

JOURNEYING TOWARD HUMILITY: COMPLEXITIES IN ADVANCING PEDAGOGY FOR THE PRIVILEGED

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This narrative describes the author's journey away from a stance of innocence, toward one of humility in her engagement with pedagogy for the privileged. With deep attention to her identity, the contentious dimensions of this pedagogy have compelled her towards a much more troubled relationship with this practice. The following narrative profiles key contributions of pedagogy for the privileged, and articulates the contentions embedded within. It concludes with three essential ingredients to moderate her privilege: practicing from a stance of humility and "not knowing," advancing research into the practice outcomes of such courses, and accountability structures where communities hold power over classroom practices.

At the close of my dissertation, I wrote: "I continue to be challenged by this form of transformative learning and committed to building its viability and vitality among educators and various sites of educational practice" (Curry-Stevens, 2005, p.418). Similarly, at the close of the first article written about my research, I stated: "I do anticipate that pedagogy for the privileged will likely remain a contested practice in the years to come" (Curry-Stevens, 2007, p.55-56).

While this stance recognized that there were contested dimensions of pedagogy in working with privileged learners, I anticipated that I would remain a steadfast supporter and relatively untouched by turmoil that I expected to surround this practice. In essence, this is a stance of innocence. I perceived that this work was a significant addition to the educator's toolbox, and that it expanded traditional anti-racist and anti-oppression practices, particularly those informed by Freire's (1970) pedagogy. The forte of Freirian pedagogy is the liberation of the oppressed. Its impact is to leave the privileged relatively untouched as their complicity (both intentional and unintentional) and working with privileged learners has remained outside of Freire's work, with the exception of his address of "class suicide" whereby privileged allies can recast themselves with the oppressed by giving up the trappings of class elitism.¹

Today, pedagogy for the privileged is emerging as an educational form that addresses the privileged dimensions of identities. The seminal anti-oppression works of Dominelli (2002), Mullaly (2002) and Bishop (2002) form its intellectual base, and have been extended by Shera (2003) and Baines (2007). Efforts to articulate the transformations involved for privileged learners has been significant. Models that have been developed explain the process of building white identity and the transformation process of becoming aware of that privilege (Helms, 1995; Tatum, 1994; Hardiman and Jackson, 1997; Curry-Stevens, 2007) and several texts on the role of whites in the process of transformation (Bowser and Hunt, 1996; Kivel, 1996a; Rodriguez and Villaverde, 2000; Fine, Weis, Pruitt & Burns, 2004). The pedagogical dimensions (the "how to teach it" work) is nascent. First initiated by Goodman (2001) in the field of education, social work's attention to anti-oppressive practice (AOP) teaching took a significant leap forward with Van Soest & Garcia (2003). Several social work scholars are now stretching into direct applications of pedagogy, privilege and social work. Contributions are really just beginning, with growing impetus being seen in the contributions of authors such as Jeffrey (2005), Curry-Stevens (2005 & 2007), Walls and colleagues (2009), and Pewewardy (2007) setting the stage for serious dialogue about teaching

privileged learners. The first "Pedagogy of Privilege" conference occurred in June 2009, hosted by the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver and is expected to both catalyze further research and consolidate work done to date.

As someone who helped develop this field through dissertation research, I am aware of both the contentions embedded in it as well as its contributions. How I navigate these tensions has changed greatly since 2005 when I completed my Ph.D. This narrative will trace the path I have taken on this journey out of a stance of innocence and towards one of humility. In the phase of innocence, I will highlight how I emphasized the contributions of pedagogy for the privileged. As illustrated above, I anticipated remaining an untroubled supporter of this pedagogy. As I move towards humility, I will illustrate how renewed focus on its contentions, and my own social location, has caused me to reconsider and reappraise its contributions. As I conclude the paper, I will highlight how I now understand the importance of taking a "not knowing" stance about the value of pedagogy for the privileged, and what this requires of me as an educator.

The core contribution of pedagogy for the privileged is being able to create a classroom environment that more effectively assists privileged learners to undergo needed transformations to unlearn privilege and dominance, and work effectively as allies in anti-oppression struggles (which might include simply getting out of the way). It is an expansion of traditional anti-oppression education that has drawn from Freire's popular education and seeks to increase the skills of educators in working on issues of privilege in the AOP classroom.

