

UNLEARNING PRIVILEGE AND BECOMING AN ALLY: IT IS NEVER TOO YOUNG TO START

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This article presents the Matrix model for understanding oppression and privilege which can inform teaching, theorizing, and practice. This framework draws upon the notion of a "matrix of domination," approaching privilege from an intersectional perspective. The author then explores her personal experience as a parent and teacher to explore the dynamics of privilege, what it means to be an ally, and the myriad ways in which we can subvert privilege on a daily basis. Finally, the concept of allyship is explored from an intersectional perspective and specific examples are considered.



As an academic scholar, my research has examined the complex dynamics of privilege, particularly among overt white supremacists. However, as scholars we rarely get the opportunity to write about our own personal reflections, and the more I understand about how privilege operates, the more evident it becomes how it shapes my own life on a daily basis. I would like to see more opportunities for us to explore the intersections of the personal and the academic in our work. After all, we do this work in order to create social change. Those of us studying privilege do so because we are committed to social justice, to the project of dismantling privilege. But to do so requires that we explore our own lives as well. Everyday we struggle with how to make real our commitment, for ourselves and for our students. As teachers, we need to be able to answer our students' questions when they ask us what they can do. It is our job not only to help students see privilege in their lives, but to provide them with tools for dismantling privilege. It is in this vein that I would like to examine a number of very personal examples from my own life.

Synthesizing the accumulated insights and research of many scholars and activists, I have sought to bring them together into a model for understanding oppression and privilege from an intersectional perspective. This framework is informed by a sociological perspective, and draws upon the notion of a "matrix of domination" (Collins, 1990). Key features of this framework are outlined below.

The Matrix Framework

1. *Recognize the importance of examining both privilege and oppression:* Privilege and oppression are two sides of the same coin; you cannot have one without the other.

2. *Intersectional:* Emphasizes that forms of privilege and oppression interact and intersect, so it makes visible diversity within groups. For example, no one has just a racial identity. This approach emphasizes that rather than seeing African Americans as a homogenous group, the experiences of African Americans vary depending upon other important social classifications such as gender, class, and sexual orientation.

3. *Social constructionist:* Categories of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, etc. are social classifications, and are historically and culturally variable. These classifications are largely the result of inequality, created and perpetuated to support specific configurations of power. This framework focuses on inequality instead of differences.

4. *Inclusive:* Virtually everyone experiences privilege (whether race, gender, ethnic, sexual orientation, class, ability); thus

it is one experience we all share. We all have a racial identity, a gender identity etc. In some ways we may be marginalized, but in others we are privileged.

5. *Inequality is institutional*: This approach does not blame individuals. Privilege and oppression are not seen as characteristics of people, but of society. According to Johnson (2001), "*Oppression and dominance* name social realities that we can participate in without being oppressive or dominating people" (p. 13). This framework focuses on outcomes and impact, which may result independent of one's intention. We receive privileges whether we want to or not. We may not be consciously heterosexist; however, heterosexuals receive privileges in our society that LGBTQ people do not.

6. *Recognizes inequality as harmful to all*: Emphasizes that narrow group identities can be harmful to everyone, even those who are privileged.

7. *Encourages ongoing self-examination*: Because we are all implicated in the dynamics of privilege and oppression, we all need to do the difficult personal and emotional work required of us.

8. *Proactive focus on social change*: We are all a part of the problem and need to be part of the solution. We all must take ownership of these issues and we should all be involved in trying to create change.

One of the truly liberatory possibilities of focusing on privilege, rather than only oppression, is that privilege is something we all experience. When we examine privilege through an intersectional prism, taking into consideration the dynamics of race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, age, and nation, we can all find some way to examine privilege in our own lives, and find some foundation to join together as allies to work for social justice.

