

Intersectional Approaches to Teaching about Privileges

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Introduction

The privilege walk usually consists of asking students to stand up and align themselves on an invisible spectrum based on their experiences or positionality.¹ This usually takes the form of a "step forward-step back" activity. For example: if you studied the culture of your ancestors in elementary school, take one step forward; if you have ever experienced discrimination based on your race, take one step back. Eventually, students are (hypothetically) positioned relative to each other based on their privileges. The multiply-marginalized take many steps back, while the more privileged take many steps forward, further separating themselves from one another.

This activity can be deployed to provide a visual and concretely physical representation of the privileges of those present. Students ostensibly confront the privileges that they may have taken for granted in their own lives, by comparing their experiences to those who are physically positioned as more oppressed. Cooper (2017) writes, "The purpose of this identity-based sequenced activity was for students to discover the diversity within themselves, as well as to experience how preconceived notions and beliefs about people, particularly their friends, affected how they view them...Additionally, this activity gave definition to 'the me I am but don't want others to see" (p. 247).

Few alternatives of the privilege walk can be found in any venue; not in scholarly publication, pedagogical venues, or blogs. Interestingly, most discussions focus on how the discomfort of it is crucial and generative (a point that we discuss below). Cooper, for example, explains that "although the 'Privilege Walk' was uncomfortable and even unsettling for some, completing this activity or a similar one was vital to prepare TFs [teaching fellows] for the community-based learning activities that followed" (p. 253).

We appreciate discomfort as potentially generative when it comes to understanding privilege and oppression. However, we are interested in re-imagining the activity in a way which lessens the risk of possibly shutting out participants by tokenizing and/or embarrassing them. Our goal here is to adapt the core concept of the activity -challenging students to recognize their positionalities -- into adaptations which add intersectionality to its structure and learning outcomes.

In the remainder of this systematic reflection, we explain why we, as instructors, use adaptations to the privilege walk; what our adaptations aim to accomplish; and how our respective adaptations function. To be clear, neither of our activities has been formally assessed; instead, we are referring them on the basis of our personal experiences using them as pedagogues, and want to point to them as openings for conversations and future work. We aim to speak to any practitioner who is concerned with helping learners recognize their own identities, whether through a short activity or through a semester-long experience.

Our Observations of the Privilege Walk

A privilege walk can help to uncover how our different identities give us access -- and prevent our access -- to certain spaces, resources, and energies. Yet, we share concerns about whether the privilege walk leads to productive discomfort. Students of marginalized groups face the potential for exhaustion, vulnerability, and objectification as they are exposed and may feel that they have to explain their circumstances yet again. It is helpful here to refer to Standpoint Theory, particularly as it is articulated by Sandra Harding (1993) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990). Standpoint Theory reminds us that people of marginalized groups - whether by gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic background, (dis)ability, or any other factor -- already understand oppression. They learn from their families, communities, and experiences how to survive in an environment that fails to support them. As Audre Lorde (1984) writes, "Survival is not an academic skill" (p. 112). Minoritized folks come to understand discrimination not from taking classes, but through experiences which force them to adapt and survive.

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At the same time, "non-belonging" and de-centering can be reified when people of marginalized groups are moved to the edge of a privilege walk, just as they are in the "real world." For students of majority groups, this activity may lead to a discomfort that is more like shame, humiliation, or embarrassment--blaming or at least gazing harshly at students "in the center." For many students of dominant or majority positionality groups, their membership among privileged groups is an accident of birth and not through willful acts. Similarly, a student might not feel comfortable sharing their sexuality, (dis)ability, gender identity, socio-economic background, or any other quality, with the class, and might lie or cover up the truth when provided a prompt asking them to reveal themselves. These intense negative emotions might be more likely to shut down their abilities to interrogate their contemporary role in multigenerational oppression, center the experiences of people of marginalized groups, and create and engage in situations of empathy and understanding (van der Kolk, 2014). We want to allow students the opportunity to share information about their positionality as they find necessary. Both of us sought activities which included private ways for students to express their authentic selves.

