

CHAPTER 2

Social Privilege

Flipping the Coin of Inequity

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Everyone is aware of people who intentionally act out in oppressive ways. But there is less attention given to the millions of people who know inequities exist and want to be part of the solution. Removing what silences them and stands in their way can tap an enormous potential for energy and change. —Allan Johnson, Power, privilege, and difference, 2006, p. 125

INTRODUCTION

Therapist: You were telling me that something upsetting happened? Can you say more?

Client: Yeah, I was flying out of the airport and, you know, it was really busy. I pulled out those bins. . . . I put my laptop in, took off my shoes, right? I was dressed normally . . . just like now [*gestures toward self*]. And all of a sudden, they went ahead and pulled me out of line, and they searched my bags before I even went through the whole TSA check. They patted me down, took me to a room, and gave me the whole questioning thing. I kept questioning back, “Why me? Why me?” and they kept on giving me the same phrase over and over again, “It’s just routine. . . . It’s a random check sir.”

Therapist: Oh wow. How stressful! What were you doing?

As psychologists and psychologists in training, we all have the best intentions. We want to listen, understand, validate, and support, especially

at the beginning of treatment. But are there client-therapist dynamics in which our good intentions and fundamental therapeutic skills are simply not enough? Are there times in which our tried-and-true, well-meaning approach invalidates and unintentionally harms both the client and the therapeutic alliance?

Client: Nothing. I wasn't doing anything. . . . I was just standing in line. I'm sick of being targeted all the time. And because of this whole thing, I missed my flight.

Therapist: That must be so frustrating. Those lines can be so horrible. It takes forever to get through them. It's such a hassle to take off your shoes, and people are so slow and disorganized. And people get stopped for no reason at all.

Client: Um . . . but it's really difficult for me.

Therapist: Oh? Well, it is a random check, though; are you sure they were targeting you?

Client: Um, yeah. . . . I mean . . . they must be targeting me; I mean, look at me [gesturing toward self].

Therapist: Oh, okay. Well, this is clearly really difficult for you. Do you think there is anything you can do to make the process go a little more smoothly for you?

In this short clinical vignette, the therapist was a White woman in her midforties. The client was an East Indian man in his midthirties, with a darker complexion and a beard. He had grown up in the United States and had an American accent. He was a young professional who typically dressed in business casual attire.

The therapist listened, validated feelings, and tried to help alleviate distress by problem-solving with the client. Although the therapist's technique can always be debated, it is difficult to debate her intention: she wanted to help. Despite the therapist's intentions, though, the client felt dismissed, invalidated, and misunderstood. The client invited the therapist to openly discuss their racial differences, and the therapist, unfortunately, missed this opportunity.

In this vignette, the therapist had received multicultural competency training in her doctoral psychology program. She learned about Asian culture with the ultimate goal of remaining respectful and considerate toward her future Asian clients. She had learned about working with Asian populations and how she should refer to herself as "Doctor," consider the importance of family, and be aware of psychological symptoms presenting somatically. She considered how her Anglo-European American culture differed from others and learned to be mindful of these differences. In the parlance of current American political terminology, she wanted to be "woke": alert to social injustice.

If the therapist was aware of cultural differences and was well-intentioned, what else might have caused the therapeutic rupture? The therapist lacked an awareness of the fundamental differences in power and social privilege between herself and her client. The therapist was unaware that her social

privilege as a White person conferred an unearned advantage of being able to get through TSA check lines without being targeted, to walk through the world without others suspecting her of wrongdoing even when she was simply standing. Had the therapist engaged in self-reflection about her social privilege as a White person, she would better understand her client's reality and be able to offer a better therapeutic experience.

The therapist in this short vignette is likely not alone. For many psychologists, reflection on social privilege and application to the therapeutic process is an unfamiliar strategy in a comprehensive therapeutic approach. Most training programs lack curriculum to address psychologist positionality within historical systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Bartoli, Bentley-Edwards, Garcia, Michael, & Ervin, 2015; Motulsky, Gere, Saleem, & Trantham, 2014; Singh et al., 2010). However, the work of scholars such as McIntosh (1988), Tatum (1997), Helms (1984, 2017), Spanierman and Smith (2017), Goodman et al. (2004), Goodman (2015), and Case (2013, 2017) suggests it is critical for psychologists to begin reflecting on their social privilege awareness to provide ethical and multiculturally competent treatment and services. If the therapist in this vignette had received sufficient training, sought consultation for her social privilege, or otherwise found a space to develop her social privilege awareness, how might the therapeutic interaction have gone differently?

This chapter will address social privilege as a driving construct within psychology and summarize its importance to the future of the field. We will visit the origins of dialogue about social privilege; highlight the understandable and inexcusable resistance and barriers to incorporating social privilege into psychological research, education, and practice; and end with suggestions for a pedagogy of social privilege recommended by Reason and Bradbury (2006) as part of the growing movement toward a pedagogy of social justice (Down & Smyth, 2012).

COURSE CORRECTIONS: APA ETHICAL CODE AND MULTICULTURAL GUIDELINES

The American Psychological Association (APA) provides vision and direction for the field of clinical psychology through aspirational principles, mandatory ethical codes, and pragmatic practice guidelines. These either guide or bind clinicians, educators, researchers, supervisors, and policy makers in responsible conduct. The APA *recommends* psychologists respect people's rights and dignity, which requires awareness of individual, cultural, and role differences (American Psychological Association, 2016). The APA *mandates* psychologists "obtain the training, experience, consultation, or supervision necessary" to understand the integral effect of "factors related to age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language, or

socioeconomic status . . . [w]here scientific or professional knowledge in the discipline of psychology establishes [emphasis added]" that this understanding is "essential for effective implementation of their services" (American Psychological Association, 2016, sec. 2). Alternatively, psychologists may "make appropriate referrals" (American Psychological Association, 2016, sec. 2), perhaps if training, experience, consultation, or supervision are not accessible—or of interest—to the psychologist.

