# THE CORNER

## DAVID EPSTON

# THE PRIVILEGE PROJECT: A NARRATIVE APPROACH FOR TEACHING SOCIAL JUSTICE AND MULTICULTURAL AWARENESS

SHAWN PATRICK
COLLEEN M. CONNOLLY
Texas State University

*The Privilege Project is a narrative-based teaching approach that targets concepts and practices related to privilege. Students enrolled in a graduate-level counseling course engaged in written reflections and group discussions in response to a nine-part Privilege Project assignment. Examination of the Project suggests that students increased their knowledge and awareness of privilege, better understood the creation and perpetuation of privilege, and enhanced their recognition of the effects of power and dominance on groups experiencing less privilege.*

The Privilege Project was developed for use in classroom settings to meet the needs and requirements of more effective social justice education (Patrick, 2008). Initially, the Dulwich Centre posted online *An Invitation to Narrative Practitioners to Address Privilege and Dominance* (Raheim et al., n.d.), which was a call to engage in deeper, potentially more difficult discussions about oppression and privilege. The posting resulted from a discussion held by several narrative practitioners who then created questions to try to address the effects of privilege in each others' lives. I (Patrick) obtained permission from this group to transform the document into an assignment for students in a graduate Counseling Diverse Populations course. The purpose of this article is to provide information about the Project and demonstrate the ways in which it expanded student conversation and awareness on matters of privilege and social justice.

Address correspondence to Shawn Patrick, Counseling Leadership, Adult Education, and School Psychology Department, Texas State University, 601 University Dr., San Marcos, TX 78666. E-mail: sp27@txstate.edu

70

As someone who has taught courses on diversity for counseling programs for several years, I found myself at a loss as how to best facilitate discussions that often faced many challenges. One of these challenges included the course being many students' first introduction to issues of power and oppression, and they often experienced a myriad of reactions to these concepts. Students reflective of dominant culture (i.e., White, heterosexual) sometimes expressed anger or defensiveness when being asked to think about racism and their own possible contributions to racism. Students of color sometimes expressed concern about addressing these issues in a group for fear of having their experiences marginalized or being seen as the "spokesperson" for a particular cultural group. And some students wanted to avoid the conversation altogether, challenging that racism no longer existed in this "post-racial" society. At the core of these reactions seemed to be the fear that each person would discover him- or herself to be a hidden "racist," a vision that was clearly difficult to come to terms with.

However, when it did occur that we engaged in sincere, open conversations about our experiences around race, culture, and privilege, everyone expressed receiving great benefit at understanding these influences in their lives, even if it meant enduring initially anxious or uncomfortable feelings. Experiences such as these compelled me to find a method for facilitating a different kind of conversation about power and privilege for an academic setting. It also became important to understand what effect this kind of conversation would have on those engaged in it.

A narrative approach, which we will detail below, seemed to offer many strategies for engaging in conversations that would examine the important meanings, values, and lessons of students' lives while potentially mitigating some of the challenges inherent in conversations about privilege and oppression. Initially, narrative approaches contend that people live and experience a "storied" life (White & Epston, 1990). These stories are influenced by multiple sources of experience, especially dominant social discourses. If, for example, discourse supporting the superiority of one race over another becomes the dominant story for an individual or group, this story then shapes thoughts, behaviors, expectations, and consequent interactions. Privilege enters the story as an entity that defines who should be the recipient of greater benefits, as well as what those more privileged will be entitled to.

For example, who can marry, and more importantly who cannot, has come under increased scrutiny in the media, on the streets, and in the court system. So looking at the issue of "marriage" is a timely and important issue. Heterosexuals in the United States have long been afforded the right to marry; this privilege communicates that heterosexual marriage is considered the norm, and thus heterosexuals can display their marital status (e.g., wedding rings, photos, marriage licenses) publicly and without fear of recrimination. People in heterosexual marriages can freely and safely use terms such as "husband" and "wife" without fear of reproach, while also receiving workplace and government benefits outlined in law and policy.

Conversely, dominant stories also will define who should have less privilege, and what the social consequences will be to those who attempt to deviate from

these expectations. From the preceding example, same-sex marriages are banned in many states across the United States; here privilege, or the removal of said privilege, conveys that same-sex relationships are not considered the "norm" and therefore are aberrations of relationships. People in same-sex relationships are constrained in the use of language around who might be referred to as a "spouse," and in many cases denied benefits and legal status, thus limiting access to resources their heterosexual counterparts freely experience. This example demonstrates how narrative philosophy is positioned in a way that incorporates recognition of privilege and power as forces that shape each person's story (Kerl, 2002). The person in a heterosexual marriage, having the choice to marry, is privileged in not having to question what impact this choice has on her or his understanding of self; however, when the person in a same-sex relationship is denied the choice, it is a constant reminder of being placed in a lesser societal position. These experiences ultimately play into how these people understand their own stories and relationships formed in relation to these stories.