Patricia Hill Collins explains that privilege involves *voyeurism*, or being able to "watch" and observe those who are minoritized from the outside (1993). Some privilege walks may be anonymized by having participants write down privileges and oppressions and then swapping; participants take steps forward and backwards based on others' profiles. However, the activity still encourages voyeurism, as those

in front "look back" at those behind them, serving as a voyeur to their stacked marginalizations.²

Bertram and Crowley (2012) explain how, in higher education, instructors often encourage students to feel sympathy for others' experiences. Students become focused on feeling sympathy for those "less fortunate" than themselves, and circumvent the task of examining their own role in these systems, or thinking about how to dismantle said structures. Intersectional scholar Daniela Gutiérrez López supports this concern, as she explains that the privilege walk is made to benefit the education of more privileged students, and to do so, "uses marginalized people as props."³ In response, we wanted to think about how adaptations to the privilege walk could move students past sympathy for other participants' experiences and into a deeper interrogation of one's complicity in systems of oppression.

We also share concerns around activities which seek to quantify privilege in a two-dimensional space, moving forward and back. Based on where they stand in line, students associate their identities with fixed positions of "more" or "less" privilege in everyday society, instead of understanding the dynamic nature of privilege. In this way, we want to avoid indulging the "double jeopardy" model of oppression (Carbado, 2013). This model suggests that, the more "minority" qualities a person has, the more oppressed they are. The queer woman of color with a (dis)ability, for example, is positioned farthest back in the line of the privilege walk, because their life experience is the most difficult. Oppression is experienced differently based on the various combinations of a person's positionality factors. In other words, being a black woman is not like being a black man, nor is being a black woman with a (dis)ability the same as being a non (dis)able-bodied and -minded black woman. None is necessarily worse or better, but simply, different. This variability and nuance may not be captured by the simple visual representation of one person standing ahead of, or behind, another. Similarly, we do not want to teach participants that axes of difference are "parallel" or comparable to each other. For example, they may leave thinking that being a person of color is "like" being queer. As Siobhan B. Somerville (2000) explains in Queering the Color Line, we want to be careful not to position facets of positionality as similar or parallel, but intersecting and interlocking.

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Experiences of privilege are contingent not only on factors like race, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic standing but also on location and situation. Our privileges shift as we move from one space to another, and as we change as people over time. For example, as a mixed-race queer woman, I (Shadia) might be the minority in a room full of white men; but I am in a relative position of privilege when I am surrounded by fellow graduate students of Gender Studies. The privilege walk also condenses experiences of privilege and oppression to the "macro" level (Sue et al., 2007). Instead, we are each interested in teaching students to learn about how privilege and oppression manifest in subtle, everyday ways. Prompts such as "if you have experienced discrimination, step forward" collapse privilege and discrimination into "headliner" events--for discrimination, events like genocide or segregation come to mind. In asking themselves, "what constitutes a moment of privilege or discrimination?" students might talk understanding themselves out of events like microaggressions as forms of discrimination. This effectively makes privilege and discrimination seem like exceptional moments.

We should also take care that any single activity is not considered sufficient education around privilege and positionality. If practiced alone, without context, debriefing, or intersectional nuance, one educational experience risks invoking what Sara Ahmed calls non-performativity: that is, saying something in order to make it *not* so (Ahmed, 2004). Ahmed points to how statements like "diversity is important" can allow institutions to avoid having to take meaningful action towards establishing diversity. In teaching about privilege, it might be tempting to think performing an activity is sufficient or that feeling bad is all the work that we need to do. We aim to avoid limiting our education of privilege down to bouts of guilt and/or sympathy, and instead inspire deeper interrogation and reflection.

Finally, we are concerned that activities requiring physical movement can be ableist. Whether we can "see" it or not, some students have (dis)abilities that will affect their mobility in the classroom. Asking students to move and stand for a sustained period is an unfair expectation, and risks outing some students as being unable to physically participate.

