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Catherine Crisp

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White and Lesbian: Intersections of Privilege and Oppression

CATHERINE CRISP
School of Social Work, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Little Rock, Arkansas, USA

This article defines and explores concepts of privilege, oppression, and intersectionality as they relate to the author's experience of being a white lesbian female. The Awareness/Acceptance/Action Model, used frequently in 12-step programs, is presented as a means by which to take initial steps to become aware of privilege and address oppression. Examples of the intersections between different forms of privilege and oppression are presented. Although the article is applicable to many different forms of privilege and oppression, the primary focus is on white privilege and lesbian oppression.

KEYWORDS intersectionality, lesbian, oppression, privilege, white privilege

INTRODUCTION

As a white, middle-class, christian, nondisabled, North American, lesbian female, I experience both privilege and oppression. I experience privilege as a function of my race, socioeconomic class, christian identity, nationality, absence of disabilities, and presentation as the gender with which I identify. However, I also experience oppression as a female and lesbian. My privilege and oppression intersect with each other and influence each other. The purpose of this article is to discuss privilege, oppression, and intersectionality; present a model for becoming aware of and addressing privilege and oppression; and present examples of how privilege and oppression intersect in my life. Although I will discuss a variety of forms of privilege and oppression, the primary focus of this article will be on the intersections of the privilege I experience as a white person and the oppression I experience as a lesbian and female. This article thus makes a unique contribution by presenting

Address correspondence to Catherine Crisp, School of Social Work, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2801 S. University Avenue, Little Rock, AR 72204. E-mail: clcrisp@ualr.edu

examples of how different forms of privilege are affected by experiences of oppression.

PRIVILEGE, OPPRESSION, AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Privilege

In her well-known essay, McIntosh (1989) defines white privilege as "an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious" (p. 10). McIntosh describes two types of privilege. Unearned entitlements are those that none of us should have to earn (McIntosh, 1989) and that include things such as feeling safe in public and working where we choose (Johnson, 2006). However, when these entitlements are limited to certain groups (such as white people), it becomes a form of privilege that McIntosh defines as unearned advantages. The second type of privilege McIntosh describes is "conferred dominance"; it gives one group the power to control others because of their race or sex.

As McIntosh (1989) notes in her definition, a key aspect of white privilege is its invisibility and the ability of white people to be oblivious to it. Consequently, it is not something I, as a white woman, see as having been bestowed upon me but is simply part of my landscape, part of the fabric of my life (Wildman, 1996). Until recently, being white was not something I was actively aware of because it did not appear to affect me negatively. Although I thought I understood racism, race was something that others had and not something that seemed to directly affect my life. As Potapchuk (2005) notes, I was blind to how the "white race card" was played every day in ways that benefited me and consequently I experienced what Johnson (2006) describes as the "luxury of obliviousness" (p. 22).

Obliviousness about white privilege has several consequences, including not having to think about being white (Johnson, 2006), not having to think about race and the impact of race on one's own life (Johnson, 2006), a lack of empathy for others' experiences (Marsiglia & Kulis, 2009), and the perception that our lives are morally neutral and normative (Goodman, 2011; McIntosh, 1988) and are the standard by which others lives should be judged (Wildman, 1996). Although trained as a social worker and committed to addressing issues of inequality and oppression as a social worker and educator, I have struggled with many of these. Until recently, I have not understood how my white identity shapes my life and I occasionally still struggle with understanding this. I have struggled to be empathic at times and, despite understanding much more about systemic privilege and oppression, I still want to believe the myth that we live in a meritocracy, a myth McIntosh (1989) says I must give up in order to embrace my white privilege. I naively want to believe in a democratic society where everyone has a voice, where

both white people and people of color contribute to defining norms. I want to reject Goodman's (2011) claim that I and others with privilege "determine what is acceptable and unacceptable, what is valued and ignored" (p. 16). The challenge for me and other white people is thus to give up our luxury of obliviousness, become aware of our white privilege, and identify ways in which white privilege affects both our lives and the lives of people of color. We must use the privilege we have to determine what is valued by acknowledging our privilege and using it to address the oppression and racism that permeate this society. I slowly began this challenge in the 1990s after reading McIntosh's (1989) article on white privilege. Twenty years later, the challenge still remains because as McIntosh (1989) notes, the pressure to avoid awareness of my white privilege is great and requires that I give up myths I have lived with my entire life.