In the updated 2017 APA multicultural guidelines, guideline 5 states, "psychologists aspire to recognize and understand historical and contemporary experiences with power, privilege, and oppression" (American Psychological Association, 2017, p. 4). Professional knowledge in psychology has established the necessity of understanding psychologists' social privilege as a factor related to their social identities and the efficacy of their services, yet science has not caught up to this common sense (Helms, 2017).

OVERCOMING INERTIA: A SOCIAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE

Social justice can be viewed as an overarching concept of which awareness of social privilege is at once a process and an outcome. Rawls defined social justice as "equal access to basic liberties and the fair distribution of goods and opportunities" (Thrift & Sugarman, 2019, p. 3). Later, Young expanded social justice from equal access and fair distribution to "recognition of difference and elimination of oppression across institutions" (Thrift & Sugarman, 2019, p. 3). The APA calls on our profession to strive to understand oppression and achieve equity for all. Awareness of social privilege offers a dramatically different perspective in APA's mission to seek justice, shifting focus from those who are deprived of benefit and resource to those who are born with benefit and resource in order to loosen the hegemonic hold of social privilege on society. Scrutiny of social privilege calls into question the invisible systemic mechanisms that manufacture inequity beyond the more visible interpersonal experiences of prejudice and discrimination. Social privilege is an essential, implicit component of an oppressive system, and thus awareness of social privilege can elucidate the mechanisms that scaffold inequity and ultimately serve a social justice mission.

LOOKING UNDER THE HOOD: SOCIAL PRIVILEGE AS ENGINE

Social privilege and oppression are corollary and divergent systems that are "inseparable and codependent structural forces" (Case, 2013, p. 4). In the past several decades, the consequences of oppression, especially racism and sexism, have received attention; however, this focus has

kept the conversation one-sided (Case, 2013; Case, Iuzzini, & Hopkins, 2012; Helms, 1984; Pinterits, Poteat, & Spanierman, 2009). Kurt Lewin (1946) implicated paralysis of “groups in power” (p. 43) in the failure to bring about social change. He drew attention to the new idea that “so-called minority problems are in fact majority problems” and that “to improve relations between groups both of the interacting groups have to be studied” (p. 44).

In her keynote speech at the 2014 Society for Intercultural Education Training and Research (SIETAR) Japan Conference, Diane J. Goodman described oppression and privilege as “two sides of the same coin” (p. 1). Goodman (2015) elaborated, stating, “While it is critical to understand how some groups are disadvantaged by individual behaviors, institutional policies, and cultural norms that is only one side of the coin of oppression. The other side of the coin is understanding how some groups are advantaged. Looking at both sides provides a clearer picture of how systemic inequality operates, and uncovers more opportunities to intervene and create change” (p. 6). Goodman’s (2015) speech thus encourages individuals to adjust their focus from oppression to the other side of the coin, social privilege, which has often been ignored. Case (2013) stated, “Understanding dominant group privilege as it functions on a personal level is essential for individuals interested in challenging systemic privilege” (p. 3), and thus highlighted that psychologists’ development of social privilege awareness is essential for challenging the status quo of oppression.

THE ISSUE OF SOCIAL PRIVILEGE

Confusion about the distinction between social privilege and diversity, multicultural psychology, and cultural competency, and its relation to oppression have obscured the purpose and place of social privilege in psychology’s evolving legacy of social justice and advocacy. Part of the difficulty of defining social privilege is that it is invisible to individuals who have it. Social privilege easily hides behind issues of oppression, discrimination, and injustice because it is inextricable from them. While one side of an issue dominates psychological attention, the other side of that issue escapes notice.

LOOKING IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR: SOCIAL PRIVILEGE AMID MULTICULTURALISM, CULTURAL COMPETENCE, AND HUMILITY

In psychology training, dominant models of multicultural counseling, cultural competence, and cultural humility are related to social privilege but can actually serve to distract from social privilege and the external structures that uphold it. Each paradigm emerged from a particular era

in psychology's history. Although each attempted an emic perspective on oppression, contributing potential solutions to prejudice and interpersonal challenges in therapy, the emic approach somehow neglected the structural elements of the field that perpetuated inequity.

Multiculturalism

Multicultural counseling competence is defined as "the counselor's acquisition of awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society (ability to communicate, interact, negotiate, and intervene on behalf of clients from diverse backgrounds), and on an organizational/societal level, advocating effectively to develop new theories, practices, policies, and organizational structures that are more responsive to all groups" (Sue, 2001, p. 802). Although this aspirational definition encourages praxis at the level of society, the practice of multicultural counseling can focus on the other within the interpersonal dyad and still neglect the contextual and ecological influences of the individual's issues. Multicultural counseling asks us to be aware of our own social identities and positions within the counseling dyad, but it does not explicitly ground this reflection in the historical context of oppression, power, and privilege.

At its core, does multicultural competence exist as it does today to soothe the racial stress so acutely and intolerably felt by White psychologists? Do multiculturally competent skills aim to instill a shallow sense of comfort and confidence in the White psychologist, to quell the fear of working with marginalized others? This is not to say that multicultural competence is ill-intentioned; it does follow the diversity-era ideology that every individual is unique, beautiful, and created equal. However, these values fundamentally dismiss the reality of historical systems of power and privilege, the consequences of which have been borne by oppressed groups. In its current practice, multicultural competence has, perhaps unintentionally, become a psychological tool to deflect "the problem" and responsibility for the problem from socially privileged psychologists; thus psychologists continue to sit, comfortably, in positions of power and privilege.

