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Pease, Bob 2006, Encouraging critical reflections on privilege in social work and the human services, Practice reflexions, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 15-26.

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Encouraging critical reflections on privilege in Social Work and the Human Services

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Abstract

Critical reflection is promoted by many progressive social work writers as a process for facilitating practitioners' capacity to reflect upon their complicity in dominant power relations. However, the critical social work literature tends to focus attention on those who are disadvantaged, oppressed and excluded. Those who are privileged in relation to gender, class, race and sexuality etc are often ignored. Given that the flipside of oppression and social exclusion is privilege, the lack of critical reflection on the privileged side of social divisions allows members of dominant groups to reinforce their dominance. This article interrogates the concept of privilege and examines how it is internalised in the psyches of members of dominant groups. After exploring the potential to undo privilege from within, the article encourages social work educators to engage in critical reflections about privilege when teaching social work students about social injustice and oppression.

Keywords: *critical reflection; privilege; intersectionality, internalised dominance.*

Interrogating critical reflection

In recent years, the literature on critical reflection has grown significantly in social work and human service practice. (Fook 1999; Bleakley 1999; Morley 2004; Yip 2006; D'Cruz, Gillingham and Melendez 2007, forthcoming). The professional social worker is encouraged to be critical and reflective about the assumptions underpinning his or her practice. In particular, professionals are asked to critically reflect upon how their values and theories are influenced by the social and political context of practice (Yip 2006). Fook (1999) has argued that critical reflection is fundamental to postmodern critical approaches to practice. She discusses the emancipatory dimension of critical reflection as a process that encourages practitioners to challenge dominant power relations.

Given that critical reflection in this context is meant to facilitate practitioners' capacity to reflect upon their complicity in dominant power relations, it would seem to have consequences for understanding the worker's role in reproducing privilege and inequality (D'Cruz et al. 2007, forthcoming). Carniol (2005) says that a critical consciousness of oppression *and* privilege is central to understand the ways in which our world views are shaped by our social positioning.

However, while acknowledging its progressive potential, many writers have noted that in practice, critical reflection can easily be appropriated by technical-rational approaches (Bleakley 1999; D'Cruz et al. 2007, forthcoming; Kondrat 1999). Critical reflection is often restricted to the personal and the decontextualised individual (Bleakley 1999). D'Cruz et al. (2007, forthcoming), in their systematic review of the

literature, observe that sometimes in critical reflection the social and political dimensions of the individual's problems are neglected and emphasis is placed on individual skills and intra-psychic processes. What seems to be missing in critical reflection is the way in which our thinking and sense making are influenced by social, historical and political factors (Ixer 1999).

Notwithstanding the above criticism, critical social work writers point to the potential that critical reflection has to assist the worker to understand the socio-political context of the lives of clients and service users (Fook 1999; Morley 2004). Hart (1990) identifies parallels between critical reflection and consciousness raising in this regard. However, this assumes that the professional is working with a marginalised or oppressed group. Carniol (2005) acknowledges that social workers are developing more of a critical consciousness about the psychological impact of oppression on individuals. However, he expresses the concern that there seems to be little awareness among social workers about the impact of privilege or dominant status on individuals' subjectivities and world views.

One of the main tenets of critical approaches to social work and community development is to explain the sources of oppression in society and encourage those affected by oppression to take action to transform it. Critical social work theory thus places a significant emphasis on the capacity of oppressed people to challenge existing institutions and dominant ideologies (Mullaly 2002).

Considerable attention is given in critical social work to how oppressed groups reproduce their own oppression (Mullaly 2002). One concept that has been utilised to explain this accommodation is 'internalised oppression' which is 'the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within an oppressed group of the prejudices against them within the dominant society' (Pheterson 1986: 148). The literature on oppression is thus concerned with strategies to assist subordinate groups to challenge their oppression. Critical reflection is potentially a useful tool in this regard.

The struggle for social justice is thus usually conceived of in terms of empowering clients who may be oppressed by class, race, gender and sexuality. Little attention is given to the ways in which the positioning of the professional worker may embody class, race, gender and sexual privilege. Social workers need to be aware of how their own power and privilege are maintained or challenged in their encounters with both clients and other staff (Rossiter 2000).

