

Exploring My Privilege

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Privilege has become a taboo topic in today's society; it is very prevalent, but people will not admit that it is there. As a society, we would like to believe that after all the struggle and pain we have faced in the past we have finally reached a point where everybody is socially equal. The problem is that there are so many levels on which people are different that we have not been able to recognize all the ways in which people can be privileged. Think about it; sure, a white middle-class heterosexual male has a plethora of privilege, but there is more than just that. Does he have short hair? Is he tall? Is he in shape? Every identity a person has factors into how much privilege they have, but unless we choose to acknowledge and embrace our privileges, we cannot overcome the inequality they cause. It is for this reason that I am thankful to have taken Diversity and Social Justice. Most people are never made aware of their privileges at all, much less in a safe environment such as the one this class provides. Prior to this class, I had a misunderstanding of what being privileged meant. I thought the areas that people were privileged in were areas that they were, for whatever reason, better in. As I have come to understand, and as the author of *White Privilege: Essential readings on the other side of racism* has said, privilege is a benefit some people receive because of the oppression of others (Rothenburg, 2012, 1). Because of this misunderstanding, I was not consciously aware of all the privileges I held due to my identities. Of the five basic categories (race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual identity, and ability), I hold privileges in three.

One identity that I hold privilege in is my race. I mention this first because race is static; I was born with my race, it is visible to all who see me or my family, and I cannot change my race. From first glance, I look like any other white girl, but I never thought about myself as being a member of a race. According to Dyer (2012), this is normal because, "Whites are everywhere in representation. Yet precisely because of this and their placing as norm they seem

not to be represented to themselves *as* whites but as people who are variously gendered, classed, sexualized and abled” (Dyer, p. 11). After reading this, I thought back to my junior year of high school. When I was going through Running Start, I took an English 101 class paired with a Humanities class. At the beginning of the quarter, we had to write a paper about who we were, so I decided to dive further into my identity by asking my family about our heritage. Only when I learned about where my family is from did I realize how white I really am. My father and my mother’s side of the family share a background in Ireland and Germany; the history on my father’s side of the family reaches out farther to Scotland, Holland, and there have been rumors of a history of Cherokee on his mother’s side (although that has never been proven because my grandmother refuses to acknowledge the question). Everything about my heritage (aside from the Cherokee rumors) ties me to Northern Europe; with my white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes, I am about as white as one can get. Harlon Dalton (2012) says that this act of claiming heritage provides a “rich source of comfort, pride, and self-understanding” and “provides shape and texture to their lives” (Dalton, p. 16). I can see this in my family’s strong ties to one another, our traditions, and our food.

Although it is important that I have realized my whiteness, it is just the first step. I must also realize the privileges that come along with my race. In her essay *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, Peggy McIntosh (2010) wrote a list of twenty-six privileges she sees in her daily life that are an effect of her race. Although I was able to identify with most of the items on this list, there were six in particular that made me think back to Dyer when he said, “White people create the dominant images of the world and don’t quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image” (Dyer, 2012, p. 12):

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
5. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
9. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple food which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
18. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race.
20. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
26. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin (McIntosh, 2010, pp. 173-174).

Dyer said that we "need to learn to see [ourselves] as white, to see [our] particularity" (Dyer, 2012, p. 12). After reflecting on this for a little while, I decided that by particularizing my race, I bring attention to the idea of white privilege and point out that whiteness is not the norm. This idea reminded me of my recent trip to Guatemala. We stayed in Huehuetenango, and my race was constantly brought up everywhere I went; I had never been the minority before. People around me were constantly yelling "gringo" and looking at me curiously. My race was brought to my attention very quickly and it occurred to me that, to a much lesser extent, we do the same thing here by individualizing our race and acting "better" than others.

Unlike my race, the privilege I get due to my sexual identity is one that I have been aware of for some time now. When I was ten years old, my family moved to Tennessee and I started school at a very southern school; by that I mean that although my race put me in the minority

category in that neighborhood, they still held the stereotypical southern values. I had a hard time making friends at this school, but there were two boys who were in every single one of my classes, both living fairly close to me, and we became friends. All of us were made fun of frequently, me for my big nose and slow physical development, and them for their sexuality. Although neither of them had identified as gay at the time, they were never interested in girls, and were therefore made fun of. I never understood the jokes being thrown at them by the upperclassmen, but I could tell by their tone of voice and by the reactions of my friends that they were being extremely hurtful, and I knew it was wrong. A year later, I moved away and I lost contact with Schyler and Travis, and I did not think about sexuality much after that. About five years later, I found Schyler and Travis on Facebook; both of them were “out” and in a relationship with another male. Both have extremely supportive friends, but only Schyler has the luxury of a supportive family. Almost instantly I was interested in the topic of sexuality again, although I had a hard time talking about it with my Christian family. When I was sixteen, I started to question my sexuality, and for almost two years, I identified myself as bisexual. This is when I was finally able to realize the full extent of the privilege I had as a straight person.

