

USE OF CONTEXT/USE OF SELF: PRIVILEGE AND MARGINALIZATION AS CATALYSTS FOR GROWTH IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE

Brent E. Cagle, Ph.D., Winthrop University

The following narrative describes the author's thoughts and experiences relating to the belief that through understanding and using experiences of privilege and oppression, we make better use of "self" in social work education and practice. The author's belief is that privilege and oppression operate as interwoven factors and are closely linked in our constructions of personal and professional identities. Balancing openness and challenge, thinking on our feet and being opportunistic practitioners and teachers, and bearing witness while battling privilege with privilege are some of the strategies he applies.

I am a middle-aged man, gay Caucasian, politically and spiritually liberal, educated, Southern, and from a relatively privileged, suburban, middle-class background. The majority of the students I teach in social work courses are straight, African American or Caucasian (about 50/50), politically and religiously conservative, nearly exclusively Christian-identified, young women from a variety of backgrounds, many being first generation college students from small towns and rural areas in South Carolina. It would seem that I have little in common with my students; in fact, glancing at the lists and labels above, our Southern upbringing might be the extent of our familiarity.

Yet I have grown to learn and appreciate that I share the commonality with my students of living our privileged and marginalized selves every day, and through our relationships I hope that we may become more aware of how these contextual experiences may work to shape our practice as social workers. I believe that privilege and oppression operate as interwoven factors and are closely linked in our constructions of personal and professional identities as well as our ability to apply the use of self as social work practitioners. Bringing forth an awareness of the importance of recognizing our own context and its constant interplay with that of those we serve in the activity of practice is one of my primary goals as a social work educator and practitioner.

When I was an MSW student at the University of Nevada, Reno in the mid-1990s, I had what I might now identify as an early experience of thinking about the contextual and interwoven relationship of privilege and oppression in my life. After watching clips from the series *Eyes on the Prize*, about the African American Civil Rights Movement, I was a little taken aback when my classmates, who were nearly all Caucasians from the West, made several disparaging comments about white Southerners and how racist "they" were and continue to be. Having lived in Reno for more than a year at this point, I suggested that although there were relatively few African Americans in the city I had noticed oppression of other groups, including Latinos and Native Americans. My colleagues quickly shot back that it wasn't the same thing; it wasn't nearly as bad.

I felt discouraged that my point was missed, but then a lone voice in our cohort spoke up and said something to the effect that it was surely the same thing. It may be more subtle around here, she said, but oppression is oppression and the privileged and the oppressed each reap results on some level. This colleague was the only African American in our group; a woman from the South who was about my age and had grown up in Alabama as I was growing up in Tennessee. Unlike our classmates, she and I had already seen *Eyes on the Prize* several times back

home, within the context of being a part of the first generation of Southerners to grow up in the post-segregation South.

My colleague and I went on to say how in some ways we had more in common with one another than we had with our other classmates, and it was through the privilege of education and exposure to diversity that we had this awareness. We talked about the shared perception that we seemed to have a different, more complex, understanding of the events and evolving results of the Civil Rights Movement than did our fellow students, based on our Southern context, even though (perhaps, because) we were of a generation removed from the height of the struggle. This complex understanding included thinking about the interconnections among the experiences of poor whites and blacks, for example, before, during, and after the apex of the Movement; interconnections that continue to be frayed and sometimes exploited today.

The shared context, although overlapping for Southern blacks and whites in admittedly sometimes limited or at the least, painful, ways, gave my colleague and I the opportunity to connect with one another, and to educate our group of fellow students. That a black woman and a white man from the South could experience a contextual relationship and draw contemporary meaning from the Civil Rights Movement was a startling and challenging experience for our classmates. This element of surprise may have made it all the more powerful for them as they reflected on their own contexts and assumptions regarding the meanings we all create about race-based oppression and privilege.