Badwall et al. (2004) have noted how social workers have ignored the ways in which their practice and the conduct of social agencies are shaped by the social construction of whiteness and white privilege. They demonstrate the way in which white privilege dictates how issues of importance are identified and how the institutionalising of that privilege in the organisation shapes the limitations of critical reflection.

Carniol (2005) is one of the few critical social work writers to discuss the importance of analysing our own social location as a precursor to analysing the social location of others. He emphasises the importance of using our critical consciousness to deepen our awareness of our privilege as well as our oppressive circumstances. Such an

awareness is an important first step if we are to become involved in challenging oppression and undoing those privileges.

Even though social workers are advocates for oppressed groups, it may be just as difficult for them to recognise their privileges as it is for members of other privileged groups. Social workers thus need to understand how their social positioning as educated people, some of whom are white, male and heterosexual, accrue privileges which are reproduced in their personal lives as well as their professional practice (Swigonski 1996).

Privilege as the other side of oppression

Following Bailey (1998: 117), I suggest that by focusing solely on oppression, we 'reinforce the structured invisibility of privilege'. If we are going to develop a comprehensive account of the sources of oppression in society, we must understand how privilege is constructed and maintained. Furthermore, we need to be 'attentive to the ways in which complex systems of domination rely on the oppression of one group to generate privilege for another' (Bailey 1998: 117).

Bailey (1998: 109) describes privilege as 'systematically conferred advantages individuals enjoy by virtue of their membership in dominant groups with access to resources and institutional power that are beyond the common advantages of marginalised citizens'. Sidanius and Pratto (1999) identify the main benefits that accrue from privilege: 'possession of a disproportionately large share of positive social value or all those material and symbolic things for which people strive. Examples of positive social value are such things as political authority and power, good and plentiful food, splendid homes, the best available health care, wealth and high social status' (Sidanius and Pratto 1999: 31-2). Individuals come to possess these benefits 'by virtue of his or her prescribed membership in a particular socially constructed group such as race, religion, clan, tribe, ethnic group or social class' (Sidanius and Pratto 1999: 32). An individual's privilege is thus more a product of their membership of privileged groups than it is of their individual capabilities.

While privilege is something that one possesses, it is also something that is 'done'. It is in part through the processes of 'accomplishing' gender, race, and other forms of difference that social dominance is reproduced. That is, people live their lives trying to attain certain valued aspirations associated with these statuses. Thus, rather than seeing the concepts of race, gender and class as reified categories, we should be more interested in the processes of gendering, racialising and classing. Race, gender and class constitute 'ongoing methodical and situated accomplishments' (Fenstermaker and West 2002: 75), in which people's everyday conduct legitimates and maintains wider social divisions.

The characteristics of privilege

To critically explore the concept of privilege, we need to identify the key characteristics. Most privilege is not recognised as such, by those who have it. In fact, 'one of the functions of privilege is to structure the world so that mechanisms of privileges are invisible – in the sense that they are unexamined – to those who benefit

from them' (Bailey 1998: 112). So not being aware of privilege is an important aspect of privilege.

We are thus more likely to be aware of experiences of oppression than we are likely to be conscious of aspects of our privilege. As Rosenblum and Travis (1996) note, members of privileged groups occupy what they call an 'unmarked status'. By this they mean that people in unmarked categories do 'not require any special comment. The unmarked category tells us what a society takes for granted' (Rosenblum and Travis 1996: 142). One of the consequences of this is that members of privileged groups are unlikely to be aware of how others may not have access to the benefits that they receive and thus they are unlikely to be able to acknowledge the experiences of those who are marginalised. Many privileged individuals may thus participate in the oppression of people without being aware of it.

Peggy McIntosh (1992) distinguishes between 'earned strength and unearned power conferred systematically' (1992: 78). In this much published and classic article, McIntosh constructed a list of forty-six advantages that were available to her as a white person that were not available to people of colour under racism. Such advantages include: being able to be in the company of people of my race most of the time; turning on the television and opening the front page of the newspaper and seeing my race widely represented; being sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race; not having to educate my children to be aware of systematic racism; never being asked to speak for all of the people of my racial group; and easily finding academic courses and institutions which give attention only to people of my race.

