

Personal Statement of Max Klein for University of Minnesota

(Uncut version at <http://notconfusing.com/personal-statement-in-full/>)

The discovery of the reality of social biases was a turning point in my life. The first time I awoke to my internalised racism a mix of discomfort and amazement overcame me. It was during a protest on the famous steps of Sproul hall where after a few rebel-rousing speeches a black woman came to the stage and started delivering activist poetry. I had been brought up to think of myself as not racist, and yet in a moment of self-awareness I saw myself dismissing her content because of how she spoke.

After the world-shattering realization of how we can hide prejudices from ourselves, subsequent prejudices came to light more rapidly. My own misogyny became very real upon a reading of favourite academic Joseph Reagle's "[Free as in Sexist](#)," a deconstruction of sexism in Open Culture. (Of course it took a man to show me that.) I lost religious dogma at the holocaust memorials in Berlin and Auschwitz, when I saw that accepting any unquestioned message is dangerous. (Like the ones from my [Jewish family](#).) Only last month the [blog of a woman](#) I met at a wedding introduced me to the "fat stigma" I had unwittingly been harbouring. These continuous epiphanies fuel my wonder at just how many unidentified stigmas I'm still holding?

The feeling I get from a solid attack on my belief-system is so powerful that chasing after it has become the driving force in my life. No wonder it's precisely what my proposed research agenda is about. The proposal is to make an algorithmic social-bias-detector to run on crowdsourced databases, an extension of [my work so far](#). Through this detector I am trying to arm underserved academics with data. The aim is to provide a series of inequality indexes like the United Nations Gender Inequality Index except also including time and ethnicity vectors. The [prototype](#) I've already made makes the available inequality data richer because it comes from the the online Open Data landscape compared to opaque surveys. This will be valuable for academics currently researching inequality, as well as make it much easier for other researchers to include inequality as a dimension in their projects.

Dedicating my efforts to the elucidation of the fair representation of others is related to understanding my own representation. When I insert myself into the spectrum of underrepresented-ness the main challenge that comes to the surface is the lack of formal education in my immigrant family. Going over my transcript to submit in this application, [the arching narrative it told](#) obviated the difficulties of having no parents that had been to college before me.

At first after high school I didn't really go to college at all: I wasn't suggested or pressured to, I was simply left to my own devices. It took some years until the social stigma (and here's another one) of having bad grades and perceived low education frustrated me. I then began college with a man-on-fire attitude. Yet as the extrinsic motivations of academic excellence for its own sake waned I slipped into a depression. This was the challenge because my family could not advise me on how to view University as a set-up for a career. I recall at that time of difficulty for me how my friends could phone their degree-holding family members, and received a boost over the shakey potholes so that they never amassed into a derelict street, and their vehicles never totally fell apart. I see this difference as a class gap; when you imagine the family as an organism – like how an idea is an organism in memetics – one can see that my family was less fit evolutionarily.

Still, I overcame the challenge of competing in elitist institutions by redirecting my energy in to real world endeavours, which is where my Wikipedia and Open Source volunteerism stem from – they require no institutional corroboration. Now I've used those alternative career-building channels to fully find my niche, and have preplanned for the academic depression by [viewing the PhD as an Open Source "project"](#).

Technologically-supported alternative education pathways are championed as a option for those coming from less privileged backgrounds to flourish, but I maintain that is still the exception. The theory breaks down with factors like closed access papers, and being propelled by serious, high quality collaborators. So as much as I might disagree with the concept in the abstract – because of it's bias against women and racial minorities, etc. – I do want and need some thing from the institution. This reluctant acceptance is what has caused me to focus my interest in computational social science research directly on unequal representation on the web and by proxy in institutions. There is no need for me to *translate* my work and history into how it will aid representation in institution because my very work and history *is about* unequal representation in institutions.