The Privilege Project engages students in the narrative process of *Externalization* (White & Epston, 1990). This process involves redefining the problem from being an internal, inherent trait to an external influencing force or entity. In other words, the person is not seen as the problem, rather the problem itself is seen as the problem. When a problem is externalized in this manner, people are then able to examine the ways in which this problem has influenced their lives, and conversely how they influence the problem. In relation to the experience of privilege, the process of externalization shifts the location of the problem from "I am privileged or not" to "this thing we call Privilege influences my life and the lives of those around me."

Externalization allows students to consider "privilege" as a dominant social discourse that influences everyone in society, including themselves. It does not target individuals. Thus "privilege" can be examined from a stance of curiosity, exploration, and understanding, rather than defending oneself against others' claims or guilt. It should be noted that externalization is not the same as placing blame on others, represented as "others need to deal with privilege, not me." Rather, "privilege" becomes something that has had varied and complex influences in relation to a person's life, thus affecting how that person views self and others, and in particular the ways in which people from different cultural groups interact.

By externalizing privilege, students can deconstruct privilege and take a stance in relation to it (White, 2007). Through this process, students discover how "privilege" influences them, and also how they have influenced or might influence "privilege." In such a conversation when employing the manner of speaking referred to as "external-izing conversations," students can more readily and easily locate and acknowledge the negative ways "privilege" has affected their lives, and at the same time recognize some of the benefits it has bestowed, along with ways they may have profited by such benefits. Externalizing conversations then engage students in deciding how they would like to continue to interact with "privilege," given what they have learned about its effects, not only on themselves but also on others. Some professionals have

criticized current approaches of teaching multicultural education because they can alienate students of color while augmenting the discomfort of students from the dominant society (Reynolds, 1995). However, the approach of externalizing privilege allows members from dominant and nondominant groups to enter the conversation together, rather than giving preeminence only to the experience of a less-privileged group while the more-privileged group sits, listens, and takes it in.

## THE PROJECT

The Privilege Project (see Table 1) was composed of nine writing sections, similar to a structured weekly journal assignment. Each section included some basic introductory explanation of the section along with specific discussion questions. Students responded to one section each week; their writings for each section were then compiled by the instructor/teaching assistant and presented back to the class the following class period. Given that this was conducted in an academic environment, certain precautions were implemented to promote students' safety and encourage writing of potentially divergent responses. Thus, student names and any identifying information were removed from their writings so students would be unaware of who was responsible for which response. Students were then broken into groups in class to discuss the responses and their reactions to the responses. After these small group discussions, the class reconvened to process their findings as a large group.

The Project was introduced during the first class meeting of the semester, and "privilege" was defined in the document as:

> . . . the word 'privilege' is used in a particular way to describe unearned rights, benefits, immunity and favors that are bestowed on individuals and groups solely on the basis of their race, culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability or other key characteristics. . . . It is important to acknowledge that some of us experience privilege in a wide range of domains (e.g., White, professional heterosexual men experience privilege in relation to race, class, gender and sexual orientation), while others may experience privilege in very few, if any, domains of life. Responsibilities for addressing privilege are therefore not equal. (Raheim et al., n.d.)

This definition is consistent with other conceptualizations of privilege that emphasize unmerited benefits bestowed upon certain groups simply due to factors like gender, skin color, etc. (McIntosh, 2012; Sue & Sue, 2008). Students completed one section of the Project per week, and each student submitted a final summary paper at the end of the semester.

