
RECOGNITION VERSUS RE-EVALUATION OF PRIVILEGE IN SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

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Social justice educators working to encourage variously privileged students to recognize the way they have been systemically advantaged while others have not are faced with many obstacles including denial, culpable ignorance, and various forms of self-deception on behalf of privileged individuals. One of the students in a pre-service education class on systemic racism and white privilege I visited asked of her group: “Why would anyone notice or challenge something that benefits them?” What is it about unearned privileges, and how they are conceived that leads to so much disavowal on the part of those whose lives are predicated on securing them on a daily basis?

This paper attempts to deconstruct the concept of “privilege” by examining two approaches—*recognition* and *re-evaluation*—for deploying the concept and how these in turn impact the goal of transformative social justice education.¹ I contend that reading “privilege” contrapuntally² uncovers important hidden dimensions that lurk behind the concept, rendering the term problematic, if not entirely inadequate. I urge that dismantling privilege requires (among other things) its *re-evaluation* in addition to its *recognition* and hope to illustrate this point by investigating claims about what it means to recognize privilege in one domain, and, subsequently, in another genre, to revalue that privilege in the context of harms that are occluded by the practice of recognition.

WHY DECONSTRUCT PRIVILEGE?

The concepts we use to theorize oppression and resistance are implicated in the reproduction of the very social structures they are invoked to critically assess and transform.³ Efforts to create transformative critical pedagogies that reclaim education as a space for cultivating possibilities of personal and social transformation are thwarted by conceptual calamities and “lexical gaps”⁴ that trip us up and need to be filled in. Legacies of colonization, slavery, and genocide constitute the language we use; our conceptual tools mask presupposed hierarchies and produce devastating epistemological, ethical, and political consequences. We need to attend to the ways language produces us to think in certain categories, which have built in hierarchies in them, such that so called neutral starting points for analysis are already loaded. Analyzing how concepts are being deployed helps us to understand how using them can undermine attempts to have a broader more transformative effect.

WHY DECONSTRUCT PRIVILEGE AND NOT SOMETHING ELSE?

There seems to be a growing concern in critical educational theory and practice that it is time to shift the gaze to the privileged side of oppression.⁵ In order to de-naturalize privileges, we need to *recognize* the ways they have been invisibly embedded in language, institutions, and inter-subjective relations. For the purposes of size and scope, I focus on theorizations of white privilege, for disrupting the invisibility and normativity of whiteness has been named fundamental to the project of creating transformative critical pedagogies.⁶ Analysis of phenomenologies of oppression has been helpful in documenting the myriad ways in which members of different groups are victimized, marginalized, harmed by, or resistant to domination while the practice of privilege has remained relatively free from interrogation. In other words, there has been little documentation of the power that whiteness holds for its owners.⁷ Like the construction of masculine privilege through lifetime socialization, the process is largely hidden.

A “QUESTION OF METHOD”

I offer a contrapuntal literature review that distinguishes two different approaches to using the concept of privilege. Contrapuntal reading is a methodological strategy mapped out by Edward Said designed to re-examine problematic foundational assumptions that have been constituted by the exploitation and exclusion of difference. It involves learning from that which has been (wrongfully) excluded from academic discourse by reading texts for their absent presences, juxtaposing different narratives that may seem distinct but are linked and mutually constituting. Texts that exist in “dominant” cultures are read together with texts from “othered” cultures. In this way, we can start to think of cultures and identities as an “ensemble”⁸ formed out of historical contexts that need to be re-examined to fully understand how they have shaped who people think they are.

The two approaches I identify to deploying the concept of privilege emerge out of different historical contexts. The first approach, the *recognition approach*, arises out of contemporary critical educational theory and practice and aims to identify and challenge the institutionalization of invisible privileging mechanisms that have for too long allowed some to benefit from the oppressions of Others. The *re-evaluation approach* arises out of a return to the insights of anti-colonial scholarship which challenge the inherent valuing of privilege as a good. These scholars theorize “boomerang effects of domination”⁹ and demonstrate that the practice of privilege damages all, not just the “victims” at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

RECOGNIZING THE PERKS OF PRIVILEGE

The recognition approach uncovers invisible privileging mechanisms that organize perception, language, structural relations, subjectivities, and even dignities that fail to be recognized as such. Alerting us to the need for structural, conceptual, institutional, and personal transformation, current research on whiteness begins the process necessary for understanding both the power of whiteness and the beginning of its deconstruction. And while whiteness theories differ with regard to their methodological approaches, aims, and theoretical claims, they all problematize the normalization and naturalization of whiteness and values coded as white that function as generic and colorblind norms.

