

Encounters with Privilege and Multiculturalism

A middle-aged, White male college professor teaches social work to students from multicultural backgrounds. The meaning and assumptions of privilege are examined by exploring diversity in every class. Just as social work practitioners "start where the client is," this social work educator "starts where the student is" and learns that variation and difference are the core of humanity.

by
Richard Holody

Richard Holody, DSW, is an Assistant Professor of Social Work, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Lehman College (CUNY), Bronx, NY.

After almost two decades of child welfare practice in both public and private agencies, I now teach baccalaureate level social work at an urban college. There is a chapter in the course outline for the social work practice sequence which, following the textbook (Compton & Galaway, 1994), is entitled "Practice Across Difference." There, I tell my students this story:

As a foster care supervisor, I am entering a courtroom to testify in a proceeding, initiated by me, that seeks to terminate the legal parental rights of two people in order that their son may be "freed" to be adopted by another family. That's my job: to act in the best interests of the child. And to this point, I and my worker and my agency have done all that can be reasonably and professionally expected to provide rehabilitative services to the birth parents of the child. Those efforts brought no observable change in the functioning of the parents. So I will now, and with confidence, testify that the agency made reasonable and diligent efforts to reunite the family and has no alternative but to

seek the remedy of termination and adoption.

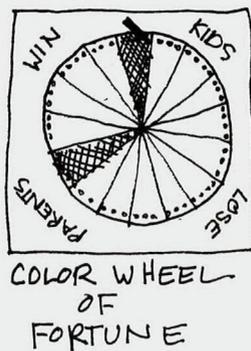
Taking the stand, I notice that the other people in the courtroom are my agency's attorney, the child's legal guardian, separate lawyers for each of the parents, a court reporter, a bailiff, and the judge. All are white; all but two of the attorneys are male. I am a white male.

The parents, neither of whom are present, are African-American and Puerto Rican, respectively.

I then ask my class to discuss this vignette and seek to reconcile what may seem to be competing truths: the reality of the parents' inability to care for their child and the demographic description of the legal proceeding.

Well into the semester, I have gained a measure of trust from my class. They accept my description of the parents' inability to provide satisfactory care for their children as accurate.

But my class is uncomfortable leaving matters there, letting the wheels of justice turn inexorably toward the inevitable conclusion of the adoption of the child by another family. They are briefly assured when



they learn that the adoptive family is demographically approximate (African-American and Dominican) to the child's family of origin. But one student, frightened by the phrase "termination of parental rights," maintains that "there's just something wrong" about what is happening in this story. Her classmates agree.

Unlike in court, in the classroom I am the only White male. There is a White female student, but the others are African-American, Caribbean-American, Puerto Rican, and immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Jamaica. Even the White female student is an immigrant from Ireland. In this evening course, the students are mostly in their 30's, have jobs and families, and for the most part have been recipients of the social service delivery system they seek to enter as generalist practitioners. They are serious, about their studies and their commitment to professional helping. After considerable discussion, including no small amount of student self-disclosure about encounters with police, lawyers, child protective service workers, and others, one student asks, "So, what

is the point of the story?" I took that to mean, what should I learn from the case vignette that will, a) help me get a good grade in this course, and b) better prepare me to be a practitioner in the real world?

In both the courtroom and in the class, I represent privilege in a multicultural world. My testimony, because I am authorized to speak for the agency, will — did — lead to the termination of parental rights. My answer, because I was hired to teach this course, will — does — command attention.

I struggle in my response. The points *are*, I say, first, that the story is true, that is, it describes an unsatisfying and conflictual reality they too will face as practitioners; second, that whatever societal injustices, historical and contemporary, deprived the parents of access to resources and opportunity, the social worker's job in this case is clearly defined: to testify in behalf of the best interests of the child; and third, that the world of the justice system is not the world of the social service system and when social workers are testifying in a court, we "play by their rules": court testimony must be certain even when we know that the truth of case activity may be ambiguous. The students take notes, silently. Perhaps they are as dissatisfied with the answer as I am.