Cultural Competence

In 2001, D. W. Sue defined cultural competence as "the ability to engage in actions or create conditions that maximize the optimal development of client and client systems" (p. 802). The goals of cultural competence and multiculturalism are closely linked by the premise that mental health providers should know and consider cultural values specific to persons of that culture in order to provide effective interventions (Sue, 2006). Multiculturalism and cultural competence both recognize the ethnocentric

and assimilationist effect on clients from underrepresented cultures of dominant theories and models of care. However, while early multiculturalism was concerned mostly with interpersonal aspects of counseling reliant on specific group differences, such as ethnicity, cultural competence expanded aspects of individual identity to community processes and focused on service delivery outcomes, social justice, and addressing oppression across ecological levels (Cross, 2008).

Cultural Humility

The concept of cultural humility is a cousin of cultural competence and came out of the medical profession, specifically nursing, and was subsequently modified for social workers (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013). Self-awareness and reflection are key to multiculturalism and cultural competence; however, cultural humility further emphasizes introspection and co-learning in order to prevent misdiagnosis. Reflecting on the psychologist's own culture and socialization is an element of social privilege awareness, but culture is not social privilege. Culture does not generally address the historical antecedents to power, nor does it raise the dysconscious element of social privilege, which King (1991) originally denoted as "an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given" (p. 135). In its recent transition from a medical context, cultural humility has incorporated an increasing focus on psychologists' awareness of their own power, privilege, and prejudices as well as the positional power that comes with the role of a professional clinician.

Multicultural counseling and cultural competence generally focus on the client from a marginalized social domain as the object of therapy, rather than on the therapist from a privileged social domain as the subject of therapeutic action. Cultural humility brings psychology one step closer to examining the perpetuation of social inequity that manifests in therapy, yet it does not make explicit the need for consciousness of personal and group social privilege. Although multiculturalism, cultural competence, and cultural humility are important foci in therapy, they minimize the magnitude of the problem of inequity that is often located in dysconscious social privilege.

ASPIRATIONAL APPLICATIONS OF A SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

Imagine again the therapist's stance in the opening vignette, prior to the advent of cultural humility. Although the therapist may have accounted for the implications of the difference between herself and the client based on training in multicultural psychology and cultural competence, her

inability to reflect on the implications of her social power as a therapist and her social privilege as a White individual resulted in therapeutic rupture. Psychologists pride themselves in therapeutic repair, but how can practitioners repair such ruptures when their professional field does not provide guidance for how to identify the source of the conflict?

Psychologists need to acknowledge that oppression exists, need to know the cultural aspects of individuals that affect therapeutic effectiveness, and need to work on developing self-awareness. But it is still threatening to consider acknowledging social privilege within oneself, bestowed by the circumstance of birth and invisibly intrinsic to the perpetuation of social oppression. Psychology needs a pedagogy of social privilege.

BRINGING DEFINITION TO THE ISSUE OF SOCIAL PRIVILEGE

The concept of social privilege and its invisibility appears to have been first identified by sociologist and historian W. E. B. Du Bois in his 1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois noticed Black persons needed a “double focus” (Du Bois, 2014, chapter 1, location 60), or an ability to see the self as both Black and American but through the eyes of White persons. In 1935, Du Bois identified the notion of White privilege as he argued that although both Black and White laborers received low wages, “[i]t must be remembered that the white group of laborers . . . were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage” (Du Bois, 2007, chapter 16, location 16468). These psychological wages, or privileges, were later called “the wages of whiteness” by historian David Roediger, in the title of his 1991 book. Here was the first allusion to the coin of privilege and oppression.

About 85 years after W. E. B. Du Bois (2007, 2014), Peggy McIntosh (1988) rekindled a critical dialogue about social privilege, this time in the field of women’s studies and education. In her seminal work, McIntosh called attention to systems of privilege that advantage White persons and men, defining privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets” (p. 1) and later adding “that [it] corresponds to unearned disadvantage in society” (McIntosh, 2013, p. xi). From the field of sociology, Alan Johnson writes that “privilege is always a problem both for those who do not have it and those who do, because privilege is always in relation to others. Privilege is always at someone else’s expense and always exacts a cost” (Johnson, 2018, p. 8). For example, able-bodied persons “can usually be confident that whether they are seen as qualified to be hired or promoted or deserving to be fired from a job will not depend on their physical ability” (Johnson, 2018, p. 27).

Psychologists have added in many ways to the concept of social privilege. Tatum (1997) recognized privilege as an implicit or unconscious and unearned advantage. Case (2013) then further defined privilege as “automatic unearned benefits bestowed upon perceived members of dominant groups based on social identity” (p. 4). Helms (2017) later reiterated social

privilege as an ability to decide when an individual or group will wield a system of power to their benefit and the detriment of others.

AN INVISIBLE MULTIPLIER

McIntosh (1988), Tatum (1997), Case (2013), and Helms's (2017) definitions underscore several important and problematic aspects of social privilege. First, as McIntosh suggested, social privilege is invisible or unconscious, especially for those with privilege, and is thus difficult to identify and discuss. Second, social privilege is dependent on social identities—both physically visible and invisible—and is not simply related to a person's race or gender but also to other socially constructed identities, including age, ethnicity, able-bodied status, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status (SES), Indigenous heritage, religion, and national origin. Acknowledgment of intersecting privileged social identities thus expands the conversation from White privilege and male privilege to the more comprehensive concept of social privilege. With this expansion also comes the potential for dilution of the most salient aspects of social privilege, and psychologists must be cautious of drawing attention away from the potent effect of Whiteness on all other social privileges.