The contributions I highlight are twofold: first is the political importance of catalyzing the transformation of people with privilege into becoming allies on struggles for social justice on the features of identity where they hold privilege. The second feature is the centering of these needs in the classroom and the potential outcomes of addressing such needs.

The contentions that arise within pedagogy for the privileged when incorporated into the

AOP classroom are numerous, beginning with the question of whether or not the transformation of privileged learners is a legitimate focus within the AOP classroom and subsequent classroom practices which, at times, can eclipse the focus on oppression. The second flows from the first: how can educators ensure that centering the needs of privileged learners is not an act of complicity with protecting privileged learners? Extending this, how can the relatively privileged faculty members who are building this field be certain the very field itself is not an overly patient indulgence of the defenses of privileged learners? This new field of practice within AOP risks being deeply disrespectful to the existing field, and potentially becomes a bourgeois journey that belies the fact that there are immediate and urgent needs to be addressed while privilege learners take too much time to potentially come to a place where they are ready to become allies. Relying on their voluntary change is precarious, without simultaneously building the profession to be more activist-oriented. At a personal level, I have rejected an untroubled relationship with pedagogy for the privileged, and am no longer suggesting that this is an innocent addition to the educator's toolbox, and notice that I cannot be entrusted with assessing whether such practice is politically savvy or complicity in domination. I have come to understand that the AOP classroom and its instructors must be accountable to those who depend on its success – the communities and its members who rely on the service of our graduates. Concurrently with building external accountability structures must be expanded research into the outcomes of the AOP classroom and a correlated set of concrete practice objectives which are believed necessary to ensure this innovation is not an expanded dalliance in reflexivity but a real force for change. Each of these contributions and contentions will be profiled in turn.

The Political Imperative for Pedagogy for the Privileged

I join with an array of educators and scholars asserting political urgency in pedagogy for the privileged. As agents of oppression

(intentional or by default), privileged people continue to advance dominance, racism, and other forms of oppression. Required is an unlearning of dominance; a process that is volatile and difficult, especially in contrast with becoming aware of oppression because it “literally excavates the ground that [learners] stand on” (Bell and Griffin, 1997, p.50) as they shift from blaming the victims for their own conditions to “naming one’s own agent group as the source of oppression as agents” (Hardiman and Jackson, 1997, p.26). This can trigger a wide array of defenses and resistance. In order to engage the privileged in anti-oppression efforts, we need to help them unlearn superiority, redefine themselves in more complex and troubled ways, and become allies in undoing racism, white privilege and other systems of domination.

Such practices have been affirmed by numerous leaders in the field, such as bell hooks who advocates for the importance of educating whites to become anti-racist allies:

“White supremacy will not end until racist white people change. Anyone who denies that this change can happen, that one can move from being racist to being actively anti-racist, is acting in collusion with the existing forces of racial domination.” (hooks, 2003, p.57)

In Canada, George Sefa Dei (2007) states:

“I think the question of whether whites should talk about racism is a ‘no-brainer’... racism can best be addressed when everyone addresses their role in maintaining the status quo... there is a place at the anti-racism table for white scholars. For the dominant, the entry point is the investigation of whiteness and white identity.” (p.viii)

Morrow and Torres (2002) profiled the need for a pedagogy of the privileged and suggested that it “remains to be invented” (p.144). Numerous participants in my dissertation research emphasized the imperative to build an effective pedagogy that stretches beyond Freire’s contributions and catalyzes privileged learners to adopt ally practices.

Pedagogy for the privileged begins to articulate pedagogical approaches to assist in these transformations. In the context of social work education, we expand beyond traditional arenas of AOP education of axes of oppression covering gender, race, class, sexual orientation, disability, religion, and age, and stretch to include the positional privilege of being a social worker over the lives of clients and communities that one serves. My classroom efforts include a focus on how social workers are embodied with the status of “social worker” holding power over the lives of their clients and communities. While individual social workers include such power, our social work profession frequently enacts social control and legitimates dominant discourses (deMontigny 1995; Breheny & Stephens, 2007; Lessa, 2006).