It should be noted that I (Patrick) spent approximately three semesters using the Project in classes prior to trying to evaluate the Project's effects on students. This time was spent becoming familiar with the Project as a teaching device and also developing a method of classroom delivery that would serve the needs of the course and the students. Although it seemed that students were engaging in more

**TABLE 1.  Privilege Project Sections**

| Section | Main Heading | Sample Questions |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | An invitation to talk about privilege | • How does privilege influence our work as therapists and community workers?<br>• How can we notice the ways in which we inadvertently enact privilege in our work? |
| 2 | Why is talking about privilege important? | • Are any of these above restraints relevant in your situation? If so, which ones?<br>• Have you slipped into some of these practices at times in the past? |
| 3 | What sustains us in talking about privilege? | • If your main interest [in exploring privilege] relates to being in this class, what other people, experiences, or histories would take your interest beyond this class?<br>• Would you say that you have a commitment to look at these issues? If so, what would you call this commitment? |
| 4 | Identifying our own privileges | How might your experience as a White person differ from the experience of a person of color in: (a) applying for a job? (b) passing police on the street? (c) preparing your child to go to school for the first time? |
| 5 | Focusing on White privilege: The values of our ancestors; Appreciating cultures | • Please name or describe one of your ancestors who came to the United States as settlers OR if your ancestor did not come as settlers, under what circumstances did your ancestor arrive in the U.S.?<br>• Please think of the sorts of values that they brought to this land and name these.<br>• What are the things you treasure and appreciate about your own cultural heritage? Why is this important to you? |
| 6 | Developing knowledge and skills about recognizing and responding to our privilege | • How, where, and from whom did you learn about how [male] privilege shapes your life?<br>• How, where, and from whom did you learn about the ways you inadvertently enact [heterosexual] privilege?<br>• In what ways will privilege be enacted in our personal relationships, in our workplace, in our counseling and/or community work? |
| 7 | Responding to other therapists and community workers | • If you see a member of your own social grouping replicating dominance . . . what is your immediate response?<br>• In these situations, what might be the forces at play that encourage us not to say anything or to "go along" with it? |

| 8 | Unpacking shame and guilt; Identifying values | • In relation to these ideas about privilege, what have you felt ashamed, guilty, angry, or sad about?<br>• . . . this shame and guilt represent certain values that you feel you have let down, that you have strayed from. What values do you think you have strayed from? |
| 9 | Next steps | • What will be the next steps of learning more about matters of power and privilege?<br>• Whom will you be linked with in these next steps? |

See http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/privilege.htm for full document.

useful conversations and describing a productive process, it became important to understand what kind of influence the Project was actually having. Thus, we developed the method described above to gather more information about what students were learning and writing about in these assignments. For example, to remove the potential influence of wanting to appear "politically correct," we removed students' names from their responses. Since Patrick taught the course, I (Connolly) examined the writings for themes and commonalities to reduce possible instructor bias. Thus, this format for delivering the Project included the purpose of assessing the Project itself; instructors wanting to use the Project can adapt the format to suit the needs of their courses in many other possible ways. For example, the Project has been converted into a seven-part course, it has been used as a vehicle for only in-class discussion, and it has also been used as an online discussion format.

After compiling and examining student writings, we found students were writing about aspects of privilege and its effects on their lives in ways that had not been seen in previous courses. In other words, students were engaging the topic sooner and in greater depth than what had been encountered before using the Project. Findings for each section and the overall Project are provided below.

### Section 1: An Invitation to Talk About Privilege

The first section of the Privilege Project gave an introduction to the concept of *privilege*. Students were asked to consider why this topic might be important to them, particularly as future mental health workers. They were also asked to consider how they might respond when they see privilege enacted in different aspects of their lives, like work, home, and so on. This section was completed the very first week of the course, at a time when most students reported little previous exposure to the topic of privilege.

We found themes indicating students believed an understanding of privilege was important in a general sense, but the actual notion of privilege remained obscure. "Privilege is something that I have never really taken a close look at or considered

to have an influence on how I do my job." Challenges with recognizing privilege were identified; for instance, "Being aware of Privilege is important, but I don't know what it is, what it looks like, or how it affects me." Some students had an awareness of privilege and recognized that they "should do something about it, but [they] have no idea what that is." "Privilege is something that I have never really taken a close look at or considered to have an influence on how I do my job." Several students indicated this class was their first time considering this subject matter.

When asked how they could respond when privilege was enacted, students often reflected that if they understood and could "identify" privilege, they should take action to do something in relation to it. "When inadvertent privilege is enacted, we must recognize it immediately and right it." Some students understood basic skills such as we must "listen to our clients." Others understood in deeper ways:

> When we are experiencing feelings of superiority, fear, judgment or elicit it in others, it is a good time to stop and reflect. When we notice others distancing [we must pay] attention to what is being said to us, even when said with humor or a smile as a cover.

However at this point, most students reflected what they considered to be their limitations in both possessing knowledge and ability to respond due to difficulties in identifying acts of oppression and in understanding how they might be a part of the problem and/or solution.