If oppression is one side of a weighted coin, privilege is the other, weighted side; privilege dictates which side lands up (Goodman, 2015; Johnson, 2018). This intrinsic tying of privilege to oppression can make privilege seem at first like an interpersonal insult. As such, privilege is neither an easy nor a natural topic of conversation. Self-identification with privilege and discussion of its benefits to those who have it could be seen as deliberate risking of that privilege and its associated benefits (Helms, 2017).

Resistance to becoming aware of social privilege is highest among people who identify strongly with a privileged social identity because there is more to lose. Stewart and Branscombe (2015) describe the defensiveness that results from being confronted with the prospect of social privilege as a barrier to awareness of privilege. From birth, many individuals with privilege are socialized to avoid shame. Antibias education insists educators should avoid making young children feel guilty or ashamed of their identity. However, collective guilt is actually a "critical ingredient" for reducing intergroup bias through social privilege awareness (Stewart & Branscombe, 2015, p. 138).

WHERE THE RUBBER HITS THE ROAD: FROM THEORY TO APPLICATION

With the knowledge of what social privilege is—what it looks like, where to find it, how to describe it—psychologists can begin to understand how social privilege operates. How does the invisible force of privilege perpetuate oppression? How can psychologists then self-examine

and self-reflect on privilege to apply the brakes to inequity? Alan Johnson (2018) highlighted the phenomenon that individuals often compare themselves to groups in society that are afforded more of anything that gives those groups greater power and usually neglect to consider groups in society with less. This sort of confirmation bias bolsters the invisibility of social privilege. Seeing the machinations of social privilege takes effort. Slowing them down for long enough to intervene takes humility and courage.

THE MECHANICS OF SOCIAL PRIVILEGE

In order for psychologists to intervene in the dynamics of social privilege, it is necessary to identify the social categories that prescribe these dynamics. Pamela Hays (2001) first conceptualized the ADDRESSING model, an acronym for each social identity domain that influences the dynamics of psychologists' work. ADDRESSING stands for age, disability, religion and spiritual orientation, ethnic and racial identity, SES, sexual orientation, Indigenous heritage, national origin, and gender identity and sex assigned at birth. Hays recognized the need to explicitly identify each social identity domain and discuss how they are related to either dominant or minority groups.

Social Privilege and Rank

The introduction of the ADDRESSING model is critical as it sparked an awareness of how historical and current systems of power categorize individuals into dominant or minority groups. Thus it has become a common cultural practice to categorize clients, friends, and family members by identity domains such as race, sexual orientation, or gender. This systematic classification has become so commonplace that the U.S. Census relies on these categories, without apparent question or concern. However, these categories are problematic not because they highlight differences in race, gender, or any other identity domain but because they highlight and maintain differences in power and social privilege. Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997) acknowledged the inherent differences in power and privilege within each social identity domain. Adams et al. introduced the concepts of agent and target to denote the possession or lack of social privilege, respectively. Thus, in the identity domain of race and ethnicity, a White person is considered an agent and a Black person is considered a target because White people have social privilege whereas Black persons do not.

Differences in power and social privilege can also be conceptualized as rank and status (Nieto & Boyer, 2006). Rank is analogous to a privileged social identity domain or being an agent; an individual thus has rank in being male, White, with high SES, able-bodied, heterosexual, or Christian. Status refers to social roles and contexts that confer an individual power,

no matter their social privilege or rank. Individuals may, therefore, have a lower rank in that they are persons of color, female, or identify as LGBTQ+ but have a higher status in that they are a doctor of psychology or a professor in a graduate program, both of which endow them with authority and power in different social contexts. Status, however, does not minimize, balance out, or negate individuals' social privilege or lack of social privilege.

These categorical systems assign value at birth and deprive individuals with a fundamental sense of agency, dignity, and worth. However, despite our lack of control in the operation of systems of power, privilege, and oppression, Nieto and Boyer (2006) argue individuals have authority over their awareness of it. Although the ascribed categories of agent and target, or rank and status, are socially constructed, they have real and dire consequences. This creates difficulty and complication in challenging the systems of power, privilege, and oppression itself. Smedley and Smedley (2005) recognized these complications and emphasized that differences in social privilege are socially ascribed and exist because of systems of power created by historically dominant groups. With regard to the domain of ethnicity and racial identity, differences in social privilege do not exist because of biological differences such as phenotype. Smedley and Smedley review the historical social construction of race and reveal that the term first emerged as a means to categorize Europeans, Africans, and Indigenous populations in the late 17th century. During the American Revolutionary War, "race" became a standardized term and a divisive political tool to justify slavery and oppression. Despite the socially constructed nature of social identity domains, such as race and ethnicity, centuries of American history have been built on the categorization of persons as privileged or oppressed, agent or target; the issue of power, privilege, and oppression is, therefore, a real issue that must be addressed.

Intersectionality of Social Privilege

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) introduced intersectional theory and stressed the interplay between the social identities. Crenshaw challenged the single-axis framework that delineated and viewed marginalized social identities as mutually exclusive. Crenshaw recognized "multiply-burdened" (1989, p. 140), or persons who have multiple marginalized social identities—specifically, "Black" and "woman"—were relegated to a distorted and partial frame of either "Black" or "woman," a frame that dismissed Black women as whole persons and rendered them invisible.