McIntosh (1992: 70) notices in relation to men, that while some men are willing to acknowledge that women are oppressed, they are less willing to recognise that they are correspondingly 'over-privileged'. She realised, however, that there were parallels between the unwillingness of men to come to terms with their male privilege and white women's reluctance to accept their white privilege. She refers to white privilege as being like 'an invisible weightless knapsack' (McIntosh 1992: 71). To partly explain this invisibility, she regards much oppressive behaviour as being unconscious. She says that she did not regard herself as racist because she was taught 'to recognise racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring racial dominance on my group from birth' (McIntosh 1992: 81). Thus members of dominant groups are taught not to see themselves as privileged or prejudiced because they are able to only identify the more blatant forms of discrimination enacted against marginalised groups. They do not recognise the ways in which society confers upon them privileges associated with gender, racial and sexual dominance.

Privileged groups have become the model for 'normative human relations' and this explains in part why they do not want to know about the experiences of the oppressed (Baker Miller 1995: 61). The privileged group thus comes to represent the hegemonic norm whereby 'white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure' people come to embody what it means to be normal' (Perry 2001: 192). The normativity of privilege means that this becomes the basis for measuring success and failure. Thus, those who are not privileged are potentially regarded as aberrant and

deviant. The negative valuation of difference is thus reproduced by the establishment of the normative standard. Because the privileged are regarded as 'normal', they are less likely to be studied or researched because the norm does not have to be 'marked'.

The normativity of privilege provides some insight to the process of 'othering', as the flipside of the 'other' are the insiders who constitute the privileged group (Dominelli 2002). Pickering (2001: 73) reminds us 'that those who are 'othered' are unequally positioned in relation to those who *do* the 'othering' (emphasis mine). The latter occupies a privileged space in which they define themselves in contrast to the others who are designated as different'.

The social divisions between the privileged and the oppressed are further reproduced through their attributed 'naturalness'. Rather than seeing difference as being socially constructed, gender, race, sexuality and class are regarded as flowing from nature. Beliefs about social hierarchy as being natural provides a rationale for social dominance and absolves dominant groups from responsibility to address social inequalities (Gould 2000).

Members of privileged groups either believe that they have inherited the characteristics which give them advantages or they set out to consciously cover up the socially constructed basis of their dominance (Wonders 2000). When we understand the way in which difference is socially constructed, we are more able to develop strategies for challenging inequality.

Tillner (1997) also believes that part of the process of interrogating dominant identities is to question their appearance of naturalness. 'It means to lay open their contingency, their dependency on power relations and to particularise them' (Tillner 1997: 3). He proposes an important strategy of endeavouring to represent non-dominant identities as 'normal' and representing dominant identities as 'particular' as a way of subverting the tendency for dominant groups to always represent themselves as 'the universal'.

Another aspect of privilege is the sense of entitlement that members of privileged groups feel about their status. As Rosenblum and Travis (1996: 141) state: 'The sense of entitlement that one has a right to be respected, acknowledged, protected and rewarded – is so much taken for granted by those of us in non-stigmatised statuses, that they are often shocked and angered when it is denied them'. Lynn (1992), in reflecting upon her own situation as a white woman, describes how she had come to believe that she deserved whatever benefits and status she had attained because she had struggled for them. She did not recognise how her class and race facilitated that struggle.

Intersectionality and privilege

We are increasingly aware of how various forms of oppression intersect. However, we tend to focus on multiple oppressions and ignore the way that privileges are also interconnected. What an intersectional analysis makes clear is that 'all groups possess varying degrees of penalty and privilege in one historically created system' (Collins 1991: 225). Black feminist criticisms of white feminism draws attention to the fact

that while white women are oppressed by their gender positioning, they also receive privileges through their whiteness. Similarly, while working-class men are oppressed by class, they still receive some dimensions of gender privilege. These examples demonstrate just two of the ways in which one may be both privileged and oppressed at the same time. Collins (1991) coined the phrase 'the matrix of domination' to describe the way in which oppression operates on three levels: the personal, the cultural and the structural. People were seen to 'experience and resist oppression' on these levels. However, people also experience and reproduce or challenge privilege on these three levels. Given that most people can be seen to exhibit both some degree of penalty and privilege, it is equally important for individuals to see themselves as belonging to dominant groups as well as to oppressed groups.

