

PRIVILEGE TAG: LEARNING AND TRANSMITTING THE CONCEPT OF PRIVILEGE

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The following narratives demonstrate how each author experienced the acquisition of privilege in three different ways, then shared their knowledge with others in various manners and for various reasons. While each encountered and overcame challenges in themselves and others in their own unique fashion, the similarities between their experiences suggest pathways for educators and activists to consider in their own attempts to relay the concept of privilege.

Authors Note: The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the policy of the United States Air Force Academy or any other government agency.

Learning about and accepting the concept of privilege is a difficult endeavor. Americans are taught such myths as “we are all equal” and “anyone can get ahead if they work hard enough.” These illusions are systematically perpetuated in our social institutions such as, for example, school and the media. When we start to realize that these values are actually ideological and not the reality for all people, it is common to experience cognitive dissonance. That is, our learned values tell us to reject the notion that our social identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, etc.) have anything to do with our own experiences and achievements in our lives. Further, it is difficult to absorb and accept the fact that when we live in a racist, sexist, heterosexist, etc. society, we are part of a system of inequalities. There is no opting out since everyone has some social identity that is privileged in society. That means we are all implicated in this unfair system (Ferber, Jiménez, Herrera, & Samuels, 2009). This concept of having privilege, an “unearned benefit” which serves to advantage us at the expense of others, is easy to reject because it goes against everything we are taught to believe is true for ourselves in society.

Thus, many people reject the notion of privilege. It is much more comfortable to believe in a meritocracy and especially in one's own merit. Some people, on the other hand, choose to accept that privilege exists, want to learn more about it, and even teach the concept to others. Their willingness to engage this topic may be due to their personal experiences or to the relationship they have with the person who is facilitating their learning about privilege. Those experiences and relationships can also dictate how likely they are to teach this concept to others once they have learned about it. The following narratives, when taken together, provide examples of this process: of learning about privilege, engaging the topic, and passing it on to others.

Dena

As a sociologist, I was always interested in conflict theory, specifically, the concept of social power inequalities. I spent much of my academic career studying those who had been on the disadvantaged side of the hierarchy. I focused on racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc., but had not thought a lot about the systemic power dynamics that serve to advantage some at the expense of others. And I had rarely if ever thought how my own actions or behaviors might contribute to the perpetuation of inequalities.

When I began teaching social theory, I continued to focus on the “isms,” but found that my students consistently pushed me to

delve further. They asked me questions about the power inequalities that perpetuated these “isms.” I answered as many as I could, but was often left wondering about the depth of my answers. It started to dawn on me that I needed to learn more. I began to seek out any opportunity that might further my education in this area. I was fortunate to find a course at the University of Maryland, taught by Paul Gorski (founder of EdChange), on the topic of critical whiteness. This course changed my career, not to mention my life.

Gorski’s course provided me with my first opportunity to hear the word *privilege* uttered in the context of inequality. I was exposed to Peggy McIntosh’s (1988) seminal article, “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” and Allan Johnson’s, *Privilege, Power, and Difference* (currently in its second edition, 2006), and started to realize what had been missing in my own education. I had been taught only to focus on “the disadvantaged” and to ignore the hierarchical structure that keeps inequalities in place. This course and these readings not only forced me to think about societal structures of inequality, but also to think about how all of this applied to my own life as a white Jewish woman.

Although I knew that as both a Jewish person and a woman, I had many disadvantages in U.S. society on a systemic level, I could hardly believe that it wasn’t until I was an adult that I had started to understand the benefits of my white skin. I certainly considered myself a feminist and someone who understood the plight of living, at times, a disadvantaged life. As Johnson (2006) would say, I considered myself “one of the good ones,” so I couldn’t possibly be racist or sexist in my thinking or my behavior. I started to learn how my own social group memberships represented something much greater than me. For the first time, I began to realize that part of the responsibility for the successes in my life had everything to do with my white skin.