Audrey Thompson distinguishes between material, discursive, institutional, and identity theories of whiteness, all of which help to demonstrate the way scholars who employ the recognition approach to the concept of privilege uncover the way white privileges have been embedded in both micro and macro practices of power.¹⁰ In her ovarian (seminal) work on white privilege, Peggy McIntosh provides concrete and everyday examples of the myriad ways white skin privilege provides various legal, material, political, social, and psychological benefits to its holders, arguing that privilege is an indiscernible combination of “unearned assets that one can count on cashing in each day, but about which one is ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.”¹¹ White privilege, she writes, is like “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, code books, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.”¹² Extending this analysis, Alison Bailey asserts that the structured invisibility of privilege ensures that “accomplishments” or lack thereof will be recognized on the basis of merit rather than on the basis of group membership. Bailey asserts that not only do members of dominant groups receive special advantages from the invisible knapsack of privilege, but they also receive additional benefits, which can be in the form of *positive* or *negative* privilege.¹³

Social justice educators who attempt to engage students in the practice of recognition report being met with various degrees of distancing, anger, and hostility when challenging ideological justifications and phenomenologies of denial.¹⁴ Alice McIntyre names “white talk” as talk which serves to “insulate white people from examining their own individual and collective roles in the perpetuation of racism.”¹⁵ Such talk “not only denies white people the experience of seeing themselves as benefiting from racism, but in doing so, frees them from taking responsibility for eradicating it.”¹⁶ Kathy Hytten and John Warren report that students often invoke “cultural logics” that work to either erase their own complicity in whiteness and systems of power, or they so distance themselves from the topic that they cease to see any possibility for resistance.¹⁷ Not only do social justice educators need to recognize the ways privileging mechanisms have been embedded institutionally and expose the various unevenly distributed material, social, and psychological perks that are conferred to owners, but they

also need to find effective ways to engage students in critique of the various (ideological) justifications that keep invisible privileging mechanisms in place. While the strategies and starting points for dismantling privilege and mobilizing resistance in the recognition approach differ from scholar to scholar, they all share in common emphasis on the *benefits* that accrue to dominant subjects, who are conceived as *beneficiaries* of the *oppression of others*.

PRIVILEGE: ALL PERK AND NO PERIL?

While most of the advantages outlined in the new taxonomies of privilege appear (at first glance) to be a set of *benefits* that enhance the life of those for whom they are available, there seems to be a missing element; even before they had been more fully articulated, McIntosh wrote, “we need a more finely differentiated taxonomy of privilege, for some of these varieties are only what one would want for everyone in a just society, and others give license to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant and destructive...Those who do not depend on conferred dominance have traits and qualities that will never develop in those who do.”¹⁸ For this reason, the word “privilege” now seems particularly misleading: “we usually think of privilege as a favored state, whether earned or conferred by birth, or luck.”¹⁹ If McIntosh is right that not all privileges are beneficial or desirable, why is it defined as an invisible weightless knapsack filled only with perk providing special tools and provisions? Why the trend to taxonomize the perks of privilege without fully articulating the perils? What else is in the (proverbial) knapsack? And why is it important to look?

RE-THINKING PRIVILEGE THROUGH *RETURN*

Returning to the insights of scholars who employ the re-evaluation approach reveals that there are important dimensions of domination that are occluded by the practice of recognition: the so-called perks of privilege do not come without costs the terms fails to connote. The driving metaphor for privilege emphasized by the recognition approach might be thought of as a “free ticket” to access all life has to offer found inside an “invisible weightless knapsack” granted to some at the expense of Others. Scholars in the camp of re-evaluation, however, might be inclined to point out that the “free ticket,” the “special provisions, maps, passports and blank checks” lead not to the land of luxury and freedom but into state of “psychic alienation”²⁰ and “corporeal malediction.”²¹ The emphasis for re-evaluation scholars is on the inherent *dehumanization* of the *perpetrators* of “privilege.” The driving metaphor of privilege for this school could be conceived as a “performative self-imprisonment.” Agency and personhood become problems for dominant subjects not just their so-called “victims” when privileges are coded as dehumanizing. Might such a view help to uncover what is behind the concept of privilege that presupposes hierarchies, such that attempts to disrupt them are less than successful through invocation of the term, as has been documented by the recognition approach?