Scholars have recently advocated for "responsible stewardship of intersectionality" (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017, p. 500), which involves respecting the theory's Black feminist roots. It is, therefore, important to be cognizant of the history of appropriating the intellectual contributions from marginalized persons. However, psychologists such as Case (2013) have begun to

recognize the benefit of applying intersectional theory to individuals with social privilege. Researchers have found that privileged and oppressed social identities overlap and intersect (Case, 2013; Collins, 1990). Thus a person may have an agent identity of White that intersects with the target identity of female; this person, therefore, has intersecting agent and target domains. The interaction of simultaneously overlapping privileged and oppressed social identities within an individual can also be referred to as “social location.”

Social location, or the combination of specific identity domains culled out by the ADDRESSING model (Hays, 2001) and the designation of agent or target, allows individuals to explore both sides of the oppression coin. Social location enables individuals to examine how different aspects of their identity change over time, as does age, or remain stable, as do ethnicity and racial identity. Scholars encourage psychologists to engage in self-reflection, personally explore their intersecting social identities, and contrast their personal experiences of privilege and oppression (Case, 2013). In addition, most individuals have both agent and target identities, which can increase empathy and insight across experience. Such reflection fosters an individual’s empathy and understanding for the individual’s oppressed identity and other oppressed group members, facilitating a recognition of the detrimental impact of social privilege and greater social privilege awareness within the individual.

THE PRICE OF PRIVILEGE

Wise and Case (2013) acknowledged individuals experience discomfort in their development of social privilege awareness. For example, individuals may feel defensiveness, guilt, or shame when recognizing they are members of a privileged group and part of a legacy of oppression. Wise and Case also suggest individuals may experience hopelessness, as they realize the existence and operation of systems of power, privilege, and oppression function beyond their individual control. If the system of power and oppression covertly confers advantages while awareness creates discomfort, it is reasonable for agents to wonder, What is the benefit of social privilege awareness for me? To answer this question, it is necessary to review the many disadvantages and advantages of social privilege awareness for agents and targets.

Costs to Agents

Spanierman and Heppner (2004) recognized negative affective, behavioral, and cognitive consequences of racism to White individuals. For example, affective costs might include feelings of anger, guilt, or fear toward people of color or about one’s White privilege. A White person

may also experience anxiety about living in a racialized world. Cognitive costs can include distortions about people of color or oneself. For example, Clark and Spanierman (2019) suggest a White person may have “an individualized sense of entitlement” (p. 143) or believe people of color fit into narrow stereotypes. Behavioral costs involve living a more limited and restricted life, as a White person may expend energy attempting to filter thoughts and communication to be more politically correct. Alternatively, a White person may exclusively spend time in White neighborhoods and spaces, limiting the person’s exposure to different belief systems and cultures. Although Spanierman and Heppner (2004) and Clark and Spanierman (2019) discuss the costs of social privilege for White persons, it is important to be conscious of the fact that each of these costs can be translated to other privileged social identity domains.

Aversive Whiteness

The failure of White persons to see themselves within a racialized world, or in the context of social privilege, may also lead to what DiAngelo (2018) called “White Fragility.” DiAngelo discusses how White people’s refusal to see their privileged positionality has caused challenges in tolerating racial stress and has thus become “highly fragile in conversations about race” (p. 1). DiAngelo speaks to the affective costs of racism and argues White people become defensive, angered, or silenced when the topics of racism and Whiteness arise. However, as American demographics shift and the number of multiracial and people of color grows in the United States (U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, 2018), conversations about racism, Whiteness, and social privilege are inevitable.

Whiteness as Predisposition to Disease

While DiAngelo identifies the fragility of Whiteness and provides examples of associated affective, cognitive, and behavioral costs, Metzl (2019) speaks to the harmful effects of Whiteness on health. Metzl (2019) identifies a paradoxical phenomenon in which midwestern lower-class White groups endorse a set of political values to increase their own health, education, and economic disparities. However, Metzl also introduces a dynamic in which White groups adhere to pro-gun legislation in order to restore White men’s privilege and balance of power in an increasingly diverse society. Therefore, although White conservative groups preserve and defend political ideologies intended to secure their power, these same ideologies are the source of their current decline in well-being. Metzl highlights, counterintuitively, “firearms have emerged as the leading cause of white, male suicide” (p. 7).

Benefits for Agents

The benefit of social privilege awareness for agents is often obscured. First, given that remaining unaware of social privilege can induce anxiety within today's racialized world, restrict communication and lifestyle, and evoke feelings of guilt and shame, social privilege awareness presents a possible solution (Wise & Case, 2013). If individuals experience an overwhelming sense of hopelessness in their inability to change the systems of power and privilege, social privilege awareness provides a means toward understanding one's positionality within a historical and systemic framework, thus outlining the limits of individual responsibility and control. Second, open conversations about social privilege normalize feelings of guilt, shame, anger, fear, stress, and worry and renders social privilege less threatening.

Agent Authenticity

Developing social privilege awareness offers an opportunity for individuals to live in a more authentic manner. In applying Spanierman and Hepner's (2004) Psychosocial Costs of Racism to Whites model, D.W. Sue (2010) recognized that White persons who deny racism can live with incongruence. Sue argues there are cognitive costs to being "oppressors" (2010, p. 128), as "they must engage in denial and live a false reality that allows them to function in good conscience." While White persons may believe themselves to be a good person, they live with the conflict of knowing they are "losing one's humanity for the sake of the power, wealth, and status attained from the subjection of others" (Sue, 2010, p. 132). Thus Sue suggests that developing social privilege awareness allows individuals to accept uncomfortable truths and begin to live with more congruence and authenticity.

Agent Compassion

Finally, most individuals have social locations with intersecting agent and target domains; and, even those with all agent domains can recall moments of less power and privilege when they were younger than age 18. This inherent developmental experience can facilitate awareness of gained social advantages. Developing social privilege awareness allows individuals to begin a process of self-compassion and forgiveness. By acknowledging their positionality within the larger historical structure of power and privilege, individuals can recognize the system's effect on their own life and, inevitably, the effect on others.

