

PRIVILEGE THROUGH THE LENS OF EMPATHY

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Teaching students about privilege is a challenge. In this narrative, the authors describe how they came to understand privilege. When they experienced the vividness of a book or the actual life of another, the neural pathways that mediate empathy were stimulated. These profound empathic moments helped them to understand privilege, and can be simulated in the classroom to help students to understand privilege as well.

Over our years of teaching, a few significant challenges surface repeatedly. One of the most difficult to address is teaching students about privilege. Providing a formal definition is relatively easy. We can intellectually talk about privilege as an advantage or right belonging to a person simply by virtue of his or her birthright: being born into a certain class, race, ethnicity, gender, or other station in life. Social work students tend to nod their heads in agreement. However, raise the idea in the classroom that we have privilege, and that the privilege plays a role in the oppression of others, and agreement begins to disappear.

As middle-aged women who remember the struggle for women's rights, we don't feel particularly privileged because we experience marginalization based on our gender. We have had to prove ourselves in academia because we are women. But we are also white, and we have gone through life with the color of skin that matched the dominant and preferred majority race in this country. We have that advantage. Additionally, we each have numerous other identities that place us among the dominant culture, being heterosexual or Christian for example, or that place us among those who are in the minority, such as being lesbian or Jewish. Our experiences are shared by most people; we experience a combination of privilege and disadvantage. Privileges cut across all areas of life, through race, gender, and sexual identity, as well as through class, ethnicity, physicality, family of birth, and numerous other characteristics that may have nothing to do with achievement and

accomplishment. We understand our students' reluctance to acknowledge that they may have reached their current status as university students at least in part through the benefit of privilege. So over the years of trying to help students learn about privilege, we have asked ourselves two questions. The first relates to understanding the mechanisms of our own experience:

1.) How did we ourselves come to understand the power of privilege even though we share many types of privilege? How did we get to a point where we can see that privilege, acknowledge it, and take action toward equality?

The second question relates to using our experiences to contribute to student learning:

2.) How do we convey that understanding to our students, who may initially reject the idea that they personally may have privilege?

Liz Remembers:

It was only a book, required reading for an English class when I was 14 years old. The book was *Black Like Me*, the account of John Howard Griffin, a white journalist who darkened his skin and spent 6 weeks traveling through the South as an African American man. Reading that book had the most profound impact on me then, and has stayed etched in my memory for almost 40 years. It was the first time I remember feeling outrage at social injustice because I resonated with the agony and fear of hatred and discrimination that the author experienced. For the first time that I can recall, I began to understand the social

injustice that was a consequence of the privilege I had, the privilege of being white.

I grew up in middle class America in an almost all white world of home, school, synagogue, and summer camp. My family was active in the Civil Rights Movement. I even heard Martin Luther King speak twice, including his famous speech on the Mall in Washington, DC in August of 1963. But until I read *Black Like Me*, I don't think I got it; I began to see the connection between racism and white privilege. I have no recollection of any class discussion, activities, or writing that might have gone with the reading assignment. But I do remember vividly the book and its effect on me.

Karen Remembers:

When I was 21 and volunteering in Taiwan, coming home from work one day I noticed a very elderly woman with a heavy load on her bicycle. She was pushing her bike rather than riding it. She was struggling to keep the bike upright. Instinctively, I ran to catch up with her and gestured that I could push the bike for her. She spoke Taiwanese and I only spoke Mandarin Chinese so we could not really communicate through words. But her eyes and her smile were surprised and grateful, and she willingly let me take her load. It took us about 10 to 15 minutes to reach her home.

While we were walking, my mind was flooded with thoughts and feelings: "What would it be like to be 80 years old and still have to ride your bike to the market each day? And then push heavy loads home? What work was there still for her to do once she reached her house?" Her body was bent; her face was weathered and old; but her eyes were beautiful and filled with dignity and strength. As we walked side by side, I was overwhelmed with deep feelings of love for this woman. I did not know her, but in those minutes I felt like I had a brief glimpse into her life. I too was staggering under the heavy load on her bike. The more I exerted myself, the more I felt an overwhelming loneliness. The more my body bent in an effort to keep the bike upright, the more I realized how remarkably strong my companion had to be to survive, both physically and mentally

I would only understand years later that I was hard wired, as we all are, to think and feel things that were similar to what she might have been thinking and feeling as I saw her pushing her bike along, and even more so as I actually "walked in her shoes" and pushed the same bike she was pushing. I was 21, a very naïve, idealistic Christian American who had gone to private schools, and learned to drive and had access to a car when I was 16. What could my privileged self possibly understand about a hard-working, 80 year old Buddhist, Taiwanese woman living on the edge of poverty?