If social work educators aim to focus on the multiple sites of oppression and privilege, they become bound to also center the positional privilege of the social work profession. For far too long, social work has configured itself as a site of innocence (Rossiter, 2001). This innocence shows up in many ways: from the early days rooted in an untroubled notion of charity (Baines, 2007), to today’s preoccupation with interventions that do not center the social construction of distress (Abramovitz, 1998). Simultaneously, our profession and wider dominant discourse portrays an untroubled notion of social workers as “helpers” which in turn seduces those who enter the profession to adhere to the idea that they are outside of relations of dominance. Illustrating this positioning is the NASW tag line that reads: “Help starts here.”

Within schools of social work, there is uneven attention given to the ways power infuses all areas of practice, and so too of teaching. Within most US schools of social

work, AOP advocates are at the margins of their schools, for the dominant “therapeutic” approach rarely centers privilege and oppression as essential to both understanding distress and pathways to alleviate it.

This sense of marginality is rendered more complex because the work “hits home” in ways that are deeply uncomfortable because we implicate our own social work students and ourselves in these relationships of dominance and oppression. While this is a defensible stance, it is an uncomfortable one, as we shine an interrogatory light onto ourselves and our students, and this often stretches into the halls of our institution. Those who thought we could introduce such content and then expect students to only implement this analysis in their external practices have been surprised at the internal consequences. Understanding how relations of dominance are at work simultaneously extends to the social work institutions and the profession itself. The consequence is to trouble the very innocence of the profession, and the scores of “helpers” and “helping organizations” that are now implicated.

Centering the Needs of Privileged Learners in the Classroom

The second contribution is that pedagogy for the privileged has developed key insights into how, specifically, the transformation of privileged learners can be successful. My dissertation research highlighted the needs of privileged learners in the classroom. These needs are understood to include:

- § To be taught about oppression, privilege and a critical analysis of power
- § To be treated as worthy of love and support
- § To be seen as in pain and suffering, despite having privilege and power
- § To have one’s suffering recognized and affirmed by both educators and fellow learners
- § To be allowed to have ambivalence about the process
- § To be treated with compassion and sensitivity
- § To be allowed to get this wrong

§ To be gently challenged when acting imperilled or defensive

§ To not make assumptions that their identity is primarily privileged

To accept this list requires that we first accept that these needs are legitimate, and appropriately centered within the classroom. To do so requires that educators believe in the transformative potential of their practice with privileged learners: that not only can they learn about privilege, but that this is a worthwhile anti-oppressive practice. To do so means, for me, that privileged learners are capable of becoming effective allies and that they have a legitimate role in undoing injustice. Despite the fact that they will continue to be implicated in domination (for students cannot change their identities towards being more marginalized, such as non-white or disabled), they are able to make conscious choices about working for change:

“You don’t need to dismantle white supremacy or patriarchy all by yourself. What’s being made available to you is an opportunity to actually make a choice, moment to moment. You’ll fuck up and you’ll forget. But it’s almost like a meditative and spiritual practice to keep saying, ‘this is important enough to me that if I’m having this at the cost of someone else, then I want to make a choice here not to have it or to use it differently.’ I think that using it differently would be my mantra around privilege.” (Research participant as cited in Curry-Stevens, 2005, p.239)

When educators bring these concepts into the AOP classroom, along with the political imperative of being invested in the transformations of privilege students, there is a pedagogical emphasis on privilege. The task of unlearning dominance serves to develop the capacity of students to understand how their embodied identities influence their capacity for practice. Pedagogy also emphasizes how to rework power relationships towards equity and equality, and build collective power instead of hierarchical power. Such efforts aim to prepare students to implement AOP in their

practicum experiences and their future employment.

The contributions of pedagogy for the privileged are significant. The field provides an array of fruitful approaches that mobilize more efforts for social change. Durable and transformative changes among students are the goal in classroom practices. But such nobility of purpose and effort must now be interrogated.

Innocence Begins to Unravel

The contentions embedded in pedagogy for the privileged are numerous. As I newly examine these contentions, with a willingness to confront my own identity, I reach very different conclusions than those asserted in the earlier part of this paper. At its core, I am more willing to examine my arrogance and how privilege may infuse my understanding and actions. As the reader will see in this text, I am journeying away from innocence and towards both humility and the appreciation that I cannot continue to be entrusted with the AOP classroom without building accountability structures to those who depend on the success of our graduates; a combination of professional and grassroots community members who are invested in the abilities BSW and MSW graduates to enact their privilege differently.