Shadia's Example

As a mixed-race, queer femme woman, I occupy many "in-betweens." Categories of race, ethnicity, and sexuality aren't either/or for me; I am white-passing, perhaps appear as heterosexual to folks, but still deeply identify with minority positions. This personal experience has helped me understand the need for flexible, nuanced, and intersectional activities for recognizing positionality.

As a teacher of Gender Studies, my courses revolve around conversations of privilege and oppression. I want to ensure that, early in the semester, my students recognize their positionalities in an intersectional and sustainable way, so they can understand their relationship to each topic or issue that comes up throughout the rest of the semester. I developed this lesson to provoke students to start thinking about the privilege and oppression they experience, to acknowledge how their privilege manifests in their daily lives, and to imagine how each facet of their positionality relates to the others. There are two parts. The first part asks students to think about their own identities; the second asks students to think about how society is subtly structured around accommodating certain identities.

intersectional mapping



(example of six qualities which can be included)

FIGURE 1. INTERSECTIONAL MAP TEMPLATE. THIS FIGURE SERVES AS A TEMPLATE FOR HOW TO CONSTRUCT ONE'S OWN MAP OF THE VARIOUS FACETS OF THEIR POSITIONALITY.

First, I introduce intersectional mapping to my students. On the board, I draw a "wheel" of two or three intersecting lines, creating a set of spokes (Figure 1). Versions of the positionality or identity "wheel" can be found in Morgan (1996) and Shaw & Lee (2015, p. 52) as well as the Program on Intergroup Relations and the Spectrum Center at the University of Michigan ("Social Identity Wheel," 2017). We pick a few famous people whose positionality we want to map, and detail one positionality quality on each spoke: their gender, race, class, education, and so forth. Often, I try to include examples of people who seem very different in their identities; students often suggest Beyoncé and Donald Trump. This way, students will not be left thinking that only those who are multiply marginalized have intersectional identities. All individuals have intersectional identities, composed of a race, a class, a gender, and so forth; some folks just have different combinations that allow them more or less privilege in certain locations.

Students then make intersectional maps of their own identities. I draw my own intersectional map on the board as a model for the students (*Figure 2*). I ask them to include at least five or six qualities. The visual representation of each of these spokes, intersecting, helps illustrate their interlocking nature. None of the qualities are more or less important; they are all interlocked.

Second, using the computer that is projected through the room, I use Google image search with the class. I search for a series of terms, and ask the class to explain how the most popular images to appear tell a story about privilege. Here are three examples:



Shadia

FIGURE 2. INTERSECTIONAL MAP (COMPLETED). AN EXAMPLE OF THE INTERSECTIONAL MAP TEMPLATE, FILLED OUT WITH SIX POSITIONALITY FACTORS OF ONE OF THE AUTHORS.

Example 1: Band-Aids

The "standard" Caucasian-toned Band-Aids appear as the most common image. When I ask students, "are these the color of everyone's skin?" students begin thinking about how racial privilege can translate into such small factors as being able to use a bandage that blends into a person's skin.

Example 2: Bathroom signs

The typical bathroom sign of a stick figure "man" and "woman" appears. Students detail these signs as genderessentializing: the "man" does not have clothing detail, but the "woman" wears a skirt/dress. By presenting only two options, the signs also reinforce the gender binary, as well as androcentrism and "othering" of women: the "man" figure is the standard, and the "woman" figure appears to be the "man" wearing a skirt. These signs communicate standards of gender performance, and those who do not adhere (trans folks, gender non-conforming, those who do not fit into the gender binary) are shamed for not participating, and may even be left feeling unsafe in both or either bathroom. Students are also able to think about (dis)ability in these signs when we look at the "handicapped" bathroom sign: the figure on this sign does not wear a skirt, implying that the quintessential person with (dis)ability is either male, or perhaps even genderless.