### Section 2: Restraints to Talking About Privilege

Section 2 provided a list of 15 possible "restraints," identified as feelings, beliefs, or situations that tended to impede communication about privilege. Descriptions of these restraints were provided and students were also invited to offer their own examples. Students identified which restraints they had previously or currently engaged in and could identify multiple restraints. Including all restraints and their definitions is too extensive to provide here, but some examples include: (a) making things equivalent: equating the problems experienced by those with more privilege as the same as those with less privilege, (b) talking isn't enough: feeling as though talking does nothing and needing to act, yet not knowing what to do, (c) individualism: seeing ourselves only as individuals and not connected to particular groups, and (d) heroic accounts: telling stories of how we have "rescued" others, in the hopes of making ourselves appear more positive or aware.

Students identified using the restraint of *Individualism* the most: "Before this study I had never thought about the groups of privilege that I am a part of" to "[I] maintained that I am not connected to or responsible for a situation just because I am a member of several privileged groups (able-bodied, intelligent, attractive, heterosexual, White, educated, and female). I failed to take responsibility for being part of these broader collective groups and the effect they have on our society

and its individuals." *Talking isn't enough* was the next most commonly identified restraint: "I think in being a quiet person it is hard for me to take a stand when I see things that I know are offensive"; along with *Heroic accounts*: "People would rather contribute to the conversation by providing a 'heroic account' in order to portray themselves in a good light, rather than examine their own mistakes." Students also frequently noted *Dividing from others* (focusing on someone else's bad behavior rather than examining my own): "I have also pointed out how others are 'worse' than I am. I may point out the extreme and/or overt actions of others in an attempt to make myself feel better and less responsible for a situation" and *Avoiding talking about it* (if I talk about it, it will divide us and make the problem worse): "I feel it is 'easier' to avoid what I envision will turn into an argument."

Regardless of restraint identified, students were able to recognize the kinds of devices they had employed or participated in to circumvent discussions related to privilege. Students seemed to recognize how these restraints helped them to absolve themselves of personal responsibility in relation to their own enactments of privilege: "Even right now as I type this, I can see how this attitude serves me . . . if I feel helpless to change or influence such strong dominant forces, well then, that conveniently excuses me from doing anything at all, now doesn't it?" Because they could identify how they had gone away from the conversation, they could now begin to develop new ways of bringing the conversation back.

### Section 3: Sustaining Talk About Privilege

Section 3 asks students to examine their level of interest in examining privilege and identifying sources of strength and commitment to learning more. When students answered why they were interested in exploring issues related to privilege, they stated it was the class assignment that initially motivated their interest: "I believe, shamefully, that I've been ignorant to the entire concept of privilege until this class." Many students acknowledged that this course was their first contact with material related to privilege concepts, and some students introduced the point that perhaps this prior lack of awareness was actually an expression of privilege. "Before this . . . I didn't think much about my personal affiliation with privilege. . . . You don't think about things that you have—you think about things that you don't have."

Students also were asked to identify possible hopes resulting from making a commitment to talk about privilege, and to provide a name for this hope. Students created such names as "Tolerance," "Super Hope," "Gumption," and "Dedication." When examining the history of their "Tolerance," "Super Hope," etc., students expressed their need for hope in pursuing this discussion: "Hope is why we get out of bed in the morning" and "[I believe] people are good and can change." Hope also was linked to future endeavors, such as to their eventual work as a professional counselor, to raising their children, or to providing benefit to society in general. Another student commented:

> I hope to be better able to reach certain populations and help them feel more comfortable with me. I think it will make me better at my job and be better equipped to help more people. It will help me understand people better, and more importantly, myself and my own biases.

Another theme related to sources of hope referred to other people or experiences that instilled hope in them. For some, a hope for change resulted from witnessing or experiencing "injustices." For others, people and events "inspired" hope with specific people being named, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Others described seeing people's "humanitarian efforts [in response to] natural disasters, [where] people from all over the world rallied together to help the victims. . . . [I]t didn't matter how rich or poor these people were or what their skin color was, all that mattered was that there were people who needed help."

