

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

The Official Journal of The White Privilege Conference and The Matrix Center for the Advancement of Social Equity and Inclusion.

The Purpose of Privilege: Engaging Privilege as a Form of Resistant Capital

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Abstract

Is privilege always a bad thing? The problem with privilege often lies in its tendency to only be afforded to a select few. This means that on the other end of privilege is the concept of exclusion. But what might be the possibility if we sought for all people to enjoy a privileged life? Is there a new way that we can conceptualize our approach to the concept of privilege? Privilege is truly about providing a firm and positive foundation. It is aligned with positive concepts like benefits, rights, and freedoms. It seems that what we are really working to achieve is an experience where all people are able to live lives of privilege, opportunity, and abundance. The social definition of privilege states that it is a benefit granted under certain conditions. From a social justice point of view, this “condition” is simply being a member of our global society. According to this definition, it seems that everyone deserves privilege as a human right. And so, the work of educators that are seeking to engineer a sense of social responsibility among privileged students is not to encourage students to discard their privilege.

Keywords: Privilege; Race; White Supremacy; Education; Class

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The Power of Privilege

Is privilege always a bad thing? The problem with privilege often lies in its tendency to be afforded only to a select few. This means that on the other end of privilege is the concept of exclusion. But what might be the possibility if we sought for all people to enjoy a privileged life? Is there a new way that we can conceptualize our approach to privilege? Privilege is truly about providing a firm and positive foundation. It is aligned with positive concepts like benefits, rights, and freedoms. It seems that what we are really working to achieve is an experience where all people are able to live lives of privilege, opportunity, and abundance. The social definition of privilege states that it is a benefit granted under certain conditions. From a social justice point of view, this “condition” is simply being a member of our global society. According to this definition, it seems that everyone deserves privilege as a human right.

(Social) Benefits: a benefit, immunity, etc., granted under certain conditions

(Government, Politics, & Diplomacy) Rights: any of the fundamental rights guaranteed to the citizens of a country by its constitution

(Law) Freedoms: the rights and immunities enjoyed by members of most legislative bodies, such as freedom of speech, freedom from arrest in civil cases during a session, etc.

(<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/privilege>)

And so, the work of educators who are seeking to engineer a sense of social responsibility among privileged students is not to encourage students to discard their privilege. Instead, we should be generating an energy and excitement for them to use their privilege to create lasting and sustainable change in the condition of the world, whether that world is on their campus, in their local community, or among global neighbors. This idea brings to mind Gilbert Young’s portrait, “He Ain’t Heavy.” This piece of artwork depicts a man reaching down over a wall for another man’s hand. Young considers the image to be a personal statement on social responsibility (<http://gilbertyoungart.com/>). In many ways, privilege actually positions us to make real social change. It gives us access to financial resources, networks of influence, educational opportunities, and institutional support that allows us to make an impact. In Young’s portrait, the man reaching over the wall is in a position of privilege. He has made it. He also possesses the means and skills to reach back and help others—in this case the means and skills are being muscular and strong. Rather than moving on after having climbed the wall, he instead reaches over the wall of opportunity that separates him from his “brother” and uses his skills and strengths to pull him up. This is a classic piece of African American art from which all communities have much to learn. When students of privilege (racial, class, sexual orientation, gender, etc.) are challenged to view all communities as brethren and sistren, their level of commitment to transform their privilege into a tool of resistance is strengthened.

Too often the word “privilege” is aligned with being White, male, wealthy, and straight. But in varying forms, even under-represented student communities have some form of privilege and must be included in the conversation about social responsibility. Some members of all racial groups know class privilege. Many students across various backgrounds benefit from the privilege of their sexual orientation. When you broaden the scope to include communities of people outside of college, almost all college students enjoy the privilege of higher education. Even the most under-represented students on our campuses have climbed the wall and now have educational privileges that many of their community peers do not. In her article, “Report: Greater Percentage of Americans Educated,” *USA Today* reporter Tamara Henry shared the percentage of college educated Americans in 2002. According to Henry, “The Census data, based on estimates from the long form sent to one in six households, showed that among people 25 and older 15.5% had earned a bachelor's degree but no higher” (<http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2002-06-05-education-census.htm>). College participation continues to be an unreachable goal for many Americans. A college education is most definitely a privilege. And so any student, regardless of the life circumstances that made his or her road to college difficult, is still being provided an opportunity through education that should be accompanied by a serious sense of social responsibility.