Example 3: Engagement photo ideas

Upon doing this search, I ask students, "what do these images teach us about couples who are engaged?" Most couples are white-presenting, appear to be a man and woman, and do not present with any (dis)abilities. Students observe that the woman is almost always smaller and shorter, is femme-presenting, while the man is larger, masculine-presenting, and often is pictured picking the

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woman up. Few pictures include people of color, and those that do usually contain phenotypically-similar couples. Finally, the images are heavily classed, as evidenced in the clothes, jewelry, and props which appear, in addition to the fact that engagement photos in themselves is a classed activity. Students learn that, if they seek images of couples who are not man/woman, who are mixed-race, who present with a (dis)ability, and so forth, they must specify their image search to those terms. In other words, those couples are "special" searches, outside the norm of the "regular" couples that appear. This image search serves as the pinnacle of the activity, since students can apply their intersectional thinking to pull out several positionality factors and their overlaps: race, class, gender, (dis)ability, and so forth, all interacting to produce a "normal" couple in these photos.

Through this activity, students learn to recognize how privilege and oppression might be effected through minor, everyday images and arrangements, and in what they might take for granted as "normal"—rather than just in events like slavery, genocide, and slurs. By using Google as a teaching tool, I also indicate to students that examples of privilege are casually and easily accessible, and that these discoveries are available to them as well.

Challenges to this activity

Though I often find that this activity engages students and gets them thinking creatively about positionality, I have experienced push back. From my experience, students might feel unconvinced that the images which appear with Google search are truly representative of privilege and oppression. In one class, a student remarked that the images which appeared were simply the results of Google's search algorithm.

In response, I acknowledged that Google's search algorithm played a role; but I also reminded my students that the algorithm responds to user's interactions with the search engine. That is to say, the search engine represents the images which people click on, save, search for, and so forth. In this way, Google's search results are indeed an indication of how people think about personhood, and thus, privilege. As such, when instructors use technology and/or point to technology for the lessons it can teach about privilege, I encourage them to push students to remember how technology is created and maintained by humans, and thus reflects human values and ideologies.

Katherine's Example

In my work as an educational developer in a teaching center, I mentored and coached graduate students and faculty in their classroom practice. I used an adaptation of a privilege walk to introduce faculty and graduate student instructors to the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion as they relate to their classroom practice, and to help them be attentive to classroom climate and the experiences of belonging by instructors and students in their classrooms. This activity typically occurs in a multi-disciplinary workshop setting and takes about 20-30 minutes. I have several goals for graduate student instructors and faculty who participate in this activity. I want participants to see that these marginalized identities and experiences of non-belonging are all around them in everyday academic contexts. I want them to see that belonging is situational and can change depending upon who is in the room and what is represented. I want them to hear real stories of people around them and to develop compassion, listening, and observing, in ways that reflect Intergroup Dialogue practices (Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). And I want them to engage in conversation that leads to simple individual and collective actions that lead to belonging.

Drawing upon Peggy McIntosh's 1989 article, "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," I developed Belonging Statements that I have heard graduate students of marginalized identities (race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, (dis)ability) at our institution say about their experiences either as Teaching Assistants to undergraduates or as students themselves in graduate classes. Examples include:

- I have had instructors who share my social identity group membership.
- Popular culture includes positive representations of professionals of my social identity groups.
- In my classes, course materials usually include authors of my social identity groups.
- In my classes, my contributions are included, listened to, and valued by my peers.
- When I speak in class, I am understood as an individual and not as a representative of my social identity group.
- In my classes, course activities have meaning and relevance to concerns in my community.
- In my classes, my instructors and peers step in when something is said that is discriminatory to my social identity group.
- My instructors, mentors, and peers understand my socio-cultural experiences.
- In general, I feel like I belong here.

