## OPPRESSION AND PRIVILEGE AS TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN:

# DECONSTRUCTING PRIVILEGE TO INITIATE PROCESSES THAT SUPPORT RECOGNIZING DIVERSITY AS RESOURCE

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**Our dialogue was sparked by a question raised at a conference after Juliana presented on Beyond Discrimination: Oppression and Privilege – Anti-Oppressive and Anti-Privilege (AOAP) Theory and Practice. As part of her response, Juliana explained that oppression and privilege are two sides of the same coin: the social relations that maintain oppression are the same that produce privilege. The processes and structures that maintain enhanced access to opportunities, rewards, and status for privileged social locations come at the expense of reduced or denied access to the same opportunities, rewards, and status for groups experiencing oppression (Mullaly & West, 2018).**

## OPPRESSION AND PRIVILEGE

Oppression, "a second-class type of citizenship, is assigned to people not on the basis of failure or weakness or lack of merit, but because of their membership in a particular social group" and occurs at three dynamic and interacting levels: the personal, cultural and structural (p. 1). Conversely, privilege, the unearned advantages of special group membership, is both an invisible package of *unearned* assets that can be counted on everyday *and* a series of disadvantages not experienced precisely because of a person's identity (Carbado, 2002).

> "Privilege is not something I take and which I therefore have the option of not taking. It is something that society gives me, and unless I change the institutions which give it to me, they will continue to give it, and I will continue to have it, however noble and egalitarian my intentions." (Harry Brod, cited in Mullaly & West, 2018, p. 35)

Those disadvantages operate as forms of everyday oppression that serve to keep marginalized groups in lower social and economic status. For example, while two social work graduates from the same Canadian university may perform equally well in the labour market, the paths non-racialized social workers may follow, based on their privilege, is likely to be very different from the paths racialized social workers traverse. Moreover, the paths racialized social workers navigate are varied through sexism and how male social

workers can often be afforded greater credibility than what female practitioners experience. The intersection of visible and invisible differences manifesting in religious discrimination, and/or ableism and/or ageism can further diversify paths experienced by racialized social workers.

It is also important to distinguish between earned and unearned advantages and avoid associating all assets as problematic. People with both earned assets (i.e. university education) and privilege (unearned advantages such as being male and/or non-racialized) can use their position to challenge oppression and the unfair advantage of privilege, and to advance equity and the equality of human dignity and opportunity. One such strategy can be through professional caucuses where racialized social workers, or female social workers of African descent, or young male Muslim social workers can experience mentorship as well as form a platform where their expertise informs the deconstruction of oppression and privilege within the larger professional body.

At the personal level, privilege involves those beliefs, attitudes, and actions that project a negative prejudice of particular marginalized social groups with/or a favourable prejudgment of the privileged group. At the cultural level, privilege consists of the belief in a superior culture and an implicit agreement about what is right and normal regarding the shared values, norms, and ways of understanding and behaving (Mullaly & West, 2018).

> "Every day, dominant group members see their identity groups (males, ['white'] people, heterosexuals, etc.), their religion, their social systems, their language, their history, and so on presented as the *norm* in the mass media, in their government bodies, in public school curricula, in advertising, and in other cultural arenas. In effect, they see themselves as the *official culture* of society, which makes them the beneficiaries of cultural privilege and, in many cases, the perpetrators of *ethnocentrism* (i.e., a narrow view of the world from within the confines of one culture)" (p. 47).

Furthermore, at the structural level, privilege is evident in the ways privilege is institutionalized – economic, legal, educational, political and social systems, institutions, policies, processes, and practices all work together in favour of privileged groups at the expense of groups experiencing oppression (Mullaly & West, 2018).

## HUMAN DIFFERENCE AND DIVERSITY AS RESOURCE

The basis of oppression and privilege is how human difference (visible and invisible) is viewed and operationalized (Mullaly & West, 2018). Growing up in a sexist, racist and hierarchical culture, we tend to view difference as better or less than; sometimes this is re-enforced by ego and the fight or flight response. The alternative is to just regard difference as providing an opportunity to explore and interrogate that which is unknown. Post-modernist thinking and critical theory provide frameworks that support open-mindedness and the understanding that there is always more to what we know (Lwanga, 2016). During one of our dialogues, Christine suggested that it was critical to understand that human difference is a resource and not something to resist. Indeed, it is Creator's idea and a re-occurring natural phenomenon that supports life in ways we do not fully understand. It is also easy to explain how human differences can be a valuable resource. For example, a tool on dominant communication styles as invisible differences (https://outsmartyourbrain.com/4-dominant-communication-styles/) demonstrates and teaches how those invisible differences can be used to compliment and support teamwork and how diversity can be recognized and accessed as a resource.

