College of Liberal Arts
Diversity and Inclusion Resource Module
Privilege and Oppression

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Introduction

The concept of privilege and its counterpart, oppression, are deeply ingrained in the structure of our society. Though they are vastly under explored and understood, they form the basis of our social hierarchy in America. This hierarchy is established through a process of social stratification, whereby we divide people into social strata or groups based on assigned or achieved traits. Each group occupies a position in society that provides particular access to resources and opportunities. Membership in groups with higher social standing bestows more power and privilege than those with lower standing, who often experience oppression.

The process of stratification normalizes privilege and oppression. This normalization means that many people do not have to reckon with the reality of how privilege and oppression shape the lived experiences and opportunities of social groups because their experiences are the norm against which everyone else is measured. For the privileged, normalization renders its existence, and implications, nearly invisible. Failing to recognize or acknowledge their salience in everyday life facilitates their continued perpetuation and may work in ways to make the implications of privilege and oppression more potent.

To learn about privilege and oppression in a learning environment in and of itself is a privilege. Yet, in order to fully understand privilege, we must grapple with how our privileges perpetuate the oppression of others. Given that we cannot challenge what we do not face, it is critical for instructors and students alike to deconstruct these concepts to identify how we may contribute to, benefit from, or be subject to their implications.

This module will provide resources to define what privilege and oppression are, how power is used to uphold them, ways we can identify them in our lives, and the type of social implications they hold for different social groups. This module is relevant because we are all impacted by, and contribute to, privilege and oppression in ways that are both conscious and subconscious. To make change, we need the opportunity to recognize it and the language for engaging it. With regards to diversity, these concepts shape people's lived experiences of race and ethnicity, gender identity, social class, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and language. Such social identities are grounded in privilege and oppression.

Outline

1. What is Privilege?
    a. Definition
        i. Privilege refers to any advantage that is unearned, exclusive, and socially conferred (Johnson 2013). It is **unearned** because it is readily available to people within certain social groups (i.e. people who are perceived to be white, wealthy, or abled-bodied). For example, when contacted by law enforcement, white people are perceived to be less threatening than their counterparts. This perception has less to do with who they are as individuals and everything to do with their membership in a group. It is **exclusive** because the advantages bestowed upon certain subgroups are limited to its members. When compared to men, women are perceived as less threatening. However, white women, in particular, are perceived as less threatening than black or Hispanic women, so the advantages here are limited in scope based on race and ethnicity. It is **socially conferred** because identities and traits are often socially constructed and employed. A person must be considered to be a woman based on socially constructed notions of womanhood and femininity if she is to be perceived as less threatening. http://www.agjohnson.us/glad/what-is-a-system-of-privilege/
    b. Privilege is a system.
        i. It governs social life by establishing a structure under which experiences are shaped. In this way, some experiences are more likely to happen for some and less for others. This system, like others, is not deterministic in that privilege invariably produces certain outcomes. Laws are never this simple. Privilege is more probabilistic in that it increases or decreases the probability of a particular outcome (i.e. advantage). Peggy McIntosh (1988) stated, "Privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they've done or failed to do. Access to privilege doesn't determine one's outcomes, but it is definitely as asset that makes it more likely that whatever talent, ability, and aspirations a person with privilege has will result in something positive for them." https://www.wcwonline.org/Publications-by-title/white-privilege-and-male-privilege-a-personal-account-of-coming-to-see-correspondences-through-work-in-women-s-studies-2
        ii. Privilege operates as a system and functions through three basic principles: dominance, identification, and centeredness (Johnson 2013).

Dominance means a certain group maintains a majority of power or control. **Identification** means that there is a standard or norm against which others are measured and that norm is perceived to be superior. **Centeredness** places that norm at the center of attention, upon which everything else revolves. For example, male privilege means that power is dominated by men, identified as masculine, and given preference to access resources and opportunities.
http://www.agjohnson.us/glad/what-is-a-system-of-privilege/

   c. Normalization of Privilege

      i. Power upholds privilege by setting norms within a system. Norms govern behavior and are the standard against which people are measured. Characteristics of people in power become the norm and members in society are judged based on those norms. Privilege is thereby normalized. For example, in American society being white is normative. People are encouraged to become 'normal' by integrating or assimilating into white culture and language. Normal becomes equivalent with good/right and anything that is considered to be abnormal is bad/wrong.

      ii. Social norms often become law. Law plays an important role in the perpetuation of privilege by ignoring that privilege exists, which makes it invisible.