We then engage in a version of a Values Clarification activity (Lederer, 2016). Each statement is printed on a separate sheet of paper and attached to the classroom wall. Participants are given sheets of red and green stickers and asked to read the statements and put either a Green (yes, I have experienced this) or Red (no, I generally don't experience this) sticker on the sheet. After about 7 minutes, we have covered the sheets with stickers. The dots provide a sense of anonymity; each participant can respond truthfully and authentically as they contribute to the collective truth of the room, but they do not have to reveal themselves publicly if they do not want to. The several times I have done this activity, each sheet has ALWAYS had both green and red stickers, though the proportions change depending on the makeup of the participants. On most occasions, participants have developed their own modifications to the activity; for example, some participants have cut the stickers in half and attached half-red/half-green stickers to illustrate that the context matters for how they respond to the statement.

I then ask people to get into groups of 4-5 and give each group 1 or 2 of the statement sheets to discuss with the following questions for small group discussion:

- What is the dominant experience represented by that statement? What is the non-dominant experience?
- What does that non-belonging feel like? What has it looked like for you? In what ways or examples have you not felt belonging in a classroom context -- as either a teacher or a student?
- How would you address this as a teacher if you assumed that: 1) a sense of belonging in your class was important; and 2) that there would be at least one person who didn't feel they belonged?

When we conduct this activity first on paper, the sheets become a text and a source of data -- an amalgamation of our collective experiences -- that we can talk about, discuss, interpret, and act on. By adapting this activity to a text about our experiences (instead of about our literal bodies), we collectively understand how those constellations of dots came to be as representations of very real personal experiences, fears, and dreams in our academic setting.

Challenges to this activity

I have had a participant willfully not participate in the activity, announcing that the statements did not represent their experiences and that they could not, and therefore would not, respond. I have also had a faculty participant assert that these statements were not relevant to the classroom experience or what they were responsible for as an instructor; they stated that they are preparing their students for "the real world" where their positionalities would not be catered to. I anticipate that participants will push back against activities about privilege and oppression, and I am prepared for and open to these expressions. At the same time, I remind them of the validity of each person's lived experience, of the importance of thinking outside of their own identities and being compassionate about how those experiences of marginalization in the classroom relate to students' performance, of our responsibilities as educators at a public university to provide an equitable education, and of the importance of appreciating others' stories, especially when those experiences are present in the room.

Conclusions

In sharing our reflections on privilege activities, we offer models to stimulate a paradigm shift in the ways each of us -- as people ourselves and as educators of undergraduate students, graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, faculty, and staff -- orients toward ongoing learning about power, privilege, oppression, and intersectional identities. We reflect on the affective components of learning about privilege -- nuance, ambiguity, personal growth, and patience with process over endpoint -- that go hand-in-hand with cognitive learning about intersectionality. Each of our activities values the privacy of participants, the complexity of positionality, and the very personal struggle of understanding one's own positionality. Perhaps most importantly, we are concerned with a particular epistemological shift. We each want our students to transition their thinking about privilege from "oppressor/oppressed" and "more or less oppressed" to an intersectional, contextual, and relative framework.

For each of us, humility and vulnerability are closely tied to this epistemological shift. Thinking intersectionally means remaining open to the realization of additional identities and experiences; it also means coming to terms with one's own failure to account for certain identities and experiences. For many people, humility and vulnerability might represent their greatest challenge when taking on such activities. This kind of epistemological shift challenges educators' facilitation skills and can produce discomfort, as participants' worldviews and what they thought they knew may shift. Participants might experience discomfort when asked to "own" their intersectional positionality. Folks might feel overwhelmed by how much they are learning about themselves. They might examine how they are complicit in the oppression of others, and might feel scared about if and how they should change some of their behaviors and their beliefs about others. They might feel intimidated by being asked to hold a place for vulnerability, for being ready to take criticism, for knowing that they will make mistakes and will learn from them. They might feel confused by the paradox or dichotomy of being vulnerable to mistakes and yet open to the critique. Feelings of shame ("I'm a fundamentally bad person") and humiliation ("I've made a bad mistake") have the potential to shut down learners new to these conversations about oppression. Participants might seek a simple answer for how to be "good," and/or how to make sure everyone is being included.