Re-evaluation scholars conceptualize dominant subjects as insecure, alienated, anxious, anguished, violently repressed, and pathological. Unable to consummate the privileges they so stridently seek, these subjects appear as self-destructive co-victims of the “massive psycho-existential complexes”²² born of colonial conquest. Dominant subjects in this setting do not “enjoy” privileges but are *haunted*²³ by them, forced to disown the very values they claim to maintain. Neither free nor autonomous, such subjects are perceived as imprisoned in a state of mutual bondage based on self-denial and violence maintained through ignorance and fear of difference. The struggle for justice and equity is not seen as one of oppressed against oppressors, but both of them against a system that turns them both into co-victims.²⁴ Scholars employing the re-evaluation approach stress the need to begin the process of dis-alienation by recovering self-and-other and revealing the pleasures to be had in experiencing social solidarity and exercising responsible agency.

Representative of such an approach, Ashis Nandy reminds us that colonialism “encouraged the colonizers to impute to themselves magical feelings of omnipotence and permanence.”²⁵ But the fantasy of superiority failed to secure within the fantasist any sense of security or bliss. The possibilities for self-determination and actualization are annihilated in the equation of domination and submission, which, as Aimé Césaire so astutely confirms, “turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production.”²⁶ In order to maintain a posture of domination, the agency of the dominant subject is confined to the dictates of an imposed imperial identity.

Elucidating this agentic ambiguity, the harsh dominion that dominant subjects must exercise over their own subjectivity, Klaus Theweleit theorizes the militarily produced, constructed as hard, organized, mechanized, and ready for attack body of the dominant subject, which becomes a “mechanism for containing the desiring production of his own unconscious.”²⁷ In pursuit of the posture of absolute domination, Theweleit’s Nazi subject endeavors to become a “man of steel,” whose most urgent task “is to pursue, to dam in, and to subdue any force that threatens to transform him back into the horribly disorganized jumble of flesh, hair, skin, bones, intestines, and feelings that calls itself human.”²⁸ Only through violence can this subject know himself as in control, such that “inside this man is a concentration camp, the concentration camp of his desires,”²⁹ for this “man of steel” must develop an extraordinarily “thick skin”³⁰ which insulates him from his own body and that of the Other, suggesting that though domination involves “enjoying” undeniable economic gain and political power, the one in the privileged position is agentially compromised. The point here is to realize that power operates dialectically, subjecting even those at the top of social/global hierarchies to its tyranny.

The inescapable gaze of the Other renders the life of the dominant subject a ceaseless struggle to maintain control, emphasizing the instability of his precarious position and imposing a sort of corporeal and/or psychic malediction. This subject can't escape the fact that he is a "privileged being and an illegitimately privileged one; that is, a usurper...not only in the eyes of the colonized, but in his own as well."³¹ It is the presence of the Other that provides the condition of his privileges while paradoxically it is as a result of this inescapable presence that he is never able to consummate them. Having adopted the posture of absolute domination, this subject finds himself standing between the gun and the gaze of the Other, an impossible situation in which to affirm his freedom. Elucidating the undertheorized boomerang effects of domination, Frantz Fanon documents the pathologies colonial officials who tortured war criminals and became increasingly violent with their families and were themselves disfigured and distressed by various forms of psychic unrest.³²

The performative self-imprisonment involved in the practice of privilege is in Cesaire's estimation a result of the fact that

the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal.³³

Scholars who code privilege as dehumanizing contend that a dominant subject maintains only the illusion of autonomy and control. On this view, the privileged subject brings about his own dehumanization, for the psychic investment in domination "dehumanizes even the most civilized man."³⁴ As we saw with the "man of steel," Theweleit's soldier male is forced to "turn the periphery of his body into a cage for the beast within. In so doing, he deprives it of its function as a surface for social contact. His contact surface becomes an insulated shield, and he loses the capacity to perceive the social corpus within which his insulated body moves."³⁵

Problematizing ordinary conceptions of privilege, Fanon asks, "Superiority? Inferiority? Why not the simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?"³⁶ Social relations of privilege and oppression preclude such possibilities, whether maintained through brutal violence or hegemonic complicity. In such an equation relative economic and political advantage, usurpation, amounts to a superiorized form of alienation: before it can adopt a positive voice, "freedom requires an effort at disalienation."³⁷ This reading of privilege would seem to suggest that it is not just the colonized that is alienated by the wearing of a white mask.

