

Privilege: What's It Good For?

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Educators who are committed to social justice and the transformative potential of education face a variety of challenges, including (1) how to overcome many White students' denial of and resistance to information that disrupts their view of United States society as egalitarian and meritocratic, and (2) how to motivate changed behaviors resulting from this awareness. The question posed by a student Jennifer Logue observed reflects the second consideration: "Why would racially privileged individuals notice or challenge something that benefits them?" To this Logue answers, "Might her question be rendered moot if privilege were not conceived as entirely beneficial?"

In her contrapuntal reading of privilege, Logue critiques a *recognition* approach that views racial privilege as always advantageous for its recipients and introduces a *re-evaluation* approach that contests "the idea that privilege entirely benefits the overall well-being of the individuals in whose favor it apparently works." Logue argues that while neither approach completely solves the problem with race privilege, it must be understood that those who derive privileges not only enjoy their "perks" but also suffer their "perils." Logue concludes that acknowledging the detrimental effects of privilege might provide social justice educators a means to engage White students more effectively in dialogues for social change and lead Whites to stop coveting, protecting, denying, and resenting their complicit position within a system of inequality.

I share Logue's desire to engage White students in efforts to make society more racially just and believe, as she does, that their participation alongside individuals to whom privileges are denied is essential for the effectiveness of such endeavors. Although Logue does note some potential risks with her recommendation that privilege be understood as both good and bad, my concern is that she minimizes the dangers resulting from this conceptualization.

First of all, Logue reasons that privilege can have psychically alienating, agentically compromising, and haunting effects on Whites. She thus characterizes them as "co-victims" in a system of inequality. Given this language of co-victimization, which implies joint or equivalent victimization, is Logue suggesting that the colonizer's insecurity about the legitimacy of his superiority or the Nazi soldier's self-enacted mental detachment (her examples) make them victims *like* their targets? In other words, are we to believe that those who have economic advantage, political power, protection against bodily or psychic violence, and other such privileges are victims *in the same way* that those who suffer actual violence and systematic deprivation are victims? Logue does not address these questions in her essay, so it is not clear what she would recommend. I believe that any characterization of co-victimization that makes interchangeable those who are privileged with

those who are victims does great injustice to the lived experiences, despair, and resilience of people who have undeniably suffered as a result of social inequality.

Of course, an alternate view of co-victimization might take into account the different types or degrees of victimization felt by those who have privilege and those who do not. Logue identifies self-destruction, self-denial, and self-imprisonment among the detrimental outcomes of privilege and directs us to consider “how to liberate these [privileged] individuals from themselves as well as their masters.” It is not clear to me who their masters are, but the power needed for liberation seems tenably within reach of privileged individuals themselves. We might conclude, then, that privileged “victims” are lesser victims than those whose suffering is imposed upon them by others against their will. While this alternate view of co-victimization distinguishes between important variables, I believe creating such a hierarchy of victimization would be futile and have potentially undesirable effects.

Logue asserts that the notion “we” are doing something for “them” must be called into question, and I agree. However, another problem with Logue’s framing of privilege is that it ultimately dissolves the meaningfulness of the concept. This has serious implications that I believe need more thorough deliberation than offered by the contradictory voices Logue hears “in the back of [her] mind.” The relational constructs of privileged/not privileged are arguably very effective metaphorical devices for illuminating inequitable social systems.¹ Although this discourse represents oversimplified relations, its limitations must be considered relative to its potential strength. The fact that these theoretical concepts can elicit hard feelings in White students does not necessarily warrant recasting privilege (and victimization) in more inclusive ways so as to minimize students’ psychological dissonance. In fact, certain theories of racial identity view these feelings as natural parts of individual development and essential catalysts for future growth and commitment to projects of social change.² Especially because our contemporary, post-civil rights society so differs from those affected by the undeniable evils of colonization or Nazi terror, the language of social relations must be strategically considered for what it elucidates about privilege as well as what it obscures or distorts.³ As it is, White students quite commonly deny their involvement in a racist society by pointing out that they were never slave owners. I doubt students would feel any more comfortable with being asked to personally identify or theoretically associate themselves with the deeds and feelings of colonizers or Nazis.

Logue acknowledges that privileged individuals dominate knowledge production and reproduction, and sometimes the ideologies they devise may in fact undermine sincere attempts to achieve social justice. Despite what I trust are her good intentions, I encourage Logue to examine how the risks resulting from her own conceptualization of race privilege might have such sabotaging effects. People of color, with their unique insights directly emanating from the experience of being denied privilege, have contributed a great deal to our collective understanding of race privilege and the power that Whiteness holds for its owners.⁴ How would Logue justify to people of color the value of her argument in light of its apparent adverse

consequences? As a person of color, I am reluctant to embrace Logue's argument that privileges should be viewed as both good and bad and am skeptical about a conceptual turn that dissolves the relational meaning of privilege such that everyone becomes a victim. In fact, it is privilege itself that allows some to feel less responsible for reconciling theoretical ideas with their real effects and to create logics that provide the shift from being identified as "privileged" to be identified "co-victim." It is often in the interest of those who have privilege to change people's consciousness rather than the actual circumstances that perpetuate inequality.⁵

I do not intend to deny the significance of what I believe is at the heart of Logue's essay: that being privileged within an unjust society may not result in a completely carefree or satisfactory state of being. This point, though, does not depend upon a reevaluation of *privilege* but rather a focus on the phenomenon of *oppression*. In fact, Logue alludes to oppression throughout her essay by using expressions such as "the practice of privilege," "privileging mechanisms," and the act of "securing and perpetuating privilege." These phrases refer to the dynamic occurrence of oppression rather than to privilege itself, which is a derivative.⁶ Let me conclude with a quote by Paulo Freire that Logue references at the beginning of her essay: "As the oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanized." In essence, although oppressors do reap privileges, the "exercise of oppression" prevents both the oppressor and the oppressed from achieving their full humanity. It is my hope that we will all continue finding inspiration in Freire's words and use the transformative potential of education to best realize the goal of social justice.

1. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

2. See Robert Carter, "Reimagining Race in Education: A New Paradigm from Psychology," *Teachers College Record* 102, no. 5 (2000): 864–897; and Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

3. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2001).

4. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991); and Gerardo R. Lopez and Laurence Parker, eds., *Interrogating Racism in Qualitative Research Methodology* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

5. Simone de Beauvoir, cited in Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 55.

6. For example, see Peggy McIntosh, "'White Privilege and Male Privilege,'" A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies," in *Gender Basics: Feminist Perspectives on Women and Men*, ed. A. Minas (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1993), 31, in which she discusses examples of White privilege including the freedom from having one's individual actions generalized to represent his/her entire racial group and being able to purchase band-aids that match one's skin color. In my view, these are important privileges for White students to recognize they have and may raise their awareness of the need to treat others as individuals or create products for more diverse populations. However, simply doing away with these privileges does not necessarily eliminate the larger, societal phenomenon of racial discrimination and oppression if one is working from a transformative orientation to social justice.