I thought long and hard about teaching that class after I left it — in ways that I hadn't thought about my teaching before. I thought about what I could have done differently. I

could have helped the class critically examine the socio-cultural construction of the terms "parental inability" and "best interests of the child." More importantly, I could have clarified that the lessons that I derived from the vignette constitute *my* truth. When in the following semester another student asks, "What is the point?" I need to reject the implicit ascription of privilege and respond, "Let us together search for answers."

Such strategizing about how the class could have gone brought me face to face with why I had changed careers, why I had left child welfare practice to become a teacher. Some motivations are obvious: new challenge, different professional lifestyle, the coincidence of opportunity and desire, the feeling of "I think my practice has given me something to share." What I am learning from my students is that teaching satisfies another motivation: it provides a chance to reflect, to scorn easy answers, to learn. The diversity of my student population demands that the understanding of social work that satisfies me must be subjected to a permanent process of re-examination, like turning a kaleidoscope again and again, challenging the viewer, each viewer, to see that change *is* reality. In practice, I guard against privilege by "starting where the client is." I must now learn to "start where the students are," not only to help them to a new level of academic accomplishment and professional grounding, but to explore together the meaning of social work.

Encounters

The very existence of institutionalized education raises the issue of privilege, from the distribution of a course outline telling the students what will be studied (and by implication, what will not) through the "testing" of students (to determine if they have learned what teachers have decided they are to learn). My privileged role as teacher was questioned in one of my first teaching assignments, a course about the historical development of social welfare services in this country. Many students, including, but not exclusively, immigrant students, are barely aware of the broad outlines of U. S. history. They don't just confuse Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt; they are genuinely surprised to hear about the Civil War and Reconstruction Era, about discrimination against the Irish and other European immigrants, and about the Great Depression. It is a "content" — not "process" — driven course, with a consequent emphasis on "what happened when."

"On the test, do you want us to give you what you said in class and what the book says? Or can we give our own opinions?" This question has been asked in each of the seven semesters I've taught the course. I first thought, there is no "opinion" about who founded the Children's Aid Society, or when the settlement house movement was prominent in this country, or that there were two New Deals.

But the persistence of the question made me realize: there is an opinion as to who thinks these questions, as opposed to others, are important. I think that they are, because that is what I was taught; that is my understanding of the development of social welfare services in the United States. If I taught from Abramowitz (1988) or Gordon (1994), I would think other names, dates, trends, and dynamics were important, and my tests would look quite different. And I remember that when I taught from Jansson (1988), my tests *were* different than when I teach from Trattner (1992). The line between historical fact and opinion blurs.

I have now added a new essay question to the final examination. "Discuss the title of the textbook, *From Poor Law to Welfare State*." I tell the students this question a week before the test and add that there is no specific answer I am looking for, no "right" answer, other than the essay must be grounded in specific material from the text and classroom discussions. Some students begin their essay by saying, "I'm not sure if this is what you want, but . . ." A few others reveal a deep anger at the abuses of the modern welfare state in the United States: "The title shows how it was better when we did not help the unworthy poor."

The majority of students, however, write essays about the persistence of poverty and the changing role of government in aiding the poor and disadvantaged. Or they write about the peculiar American circum-

stances — great wealth, constitutional freedom, complex system of government — and how they combine to structure the current welfare delivery system. One gives a cogent argument, supported by historical references, for the "lie" of a welfare state in a country so scarred by racism and sexism.

My answer to the persistent question is now: "I want an answer that is thoughtful and reflects what you have learned in this course. I need to know what you think, and what you think includes what you know and how you know it, and what you believe and why you believe it." It is an answer that I hope liberates us, if only a little, from the conceit that their role is only to anticipate what privilege dictates "the right answer" to be. They are learning to develop their own points of view, drawing selectively on materials from the course to support it.

In teaching them to develop their own views, I have often used analogies to help them consider different views and deepen their understanding of complex issues. For example, in teaching the course entitled "Human Behavior and the Social Environment," I lead discussions about parenting—what works and what doesn't. Inevitably we confront corporal punishment: Is it effective? Does potential long-term harm (unresolved conflicted feelings toward the punishing parent) outweigh the possible good (short-term change in the behavior of the child)? Is spanking the expression of a frustrated parent or a legitimate attempt to de-

crease unwanted behavior? Many students have shared that they were "whipped" and they learned to respect their parents as a result. Many of *these* students were raised outside of the United States and before passage of American laws concerning the definition, reporting, and investigation of child abuse.