RISKS OF RE-EVALUATION

There are indeed some potential risks that need to be considered if we are to take the re-evaluation approach seriously. First of all it may be objected that the dominant subject reviewed in the context of re-evaluation bears no resemblance to a privileged individual in contemporary North American society. Secondly, one might want to know why we should draw out the boomerang effects of domination when the perks of privilege are so clear and ever-present. Why be concerned with the well-being of those that perpetually procure perks and profits premised upon the deprivation, degradation, and devaluation of Others? It could be objected that rather than de-centering the dominant subject, the re-evaluation approach re-centers it. It could also be argued that emphasizing how the dominant suffer in social relations of exploitation and oppressive inter-subjective relations amounts to collapsing oppressions and stretching the term to meaninglessness.³⁸ While there may be other potential objections to the approach of re-evaluation, I consider these potential objections as they seem to me to be pertinent for the creation of transformative critical pedagogies.

While a certain dominant subject has been at the center of knowledge production and reproduction, the human beings constituting those subject positions have, with stupendous efforts, almost successfully written themselves out of the discourse: “silence from and about the subject was the order of the day”³⁹ while volumes have been written on the racialized and ‘inferior’ Other.⁴⁰ Given that we “talk about racial matters in a language designed to disguise the subject,”⁴¹ our efforts to subvert domination are often undermined by the very conceptual tools we invoke to disrupt the hierarchies. The re-evaluation approach to eradicating privilege subjects *the subject* to interrogation that for too long it has escaped.

Does analysis of the boomerang effects of domination amount to collapsing oppressions, and stretching that term and its consequences to meaninglessness, as Marylyn Frye would suggest? I hear her voice in the back of my mind loud and clear: “when the stresses and frustrations of being a man are cited as evidence that oppressors are oppressed by their oppressing, the word ‘oppression’ is being stretched to meaninglessness.”⁴² But in my attempt to employ a contrapuntal analysis, I hear other voices: “For me, oppression is the greatest calamity of humanity. It diverts and pollutes the best energies of man—of oppressed and oppressor alike, for if colonization destroys the colonized, it rots the colonizer.”⁴³ The re-evaluation approach contests the idea that privilege entirely benefits the overall well being of the individuals in whose favor it apparently works, a strategy aimed at undermining both the inferiority and superiority complexes born of colonial conquest, suggesting that manifestations of false superiority, alienation, injustice, and resentment will likely prevail if privileges are conceived as entirely advantageous.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION...

Crucial elements that are left out of much contemporary debate on how privileges can and should be renounced impede our being able to fully grasp the nature of the problem with privilege, potentially implicating invocation of the term in the reproduction of systemic inequalities rather than their transformation. Epistemologically speaking, if we neglect to outline the way privilege alienates dominant subjects from Others, and from themselves, we risk ascribing a “deficit identity”⁴⁴ to Others, whose lives tend to be imagined as consisting in burdens, problems, or deficits relative to a pathologically romanticized dominant group. Ethically speaking, we need to dislodge notions that “we” are doing something for “them” if social justice is to become something other than a performance of false superiority. Recognizing perks of privilege without maintaining vigilance to “the psyche or peculiarity of the oppressor” risks setting the oppressed group up as “powerless and defective by contrast with the more powerful group which is seen as the norm, and not examined for its cultural specificity, peculiarity, or pathology.”⁴⁵ Politically speaking, as long as privileges are thought to be entirely desirable and advantageous, it seems likely that they will continue to be coveted, protected, denied, and resented.

Reading “privilege” contrapuntally may well provide social justice educators with strategies to captivate seemingly intractable students and create spaces for dialogue across privileged/oppressed divides. Such a reading suggests that the concept of “privilege” is in need of further interrogation, of re-conceptualization; for not only does the concept often connote something desirable, a superior state of being in the world, it also seems to maintain an illusion of autonomy, and the price one pays for securing and perpetuating privilege remains relatively free from scrutiny. And it may be that the price of privilege, particularly in the so-called free world, is freedom itself.