   d. Invisible Knapsack

      i. In White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack, Peggy McIntosh (2003) argues that white people are taught not to recognize privilege. She perceives white privilege to be an invisible package of unearned assets that people can cash in every day. In this exchange, white people are, or are supposed to be, oblivious to the special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks they have access to. She goes on to identify 50 daily effects of white privilege to expose the ways in which white people benefit from their privilege.
https://nationalseedproject.org/Key-SEED-Texts/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack

2. What is Oppression?

   a. Definition

      i. A system that maintains advantage and disadvantage based on social group memberships and operates, intentionally and unintentionally, on individual, institutional, and cultural levels.

      ii. Johnson (2000) argues, "The concept of oppression points to social forces that tend to press upon people and hold them down, to hem them in and

block their pursuits of a good life. Just as privilege tends to open doors of opportunity, oppression tends to slam them shut."

    iii. According to the Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology, "Social oppression is a concept that describes a relationship between groups or categories of between groups or categories of people in which a dominant group benefits from the systematic abuse, exploitation, and injustice directed toward a subordinate group. The relationship between whites and blacks in the United States and South Africa, between social classes in many industrial societies, between men and women in most societies, between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland - all have elements of social oppression in that the organization of social life enables those who dominate to oppress others. Relationships between groups and relationships between groups and social categories, it should not be confused with the oppressive behavior of individuals. A white man may not himself actively participate in oppressive behavior directed at blacks or women, for example, but he nonetheless benefits from the general oppression of blacks and women simply because he is a white man. In this sense, all members of dominant and subordinate categories participate in social oppression regardless of their individual attitudes or behavior. Social oppression becomes institutionalized when its enforcement is so of social life that it is not easily identified as oppression and does not require conscious prejudice or overt acts of discrimination."

b. Marilyn Frye's Oppression (1983)

    i. Explaining oppression

        1. To be pressed is to be caught between or among forces which are so related to one another that they work together to restrain, restrict, or prevent motion or mobility of the object. To be pressed therefore is to be molded, immobilized, or reduced.

    ii. Double bind

        1. Frye argues that oppress people experience the double bind- situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, or deprivation. It is described as a damned if you do and damned if you don't situation because oppressed groups are confronted with two irreconcilable demands or a choice between two undesirable courses of action. There is no winning.

      iii.   Bird Cage

         1.   Frye argues that when we look at conditions from a micro perspective, it is difficult to identify oppression because the focus is on individual events. It is only when we take a macro-level, large-scale, view of conditions that we will see the network of forces and barriers that are systematically related. These forces immobile, reduce, and mold the oppressed.

         2.   She provides an example of a birdcage- the bars are individuals events and if we focus on examining one bar then we fail to see the other bars. We also question why that person or group doesn't just go around the bar and we begin to assign blame to their personal shortcomings. It is necessary to see the structure as a whole in order to understand how all of the bars work together to create a cage.

c. Young's Five Faces of Oppression (2004)

      i.   Exploitation

         1.   The structure of exploitation relies on the notion that some people have their power and wealth **because** they profit from the labors of others.

         2.   Exploitation enacts a structural relation between social groups. These relations are produced and reproduced through a systematic process in which the energies of the have-nots are continuously expended to maintain and augment the power, status, and wealth of the haves.

      ii.   Marginalization

         1.   The act of relegating a group of people to a lower social standing or outer limit or edge of society. It is a process of exclusion by creating a group of people that the labor system cannot or will not use (i.e. old people, physically or mentally disabled, etc.).

         2.   Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination.

      iii.   Powerlessness

         1.   The act of excluding people from participating in the making of decisions that affect their lives. The powerless are dominated by the ruling class in that they are situated to take orders but rarely have the right to give them.

2. According to Paulo Freire, oppressed people become so powerless that they do not even talk about their oppression, which creates a **culture of silence.**

3. Indoctrination amplifies the culture of silence. The oppressed are dehumanized and taught to believe the negative perceptions as fact. At this point, the oppressed aren't silent because they are forced to be; they are silent because they choose to be.

iv. Cultural Imperialism

1. The groups that have power in society control how the people in that society interpret and communicate. They project their experiences as representative of the society as a whole and neglect the experiences of others. Normalization of the dominant group's lifestyles.

2. Those who are oppressed by cultural imperialism are both marked by stereotypes and made to feel invisible. The stereotypes define what they can and cannot be.

v. Violence

1. Probably the most obvious and visible form of oppression.

2. The social context that perpetuates and legitimates violence against some but not all. Violence is used to intimidate and maintain dominance of the group in power.

3. These attacks do not necessarily need a motive but are intended to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person.

