practitioners with a combination of prescriptive and analytical tools to solve those challenges. The prescriptive tools aim at planning, organising, managing, and controlling the construction processes, as well as addressing the individual, social and organisational aspects of the sector; the analytical tools, methods, and theories, aim to enable the future practitioners to

develop a holistic view, be more reflexive about the context they are evolved in, and accordingly make informed decisions.

The programme is popular and continuously in the top three of the most sought graduate education tracks in the institution it belongs to. The class offers 50 seats to internal university students from different programs, and 25 for external students from both Swedish and international universities. The waiting list is typically long for both internal and external applicants. Universities' education is free of charges for EU and EEA citizens in Sweden but requires an annual tuition fee of 140 000 SEK (around 11 300 GBP) for students coming from other countries.

The participants' selection is carried out by the administration without contact with the programme and is based on the previous academic results of the students (high grades being the first criterion). The university owning the programme is also regarded as one of the most selective in Sweden, a status which has had some unfortunate consequences on the ego of the local students. The programme runs over two years. In the first semester, the courses are mandatory - meaning that all the students follow the same progression and are gathered in the same class. Attention to diversity and segregation is translated into classroom initiatives aiming at guided integration through work in mixed groups, introduction to cultural relativity, diversity in the education team, and lectures and exercises in conflict negotiation and resolution.

In-class gender distribution is almost fair in binary terms, with an average of 43% of female students over the last 5 years. In contrast to gender, it is more difficult to trace the percentage of national and international students, as we cannot collect information about the students' background. We therefore used language as a selection criterion, where the students who do not speak Swedish fluently are labelled as international. The percentage of non-Swedish speakers is around 15-17%, a figure - like the in-class representation of students coming from other Swedish universities. The teaching team is around 70% Swedish and 75% male dominated.

## FINDINGS

*Students and Privilege*
First, the good news: our students, both national and international, did not perceive a gendered difference of behaviours or treatments. This does not imply that there is no dfferences, but the students we have talked to cannot find examples of gender-related privilege.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that there is no hierarchy in project work. When dealing with their assignments, the students recognise differences in being legitimised to take on a leading role, according to criteria such as having on-site experience or having worked in the industry. Being active in the sector seems to confer students the possibility to be dominant and allow them to make decisions without being challenged. However, this practical experience is recognised only for the national students of both genders, but not for the international ones, whose professional past regardless of the number of years spent in the industry tends to be simply disregarded.

But if gender is not a problem for our students, discrimination linked to ethnicity is. The distribution of students in mixed groups is often communicated as being "forced", by the local students preferring to revert to a Swedish - non-Swedish repartition. However, as the number of international students is limited, the latter end up working with always the same partners if the groups are not organised by the teachers. There is an apparent lack of trust towards "foreigners" (a "we-them" mentality), and

emerging conflicts are taken at the level of nationality instead of differences between individuals - as put harshly by a Swedish student,

> "The foreigners should not think that they will have a free ride in our education and steal our jobs afterwards" (Swedish male student)

The anonymous course evaluation surveys systematically underline that it is difficult or prejudicial for some local students to work with international ones. However, these comments are counterbalanced by some of the international students being critical to the lack of work motivation expressed by their Swedish colleagues. Coming to a foreign university, it is for some of them important to demonstrate their ability by achieving the highest grades, whereas "*the nationals know they will get a job whatever their results*" (international male student).

> "Here I become more compromised when working with new people, especially when they have unfamiliar cultural backgrounds to me. For several times, I spent time figuring out some suggestions on modifying project process and results, but eventually I gave them up, because I do not want to be hated for giving too much pressure on my team members. But when I worked with my country classmates before, I usually stick to my ideas unless there are more convincing ways to do" (individual assessment international female student).

The local students have often misidentified the international ones for exchange students, which is connoted as students "*spending a holiday semester abroad…*" and not worth investing during the class or socially,

> "They keep calling us exchange students, but we are not in any exchange programme, we have decided to come and study here, we have been admitted by selection and some of us paid quite a lot to be here" (international male student).

Moreover, most of the international students actually intend to stay in Sweden after obtaining their diploma and are longing for establishing contact with their national colleagues and broaden their network. "*They don't invite us to their parties, but we invite them to ours and sometimes they come*" (International mal student).

The language is another issue. It is convenient for the national students to revert to Swedish when doing project work, even if one or two of the group members are international. The latter are getting a summary of what has been said in English or are in the worst case:"*informed*" about the tasks they need to perform. As frustrating as this situation can be, "*it is tiring to repeatedly ask them to use English during the sessions, so you just give up*" (international female student).

The local students benefit of a network of older and former students with whom they discuss about the courses, the teachers, and the previous exams and assignments. This allows them to have access not only to previous tests, but also their answers. If these are shared within social media, the international students are not always part of these networks or aware of the benefits they can drag out of them; as such, they feel "*cheated*". The local students acknowledge the situation but blame it on the naivety of the teachers:

> "Today we can get everything online, all can be shared, it is just a question to know where from, but I am not sure the teachers are aware of that" *(local Swedish male student).*

The problem is that external and international students may not be aware of what they can search for in the first place. Even if the students do not notice any kind of discrimination regarding gender, the reactions of the international students towards national students' behaviours are quite strongly differentiated within the two groups.