At first, I was in disbelief. I literally felt like I had been kicked in the stomach. I could hardly believe that I had spent my whole life taking my own privilege for granted. It seemed to be true based on what I understood about discrimination, but I was struggling with my

long-held learned values. In class, watching the video *The Color of Fear* (Mun Wah, 1994) helped me to recognize the resistance I was feeling, and to start to get beyond it to accept my own privilege. As the realization began to sink in, I was overwhelmed. My physical symptoms continued and intensified, mirroring my mental discomfort with this knowledge. Even as willing as I was to learn about the concept of privilege, I felt angry at society for the fact that it had been constructed so unequally, that my education had failed me, and that I, in turn, had failed society.

In the midst of trying to accept what I was learning, and to make sense of it, I had an experience that showed me that what I was learning wasn’t just academic. For the first time, I was able to recognize a few of the real-life consequences of my privilege. After all, it is one thing to learn about privilege abstractly in the classroom with national macro-level examples; it is quite another to see my contribution unfurl right in front of me in my life.

One day, I walked into a supermarket to return an item. I held a bag in my hand that contained the item and the receipt. I went up to the customer service counter and stood behind an African American gentleman who was being helped by a white female clerk behind the desk. As soon as I got in line, the clerk looked up at me, and by a gesture of her hand, summoned me forward. As I was in mid-step, my arms outstretched with my bag, a light bulb went on in my head. Before I could stop myself, the clerk had already taken the bag out of my hand and started the process for returned items. My face turned bright red and I was truly in shock. My mind started to race as I began to put the pieces together: Why had this clerk interrupted her transaction with this gentleman and asked me to step forward? Is this what being *white* gets you? Is this an example of my “unearned” benefit at work? I started to reel as I tried to think of what I could do to ameliorate the situation. As I finished my step forward, I turned to the gentleman (who was now beside me) and said, “I am so sorry . I should not have stepped forward.”

He looked at me and slowly said, "Lady it happens all the time."

I felt nauseated and still stunned as this was the first time I had consciously been confronted with my own privilege. Given what I had learned in class about creating change, and inspired by Dianne Sawyer's ABC News Prime Time Live video (1992) *True Colors* (in which she continually challenges the racist clerks with whom she comes in contact), I took a deep breath, turned to the clerk behind the counter, and said, "Excuse me, but can you tell me why you took me when you were already helping this gentleman?" The clerk looked up at me, looked over at the man, and quickly looked down, silent, her face turning a deep shade of red. I realized at that moment that this was, in fact, how privilege works. My stepping forward to be helped by this clerk represented the entitlement I had been taught I deserved, and the benefit afforded to those with white skin. After the additional 30 seconds or so it took the clerk to process my return, I turned to the man and apologized again. As I left, I was overcome with shame and embarrassment when I remembered that my very first thought as I saw the clerk summon me forward had been, "Oh good, I can get this errand done quickly" with no immediate regard for "at whose expense."

In relaying this story to others, I have experienced incredible resistance. Some have claimed there must be an alternative explanation for my experience, immediately trying to put the blame on the African American man using any number of convoluted rationalizations. Since I was there, I know there were no extenuating circumstances. Both of us had receipts (actually, the clerk knew he had his but didn't yet know I had mine), no supervisor was needed for either return, neither of us had credit card or personal check issues, etc. Although the explanations people have suggested are extremely creative, they ignore the obvious and most parsimonious answer: different races are treated differently. People will misread and mishear the most obvious of situations in order to avoid the idea that their egalitarian vision of the world may not be accurate.

In the midst of all of this learning and discomfort, I found somewhat of an outlet from my partner, Steve. I began to share with him what I had been learning in class and my experience at the supermarket. For me, talking about privilege helped me further understand and work through my own feelings around the concept of privilege. He was willing to listen as I spoke about these issues, though he often challenged me on many of my arguments. He was clearly skeptical, having himself never learned about this topic either in a book or in a classroom. I believe he listened, at least at first, only out of respect for me. Even though every course I teach now is grounded in privilege theory, at the time, I was not necessarily trying to teach Steve something I thought would benefit him. In reality, I was sharing with him something I thought was very important, that I was trying to make sense of for myself, and that I hoped he might consider. Our relationship was strong enough that I felt he took what I had to say seriously.