I never told my family, but my best friend at the time took the liberty of telling her father, who was also our youth group leader. His reaction was similar to what we saw in Daniel Karlake’s documentary *For the Bible Tells Me So* (2007); Judeo-Christian tradition teaches its followers that being gay is a sin and that anyone who identified as gay, faith or not, would go to Hell. My friend’s father took me to a park, sat me down on a bench, and told me I was better than that, that I was just confused about what I wanted, and that he knew I was a good, straight, Christian girl. Even now, identifying as straight, I take extreme offence to what he said to me; Karlake’s documentary highlighted the struggle between religion and homosexuality, and I

think this has been one of the biggest struggles I have had to face so far. I was raised in a Christian household, but having loved Schyler and Travis before they knew they were gay, and having thought I was bisexual myself, I cannot actually believe what my religion was trying to tell me. Over the past two years, I have had significant struggles with my religion; I have continued to attend The INN Ministries every week and even took up an internship there this year, but I continue to struggle. No matter what I believe about religion, I know one thing is certain: “all loving relationships are accepted by God” (Karlsruhe, 2007), and this is backed up by my favorite Bible verse, 1 John 3:18, “My children, we must not only talk about loving people; we must also show we love people by what we do for them. We just really love them.”

All of my experiences with homosexuality brought the privileges of heterosexuality to my attention, and I was able to pull all my thoughts together in this class. A couple weeks ago, as part of our weekly homework, we were asked to make a list of heterosexual privileges in the U.S., and I think the class summed it up perfectly:

Heterosexuals are able to: love and marry who they want legally and without judgment and persecution, be open about relationships, have immediate access to loved one in emergencies, easily have friends and neighbors that accept them, act and dress how they want without it being a reflection of sexuality, see similar people portrayed in media, and know they will not be fired because of sexuality. (HSP 455, personal communication, May 6, 2013; McIntosh, 2010).

This list can go on and on, and the severity depends on where you live.

The identity that I have struggled with the most in my life has been my socioeconomic status (SES). I was born into a middle-class family, dad was in the Air Force and mom always

had a decent paying job. Looking back, I had many privileges as a child. I lived in a nice house, we could afford to have pets, I never went without food, my parents were able to drive me to and from my various activities, we were able to purchase instruments as I believed I wanted to learn them, I got new clothes as I needed them, and people believed I would grow up to be something great. When I was eleven though, my parents decided to get a divorce, and this is where I started to get confused about what SES meant. My mother and I moved to Washington and lived with my grandparents for a short time before moving into a house of our own. Seemingly, nothing had changed, save the absence of my father. However, as years went by, I became more and more aware that something had changed in the way I lived my life, something that effected my well-being; at school, I felt and looked like everybody else, but at home, I knew I was not.

In class last week, Trula asked us what determines our SES. The question was whether it was based on income or attitude, something I had never thought about before. After a few minutes of discussion, Trula said, "Money is part of it, but not most of it; it's a mindset" (T. Nicholas, personal communication, May 16, 2013). When she said this, I realized what had been bothering me throughout my childhood. My father had called a lot those first couple years to check in and see how I was doing. As time went by, he let me in on how much he was paying my mom in alimony and child support; it was seemingly enough money to keep up the middle-class life I was used to. However, through my last year of middle school and all of high school, I was convinced that I was poor; how could that be? I never got new clothes unless I paid for them myself because I was told we did not have enough money, I often went without food because my mom hated grocery shopping, and my presents for Christmas and my birthday had gone from nice new toys on my list to hand-me-downs from coworkers of my mom's. I legitimately thought we did not have any money, but then was confused when my mother would

come home from the liquor store with a big bag full of many bottles. I disagree with what we debated in class; I do not think SES is a question of income or attitude, I think it is based on our income and the decisions we make about what to do with our income. There is not much difference between my household's income when I was ten and when I was eleven, but there was a huge difference in what the money was being spent on, and that directly correlates with what I believed my SES to be.

All of this being said, I do believe SES is a matter of perspective and societal "norms". What I believed to be poor was nothing like what we read in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (2009). No matter how much money we had or did not have, we always had enough money to take our pets to the vet (p. 10), I have never had to worry about my education being out of date (p. 31), I never felt inferior to my classmates because of the way I dressed (p. 57), and I have never missed school because I could not afford a ride (p. 88).

I think all of these socially constructed identities are very clear about which group is privileged and which group is not. On the other side of this, we look at gender. There has been a lot of struggle in our history surrounding equality among men and women, and I think it has become somewhat of a taboo topic in today's society. We act as if everything is equal and it all worked out, but deep down, we all see the inequality between genders. I think Judith Lorber says it best when she says,

A sex category becomes a gender status through naming, dress, and the use of other gender markers. Once a child's gender is evident, others treat those in one gender differently from those in the other, and the children respond to the different treatment by feeling different and behaving differently. (Lorber, 2010, p. 55)

When I read this, it makes me think of the saying “separate but equal”, which ultimately means unequal; once you start treating somebody differently than somebody else, you get rid of the equality. From what I learned in high school and hearing stories of my older friends, I understand that there is still much inequality in the workplace when it comes to gender. In my own experiences, though, I have only experienced discrimination based on my gender when it came to sports. I have always been an athletic child, but in high school I had to really push myself (and push the boys around) to prove that I was as good as the boys. I remember one instance in particular; my sophomore year, my gym teacher had us play flag football with the weight training class. Naturally, I got put on a team with only a few of my male classmates and the rest of our team and the opposing team was made up of big dudes. I was never given a chance to really get involved in the game. With ten minutes left, I decided I had had enough and went for a touchdown. As I ran to catch the ball, one of the big dudes on my team decided to act as backup and ended up body checking me, sending me flying through the air. Only when this happened did my team decided to let me participate, but only out of pity. I could not believe that just because of my gender, they decided to ignore me all together.