Layne Remembers:

I nervously anticipated the first day of my BSW field placement at a large state psychiatric facility. I grew up in a family where secrecy surrounded my grandfather's 30-year residence in the psychiatric ward of a Veteran's Administration hospital. My great-grandfather committed suicide. I sought out educational experiences to help me understand why some family members developed mental health conditions and others did not. The unit psychologist kindly offered a tour of the adolescent ward to which I was assigned. Upon meeting a young male resident in the hallway, the psychologist introduced me as a newly admitted resident of the unit. Shocked, I knew I had to speak up but was unsure how to proceed. The psychologist's unethical "joke" clearly defined the divide between "us"—the privileged staff—and "them"—the powerless "patients" as they were then called. I felt strongly that the young man could easily be a member of my own family and to respond too vehemently would be stigmatizing. I don't remember my exact words, but I stepped forward, introduced myself as the new social work intern, and shook his hand. Upon reflection, I felt the older male psychologist's privilege allowed him to feel it was acceptable to make a joke at the expense of a young, female intern, and to further use a powerless patient to do so. Yet I was privileged enough to have the power to set the record straight. I couldn't help but wonder: what would it be like to have mental health symptoms so severe that one had to be hospitalized and be treated

so disrespectfully by a professional staff member?

Maria Remembers:

I was excited about my first day as a student intern in a school in the South Bronx. Upon arrival in the parking lot, I was chased by packs of dogs and encountered a few homeless men as I walked the short distance to the school building. I was thankful to arrive safely. I was shocked when my assigned teacher announced to me that the students were “unteachable.” As I observed the children, I paid attention to their faces and body language; it seemed like fear and sadness emanated from them. I was struck by their worn out clothes. At snack time, they swarmed around the snack table, grabbing at every crumb. I asked my teacher to give me the eight most “difficult” students she had. She seemed relieved to pass on the responsibility. Every day I took my group of students to a small section of the classroom and listened to their stories before we ever took a pencil to paper to begin the classwork. Many of them shared that they had no food to eat at home; a few of them had been physically and/or sexually abused. All of them walked to school alone in fear of crossing the large intersections.

My world was so very different. I had food, love, and enough money to live a happy and secure life. How could I possibly understand their struggles? My ability to be completely present with acceptance for my students helped me to imagine what it was like to be them. Regardless, at the end of the day I could return to my privileged life wondering what traumas I would hear about the next day.

I was not convinced that they could not learn. In spite of their neglect and trauma, I listened to their stories without judgment, bringing in food to satisfy their hunger and offering my unconditional love. I asked my mentor if I could give my students a more advanced math test. She said she appreciated my enthusiasm, but was certain that the children would fail. I did it anyway. Much to her surprise, they passed with flying colors. For a moment the sadness in their eyes melted and was replaced by a twinkle of pride and

joy. The experience had a deep impact on me. The eyes of my students in the Bronx are embedded in my memory forever.

Our stories demonstrate that our experiences—whether the vividness of a book or the actual life of another—fostered experiences of empathy, which our minds began to process. We took those experiences and the consciousness cognitively processed through the lens of empathy into our work as social workers. These empathic moments laid a foundation to help us start to understand privilege.

What Is Privilege?

Using the simplest definition, privilege is an unearned advantage. It is that extra benefit gained by virtue of who we are, not what we have done. For example, we were all born into white, middle class families in the United States; the Taiwanese woman Karen met and the children Maria taught were born into poverty. A random accident of birth placed us in economically and racially privileged groups even while we were still in the womb. The reality that we did nothing to earn this privilege can be very disturbing, especially when we start to realize that others who don't share that privilege see us as privileged. “I worked hard to get where I am” is often our response to the idea of privilege, with each person's definition of how they worked hard as varied as those who are defining it.

Having privileged access to the benefits in society is usually not a matter of having good luck or of being fortunate. Neither is privilege solely a matter of personal effort. Routine privilege is largely due to our membership in elite class, race, and gender groups that enjoy unshared power in our society... unearned benefits come when our group has the power to increase the social burden on other groups (Hobgood, 2000, p. 3).