Steve

"Yes dear," I said, as Dena was explaining this new concept she was studying to me. The strange thing is, I'm not a "yes, dear" kind of person. I know my life partner is incredibly smart and insightful, and when she puts thought into an idea, it is usually worthwhile. What she was explaining to me, however, seemed like nonsense. I didn't see my whiteness or maleness as buying me any advantages. And my Judaism allowed me to tell myself I understood oppression (although I didn't realize at the time that since I am neither Orthodox nor Chasidic, which would indicate my religion to others, my Judaism is largely an invisible identity).

Additionally, as a social psychologist, I very much understood how prejudice plays out in the world. Every semester, I teach racism and sexism, and how discrimination exists to this day. I also knew that as *overt* prejudice (the attitude) and discrimination (the behavior) were on the wane, *covert* racist and sexist attitudes and behaviors were on the rise. For example, every social psychological textbook has graphs showing beliefs about racial segregation have declined over time while the amount of people

who would vote for a qualified woman as president has increased. But subtler forms of discrimination still exist. This modern racism and sexism especially come out in statements denying any lingering forms of discrimination; we often hear people say, "racism/sexism no longer exists."

And yet, despite my respect for my partner and my social psychological knowledge about American cultural inequity and inequality my reaction was still to ignore, rationalize, and explain away the logic and evidence of privilege. This bothered me intensely as I was quite conscious of the competing ideas. The term "wrestling with my thoughts" was never quite so meaningful as I tried to reconcile the dichotomy of respect for my partner and knowledge that the world isn't fair with the severe desire to believe that I, and I alone, completely earned and deserved my successes.

I did my best to keep an open mind and look for real-world stories where oppression manifested itself. Dena's unambiguous experience in the supermarket shocked me to the core... and her refusal to be a co-conspirator served as a role model for me. Again, I was of two minds as I hoped I could emulate her reaction and yet still wasn't 100% convinced of the phenomenon.

Was this an anomaly? Perhaps her supermarket clerk was one of the few overt racists and an exception to the way the world worked that coincidentally occurred after Dena began to understand how privilege plays out in the world (certainly not the most parsimonious explanation!). Then, not two weeks later, I found myself in a similar situation that helped me move past the previous resistant rationalizations. On a Sunday afternoon, my family entered a frozen yogurt shop and got in line behind an African American family. Like many ice cream shops in America, their children and our children were walking up and down the long counter looking at the vast number of flavors. At the same time, the adults were clearly positioned in line, with Dena and me behind them. When the lone worker behind the counter finished with the previous customer, she first looked at the African American couple then turned to

look at me. Without a pause, she said to me, "Can I help you?"

Now I knew how Dena felt, and why she said she felt physically sick at times. My stomach flip-flopped and a myriad of thoughts and feelings went through my mind. I now had to deal with the backlog I had created by not processing what I had been made aware of over the course of the previous months. My mind went in several different directions: I felt pure panic; I realized I had not necessarily earned all my life accomplishments; and (weirdly) I was overwhelmed by a certain satisfying peace as I finally started to understand what was really happening. I also felt horror that this wasn't the first time I was in this situation and I had been part of the problem along the way. Accompanying that was the idea that things could, and would, change. Fortunately, my discussions with Dena prepared me; her supermarket experience provided me the knowledge that I didn't have to be passive. "I'm sorry," I said, "but this family was clearly in front of us."

The worker paused, as if confused. She then said, "No, they haven't decided yet." Since I had been standing there the whole time, I realized there was no way the worker could have known that as she had not asked them. Moreover, in American ice cream and frozen yogurt shops, the norm is to ask for several "tastes," ostensibly to discover what one wants to order. Thus, it is perfectly acceptable, even expected, that someone not know what they want before they order. Regardless, as mentioned above, the server had not asked them if they even wanted to try anything.

Again, Dena's experience prepared me for the resistance the worker was giving me, although I was surprised to see how strongly the clerk was fighting back, clearly not wanting to admit her learned racism. Her reaction, of course, mirrored my reactions to Dena throughout the past few months. Seeing myself in her made me ashamed. I turned to the family and said in the most quizzical voice I could generate, "Is that true?"

"No," said the father figure, "We're ready." And they proceeded to order.