My students have always been suspicious of statutory definitions of child abuse and neglect. Child rearing, they argue, is *culturally determined*. To label one set of parental practices as abusive or neglectful is to impose one culture over another. This position has some support in the social work literature on multiculturalism: "Fundamentally, multiculturalism presents a paradigm that . . . incorporates the existence of *equivalent cultural realities* within society" (K. H. Gould, 1996, p. 37, emphasis added). When I first taught the course, I would respond:

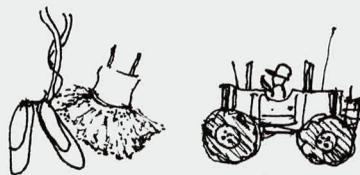
"Suppose you grew up in a country where there was no speed limit on the highways. Then you moved to the United States, drove 75 miles an hour on the highway, and were stopped by the police. Do you think it would be an acceptable defense to the charge of speeding to say that in your country it is acceptable to speed?"

This analogy always "worked"; students saw that in any society there are standards of conduct and behavior, and that being raised in a different society does not excuse devia-

tion from the standards in the place where you are. It is not that one argument is privileged, but rather a recognition of the need for common standards, based on new knowledge (e.g., the reality of the Battered Child Syndrome as a recognized diagnosis) and the (presumably) cross-cultural value of the right of every child to be free from physical harm.

Recently, however, one student noted, "Of course, the police don't arrest *everyone* for speeding." The class knew what she meant: laws are enforced differentially, prejudicially. My analogy revealed more than I thought.

Later, I wondered how I could have made such a silly mistake. I realized that while I was trying to force the students to look at only the one aspect of the issue that concerned me, the student said, in effect, "Let's keep looking at the whole pic-



ture." I made the mistake Maluccio (1991) warned against: I gave only "intellectual acknowledgment" to the social, class, and ethnic construction of the problem of child abuse and

ignored the ethical imperative to fight "conditions of racism and oppression" (p. 608). This is a "mistake" of privilege that turns teaching into a game of "gotcha."

I now see that class discussions of social welfare policy formulation, such as child abuse legislation, must include—considering that society's struggle for consensus does not end with passage of legislation but continues through implementation and enforcement, stages that can reveal the hidden preconceptions and value preferences that lie behind even seemingly non-controversial laws. The students' questioning of the cultural assumptions behind statutory definitions of child abuse reveals, in Giddens's (1979) words, how "domination [by the privileged] is concealed as domination . . . [and] the need to sustain legitimacy [occurs] through the claim to represent the interests of the community as a whole" (p. 193).

Perhaps we stray too far afield in this baccalaureate-level class. In any case my students do not appear interested in critiquing privilege *per se*. They accept the need to draw somewhere a line that prevents bodily harm to children, but that seems less interesting to them than the stories, from the diverse cultural backgrounds of their fellow students, of the variety of ways of raising children. As I listen to their discussion, I realize not only how much students learn from each other but how fundamental is process to both education and practice. Privilege provides predeter-



mined answers; multiculturalism allows for exploration of complexity.

I also have used analogies to clarify values in social welfare policy. In discussing the rationale for proving eligibility, for example, we considered that scarce resources require a method of assuring that they are dispensed only to those who are most needy and that the American value of "rugged individualism" requires the separation of the "worthy" from the "non-worthy" poor. Inevitably, we must confront the issue of fraud. "I see this woman all the time," one student said, "cashing her welfare check and I know she works!" Others in the class agreed this is outrageous. I would ask if they are as upset by middle-class income tax fraud. Some would say "yes," but clearly without the same level of anger.

So, my analogy: "What's different about poor people cheating from, say, the notion of Donald Trump fudging his income tax deductions? Surely the poor person needs whatever extra can be obtained, whereas we can be sure that Trump's lifestyle would be little changed

if he paid more to the government."

