

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE: ISSUES OF PRIVILEGE IN SOCIAL WORK AND OTHER HELPING PROFESSIONS

Guest Editor: N. Eugene Walls, Ph.D., University of Denver

The issue of privilege – unearned advantages that accrue to members of certain social groups solely because of membership in those groups, and at the cost to corresponding marginalized groups – has only recently started to emerge as a topic of scholarship in the social work literature and to become a topic addressed in social work classrooms (Curry-Stevens, 2007; Van Soest & Garcia, 2003; Walls et al., 2009). For years, as many of the authors included in this volume report in their own processes, social work educators have focused on marginalized populations, allowing us as a profession to avoid turning a critical gaze on ourselves, and the role that we play in maintaining oppression in our day-to-day lives and in our professional practice.

As a discipline, social work is not unique in this avoidance of such a critical gaze, as authors from other disciplines in this volume attest in their critique of their own chosen professions, whether higher education, communication studies, or student affairs. That is not to say that there have been no voices in social work challenging the way we do business, for there clearly have (Baines, 2007; Mulally, 2002), but those voices have tended to be pushed to the fringes of the discipline.

This collection of articles represents what I believe to be the first in a social work journal to bring together voices across the discipline (and other disciplines) to interrogate the concept of privilege and what it means for us as a profession committed to social justice. It is clear from the writings included here that

social workers – both in education and in practice – are thinking about and struggling with these issues. Our collective hope is that the publication of this collection will encourage even more practitioners and scholars to examine, write about, and challenge privilege in their day-to-day interactions with their colleagues, clients, friends, and families so we can move toward creating a more just world.

Notes on this Collection

While numerous types of privilege are examined in this volume (white privilege, male privilege, heterosexual privilege, Christian privilege, positional privilege), the reader will find that discussion of other types of privilege are largely absent (US/American privilege, cisgender privilege, etc.). This in no way is meant to suggest that these types of privilege are less important, but is rather a reflection of the embryonic state of the scholarship on privilege.

The narratives in this volume are arranged in three primary groupings by the themes of (a) critical self-reflexivity and emerging awareness, (b) privilege in the classroom and educational context, and (c) privilege in the context of social work practice. However, you will find that many of the narratives successfully integrate two or all three of these themes.

Another note about this collection is that you will find authors who are writing from early in their personal and professional journeys in understanding the complexity of privilege, and you will find authors who have been grappling

with issues of power, oppression, and privilege for many years. We sought to include this wide range of voices as, no doubt, readers likewise will mirror this continuum of awareness.

One difficulty in writing about one's journey of awakening to issues of privilege is how to convey that process without sounding as if one thinks that one "has arrived" and that one now completely understands the complexity of privilege. This concern is particularly important because just broaching the topic of power, oppression, and privilege frequently triggers defensiveness and resistance, making writing from a place of humility especially important on this topic. In my various email, telephone, and face-to-face discussions of these manuscripts with the authors, this was not an infrequent topic that they themselves brought up or that was raised by the peer reviewers (or both in some cases). While some authors are more talented at conveying this necessary humility all have, in their own ways, wrestled with what it means for them on their journeys to increased awareness.

A second difficulty in telling one's story about this topic is the necessity for vulnerability on the part of the author. If one is to paint a picture of one's starting point in the process of emerging awareness, that means there must be recognition and acknowledgement that there was a time – perhaps very recently – that one embodied ignorance about privilege. Likewise, humility requires that one must also acknowledge that they are still in process, meaning that they continue to stumble on this journey. The authors have demonstrated extraordinary courage in acknowledging this to you – their peers. I applaud their courage.

Content of the Collection

The initial narrative, by Rachel Griffin, starts off the volume by taking stock of our current historical moment. She weighs the progress we have made that is symbolized in the election of Barack Obama as the first biracial, African American President of the United States, with the great distance we still have left to realize the promise of equality. She skillfully and poetically weaves her experience of attending Obama's inauguration

with both her personal trajectory of grappling with intersectionality and what that means for her as a woman of color examining the topic of privilege, and the historical reality of our society. As one anonymous reviewer suggested, her piece makes the perfect call to action to kick off this collection.

Critical Self-Reflexivity and Emerging Awareness

The next six manuscripts in the collection focus primarily on critical self-reflection and the arduous and often painful trajectory that the authors have followed in coming to recognize their privilege and how it shapes their lives and interactions. Diane Schmitz welcomes the shaking of the very foundation of her worldview as she makes peace with not feeling safe in her process of exploring the "whiteness curriculum of life." Colleen Dunne-Cascio acknowledges the bolts of lightning that sometimes jar us out of our complacency to recognize where we are in our own identity development, and then links racialized experiences of childhood with current beliefs. Peggy Proudfoot McGuire takes up the task of exploring the process of recognizing the marginalization of one's ethnic culture when one intimately knows the strengths of that culture, commenting on the relative nature of privilege and marginalization.

Ending up raising more questions than providing answers, Amy Lopez writes about the tension between her daily personal choices and her professional commitment to social justice. In doing so, she excavates (Kendall, 2006) her shame and the resistance to recognizing privilege as true recognition necessitates that action has to be taken if one is to live a life of integrity. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz charts her life trajectory and how different experiences with social movements along that trajectory shaped who she has become as a scholar and activist.

Lynn Parker not only shares her personal trajectory and those crucible moments in her life that pointed the direction to greater awareness for her, but then – in an excellent segue to the next sections – discusses models for integrating issues of social justice into

clinical practice and teaching about clinical practice.