Of course, while my participation in this oppressive situation was minimized, the worker

had still disempowered the family. At a simple level, the children had lost the opportunity to have several tastes. In fact, when one child began to talk about what flavors she was deciding between, the worker tried to catch my attention and rolled her eyes about this inconvenience. Somehow, she still believed I was her silent ally. In many ways, we did resemble each other. We were both white, and both dressed in t-shirts and shorts given the hot day. The African American family, on the other hand, was dressed extremely well in suits and dresses, as if coming from church or another formal setting. Their higher SES dictated by their dress was eclipsed by my race. More than even the initial experience itself, this tantamount alliance told me how challenging my new knowledge would be to share.

With eyes opening (not yet fully opened, but finally on the path), I have continued to notice privilege manifest itself. I started actively trying to make a difference and have collected anecdotes to share with others. For example, at the supermarket deli counter, I am sometimes taken ahead of a person of color, or at least asked if I were next. I have learned in such situations to stand behind a person so as to make the situation as concrete as possible. Remembering my own resistance, and knowing how important concrete examples were to me, these become great ways to start conversations with my students about privilege and race. I start by asking, "Have you ever been in a line and someone behind you was taken before you were?"

When I pose this question to white people, they simply do not understand what I am asking. "You mean, if there's no real line and they accidentally think someone else was in front of me?" or "You mean, if there are two lines and I'm in the slower moving one?" or "You mean, if I forgot to grab one of those number tickets?"

"No," I calmly explain, "I mean you are in front of them, you know it, they know it, the server knows it, and the server takes the person behind you first." Most white people continue to protest that cannot happen as that's what a line is for. Like Dena, I have encountered people who have created

outlandish alternatives rather than admitting what happened in the ice cream store was racially motivated. One even claimed that people who get free tastes ought to be served more slowly; interesting, as this is simply not what happens in America, and thus cannot be the explanation. Additionally, this person appeared to have actually invented this explanation as my account specifically stated the group in front of me did *not* get to taste anything. Better to mishear or even create an alternate normative experience than admit the uncomfortable truth. On the other hand, when I speak to African American groups or individuals, most nod their heads and understand exactly what I am talking about.

That's the struggle, of course. I do not believe my experiences are different from most others privileged by society I had clearly albeit perhaps unwittingly, participated in a system of oppression in which I benefitted. As I discussed with and taught colleagues and students, I came to realize that those in positions of privilege consistently had no idea what I was talking about, and actively resisted any and all evidence that they benefitted at the expense of others. In fact, many were convinced that it was the oppressed groups that actually benefitted due to affirmative action programs and other ways organizations use to foster diversity in their ranks. I still remember sharing Johnson's (2006) *Privilege, Power, and Difference* with a colleague I consider quite intelligent and his response was pure astonishment: "Do you really believe this?"

Again, those who are in oppressed groups perfectly understand what's happening. They shrug their shoulders after reading Johnson's book as if to say, "Isn't this obvious?" For nearly all people of color their lack of privilege is not invisible to them, and thus they find little surprising in the concept. This is true for other oppressed social identities as well. I interact with many female cadets who, by virtue of living in the masculinized world of the Air Force Academy, understand the concept since they witness male privilege every day.

As an educator, and a person who wants to create a better Air Force Academy and a better world, I struggle with how to get this crucial message across. Realizing my target

audience has to be those in privileged groups, I continued to think about ways to reduce their resistance. Glancing through the newspaper one day, I realized that perhaps I could use sports to help others understand the concept of privilege. Specifically, while American Division I college basketball invites the winner of each conference into its championship tournament, college football only allows the top two ranked schools to compete for the championship. As opposed to basketball, the top two teams in football are not determined by their performances, but rather by the voting of coaches and sportswriters. Over the years, it had become clear to me that different teams and different conferences are treated unequally. That is, regardless of their won-loss records, certain teams from certain conferences would never be chosen for the championship game (S.M. Samuels & Martinez, 2009).

I have found less resistance in explaining this system of privilege due to the fact that it is not about social identity. Still, some resistance does occur and is similar to that described above. Though not as personally relevant (and thus not as volatile), some people remain wedded to the status quo and are unwilling to accept counter explanations. They may argue that some football conferences are more competitive than others. That is, some teams play more difficult schedules because they have to play other members of their conferences who are better teams. While this can be true, notice this is circular reasoning: conferences are better because they have better teams, and teams are better because they play in better conferences. Thus, reputation is as much a factor as on-field excellence in determining who the best teams are.