Pedagogy for the privileged risks reinscribing the dominance of privileged students. While it is obvious that the dynamics of privilege and oppression are interdependent and co-constructed, there is a significant letting go of attention on the oppressed dimensions of one's identity, to one of interrogating privilege. This does not mean that accessing privilege is done without reference to oppression. I advocate a pedagogy for the privileged that is entered through student experiences of oppression (Curry-Stevens, 2005 & 2007), but that the political objective that I give primacy to is one of reaching social work students about their embodied privilege, as opposed to their embodied oppression. I advocate a universal construction of privilege, whereby all students are understood to embody privilege albeit to varying degrees, and their embodiment of positional privilege as "social worker." For a discussion of the rationale for

this universal construction, please see Curry-Stevens (2005 & 2007).

The works of Thompson (1999) and Mayo (2004) flag that pedagogy for the privileged can lead to centering the needs of white, male, upper class students. Under these conditions, a privilege-centered pedagogy reinscribes dominance. But if privilege is universally constructed (and all people are understood to embody privilege), then the needs of everyone are centered. It is students' privileged dimensions that are given primacy in learning about oppression and domination. The rationale for such focus is to jolt social workers away from their stance of innocent helpers and to catalyze both personal and political agency to work for change. As agents of privilege, and complicit in inscribing oppression, working with the privileged dimensions of student identities is critically important to advancing social justice.

Implicating myself in this dialogue, I now turn to my own embodied identity and consider my subject location, as a white, upper class, university professor and professional social worker, who is advocating centering privilege in the AOP classroom. What does it mean to stand as a predominantly privileged person and advance pedagogy for the privileged? What does it mean to stand as white, and advocate that the needs of white students be held more central to learning about anti-racism work? While I reach this conclusion as a result of the political importance of assisting in their transformation, it may indeed, as Thompson and Mayo each assert, be an act of dominance. In essence, an anti-oppression lens exposes that I cannot be trusted to ensure that raising the importance of the needs to privileged learners in the classroom is not an act of complicity. I have been reluctant to believe it is complicity, but I, as predominantly privileged, cannot be trusted to interpret this dynamic. I cannot be trusted to assess whether this is a reinscription of dominance, or political savvy. And yet, something within me guides me to continue to want to sustain privileged learners in the classroom – sending them fleeing because their needs were not tended seems a loss and, implicitly, a move that deepens oppression because we have lost the

opportunity of aiming for their transformation and eradicating their resistance to anti-oppression practice.

Complicating the issue of my identity is my positional privilege and the dynamic that continues to besiege whites as anti-racism allies. With my newly minted PhD (in 2005), and a dissertation that focused on pedagogy for the privileged, I slipped into a stance of arrogance as an untroubled ally who asserted that pedagogy for the privileged was a politically savvy extension of AOP. My work on pedagogy for the privileged risks being deeply disrespectful of earlier contributors, and implicitly an act of reinscribing dominance. This is doubly troubling when we notice that these elder bodies are more likely to be people of color. The main leadership within pedagogy for the privileged is white. What this means is that we are repeating a dynamic of suggesting, albeit implicitly, that professionals of color need to step aside for white professionals, and that they are not practicing to acceptable standards, and that they need to be re-schooled by white educators. I believe that we need to preserve space to interrogate pedagogy within the AOP classroom, but when this dynamic slides to one of white educators suggesting to educators of color that they need to learn from us, we have slipped into a dynamic that reinscribes dominance. Privileged educators need to understand the multiplicity of ways in which we fail to understand oppression and dominance, and how we remain truly invested in our dominance. Jeffrey's work (2005) provides an analysis of the influence of identity and subjectivities in navigating the anti-racist classroom, and provides impetus to reject spaces of knowing on multiple social work fronts, framing this as a paradox of the profession. While I found (and even sought) the path to being a groundbreaking scholar, I was seeking recognition and appreciation for being exemplary, and this allowed me to hold the stance as an "exceptional" white, who distinguished themselves from others in the field. The fact that I found it, and reaped benefits from the work, likely says more about my privilege and my ability to exploit the knowledge of others than it does about my merit.

