UNDERSTANDING PRIVILEGE, UNLEARNING OPPRESSION

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DISCLAIMERS

We cannot cover all information about oppressive systems, self-work, and social justice in education in a single session; this is just a start.

This space cannot be guaranteed to be “safe” for folks, but I hope we can work to respect each other and risk our comfort in hopes of learning.

I am not perfect, “woke”, an “expert”, or an authority on the experiences of all privileged or marginalized people; I am still learning every day and striving to align my actions with my values.
WHO AM I?

My pronouns are they/them/their

Academic Advisor II in College of Communication and Information, Kent State University

PhD student in Cultural Foundations of education at KSU

NACADA Emerging Leader

My salient social identities:

- White person
- Genderqueer/trans person
- Queer and legally married to a man
- Fat person
- Middle class
- Highly educated (graduate degree)
- Millennial
- Person with a disability & chronic pain
WHO ARE WE?

Similarities

Advisors (of different types)

Educational privilege
  • Higher education, often graduate and even terminal degrees

Care for students and for higher education

Professional status (not blue-collar)

Differences

Variety of:
  • Racial identities
  • Genders
  • Socio-economic backgrounds
  • Ability statuses, body sizes
  • Ages
  • Sexualities, marital and family statuses
  • Faiths or non-faiths
  • Professional backgrounds/disciplines
EVERY PERSON HOLDS A “CONSTELLATION” OF IDENTITIES THAT INCLUDE BOTH PRIVILEGED AND OPPRESSED GROUPS (IVERSON, 2014)
WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Professional competencies and personal values
- ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies (Social Justice & Inclusion)
- NACADA Core Competencies
- Personal values

Student experience and campus environments
- Campus climate data
- How students experience advising
- Retention and graduation, but also our commitment to students as people
WHAT IS THE VALUE OF EXAMINING SYSTEMS?

Peggy McIntosh—“White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1989)
* Individuals carry these things without having done anything to receive them, but also without having asked for them

Dean Spade—*Normal Life*
* “administrative violence” (Spade, 2011)
* Administrative structures are engineered based on oppressive systems but operate without the need of individuals to hold oppressive intent

Focusing only on individual actions and not systems leaves out a layer that has direct impact on students and colleagues
ACTIVITY: WHAT’S IN YOUR KNAPSACK?

Write down some identities and/or experiences that help to define you. Try to include both experiences of marginalization and privilege. This can be challenging since the knapsack is “invisible”—we don’t realize many of these things as they are just part of our day-to-day.

Consider recent news events (folks who are asked to leave or have the police called on them). Think about how people treat you when you enter a store, restaurant, or office. Think about your experiences with schooling, community centers or houses of worship. Consider the media you regularly encounter.

Try to think about yourself but also outside of yourself. Think about what is in your knapsack that might not be in others’.
WHY IS THINKING ABOUT INDIVIDUALS NOT ENOUGH?

Administrative violence—oppression can happen without individual intent to cause harm

Disparate impact of “identity ignorant” policies
• Not created with the intent of affecting groups differently but has that effect
• How do policies about no-shows affect low-income students who have challenges with transportation?

We need to consider systems in our thinking
WHAT ARE THESE SYSTEMS? (ADAMS, BELL, & GRIFFIN, 2007)

Racism and White supremacy (oppression of minoritized races)
Genderism and Sexism (oppression of minoritized genders and sexes)
Heterosexism (oppression of minoritized sexualities)
Ableism (oppression of people with disabilities)
Classism (oppression of those with lower socioeconomic status)
Ageism (oppression of both elders and youth, those outside typical ages of “adulthood”)
And More! (colorism, sizeism, religious oppression, xenophobia…)
Intersectionality is a way of looking at how these systems interact

Specifically about race and sex and the way that Black women are erased when forms of oppression intersect

Not a synonym for diversity, inclusion, social justice, or multiple identities
PRIVILEGED IDENTITY EXPLORATION MODEL

Self-Work as an Initial Step
Model of reactions to learning about privileged identities

Three levels that reflect increasing awareness and action about social justice issues

- Recognizing Privileged Identity
- Contemplating Privileged Identity
- Addressing Privileged Identity

Many people do not move linearly in these levels, sometimes take steps backward

Useful to identify your reaction and what it could mean
Denial—arguing that this issue, form of oppression, or privilege does not exist
- “We don’t have racism in the US anymore. People of color just need to work harder.”

Deflection—moving the focus to another issue because it is less threatening
- “The issue isn’t race, it’s social class. All lives matter.”

Rationalization—offering logical or rational reasons other than oppression or privilege (PLE’s)
- “Women just aren’t as good at math, that’s why there’s a gender gap in STEM.”
CONTEMPLATING PRIVILEGED IDENTITY

Intellectualization—focusing only on facts or intellectual responses to explain instances of oppression
- “I don’t agree with President Trump’s rhetoric but unemployment in the US is a serious issue. Americans need jobs, that’s just a fact.”

Principium—appealing to principles like core values or religious beliefs to avoid deeper exploration
- “Islamophobia is bad but my faith teaches that I should try to convert anyone who is not a Christian. America should be a Christian nation.”

False Envy—pointing out appealing aspects of a person or identity to deny the complexity of oppression
- “It would be great to be Native American; I wish I had a real ‘spirit animal’.”
**ADDRESSING PRIVILEGED IDENTITY**

**Benevolence**—becoming overly sensitive to issues of privilege or oppression based on notions of pity or charity

• “It’s so sad that some people have to use wheelchairs, I have to make sure our building is wheelchair accessible!”

**Minimization**—reducing the totality of privilege or oppression down to simple facts or a recipe

• “I just need to learn the right words to use when talking about gender, ask people to share their pronouns, and have a gender-neutral bathroom on my campus, then we will be doing right by our trans students.”
WHAT IS THE VALUE OF PIE?

Framework for understanding reactions to difficult dialogues about privilege, power, and oppression

How do our reactions shape how we experience learning/unlearning process?

How do these enable or prevent us from moving forward?
  * How do these reactions land for someone with marginalized identities?
WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS OF PIE?

This is a model of negative reactions. How do we move beyond feelings of guilt, shame and into a state of action?

What does it mean to foreground privileged identities? Is PIE an over-intellectualization?

How do we acknowledge that learning about how we may inadvertently uphold these structures is a painful process? It feels bad!
WHAT CAN WE DO?

Start-Continue-Stop

Individual changes, collective changes, cultural changes

Keep learning, dialoguing

Find critical friends
  • People who will hold you accountable and are willing to work alongside you
  • Don’t assume that every person with a minoritized identity wants to educate you about racism/ableism/transphobia/fatphobia/etc.
REMEMBER

Everyone has a role to play
Start small
Self-work is work!
But don’t stop with yourself—move outward
FURTHER READING ON PRIVILEGE, SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

Readings for Diversity and Social Justice by Adams et al.

On Being Included by Ahmed

Racism Without Racists by Bonilla-Silva

Advancing Social Justice by Davis and Harrison

Disability in Higher Education by Evans, Broido, Brown, and Wilke

Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Friere

Teaching to Transgress by hooks

Privilege, Power, and Difference by Johnson

Lower Ed by McMillan-Cottom

Trans* in College by Nicolazzo

Paying the Price by Rab

Intersectionality & Higher Education by Mitchell et al.

What’s Wrong with Fat? by Saguy

Transgender History (2nd ed.) by Stryker

Covering by Yoshino


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