Privilege Points Essay

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HSP 455 – Spring 2012

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HSP 455 – Diversity & Social Justice  
18 May 2012

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The United States of America was founded by a group of individuals escaping religious persecution. However, coming from a culture based around the class system, the act of persecuting continued. The class system itself is based around socially constructed ideas and because of this history, “our [current] identity, thinking, and behavior as human beings are far more “socially-constructed” than we might at first imagine” (Schenck, 2010). Beginning with the socially constructed idea of race, people are then stereotypically defined by ability, socioeconomic status, sexual identity, gender, and religion. This causes a divide, giving certain groups privileges and taking away the privileges of others.

In the following discussion, I will begin by looking at the identities I am socially defined by and whether these definitions give me privileges or not, the issues caused by distributing privileges amongst inherently equal individuals, a reevaluation of the dominate value system that operates in U.S. culture as it relates to each of the socially constructed identities, and will conclude by discussing what social changes need to occur.

I am Caucasian, or White, as defined by my forefathers. Through this socially constructed race, I’ve gained a multitude of privileges. I can get into any school and job. At restaurants and stores, I am not stared at suspiciously. “White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools , and blank checks” (McIntosh, 2010). In these ways, I am not being discriminated against, which is a privilege. At the same time, I see myself as having a lack of racial privilege. The privilege that I lack is being able to see *all* of my White privileges. This blindness in itself is not a privilege, because, by not being aware of it, I am allowing racial privilege to continue unjustly.

I also have several privileges granted to me by my own ability. I have two working feet that allow me to take stairs, ladders, ramps, and other forms of pathways without complication. My eyesight is good enough that I can drive without serious issues and can see all colors, allowing me to travel on my own and learn what colors are socially considered to complement each other and what colors do not. My mental ability is also very good. I am able to understand any written warning or instruction. In school, I was always allowed into any elective and my classes were at the level or above what was socially acceptable for someone my age. My abilities make me appear “normal” versus someone who might not have the same abilities as me appearing to be “abnormal” and “strange”.

“Able-bodied privilege also encompasses things like not having to worry about…the possible negative reactions of others to one’s needs due to his/her…disability or chronic condition, being stared at or questioned about his/her… disability or condition by strangers...being able to make decisions about the course of one’s medical, psychiatric, or other type of treatment without being questioned by others as to whether he/she… is making “the right choice” or can make a “rational” decision about his/her...[and so on]” (Hamilton, 2009).

Once again, as the privileged group, I do not face this discrimination. However, while I have visible privileges through my abilities, there are also some abilities that I lack that prevent me from receiving the full privilege package. First, the nerves in my left and right hand are fused somewhere in my brain, thus causing my left hand to move when I am trying to move my right hand, straining it because it is forcing itself to move. This causes me to be in constant pain when working with computers or writing during class time, which requires the constant use of my hands. It also prevents me from enjoying certain sports using racquets and balls and all video games. But this lack of privileges is nothing compared to the privileges that I do have.

I fluctuate between middle and upper-middle class dependent upon the season. This causes me to have a variety of privileges and lack thereof. When it comes to privileges through attire, my family has a few. Most of my clothes growing up were hand-me downs from my cousins. To this day, my family and I only ever shop sales and I wear my clothes until they are no longer wearable. While this may seem like I lack privileges through my attire, I am still able to shop at department stores, thereby giving me certain privileges. In terms of property privileges, as of right now I live in a five bedroom house with 3.5 bathrooms, and six rooms used for socializing. I also have a kitchen twice the size of one in an average home. My family owns a cabin the San Juans, and pays for two apartments while my brother and I are in college. There are six cars and two boats owned by my family and all are driven regularly. We also have multiple electronic devices used for entertainment and work. My privileges through money are where it gets more complicated. Most of my property was received through trades. My father worked three jobs and was rarely home while I was growing up. This is because he was an electrician trying to start his own company. Eventually, my father was able to do so. While having a family member be the boss of their own company gains many privileges on its own, being an industrial electrical company, money is hard earned—especially with the struggling economy and businesses being shut down. In order to get supplies needed, my father would do free electrical labor for someone and then they would trade us the wanted supplies. That is how we build our house—by hand and through a lot of strenuous outside work. One year, my father’s company made so much money that my father alone came out of it with other one-million dollars, but that money quickly disappeared to take care of the next work year’s bonding. As an electrical company, every employee (included each member of my family) is part of one of two unions. I have been part of W-90 my entire life, and without it I would not have health insurance. Socioeconomic status is a complicated measurement of privilege, but overall, I do receive a lot of privileges from it.