Pedagogy for the privileged has the appeal of a shiny new penny, promising much and gaining the spotlight within the field of anti-oppression and anti-racism practice. This shiny new penny serves to undermine the contributions of older initiatives and sensibilities that are borne of anti-oppression and anti-racism education. To amplify this dynamic, I share a brief story. When invited to present my work in an education policy panel at the 2008 Canadian Race Relations Foundation's conference, I proudly sat at the table of presenters, and was honored to be introduced by Zanana Akande, Canada's first black female cabinet minister in Ontario. At the close of this session, she shared her thoughts with me about my work. She said, "But our children are waiting;" and did this research not suggest that existing anti-racism educators needed to be re-schooled in a new paradigm and approach? At the time, I remained invested in my stature as one who was sharing the leadership in advancing a new approach that would be more successful and did not contemplate this more. Now, however, I see that this work is implicitly disrespectful, especially as it does suggest that cadres of educators need to be newly educated in pedagogy for the privileged.

Our children are indeed waiting; deeply invested in a society that will rid them of racism and other forms of oppression. Notice, however, that not all children are waiting equally as some lives are violated at their core by these dynamics while others pass and are even given "passports" (McIntosh, 1988) to aid their journey. Many are waiting for an end to damaging disproportionality in many systems, and waiting for an end to dominant discourses that render them with less access to resources and lowered expectations for achievement, and significant marginalizing of their claims to society's resources. The waiting game has gone on too long – and pedagogy for the privileged risks adding another inning in this game.

As I try to reconcile these positionalities, I now embrace the possibility that I am enacting dominance. My personal goal is to remain in the lively space that considers both that pedagogy for the privileged is politically

savvy and that it is a mechanism for me to distinguish myself as an “exceptional” ally who obscures the dangers of her praxis. Both of these interpretations are possible.

And yet, this does not seem to go far enough.

Pedagogy for the privileged (and, indeed, most AOP education) has heavy reliance on reflexivity for its success. Taking time and its forgone opportunity costs (of doing something else that might have more impact on the community) is itself a privilege. We need to balance urgency with introspection. And notice that the latter precludes the former – if a culture of introspection (especially one in the privacy of one’s office or home) is advanced, then the urgency is likely to diminish. Taking the time to do this well is one that renders it, as suggested by McWhinney, a “liberal dalliance” (personal communication, 2005). Kinchenloe and Steinberg (1998) hold a similarly dim interpretation of the prognosis of relying on the patient transformation of the privileged to create change: “The need for change is immediate and people of color do not have time to wait for whites to take some slow , bourgeois journey of white discovery” (as cited in Allen, 2004, p.133). When we consider whose bodies are likely to hold more urgency for action, we must notice that more oppressed bodies will be likely to be more impatient in expecting practice to improve. This taps into earlier dynamics whereby privileged bodies are not logical leaders in action and nor should they be the arbiters of outcomes and classroom practices.

The AOP classroom really serves to focus student efforts at the personal arena, and while important, does risk leaving students there. It is essential that AOP practice not be reduced to one of contemplating identity . While introspection is important, change must be framed in two ways: the first is that awareness must be tied to action (for changed awareness is not enough for change to be achieved) and the second is that the personal arena of change must be supplemented by learning about and building confidence about working for change in the structural, institutional and ideological arenas.

Both AOP and pedagogy for the privileged implicitly suggests that we can persuade privileged social workers to become allies and advocates. This recruitment is voluntary; for while courses might be mandatory , the transformations they might manifest are voluntary. We then rely on the voluntary action of the newly transformed to achieve change. Implicitly, this can suggest that the pressure tactics of social movements and their campaigns is irrelevant. This was never the intention of pedagogy for the privileged – but it can suggest that changes can be catalyzed through voluntary shifts in perspective, instead of pressure politics. We need to preclude the possibility of this dichotomy and instead assert that change is required at both ends. We simultaneously need change strategies in the structural (policy), institutional, ideological and behavioral arenas, and need to ensure that social action is legitimated within schools of social work. Undue reliance on voluntary transformative change is indeed “undue,” and it must be balanced by building the strength and vitality of social movements and campaigns that use pressure politics to advance change. Similarly, we need effective practitioners within organizations to change policies, practices and discourses. It is time for occupational segregation to end, glass ceilings to be broken, and the gatekeepers of dominant traditions and cultures to permanently step aside. We must prepare social workers to be effectively engaged and invested in change at all levels.