Often, when we critically assess our life accomplishments, we have to acknowledge that there is a mix of hard work and unearned advantage.

Privilege and Social Justice

The impact of privilege goes beyond the individual. Ethicist Mary Elizabeth Hobgood (2000), whose definition of privilege we cite above, argues that our humanity is diminished by unfairness and that those who are privileged have a moral imperative, as well as self benefit, from working to dismantle privilege. She sees privilege as a social construction that can be changed. She argues that we are social beings who are interrelated, and that privilege can blind us to that interdependency. There is an irony in this. Because privilege blinds us to the advantages we have, it also blinds us to those who in their disadvantage inadvertently help us benefit from privilege, and in turn how we actually harm ourselves over time from ignoring this injustice. That leads her to argue for social justice. Social justice requires fairness in human relationships in society. Privilege unevenly distributes advantage and therefore blocks social justice.

While privilege may be an unfortunate reality of our society, social justice is the antidote. According to Rawls (1999), the only way to have a civilized society is that "all social values—liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the social bases of self-respect—are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone's advantage" (p. 54).

Teaching Privilege

As if understanding our own privilege is not hard enough, trying to teach about privilege seems to be even harder. Students rarely feel privileged: they struggle to juggle school, family friends, and finances. It is frequently difficult for our students to have enough resources to satisfy all their needs. Higher education is a special opportunity, with only 29% of the adult population in the United States having a baccalaureate degree or higher. The percentage gets even smaller as we ascend the educational achievement scale: only 10% of the total adult population has a graduate

degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Our social work students are educationally elite, as hard as that is for them to grasp. Telling this to social work students makes an impression, but they still tend to feel disadvantaged more than privileged. All of the stresses previously identified, coupled with entering a profession that pays lower salaries and has lower status than most other professions, hardly helps social work students recognize their privilege. Add to that the reality that social workers, more than in other professions, disproportionately include women and people of color, those who have been historically disadvantaged in our society and it can become even more difficult to teach privilege. We are likely to enter a social work classroom with students who do not understand the complexity of the relationship between privilege and marginalization. It is a continuum with marginalization at one end and privilege at the other end. It is not a binary condition. We may be privileged in some instances, and marginalized in others. We may be privileged but unaware, privileged but denying it, privileged and feeling defensive, lacking privilege and angry, lacking privilege and internalizing inferiority, and all combinations of these situations. The struggle to understand privilege is a life-long process, and we often move between times of privilege and times of marginalization. So how do we teach about privilege?

We suggest teaching empathy, and particularly social empathy, as one way to pave the path to understanding privilege. To start to understand privilege, you need to understand the difference between yourself and others. We suggest that one of the best ways to achieve this is through empathy. Consider Layne's experience. She felt what powerlessness of a patient might be and wondered what it would be like to be in his situation, imagining he might be no different from a member of her family. To understand others as members of advantaged or disadvantaged groups and work towards societal good, human beings need to practice and understand empathy and social empathy. In this article, we share our concepts of empathy and social empathy, ways to teach

empathy and social empathy, and how the insight and knowledge gained can lead to understanding privilege.

What Is Empathy?

Most of us tend to assume that telling our students that, "Empathy is very important," is enough to convey its importance and help them become proficient in practice, an assumption which, however well-intentioned, is incorrect (Morgan & Morgan, 2005). Today we frequently hear the word "empathy" especially in political rhetoric, yet the definition and understanding of empathy varies. People generally agree that empathy is an interaction between two people with one person feeling what the other person is experiencing. However, there are numerous variations in the general public's understanding, such as sympathy, emotional contagion, and pity all of which are not empathy. We have developed a more detailed definition, blending the findings of numerous other disciplines and uniquely placing it within social work (Gerdes & Segal, in press). Empathy consists of three primary components: 1) an **affective response** to another's emotions or actions, 2) **cognitive processing** of the other person's perspective as well as one's own affective reaction, and 3) a **conscious decision-making** process that leads to empathic action.