### Section 4: Identifying One's Levels of Privilege

This section presented seven different scenarios in which students were asked to make a comparison between one's current experience and the anticipated experience of someone who is of a different race, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, socioeconomic status, or religion. Identifying similar themes across all responses was difficult due to a high variability in responses. In classroom discussion about the compiled responses, students addressed how difficult it was for many of them to answer the questions in each scenario due to a lack of factual knowledge or experience. For example, one scenario asked students to consider how being a member of the indigenous population might affect how they access resources for dealing with grief. Many students had never thought about grief being culturally influenced or that the models of grief taught in courses might reflect only one tradition of grieving. Students also struggled with the term "indigenous" and whom it referred to. Themes reflected the ways in which students attempted to make sense of what they did not know. For instance, when responding about having an advantage by being White, one student's justification was "If I insult a Latino by teasing their lack of English skills, it's 'okay' because they're in America and should speak our language . . . I've never done that. . . . I've thought it before, and I realize now that's just as wrong and just as racist. I take a lot for granted in just walking down the street."

Other themes reflected an awareness of how this lack of knowledge of manifestations of privilege likely contributed to their own expressions of bias or discrimination. For example, one student expressed that the experience of attending a parent-teacher night as a professional wage earner might differ from that of someone who is unemployed by way of "more respect from the teacher, assumed intelligence," and assumptions that the wage earner is a more "competent parent, mature, responsible" than someone unemployed. Another instance of bias related to sexual orientation is as follows:

[As a heterosexual person] I would not expect to get a judging look or stare for hold-
ing hands or other PDAs [public displays of affection, . . . whereas same-sex couples]
would have to worry about this and feel uncomfortable about something that everyone
should enjoy. I myself am guilty of giving such looks. In doing this assignment I have
become more aware of that, and am learning to watch my reactions.

### Section 5: The Values of Our Ancestors and Appreciation of Other Cultures

Students first identified an ancestor who came to the United States either by choice
or by force and answered a series of questions related to what this ancestor may
have brought forward in values, traditions, expectations, aspirations, and so on.
Students then speculated on how the values of indigenous populations may have
been subjugated by other groups that came to "claim" the country. The experience
of exploring ancestry appears to have been the most salient feature for students
engaged in this part of the Project.

The initial questions of this section asked students to consider why this ancestor
may have migrated to the United States, and what traditions or values that person
passed on. Although several students indicated not knowing who this ancestor
was, many were motivated to talk to other family members or utilize websites
like Ancestor.com to identify this person. Some students initiated conversations
with extended family to learn more about family stories related to migration and
expectations, and in many cases found new information. Students expressed how
meaningful it was for them to examine their current values in the context of their
ancestry and migration experiences. Many students shared an increase in under-
standing as to why certain values had become "important" in their own families,
even recognizing that while some values initially might have developed as a means
for "survival," through time they morphed into expressions of bigotry or racism.
For some White students, these values also became the basis for creating an un-
derstanding of a White identity.

Since these explorations resulted in identification and development of the values
that mattered to their families, students could then examine if their current actions
and beliefs lived up to these values, or if these values had changed into something
else completely. A theme that became apparent was the recognition of how devel-
opment of their values emerged as a result of family "choices." Once the history of
values was explored, some students recognized they had an informed choice about
which values they would "continue" to adhere to and which values they would
no longer maintain. Others discussed how a value that had become distorted over
time could now be restored and even reflect their desired value of equality. Thus,
when examining the history of migration in the United States and how this related
to the subjugation of indigenous cultures, students could better understand how
values of different cultures clashed. Students recognized the "damage" associated
with subjugating the values and traditions of nondominant cultural groups and

began to realize that no one set of values maintains superiority over another set, as described in this passage:

> We must own [our heritage] and not let White dominance minimize it. I did this for years because I had no one tell me differently. I was raised in a White dominant household after my parents died and almost lost the influence of my mother's culture on my life. I was made to believe my mother lived a subordinate life. We do not ever need to be ashamed of where we came from culturally. It is who we are.

## Section 6: Recognizing and Responding to Privilege

Students identified which aspects of "privilege" manifested in their own lives, such as White privilege, male privilege, heterosexual privilege, etc. Themes of recognition, understanding, and acknowledgment emerged:

> I learned the majority of my female behavior from my mother, but she died when I was young. At that point I began to search for what I would become. I have journeyed through life focusing my sights on the behavior of females I wish to emulate in different ways: spirit of independence, intellectually, fashion sense, poise, relationally—in the workplace and in their families, how personal values were exemplified. Over the decades I have found these women in school, church, neighborhoods, and work as well as through friends and family fully aware that being female offers unique privilege, but can have societal limits when compared with aspects of male privilege.