I am coming to appreciate my inability to hold myself accountable for practices in the AOP classroom. Relying on my voluntary actions, even if in concert with an array of other instructors in the area, is not enough. I now embrace that we need a structural shift, one that is akin to Law’s (2000) “partnership accountability process” or Kivel’ s (1996b) accountability practices for educators but that takes it much further. I now recommend that we pilot structures within academic settings that place authority over course selection, course objectives, and even pedagogy in the hands of communities of practitioners and their grassroots membership who depend on our institution’s ability to graduate effective AOP

practitioners. Instructors should be required to meet with these bodies and be accountable for what occurs in the classroom. This body should have significant authority over course structures, objectives and pedagogical dimensions. Essentially, our privileged identity (institutionally, positionally, and by social location) makes us structurally unsound as leaders in the field.

If I continue to hold myself accountable to my students and to the tenure & promotion committee, and don't extend beyond this limit, then I have not walked my role as an ally with integrity. And that absence of integrity is one that is borne of my privilege. If I don't have an embodied experience whereby the fibers and neurons in my body resist and scream in the face of oppression and privilege, then I am an unreliable ally. I have reinscribed privilege if I let our field off the hook. I pride myself as someone who advocates for accountability structures throughout our profession – espousing that organizations be accountable to their communities in real ways, and for communities to hold bureaucracies accountable when outcomes such as disproportionality are identified. I now see how my privilege has let me accept inadequate accountability structures. Instead, successful accountability practices need to be rooted institutionally within bodies that have the lived experiences of oppression and who have durable commitments to its eradication. It is within those communities that the imperative for change is urgent, for they hold the investments in the future of their children who are waiting for an end to racism and other forms of oppression. They should hold the power to enforce change.

Tokenistic accountability must be avoided (Arnstein, 1969). When marginalized populations are consulted and placated (by protestations that those in power are “doing the right thing”), we are asked to notice that those in power continue to hold the right to decide where and how such input is gathered. Those invited to the table can be uninvited – a condition that renders their voice and influence implicitly contingent on not “rocking the boat.” Instead, real power among the marginalized can only occur when they have control and

authority. Such is the challenge of the AOP classroom. While AOP seeks to rectify unjust power relations, the AOP classroom and its institutional dimensions (as located in a higher education classroom) effectively ignores the most marginalized, resulting in tokenistic deference to the needs of those with little power. I have come to understand that these accountability practices are where the “rubber hits the road” and offer those who hold significant power and authority choices that illustrate our commitments to truly transformative practices. We are challenged to go beyond paying lip service to real change, and tokenistic involvement that leaves us with the power to decide who is at the table. What are methods that truly provide marginalized groups power and influence to demand social change?

Concurrent with excitement about such accountability is fear. What would it really look like to be accountable to an external body for what happens in my classrooms? Institutionally this is the role for curriculum committees and tenure and promotion committees. Notice, however, that the power here remains with similarly privileged bodies, particularly elders among us who have been schooled prior to the advent of anti-oppression courses and theories. I perceive that these existing institutional bodies will become an intermediate step with expanded influence over pedagogical practices. Our core task is, however, to find structures through which real power is placed in the hands of those who depend on our graduates for the services they will deliver.

At the same time, faculty need to understand the transformations that occur in the classroom, and to begin to articulate the ways in which practice skills are expected to be influenced by AOP. The researchers among us need to figure out how to track the impact of these transformations and other impacts of the AOP classroom. Does it lead to the development of an altered body of practitioners, who are able to spot and reform organizational practices that are racist and otherwise oppressive? Does it lead to the development of better partnership practices among communities of color? With the homeless? Does it lead to advocacy activities

in the policy arena? Within political arenas where decision makers allocate resources and decide how to advance the inclusion of marginalized communities in urban areas? And does it lead our profession to hold itself accountable as a social movement in anti-oppression struggles? I announce an intention to embark on this journey and to build community accountability practices in my own classrooms over the next few years. Notice again, however, that until the profession has configured itself to be accountable to communities where we practice that such efforts are voluntary and thus precarious, even dangerous, commitments.

Without such accountability, the AOP classroom risks becoming the dalliance that McWhinney foreshadowed. Continuing to hold our privileged bodies as the arbiters of concrete outcomes risks letting AOP feel better about ourselves, as we proclaim ourselves allies. The AOP classroom is poised to become an act of dominance that allows privileged educators to strengthen our resumes (both ours and our student graduates) as “anti-oppressive” and we become likely to slide into complacency. We all know of the possibilities that we can have better analysis but not doing anything differently. We are reminded by Lopes and Thomas (2006) that “good white resumes don’t trickle down.”