This is not the only instance I have been underestimated in sports, and this is not the only reason why. I participated in track eighth grade all the way through high school, sprinting and jumping my way through school. Track was the one place I felt I was not underestimated for being a girl; there were plenty of girls on our team who could beat plenty of boys. However, after a series of injuries, I was forced to sit my last season out and go through physical therapy. My junior year, I strained my right quad; when I did not tell anybody though, it got worse. I sat a couple weeks out and made a comeback at the end of the season. My senior year, four weeks into the season and two weeks after making the varsity team, I was at a track meet and wiped out

while jumping. I have no idea what happened, one second I was sprinting down the runway, and the next I was laying in the pit in an unbelievable amount of pain. As it turns out, my junior year I had torn my quad, groin, and hip flexor, and because I did not seek treatment, it did not heal correctly and my senior year I ended up tearing the scar tissue. Although it does not look like it, I do consider myself disabled. Ability is a relative term, I know. My best friend would not consider me disabled; I can clearly walk around. I think ability is different to every person because nobody knows your limitations to their full extent. Although I consider myself disabled and have troubles getting around all the stairs on campus, this does not mean I am not capable. Scotch (2009) wrote an article about disability writes, and after reading it, I understood that as a disabled person, it is not unusual that I feel as if I am not getting the respect I deserve as a member of my community (Scotch, 2009, pp. 17-22). I consider it disrespectful that my needs (and the needs of others) are not met on campus; Western is extremely difficult to get around, with all the hills, stairs, and uneven bricks, it is difficult for me to walk around.

I have spent a large portion of this class thinking about my privileges separately, putting each identity into its own compartment and looking at them one at a time. However, I know some identities intersect with one another. The biggest example I can think of is my gender and my ability. When I first got injured during my junior year of high school, I went to the sports medicine office for treatment, but because he was male and I was female, he was not allowed to touch me. Without being able to thoroughly inspect the injured body part, it worsened and we were not able to help it heal properly; this led to the mass of scar tissue throughout my leg that I tore the next year. So, because of my gender, my ability was affected. I also see intersectionality in the lives of my classmates. Shannon told us a story about wanting to live in Del Ridge, but her boyfriend's family told her she "wasn't the right color to live there" (S.

Sperberg, personal communication, May 16, 2013). These people were creating an intersection between her race and SES, assuming that because she is white, she would have enough money to live in a better neighborhood. I think this example is one that is prevalent in today's society, and one that we saw an example of in Sherman Alexie's novel. Arnold explains to Gordy that "some Indians think you have to act white to make your life better. Some Indians think you *become* white if you try to make your life better; if you become successful" to which Gordy replies "if that were true, then wouldn't all white people be successful?" (Alexie, 2009, p. 131). Race is such a huge part of our identity that it intertwines with our other identities.

When we give an identity a name, we give it power. With power comes inequality and oppression. Every identity holds a power relation which allows those who hold the power to oppress and discriminate against the other; we see this in the identities I have described of myself. As a white person, I am represented in public, which gives me power, and also oppresses those who cannot relate. As a straight person, I am publicly supported by those around me, which gives me power, and oppresses those who are not supported. As a middle-class person, I am provided with more opportunities which gives me more power, and oppresses those who do not have those same opportunities. As a female, I hold less power than males, and am oppressed in sports, work, and daily life. As a person with a disability, I am looked down upon by those who are fully able-bodied, and oppressed in the most simple of ways.

On the first day of class, we were asked to list our identities in the order in which we found them important and share our reasoning with the class. I wrote gender, socioeconomic status, race, disability, and sexual identity. My reasoning was this: as a female, my gender is what I notice first about myself; as a college student, my financial situation is at the forefront of my mind; race is not something I think about often, but I do notice I am different than others;

disability is something I think about as my pain arises, but nothing I think about on a regular basis; my sexual identity is something that has changed in the past, and I have become comfortable with whatever may happen in regards to my sexuality. In the last nine weeks, I have become aware of the privileges I hold in regard to my different identities and the dominant value systems in America. In week eight, we were asked to re-write our list of identities. After learning what I have about my privileges as well as my non-privileged identities, my list has been reordered: gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual identity, disability. I believe this is the order in which the general American population views people. This class has taught me to use my privileges to become an effective ally. It can be hard to be an out ally, but I want to challenge those around me to rethink the derogatory remarks they may not be aware they are saying.

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