Over 100 years ago, another important African American thinker, W. E. B. Dubois, advanced the idea that the college educated had a responsibility to use their education for the benefit of others. These perspectives and opinions that have largely lived within the African American

consciousness and history must be transported into the social consciousness of all Americans. Dubois’s (1903) “talented tenth” theory speaks to the greater purpose of a college education. It positions this education as a privilege that only 10% of the population at that time was able to experience. Given the more recent statistics on college participation shared above, his theory of the college-educated 10% has not increased much. DuBois’s theory compelled the educated 10% to reach over the wall. It was much less about the educated being the chosen ones and more about instilling a sense of community responsibility in those who are provided the privilege of a college education. His philosophy holds weight now more than ever. Though our world has indeed become more flat, close, and technologically open, we are living in a much more individualistic state across countless ethnic groups. Education has become much less about community. Many view college as an individual opportunity. For those coming from lives of social affluence and economic wealth, college is simply another stop on the road to a lucrative career. For those coming from lives of hardship and struggle, college becomes the avenue for the individual to “make it out” of poverty. We should be concerned about what the young college graduates from all communities will do with their education. Do wealthy students have any sense of connection to issues of poverty? Do they understand that they are indeed connected to poverty but they are simply standing on the other end of the line? Do White students have a foundational understanding of the ways that the American power structure (including schools, media, political organization, and business) has been developed on a largely cultural imperialist hegemony? Do students who come from marginalized and oppressed communities feel a sense of responsibility to

use their education to help their community in any meaningful way—to help raise up the communities that raised them? That is the essence of the “talented tenth” concept. Though his language reflects the gender exclusivity marked by that time period, his words can be translated and applied to all students in a contemporary world:

Now the training of men is a difficult and intricate task. Its technique is a matter for educational experts, but its object is for the vision of seers. If we make money the object of ... training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men; if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans but not, in nature, men. Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools—intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it—this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true life. On this foundation we may build bread winning, skill of hand and quickness of brain, with never a fear lest the child ... mistake the means of living for the object of life. (DuBois, 1903, p.1)

This type of thinking posits our understanding of privilege beyond the campus (majority/minoritized students) and into the larger society where we push all college students to understand their place of privilege and social responsibility in the world. Educators must understand the importance of a learning experience that causes students to wrestle with their personal identities, issues of privilege, and real circumstances of oppression and exclusion. We must come to understand the impact of resistance education on

traditionally privileged populations (White, straight, etc.) as well as those students whose privilege resides on the borders (where the very act of college going represents border crossing into lives of privilege). The firm and positive commitment to their campus and local communities, nations, and world that is created in college can have potential long-term effects not only on college students, but also on the society at large. Resistance education is an important means by which young adults develop a commitment to become active and productive students, citizens, and community leaders. But most importantly, it is the means by which privileged students find their place in co-creating a more open, inclusive, and democratic world.

Cultivating a Culture of Resistance

Traditionally marginalized communities have always created cultures of resistance. Despite the social shackles placed on them, they developed strategies to survive and navigate society. Some of these strategies may be the very reason that a privileged student’s underprivileged classmate is able to sit in a college classroom. These oppositional forms of capital have been termed “cultural” capital. The idea of cultural capital is influenced by the traditional notions of capital that often represent a form of privilege for many students: physical capital (physical objects), financial capital (money), political capital (power to govern), human capital (individual properties), and social capital (social networks and norms). Perry and Ting (2002), in their examination of the disparities of service within the student affairs division at a large, predominantly White institution, argued that the historical vestiges within the institution that often privileged, educated, and celebrated

majority cultures were a key factor in contributing to long-lasting service disparities. “The historical narratives of how oppression becomes institutionalized reveal characters, settings, and resources that ossify power along lines of culture, race, gender and ethnicity” (p. 5). Furthermore, such historical legacies can impact the campus climate and create an institutional culture of exclusion (Hurtado, 1998). Thus, the demand made by students for universities to increase diversity and evaluate the effectiveness of cultural offerings is an expectation to equalize many forms of capital, the most prevalent being cultural capital. The term “cultural capital” represents cultural beliefs, values, rituals, norms, and experiences that both equip and include people in the life of a society or environment (Bowles, 2006; Macleod, 1995). There are six forms of cultural capital that are often important to the cultural group (Yosso, 2005). These include:

