

Exploring my privilege

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Introduction –

I have never thought of myself as privileged, I have always been average or normal. I have understood and learned about the history in the United States regarding human rights movements and social activism affecting people of color, people with disabilities, people who identify as gay or lesbian, and people who are of low socioeconomic status – but I have never thought of myself as being privileged in comparison. Learning this concept has challenged me to think differently about what I do and who I am, much different than I was taught to understand in the beginning of HSP 301 *Human Services and Personal Systems*. After taking this class (HSP 455 *Diversity and Social Justice*) I have developed not only a new perspective on these concepts, but also an entirely new identity.

Race –

Racial identity is a large part of the inequality many Americans face every day. As a white individual I am privileged in our society because I am seen as pure or as though I am more human than others. Michael Omi and Howard Winant discuss the idea that those who have darker skin color were frequently thought to be less human and therefore not as worthy of life as they White person (2010). This concept has shaped much of United States history and has influenced a person of color's available opportunities and lived experiences. Unfortunately, this also means that there will continue to be a bridge in the trust and respect between white and people of color.

In the video, *Race the Power of an Illusion*, (2003) the idea of racial difference being linked to human genetics was discussed. Researchers concluded that culture has created the idea of racial difference and that there is only one gene in every 1,000 that differs one person from

another. This means that there is no current findings that support this idea. Instead, the documentary describes the difference in skin color is due to the geographic location of the individual. Those who live closer to the equator are more likely to have a darker skin color because of the increased melanin production in the human body.

Dalton explains this common perception among white individuals by stating “most white people, in my experience, tend not to think of themselves in racial terms. They know they are White, of course, but mostly that translates into being not Black, not Asian-American, and not Native American. Whiteness, in and of itself, has little meaning” (2012, pp. 15). Before closely examining my privileges this was the understanding I had of being White. I didn’t fully comprehend what it means or how I was privileged because of it, until now.

Throughout history white people had a common understanding of what race meant. Dyer describes this viewpoint as thinking that “other people are raced, we are just people. [He also says] there is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human” (2008, pp. 10). The mindset of thinking whites are purely human shows just how much whites are privileged. Unfortunately, because of this, society is catered to people of my race. I am given more opportunities and treated with higher regards. I am not assumed to be a criminal and up to no good, and I am not disrespected simply because of the misconception of my skin color. I have not been oppressed and can choose to hide blemishes with makeup. I understand that my privileges as a white individual lie in every aspect of my community and I will continue to develop an awareness and understanding of how this affects the people around me.

Gender –

Our society is centered on a patriarchal system that is male centered, identified, and focused. From the early settlers the United States culture has primarily claimed “women were ... less evolved than white men, their disabilities are a result of lesser evolutionary development” (Baynton, 2010, pp. 96). While it is easy for the underprivileged, women in this case, to see where the issues begin it is often times difficult for those of privilege, men for example, to see this perspective. McIntosh confirms this in saying “denials which amount to taboos surround the subject of advantages which men gain from women’s disadvantages. These denials protect male privilege from being fully acknowledged, lessened or ended” (2010).

As a woman I have grown to understand that I am underprivileged in our society. I have always been aware of the discrimination women bore throughout history and I am a strong advocate for women’s rights, but I never thought of gender identification as an area of *privilege*. Our society’s gender norms are a major influence to this discrimination. As a women, the social media is constantly putting out unattainable standards of how I should act, look, dress, talk, eat, smile, and so much more. The average woman’s image on the television has been edited in so many areas that it’s physically impossible for a woman to meet these expectations. Not only are women portrayed unrealistically by they are often shown as sexual objects to increase product distribution. All of these expectations are set to a man’s standard; what a man wants out of a woman and what will fill HIS desires.

However, as a woman I can also be privileged in some ways. It is important to understand that I am not given a second look when I am around children. I currently work in a children’s play center in town and the majority of our staff are gender identified women. I think part of the reason for this is because of the socially constructed idea that all men are sex offenders and

aren't safe to be around children. As a woman, it is assumed that I am great with children and will love and nurture them all. In this way I am privileged in United States society when men are not.

Ability –

The terms ability and disability can be interpreted very differently depending on how you feel you relate to it. I have never once been in the hospital for any health concerns; I have never needed stitches or broken a bone. I have never needed blood work or any tests done to examine my health or my ability to function. I am an able bodied individual and am very privileged because of it.