In recent years, a great deal of research in the field of social cognitive neuroscience has emerged identifying the biophysical components that mediate empathy in the brain (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Decety & Lamm, 2006; Decety & Moriguchi, 2007). Neuroscientists used sophisticated brain imaging equipment to confirm what we have suspected for years, that when we see or hear another person's actions, such as laughing or crying, our body responds as if we are experiencing the same thing (Gazzola, Aziz-Zadeh, & Keysers, 2006). This phenomenon is called "mirroring," and the neural circuitry of the brain that facilitates this experience is called mirror neurons. We now know through the work of neuroscientists that the human brain is wired to emotionally mimic other people, and this mimicry initiates a physiological experience in the observer

When Karen saw the elderly woman in Taiwan, her visual and auditory mirror neurons kicked in and she began to have an automatic physiological and affective response. In other words Karen began to mentally mimic the woman's nonverbal actions and body posture and imagine what the woman was thinking and feeling. When Karen literally assumed the woman's position by taking over the heavy load on the bike, her insights were enhanced even further through somatic empathy or postural mirroring (Rand, 2002).

After the automatic physiological and affective response kicks in, cognitive processing of that response and of the other person's perspective begins. All of us, Liz through the vividness of a book, Karen and Layne through putting themselves physically in the place of the other, and Maria through listening nonjudgmentally to the children's stories about their lives, toggled back and forth between our own perspectives and the imagined perspectives and feelings of others. This cognitive processing, however, may or may not result in action. Moving beyond understanding and perspective-taking toward conscious, planned empathic action is perhaps one of the most critical components of this process for social workers. All three components of empathy can contribute greatly to understanding privilege, but empathic action can help to address the inequalities of privilege and promote social justice. For all of us, these early experiences as well as many since then, have created empathic moments and help us to continue deepening our understanding of privilege.

To be empathic, we need to affectively and physiologically respond to others' emotions, and have a cognitive awareness of the difference between what we are feeling and what the other person is feeling. This can only be accomplished when a person is self-aware and is capable of maintaining a boundary between self and other. Boundaries are maintained when we are open to another's experience without engaging our own opinions, thoughts, or emotions, and non-judgmentally accepting the other's experience. Brain science confirms that empathy has both biological components that are automatic and

a cognitive component that can be learned. Finally, when we apply empathy on a social level, we use the above skills to consider what life is like for members of groups different from our own and thereby , practice social empathy.

How Does Social Empathy Relate to Understanding Privilege?

We think the best way to teach about privilege is to infuse empathy in our teaching and use it as a tool to understand privilege. We can teach empathy by shifting our attention from a focus solely on information to concentrate more on what people are actually experiencing. Simply stated, one can go beyond thinking by integrating the whole person: thoughts and feelings. Unfortunately , in a society that encourages individualism, the stage is set for people to be overly preoccupied with their own experiences and often numb or reactive to the experiences of others. When one participates in activities that stimulate emotion as well as thought, empathy can occur offering the opportunity to step outside of ourselves. To view our own advantages or disadvantages compared to other people's life conditions requires all the skills of empathy . The concept of privilege requires this comparison: how can one be advantaged unless there is a social order where we can rank people's advantage relative to others? Thus, to understand privilege means we need to view our own situation and compare it to others. We need empathy to develop the skill of comparison. Social empathy takes this skill a step further . Empathy is the primary underlying ability behind social empathy which requires the ability to analyze social events and interactions. Simply put, social empathy is the application of empathic understanding on a societal level.

Teaching about Privilege through Empathy

Being empathic involves the three abilities discussed previously . The first is the physiological ability to mirror others. The second is the cognitive processing necessary to recognize the perspective of others, and the third is the conscious decision to act based on

empathic reaction. We can apply all three of these processes to teaching about privilege. Table 1 contains a model which outlines the steps to teach about privilege using empathy with three levels that follow progressively . Each level reflects the components of empathy and can result in achieving a deeper understanding of differences and privilege.

Table 1 - Model for Teaching Privilege through Empathy

LEVELS OF LEARNING
QUESTIONS TO GUIDE LEARNING
ACTIONS

Level 1 – EXPOSURE **viewing other people's lives.** Who is different from me? How are they dif ferent? *Visit places and people who are different from me.*

Level 2 – EXPLANATION **processing the differences in people's life experiences.** What are the differences? How have our lives been different? Why have our lives been different? What would it be like for me to live as a person of a different: class, sex, ability, age, sexual identity , race, nationality? *Read and study about different groups.*

Level 3 – EXPERIENCE **living the differences in people's life experiences and taking action.** Imagine your life as a person who is a dif ferent: class, sex, ability, age, sexual identity , race, nationality . What would it be like?What can you do to improve the well-being of people?*Spend time in places where people are different from you, interacting with people who are different from you, plan advocacy that leads to social justice.*

(based on Segal, 2007)