1. Aspirational Capital, or the ability to achieve hopes and dreams;
2. Linguistic Capital, or multiple language skills;
3. Familial Capital, or family history and memory;
4. Social Capital, or support systems in the form of community networks;
5. Navigational Capital, or the skill to navigate through various institutions; and
6. Resistant Capital or the skills developed through behavior that works in opposition to oppression. (Yosso, 2005)

Providing an opportunity for privileged students to critically understand the utility and importance of these forms of capital is important. For the privileged

student, one of the most important forms of cultural capital that can be learned from traditionally marginalized communities is resistant capital. We must give students experiences that build their skills and capacity to take real action against oppression. How can they use their social networks to create change? How can they use their degrees for some real social benefit? How can they use their voices to change minds?

The first step in our work educating privileged students about issues of social justice and resistance involves the act of acknowledgement. Of course, students must recognize and acknowledge their own privilege. But students must also acknowledge the larger, broader, and systemic realities of oppression. The process of unlearning myths of meritocracy and individuality is important. When students are pushed to see oppression not as an individual circumstance but as a larger web of social structures that constrain both the classmate sitting next to them as well as whole communities a more realistic view of oppression is developed. Oppression is not simply about another person being unable to achieve what you have because he or she doesn't have the same privileges. The larger issue is the major social systems that create a situation where this other person can't come to know or experience privilege, opportunity, or a sense of inclusion: significant inequalities in the education system; the ways that urban poverty is geographically mapped and planned; inequities in the criminal justice system; a lack of economic infrastructure in poor communities; dysfunctional administrative policies in social agencies; and inadequate access to healthcare and health education. As Marilyn Frye (2010) reminds us in her classic essay on oppression, a commitment

to social justice requires a macroscopic rather than microscopic approach:

The root of the word "oppression" is the element "press" . . . to press a pair of pants; printing press; press the button. Presses are used to mold things or flatten them or reduce them in bulk. . . . Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers, which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing's motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce. . . . It is the experience of being caged in. . . . Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere. . . . It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you will see it in a moment. . . . It is perfectly obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon. (p. 2, <http://feministtheoryreadinggroup.wordpress.com/2010/11/23/marilyn-frye-the-politics-of-reality-oppression/>)

And so the work around social justice and resistance within the field of higher education must work through a broad and complex lens of how oppression lives beyond the campus. This is not simply an issue of one student understanding another. Rather, this is an issue of clearing the view so that one student can truly see another's full life circumstances—as a student, son or daughter, brother or sister, and community member. Resistance education is interdisciplinary. It affirms the theoretical perspectives and ideologies of disciplines like transnational feminism. Surhone, Timpledon, and Marseken (2010) explain the concept of transnational feminism:

As a feminist approach, it can be said that transnational feminism is generally attentive to intersections among nationhood, race, gender, sexuality and economic exploitation on a world scale. . . . Transnational feminists inquire into the social, political and economic conditions comprising imperialism; their connections to colonialism and nationalism; the role of gender, the state, race, class, and sexuality in the organization of resistance to hegemonies in the making and unmaking of nation and nation-state. (p. 10)

When we broaden the scope of our work to both include and move beyond the campus, we make real inroads in fighting the larger issue of cultural hegemony and cultural imperialism. Hegemony and cultural imperialism concern the domination of power—one social class or entity has power over the other. Beyond the ways that this power of dominion provides the dominant group access to resources, wealth, and opportunity, this group's values, behaviors, beliefs, and ways of knowing and being

become the norm. This forms the foundation for privilege.