3. What is Power?
   a. Definition
      i. The ability to decide who will have access to what resources; the capacity to direct or influence the behavior of others, oneself, and/or the course of events.

      ii. People in power establish control through the spread of ideologies-beliefs, assumptions, and values- through social institutions such as schools, churches, courts, and the media, among others. These institutions socialize people into the norms, values, and beliefs of the dominant social group. As such, the group that controls these institutions controls the rest of society.

      iii. In American culture, power is used to uphold privilege through the use of norms, values, and language.

b. How is Power Used?
   i. Meritocracy
      1. An ideology that people advance or succeed in a society based on their individual merit. It is a social system in which personal effort/talent/abilities determines social standing. Success is based on merit and the failure to attain success is believed to be a result of individual shortcomings.
      2. A process in which we reward those who possess the resources to attain higher quality education based on their intellectual, financial, or physical merit. Reinforces social disparity between the haves and the have nots.
      3. Social inequality is therefore a result of lack of effort/talent/abilities. Justifies social inequality because there is a belief that everyone has an equal chance to succeed based on merit.
      4. Is an ideal because social standing has never been based solely on merit. Power is used to shape access to resources, reinforcing systems of privilege and oppression.
      5. Life experiences have less to do with individual ability and more to do with where/how you are positioned in society.
   ii. Social stratification
      1. A hierarchical process of ranking people into social groups that determine access to basic goods and services, such as food, clothing, shelter, education, and healthcare.
      2. Life chances are shaped by membership into certain groups.
      3. America has a **class system** of stratification, which is based on a combination of social factors and merit. A class is considered a group of people with shared status based on conditions of wealth, income, education, and occupation. Class systems are **open** in that people can move in and out or up and down between social classes.
      4. Power is used to socially construct norms and narratives that are associated with social groups (i.e. poor people are considered lazy based on the idea of meritocracy, and there no examination of structural constraints or social exclusion that have shaped their life experiences).

iii. Inequality
1. The unequal distribution of goods, services, power, and resources based on membership in social groups along the lines of race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, and religion.
2. Two types of inequality
   a. Conditions- unequal distribution of **income, wealth, and material goods** (i.e. access to housing, safety and investment within communities).
   b. Opportunities- unequal distribution of **life chances** (i.e. education, employment, and healthcare),
3. Inequality is supported and sustained by an ideology of meritocracy.

iv. Intersectionality
1. According to Merriam Webster, intersectionality is, "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups."
2. Kimberle Crenshaw who coined the term in 1989, describes intersectionality as a lens through which you can examine where power comes and collides, and how it interlocks and intersects based on identities.
https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf
3. Intersectionality reveals privilege and oppression by bringing attention to complex interaction of identities.

Annotated Bibliography for Instructors

Kimmel, M. S., Ferber, A. L., Kimmel, M. S., & Ferber, A. L. (2017). *Privilege: a reader* (4th ed.).
     Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

A collection of essays that take an intersectional examination of privilege using personal
narratives, critical intersectional analysis, and insightful deconstructions. Includes perspectives
from individuals who occupy superordinate groups in society. Collectively, the essays provide
an in-depth exploration of the dynamics of diversity and stratification, advantage, and power.
The reader is organized into several sections that guide the audience through seeing- and
refusing to see privilege, understanding privilege, the complicated reality of intersections, and
how to make new connections to move forward.

Johnson, A. G. (2001). The trouble we're in. In *Privilege, power, and difference, 2nd ed.* (pp. 15-
     41). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill Education. https://www.maryville.edu/wp-
     content/uploads/2017/05/Article-JohnsonTheTroubleWereIn-.pdf

This chapter examines privilege and the distribution of power. It addresses some common
misperceptions about fear and difference to explore who we are individually and where our
differences lie. It encourages us to think critically about how our identities shape our
experience and how the perceptions of who we are contingent on socially constructed notions
of what those identities mean. Johnson also explains privilege and employs McIntosh's
conceptualization of the Invisible Knapsack. Similar to McIntosh, he outlines ways in which
privilege plays out in our everyday, but extends his list to include, race, gender, and sexual
orientation.

Young, I. M. (2014). Five faces of oppression. In Asumah, S. N. (Ed.), *Diversity, social justice, and
     inclusive excellence: transdisciplinary and global perspectives*. Albany: State University of
     New York Press. https://www.sunypress.edu/pdf/62970.pdf

This article sheds light on oppression and how it is perpetrated. Young refutes the idea that
oppression only occurs under tyranny. She argues that oppression is often the result of a few
people's decisions that lead to norms and values that become embedded in society. She
identifies five "faces" or types of oppression, which include violence, exploitation,
marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism.

