

A White Man's Experience of Oppression in a Life of Privilege

Cooper Thompson



For the past 30 years, Cooper Thompson has led workshops, consulted and written about sexism, homophobia, and racism. He is a coauthor of *White Men Challenging Racism: 35 Personal Stories*¹ and the author of many essays and educational materials on oppression, including previous articles for *The Diversity Factor*.

As a diversity consultant, I have watched some white men go through a transformation in their understanding of oppression. These white men started with little or no information about oppression, and through contact with a variety of people unlike themselves, they became more aware of the negative impact of oppression on the lives of some of their coworkers. I myself have gone through a similar process. In my 20s, I had no clue about sexism or racism. Now, in my late 50s, I have a great deal more information about these and other "isms."

At the same time, I have come to realize that there is much I don't understand about the life experiences of women and people of color, and many other groups that are the targets of oppression. In particular, there is an emotional aspect to oppression that eludes me, because I haven't experienced the daily reality of being treated as "less than." I haven't felt the deep psychological injury that results from oppression, nor have I developed the inner strength that some people are able to tap.

You could say that I have cognitive information, but not the emotional experience of oppression. I believe that this weakens my commitment to challenging oppression and leaves me vulnerable to not "getting it." And, over the years, a variety of colleagues and friends tell me, or hint, that they don't trust my commitment to this work, even as they have appreciated what I have done.

Let me try to describe this situation using the comments of a woman of color in an organization. Although this "quote" is fictional, it is a composite from several people with whom I have worked.

"One of my male colleagues knows about my experiences of racism and sexism in this company and in our city. He has listened to me and learned from me, and then later I've heard him explain to other white men what people like me have to deal with. I've even heard him confront other white men on their privilege. Unlike many of the other white men in our company, he doesn't try to deny what's happening here. Clearly, he gets it that oppression is real.

But I don't think he understands the emotional price that I have to pay, day in, day out. Does he really understand the anger I feel about how people treat me, the fears I have of who is out to get me, or the sadness I feel about what I could have accomplished if I weren't dealing with race and gender?

And if he did understand those feelings, would he then support me, unconditionally, in the same way that he has supported white men? Or would he do what most white men have done: when push comes to shove, support white

men like himself and the system that keeps them in power?"²

I could imagine that this woman of color might say the same thing about me. When people of color, women and other members of oppressed and marginalized groups tell me at length about their experiences, I ask questions and listen carefully. I try to integrate what they tell me into a broader framework of what I have learned from others in similar circumstances. I try really hard to understand.

But I also notice that I often keep myself emotionally distant when people share their experiences with me. In truth, I haven't had the same experiences and don't understand what it feels like. When it comes to responding — and I typically feel the need to respond instead of simply empathize — I often jump into some kind of problem solving, based of course on what I would do from my position of privilege. In general, my solutions haven't been very helpful, and even on occasions when they are, my attempts to solve others' problems are so limited because the real problem — racism and sexism — is systemic.

Looking through the lens of recent experiences I now realize I didn't understand the emotional price of oppression, nor did I understand the experience of internalized oppression that leads to doubting your own abilities, minimizing your power and being afraid to challenge others who marginalize. How could I understand this? I always had a deep sense of personal confidence that came, in part, from my privilege.

My sense of confidence in myself has been shaken due to some experiences over the past few years. In this article, I share some of these experiences and what I've learned. I hope that what I share is useful.

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Becoming an Immigrant, Learning a New Language

In 2003, I moved to Nürnberg, Germany, but also continued my work in the U.S. as a diversity consultant. I commuted monthly and spent approximately half of my time in the U.S. and the other half in my new home.

At first I was excited about living in a new culture. But within the first few months, I began to experience the pain of being an outsider. Eventually I realized that I was experiencing culture shock.

Even after four years, the differences between my life in the U.S. and my life here are striking. In the U.S., I receive many compliments for my work, but practically none here in Germany. In the U.S., I receive phone calls from friends and colleagues. Here, practically none. In the U.S., I walk into some stores in my neighborhood and I'm greeted by my first name. Here, I might be greeted but almost never by name. In the U.S., I am recognized. Here I am largely invisible.

Eventually, I started a support group for other immigrants like myself. I heard them also talk about a sense of not being seen here. A typical comment was: "In my home country, I had a good job and people who respected me, friends and family who cared about me. Here, I'm nobody."