Throughout history physically and mentally disabled individuals have experiences institutionalized oppression. They have been viewed as less than human, worthless, and been highly disrespected because of it. It hasn't been until recently that the United States societal views on this controversy have altered in their favor. This inequality has been seen with the mentally ill, blind, injured, and deaf individuals.

It is often interpreted that deaf communities have a disadvantage because they can't hear. This is the perception coming from a hearing person. However, if you examine the deaf culture a little more in depth you will see that most deaf people don't view it as a disability what so ever. Instead, being deaf is viewed as a different type of ability. As seen in the video, *Sound and Fury* (2002), the two family's opinions collided when the idea of giving their deaf children cochlear implants came up. In the eyes of the hearing family, being deaf is a disability. From their point of view, the only way their child would have a chance at a normal and full life would be to get the implant. However, when the deaf family found out their daughter wanted to get the cochlear implant, their immediate reaction expressed grievance. In

their eyes, their daughter is saying she thinks of being deaf as a disability and she wants to change her culture.

I can also be considered disabled because I am a woman. As described by Douglas C. Baynton (2010) women are seen in many societies as lower than men. They often don't have equal rights and are considered to be disabled because of this. Baynton discusses the idea that women have been categorized as disabled in order to "justify discrimination... by attributing disability to them. [They would] point to the physical, intellectual, and psychological flaws of women, their frailty, irrationality, and emotional excesses." (2010, pp. 96)

Despite the disadvantages of having very poor eyesight and occasionally losing my voice, I am a fully able mind and body person. I have never had similar lived experiences as those who are or have been disabled. I am privileged in this area and never have to worry about being turned down or fired from a position for being unable to perform daily tasks without assistance, being disrespected because I cannot fight back, or needing the help of others to follow my daily routines. Although I have never had to worry about this I have known many people who are disabled in one way or another and will continue to be an ally for them throughout my life.

Socioeconomic status –

Socioeconomic status can be described as the haves and the have nots. It can be seen in the opportunities available for you and your priorities in life. It's in the way you were raised, where you were raised, and who you were brought to admire. There are a million different pieces that make up your socioeconomic status, such as the type of place you call home, the type of food you eat, how you look at the world around you, and how you perceive the people in your life. This subject can be seen in all areas of a person's life decisions; however, "in the United

States, there is little discussion about social class” (Borrego, S. E., 2008). It is an area of privilege demonstrated throughout history that affects every single human being. An individual’s perceptions on life are influenced by many factors surrounding their socioeconomic status including, aspirations, opinions, perceptions, ability to function in varying settings, and understanding of varying life events.

Socioeconomic status was the only discussion point I have always been familiar with being privileged in. Although growing up we didn’t have much, I always knew where my food was coming from and I always had a roof over my head. I always had clothes on my back and friends and family I could trust and count on. Even now that I have grown up and moved out of my parent’s house I am still privileged. I was born into a family that is considered by society to be middle class. When I was younger I didn’t appreciate all that I had, I always wanted something different or something more. Unfortunately, this mindset is common among most youth and young adults in the United States.

In the summer of 2010 I traveled abroad on a mission trip to Mexico. Here I volunteered at an orphanage both doing yard work and community evangelism. This experience was humbling, inspiring, and eye opening for me. This is when I truly began to understand the difference between being a privileged lower-middle class, average person and an underprivileged person. The children we reached out to in neighboring communities had very little belongings but speaking with them and learning about their lives and their cultures showed me how socioeconomic status reached beyond the physical needs and wants and shapes also how we think.

In Nancy Mullane's Junior CORE I participated in an activity that examines different perspectives on socioeconomic status. Part of the activity listed out three viewpoints of a meal that is placed in front of you. If your mind prioritized that the meal was hot, you were in socioeconomic status. If you judged the meal based on if it tasted good, you were of middle class. Finally, if you judged the meal based on appearance (whether or not it was presented well) you were of upper socioeconomic class. According to what I understand of each of the socioeconomic classes what this activity presented appeared to be very realistic. Based on the way I judge my meals I belong somewhere between lower and middle class. When I have a meal I first judge if it is fresh (compared to being a day or so old) and then if it tasted good (whether I enjoyed it or not).