Kashtan, M. (2019). Why and how facing your privilege can be liberating. Understanding and Dismantling Privilege, Vol. 9 (1), pp. 22-30. https://www.wpcjournal.com/article/view/18303

This article addressing the discomfort in acknowledging privilege and identifies four positive and four negative ways that privilege is generally engaged. The negative ways include denial, guilt, defensiveness, and entitlement. The positive ways include owning, learning about privilege, being open to receive feedback, and stewarding privilege for the benefit of all. She concludes by discussing the necessary and unnecessary levels of discomfort.

Castania, K., Alston-Mills, B., & M. Whittington-Couse. (2017) Examining privilege: An effective strategy for overcoming resistance in a power and oppression workshop. Understanding and Dismantling Privilege, Vol. 7 (1), pp. 20-30. http://www.wpcjournal.com/article/view/17208

This article provides an overview of and suggestions for a workshop on power, oppression, and difference. It employs strategies to overcome participant resistance in identifying their privilege. Participants engage in reflection and dialogue as members of a dominant group and as members of an excluded group. They are tasked to discuss examples of privilege and oppression and how it feels to be members in each group.

Annotated Bibliography for Students

Frye, M. (1983). Oppression. In The politics of reality: Essays in feminist theory (pp. 1-16). New York, NY: Crossing Press.
http://www.filosoficas.unam.mx/docs/327/files/Marilyn%20Frye,%20Oppression.pdf

This chapter discusses oppression as a social construct and attempts to distinguish it from everyday experiences of human suffering or limitation. She deconstructs the definition of oppression and provides figurative and literal examples to assist the reader in understanding oppression as a structural concept. She explains how double binds make it difficult to observe oppression because of the culture of silence, and how the examination of a birdcage can be used to understand oppression from a macro perspective.

Young, I. M. (2014). Five faces of oppression. In Asumah, S. N. (Ed.), *Diversity, social justice, and inclusive excellence: transdisciplinary and global perspectives*. Albany: State University of New York Press. https://www.sunypress.edu/pdf/62970.pdf

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McIntosh, P. (2003). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. In S. Plous (Ed.), Understanding prejudice and discrimination (pp. 191–196). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mcintosh.pdf

This article addresses the invisibility of white privilege by identifying 50 everyday ways that white people benefit from privilege. McIntosh perceives white privilege to be an invisible package of unearned assets that people can cash in every day. In this exchange, white people are, or are supposed to be, oblivious to the special provisions that they have access to. These goods and services include maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.

Kashtan, M. (2019). Why and how facing your privilege can be liberating. Understanding and Dismantling Privilege, Vol. 9 (1), pp. 22-30.
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Suggested Activities

1. **Privilege for Sale**

   Instructions copied from the website:

   https://www.socialjusticetoolbox.com/activity/privilege-for-sale/

   a. Materials & Media:
      i. Participant handouts
      ii. (optional) writing implement
      iii. Scrap paper for money amounts for groups
   b. Set Up:
      i. Write amounts of money to give to the different groups on pieces of scrap paper. The amounts should differ (300, 500, 700, 900, 1100) and ideally are not divisible by the # of people in the group.
   c. Goals & Learning Outcomes:
      i. For participants to realize what privileges they may not realize they have and/or take for granted
      ii. For participants to recognize that privilege is not only a legal construct but also social, religious, economical and so on
      iii. For participants to see how their personal perspective, life situation, etc. influence the types of choices they make
   d. Process Steps & Talking Points:
      i. Explain that we are about to do a group activity and have participants get into groups of 3-5.
      ii. Once in their groups frame the activity.
      iii. "For the purposes of this activity, you do not have any of these privileges. Your group will have an amount of money and collectively you have to decide which privileges you'd like to buy. Again, your group is going to get an amount of money and you have to decide together what from the list you're going to purchase. I'll come around in a moment with your money, each privilege costs $100."
      iv. Pass out the privilege sheets
      v. Pass out slips of paper with the amount of money written on them.
      vi. Check in with each group to see if they have any questions about the directions.
      vii. Give participants approximately 5 minutes to pick privileges. Let them know when they have two minutes left.
      viii. Wrap up the activity and bring the participants back to process with the larger group.