This framework has directed my attention to my own experiences of race, class, and heterosexual privilege, and challenged me to examine my own role in reproducing privilege. When I walk into a store, no one follows me around to make sure I don't shoplift. I have never been pulled over by the police because of my race, and unlike my

African American and Latina friends, I have been stopped by the police on more than one occasion for speeding and let go with just a "warning." Most important, I have realized the extent to which I can ignore race. I have the luxury of ignoring race in my daily life. I do not have to worry about my child being called names in school, harassed, beat up, arrested, denied a job, denied a raise, or charged more for a car because of race. I can count on race working in her favor.

I not only benefit from my white privilege, but also from my heterosexual privilege. I can walk hand in hand with my husband in public and display his photo on my desk without fear. We can assume without question that we can benefit from each other's health and life insurance. We do not fear for our child being teased at school for having two parents of the same sex/gender. We know that she sees families like hers everyday in books, on television, in movies, generally portrayed in a positive light, and do not worry about her being exposed to stereotypes about our sexuality or race. Everywhere we go, we are always represented as the norm.

Thank You, David Duke

I am a member of the organizing team of the White Privilege Conference (WPC), an annual conference committed to examining white supremacy, privilege, and oppression. I would like to share one experience that occurred last spring at the 10th annual conference.

Working with the WPC makes clear how the potential loss of privilege is truly threatening to many people, and gets in the way of people stepping up as allies. This year, in addition to the expected hate letters, white supremacist David Duke featured the WPC on his website, including my photo, and that of other conference planning team members. This created an atmosphere of fear and anxiety for many at the conference. We know that these kinds of articles can precipitate hate crimes and are simply one manifestation of the feelings that many people harbor when it comes to race. This was an occasion for me to examine my own privilege in a number of ways.

First, for a very brief moment at the conference, I experienced *not* having racial privilege. I remember very clearly the moment when one participant casually observed, "It is interesting that no white people were targeted in [David Duke's] article." Hearing that immediately stunned me. *I am* a white person. Here I was in the midst of a four-day experience examining in detail my whiteness and the privileges I reap from it every day. And yet, this comment highlighted that for many people, including the readers of David Duke's website, I am not white because I am Jewish. For a very brief time, I felt what it was like to not have white privilege in every aspect of my life. At the same time, losing that privilege made me starkly aware of it, and how much I benefit from it most of the time. I have the luxury of feeling safe *most* of the days and moments of my life, and in most contexts.

This was driven home even further by the immediate outpouring of support from conference participants. As more and more people at the conference learned about the Duke article, it prompted many attendees to confront their own privilege. One presenter, Jessica Pettit, sent me these thoughts (included here with her permission):

*What is my white privilege -
not being used to this,
not having my picture in the article,
not having my name in the article,
being scared by this to some/any
degree
I wonder even if you may be used to
this-
Do you really just get used to being
threatened? scared?
Not knowing this is my white
privilege.*

I was truly touched when another participant told me, "We have your back." But even more so, I felt ambivalence. As someone who is tremendously privileged by my whiteness *most* of the time, I don't typically need anyone looking out for me. My thoughts turned, immediately, to all of the people of color and LGBT folks targeted in white supremacist publications, day in and day out, who can not

pass for white, or heterosexual, or gender conforming...*who has their backs?* When Angie Zapata, a young transgender Colorado woman, was brutally murdered last year why didn't anyone have her back? I felt ambivalence, and, honestly, anger. Anger that I was the recipient of so much support, and feeling what an impact this can have, yet knowing that so many others who need this support do not receive it. It was only a very fleeting moment of fear for me; for others it lasts a lifetime. I also recognize I was the beneficiary of this support because of my class privilege, which allowed me to be there in the first place, and my white privilege, which gives me the option of doing this work at much less personal cost than people of color who do this work.