Students also identified how easily privilege was enacted in situations where they felt "most comfortable and powerful." In particular, enactment of privilege allowed students to ignore differences between themselves and people from less privileged groups. Students expressed how "privilege" existed because they could exercise their ability to simply not see it, thus reinforcing privilege in situations where they wanted to assume some advantage over another and make sure their rights were respected or taken care of—even it if meant ignoring the rights of someone else. "I think we enact privilege when we know that it will get us ahead. Rather than doing it the right way we may use privilege because it is faster."

Another theme that emerged was the acknowledgment of the severity of consequences inflicted when someone attempted to challenge these norms. For example, a male student wrote about how he had confronted sexist attitudes expressed by a group of other men. By challenging the privileged attitudes, he was ridiculed, accused of being "gay," and "an individual joked that [this counseling student] must've been castrated at a young age."

## Section 7: Responding to Other Therapists and Community Workers

Section 7 focuses on developing methods of responding to others when observing the replication of dominance and privilege, with an emphasis on work environments.

Students wrote about how they had and would like to respond when seeing others engaging in oppressive acts. Themes emerged of feeling "angry," "uncomfortable," and "afraid" when witnessing such enactments and how these feelings hindered their ability to respond. Students also commented on the complexities of responding in different contexts. For example, "If the oppression occurs in a situation with people I esteem, whose opinions…are personally valuable, [then] it's much more difficult to 'rock the boat' with someone that I admire than with a complete stranger."

What emerged clearly was a general theme of all concerned wanting to do something about privilege. "I would now like to act more culturally responsible." Some mentioned having "used this class as a way of getting the ball rolling, and opening the discussion with others." Some students referred to having talked with "coworkers, friends, and family about what I am learning in my diversity class that really has helped me to understand the ways I have personally oppressed groups."

Students recognized and confronted privilege in different ways. "Lately, I have noticed racist, homophobic, and sexist jokes and attitudes a lot more than I did before this project and class. So the way that I react now is slightly different or at least occurs more frequently." Another student described:

> It was scary to speak up at first. I was more diplomatic in the beginning. Once I got comfortable, the anger got going. I would like to work on being more diplomatic. Sometimes however, anger is the right thing to do. The images that come up depend on the situation, but are usually seeing my loved ones' faces in a situation they were treated badly, or were expressing their fears to me.

Comfort in communication was context dependent. "If I am with family or my closest friends I probe for clarity because I really want to know where 'that comment' came from. I've been the target of similar comments and I have felt oppressed when hearing comments from not only professionals but family and friends."

Yet for work environments, "when you voice your opinion and speak out you put your job at risk," especially if the person demonstrating dominance is a "person in some sort of authority," such as a supervisor or employer. So risk to self and others played a role in taking action. Two important exceptions were reported. "I think a lot of the forces that are encouraging me not to say something are my personal safety and safety of my family." It was not a fear of "people liking me or not, but I'm afraid they may try to sabotage my job or harm me or my family." A second exception was population-specific and based on "stubbornness at accepting the GLBT population. I can commit to stopping racial remarks and trying to educate my peers about their jokes or comments, but it will be some time before I could chastise someone for provoking a homosexual person."

## Section 8: Unpacking Shame and Guilt

Students reflected upon feelings and times they might be feeling ashamed, guilty, and/or sad in relation to experiences with "privilege." Almost all students identified

guilt, shame, or sadness around realizing they had personally enacted privilege and thus engaged in some form of oppression in the past. Increased awareness regarding feelings of shame included, "I feel ashamed of the fact that I never knew some of my actions and mannerisms were offensive to other people's race, ethnicity and orientation." Another wrote: "I feel ashamed that I have harmed other people around such a core right—to be seen, valued and respected."

With respect to guilt, students shifted in their awareness and recognition of being an active participant in perpetuating the problem. "I feel guilty that prior to this class, I did not even realize how I have enacted privilege in my life, and did not even consider how I have been hurting so many people." Another commented, "I feel guilty in knowing that I have personally perpetuated the problem by telling or laughing at racist jokes, looking at people differently because of their skin color, assuming something about their intelligence, class, wealth, intentions based on their color."

Students related feelings of sadness in a variety of ways: "I am sad because I had no idea I was 'that kind' of person who could be so ignorant and thoughtless about others"; "I feel sad that I am just now beginning to understand the extent to which I have hurt others, even though I didn't want to." Not all students expressed guilt or shame, with a few relating, "I do not so much feel ashamed or guilty at this point. This many weeks into the class I feel that I have already passed through a phase of feeling these types of feelings. They are mostly sadness at this point. The sadness is that these types of oppression, discrimination, use of privilege and sometimes just blatant racism exist."