I made a commitment to learn and use German. I spoke no German prior to living here, and it was not easy to begin learning a new language at the age of 54. It's been difficult, emotionally

and cognitively. I've become a student again, using my brain in a new way to learn a new vocabulary and grammar. For most of my adult life, I have had tremendous confidence in my ability to learn something new until I enrolled in an intermediate-level German class, which was more difficult than I had imagined. On my way to class, I would sometimes feel nauseous.

After a couple of weeks in class, I began to have irregular heart beats. I talked with doctors and the only possible cause we could find was the anxiety of my German class. As I reflected on this, I also became aware of a voice in my head telling me, "You are not capable of learning German. It's too difficult. You'll never understand what people are saying, and you won't be able to share your thoughts and feelings." This was one of the first times I recall having such little confidence in myself. With medication, my heart problem disappeared, but the anxiety did not.

When my wife (who's German) and I had people over for dinner, everyone spoke German. While I saw this as an opportunity to practice my German, it was exhausting. I sometimes asked someone who was speaking fast and in dialect to please speak slowly so I could understand. But sometimes they continued just like they had been. When I tried to enter a conversation people would listen, sometimes with impatience, but then shift topics or not seem very interested in what I had to say. In a few cases, our guests completely ignored me, speaking only to my wife. This experience of invisibility also happened in public: at the bank, the doctor's office and city agencies.

When it first happened, I thought, "This can't be. This never happens to me in the U.S." After this first wave of denial and anger, I began to wonder if something was wrong with me. Maybe I'm not worth talking to? Maybe I don't belong here? Or, in my worst moments, I began to believe that people might think I'm not very intelligent, because my vocabulary and grammar was that of a child.

One time I even caught myself making this same assumption about another immigrant. In a German conversation group I attended, a Russian woman was struggling to say something in German. As I listened, I became painfully aware that I was assuming she had a mental disability. And what data did I have for this? Only that her German was so basic.

My lack of German fluency also triggered a child-like anger. After living here for a year we moved to a larger apartment but first had to repaint our old apartment. I worked for days to get the place ready, but when the inspector came he rejected my work based on what I thought were petty details. I had been a professional painter as a young man and considered myself a good painter. Plus, this was a simple little apartment, and this guy was acting like it was luxury housing.

I was really angry but unable to express my anger in German. I couldn't communicate to him why I thought I was right and he was wrong. I lost my temper and began to swear at him, and he became more rigid as I got angrier. I lost the argument and we had to pay for a "professional" painter on the inspector's approved list.

I don't think I would have behaved this way in the U.S. My privilege would have taught me that I have other options and that I can remain angry but cool and I might win the argument, possibly through verbal intimidation. Here, I could only lose my temper and pound my fist on

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The Experience of Adulthood

In 2004, when my father's health was deteriorating, my sister and I were strongly encouraged by his attorney, his pastoral care nurse and the staff at his independent living facility, to take responsibility for his finances. He was disoriented, confined to his hospital bed and unable to stand. He also believed he didn't need help with the basics of life, certainly not from his children. My sister and I decided I would go to the hospital the next day and ask Dad to sign a document that would give us power of attorney.

That night I had nightmares about being assaulted by my father. I woke up the next morning, called my sister and talked with her about our childhood fears of our fathers' anger. I knew about his verbally abusive behavior towards her, but since I had been "the good son" and she "the bad daughter" I was spared the direct abuse she received. And, I had toughened myself against his meanness and discounted its impact.

Here I was, at the age of 54, afraid that my father would hurt me, even though he was physically unable to even sit up in bed. It sounds irrational, but at the time it felt real to me. My sister completely understood. Instead of going to the hospital, I called the attorney and requested that he ask my father to sign the papers.

Later that day, I talked with a friend who is a Vice President at a large company, and who is perceived by her colleagues as very self confident. When I told her about my fear of my father's reaction to signing the papers, she, like my sister, understood completely and added, "Everyday I have the same kind of experience with men in this company. On the one hand, I know that I am powerful and that many men respect and listen to me here. But when I'm in the middle of a meeting and challenging them on something, some part of me is afraid they will physically attack me. Maybe it does sound irrational, but it's because of my past experiences with men and the fact that there are men out there who might attack me. It's the legacy of sexism."