Excellence is further compromised by reputation when polling is examined. Again, there are two subjective polls that heavily influence the final BCS poll (Bowl Championship Series, a computer poll which takes the two human polls strongly into account to determine the ranking of all teams). One poll is based on coaches' opinions, which is so obviously problematic I will not further discuss it here. The other poll is based on the opinions

of sportswriters, who may or may not be biased in favor of local (or favorite) teams. Even if a sportswriter is perfectly unbiased, she or he will not be able to watch every team play every week. Instead, only the "best teams from the best conferences" are regularly televised. Again, a systemic form of privilege: those that have power retain power.

An additional argument I hear in favor of the present system is that the bowls often select teams based on how large a crowd they can attract. This argument, of course, is *exactly* what privilege argues: it is not talent that matters, but power (in this case, money). Regardless, even if someone believes that the above system works perfectly the fact is when the season starts, *not every team has a chance to win the championship*. That is, regardless of their actual success on the field, the simple fact is that the eventual champion is already pre-ordained to be from a specific group of conferences. Not surprisingly, the University of Utah, the *only* undefeated team in the 2008 season, attempted to sue the NCAA after not being picked for the championship game. Like the University of Hawaii, the only undefeated team in the regular season in 2007, and Boise State, the only undefeated team in 2006, Utah never had a chance to be champion based solely on their conference and not their ability. In sum, American college football remains the *only* team sport where reputation is comparable in importance with actual on-field performance.

This football structure presented an excellent analogy to the social systems of inequality. Now all I needed was a student to help me look in depth into a privileged team and a non-privileged team for one season to see if my assumptions were correct.

Jaime

I kept shaking my head in disapproval as I sat in Dr. Samuels' office, listening to ideas for independent research. Many of the topics he proposed did not interest me, but the mention of privilege raised my curiosity. The thought that some people have systematic advantages over others in today's society made me feel disconcerted. Having been born and raised in the relatively homogenous population

of San Juan, Puerto Rico, I carried some incorrect preconceptions about privilege. Growing up, I thought discrimination had been largely abolished, something that seldom occurred in this day and age, and that I would never experience. After visiting the United States, however, I saw a clear disparity in the treatment of virtually every non-dominant demographic group. Most notably, I saw how the color of your skin can give or deny you the benefit of the doubt. Being Hispanic, I have experienced differential treatment from people of other races, but my ethnicity is only a very small part of it. Being male and going to prestigious, competitive schools have also been part of what segregates me from others in society, for better or for worse.

Despite my first-hand experiences, I still did not fully understand the widespread implications of privilege. For example, I thought of affirmative action as a form of reverse-discrimination, not recognizing the legacy of systemic inequalities creating the culture's need for it. Because of my racial and cultural background, I could see how some forms of privilege manifested themselves more than others. Even after exploring the concept more in depth, I was still confused by what exactly privilege was and how it could possibly be so widely spread through society. I decided to take on privilege as a research topic.

While sharing my research topic with classmates, their reactions made me realize how prevalent privilege really is. While the women and Black males I approached generally recognized my research as valid and expressed disappointment and, in some cases, anger towards the prevalence and subtlety of this benefit imbalance, White males generally were very dismissive of the whole endeavor. I was finally seeing privilege unfold before me, and it became easier for me to understand how it is manifested and perpetuated. With difficulty, I started to see that privilege is insidious and felt concerned that it would neither be as easy to teach nor be as obvious to comprehend as discrimination is.

Johnson's (2006) *Privilege, Power, and Difference* further opened my eyes to the world of privilege and how it remains deeply engrained in daily societal interactions. I started

to understand how uncomfortable it is for us to admit that we are favored by certain characteristics, and how we pass the blame on to someone else, thinking "that is just the way it's always been" or "I didn't do anything to cast privilege upon myself." After reading *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, I thought about examples of privilege that I had seen or experienced. For example, I experience male privilege whenever someone doesn't think twice about lending me their stick shift car (though I cannot drive one) while they are skeptical to lend a woman the same car. Yet, it still is difficult today for me to recognize my male privilege until I see women being treated differently.