Section 8 also connected these feelings to values. By "buying into" notions of privilege, students realized they had given up or ignored other values that had once helped provide direction in their lives. Some saw, though, that these values could be used as a starting point for building connections with others who disagreed with them or as a way to diffuse potential conflict. One student reflected not losing sight of values, but rather, "I'm not sure if I understand the question about what values I have strayed from. If anything, this exercise has added additional values that I hope to continue to follow and one day pass on to my children."

### Section 9: Next Steps

The ninth and final section of the Privilege Project opens up an invitation for students to reflect upon what they would do with this new knowledge and how they can continue this work beyond the classroom. We found a theme calling for the requirement of "continued self-awareness and a life-long commitment to learning about power, privilege, and multicultural issues." Another commented, "I will dedicate my time to becoming culturally competent, learning about power struggles, and the different types of privilege that I enact." Others stated in their workplaces they now had assumed a "responsibility to seek it out . . . to promote equality and fairness." "It's time to take action to put everyone on an equal playing field." Furthermore, "not succumbing to this privilege and educating colleagues is the next step."

Some participants noted that change had already started as a result of engaging in the Project. "Hopefully, the next step is in motion for all who completed this project. First of all, we must acknowledge the awareness as being significant. Secondly, we must make the significance personal on a daily basis." Another noted: "The concepts I have learned from this class have changed my perspective completely. There is no going back to my previous perception of societal issues in America." This participant identified the next step would be in "my approach to counseling. The way I view children I am counseling will be different because of what I have learned in this class."

## DISCUSSION

Students demonstrated a considerable shift in awareness over time and in a variety of areas. At the start, the students initially expressed a lack of knowledge and awareness about the concept of privilege, and they had great difficulty recognizing their own actions and roles in maintaining privilege for dominant groups (Hays, Dean & Chang, 2007; Sue & Sue, 2008). Initially students' connections to the topic were more related to being in the course rather than an intrinsic motivation. However, by section 2, students could begin identifying the ways in which they would stay away from or create distance between themselves and the topic of Privilege. By section 4 a subtle recognition emerged that nondominant groups could be treated differently from dominant groups. However, even without specific intracultural knowledge, students began recognizing that privilege could influence if and how a nondominant group might be perceived as "desirable" or even "acceptable." Students also demonstrated an additional awareness: rather than discrimination being random acts by individuals, groups might be affected by oppression on an ongoing, systemic basis, and the impact of that process could have a harmful, pervasive, and profound effect on people from nondominant groups. These reflections are consistent with findings in other research related to how White counselors conceptualize privilege (Hays, Chang, & Dean, 2004).

Several weeks into the Project, student writings suggested expansion in knowledge, learning, and development. In contrast with the previous sections of the Project, students could begin to identify specific manifestations of "privilege" in different facets of life. The writings themselves also showed a greater depth of insight and comprehension than early writings that tended to be more superficial. Students were able to identify some ways cultural norms are socially constructed and how discourse shaped expectations. This development seemed highly influenced by delving into their own family histories and connecting these histories to current values and traditions (McGoldrick, Giordano, & Garcia-Preto, 2005). Students also began expanding the process outside of the classroom; they mentioned how they had begun to initiate new conversations about privilege and oppression within their family and work environments as a result of engaging in this Project. Power-over

relationships, such as employers and supervisors, remained a future challenge, but students could begin identifying action steps; for instance, one student decided to create a different environment in agency team meetings to make conversations about privilege and its effects the norm instead of the exception.

Students also expressed recognition of bias and in particular, microaggressions (Sue, 2010). One participant wrote of her action to not "speak ill of homosexuals. . . . [but instead] just silently disapprove of the relationship. . . . I'm probably hurting them anyways with my microagressions, and maybe they can see it in my face, but I don't outwardly show that it's hard for me to accept them. I know that counseling a gay or lesbian couple will be the hardest thing in counseling sessions." This participant also related her "religious background makes me opposed to same-sex relationships. I hate typing this because I know that it might hurt the feelings of some classmates—I don't wish to do that—but this is an issue I know I will have to work on!" The ability to recognize their own participation in oppressive acts marks a transition from seeing privilege as a vague, impersonal theory to a very real and active force that does affect how they see themselves and others. For some this related to feelings of guilt or shame, but for others these feelings also lead to a decision to no longer be guided by "privilege," but rather to act against it.