After completing my MSW degree, I returned home to the South to work first as a child welfare worker and then as an in-home therapist with runaway adolescents and their families in the mountains of North Carolina. Like many other social workers, I often fielded questions related to my apparent greenness and lack of having had the experience of raising children myself. I also sensed suspicion on the part of clients who thought I might be "book smart" but wondered about my common sense. After all, what self-respecting white male (with all the privileges afforded to him) would

spend so much time in school to do such low status work with little pay?

In addition, although I didn't make it a point to disclose my sexual identity to my clients, I worried that it might further limit my perceived ability to relate to them, given the fact that they were often marginalized themselves, uneducated, and had inaccurate and stereotypical views of gay people. Clearly I had some fears and assumptions about the relationships I would encounter as a new social worker in the field.

My fears were eased as I realized that there were many ways I connected with clients, and it still seems to me that people will naturally look for points of connection, if given the opportunity, and if approached in a respectful and open manner. The fact that I was a native North Carolinian was a door opener for me on several occasions and I used this commonality as a "way in" with many families. The status of being a white male also afforded me authority on some level, no matter my sexual identity. Although I sometimes had to think on my feet to realize what I could use to gain entry into the lives of clients, I used the opportunities afforded me by connection and by privilege as best I could.

After five years in the field, I decided to pursue a doctorate and focus on teaching and scholarship. As a doctoral student, I created an opportunity to develop a course on social work practice with lesbian, gay bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) populations as part of a teaching practicum at the University of South Carolina (USC), supervised by a faculty member who later served on my dissertation committee. I developed the course under an already existing course title, "Sexuality Issues in Social Work Practice," which was previously taught with a focus on the basics of sexuality education. Using the same course title, yet understanding that I was significantly altering the course focus, I rewrote the description and objectives and developed the first elective in the College of Social Work at USC to address LGBT issues systematically over a full term. The course was successful among MSW students, and students from other graduate programs also took it as an elective.

I ended up teaching the course several times, always with good numbers and evaluations.¹

The revamped version of Sexuality Issues in Social Work Practice did not exist without controversy – not originating from the students, but from my teaching colleagues. Mid-way through the first semester I taught the course, I was made aware that some members of the faculty were deeply concerned about what was going on in my classroom. One objected to my use of the word “queer” in the syllabus, and, more disturbingly to me, questioned how such a topic could sustain a semester course. Fortunately, after I approached the Dean to defend the course, the controversy subsided, presumably squelched from the top. I cannot help but believe that my privileged status as a white male and a Southerner helped me to develop, deliver, and defend that course at that particular place at that particular time. Further on a continuum of gendered expressions of masculinity and femininity, I would place myself somewhere in the middle rather than on the feminine side of the scale; this may or may not have contributed to my accomplishment, as well. The devaluation of femininity in general and feminine gender expression in some gay men in particular is largely overlooked and little discussed, but constantly working, under the surface, in social work settings as in our larger culture.

Although students responded quite positively to the overall experience of the LGBT course, I found myself astonished by the comments they would make in class, mainly regarding what I thought were outdated stereotypes about lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people. After all, I was an openly gay instructor and they were saying these things unabashedly and right to my face. I had the mixed reaction of feeling deeply offended on one level, and I thought about how inappropriate these comments would seem to the students if they were being said about another group of people like women or African Americans. On the other hand, I thought, obviously they feel comfortable enough in the safety we created together in class to air their assumptions and misinformation, and that safety might lend itself to the possibility of growth and change. Or was it that they felt

comfort in their privilege to speak out derisively about LGBT people, as was common in their contexts?

Interestingly, in all the times I taught the course I only remember one openly gay student. I always worried that the offensive comments would be painful for LGBT students in the class, especially if they were newly self-identified and/or in the early processes of coming out. Of course, I did consider that there were LGBT students who did not out themselves to the group, and I tried to create, with the students, some basic ground rules of respect, maintaining both an atmosphere of openness to express assumptions and ask questions, while also making certain to challenge misinformation.

