

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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A Journey Through Alienation and Privilege to Healing

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Abstract

When a white man first enters onto an Indian reservation he may feel that he doesn't belong. Many of our students also don't feel as though they belong when they come to our college campuses. While it is clearly not the same, the feeling of being different can certainly raise awareness and sensitivity. This article examines how as a reflection of a "culture of fear" (given the state of the recessionary economy, poor job market, global warming, terrorism, wars, and other social conditions), subtle and often unintentional privilege and discrimination can affect our students, and how we as college counselors can be most supportive in empowering our students to heal and grow in the midst of these challenging opportunities. A theoretical framework and practical strategies are provided to assist clinicians in addressing these issues.

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**It is my hope that this article will be useful for all counselors.*

In 2001, I had my first of eight opportunities to spend time on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. Though some of the Lakota people were friendly, I felt a sense of discomfort. The people stared at me in the stores, held their gazes as I drove by, and some even ignored me as I wished them a good morning. It was culture shock. And it hit me hard, that I didn't fit in—I was a white man on the reservation.

How do our college campuses feel to students when they first arrive? Many of our students, especially those of color, those from different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds, LGBT students, and students with disabilities, quickly feel disenfranchised, disempowered, and alienated, feeling that they simply don't fit in. One of our primary roles as college counselors is to provide a safe haven where our students can address these issues.

A white man entering onto a Native American reservation parallels many of our students entering onto our campuses, particularly in the shared experience of being the "other." My experience was certainly a wake-up call for me, a powerful reminder of how it feels to not be part of the norm. However, there are clear differences based on historical and contemporary experiences related to being white, Native, and other racial and ethnic minorities. These historical and contemporary experiences are key in determining how the experience of being a "white man on the rez" and experiences of black students differ.

The important work of intersectionality theory can be helpful here

to better understand these differences. Intersectionality theory examines how there may be many factors that intersect on multiple and often simultaneous levels, thus contributing to systematic and social inequity. These factors may include biological, social, and cultural categories such as gender, race, class, economic status, ability, sexual orientation, and other measures of identity (Anderson & Collins, 2003).

So too, the experience of feeling different is often not solely based on race, but additional factors that may not be so obvious, such as sexual orientation, culture, and economic status.

For the white man entering the reservation, being the "other" may be an isolated experience. This is especially true if he grew up in a predominantly white, middle-class neighborhood and is heterosexual. However there may be white people who are privileged based on their racial status, but disadvantaged due to some other statuses, such as being poor, gay, or having a disability. A sense of marginalization may be more normative for the young black student entering onto the campus (Cannady, 2009), especially if he grew up in a poor, predominantly black neighborhood, and went to a predominantly white high school. The white, heterosexual, middle-class man may be able to choose to leave the reservation to return to his privileged life. The student of color who is poor may lack that option. If the black student is lesbian and poor she will likely face additional challenges in fitting in on campus as well as in her culture and the

community from which she came. Thus we can see how many factors can influence the level of privilege and discrimination that individuals may experience.

Given the fast pace of technological change or *Future Shock* (Toffler, 1975), and the state of the recessionary economy, poor job market, global warming, terrorism, wars, and other social conditions, many of our students feel overwhelmed and ill-prepared to make choices that often will affect the rest of their lives. They are trying to find their place in a world that often feels harsh and unwelcoming, a world presenting a “culture of fear.” Fear can breed insecurity and the striving for more power, wealth, and control to give the illusion of security. Power, wealth, and control create privilege, and the more some have, the less others have. Those who have power may often stereotype and perceive homogeneity because their perceptions are rarely challenged by those not in power (Fine, Weis, Powell, & Wong, 1997; Keltner, Anderson, & Gruenfeld, 2003). It is a self-perpetuating cycle.

Our colleges and universities are reflections of the best and worst of the larger culture. Whereas many elements of our culture welcome diversity, others are elitist or discriminatory, or both. Therefore, while usually subtle and often unintentional, these same elements of elitism and discrimination are also present on our college campuses.