Making Way for Restoration

Helms (1984) initially called for White psychologists to begin examining the opposite side of the oppression coin, to understand their socially

privileged positions and tacit participation in oppressive systems. While there are personal advantages for privileged persons to engage in a practice of self-reflection about their social privilege, there are also crucial systemic advantages. In their development of social privilege awareness, agents can concomitantly aid in lifting the constraints of inequity and cultivate a space for restorative justice.

Costs to Targets

Social privilege awareness has the additional potential to invite both agents and targets to experience less fear and anxiety about difference. In their book, Torino, Rivera, Capodilupo, Nadal, and Sue (2019) discuss the effects of microaggressions, which “are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, or environmental slights, snubs or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (p. 129). While the negative effects of aversive racism are indisputable, implicit biases and attitudes about marginalized persons portrayed in the form of microaggressions are more challenging to dispute.

Torino et al. explain microaggressions can be explicit or implicit but are often difficult to identify; although they may be delivered by well-meaning individuals who support anti-racist attitudes, microaggressions reflect the invisible and unconscious nature of social privilege. Thus the aggressors may not recognize they are committing microaggressions, and the victims may not realize they are the recipients of same; however, Torino et al. highlight that even when microaggressions go unnoticed, the victim is typically exposed to a range of uncomfortable experiences, including confusion, anger, rage, anxiety, depression, and hopelessness.

Smedley and Smedley (2005) emphasize that while race and ethnicity are social constructions, their consequences are dire and tangible. Similarly, microaggressions may be perceived as subjective, yet they also contribute to real-life consequences. Dovidio, Pearson, and Penner (2019) note that microaggressions occur within the delivery of health-care systems and, when compared to Whites, contribute to poorer health for Black persons across the life span.

POWER IN ILLUSION, NOT NUMBERS

U.S. Census data from 2014 projects that by 2045, about 50 percent of the American population will identify as non-White, while more than 50 percent of younger generations, such as 18- to 29-year-olds, will identify as non-White by 2027. In their study, Cohen, Fowler, Medenica, and Rogowski (2017) found that about 48 percent of White millennials believe discrimination is of equal concern for White persons as it is for Black, Asian, or Hispanic persons. These findings are especially concerning given that in 2016, White psychologists constituted about 84 percent of the

psychology workforce (American Psychological Association, 2018); which suggests that incoming professionals may not fully appreciate the lived experiences of growing marginalized groups and may inflict harm by invalidating, minimizing, and dismissing the reality of marginalization.

Helms (1984) recognized the power of social privilege to place undue burden on oppressed groups to identify, discuss, and address systems of power and privilege. However, as social privilege remains invisible, so, too, does the source of oppression, conveniently removing the responsibility of privileged groups. Echoing Helms, DiAngelo argues, “Whites invoke the power to choose when, how, and to what extent racism is addressed or challenged” (2018, p. 108). Privileged persons have the power to control the conversation. By focusing on oppressed groups, the invisibility of social privilege places “the problem” and the potential solution to the problem within the other. This enables privileged persons to deflect responsibility and maintain their privileged positions.

Take into account the short vignette at the beginning of this chapter. The therapist was uncomfortable about her client’s willingness to call attention to their racial differences, which resulted in her anxious avoidance of the topic of race. She asked, “What were you doing?” “What can you do to make this easier?” The therapist had difficulty tolerating racial stress and instead deflected responsibility by placing “the problem” and burden of change on her client.

SHIFTING GEARS: FROM TARGET TO AGENT, FROM AGENT TO ALLY

Social privilege awareness removes the burden of change from targets; social privilege can finally be examined as an agent’s problem, as it has been since its conception. As responsibility is reassigned and systems of power and privilege are acknowledged and called into question, oppressive myths begin to shatter. Social privilege challenges the myth of meritocracy, the idea that individuals earn advantages solely by their effort and abilities. Such a notion positions oppressed persons to incorrectly believe their disadvantages are based on their characteristics and personhood. Social privilege awareness, therefore, assists in liberating marginalized group members from oppressive myths of self-worth, stereotypes, internalized oppression, and pervasive feelings of shame.

“Ally”: Noun, Verb, or Both?

Despite the APA’s call for psychologists to engage in allyship, there are few resources that provide clear standards and guidelines about what responsible and ethical allyship entails. According to Tatum (2007), a White ally is “namely, a White person who understands that it is possible to use one’s privilege to create more equitable systems; that there are

White people throughout history who have done exactly that; and that one can align oneself with that history” (p. 37). This role can be expanded outside of a racial framework, and the APA’s 2017 Multicultural Guidelines call for psychologists to practice within the boundaries of what Tatum defines as allyship.

Steps to Allyship

Spanierman and Smith (2017) outline the defining features of White allies and six steps toward becoming an ally. The following six steps are modified to speak beyond White allyship and consider allyship in all social identity domains. According to Spanierman and Smith, the six steps involve:

1. Gaining a nuanced understanding of institutional oppression and social privilege
2. Enacting a continual process of self-reflection about one’s own racism, biases, and positionality
3. Committing to promoting equity from a position of privilege
4. Taking responsibility for actions against racism, discrimination, and the status quo on multiple levels
5. Participating in solidarity work with people of marginalized groups
6. Encountering resistance from other socially privileged individuals

While the final three steps are dedicated to engaging in specific behaviors, the first two foundational steps suggest allies should understand institutionalized privilege and oppression and engage in a continual process of self-reflection about their privileged social location. Spanierman and Smith (2017) thus argue that all allyship should begin with a fundamental development of social privilege awareness. Without a commitment to this fundamental first step, Spanierman and Smith warn that although well-intentioned, allies are susceptible to adopting “savior attitudes and behaviors” (2017, p. 610); the ally work can become shallow, with the ultimate purpose of fueling the privileged person’s desire to live in good conscience instead of enacting and facilitating “deep structural change” (Spanierman & Smith, 2017, p. 610).