NOTES

1. I also refer to transformative critical pedagogies and have in mind those practices that challenge imperialist practices of knowledge production so that education resists rather than reproduces various unnecessary forms of interlocking race, gender, and other oppressions.
2. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994). Contrapuntal reading always looks to include a counterpoint or alternative perspective and will be outlined in more detail below.
3. “Power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative institution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.” Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 27. In order to modify

power relations –which, for Foucault, always exist—we need to undo the language that is the basis of the knowledge wherein are embedded the power relations we seek to modify.

4. Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998), 110.
 5. Scholars who employ the recognition approach share this assumption.
 6. Aida Hurtado and Abigail J Stewart, “Through the Looking Glass: Implications of Studying Whiteness for Feminist Methods,” in *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society*, ed. Michelle Fine, Linda Powell, and L. Mun Wong (New York: Routledge, 1997), 297–311.
 7. On the transparency of whiteness, see Hurtado and Stewart, “Through the Looking Glass.”
 8. See Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.
 9. I borrow this phrase from Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonization*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).
 10. Audrey Thompson, “Summary of Whiteness Theory,” <http://www.pauahtun.org/Whiteness-Summary-1.html> [cited 9 March 2004].
 11. Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies,” in *Gender Basics: Feminist Perspectives on Women and Men*, ed. A. Minas (California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993), 31.
 12. McIntosh, “White Privilege,” 31.
 13. Negative privilege is understood as the absence of barriers while positive privilege is understood as the presence of additional perks that cannot be described in terms of immunities alone. Most men, for example, will generally have access to the negative privilege of not being afraid to go out alone at night, and an example of a positive privilege is being treated with respect as a result of one’s skin color. Alison Bailey, ”Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye’s ‘Oppression’,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 29, no. 3 (1998): 104–119.
 14. See Sandra Bartky, *Sympathy and Solidarity and Other Essays* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 151–166.
 15. Alice McIntyre, *Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identity with White Teachers* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1997), 31.
 16. McIntyre, *Marking Meaning of Whiteness*, 31.
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17. Kathy Hytten and John Warren, “Engaging Whiteness: How Racial Power Gets Reified in Education,” *Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (2003): 65-89.
18. McIntosh, “White Privilege,” 36.
19. McIntosh, “White Privilege,” 36.
20. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967). Fanon describes the psychological effects of colonization on the colonized as producing a psychic alienation, but a case can be made that this term can also apply to the colonizer, for Fanon is concerned with the elimination of a vicious circle in which the “black man wants to be white and the white man slaves to reach a human level” (9-10). Both are alienated in this equation and in need of liberation.
21. Please see Chapters 5 and 7 of Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Again, Fanon’s concept is designed to refer primarily to the condition of the black man. See Linda Martin Alcoff, “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment” in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), for elaboration of my claim that a case can be made that these terms can also be used to describe those in privileged positions.
22. Fanon, *Black Skin*, 12.
23. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard UP , 1990).
24. For elaboration of this position see Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988).
25. Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, 35.
26. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonization*, 42.
27. Sherene Razack, *Dark Threats and White Knights: The Somalia Affair, Peacekeeping and the New Imperialism* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004), 60.
28. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies Vol. 2: Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 160.
29. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, 6.
30. McIntosh, “White Privilege,” 36, 144. Theweleit stresses that this thick skin should not be understood metaphorically.
31. Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, trans. Howard Greenfeld (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 9.

32. Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington_ (New York: Grove Press, 1963).
 33. Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonization*, 41.
 34. Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonization*, 41.
 35. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, 22.
 36. Fanon, *Black Skin*, 231.
 37. Fanon, *Black Skin*, 231.
 38. On definitions of oppression, see Marilyn Frye, “Oppression,” in *The Politics of Reality* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1983), 1-16.
 39. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 51.
 40. See Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.
 41. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 50.
 42. Frye, “Oppression,” 1.
 43. Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, xvii.
 44. Peggy McIntosh, “Interactive Phases of Curricular and Personal Re-Vision with Regard to Race” Working Paper No. 219 (Wellesley College, MA: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, 1990).
 45. McIntosh, “Interactive Phases,” 7.
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