The stance I held of an untroubled advocate of pedagogy for the privileged was a dangerous one. Complacency complicity and the reproduction of dominance are its likely consequences. While I still hold that there is a political imperative in reaching privileged learners, I now embrace a “not knowing” stance that such practice may create an oppressive experience for those with more marginalized identities. I certainly embrace that I cannot be trusted to enact durable and consistent classroom practices that address all forms of dominance due to my privileged identity.

Drawing from the works of Tervalon & Murray-Garcia (1998) and Dean (2001) on “cultural humility,” much harm is done by embracing the “expert” and “mastery” dimensions of the concept of “cultural competence” that has taken firm root in social

work over the last decade. Cultural knowledge is ripe with stereotyping, as social workers are encouraged to “know” the other in ways outside of their direct engagement (Rodriguez & Walls, 2000). While pedagogy for the privileged may hold political savvy and may eventually be upheld by communities to which I advocate we must be accountable, my stance as an innocent educator and researcher must be rejected. Any privileged body, even those who work in dedicated ways towards being an ally, building expertise about the “other” is ripe with arrogance and error. Simultaneously, the assumption that the core relational task is knowing and understanding the “other” is primed with potential to ignore the substantial power differences that exist between social worker and client/consumer/community. Tervalon & Murray-Garcia implicate both dimensions of injustice in the notion of cultural competence, and instead advance humility.

Conclusion

Where now do I stand? I must hold out possibility, indeed likelihood, that my embrace of pedagogy for the privileged is a defense mechanism to define a role for a privileged white woman in anti-oppression practice. It likely says “make a role for me,” and “see me as an ally.” but I now reject the space that positions me as an untroubled advocate, and embrace that I am likely a “dangerous ally” (Lopes & Thomas, 2006, p.225) to marginalized communities. I now have gained enough humility to interrogate my own praxis, and recognize the value of being suspicious, while rejecting that space of innocence. I simultaneously hold that I cannot be entrusted with this reflexivity and external accountability structures are required for the integrity of AOP education, for the profession to maintain integrity in advancing AOP, and for the advancement of social justice.

My conclusion is that “I don’t know” about the vitality and value of this practice. Holding this space is the best way I know to practice social work education, and indeed social work as a whole. I have spent the last few years working with students to embrace the contradictions and ambiguities in practice and to be willing to not know (and indeed never

know) a space of innocence for themselves – or a surety that they are doing good and not re-inscribing dominant power relationships. Living in the contradictions, complexities and ambiguities is the ethos I commit to. I have to consider that pedagogy for the privileged may be an act of trespass, albeit dressed up or even cloaked as political strategy for advancing the field. I know that social work always contains elements of trespass (Rossiter, 2001). I now come to appreciate that there will never be clarity about pedagogy for the privileged. It will, and indeed must, stand in a place of contradictions and values dilemmas. I have stepped off my soapbox. I look forward to being alive in this space with students and colleagues, and embrace practice ripe with ambiguities, contradictions, and most importantly, humility. The best I can do now is say “I don’t know” and while a part of me yearns for reconciliation and movement towards certainty, a deeper and more wise self knows that embracing a “not knowing” stance is as much certainty as the field is warranted in offering.

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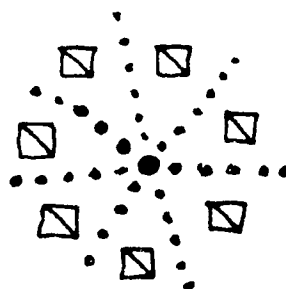
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(Endnotes)

¹ Please note that Freire's analysis thoroughly implicates the privileged, but his pedagogical work (what has become known



as "popular education") addresses only the oppressed.

² I acknowledge the powerful way Laura Nissen (personal communication, April 29, 2009) has punctuated the importance of this term. She holds it discursively framing it as a form of resistant discourse and introducing a playful notion of how "troubling" can appeal to the rebel in each of us. This discursive use of the term supports the concrete need for social workers to trouble complacency and complicity.

³ Please note that I, like the reader, am inclined to add qualifiers to each element such as, on the last item: "...although privileged dimensions of one's identity are appropriately centered in the classroom." I maintain attention to the subject, not its qualifiers as this will dilute my intention.

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