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Questioning Privilege: Tools for Research and Teaching

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Abstract: Privilege and bias are important concepts for researchers and educators to examine, as part of doctoral training and as professional experiences develop. In this session, we explore tools and strategies for furthering awareness of privilege and bias for academics at all stages and for personal, research, and instructional use.

Keywords: social justice, critical theory, qualitative research

A key component of qualitative research is the process of examining personal privilege. This process is also embedded in most adult education graduate programs with a social justice emphasis. Acknowledging personal privilege and oppression is the starting point for open dialogue and understanding about the elements that potentially divide us, but it is crucial to utilize those elements to promote understanding.

This roundtable, through the exploration of the literature and strategies related to privilege, aims to empower educators and researchers to influence students and other adult learners and encourage additional social justice research. This roundtable derives from a professional development workshop designed to engage people in recognizing privilege and oppression. The original concept evolved from work at a non-profit, rural community organization serving domestic violence and sexual assault survivors.

This roundtable will present an opportunity for a relevant discussion of how to integrate activities that explore and prepare educators to further develop their own personal privilege and enter into conversations around privilege in non-threatening ways. This roundtable has two primary purposes: (a) To provide an overview of literature on unrecognized personal bias and privilege experienced by educators and researchers, and (b) to explore the methods or strategies adult educators and researchers can use to uncover biases or privileges as part of professional development, with adult learners, or with graduate students who plan to conduct research.

Conceptual Framework

This roundtable's conceptual framework stems from critical theory and perspectives. Educators and researchers must personally manage multiple experiences of power and oppression. "One's race, gender, or class can increase or decrease the influential sphere of power one has over the discourse and activities related to success in the academy" (Sheared, 2006, p. 185). The dichotomous experience described here can impact people who experience life in society's margins yet hold power over others in professional capacities. "Before one can recognize, understand, and act on another person or group's behalf, she or he must recognize, understand, and act on his or her own" (p. 188). Thus personal reflection is necessary for academics who at times encompass attributes that give them power through their professional position and oppression because of their physical attributes or social position. Critical perspectives "urge us to find ways of naming, knowing, and being in the world that move ... into spaces of transformation" (Desforges & Fox, 2002, p. 198). As such, we must identify our own perspectives before we can hope to influence others or society. In particular, as academics function in higher education institutions, critical theory plays a role in the creation of community through the process of learning collaboratively an aspiration we wish to foster

(Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). To support this aim, the activities and strategies examine “mythical norms” impacting our personal perceptions (Lorde, 1980). These norms are established to expose and explain the way our personal identities relate to our external experience of power.

Roundtable Activities

The facilitators will engage roundtable attendees by sharing some existing activities and strategies and will invite participants to share their own experiences uncovering bias and privilege, including any challenges. The following table presents three activities. Participants will be asked to engage in these activities and discuss their usefulness and limitations.

Activity	Main Idea	Tasks
Examining Mythical Norms (Lorde, 1980)	Introduce participants to the normative standard of the white, wealthy, young, thin, Christian male.	Engage in a group discussion about the mythology around each of these norms.
Wheel of Oppression (Lorde, 1980)	Participants plot their location on the wheel to explore their personal power location.	Complete a wheel and discuss the implications.
Privilege Chains (McIntosh, 1988)	Participants explore the concepts of privilege and oppression, and ways in which they benefit and are constrained by these systems.	Construct a “privilege chain,” building on individuals’ experience of privilege in the world.

Implications

These activities are introduced to support those who wish to further their personal awareness, grow the toolkit of current and future scholars engaging in social justice related research, and provide a forum for best practices. Researchers, educators, administrators, and staff may utilize these strategies to ease into conversations about personal identity and grow into deeper conversations, transferable to many contexts.

As researchers and educators, it is necessary that we become immersed in the world of advocacy and confronting issues to increase our awareness. By exploring our own privilege and biases, we shape the way we approach and interact with others and how we exemplify, as researchers and educators, the role of higher education institutions in our communities. These are not conversations and practices that exist in isolation, but rather they have far reaching implications in all areas of the human experience.

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