Oppression

Oppression directly stems from privilege and is "a system that maintains advantage and disadvantage based on social group memberships and operates, intentionally and unintentionally, on individual, institutional, and cultural levels" (Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2007, p. 58). Several key aspects of this definition are noteworthy. First, oppression exists because others obtain some advantage from it, advantages that McIntosh (1989) refers to as unearned advantages. Consequently, oppression of some does not occur without others' experience of privilege. Simply put, people of color are oppressed because whites like me obtain advantages from it. Second, like privilege, oppression results from placement in socially constructed groups (Johnson, 2006) and cannot exist without these groups and placement in them. Third, oppression does not require intent by the oppressor and the absence of intent to oppress does not lessen its impact. Whether or not I and others intend to oppress, the consequences of oppression are still the same, the oppression has still occurred, and the pain and harm of the oppression are still present. Finally, oppression can occur at the individual level and is not limited to the institutional and cultural levels. Individuals, groups, institutions, and cultures can all be oppressive; consequently, people with privilege must take responsibility for our role in contributing to oppression at each of these levels.

Like privilege, oppression affects both privileged and subordinate groups (Sisneros, Stakeman, Joyner, & Schmitz, 2008). Consequences for members of privileged groups include but are not restricted to limited self knowledge, distorted views of self, denial of emotions, isolation from people who are different, ignorance of one's own culture and history, guilt and shame, stress, and spiritual emptiness (Goodman, 2011). Consequences for members of oppressed groups are often more destructive as oppression silences marginalized people and denies them the opportunity to fully

participate in society (Sisneros et al., 2008). It also "systematically reduces, molds, and immobilizes" members of oppressed groups (Sisneros et al., 2008, pp. 7–8) and thus may keep them from taking steps to address the oppression they experience. Whereas privilege opens doors for people, oppression "slams them shut" (Johnson, 2006, p. 38). Oppression dehumanizes and devalues individuals and, when internalized (subconsciously accepted by members of oppressed groups), it may lead members of oppressed groups to experience decreases in self-esteem, their sense of empowerment, their connections to others in their reference group, and to engage in dysfunctional and unhealthy behaviors (Goodman, 2011). At its worst, oppression leads to violence toward and death of members of oppressed groups when members of oppressed groups are targeted for crimes on the basis of their placement in these groups.

Intersectionality

Most of us experience privilege based on our membership in some categories of our lives and oppression based on our membership in others (Sisneros et al., 2008). Although Collins (2000) defines intersectionality as "particular forms of intersecting oppressions" (p. 18), a broader definition includes intersections of both privilege and oppression and refers "to the multidimensionality and complexity of the human experience and describes the place where multiple identities come together or intersect" (Marsiglia & Kulis, 2009, p. 42).

A basic premise of intersectionality is that "people live multiple, layered identities derived from social relations, history, and the operations of structures of power. People are members of more than one community at the same time, and can simultaneously experience oppression and privilege" (Association for Women's Rights in Development [AWID], 2004, p. 2). Furthermore, this combination of identities should not be viewed as additive but rather as creating experiences that are unique to each individual (AWID, 2004; Murphy, Hunt, Zajicek, Norris, & Hamilton, 2009). When viewed in this context, this perspective is consistent with Pharr's (1988) claims that there is no hierarchy of oppression, none is better or worse than the others. Furthermore, our experiences of privilege and oppression vary based on other forms of oppression and privilege we experience. Our privilege may be mitigated or reduced by an oppressed identity and conversely, our oppression may be mitigated or reduced by our privilege. Despite the potential impact of our privilege on the oppression we experience, privilege in one area of our lives does not prevent oppression in another area and vice versa (Goodman, 2011).

One way to think about intersections of privilege and oppression is through the lens of a matrix of domination (Collins, 2000) and/or privilege (Disch, 2002) that can be used to examine how intersections are organized.

Among the benefits of viewing privilege and oppression through this lens is that we can stop trying to identify which oppression is the worst (Johnson, 2006). As Pharr (1988) proclaims, they are all "terrible and destructive" (p. 53). We also can move from our dichotomous thinking that one is either privileged or oppressed; the reality is that most of us are both (Johnson, 2006). In addition, Johnson (2006) suggests that the matrix can help us see that:

1. One form of privilege or oppression can reinforce another.
2. Access to some forms of privilege can affect access to other forms of privilege.
3. Access to some forms of privilege can serve as compensation for not having access to other forms of privilege.
4. Oppressed groups may be pitted against each other to draw attention away from systems that reinforce privilege that harms them.