Social class has always appeared as a community divider to me. It separates those who have the means of getting and going where they want and those who don't. The biggest difference I notice in social class is the ability to enjoy life. From my general life observations, I notice that those of upper class feel the need to continuously purchase new things or travel on new vacations to be happy; however, those of lower class often can find happiness at home just by being surrounded with people they care for. This also demonstrates a difference in values as a person of upper class will value the higher priced prestigious things and the individual of lower class will value hard work, loyalty, and friendship. This difference can be attributed to available funds, how the individual was raised (be it to work for what they want or expect it to be handed to them), the love and affection given to them throughout their childhood (an upper class family will often spend less time with their children), and family legacy within a community.

Being raised lower-middle class I can say that I value many similar things as those of lower class individuals. I cherish time with my friends and family, understand that if I work hard anything is possible, and have been taught to treat everything and everyone with respect and loyalty. However, I have also had some experiences that contribute to my middle class mentality. This includes always having new school clothes each year, being able to pick out what I want to eat from a grocery store, going on a family vacation to our camp spot by the river each summer, and being able to watch movies or television whenever I wanted. These privileges were never gone without acknowledgement though. My parents would frequently remind me and my siblings that what we had was to be valued, treated right, and a privilege not to be abused. Being raised by parents who understood what it meant to be privileged were the most influential piece to my understanding.

Sexual Identity –

I have been dating my current boyfriend for over four years. We are high school sweethearts and have two dogs together. We live in a small apartment here in Bellingham and are incredibly privileged to have each other. As a heterosexual woman I know that I haven't had to live with as many difficult experiences as those who identify as a part of the LGBTQ community.

Peggy McIntosh discusses white privilege through a list of experiences that White individuals may experience apart from people of color. Through an in-class exercise I found this list to also be applicable to sexual identity. Being a heterosexual there are multiple things in life I don't have to worry about that a person of the LGBTQ community does. These include:

- I'm not asked why I'm not heterosexual

- Straight hasn't been translated to stupid (for example, that's so gay)
- I receive social acceptance
- I can choose not to think politically about my sexual identity
- I have access to my partner in emergency situations
- My marriage and rights are socially accepted
- I receive support from religious communities
- Heterosexism isn't seen as a 'phase'
- I don't have to ask for a baby and
- My sexual identity is portrayed in social media. (HSP 455 Diversity and Social Justice, Personal Communications, May 9th, 2013)

After this exercise I came to a new understanding that I don't have to live through a lot of traumatic and unsettling experiences that a person coming-out to their friends, family, and community have to. It is very easy for me to be accepted by everyone I know and I never have to worry about losing their support.

Watching the documentary, *For the Bible Tells me so*, was heart wrenching. It was incredibly difficult to see families and communities torn apart because they were unable to understand or accept a person because of who they loved. My image of a family has always included unconditional love; a love for one another that could never be broken or tattered. This video showed me just how faulty that perception could be and challenged me to realize that not everyone is privileged to have family members that will stick with you and support you in anything and everything. This video was an eye opener as it showed me just how privileged I am in this area. My family has never shown anything but support in my choices and I can't even

imagine what it would be like to experience what many of gay and lesbian individuals have to endure.

Being an Ally –

An ally is described as “a member of a dominant group in our society who works to dismantle any form of oppression from which she or he receives the benefit” (Ayvazian, A., 2010, pp. 684).

Although this definition appears to make the job of an ally sound simple, that is far from the truth as I understand it. Michael Spenser discusses the requirements to becoming a successful ally by stating “allyship requires tremendous humility. It means never being truly culturally competent, but rather, recognizing that the pursuit of critical consciousness is a lifelong process” (2008, pp. 101). I feel this is an accurate representation of the potential struggles an individual will face in this process. I know it is not going to be easy learning and understanding how to become an ally, but it is a process I am going to continue to develop with and a trait that I am going to always value.

It is incredible how much my perspective on the term privilege has changed. I have always considered myself to be lucky and blessed to be given the life I have, but I never thought about it in relation to the socially constructed idea of privilege. After examining the areas in which I am privileged or underprivileged in the United States, I have come to the conclusion that it is my privilege to become an ally for those who aren't privileged in the same ways I am. I will respect each individual and treat them with dignity and an open mind. Developing an understanding of the varying forms of institutionalized oppression and diversity around the globe, particularly in the United States, has influenced my decision to interact with each person as an individual. I will continue to develop awareness of the areas an individual may appear to be privileged or underprivileged and acknowledge that this has been an influence in their life. Instead of ignoring these pieces of who they are I will recognize how it might influence their

personality. It is also important to acknowledge and recognize a person's lived experiences. This can be seen in terms of race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual identity, or ability and the ways people with similar lived experiences have been oppressed throughout history and in modern society.

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