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I taught others about oppression for decades, and yet this knowledge was something different. It was in my body and in my feelings. I was experiencing the legacy of adulthood: the oppression of children by adults. Even though I was no longer a child, I was re-experiencing the oppression I had felt as a boy.

The Impact of Privilege on the Experience of Oppression

When I think about the many times I have heard people of color and women talk about their experiences with racism and sexism, I see parallels in my experience as a child, an adult child, an immigrant and a second language user: fear of assault, invisibility, loss of voice, loss of self-confidence, a sense that I don't belong, a belief that I'm not good enough, anger at forces out of my control.

At the same time, I want to be clear that privilege has protected me from more severe targeting. My sister felt the weight of my father's sexism in ways that I never did. I found his sexism distasteful, but I didn't lose my voice and self-confidence, and I had enough sense of personal strength that I was able, on occasion, to confront him. And, despite his sexism and my fear of his anger, I had many intimate moments with my father before he died. In spite of the oppression I have experienced, my privilege gave me a sense of safety.

In Germany, my privilege as a U.S. citizen and a white man has also protected me. There is no systemic or predictable discrimination against me as a U.S. citizen as there is against other immigrants. Quite the opposite. I had a much easier time gaining permanent residence status and the right to work than darker-skinned immigrants. No one questioned if my marriage to a German woman was only for the purpose of gaining the right to live and work here. In social settings, I sometimes hear hostile comments about dark-skinned immigrants, but not about people like me. Police never stop me and ask to see identification as they do with dark-skinned people, even when they are German citizens.

I have had greater opportunity, freedom and even recognition here in comparison to immigrants from Turkey, Nigeria or India. I have met men with engineering degrees who could only obtain jobs as taxi drivers. The same phenomenon happens in the U.S.: immigrants with university degrees work in the service sector. In contrast, I travel regularly to the U.S. to continue my consulting work, and I have slowly made professional contacts in Europe, a few of which led to paid work as a consultant.

In my support group for immigrants, a Jewish Russian woman once said to me, "You aren't a real immigrant. You chose to come here, you can travel wherever you want, and you can always go back to the U.S." She's right. My status as an immigrant and second language user is voluntary. I can choose at any time to abandon the "temporary" oppression I experience here in Germany. In contrast, history tells her that a Jewish woman like herself can never really be safe. Despite the fact that she can legally live in Germany or in Russia — at least for now — neither country really wants her. The immigration authorities welcome me when I return to the U.S., and in spite of widespread anger towards U.S. policies, most people welcome my presence in Germany.

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The Importance of Understanding the Emotional Impact of Oppression

My privilege is a reality, but so is my experience of oppression. And through this experience, I think I now understand internalized oppression both as a concept and as a feeling. I have heard the internal voice that says, "I can't do it," "It isn't possible," "They are too powerful" and "I can't challenge them." I have experienced first hand the belief that I am inferior simply because of my membership in certain groups.

Before I understood oppression in this way, I was subtly blaming the victim. When I heard people talk about the internalized oppression they experience, my reaction was to try and help them get past it. I suspect the impact was about the same as if I had simply said to them "just get over it."

I now understand how difficult it is to simply "get over it" and "deal with it." The experience of oppression is numbing and it can be hard to find the courage to keep going. Some people do, many people don't. I think it's a miracle that some people do succeed in the face of oppression.

When I apply this to my work as a diversity consultant with white men, I draw two conclusions. First, the task for white men is to support people of color and women, based on what they want and need. People in oppressed groups usually — not always, but usually — have a clearer sense than the people in dominant groups about what can and must be done to challenge

oppression. People of color and women are in a much better position than we are to decide when and how to challenge the racism and sexism they face.

The second conclusion I draw is the importance of encouraging white men to examine both our privilege and our experiences with oppression, however small or temporary they may seem. We may not want to recall our painful childhood experiences with adultism, or other experiences when we lost or never had the power and confidence we thought we had. Our conditioning tells us to "forget about it" and "move on." But until we allow ourselves to feel the impact of oppression, first hand, we won't really understand.

Endnotes

1. Cooper Thompson, Emmett Schaefer, and Harry Brod, eds., *White Men Challenging Racism: 35 Personal Stories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
2. Although the example I'm using here involves racism and sexism, it could easily involve another form of oppression. In no way am I discounting the importance of isms. I've chosen to use race and gender simply because my focus here is on white men.



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