In twentieth-century political science, the concept of hegemony is central to cultural hegemony, a philosophic and sociologic explanation of how, by the manipulation of the societal value system, one social class dominates the other social classes of a society, with a world view justifying the status quo. . . . One of the reasons often given for opposing any form of cultural imperialism, voluntary or otherwise, is the preservation of cultural diversity, a goal seen by some as analogous to the preservation of ecological diversity. Proponents of this idea argue either that such diversity is valuable in itself, to preserve human historical heritage and knowledge, or instrumentally valuable because it makes available more ways of solving problems and responding to catastrophes, natural or otherwise. (Stanford, 1996, p. 76)

Resistance education must move privileged students towards wrestling with these big and complex issues, such as opposing hegemony and cultural imperialism on the campus and in the broader society. Any one, isolated experience may not achieve this goal. But each experience will indeed move them along the path. To achieve this, there must be a commitment to create significant learning experiences that are many and varied. According to Fink (2003), significant learning differs from other types of learning because of its utility, urgency, and saliency in students' lives. One of the most defining factors is the way in which the educational experience motivates a change in the

student. "For learning to occur, there has to be some kind of change in the learner. No change, no learning. And significant learning requires that there be some kind of lasting change that is important in terms of the learner's life" (p. 30). Significant learning refers to the ways in which education provides opportunities for students to come to know themselves more deeply; develop important attachments to the process of learning; connect what they learn to their lives; establish a sense of caring and commitment about issues of oppression, social justice, and resistance; and take action on what they have learned in some meaningful way. In his book *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professorate*, Boyer (1997) points out the growing need for colleges and universities to connect with communities in more meaningful ways:

The scholarship of engagement means connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic and ethical problems, to our children, to our schools, to our teachers and to our cities. . . . I have this growing conviction that what's also needed is not just more programs, but a larger purpose, a sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction in the nation's life as we move toward century twenty-one. (p. 64)

Resistance education recognizes that not only do individual students need college, but communities also need college. They need the resources, talents, and skills that reside on a college campus and they need deep and creative thinkers who can work in partnership to help resist oppression. But beyond this, colleges need communities. Students have much to learn from community activists, artists, organizers, and

elders. Exposing privileged students to the worldviews and experiences of both their marginalized peers and citizens outside of campus strengthens their sense of place as resisters to oppression, cultural hegemony, and social exclusion.

Social Justice Orientations

What role can privileged students take in the fight for social justice—in the effort to resist oppression? Their educational experiences should help them build skills to assume any number of roles. In the *About Campus* article “A Seat at the Table That I Set: Beyond Social Justice Allies,” three examples of the roles that students can embrace are shared (Jenkins, 2009). Choosing any of these roles depends on a student’s personal talents, skills, and comfort levels.

***Ally (Relational)** An ally is a relational orientation towards justice . . . the word “ally” is defined by Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary in the following way: to develop a friendly association, to unite formally, and to enter into an alliance for some common cause or purpose. As Robert Reason and Ellen Broido point out in their chapter, *Issues and Strategies for Social Justice Allies*, allies reside outside of a community/group and may have some of the privileges of the dominant group. Though they are not members of the target group, they actively support the struggles of this group.*

***Advocate (Vocal)** To be an advocate is to take a vocal orientation towards justice. An advocate is one that argues for a cause; a supporter or defender; a person who pleads for a cause or propounds an idea.*

Advocates give voice to issues; they may or may not identify with the group, and may or may not take action beyond articulating what needs to be changed.

***Agent (Action)** Agency represents an action-oriented involvement in social justice issues. An agent is defined as one that acts or has the power or authority to act. An agent is a means by which something is done and a force that causes change. Agents may or may not identify with the community or group. Agents orient themselves toward action and go beyond developing empathetic relations or vocal oppositions—they work to create change within the dimensions of society in which they may or may not have power. (p. 28)*

In practice, resistance education provides privileged students an opportunity to understand positionality (ally, advocate, agent). They leave feeling willing and able to assume one, all, or other self-created positions available to them within the work of social justice. They may volunteer to support efforts created by others; they might take to a social networking site or a blog to give voice to an issue; or they may create their own organization to address a critical problem. An example of this type of social agency among privileged students is the case of Sarah Evans, a young, White undergraduate woman at George Mason University. Sarah immediately jumped into the role of advocate upon hearing about a racial incident between the police and an African student on her campus. She had never been the victim of any harassment similar to what her classmate experienced. But Sarah took to Facebook and wrote a public statement to make others aware of the issue. Shared below is an excerpt of the

simple story that Sarah told which ultimately gave voice to a friend who had been rendered voiceless.