Knowing about the possibility of all of these discomforting feelings, we think intentionally about the experience of our privilege activities as a place of possibility and productive vulnerability. We convey openly and intentionally that the experience is a journey and path, not just objective stuff to know, but a constant process of learning. We believe our activities encourage participants to detach from the idea of a "final" point or lesson not just about "not being an asshole" to individual people. Instead, we try to engage participants to look critically at the systems that inform and constrain our behaviors that result in and perpetuate systems of oppression. We try to offer possibilities and hope in the follow-up discussions. We think deliberately about how to help participants move beyond guilt toward actions that make liberatory impacts on systems. As facilitators, we publicly admit our own learning position within the activities we propose.

We as educators also engage intentionally in our own learning about the concepts of positionality and intersectionality as well as in personal reflection on our own implicit and explicit participation in others' oppression and liberation. For each of us, this epistemological shift is sourced from our engagements with various literatures, in fields including disability, Indigeneity, race, gender. We recommend texts including: intersectional knowledge (Taylor, 2017; Crenshaw, 1989; Hill, Collins, and Bilge, 2016; Cooper, 2018; Oluo, 2018); vulnerability in education (Brown, 2018; Palmer, 1997; Bertram and Crowley, 2012); (dis)ability as a facet of intersectional identity (Knoll, 2009; Erevelles and Minear, 2010); brave spaces and traumainformed teaching (Arao and Clemens, 2013; van der Kolk, 2014); and imagining within the academy (Tuck and Yang, 2012; paperson, 2017). These literatures help us think about intersectionality as a lived experience and not as a research methodology. We apply this approach to our learning spaces as we guide students to think intersectionally so they can understand any situation they encounter. We also think about our relationships with our learners and our role in guiding activities about privilege. We remain personally grounded in the activity. We do not have to know all of the answers. Thus, our role is to ask questions, orient students to the activity goal and process, and facilitate dialogue and understanding. We also trust students to engage to the best of their ability, help them choose courage over comfort, and guide them toward ethical behavior and lives that are aligned with their values.

Questions and Practices for Instructors to Consider

When organizing an activity that recognizes privilege and oppression, we recommend that instructors consider these questions:

- How can I activate participants' thinking not only towards various facets of positionality, but towards their interactions with each other?
- What are the identities I cannot "see," but to which I should turn participants' attention? Consider those who are undocumented/DACAmented, homeless, food insecure; those experiencing violence in their personal lives; those facing addiction, and who experience non-visible (dis)abilities.
- How can I encourage sustained interrogation of privilege and oppression, and individuals' places in these systems, across a long period of time (i.e., a semester)?
- How can I encourage students to think about oppressions as interlocking?
- How can I orient students towards thinking about privilege and oppression as they manifest in subtle, everyday ways?

 How do I locate *myself* and *my* positionality in activities and discussions? What are *my* feelings in reaction to being vulnerable about my experiences of privilege and oppression?

We invite other educators to share further examples and possibilities around how practitioners enact privilege activities, to share why they make certain choices based on context, positionality, and goals. We also invite dialogue about how we as a practitioner community can reveal, understand, establish the short- and long-term impacts -cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal outcomes -- of engagement in activities like these. We ask instructors in any discipline to consider how privilege is functioning in the lives of their students, how they are activating students' knowledge towards it, and how to do so in an intersectional, nuanced, and flexible way.

Notes

¹ At a 2015 public talk at Indiana University Bloomington at which they were all present, Ariane Cruz, Amber Musser, Kai M. Green, and C. Riley Snorton discussed how they favored the use of "positionality" rather than "identity" to locate social experience (and thus marginalizations and privileges experienced). We share an affinity for this term for its recognition that the power attached to factors such as race, gender, and class, shift across different contexts and in different combinations with one another.

² An interesting version of the privilege walk that is worth considering is one from the American Immigration Council (2016), which suggest an "immigration status privilege walk."

³ Daniela Gutiérrez López, personal communication, February 22, 2019.

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