Further, there appears to be an exclusive, heightened focus on getting good grades for the purpose of getting good jobs (“not that there’s anything wrong with that,” as comedian Jerry Seinfeld says). This results in many of our students feeling as

though their self-worth depends solely on their academic performance. I continually hear our students express longing for more warmth and collaboration, rather than cold competition. I believe that the ultimate mission of higher education is to help individuals to develop into healthy, well-balanced (emotionally, mentally, physically, spiritually, socially), happy, responsible citizens of the world. As a reflection of that mission, I believe that our primary goal as college counselors is to support our students in learning how to embrace their core inner worth and of the worth of all living things. A Buddhist teaching is that “the greatest privilege is to know oneself.”

In discussing privilege, it is important to emphasize that educating ourselves and our students about this topic is not about blaming or finding fault, but rather about helping us to increase our understanding and compassion, and creating an environment that is more fully accepting and more fully embracing of all differences.

While there are many forms of privilege, I will here refer to the term “white privilege,” because (1) I am a white male; (2) in this culture, at least, most power, wealth, and control still lie in the hands of white men; and (3) because the term provides a clear context within which to explore healing. This is not about bashing wealthy white men, or anyone else. For if we have food, clothing, and shelter, we have a certain privilege. We can each feel equal, powerful, and privileged in given moments. Similarly, we can each feel unequal, powerless, and unprivileged in given moments. For example, I can feel equal,

powerful, and privileged after presenting on white privilege at a national conference and being well received. However, I also felt unequal, powerless, and unprivileged when my efforts to present the same topic were rejected by the administration at the elite university where I was employed.

White privilege may be simply defined as the benefits, such as prestige, power, and privilege, derived solely because of the color of our skin, and often at the expense of people who are not white (McIntosh, 1988). Why, when many view the term as offensive and divisive, can it still be helpful to use it? The main reason is that the harmful norms and values inherent in the term “white privilege,” are alive and well—that is, elitism, superiority, and competition for power, wealth, and control. While these norms and values are not uniquely white, they certainly continue to permeate our culture and our world. And even when the whites in this culture become the minority (which they soon will be), the prevailing white privilege norms and values will continue to be emulated by people of color, women, and others who ascend to the power positions. Until these norms and values are replaced by healthier ones, such as inclusion, cooperation, and sharing the wealth, using this term can help us to keep our focus on creating change, which will serve all.

While the term “white privilege” initially may be uncomfortable to acknowledge, it can also be very useful in helping us to better understand how many of the members of our communities often feel marginalized. It is important for us to

examine how white norms continue to exist, and how they may hinder people of color from feeling really welcomed on our college campuses. Some very basic examples of white norms are the way people speak, dress, and act.

If you don’t imitate these norms, you don’t feel you fit in. As a college counselor, I heard many painful stories from students who felt disenfranchised due to their race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, or socioeconomic status. Students’ future career success was often dependent on how well they fit into the social strata of their peers. Conforming to the white, heterosexual, male norms was essential. Anything that would draw attention to differences or uniqueness needed to be minimized.

Privilege can be viewed historically as a predominantly male issue, rooted deeply in insecurity, fear, and fight for survival. Ancient fear of women was coupled with seeing anyone outside the family, tribe, or village as adversarial or enemies. In his book, *Fear of Women*, Lederer (1968) a white, German psychiatrist, speaks of cavemen casting women out of the caves during menstruation and when they were about to give birth. It is not hard to imagine the awe and fear experienced by the men as they witnessed the incredible mystery of women’s ability to give life—the most powerful gift. That fear was compounded by the insecurity and vulnerability of having an appendage between their legs. So it seems likely that the quest for power and control had its roots in the need to overcompensate for feelings

of jealousy, vulnerability, insecurity, and fear.