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The female students focus on cultural differences and underline their feelings of being discriminated or even excluded, while the male students display a more active and powerful attitude:

> "I rely on myself, I am taking initiative"*; or even excuse the local behaviours:* "It would be the same in my country, … I also prefer talking my own language" (international male students).

*Teachers and privilege*

The local students, after three years of bachelor studies at the university, are well-versed to the culture and routines of the institution. They know the rules, both formal and informal, as well as what is expected from them in terms of behaviour and delivery. This gives them a clear advantage when interacting with the teaching staff or planning and executing project work. The international students are more distant and respectful towards teachers and rules, and consequently may be disadvantaged in certain situations like taking the word or asking questions during class sessions. Likewise, local students may start whispering to each other when the internationals are asking questions, showing their lack of interest for the ongoing interaction. Unfortunately, teachers may not always be attentive and compensate for the imbalanced pedagogical outcome that may stem from these kinds of situations.

This division of "insiders " versus "outsiders" is reinforced by the teachers mostly referencing local or national projects and/or companies during the courses. These may be known to the national students, but the international ones often miss contextual information to make sense of the given examples. This situation can be attributed to a lack of attention or knowledge from the Swedish teachers. For the international teachers, however, using local references may also serve to demonstrate that they are knowledgeable about the Swedish context, which in turn contributes to their own legitimisation process as competent lecturers.

Language is an issue during the classes, when teachers build on Swedish vocabulary, slides, or assignments. As quoted by several of the international students, being told that "*they can look in their mobile for translation*", does not really feel inclusive. Bilingual students have also noticed that they tend to have longer and more complete answers from the local lecturers if they use Swedish to ask questions. So, besides feeling disregarded, the internationals' learning possibilities are also reduced.

## CONCLUSIONS

It was a pleasant surprise that our students did not find examples of gendered discrimination. However, our theoretical background on privilege draws the attention to respective experiences being common among other minority identities. The use of the possessive words "our education, our jobs", underlines a taken for granted situation deserved by the local students; something to which they are entitled, and which can potentially be "stolen" by somebody who does not share the same privilege. The vocabulary used to describe the international students, delegitimises their presence in the education, and constructs them as outsiders who may jeopardise the local students' progression (Iverson 2007). There is a need to question these affirmations, as well as the way this perceived ownership of education is attributed, and to make the explanation for these levels of discrimination visible (Kimmel 2018).

The insights gained by the literature and the empirical investigation show that the visibility of privilege and the preparation of soon-to-be construction management professionals for adequately responding to minority-based challenges, need to be first tackled during their education, in the level of the classroom, syllabi, curricula, and

even university policies. Listing these privileges contributes not only to creating awareness, but also gives us the possibility to identify and improve the situation of the non-privileged students, as well as implement measures to compensate for and share some of these benefits. Even if learning goals regarding ethics and discrimination are added to the curriculum, there is no follow-up, reflection, or assessment of these goals in terms of students' behaviour or practices in class - which in turn can perpetuate the blindness towards privilege.

Whereas awareness is being created around minority discrimination (e.g., with teachers trained to use gender-neutral vocabulary), microaggressions rooted in embodied privileges that might not even be visible to the ones having them, are still part of the daily life. Microaggressions can include minor and delicate instances of marginalisation, which perpetuate negative messages toward minorities and over time, build a negative attitude (Ogunyemi *et al.,* 2020). Such perpetuations are worsened when ignoring or dismissing an idea, question, or student's presence (Hinton Jr. *et al.,* 2020) - all of which can be understood as instances of privilege enactment. As such it also questions our roles and behaviours as educators.

Attention should also be drawn to instances of tokenisation, initially perceived as something positive. Being attributed specific competences or behaviours because of one's provenance, is discrimination as well - because it tends to ignore one's personal labour and investment in their skills and professional development, and rather exoticising those as something almost "metaphysical" and connected to one's ethnic and/or cultural background or origin.

Even more alarmingly, there can be instances of "diversity washing" through relevant low-budgeted programs, which may be not enough to account for serious initiatives. In this context, university-proposed solutions are bound to fail, as the organisational structure does not seriously support them.

As an endnote, other minorities (such as older students or LGBTQI+ people), should also be benefitted by the implementation of non-discrimination policies, practices, and measures combating privilege enactment. However, it seems that tackling privilege leading to minority discrimination has still a long way to go, even in the most "aware" higher education institutions. Therefore, continuous work is needed, as identifying what the privilege is, can lead to finding a way to balance it, as well as communicate it to the students. This requires though that we the educators do align what we say we want to achieve with what we do in the classroom so that we can build back wiser.

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