Students described how knowledge gained through the Project influenced other contexts, including work settings, intimate relationships, friendships, and family relationships. Student reflections also suggested a grasp of the power of one person's actions in the construction of privilege and dominance, suggesting movement toward personal agency and deconstructing privilege. This movement from passive observer to active participant is consistent with the goals of social justice education (Vera & Speight, 2003). Students wrote of their own personal journey throughout the process of the Project, the sense of community that was developed in that "we are in this together," and their commitment to continuing this important endeavor. The powerful impact of the Project and the group was summarized as follows:

> I think I will be linked with the peers in my diversity class. I feel a connection with them because they are going through the same eye-opening self-awareness experience that I am going through. I also feel comfortable with them because I have gotten used to expressing my thoughts and opinions with them, and it is a safe and educational environment in order to explore such hard issues.

In course feedback, students expressed an appreciation of the anonymous structure for the responses but noted that the need for this lessened over time. This suggests that regardless of the method used, careful consideration and safeguards in generating safety in the classroom around these discussions, especially in the early stages, remain important. This feedback is also a reminder that any activity implemented in a diversity course must consider empathy and safety between students and teacher (Patrick & Connolly, 2009). While the Project provides one way of initiating a safe environment, instructors still need to reinforce this norm through leadership and classroom facilitation.

The overall advantage of the Privilege Project is that it offers a framework for inviting reflections about privilege and power. It appears to introduce and amplify students' commitment to social justice and assist students' movement from stages of pre-contemplation and contemplation to preparation, action, and goals of maintenance (Prochaska & Norcross, 2010). The Project can aid students in more clearly recognizing their own involvement in perpetuating unearned "privilege." Students discovered ways they had intentionally or inadvertently supported oppression, explored emotions surrounding these experiences, and identified specific strategies to combat such practices of oppression. The findings from this exploration also imply that a Narrative approach provides a method for students to address these themes of discovery, exploration, growth, and transformation in a safe and genuinely reflective process (Kerl, 2002). Although the content of classroom group discussions was not analyzed, the Privilege Project provided the catalyst for students initiating these discussions with their peers. Thus the Privilege Project could be a useful way of allowing students to explore their roles related to privilege and oppression while creating a forum to learn how to communicate more openly about these ideas.

## REFERENCES

Hays, D. G., Chang, C. Y., & Dean, J. K. (2004). White counselors' conceptualization of privilege and oppression: Implications for counselor training. *Counselor Education & Supervision, 4*(3), 242–257.

Hays, D., Dean, J., & Chang, C. (2007). Addressing privilege and oppression in counselor training and practice: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 85*(3), 317–324.

Kerl, S. (2002). Using narrative approaches to teach multicultural counseling. *Journal of Mulicultural Counseling and Development, 30*(2), 135–143.

McGoldrick, M., Giordano, J., & Garcia-Preto, N. (2005). *Ethnicity and family therapy* (2nd ed.). New York: Guilford.

McIntosh, P. (2012). Reflections and future directions for privilege studies. *Journal of Social Issues, 68*(1), 194–206. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.2011.01744.x

Patrick, S. (2008, November). *Reflecting on "An invitation to address privilege and dominance": Altering relationships with privilege*. Paper presented at the 9th Annual International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference, Adelaide, Australia.

Patrick, S., & Connolly, C. M. (2009). The token activity: Generating awareness of power in counseling relationships. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 37*(2), 117–128.

Prochaska, J. O., & Norcross, J. C. (2010). *Systems of psychotherapy: A transtheoretical analysis* (7th ed.) (pp. 485–516). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Raheim, S., White, C., Denborough, D., Waldegrave, C., Tamasese, K., Tuhaka, F., Franklin, A., Fox, H., & Carey, M. (n.d). *An invitation to narrative practitioners to address privilege and dominance*. Retrieved August 1, 2005, from: http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/privilege.htm

Reynolds, A. L. (1995). Challenges and strategies for teaching multicultural counseling courses. In J. G. Ponterotto, J. M. Casas, L. A. Suzuki, & C. M. Alexander (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural counseling* (pp. 312–330). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sue, D. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Sue, D. W., & Sue, D. (2008). *Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and practice* (5th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Vera, E. M., & Speight, S. L. (2003). Multicultural competence, social justice, and counseling psychology: Expanding our roles. *Counseling Psychologist*, *31*(3), 253–272.

White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. New York: W. W. Norton.

White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. New York: W. W. Norton.