On campuses across the country, traditional white, heterosexual, male values of competition, power, wealth, and control (which can also be viewed as major contributors to radical nationalism) dominate the primary missions of these institutions of higher learning. This intra-university competition (again similar to nationalistic fervor to be number one) puts extra pressure on students who feel different, and uninterested in competition, to try to fit in and to support those norms. This puts students in an often untenable situation: “Do I sell out who I am to fit in?” or “Do I stand up for who I am, run the risk of feeling ostracized, and jeopardize my future career success?”

Most discriminatory behavior today is very subtle (Sue, 2004) and unintentional. As someone who has attended many trainings on white privilege, I will attest to how useful that experience has been in helping me examine my own privilege, even though I had never seen myself as someone who had a great deal of privilege (Aneis & Szymanski, 2001), and certainly not as someone who harbored any biases or prejudices. However, when I realized that we all have certain privileges and biases, and felt safe enough to acknowledge and examine them, then I could start addressing them.

Most of us have felt different, or that we didn't fit in, at least once in our lives. Some of my first recollections of feeling different and of having privilege occurred when I was 10 years old. My mother took

my younger brother and me to Mexico, where she was obtaining a divorce from my father. We stayed with wealthy relatives in Mexico City who had Mexican servants. This was one of my first clear experiences of having privilege and yet of not fitting in. On the trip home we stopped in Florida to stay with other relatives. This was in the 1950s when segregation was still prominent. We went to a soft ice cream stand. There were two water fountains. One had a sign saying “colored,” the other a sign saying “white.” I excitedly ran up to the “colored” water fountain, expecting to see colored water. My mother explained. The painful realities opened a little boy's eyes and became deeply imbedded in my memory in that moment.

Of course, this experience with the water fountain doesn't come close to equaling the life-long experience of having a different skin color, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability. However, remembering these painful experiences of difference can give us a small sense of what many of our students have felt often in their lives. This is one reason it is crucial for us to do our own gentle, healing work with inequity, power, and privilege. For by feeling and understanding that connection to not fitting in, however small it may be, and by feeling more comfortable in discussing our own privilege, we are better able to provide a safer space for our students to explore this often painful and threatening topic, should they choose to do so. A word of caution here is necessary. It is important not to assume we know how it feels to walk in another's shoes. What we can do is be willing to respectfully try to learn from each

individual, so that we can seek to join with her/him in a way that honors her/his truth.

It can be helpful for us to understand that the color of our skin (or our gender, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, and able-bodied state) may automatically convey privilege, status, and being part of the norm. People of color often do not feel that they fit into this norm, no matter how much they try to conform. Inequity, power, and privilege can hurt us all. For if some of us feel diminished, then so are we all. And the burden of achieving and maintaining the “top” position can lead to a fragile and illusory sense of worth, as well as premature stress-related illness and heart attacks.

Cooperation and inclusion are the hallmarks of a compassionate and respectful community. Competitiveness, the pursuit of excellence at all costs, and of supremacy, power, and control, are hallmarks of elitism and privilege—and lest we forget, were the antecedents of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and of the resulting genocide of Native Americans, and of slavery. This is not about evoking guilt; we are not guilty for the sins of our forefathers. However, it is important that we remember and continue to learn from our history. With this understanding, we will be better able to continue to help make our universities and our culture healthier environments for all of us.

Traditional Buddhist wisdom teaches that “in the heart of the darkness is the light.” So, too, it may very well be that deep within the roots of privilege lie the essential ingredients for the healing of our world—that is, seeing and treating all life as sacred

(Marshall, 2001; Mohatt & Eagle Elk, 2002), unique, worthwhile, precious, and interconnected. We are all relatives, all living things are related, as reflected in the main teachings of Lakota, Buddhist, and other great spiritual traditions. Many individuals use their privilege to make the world a better place by adopting children, contributing to social justice causes, etc. Thus, privilege isn’t necessarily a bad or a good, it depends how it’s used.

What can we as college counselors do?