Perhaps the most obvious example of privilege presented itself while dining with my sponsor (who was also Hispanic) at a restaurant where a waitress served white newcomers around us first even though we had been in the restaurant for a longer time. The invisibility of privilege allowed those customers to have been impressed with the waitress' expeditious service, likely unaware that it was at our expense. They had their drinks refilled several times while we sat thirsty trying to get the waitress's attention. Another example is that every time I have been pulled over in a speed trap in Texas, I have watched as white violators received their citation and were let go while Hispanic drivers were interrogated longer. For me, it always seems to be about questioning my citizenship and my credentials. On the other hand, *my* privilege became apparent when the same police officers let me go with a warning when they learn that I am a military member. Although for me being in the military was voluntary and thus somewhat of an earned privilege, it has nothing to do with driving.

Returning to our research, we began to explore privilege in other social systems to see if there were less controversial ways of starting a conversation about it with the goal of reducing initial resistance. For example, in politics, the use of caucuses over primary voting is an example of privilege. The timing and time commitment privilege those who are available at night over those who are not: those who work nights, single parents with small

children, and others who do not have full control over their schedules. We chose to focus on college football because of its widespread popularity, especially among dominant groups who often exhibit resistance when introduced to the concept of privilege.

Upon analyzing how teams are ranked and following trends over the season, we found strong evidence that teams from certain conferences were privileged by receiving higher subjective rankings and therefore received more money by going to better bowls. For example, we found that wins over similar opponents helped privileged teams more than they helped non-privileged teams, while losses over similar opponents hurt non-privileged teams more than they hurt privileged teams (S.M. Samuels & Martinez, 2009). This example resonated with me not only because football is safe to talk about in public, but also because I knew very little about college football, so I did not have to worry that I might favor one team over another in my analysis.

Soon after the 2007 season, I set out to share this knowledge and expose privilege in college football to my peers. I did not reveal that I was doing research; instead I just started talking about football. I found that I still experienced mixed reactions to my conclusion that some conferences are favored in rankings. People who were not very passionate about football were open to the existence of privilege, and I felt like they had a better understanding of how privilege is self-sustaining. From there I revealed how privilege plays out in other areas of society, and I felt it was easier for them to make the connection to other, more serious situations. On the other hand, when I exposed privilege in football to diehard fans, they immediately provided me with a long list of reasons why the BCS system was fair (e.g., pointing out the quality of the teams each conference plays). I felt defeated. It was nearly impossible to transmit these ideas to my peers because they were blinded by passion for the teams they supported. It seemed as if I was discrediting them directly as they experienced privilege vicariously through their chosen teams.

Interestingly, months later, long after the season had ended, several who had initially

balked at my conclusions came back to me and admitted that the system has some flaws, but still failed to understand how privilege feeds on and perpetuates itself. For them, understanding privilege only began when I was able to find a different example other than football. Then I understood that to them, talking about football was like talking about race or gender. A wider range of people were receptive to the election example. They could sympathize with shift workers and single parents who could not attend caucuses, and began to understand that if they didn't live in New Hampshire or Iowa, most states have a much later, and thus less influential, primary election.

As for me, I've seen privilege affect people in different groups and in organizations I did not think possible. I had gone from thinking inequality no longer existed to thinking about it as a problem that was so deeply engrained in society that there was nothing I could do but let it be, and that hopefully it would disappear. Now I feel that eradicating every kind of privilege is my responsibility; I should be the change I want to see, and help people understand how it works and how it is their problem too. It seems too few people understand it, and of the people who do recognize it, many condemn it but then sit with their arms crossed waiting for privilege to abolish itself. I find myself thinking that if we could take an extra step in education to show people how privilege directly affects them and their loved ones, everyone would take ownership over the problem.

Conclusion

Dena, Steve, and Jaime share different experiences and new realizations as they make their own journeys to understanding privilege. The panic, disbelief, and disappointment they felt compelled them to transmit their knowledge. Hence, awareness of privilege extends as each person becomes the next person's mentor. Of course, this is only one section of the whole timeline: we know that Paul Gorski came before Dena and many of Jaime's friends come after him.