Along with being white and middle-class, I am also heterosexual. The privileges I receive from having this sexual identity are humungous. It is ridiculous how many privileges I get from this orientation than do others who consider themselves to be homosexual, transsexual, bisexual, pansexual—*anything* but heterosexual. I can talk about my relationships freely without fear of bullying, murder, and isolation. I receive a multitude of benefits from marriage to a member of the opposite sex and gender. As long as I believe in their god(s), all religions accept me. For the past several decades, joining the military did not mean I had to deny who I was. After listing off my privileges (and there are many more I didn’t include), I can honestly think of no privileges that I lack because of my sexual identity. That fact alone, is a horrible truth that is destroying the lives of millions of individuals every second of every day.

I am also female. Because of my gender my lack of privileges outweighs the actual privileges. I am privileged to be the first pick for jobs that are maternal and “feminine”. But I am not given the same opportunity with paternal and “masculine” jobs. Also, regardless of the job I receive, I always make less than men. Then there is the matter of clothing and sex. Women have more issues shopping for clothes than any man ever will, what with the various, meticulous sizes, lighter and sheerer fabrics, and the high costs. They are also used to sell objects and activities to men with their bodies, which is demeaning (though not necessarily to all women) in itself.

Finally, through religion I’ve found a mixture of both the lack and presence of privileges. I am Catholic, therefore I am of an old Christian, faith-based group. As a follower of Christianity, I am part of the majority religion in the United States and have many of my beliefs upheld by government officials. To this day, other religions are persecuted in our country for their beliefs, but mine is left untouched—almost. While I am very privileged from being a Christian, other groups, some being other Christian denominations, seek to persecute me for my beliefs. On a regular basis, I hear on religious radio stations about accusations toward “another Catholic priest” and demeaning jokes toward the religion, but only “a good Christian” when talking about a Catholics good deed—never mentioning their denomination. When I was in middle school, another student decided that my soul needed to be saved and went to the point of screaming at me for being “unholy and the work of Satan”. Because of my religion, I am constantly forced to sit quietly while other students in my classes at WWU make snarky remarks about “Catholics taking away our Health Care and being bigoted idiots”. I am forced to sit with my mouth closed and take the insults, but when I stand up—to strangers and even my friends—I am rallied against and broken down until I become quiet once more. I have privileges as a Christian, but by being of the Catholic denomination, which is supposed to mean “universal”, I feel as if all of my privileges are taken away.

While critically analyzing the topic of privileges in the United States, I have become aware of a multitude of issues around the subject. These issues are of equity, power relations, and institutionalized oppression. Equity is the attempt to be fair and impartial to all groups. While making things equitable is a noble cause, it is also unrealistic. The reality is that to make something fair and impartial to all groups is to make it unfair and partial to another. Personally, I will always be a firm believer in the possibility of equity for all, but through my research I am more aware of the drawbacks—the increase in suffering for individuals without privileges. If anything, it rears me back so that I don’t charge in to the battle on unfair privilege unprepared and under-cautious. Power relations on the other hand are the hierarchical relationships between individuals based on their differences in privilege—i.e. the one with privilege is at the top and controls the one without privilege. The biggest issue with this type of a relationship is that it denounces the value of the individual with less or no power. It is the modern take on our ancestor’s class system. That’s not ok and needs to stop. Unfortunately for many of the individuals who can help promote this change to the entire nation, they are the power in power relations—and they use their power to their own benefit on a regular basis—both consciously and unconsciously. My take on power relationships has always been a negative one. In fact, over all, I highly dislike all positions of power. For me, what I have to acknowledge is that even with my high dislike for power relations, with my privileges, I create and maintain such relationships on a regular basis. To begin changing this social structure, I need to first become more fully aware of my on part within it. Institutionalized oppression is the systematic mistreatment of people of a specific identity, which is then supported and enforced by institutions. This is a huge problem, because, by letting a large group discriminate against another—and get away with it—it makes it seem like that mistreatment is ok. Certain Christian organizations do that with non-heterosexual individuals on a day-by-day basis. Many sports teams do not accept females are individuals with a low amount of physical movement. Many more job positions, areas of entertainment, and helpful organizations are in accessible unless your socio-economic status is up to par with the standards. As the individual that I am, with my various identities, I both belong and am restricted from intuitions. Thereby, without consciously being aware of it, I support institutionalized oppression. Something I can do to build my (and others) awareness is, when able, speak up for the groups being oppressed by my institutions. I may even leave the institutions I can get by without; because, if a large group can’t have access, no one should. In the United States, we try so hard and speak so often about equality for all. But obviously we are missing something. You cannot create social change if you are unaware of what you can change about yourself for the betterment of people first. Until then, nothing will come of it.