Acknowledging that we have very rewarding, yet often very difficult and frustrating, jobs is an important starting point. Many of our students come to us hurting, scared, and confused. Because of heavy case loads and understaffing, we often feel limited in what we can provide. Sometimes it feels as though we’re merely putting band-aids on our students—so they can go back out to continue the fight. We sometimes feel ill-equipped to handle the increasingly severe levels of anxiety and depression with which we are presented. Medication is prescribed with more frequency, as students are labeled with increasingly serious diagnoses.

Clearly, it is our primary responsibility to provide the best treatment we possibly can with each student we see. And that is a worthy goal. Addressing the emotional, mental, physical, spiritual, and social needs of our students on a broad scale is a much greater task. Most of us don’t have the time or the energy to do outreach, prevention, training, and advocacy for social change.

The following are some strategies for encouraging us to begin or continue the process of engaging in this important work for ourselves and our students.

Counselor Strategies:

1. Remember that this can be hard work that takes a lot of empathy and courage. So it's important to be gentle and compassionate with ourselves. For example, by taking lots of deep breaths and giving ourselves lots of "atta girls" and "atta boys," and breathing in comfort and words of nurturance and encouragement.

2. Be willing to continue uncovering our own biases as we continue to work on enhancing our self-awareness (Johnson, 2001), so we can become more comfortable talking about diversity and privilege with peers and students. For example, it's a good idea to keep a white privilege journal of reminders and new learning about our biases and privilege, as we continue to affirm and acknowledge our efforts.

3. Let our students know we are open to discussing these issues when appropriate. For example, having pictures and artifacts in our offices can help make our sensitivity to multicultural issues clear. When appropriate, we should share our interest in discussing these issues.

4. Remind our students, especially our young men, to recognize their internal worth, rather than look for external validation (Schiraldi, 2001). We should help them learn how to celebrate their uniqueness, while recognizing their interconnectedness to all other living things.

For example, use the crystal picture found in Chapter four of Schiraldi's Self-esteem Workbook (2001) to demonstrate how our essence is worthiness, but that we've often been taught a belief system that focuses on materialism and external validation.

5. Support our students in learning how to deal with feeling different and disconnected. This might be facilitated through offering support groups that address related issues such as multicultural concerns; being male yet gentle with oneself and one's world (Kivel, 1993); healthy relationships; and managing emotions, with approaches such as dialectical behavior therapy (Marra, 2005), mindfulness meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), and learning how to meet basic human needs such as acceptance, connection, and empathy through the art of nonviolent communication (Rosenberg, 2003). Each of these aforementioned approaches teach specific tools about learning self-respect and emotional management with ourselves and empathetic connection with others.

6. Look for allies. This work is too hard to do alone. Finding others who feel the same way can be so helpful in preventing burnout and discouragement. While it might be difficult to find allies to do this work, it is essential. If there are no campus organizations, there are usually some organizations in the community that address privilege and multicultural concerns.

7. Believe in ourselves and our students. We can make a difference and so can they, one little step at a time, one person at a time. Keep a journal of our efforts and encourage our students to do the same. Graphing

progress can also be useful in keeping our challenges and progress in perspective.

8. Be prepared for negative reactions to our efforts (Boatright-Horowitz, 2009), and try not to take them personally. The issue of privilege brings up a wide range of feelings in people. Again, journaling, mindfulness meditation, and nonviolent communication can be very helpful in providing self-comfort as we acknowledge our feelings and needs and others' feelings and needs. When people are feeling unsafe and threatened, they often react negatively.

9. Have fun and be willing to consider creative approaches. As difficult as this work can be, it is very exciting, enriching, and rewarding. Keep a list of new approaches, strategies, and tools gained from attending trainings—especially those that help us laugh, as keeping a good sense of humor is so important in doing this work.

10. Consider setting an intention, making a pledge, writing a commitment letter (whatever works), to address cultural competency and privilege in an ongoing way, personally and professionally—for example, by discussing it with friends and colleagues; getting more training; attending the annual White Privilege Conference; asking for support from our bosses to have staff training; joining work groups that address cultural competence; and maybe even (take a deep breath) being willing to give up some of our privilege, temporarily or permanently, in whatever way feels right to us (for example, by eating less or periodically fasting, donating time or money to charitable and social justice causes, conserving energy, or recycling).