There are many benefits of an intersectional analysis. Intersectionality helps us understand the complexity of the human experience, precludes broad stroke generalizations, and encourages us to avoid seeing people on the basis of single socially constructed categories. It moves us away from an either/or mentality. An intersectional analysis encourages us to examine areas where we have privilege and areas where we are oppressed. This approach can help us move away from competing oppressions (e.g., being white and lesbian is worse than being black and heterosexual) because it acknowledges the interplay of the oppression and privilege and the complexity of the identities that we hold. Moreover, it can be a useful tool for examining privilege (Marsiglia & Kulis, 2009) when we are asked to examine the multiple forms of privilege and their interplay, and how privilege may be mitigated by oppression. It can also be used to identify common ground among members of diverse groups (Marsiglia & Kulis, 2009). For example, among women who are challenged by poverty, it can be used to identify the economic challenges they experience as common ground while also acknowledging the differences they experience as a function of other characteristics such as race and sexual orientation. Despite these strengths, one of the greatest challenges in using this approach is that members of privileged groups may shift their focus from their privileged identities to their oppressed identities as a means of denying their privilege (Goodman, 2011; Johnson, 2006).

MODEL TO ADDRESS PRIVILEGE AND OPPRESSION

For several years, I have attempted to address the many forms of privilege I experience, particularly my white privilege, while maintaining my awareness

of areas in which I am oppressed. In the course of this journey, I have found it helpful to apply the Awareness/Acceptance/Action Model (AAAM) (Rutledge & Abell, 2005), a model used in many 12-step recovery programs to address addiction. Although addiction and privilege have little in common, addressing both issues involves accepting something we may want to deny. Consequently, the model is applicable to increasing awareness about a variety of issues and has also been applied to other issues besides addiction. Addressing privilege and oppression is a complex and life long journey that involves challenging structural forces that perpetuate systems of oppression. The model presented here, while seemingly simplistic, is intended to help people identify initial steps they can take to increase awareness of their privilege and address oppression.

Awareness

Awareness, the first step in the model and the most difficult for me, consists of overcoming the denial that is endemic to privilege holders and becoming aware of the privilege we hold. Goodman (2011) discusses several reasons that we are challenged to see the privilege we hold. First, most of us want to view ourselves as nice people who treat others fairly. As McIntosh (1989) states, most of us were taught to see racism as "individual acts of meanness" (p. 10). I thought that I treated others fairly and certainly did not see myself as mean or racist, perceptions that limited my ability to accept my white privilege. Second, because privilege is a function of others' perception that we belong in certain social categories and not a function of who we are, what we have done, or something we have earned, and thus is not something we have willingly contributed to, most of us do not *feel* privileged or powerful, an experience that Johnson (2006) refers to as the "paradox of privilege" (p. 35). Third, most of us with privilege do not realize we have an identity that gives us privilege; we "are simply 'normal'" and do not realize that where oppression exists, so must privilege (Goodman, 2011, p. 29). As a white lesbian woman, I did not feel privileged because I did not think much, if at all, about being white and the benefits I received because of it. I now realize that I have white privilege but chose to focus on areas in which I was oppressed because those were easier to acknowledge in many ways. Finally, our sense of privilege is relative (Goodman, 2011; Johnson, 2006). When we compare ourselves to others, we often compare ourselves to those we identify as being in the same category or higher than us and do not compare ourselves to people we perceive as being in lower social categories (Johnson, 2006). Thus, as a white person, I compared myself to other white people and when I did, I did not see that I was different (along racial lines) than they were.

I have engaged in several different activities to increase awareness of my white privilege. While my awareness unexpectedly began by reading

McIntosh's (1989) article, I have continued to read books and articles on white privilege and racism. In addition, I have attended conference presentations on white privilege, watched videos, and had conversations with colleagues and students about this topic, all of which have contributed to increasing my awareness of my white privilege. Reading lists of the privileges held by christians (Schlosser, 2003) and nondisabled people (Johnson, 2006) has further increased my awareness of my white privilege by giving me insight into other types of privilege I hold and into common elements of privilege.

Acknowledging my privilege is an important step in the process of increasing my awareness but is not alone sufficient to address the privilege I hold. Concurrent with this, I must also become aware of the ways in which I have oppressed others and benefited from their oppression, even if I did not intend to do either. I must acknowledge, for example, that I often earn more money than people of color and benefit from their lower wages. I must acknowledge that I have made assumptions about people based on the color of their skin. I must attempt to be aware of both my privilege and the ways I have used my privilege to oppress others.