Because of the history wrought by issues in equity, power relations, and institutionalized oppression, the dominant value system that operates in the United States is that of a male. But this male isn’t an ordinary male, he has a very small list of coveted traits. We’ll begin by looking at the stereotypical male as a whole. Individuals in the United States are affirmed for their masculinity before they receive any affirmation for their femininity. I took a class once called Teacher & the Social Order (EDUC 310), in which we examined the stereotypes of being masculine. Our stereotypes included, but were not limited to: strong, protective, brave, intelligent/charismatic, and so on. Because of the class system that was knowledgeably in place when our ancestors came to this country, the individuals who were considered the best (strongest, bravest, smartest; etc.) were part of the upper class. Since women were left at home to care for the children and do indoor tasks, that left the men as the only individuals able to be given these stereotypes, and therefore the ones to become the upper class. Over the years, though we have attempted to evolve from socially constructed gender roles, they still exist because of the value on masculinity we have had for hundreds of years. The men that are so highly valued are also white. Now, we’ll make our male model into a Caucasian, or “white”. The term “white” was coined to describe pale aristocrats that conducted work inside while the “black” lower-class did heavy labor jobs that either got them dirty or caused them to tan. Today, the only “black” individuals are people of African or South American decent. The terms has held on strongly to this group of people because they have had more years of being oppressed by it than previous “black” groups, but are they really “black”? No, every individual on this planet has a variable brown hue to their skin, give or take a few shades and tones. There is no other difference separating “white” and “black” individuals. Unfortunately, we’ve held on to it for so long that “Black”, “White”, and other races have become a social reality. Ability is another socially constructed value we can add to our male model. The United States views “able” as being able to communicate with an auditory language, have an IQ above 60, and have every limb be “fully” functioning. If you don’t match up with all of these standards you are not the perfect image of “able”. Unfortunately most individuals are not perfect. Mutations are common in the human genome, but the United States does not value the mutations, causing many individuals to fall behind. Next, let’s give our male model a middle-class socioeconomic status. Even with a middle-class status, with all the other components, the male is very likely to achieve upper-class status in no time. Socioeconomic status is highly coveted. The American Dream is to be successful and happy. Unfortunately, few achieve their dream of ultimate success and happiness is not fully realized. Money is highly valued and if you don’t look the part of someone who has money, it is less likely that you will earn property, attire, and a strong social circle to push you even higher on the social ladder. Finally, our model also happens to be heterosexual and Christian. Both of these components are valuable because individuals with these traits have the most say in politics. To have these traits is to have a say in the United States.

By understanding and acknowledging what privileges I have and those that I am lacking, I am capable of promoting social change on the issue. First, I need to “opt-in”. That is to say, I need to acknowledge how privileges have affected the way our society is run. Along with this, I need to accept that they are a part of our society that is not going away any time soon. Once I have “opted-in” I can challenge the dominant ideology. To challenge is to express my awareness of the issue and to openly state that I am against the dominant ideology surrounding it. There are opportunities every single day for this such as using blogs, forums, and other social media to express my stance, joining organizations, panels, rallies and protests supporting my opinion, voting, being a living example, and even simply talking to the people around me whether they are strangers or close friends and family. Big or small, regardless of the amount of energy put toward social change it is always worth it. As individuals, if we really want to see such change, we have to push ourselves to be fully motivated to do whatever we choose.

In the United States, privilege equals success and power. However, the more privilege one has, the more likely that individual is unaware of the unfair discrimination going on around them. As a white, heterosexual, middle-class, able, Catholic woman, I have a plethora of privileges and the lack thereof. I am both consciously and unconsciously pitted against other individuals lack and presence of privileges on a daily basis. The United States places value in the white, heterosexual, able-bodied, upper-class, Christian male. But, how is *that* “the Land of the Free”? In all truth, it is not. Social change needs to occur. Our nation has tried it with equity, but power relations and institutional oppression don’t end just because one tells it to. No, social change can only occur by bridging the gaps between power relations through awareness and *constant* conversation. Anyone can do one social change event and forget about it months later. This is a social even that needs to extend lifetimes. There is no break. To take a break is to watch all of your hard work fail. So start blogging; start advertising; become a true advocate—someone who lives and breathes this thing we call *social change*.

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