Tuesday, March 8, 2011 was like any other weekday at George Mason University. One student's quest for an empty study room was met after a long search in Fenwick Library. Little did he know picking that study room, that day would forever change his life. . . . Abdirashid Dahir, a senior, had searched . . . to find a study room . . . to work on his research paper. . . . Finally, finding one on the third floor, Abdi settled in and set up his things to prepare for a long work period. After settling in, Abdi realized he had left his laptop charger in his dorm. Gone approximately seven minutes, the time it might take some to use the restroom or find a book, Abdi returned to find something unexpected. A girl had taken over the study room, placing all of Abdi's belongings in the hallway by the door. Abdi explained to the girl that he had only been gone seven minutes and that it was really unfair for her to just take the study room. The girl wouldn't budge. Abdi, needing to get his work done, then tried to reason with the girl, saying that they both clearly needed to use the room and could possibly share it. The girl did not like this idea but refused to leave. When Abdi refused to leave, the girl decided to call Mason Police. While Abdi and the girl waited for the police to arrive, the girl expressed her dislike of "foreigners," referring to Abdi's accent, saying how her father was a Federal police officer, and that she

intended on getting him into a lot of trouble. She also told him he ought to go back to his country. . . . Soon after her second call, four officers showed up at the study room. . . . [One] officer . . . question[ed] the girl. . . . After a few minutes, [he] came over, leaving the girl in the room. [The officer] then told Abdi that he had to leave [the] library. Abdi . . . ask[ed] why he was getting kicked out, when he was there first. The officers did not answer his questions, replying only with a simple answer of, "You need to leave." Abdi began to cry. . . . He told the officers, "I don't think this is right; you haven't given me a chance to tell my side, and you rushed to this conclusion." They were silent. Abdi left [the library], heading straight for the Police Station, to file a formal complaint against the two officers. . . . [Later] Abdi decided to try and get some work done on the research paper he had attempted to work on in [the library]. . . . He set up in the floor study room [of his residence hall]. Three or four hours after the incident at the library, [two] officers entered the study room. [One] officer said, "I'm sorry; I should have done this earlier. . . . But now I'm here to arrest you." [He] showed Abdi the warrant, just enough to see his name on it. Abdi, confused about why he was being arrested asked, "For what?" [The officer] replied, "Abduction," which is a felony in the Commonwealth of Virginia. . . . Since the incident, Abdi has been prohibited from entering his building, as a precaution to the community, leaving him homeless. . . . It is clear that his rights as a student, a citizen, and as a human being have

been compromised. Justice has not been served. The underlying ethnocentric discrimination and lack of equal opportunity is unacceptable. . . . For a university that so proudly flaunts its openness to diversity and international students, we really missed the mark on this one. . . . I remember as a freshman, attending Freshman Convocation on move-in day, seeing a man wearing a sandwich board with the words "Fairfax Police Hate Black People," written on it. Abdi is a black, Somalian, Muslim. Did he get fair treatment or is this a hate crime perpetrated by another student and exacerbated by the actions and inactions of the [campus] police? As classmates, educators, counselors, advisors, students, residents, coworkers . . . we need to band together and insist justice be served. How can we take ourselves seriously if a school, that is "committed to providing equal

opportunity and an educational and work environment free from any discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, disability, veteran status, sexual orientation, or age," can't even manage to do just that?
(<http://www.grandstrategy.com/2011/03/39391919291-gmu-students-take-stand.html>)

Sarah's Facebook page went viral. Thousands of people visited the page. The story was picked up by major news outlets like CNN *iReport* and *The Washington Post*. Protests were organized. Eventually, the charges were dropped and the university began to work with the police to address the issue. This all started from one student's advocacy on Facebook. Sarah's decision to stand beside her classmate and to speak out against injustice on her campus is a strong example of how privilege can be transformed into purpose.

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