Despite their differences, all three authors learned the process slowly over time. While

each described a breakthrough experience, it seemed to be preceded by a lot of work for each of them. Not only did they need to learn the theory, but also they had to be made aware of how privilege impacts others and themselves. Each described emotional (and even physical) responses that *preceded* their breakthrough. It is as if their bodies comprehended the depth of these concepts before their minds did. But instead of avoiding those feelings, all three encountered concrete experiences that made the basics of privilege finally clear. These similarities should help educators and activists understand that privilege cannot be taught with only a lecture. Instead, they should expect to take time to get the concept across and be ready to support learners as they move through the emotional and even physical difficulties that will almost certainly occur. Creating or facilitating real life experiences that lead to breakthroughs can solidify the real-life awareness and understanding of privilege.

Interestingly, it was not the dramatic, national examples that created the transformation in the authors. Rather it was the everyday mundane examples that shocked them and truly helped them understand their own contribution to the continuance of privilege. That makes sense, of course, as the personal is always the most compelling. National issues, on the other hand, serve to educate us only about generalities. For example, when 58 year old African American Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. was arrested inside his own home, it highlights that police may treat different races differently. But it is the trivial experiences of people's lives that truly seem to open their eyes and change their inner-beliefs. Additionally, it is quite easy to invent circumstances surrounding a distant example (e.g., the tremendous in-depth commentary generated by Gates' arrest by people who had absolutely no knowledge of events beyond basic facts garnered from the news). This is juxtaposed with the experiences of the authors; when something happened in their own lives, they realized there were no mitigating circumstances and the concept of privilege could not be explained away.

All three authors have important differences, of course. Their individual backgrounds and social identities better prepare them for the revolutionary outlook of privilege. Dena as a white, female, sociologist has a different experience than Jaime as a Hispanic, male, AirForce Academy cadet. And both are radically different from Steve, who as a white, heterosexual, able-bodied male has the prototypical identity to benefit from privilege. Perhaps this is why Steve exhibited the most resistance to the concept. Or perhaps it might be due to the fact he was the only one who came to the acquisition piece less than voluntarily. Dena actively sought out answers to her students' questions and Jaime deliberately chose the topic for his research endeavor.

These differences in their identities and in their willingness to learn inform us that students will probably be more receptive to the concept of privilege when they are made aware of their own oppressed identities than when they come to the topic of their own accord. Similarly, it likely will be much more difficult to force this learning on others who are unwilling to examine themselves and their place in society. This may be especially significant for those institutions that *mandate* such an experience via courses or trainings rather than *recommend* diversity and inclusiveness workshops. That said, Steve's learning demonstrates this resistance may be overcome if a personal relationship exists where the resistant person trusts and respects the educator. Further, Jaime's work shows that using domains not central to social identity may reduce the resistance as well.

Added together, these stories make a powerful statement about creating change in the world. Jaime notes that it is not enough to simply understand privilege; taking action matters. There may be something inherent in understanding privilege that encourages activism. As the authors stated in their narratives, once they began to understand the dynamics of privilege, they clearly felt motivated to create change. Is it possible, then, that this motivation is somehow due to their individual personalities and experiences? Or rather that those who truly accept privilege

often feel compelled to become a social activist? If Dena's teaching experience is any indication, she reports that those students who have internalized the concept of privilege are much more likely to choose to actively fight systemic inequalities, as compared to students she taught prior to learning about privilege herself. Perhaps as Johnson (2006) suggests, truly understanding privilege means you now know that you are responsible: you are either part of the problem or part of the solution.

Ultimately, this paper is not simply a section of a timeline as mentioned above. Rather, it represents a limb of an ever-spreading tree as each person talks to many people, who then go on to question and challenge many others. Each person becomes a node for change, with huge transformational potential as the people each reaches become their own new nodes for change. We are not suggesting that once a person understands privilege and teaches the concept to others that all now completely understand it. Accepting the existence of systemic privilege is the first step in the lifelong journey of self-reflection and social justice work. But that first step is critically important because privilege provides a framework for contextualizing our learned social behaviors and how they often can maintain or even reinforce systemic inequalities (S.M. Samuels & Samuels, in press). Learning and teaching about privilege

is vital to the process of dismantling those systems to create a more socially just world.

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