We all need to locate ourselves in the social relations of domination and oppression. If everyone were simply privileged or just subordinated then the analysis of systems of privilege would be easier. But each of us lives at the juncture of privilege in some areas and subordination in others. Thus, we are never just a man or a woman or a black person or a white person. We all experience these intersections in our lives.

Privileged social locations and the internalisation of dominance

Those in dominant groups will be more likely than those in subordinate groups to argue that existing inequalities are legitimate or natural. Hurst (2001: 199), for example, argues that 'groups in economic and political positions of dominance exploit their positions for their own and at the cost of others' benefits'. Sidanius and Pratto (1999: 61) formulate the notion of 'social dominance orientation' to explain 'the value that people place on non-egalitarianism and hierarchically-structured relations among people and social groups'. They argue that people develop an 'orientation towards social dominance' by virtue of the power and status of their primary group. They argue that this social dominance orientation is largely a product of one's membership within dominant groups, although they seem to allow that some members of dominant groups may identify with subordinates.

It certainly seems to be so that most members of privileged groups appear to actively defend privileged positions. In this context, government interventions aimed at addressing inequality and mobilisation by oppressed groups (important as they both are) seem unlikely to fundamentally change the social relations of dominance and subordination (Crowfoot and Chesler 2003).

A concept that has been used to understand some of the ways in which privileged people sustain their dominant position is 'internalised domination'. Pheterson (1986: 147) defines internalised domination as 'the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within a dominant group of prejudices against others'. The concept of internalised domination may explain in part 'why significant numbers of people from the dominant group seem to hold oppressive thoughts and exert oppressive behaviour but do not consider themselves to be oppressive' (Mullaly 2002: 145).

Tillner (1997: 2) usefully takes this notion of internalised domination a little further by defining dominance 'as a form of identity practice that constructs a difference which legitimises dominance and grants the agent of dominance the illusion of a

superior identity'. In this process, the identity of others are invalidated. Thus, dominance is socially constructed and internalised. To challenge dominant identities, we will need to explore different models of identity and construct subjectivities that are not based on domination and subordination.

It is not possible for members of dominant groups to escape completely the internalisation of dominance (Johnson 2001). Negative ideas and images are deeply embedded in the culture and it is unlikely that men, whites and heterosexuals will not be affected by sexism, racism and homophobia. As noted earlier, prejudice is not necessarily always consciously enacted by members of dominant groups.

The concept of internalised domination helps us to understand the seeming paradox that Minow (1990) identifies in relation to those who publicly criticise social inequality, while at the same time engaging in practices that perpetuate these inequalities. While she emphasises the task of examining and reformulating our assumptions about the social world, she acknowledges that this requires more than individuals learning to think differently, because of the ways in which the individual's thinking is shaped by institutional and cultural forces. Thus while it is important for individuals to acknowledge the privileges they have and to speak out against them, it is impossible to simply relinquish privilege.

So what likelihood is there that members of privileged groups might form alliances with oppressed groups against their privilege? What would encourage them to do so? To address the potential for members of privileged groups to develop a critical distance from their privilege, it is useful to turn to feminist standpoint theory. Feminist standpoint theory posits a direct relationship between one's structural location in the world and one's understanding of the nature of the world (Bailey 2000: 284). For Swigonski (1993: 172, 179), a standpoint involves a level of awareness about an individual's social location, from which certain features of reality come into prominence and from which others are obscured.

Thus, a standpoint emerges from our social position in relation to gender, culture, ethnicity, class, and sexuality and the way in which these factors interact with our experience of the world. If where we stand shapes what we can see and how we can understand it, from what standpoint can members of dominant groups study dominance and privilege? Is it possible for members of dominant groups to develop knowledge that would contribute to the erosion of their own power and privileges?