In our examples, Liz, Layne, and Maria explored levels 1 and 2 of the model. Karen's experience of living in a different community went further and took her to level 3.All three levels informed our actions. Our experiences reflected the neuroscience evidence of empathy. We had physical sensations, identified with people whose lives were different from our own, consciously processed that

information, and came to an understanding of how our life experiences differed. Over our lives, with these and other experiences and cognitive processing, we committed ourselves to the third process of taking action by becoming social workers and educators committed to advancing social justice. We believe teaching and modeling helped us get there. With guidance, we examined these ideas and feelings and developed a deeper understanding of privilege and social justice. As social work educators, we believe that teaching empathy from a social empathy perspective can help students to better understand privilege and social justice.

Teaching about Privilege Using Techniques that Apply Empathy

There are numerous exercises that can be used to view privilege through the use of empathy. The following vignettes can serve as discussion exercises with students:

Mary and John are an educated, white couple who both have the opportunity to take very good, high paying jobs as lawyers. However, they have very young children who need to be cared for during the day. The solution is to hire a nanny, a woman whom they would pay to come to their house and care for their children. This is not inherently problematic. The woman they may hire has homemaking skills, so she has the opportunity to take a job that needs her expertise, and they have the necessary skills to work in a law firm. However, they are thrilled to find that if they pay the nanny "under the table," that is without benefits and Social Security, it is less costly, and they can promise the nanny that she will have more money in her paycheck to spend now. She needs the job, does not have the professional degrees and job opportunities that Mary and John have, and the prospect of more money now seems reasonable. But what if we analyzed this through the lens of empathy? Would Mary and John be willing to do the same for their positions in the law firm? Would they prefer to take home more money now but not receive benefits such as health insurance, retirement coverage, or accrued vacation days? And what if we expand that analysis

and consider this example from a social empathy perspective? Do we want a two-tiered employment system where those who are less educated and female are unprepared for illness because they lack health insurance and have nothing available for retirement? Those are two areas that become social welfare responsibilities and hence affect all of us over time, including Mary and John. What are the privileges that Mary and John have that the nanny does not? Why?

Cathy and Joe have both taught sixth grade students for years in local elementary schools. The principal job in their district has opened, and both were asked to apply. The salary would be double what they are making now but there would be greater responsibilities and increased hours. They both consider it a major professional opportunity for advancement. Joe discusses it with his wife and although he will have less time and energy to help with the children at home, the long-term benefits of this promotion seem worth the costs to family. Cathy discusses it with her husband who works full-time as an accountant. The cost and stress of covering family obligations and care for the children by hiring someone to make up for the time Cathy will need for the principal job do not seem to be worth it. She decides not to put her name in for the position. Imagine how you might feel if you were Cathy? Joe? Their spouses? Are there subtle privileges for Joe? Or is it simply a matter of choosing alternatives? What are the broader implications?

Peter and Michael both teach English courses at the local community college. They love their jobs and get excellent student reviews. They are invited by their Dean to a social get-together at her house before the new semester starts. Peter smiles at the invitation and replies that he is sure his wife would be delighted to join him. Michael hesitates. He thinks about mentioning his partner of 10 years, David, but then hesitates. What if the Dean, his boss, or his colleagues were uncomfortable with his being gay and bringing his partner? Does Peter have a privilege?

Kay, a BSW who has a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, works at a public mental health clinic as a peer support specialist. These positions are open to people recovering from a mental health condition. Mary is a BSW who works at the same agency. Mary is routinely included in social events with others in the workplace but Kay and other peer support specialists are never invited. Does Mary have a privilege?

Conclusion: Empathy Helps Us Understand Privilege

These vignettes raise issues of privilege in subtle, yet real ways. In the first, there are questions about the privilege of class, education, and possibly race and ethnicity. In the second, gender privilege is an issue. In the third, heterosexual privilege is raised. In the fourth, privilege granted to people who do not have a diagnosis of mental illness is described. By imagining ourselves as the characters in these vignettes, we can begin to trigger our mirror neurons, and with direction from the teacher process cognitively what we might be feeling. This is one way in the classroom to introduce empathy and privilege. Movies, novels, and field trips are other ways to trigger mirror neurons. Discussion allows for cognitive processing to integrate the experiences. Following these processes should be the third level of building empathy, the conscious decision-making of what can be done to address privilege in our society. Through these steps, empathy can help us to understand and dismantle privilege.

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