Acceptance

Acceptance, the second step in the model, consists of detaching and looking at issues more objectively. I must accept that even though I do not feel privileged, I am (Goodman, 2011; Johnson, 2006). I must accept that although I do not intend to harm and oppress others, I nonetheless did and continue to do so. Moreover, I must accept that denial of my privilege creates obstacles to having authentic relationships with people of color and to doing antiracism work, and I must begin to come to terms with the benefits I have received from my privilege (even though I did not ask for these benefits) and the harms I have caused. By increasing awareness of my privilege, accepting that I have it and continue to benefit from it, and acknowledging and accepting the ways I have oppressed others, I can lay the foundation for the final step in the model.

Action

Action, the third step in the model, consists of "intentional responses" (Rutledge & Abell, 2005, p. 192) and entails taking concrete action to address the inequities that result from the privilege I and others experience. According to Johnson (2006), we should first make a commitment to maintain our awareness of our privilege as an ongoing part of our lives. For me, this has meant reading and talking about privilege with others, teaching about it to my students, and journaling and meditating on it. Another step in my journey has been to identify the types of privilege I have, how I benefit from

them, how I oppress others, and how systems of oppression operate. I have also challenged my students to engage in many of the same activities and we have struggled together at times in this process. I have also begun work toward becoming an ally for people of color and other oppressed groups: "member[s] of the agent social group who take a stand against social injustice directed at target groups . . . and who work to become agent[s] of social change rather than agent[s] of oppression" (Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, & Love, 1997, p. 108). This journey has included taking responsibility for listening to, learning about, and respecting the experiences of members of oppressed groups; being willing to take risks by talking about privilege and challenging others' denial of their privilege, even when it's uncomfortable for me to do so; learning new behaviors in spite of resistance from friends and family with privilege; being accountable to members of oppressed groups; and seeing connections between privilege and oppression (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Goodman, 2011). I have also attempted to use the relationships I have (many of which are function of my privilege, especially my white privilege) to educate others about privilege and oppression and to change oppressive systems. I frequently post information on social media sites about oppressive policies and legislation and urge others to take action to address oppression. I "vote with my wallet" by boycotting discriminatory businesses and organizations and by supporting those who support diversity and equality. I contact elected officials and urge them to support legislation that supports diverse groups. I work with others to change racist policies and procedures. By being strong and vocal advocates for equality and by refusing to comply with the code of silence regarding privilege, I and others with privilege can work to end its destructive effects and to address the racism and oppression that results from it.

EXAMPLES OF THE INTERSECTIONS

As previously discussed, most people have multiple identities and simultaneously experience both privilege and oppression. Although several authors such as McIntosh (1989), Schlosser (2003), and Johnson (2006) have provided examples of privilege that people with certain characteristics experience, they focus on privilege without providing examples of how particular forms of privilege may be impacted by oppressed identities and conversely, how oppressed identities may be impacted by privileged ones. The examples that follow are intended to build on their work while demonstrating how privilege and oppression interact with each other and thus help others understand the relationship between different forms of privilege and oppression. Although I experience privilege and oppression based on several characteristics, the examples that follow focus largely on my identity as a white lesbian and are based on the work of McIntosh (1989). Other examples

of the intersections between my christian and middle class privilege and lesbian identities build on the work of Schlosser (2003) and Johnson (2006) and are provided to further highlight how privileged and oppressed identities interact and influence each other. We each have unique experiences as a function of the privilege and oppression we experience. At the same time, because there are common elements and experiences of privilege and oppression, my experiences may be shared by others with similar identities.

White Privilege/Lesbian Oppression

As a white person, I can arrange to be with people of the same race most of the time, but as a lesbian, it is often difficult to find environments in which to interact with other lesbians. When I do enter lesbian spaces, I expect that most lesbians will be white.

As a white lesbian, I have never heard statements to the effect of "I've never met a white lesbian" or "I didn't know there were white lesbians." I've never had my whiteness challenged because I am a lesbian. I've never been told that I'm "not white enough."

As part of a lesbian couple, my combined household income may be lower than that of many heterosexual couples. However, because white women are likely to earn more than black women and because both my wife and I are white, our combined income will likely be higher than that of many interracial lesbian couples and/or black lesbian couples.