Being an Ally

Many authors have written about the importance of being an ally. Anyone who experiences privilege has the potential to be an ally to those who are oppressed. We know that systems of oppression and privilege are interacting, mutually constitutive, and reinforcing. Therefore, we cannot oppose only one system of inequality and meet with any success. We must work to undermine all forms of inequality simultaneously. Starting with the matrix framework as a foundation, I offer the following guidelines, many of which have been adapted from others, including Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, and Love (1997); Gorski (2009); and Kivel (2009):

- Take responsibility for learning about how oppression and privilege works, and teach others. Do not expect others to teach you.
- Assume that inequality and oppression are everywhere, all the time, even when not visible to you.
- Work continuously to be aware of your own privilege, and the way privilege operates. Notice who is the center of attention and who has access to power.
- Notice the ways in which oppression and privilege are denied, ignored, minimized, or justified.
- Learn from history from both the history of specific forms of inequality as well as from

social movements that have worked for change and social justice.

- Understand the connections between the various forms of oppression and privilege and pay attention to how they intersect and support each other.

- Speak out! Take a stand against injustice. Take risks and be willing to act in spite of your own fear and the resistance you face from others.

- Recognize that learning to see oppression and privilege is an ongoing, lifelong process.

- Recognize that you will make mistakes and approach them as learning opportunities. Be willing to be confronted about your own behavior and attitudes. It is okay to be uncomfortable. It is a sign that you are learning!

- Pick your battles, taking action against social injustice in your own sphere of influence.

- Pay attention to mundane, daily interactions, and media messages. Privilege is normalized in very subtle ways and is so pervasive that we often do not recognize it.

- Listen to, respect, and support the leadership, perspectives, and experiences of members of oppressed groups.

- Protect yourself from burnout, and find support among other individuals, groups, and organizations. Take advantage of opportunities to reenergize and recommit yourself to this difficult work (for example, attend the WPC). Strive to cultivate a community of allies.

I think it is particularly important to emphasize that privilege is manifested all the time. Working to dismantle privilege is not just a question of confronting major cases of injustice, or embracing specific social movements or organizations. No matter what we do in our life, no matter where we are, we encounter experiences of privilege and oppression being normalized and institutionalized on a daily basis. Every one of these experiences presents an occasion for educating ourselves and others, and working for change. I see my privilege everyday, and one of the biggest challenges for me is how to make this visible for my daughter. In doing inclusion work with teachers, one of the concerns I often hear is that kids can't really

deal with these issues until they reach a certain age. Many teachers are convinced that we cannot examine privilege with young children. I disagree. Because privilege is such an omnipresent issue in our lives, we are provided with daily occasions for examining it with children. The earlier we start, the better. Every occasion of the normalization of privilege is also an occasion for its interrogation. Let me share a few examples.

Barbie Gets Married

I remember when my daughter was a preschooler and we were sitting in a doctor's office waiting room, and she picked up a book for me to read to her. It was a book about Barbie getting married. As we were reading the book, we came to a page with pictures of Barbie in her wedding dress, standing next to Skipper, her bridesmaid. When my daughter saw the picture she exclaimed, with joy "Look! Barbie's marrying Skipper!" I remember being shocked and thinking quickly about how to respond. My very first thought was how wonderful it is that she sees this as possible: that she can imagine and be excited about two women getting married! My next thought was, I don't want to crush her enthusiasm. So I went along with it, and responded, "Yes, how exciting!" Because she could not yet read, I was able to change the story, and when Ken entered the picture, I simply pretended that he was a member of the wedding party.

The Game of Life

My daughter used to like playing *Life*, the game with little plastic people who move around the board in little plastic cars. The little plastic people come in two colors; you guessed it – pink or blue! As you move through "Life," at some point you land on a space that commands you to get married. First, notice how the institution of heterosexual marriage is normalized here. The players do not get to decide whether or not to marry, and later, whether or not to have kids. The fact of marriage and parenthood is normalized as a natural part of life everyone will engage in. When we played the game, I pointed this out, and we talked about some of the adults we know who are not married, or who do not have

children, yet have full, successful, happy lives. Next, I made the decision to select a marriage partner of the same color . I used this as an opportunity to casually point out that in most states two people of the same gender are not allowed to get married, but that I think this is wrong, people should be allowed to marry whomever they love. As she got a bit older, I could take the discussion a bit deeper . What was most gratifying was to see her begin pondering whether to marry a pink or blue character, and to vary it in future games.