My students again agree. And yet: "Don't you understand? We see the welfare cheating! It's done by our neighbors!

What does that cheating say about *us* who live in the same housing projects, shop in the same bodegas, maybe even are in receipt of public assistance or food stamps too?"

Upon reflection, I have wondered if the contrasting verbs — "cheating" vs. "fudging"— unintentionally undermined the analogy. Perhaps my choice of verbs also reflected my privileged status: a White middle class male has more opportunity to cheat on his income tax returns than to fudge on his application for public assistance.

The more critical lesson, I now believe, is for me to understand the source of the students' anger. They are, in a way, "more American" than I am. They believe in the values of industry, struggle, commitment, responsibility, and community. Yes, they believe that hard work provides its own reward, but also should provide more than indolence and deception. It does matter that their neighbor cheats. It matters to them personally and it matters to the soul of the community in which they live. Their proximity to the cheating heightens their concern

and inflames their response. Isolated from their struggles, I can blithely say, "Oh well, to cheat is human." For people who live in housing projects, utilize underfunded municipal services, and struggle against the oppression and injustice, these values matter in a way I have not experienced. I can only learn from them, accepting their challenge to probe deeper into the biases to which my privilege blinds me.

The incident from social welfare policy may also illustrate how analysis will differ when the behavior under study reflects one's own community, when the "other" is in fact us. In my practice class, I look for a way to help my students to confront a culture unlike their own as the basis for their term paper assignment, a biopsychosocial assessment. This was not an easy task, given the many nationalities represented in class. I decided on the New Zealand film, *Once Were Warriors*.

My students had likely not seen the film, and almost certainly have never had encounters with contemporary Maori culture. The film portrays, in brutally realistic scenes, wife battering, rape, suicide, and alcohol-driven violence. It concludes with the hero, Beth, finding the hope and strength in her Maori culture to defend herself and her children. The film's harsh language and raw depictions require that I alert the class beforehand to the film's intensity and that some time is spent after to process their reactions.

Well, what do you think,

I ask when the lights were turned on. "It was like seeing scenes from my childhood," an African-American man stated. A woman from Jamaica commented on the influence of reggae on contemporary music in New Zealand. A Latino man, struggling with his own recovery from substance dependency and past criminal acts, quietly said, "Too close to home, man. Too many things I've seen. Too many things I've done." Some students planned to meet to watch the film again, together. An older African-American woman planned to buy the tape: "This film must be seen by groups in my church to understand what drinking and violence is all about."

I was moved beyond all expectation by the commonality of human experience; by how my students could see themselves in others even through the barriers of unfamiliar culture. I realized that again I had revealed my privilege. I had set up the Maori as "the other," as certainly they were for me when I first viewed the film. But my students, even when admitting they could not understand all of the Maori historical and cultural references, saw the Maori as themselves.

The challenge of exploring the meaning of culture did not end with that classroom epiphany. Perhaps my students simply ignored the differences between themselves and the fictional family, seeking only to identify what was common or familiar because that was easier

to do. Or perhaps their identification with the family derived from the parallel oppressions experienced by the urban Maori and themselves in their lives in the city. I don't know.

Final Thought

The paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould (1996) wrote that the "deepest meaning of the Darwinian revolution" is "to understand variation itself as irreducible, as 'real' in the sense of 'what the world is made of'" (p. 3). He argued that we misunderstand variation in nature because we prefer to understand evolution as progress towards something — an ideal, an essence, greater complexity, a higher average — because "we crave progress as our best hope for retaining human arrogance in an evolutionary world" (p. 29). We can only understand the natural world we live in when we consider the totality of nature, e.g., the dominant existence of bacteria, and not simply extract for consideration and approval the development of one species, *Homo Sapiens*.

Though Gould is careful to distinguish natural evolution from social and cultural change (pp. 217-230), I think an analogy is possible: the deepest meaning of human life is variation, diversity of experience not the preference of privilege. Effective social work, both in practice and in education, requires constant challenging of privilege and exploration of difference. □

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