As a white person, when I move into a new neighborhood, I can assume that most of my neighbors will be the same race as I am. However, as a lesbian, I do not assume that most of my neighbors will be gay, lesbian, or bisexual and I often fear that my neighbors will not accept me and my family.

As a white person, I do not fear being the victim of racially-based violence. However, as a woman and lesbian, I fear being the victim of gender and sexual orientation-based violence.

As a white person, I am not expected to speak for my entire race but as a lesbian, I am often asked "How do lesbians. . .?"

I am rarely the only white person in certain settings but I am often the only lesbian.

I am not known as the "white professor" but my students tell me I have been referred to as the "lesbian professor."

I do not worry if others will like me despite my whiteness but I do worry if others will like me despite my lesbianness.

As a white person, I do not need to seek out "white-owned and operated" establishments when I travel and I assume I will be accepted as a white person. However, as lesbian, I often seek out "lesbian owned and operated" travel venues because I want to be accepted for who I am and do not want to deal with discrimination when I travel.

I do not have to disclose that I am white because my skin color is very fair but I do have to disclose to people that I am lesbian if I want them to know this aspect of me.

As a white person, I expect to be accepted in the environments in which I interact and I expect that my voice will heard and validated, but I often question whether I will be accepted as a lesbian and whether my voice as a lesbian will be heard and validated.

Christian Privilege/Lesbian Oppression

As a christian, it is easy to find places to worship in my community. However, as a lesbian, it is hard to find christian churches that support my identity and behavior as a lesbian and a woman who has sex with other women that allow me to participate in the church at all levels, and who do not condemn me for being open and honest about who I am.

As a white female who lives in the U.S. south, I am expected to be a christian. However, when some learn that I am a lesbian, my christianity is questioned. I have heard statements such as "How do you reconcile your faith with your sexuality?" as if they are, by definition, incompatible with each other.

Economic Privilege/Lesbian Oppression

As part of a couple with a combined household income that puts my wife and me in the top 20% of the U.S. population, I have economic privilege. However, because the state in which I live does not recognize our marriage, we pay significantly more in taxes than heterosexually married couples with similar incomes.

As a lesbian, I occasionally see and hear anti-gay/anti-lesbian remarks and signs in my community. However, my economic privilege gives me the resources to escape to lesbian-friendly places and vacation in places where my identity, behaviors, and relationship are supported and shared by others.

In looking at people through an intersectional lens, as individuals who experience both privilege and oppression, we must be careful not to focus on their oppressed characteristics as a way of denying the privilege they experience. Although oppression may reduce the impact of privilege, it does not negate it. I must continue to own the many forms of privilege I have without minimizing them due to the oppression I experience.

CONCLUSION

White privilege is a system of unearned advantages that I benefit from but which I am encouraged to remain oblivious to (McIntosh, 1989). Oppression

is a system that works to maintain advantages and occurs at the individual, institutional, and cultural levels (Hardiman et al., 2007). In order to address both privilege and oppression, we must take a proactive approach. Despite the pressure to avoid it, we must become aware of the privilege we have and the benefits we derive from it. Although many of us are oppressed in other areas, we must remain vigilant in maintaining awareness of our privilege while simultaneously acknowledging the ways in which we are oppressed *without* using our experiences of oppression to minimize the impact of our privilege and the harms we have inflicted on others.

Armed with this awareness, we must own, accept, and take responsibility for the harm we have caused. We must accept that even though we did not intend to harm others, we still did. Having done this, we must now address the harms we have caused and take action to prevent further harms. We must speak out about the privilege we have and the benefits we continue to receive from it and challenge others to do the same. We must become vocal advocates and allies for oppressed groups and use the privilege we have to address oppression. We must become a part of the solution instead of contributing, through ignorance, denial, and inaction, to the problem. We must work together to become aware of our privilege, teach others about the privilege they have, and strive to eradicate it and the benefits that we receive from it. By acknowledging, accepting, and addressing our own privilege and the oppression that results from it, we can work to create a world that celebrates and values diversity.

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CONTRIBUTOR

Catherine Crisp is an Assistant Professor at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock where she teaches courses on social work and cultural diversity and social work practice in the School of Social Work. She has a Ph.D. in Social Work from the University of Texas at Austin, an M.S.W. from the University of Kansas, and a B.A. in Sociology from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. She is the author of the *Gay Affirmative Practice Scale* that assesses practitioners' use of culturally competent practice methods with gay and lesbian clients, and has published approximately 20 book chapters and journal articles.