I believe my success in teaching the course was largely due to encouraging openness and respect for talking about issues that were, from the context of the majority of the students, sensitive, controversial, and greatly misunderstood. I learned that they had never had the opportunity to discuss such things before: not with peers, not at home, and not in educational or religious settings. This stifling effect reenacts and reinforces oppressive attitudes and ideas and it is only when safe space is present for the free expression of context and assumptions that new ones may be developed through challenge. I believe I used my own personal contexts of both privilege and marginalization to co-create, with the students, classroom experiences that led to their often reported realignment of assumptions and shifting of contextual understandings regarding LGBT people.

In addition to developing and teaching the LGBT course at USC, I began to speak in the community about LGBT issues, and LGBT youth in particular, and I continue to do so as part of academic service. I have given several invited talks to groups of school teachers, administrators, and counselors; as well as school resource officers, church groups, and groups of students in teacher education. Without exception, my ideas and the material I present have been attacked, ridiculed, and zealously debated at these events, sometimes by one participant, often by a small group. One example is from a statewide school resource

officer conference where I, along with an MSW student, presented information about working with LGBT youth. One attendee remarked that young people were just like a dog: "If the dog does wrong, you beat it out of him. This is just wrong." He wasn't kidding, and several other attendees nodded and commented in agreement.

In educating and advocating about LGBT youth issues in the community I feel like I am using my privilege—as an educated person, who doesn't appear to be "too radical," or "too gay," who is a native Southerner and with the status of working at a University—to bear witness. I bear witness about the ongoing plight of young people who are still routinely harassed and bullied, thrown out of their homes, and often are not supported and protected by the adults in their lives who are supposed to be there to do just that. I use my privilege to battle the privilege that is often afforded the uneducated to espouse misinformation in the time and place I live.

Teaching the LGBT course, speaking in the community about LGBT youth, and leading class discussions about LGBT topics in HBSE, practice, and policy classes I teach today does not come without personal costs. Often after such engagements I feel physically and emotionally drained. I question why I put myself in the position to be offended and disheartened, again and again, and it is frustrating to see how such horrible attitudes and beliefs persist amongst my students. These same beliefs and attitudes seem to be even more entrenched among youth-serving professionals in the community who are working with young people, every day.

I sometimes wonder if I have created a situation where I relive the pain of my own developmental process continually. I wonder why, at times, I have chosen a path that has led me to work in one of the most conservative and repressive states in the country, and to focus part of my professional life on issues that cause such strain and sometimes outright disdain from those I meet in my work in the community and the classroom.

The strain and disdain I refer to comes largely from the fundamentalist religious influence in this region of the country, and

another struggle for me is the claim by many of my conservative, Christian-identified students that the social work education process marginalizes and oppresses them. While attempting to provide an open and safe space to allow students to be frank about their assumptions and experiences, I also work to help them identify the contextual privilege of Christianity in our region and country, and I emphasize that social work is driven by values such as a focus on the dignity and worth of the person to determine his or her own journey. In other words, it's not really about *you*, I try to explain. Of course, it is about *all of us*, too, as self-aware practitioners and educators; it's just that the focus of practice and education is service to others. Again, I believe it is the interweaving of my own contextual experiences of privilege and marginalization that allow me to try to strike a balance between being open and being challenging.

I am still working to understand and hold at the same time together the inherent tension between my privileged and marginalized experiences and to translate this understanding into the ability to effectively employ use of self as a social work practitioner and educator. I'm also experimenting with how to engage students in the examination of their own privileged and marginalized selves so that they may begin to think about how they will incorporate these interwoven experiences, and use them to effectively engage with others in practice.

For me, on better days, I hold strongly to the belief that in my teaching and community service I am doing good and important work and that the work may be meaningful to me and others, not despite the fact that I live in such a conventional environment but because of it. I have lived in more progressive areas of the country and find it is not a good fit for me. Since I was a child I have felt "up against it" in terms of challenging the conventional while remaining connected to place and people. I love the South and refuse to be run off from it. The struggle for me is to pay attention to take care of myself as I continue to shape and give meaning to my context, as that context constantly shifts and changes based on my

relationships with students and community members I encounter in my professional roles.