Applying Allyship in Practice

In the vignette, despite the therapist’s multiculturally competent training, the exchange was tense and stressful for both the client and the therapist, undermining therapeutic rapport and treatment. Further, although the therapist was well-intentioned, without her engagement in Spanierman and Smith’s (2017) fundamental first two steps of becoming an ally, her efforts to help her clients can be perceived as empty advocacy, as her effort was primarily directed toward easing her own discomfort. Had the

therapist expanded her nuanced understanding of systems of power and privilege and engaged in self-reflection about her social privilege, she might have been less apt to perpetuate oppressive forms of interaction and enact ongoing racial trauma for the client.

In their six steps toward allyship, Spanierman and Smith (2017) introduce the need for a developmental framework. Each step builds on the other and, without the fundamental first step of self-reflection about one's own social privilege, allyship can manifest as empty, shallow, and harmful work. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) and Case (2013) assert that becoming aware of social privilege is no easy task. Malin Fors (2018) astutely states, "There is no doubt that discovering blind spots in oneself is challenging and sometimes quite painful" (p. 4). Unlike the single-axis structure of either agent/target or "privileged" and "not privileged" in which we currently live, social privilege awareness does not exist within a binary or dichotomous framework. Much like the concept of growing pains, the difficulty in developing social privilege awareness alludes to the developmental nature of the process.

A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Psychology has long been the source of developmental theory, spanning from the moral and cognitive to the sexual and social. Piaget (1976) established the dynamic cognitive leaps children make from birth to adolescence, which has influenced primary education ever since. Kohlberg (1981) took Piaget's model a step forward, elucidating how our moral and ethical values increase in sophistication over time. Erikson (1968) labeled the essential tensions that define stages across the life span. Bandura (1997) bridged the behavioral and cognitive, positing that social learning results in self-efficacy. These models provide a temporal map that permits individuals to move and grow over time. The developmental perspective allows for progression and growth, accumulation and scaffolding, in which change is natural and normal.

The arena of social privilege is fraught with shame, anger, and isolation. The "call-out culture" results in fear to open up to others about our confusion regarding the latent and inevitable racism, sexism, and ableism that have been ingrained in all of us. The unrealistic demand that individuals immediately become woke versus the process of awakening results in a dichotomy that gives no room for gray, only a demand that we think, say, and act on the ideal values of equity. While aspiring to move from an agent to an ally, we will all struggle to shake the socialization that reinforces implicitly privileged thought, feeling, and behavior. Applying a developmental lens to social privilege can offer permission, relief, and encouragement in the unsettling task of acknowledging our privilege and moving to disrupt the structures and institutions that serve to gate-keep resources. The incremental developmental perspective counteracts the

accusation of intentionality and instead establishes that our lack of social privilege awareness is a common and reasonable starting point. Thus not being aware of our social location does not infer mal intent, despite its negative consequences on others.

There are contributing factors, social interactions, and cognitive frameworks required for the development of effective allyship. Since development is sequential and cumulative, we must give ourselves and others permission to progress instead of demanding that we leap to the desired outcome. Coming to terms with our own social location and privilege is difficult, and the fear of being called out as not woke can be counterproductive. Developmental theory includes the aspect of regression, in which negative experiences can cause an individual to get stuck or revert to a prior stage. A sense of compassion for privileged individuals who are trying to increase their capacity of allyship can be a powerful motivator. Just as we soften when we see a child struggling to learn, we can offer ourselves some forgiveness in not fully understanding the pervasive power of our social privilege.

Psychologists have utilized a developmental perspective to elucidate racial identity development, which often alludes to racial privilege but does not clearly call it out. Developmental models by Cross (1978), Thomas (1971, as cited in Ponterotto, 1988), and Root (1996) supported and guided the shift from a singular to multiple realities and focused largely on the developmental experience of persons marginalized within American society. Models such as these could be resources to practicing psychologists, but the foundational guidelines for implementing such models in culturally competent practice have been mostly theoretical (Sue, 1996). Contemporary critique of these models is that they focus solely on racial target domains and put the burden of liberation squarely on individuals of color.

Psychologists must consider that the use of models focused only on one side of a therapeutic relationship could “reinscribe White hegemony” (Spanierman, Poteat, Whittaker, Schlosser, & Arévalo Avalos, 2017, p. 619) and other systems of power. Other than White Racial Identity Theory (Helms & Carter, 1993), the Psychosocial Costs of Racism to Whites Scale (Spanierman & Heppner, 2004), the Racial Consciousness Development Model (Ponterotto, 1988), and the Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1986), developmental theories specific to persons with privilege and in positions of power in American society are conspicuously absent from the developmental or clinical psychology literature. Studies specific to training culturally competent therapists have either applied scholar-conjectured models in classroom training (Case, 2015; Ferber & Herrera, 2013; Goodman & Jackson III, 2011) or focused on small cohorts of culturally competent White counselors to explore growth of a culturally competent perspective (Atkins, Fitzpatrick, Poolokasingham, Lebeau, & Spanierman, 2017; Case, 2007; Goodman, Wilson, Helms, Greenstein, & Medzhitova, 2018; Ouellette & Campbell, 2014; Pruegger & Rogers, 1994).