Within the context of the intersectionality of oppression and privilege, our dialogues deepened the understanding of difference as a resource, as opposed to a basis for exploitation or threat. For example, within the context of a forum on the intersectionality of oppression, we need to engage men in championing women's rights in ways that dismantle male dominance and superiority, instead of when addressing racism, witnessing men actively silencing women who speak out against gender inequality. As Johnson (2000) cautions, "We won't get rid of racism... without doing something about sexism and classism, because the system that produces the one also produces the others and connects them" (p. 53).

People's social locations also intersect – their gender, whether and how they are racialized, their class, their sexual orientation, their status, their point of interaction with society, all contribute to the amount of access and inclusion they experience at that particular point in time. In addition, while power exists in all human interactions, a distinction between having power and exercising power is noteworthy. While we all occupy diverse, varying, and intersecting sets of privileged and oppressed social locations, a person's particular configuration may or may not result in a sense of personal power (Mullaly & West, 2018).

Moreover, visible and invisible difference manifests in the externally imposed and internally constructed individual and group identities we occupy. Externally imposed identities, constructed through myths and stereotypes, benefit the dominant group: oppressed groups experience negative stereotypes (less worthy, less capable, less moral) while privileged groups enjoy positive stereotypes (more worthy, more capable, more moral). Internally constructed identities, in contrast, are influenced by internalized second-class status and oppression or internalised privilege (entitlement and superiority) (Mullaly & West, 2018).

> " 'Whiteness' and 'colour' or 'Blackness' are essentially social constructs applied to human beings rather than veritable truths that have universal validity. The power of Whiteness, however, is manifested by the ways in which racialized Whiteness becomes transformed into intellectual, social, political, economic, and cultural behaviour. White culture, norms, and values in all these areas become normative and natural. They become the standard against which all other cultures, groups, and individuals are measured and usually found to be inferior" (Henry & Tator, 2009, pp. 25).

## STRATEGIES FOR RESISTANCE

While Anti-Oppressive Practice (AOP) has tended to look outward for change in removing barriers to inclusion and democratic participation, Anti-Oppressive and Anti-Privilege (AOAP) Theory and Practice maintains that the perceptions and expectations arising from privilege must be unsettled, deconstructed, and examined. The lenses of privileged bias are equally urgent and important sites for interrogation (Mullaly & West, 2018).

The key is that everyone has to be at the table. Social justice necessitates that people who experience marginalization, their discourse, experiences, and analyses must form the centre of our knowledge systems and, this transformation needs to include allies (Hooks, 2000). While maintaining the reality of 'race' as a social construction and the post-modern critique of language and discourse, we need to engage those regarded as 'white' in anti-racism work.

There is a need for on-going critical reflection and reflexivity, naming and questioning, and resistance. There is a need for caution – to speak out from a place of critical self-reflection and not from aggression – to understand and use power in ways that do not reproduce that which we seek to overcome – oppression, domination and privilege. There is a need for respecting in-sider outsider positions within the context of multiple identities and social locations. Moreover, there is a need to deconstruct myths and reclaim voice to write a new narrative and claim back power. We need to use terms such as *white* or *black* people with caution acknowledging that colour, as a descriptor used for objects, results in dehumanization when applied to people.

We also need to understand that the policies and practices of inclusion and exclusion occurring at the structural level are based on internalized expectations of privilege and the maintenance of oppressive dominant social relations. The use of white within anti-racism work reinforces the racist agenda and discounts and erases the experiences of oppression of the Ukrainian and Francophone communities in Canada. *Race*, as a time and geographic specific social construct, oppresses and maintains dominance – it cannot empower (Lwanga, 2004). As UNESCO (1978) declared, there is only one human race.

Moreover, we need to use the privilege and power we are afforded to leverage social transformation and to deconstruct how we engage with one another. If we see others only in terms of their usefulness to us, we reduce their humanity to what we perceive their function is. If in contrast, we enter into relationship, into *dialogue*; our encounter transforms and enriches both (Buber, 2010, 1937). Our understanding needs to be tempered by an ongoing and continuous self-interrogation of how our own locations of privilege and oppression affect our understanding and practice. As scholars, social workers, and social activists, our praxis needs to be based on the expertise and scholarship of people with firsthand experience: racialized women academics, new African immigrants, 5th generation racialized Canadian Elders, young queer Muslim men. We can all use our privileged locations to dismantle oppression and privilege.

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