Opportunities arise all the time to discuss these issues with children. The fact is that they are getting messages about privilege all the time, from television, movies, storybooks, etc., and we need to be able to respond as when they arise. I do not think we need to sit down and have a formal discussion about sexual orientation with preschoolers, but when they are exposed to messages that normalize heterosexual privilege, we should be ready to respond and teach our children to question that normalization. It should become a normal and conscious part of our role as parents, teachers, and responsible adults.

Saving Sex for Marriage

A final example I want to share happened very recently. I attended a meeting for parents at my daughter's middle school to meet with two ob/gyns who were volunteering their time to conduct human development discussions with the students. The discussions would encompass basic body changes and reproductive functioning, birth control, relationships, including lesbian and gay relationships (hurray!!! I thought), various STIs and protection, etc. I was relieved that my daughter was attending a school where these issues would be openly discussed. During the Q and A period, some questions arose regarding protection and abstinence. In response, one of the speakers said that she wanted to be clear that she has her own values around this subject matter, and that given all of the pregnant teens and teens with STIs that she sees, her advice to teens is that they should "wait until marriage." She acknowledged that this may not be realistic, and believes that kids need to know how to protect themselves if

they engage in sexual activity but that she also wants to make clear that she believes the best choice is to "wait until marriage."

Well, this immediately set off alarms for me. I know that in my daughter's class alone there are a number of kids with single parents, and some with parents in committed gay and lesbian relationships. I raised my hand and pointed this out. "What I meant," she responded, "is that they should wait until they are adults, and can make informed choices, and are ready to handle the adult responsibilities that accompany sexual activity ." But it was interesting how easily that translated into and was symbolized by marriage. We equate marriage with adulthood, responsibility, and commitment. Saying "wait until you're married" became shorthand for "wait until you are a responsible adult and really ready." We know there are many abstinence only educators who argue vehemently that heterosexual marriage is the only acceptable time to engage in sexual activity But that was not what she meant. And, that was not what the school wanted to convey . The fact that they were willing to teach about birth control and lesbian and gay identities/relationships signals this. So in this incident what is disturbing to me is how even among liberals with the best intentions, heterosexual privilege is so easily normalized. What kind of subtle message does it send to kids when they hear , from a doctor, that it is best to reserve sexual activity for marriage? In that moment, how does it make those children feel who have two parents who cannot legally marry? Despite the best of intentions, we need to be ever vigilant about the ways in which heterosexual privilege is normalized unconsciously everyday , all the time.

Conclusion

I incorporate these kinds of stories and examples into my teaching as often as possible. All of the courses I teach focus on issues of race, gender, and sexuality, and it is often the first time students have really thought about how privilege affects their lives on a daily basis. Sharing these personal stories can be powerful and through them I emphasize that unlearning oppression and privilege is a life-long process.

I am able to model the ways that I continually recognize new instances of privilege that I had not recognized before. Sharing examples of times when I have felt successful, as well as the times I have felt displeased with my response, is essential, demonstrating that we must all be open to making mistakes and learning from them. At the same time, sharing these instances with students also highlights why it is so important to find networks of support. As a class, we can share ideas and strategies for how I might have responded differently. I also use this as an opportunity to ask students where they will find support once they leave this class, or college, all together.

These examples also highlight some of the key ways in which we can work to be allies, everyday, all the time, no matter where we are. I find that students often narrowly envision activism and being an ally as a formal role one takes on, for example, by joining a social movement or anti-racist organization. Using these examples from my daily life allows students to envision how they might incorporate being an ally into everything they do, no matter what career they embark upon. We need to work on seeing our privilege in our daily mundane activities. Allies are needed everywhere—in doctors offices, at schools, at restaurants, in stores—because privilege manifests everywhere. Privilege is often normalized in very subtle ways. It is our choice whether we continue to uncritically normalize privilege or commit to challenging it when and where we can, and it is never too soon to start.

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