While it seems clear that many people in dominant groups cannot escape their materially-embodied position, I argue that it is possible to escape our ideological position. The idea of standpoint relates both to structural location as well as the construction of subjectivity. Just as oppressed groups can develop a self-conscious engagement with their own position, so too can members of dominant groups develop a self-critical engagement with their dominant position. Sandra Harding (1995), for example, has argued that members of dominant groups can understand the viewpoints and experiences of marginalised groups. In this view, profeminist men can challenge patriarchal power and anti-racist whites can challenge white privilege.

Harding expands upon standpoint theory to consider how 'traitorous identities' might be able to develop what she calls 'liberatory knowledge'. She distinguishes between insiders who are 'critically reflective' of their privilege and insiders who are oblivious to privilege. In her view, making visible the nature of privilege enables members of dominant groups to generate liberatory knowledge. Being, white, male or heterosexual presents a challenge in generating this knowledge but it is not an insurmountable obstacle.

Bailey (2000) also argues that members of dominant groups can develop 'traitorous identities'. She differentiates between those who are unaware of their privilege and those who are critically cognisant of their privilege. Traitors are thus those who refuse to reproduce their privilege and who challenge the worldviews that dominant groups are expected to adhere to. Because of their awareness of their privilege, these dominant group members are able to identify with the experiences of oppressed groups. It is from this basis that white people will challenge racism and that men will challenge patriarchy. So from this premise, while it is difficult for members of privileged groups to critically appraise their own position, it is not impossible.

May (1998), for example, differentiates between a 'traditional male standpoint' and what he calls a 'progressive male standpoint'. A traditional men's standpoint is based on the privileges and powers men have, and excludes the perspective of women. A progressive male standpoint involves an ability to be critical of men's position in society and how it contributes to the inequality of women and developing an ethical and moral commitment to addressing that inequality and discrimination because of the harm it causes. This progressive standpoint could be applied to other areas of dominance as well.

Similarly in relation to whiteness, Frankenberg (1993) develops what she calls a 'white anti-racist standpoint' from which to research white women's experiences. Flagg (1997: 629) argues that white people can develop 'a positive white racial identity' that is 'neither founded on the implicit acceptance of white racial domination nor productive of distributive effects that systematically advantage whites'. This means that the white person has to accept their own whiteness. So in this view, whiteness as domination can be unlearned, just as men can unlearn hegemonic masculinity.

Teaching Social Work students about privilege

What can social workers and human service practitioners do to increase their awareness of privilege in order to challenge it? In social work education we spend a lot of time examining the experiences of being oppressed and the social forces that discriminate and exclude oppressed people.

In my privileged position of teaching in social work, I have been challenging students to reflect upon their privileged statuses as well as their subordinated positions in relation to the major social divisions in society. I ask students to position themselves in relation to class, gender, race, ethnicity, age, ability, sexuality, religion and other positionings. I also suggest that such positionings generate standpoints which partially shape how we make sense of the world. I ask them to reflect upon the construction of

their own identity, status and values so that they may more easily see both the disadvantages and privileges that individuals experience as a result of their membership of particular social groups.

In this context it is important for me to situate myself as a white straight middle-aged, temporarily able-bodied middle-class man from a working-class background. I am a father with two adult children and a six-year-old child. When I speak or write, I thus do so from this privileged position filtered through my values and theoretical perspectives. I also emphasise how my knowledge and understanding are shaped by the partiality of my experiences (Schacht 2003).

If they are members of one or more privileged groups, I ask them to list the privileges they think that they have as a result of that membership. I also ask them to reflect upon times when they were conscious of using any form of privilege they have and how it felt. By encouraging students to write their own personal narratives of oppression and privilege and by engaging in dialogue with others about their experiences, I hope to increase students' awareness of the ways in which privilege as well as oppression intersects in their lives. If social work is to be committed to social change and social justice, social workers will need to face the predicament of their unearned advantages and find ways to undo their privileges.

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Note

An earlier version of the overview of privilege in the section titled 'The characteristics of privilege' was previously published as part of the following article:

Flood, M. & Pease, B. (2005) 'Undoing Men's Privilege and Advancing Gender Equality in Public Sector Institutions', *Policy and Society*, 25, 1: 119-138

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