Coming to terms with our own social location and the ascribed privilege, both in the personal and professional sense, requires sustained effort. A developmental perspective can offer permission, acceptance, progression, compassion, and hope. While there are various developmental models exploring racial identity and cultural competency, there are not many resources applied directly to social privilege. We encourage the field of clinical psychology to remedy this gap.

APPLYING THE BRAKES TO SOCIAL PRIVILEGE

To review, social privilege has recently entered the grand forum of psychology discourse through multicultural psychology, cultural competence, and social justice. As a distinct construct within the frame of social justice, social privilege is fraught with political and emotional tenor, which has kept it from the general purview of psychology. Social privilege is allocated by societal institutions such as law, economics, and education in order to benefit those historically advantaged. Social privilege calls us to move beyond our attention on oppression and its survivors to how we are complacently involved in the system of oppression simply by being a part of society. If we confront privilege, we realize that we unintentionally benefit from it despite the fact that we disagree with it. The imperative work of psychologists to continue the legacy of social justice and advocacy that was initiated decades ago requires psychologists to meaningfully translate social privilege reflexivity into research, education, and practice.

Research

Psychologists ought to now join the ranks of “scholars in each field [who] are asked to be accountable for recognizing that privilege exists in creation of knowledge as well as in all other human experience, and should be included in frames of analysis and discourse” (McIntosh, 2012, p. 195). In the heyday of the multicultural psychology revolution, White researchers called attention to the “Eurocentric bias present in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*” (Spanierman & Poteat, 2005). Recent qualitative studies in counseling psychology have turned the focus toward this bias (e.g., Atkins et al., 2017; Smith, Kashubeck-West, Payton, & Adams, 2017; Spanierman & Smith, 2017; Spanierman et al., 2017). Although these researchers were well-intentioned, “the authors focused very little attention on the benefits of their internalized whiteness as impediments to fulfilling their scholarly and professional goals” (Helms, 2017, p. 717).

There is minimal momentum in psychological research and even less mainstream literature that aim to understand the experience and effects of privilege on researchers, educators, and practitioners. As many before now have implored, reflexive research of social privilege in psychology

must address the “what,” “how,” and “why” of research, education, and practice. Such research can inform hypotheses, design, analysis, interpretation, and implementation. A developmental model of social privilege as a general construct could guide educators and clinicians.

Education

Despite the APA’s recent call to action, there is a dearth of literature offering approaches, standards, and outcomes for implementing doctoral-level social justice pedagogy in clinical psychology curricula. Literature focuses on social justice philosophies, definitions, and competencies (Ali, Liu, Mahmood, & Arguello, 2008; Motulsky et al., 2014, Singh et al., 2010) without offering practical suggestions for social justice implementation across doctoral psychology curricula.

Among 66 doctoral-level psychology trainees, Singh et al. (2010) found that 85 percent had not taken a course with social justice content, and the trainees reported disparities in their definition of social justice. However, Singh et al., also found that the majority of participants endeavored to integrate social justice into their practice and sought social justice training outside of their academic programs. Vera and Speight (2003) suggest training the next generation of psychologists as change agents. If the field of psychology is to realize the APA’s social justice aspirations, doctoral-level psychology programs must begin to consider a comprehensive inclusion of social justice pedagogy.

Practice

Despite best efforts, there is no clear standard for social justice practice in clinical psychology. Current literature seldom incorporates social justice perspectives into clinical practice. However, the lack of social justice initiatives in the therapeutic space is understandable. Psychology has a long-standing history and tradition of remaining therapeutically neutral. Especially with the push for evidence-based practice, the psychologist’s personhood is conveniently left out of the therapeutic dyad. Although we are asked to engage in self-reflection and be aware of our racial biases, political attitudes, and personal values, most theoretical orientations discourage us from explicitly bringing these human parts of ourselves into the therapy room. As one of the sole authors addressing power in psychotherapy, Malin Fors (2018) recognized the importance of differences and similarities of social privilege within the therapeutic dyad, and their effects on the outcome of therapy. She provides practical tools for incorporating what she refers to as the “matrix of relative privilege” into clinical practice (Fors, 2018, p. 59).

Thrift and Sugarman (2019) argue that psychology has failed to acknowledge the historical context, evolution, and implications of social

justice. Thus psychology has ignored the wider political and moral debate about “human freedom, individual and collective responsibility, and the role of the state” (Thrift & Sugarman, 2019, pp. 13–14) that necessarily accompanies social justice. Moreover, psychologists such as Goodman et al. (2004) call for professionals to become change agents who pursue challenging “societal values, structures, policies, and practices” (p. 793). The introduction of social justice invites American history and collective responsibility into the therapeutic dyad. We are no longer alone in the therapy room. We are no longer only advocating for our client but for the collective good.

TRANSFERRING MOMENTUM

Let’s revisit the opening scenario. When clients are asking for the therapist to recognize and meet their needs, and the therapist has no historical context or internal reference point for recognizing the experience of oppression, how can the therapist be therapeutically effective? Unaddressed power imbalances between therapist and client can be the source of therapeutic ruptures, misinterpretation, and ongoing harm by replicating the silent and invisible oppressive patterns that clients experience throughout life. Without clear research on how a therapist who has cultivated privilege awareness should or would respond, it is a risk to trust that the combination of self-reflection, accountability, and foundational clinical skills would prepare the therapist to validate the client’s experience of a legacy of inequity and injustice.

In following the APA’s practice guidelines, psychologists are called to first delineate their social location, acknowledging the identity domains in which they hold agent or target rank. Second, psychologists must cultivate ongoing self-awareness about how their positionality influences their cognitive biases, relationships, and life accomplishments. And finally, they must own their positionality in relation to those they serve across the roles of researcher, educator, and therapist.

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