The contextual use of self in social work has a long history of discussion and description. For example, in *Learning and Teaching in the Practice of Social Work*, Bertha Capen Reynolds (1942/1985) traces the development of social work from an authoritative and moralistic enterprise to a scientific yet relativistic endeavor that seeks to understand individuals in the context of their environments instead of prescribing blanket answers. Reynolds positions client self-determination and the professional use of self in a mutually enriching relationship between worker and client as primary aims.

Similar dynamics occur in the social work classroom. Reynolds (1942/1985, p. 25) acknowledges that most education (along with most "social work") occurs outside the teaching (practice) influence. Any growth or learning in education or in practice takes place because of a fundamental respect for people and a commitment to human relationship, "by virtue of adding our presence and intelligence to what is already there."

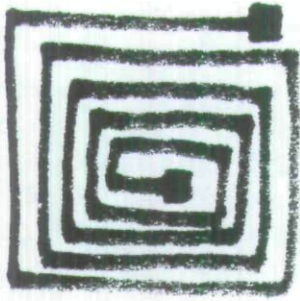
While a relational view of the use of self in practice is often centered in discussions of clinical practice (e.g., Arnd-Caddigan & Pozzuto, 2008; Reupert, 2007), context and relationship play a critical role in all social work interventions. Kondrat (1999) describes the importance for social workers to recognize the influence of our encounters with all kinds of social institutions and the multitude of personal and professional relationships we experience as the formational context of the perceptions and knowledge we bring to practice. Developing an understanding of the selves we are and how we interconnect with all those we serve, in every setting, is a significant aspiration in social work education and practice. Recognizing aspects of privilege and oppression in our experiences and how these may be used in practice and education contributes greatly to this developing understanding.

Engaging students in examining and making meaning of their privileged and marginalized selves and incorporating those meanings into use of self in practice is a

continuing journey. I see myself as an opportunistic teacher, looking for teaching moments when we may go off on a bit of a tangent, but we are going deeper, too.

For example, in recent class discussions two students shared their views of how privilege and oppression are interconnected in their developing professional lives. One student from a poor coastal community said that she was planning to use the privilege of her social work education and developing understanding of various social systems to return home after completing her master's degree, and work for change in the schools she herself attended. She shared a heartfelt story of how students from her high school, along with their families and communities, are routinely insulted and discounted in school district discussions regarding funding priorities and school consolidation issues. Another young woman, who identifies as Christian and an LGBT advocate, reported a recent event at the teen health-focused agency where she works when staff invited an LGBT youth organization to conduct training with volunteers so that they may better understand and serve young LGBT people. Some of the volunteers, older women with Christian backgrounds, shared their feelings of discomfort with the topic with my student. She talked about using her privilege as a Christian with a respectable reputation in the faith community to address the volunteers' concerns from both a human rights and a spiritual perspective in an attempt to break down labels and see the people underneath. Both students will face challenges and opportunities as they continue to integrate their privileged and marginalized selves.

Experiences and meanings of privilege and oppression are contextual, interwoven, and cannot be easily taken apart as separate and independent phenomena. In social work practice and education we can work to pay attention to how we interpret and use our contextual selves in our work as practitioners and teachers, and how we may better help students develop a more integrated use of self in their work with others, drawing on their own contextual "selves."



References

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Brent E. Cagle, Ph.D., has worked in services for persons living with HIV/AIDS as an educator, case manager, and administrator; in child welfare as a foster care worker, and in community mental health as a therapist working with adolescents and their families. Brent's teaching is centered on developmental and practice theory and social work practice with families, children, and youth. His scholarship focus is to better understand young people's experiences so that we may provide appropriate resources to meet their needs. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: cagleb@winthrop.edu

(Footnotes)

¹For more information about this course, you may contact the author at cagleb@winthrop.edu.

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