e. Debrief/Process Questions:
   i. What was it like to do this activity?
   ii. What questions did you all wrestle with when trying to make this decision as a group?
   iii. What struck you about the list?
   iv. What themes did you notice in the list?
   v. What was the process like deciding as a group? What do you think the value of doing this activity in groups was?
   vi. Why do you think I gave you money to buy the privileges with rather than say like every privilege costs a token and you get a certain number of tokens as a group?
   vii. What are you taking away from this activity?
f. Wrap Up:
   i. Feel free to share back with the group some of the themes that you noticed in the discussion or wrap up by connecting the activity back to the large conversation you were having about privilege.
g. Co-Facilitator Notes:
   i. If you both have different things or focal points that you get out of the activity then it would be great to focus your wrap up and contributions on those different things.
h. Bring Your Style:
   i. This activity is very adaptable and can easily be focused for the group that you are working with. If you are working with athletes you could talk about privilege of feeling comfortable changing in locker rooms without the worry of others thinking that you are attracted to them or the privilege of talking openly about your sexuality with your teammates. The more focused that you can make the activity for the group you are working with the better.

2. **Connecting to Privilege and Oppression: A Pedagogy for Social Justice**
   http://jfmueller.faculty.noctrl.edu/crow/connectingtooppressionandprivilege.doc
   The link above provides a document that describes and provides instructions on facilitating four exercises that build upon one another to acknowledge privilege and oppression. These exercises expose students to their intersecting identities and how they can experience both privilege and oppression based on their social locations. It includes Patricia Hill Collins' **Matrix of Domination**, which is a really useful exercise to demonstrate intersectionality and how it may impede mobility.

Media Resources

1. Essays
   a. Privilege by Kyle Korver- essay https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/kyle-korver-utah-jazz-nba
   b. The culture of power by Paul Kivel- essay
   c. http://paulkivel.com/resource/the-culture-of-power/
2. Videos/Films
   a. The Pathology of White Privilege, by Tim Wise- speech
      https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4mVaLvpsXs&feature=youtu.be
   b. Between the Scenes with Trevor Noah- using humor to address meritocracy
      http://www.cc.com/video-clips/mygxnu/the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah-between-the-scenes---the-college-bribery-scam-and-america-s-so-called-meritocracy
   c. Power, Privilege, and Oppression- an animation to explain concepts
      https://youtu.be/LTDikx-maoM
   d. Mirrors of Privilege: Making Whiteness Visible- film
      https://www.radioproject.org/2017/08/mirrors-privilege-making-whiteness-visible-encore-edition
3. Exercises/Resources
   1. The GLSEN Jumpstart Guide to Examining Power, Privilege, and Oppression- handout of exercises
      https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/Jump%20Start%20Guide%20Part%205_1.pdf
   2. It's pronounced Metrosexual- website full of resources/exercises
      https://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/
      a. You Soup: Understanding Diversity and the Intersections of Identity
         https://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/10/individual-difference-and-group-similiarity/
      b. 30 Examples of CisGender Privileges
         https://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2011/11/list-of-cisgender-privileges/
      c. 30 Examples of Male Privileges
         https://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/11/30-examples-of-male-privilege/
      d. 30 Examples of Heterosexual Privileges
         https://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/01/29-examples-of-heterosexual-privilege/

e. 30 Examples of Christian Privileges
   https://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/05/list-of-examples-of-christian-privileg/

Tips and Pitfalls

Set the stage- Prepare students on what to expect with this topic. Prepare them for the discomfort and encourage them to keep an honest and open mind throughout. Explain that this topic is uncomfortable because we have chosen to ignore it and or because we are in denial about its existence. Provide them with an outline of what will be expected of them and allow an opportunity for them to ask questions or express concerns before proceeding. It always helps to lead by example, so set the stage using personal stories of your own.

Be transparent with what you know and don't know- Be honest with yourself and your students about your level of expertise in this area. It is acceptable to admit that you are learning right along with them and that each of you have experiences and observations to contribute to the learning process. Remind them and yourself that you are a facilitator and not an expert and that you will do your best to address any concerns or questions that arise.

The Vegas Rule- Emphasize that what is shared during the course is private and confidential. Students can talk about how the discussion affected them personally and what they learned generally, but they should respect the privacy of the personal information of the other students. In other words, **the learning leaves but the names and stories stay.**

Set communal agreements- Identify a handful of agreements that the class can adhere to when discussing difficult topics to ensure a safe space for learning. Common agreements include:
   A. Respect (may be useful to create a working definition of respect for the class).
   B. Using "I" statements- be the expert of your own experience without generalizing to a larger group.
   C. One voice, all ears- one person speaks at a time.
   D. The Vegas rule- Each participant within the community needs to feel that he/she can trust that what is shared with peers will not be shared outside of the group.

Be okay with silence- Leave space for processing during and after discussions or exercises. Encourage students to process and reflect on learning both inside and outside of the space. Create space for silent reflection, which may or may not be followed by journaling.