Privilege in the Classroom and Educational Context

To kick off this section, Ann Curry-Stevens problematizes the “pedagogy of privilege” and interrogates her previously naïve stance of uncritically supporting this emerging pedagogy without taking into account how her own privileged identities shape her view of the approach. She also incorporates the notion of *positional privilege* (a frequently unmentioned and recognized form of privilege in the scholarship on privilege) and pushes toward a model of social work education that is held accountable to marginalized communities.

Brent Cagle grapples with the professional use of self in social work education and practice, and in doing so, acknowledges the costs of embodied teaching. Elizabeth Segal and her colleagues from Arizona State University look at the role of empathy and social empathy in teaching about privilege, offering ideas about how to support the development of social empathy in social work students. Tracing the pathway of the transmission of knowledge about the concept of privilege, Samuels and his colleagues look at how power, oppression, and privilege get recreated and fortified in everyday, mundane interactions, and offer an approach to teaching about privilege that may be helpful in reducing resistance in the learner.

In one of the most poetic pieces in the volume, Jim Davis-Rosenthal revisits the costs of embodied teaching that Cagle introduces in his earlier piece. He wrestles with the vulnerability of educators around their marginalized identities, the difficulty in working with students to increase comfort with ambiguity and uncertainty, and the tension that arises in classrooms when students are at very different places in their own process, as is almost always the case. He ends, asking us, like he asks his students, “Who will be more free because of the way you lived your life?”

Teaching about practice is not the only place in the educational process where the issue of privilege is omnipresent. The final two

articles in this section query doctoral education and the research enterprise. In a piece that captures a dialogue between a former social work doctoral student and her dissertation adviser, Hadidja Nyiransekuye and Susan Manning turn a critical gaze on how social work doctoral education can recreate marginalization for international students even as it calls for increased attention to cultural pluralism. Richard Jones, Jr., then, wraps up this section with a discussion of the tension between his scholar and activist identities, touching again on issues of intersectionality, the problem with too much focus on increasing awareness and too little on action, and makes ties back to Samuels and colleagues’ piece in terms of how we touch and shape others with whom we come into contact.

Privilege in the Context of Social Work Practice

Training and consulting on issues of power oppression, and privilege is fraught with numerous potential areas of contention and tension. Robin Parker leads off this section of writings exploring one particularly taboo intersection of identities, that between Black men and White women. His nuanced analyses offers an insightful look into how day-to-day interactions can embody larger historical narratives of the dominant culture. Abby Ferber uses a series of her experiences as a parent to illustrate everyday situations that offer the opportunity to intervene and increase her child’s awareness of privilege. Julie Todd, a minister and doctoral student, unflinchingly interrogates her identity as a Christian leading her to argue that the term “Christian supremacy” is both accurate and necessary if she is committed to challenging Christian privilege. To my knowledge, this is one of the first writings on Christian privilege in the scholarly literature that has been written by someone who currently embraces a Christian identity.

Heather Greene, takes a look at social work supervision in her own practice, as an opportunity to challenge privilege and the ways in which supervisors might use the concept to deepen the education of social work interns and those whom they supervise. Wrapping up

the volume is a piece by Chris Crass, who traces his development as a White anti-racist activist and ally and the challenges he experienced along the way to being a "traitor to whiteness" (Ignatiev, 1997; racetractor.org, 1993).

Conclusion

Whether picking up this volume of writings represents the first time you have read about and contemplated the issue of privilege, or is one more exploration in years of excavating the topic in your life and practice, I think you will find something valuable herein. No doubt some will argue vehemently against specific aspects of the various authors' experiences and interpretations, and perhaps even with the concept of privilege itself. However, what should become clear, is that the concept of privilege is making an impact on social work education and practice (and in other disciplines), and is not likely to disappear from the scholarly writings on multiculturalism for quite some time.

References

- Baines, D. (Ed.). (2007). *Doing Anti-Oppressive Practice: Building Transformative Politicized Social Work*. Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood.
- Curry-Stevens, A. (2007). New forms of transformative education: Pedagogy for the privileged. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 5, 33-58.
- Ignatiev, N. (1997). The point is not to interpret whiteness but to abolish it. Lecture presented at the Making and Unmaking Whiteness Conference. Berkeley, CA. Retrieved from <http://racetractor.org> on December 21, 2009.
- Kendall, F.E. (2006). *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Mullaly, B. (2002). *Challenging Oppression: A Critical Social Work*

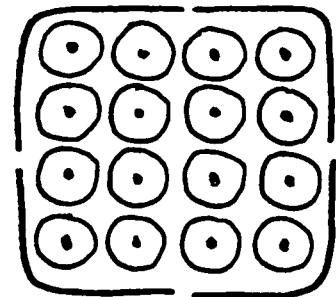
Approach. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

- racetractor.org. (1993). Abolish the white race: By any means necessary. *Race Traitor*, 1. Retrieved from <http://racetractor.org> on December 21, 2009.

- Van Soest, D., & Garcia, B. (2003). *Diversity Education for Social Justice: Mastering Teaching Skills*. Alexandria, VA: Council of Social Work Education.

- Walls, N.E., Griffin, R., Arnold-Renicker, H., Burson, M., Johnston, L., Moorman, N., Nelson, J., & Schutte, E.C. (2009). Graduate social work students' learning journey about heterosexual privilege. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 45, 289-307.

N. Eugene Walls (Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Notre Dame, and M.S.S.W. from the University of Texas at Austin) is an Assistant Professor in the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver. His research examines issues of power, oppression, and privilege in social work education, in the lives of gay lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth and young adults, and in modern forms of sexism and heterosexism. Comments can be sent to: ewalls2@du.edu



Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.