Working for change on an institutional level takes much resilience, patience, and planning. Joining cultural competency work groups can provide mutual support and enriching forums for exploring the most effective ways to move forward.

Watson, Terrell, and Wright (2002) assert the following:

Before an institution can expect to gain the full commitment and contributions of all its agents and students, exclusive barriers must be recognized and removed. Removing barriers cannot be accomplished by a multicultural awareness workshop, an ethnic foods week, or a valuing diversity initiative. Building an inclusive institutional culture requires a serious commitment to fundamental changes in the structures, behaviors, expectations, operating procedures, human resources systems, formal and informal reward systems, leadership practices, competency requirements, and culture of the organization. (p.112)

The following is a list of institutional strategies for addressing cultural competency, inequity, power, and privilege issues.

Institutional Strategies:

1. Regularly issue a strong statement to the university community from the president and board of trustees of the ongoing commitment and plan to address these issues

on all levels. Additionally, as part of this statement, regularly solicit input from the campus community and collect yearly pledges/petitions signed in support of the mission statement.

2. Establish a core curriculum course addressing cultural competency, values, self-worth, healthy relationships, and decision making—that is, how to be healthy (emotionally, mentally, physically, spiritually, socially), well-rounded, happy, responsible adults. This can be multidisciplinary in nature, and team taught by various appropriate departments and community organizations. These should be highly interactive and ongoing throughout the four years.

3. Provide regularly scheduled, highest-level cultural competency training for all students, faculty, and staff, which addresses how to create an interpersonal environment where students who feel different (due to race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability, international background) feel welcomed, safe, and strongly supported. The training should also include how to break barriers of language and communication with students of color and international students, as well as cultural differences among white students. Additionally, training for the students who feel different on how to manage, survive, and thrive in the dominant culture is essential.

4. Ensure that information on inequity, power, and privilege is incorporated into all cultural competency trainings. Perhaps a campus-wide privilege/cultural competency oversight group would review all significant proposals. This group would have

representatives from key student, staff, and faculty groups.

5. Ensure equal representation of women and minorities in the leadership of all social and other organizations. This inclusion would be a part of the university's mission statement addressing cultural competency, equity, power, and privilege.

6. Contribute to a university mission statement that emphasizes the primary mission of graduating optimally healthy (mentally, physically, emotionally, socially, spiritually) and well-rounded, happy, responsible adults who will serve the world. Consider making "in service of the world" be a primary mission statement/value of the university. Require a one-year service commitment for all students. This service commitment, as well as the ongoing cultural competency training, will help to ensure that students will be successful leaders in an increasingly global marketplace. Perhaps a student, staff, or faculty work group could be formed with the task of carrying forth this intention of the one-year service commitment as its primary goal.

7. Ensure that minority and international student perspectives accurately reflect the multicultural campus climate in recruitment efforts. Student work groups representing different culture and class distinctions, and wherever possible student involvement in the recruitment efforts, would help monitor this effort.

8. Hold regularly scheduled forums on controversial topics such as inequity, power, privilege, and all the "isms," to continually promote moving beyond a culture of

political correctness. Oversight could be provided by the aforementioned group in recommendation #4.

9. Establish recognition programs for students and staff who go beyond the call of duty to make a campus environment that is welcoming to all. Oversight might be provided by the aforementioned group in recommendation #4. These programs should be well publicized and a major selling-point of the university.

10. Conduct ongoing bench-mark studies with similar universities, as well as internal

surveys with students, faculty, and staff addressing cultural competency, inequity, power, and privilege. Various appropriate academic/research related departments and student organizations can take the lead, working with the oversight committee to ensure that all of these efforts are tied together.

When we address inequity, power, and privilege we help ourselves and our students on our healing journeys. May we choose to be kind to ourselves and all our relatives.

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