

## Examining Privilege: An Effective Strategy for Overcoming Resistance in a Power and Oppression Workshop

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### Abstract

We offer an approach for working with participants in a three-day retreat workshop on power, oppression, and difference. Opening Doors: A Personal and Professional Journey is a workshop designed in 1992 and revised in 2011 and 2015. High levels of resistance by participants to viewing personal experiences through the lens of privilege ultimately led to the development of a strategy that gives participants a path to examining and accepting the implications of privilege in their lives. This article describes a process whereby participants are asked to meet initially in identity groups based on where they have experienced exclusion and discrimination. In these groups participants share their experiences witnessing the privileges of members of the “dominant group” to their excluded group. This practice of meeting in excluded groups first confers their engagement with the concept of privilege, so that they experience less resistance to owning it in their dominant identities. Another key to the success of Opening Doors workshops has been the focus on integrating multiple oppressions simultaneously, and applying concepts of social identity development and intersectionality. This paper will outline the strategies, tools, beliefs, and language that led up to this unit and how a team of facilitators, with the aim of assisting participants in their movement, has effectively processed the nuances and complexities that arise during the group discussions.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe effective strategies that are part of a unit on privilege used when working with participants in a three-day overnight retreat entitled *Opening Doors: A Personal and Professional Journey (OD)* (Castania, 2011). The workshop began as an effort to address the race and class exclusion of migrant farmworkers in communities throughout New York State. Their stories of rejection, both by individuals and institutions, led to the creation of the *Opening Doors* workshops. Over 2,000 participants from 37 national and international groups, including government, community-development organizations, universities, school districts, and human service agencies, have attended this power, oppression, and difference workshop since its inception in 1992. The workshop was conceived and developed by one of the authors of this paper, Kathy Castania. The co-authors of this paper are Brenda Alston-Mills, who became an OD facilitator in 2008; and Maryellen

Whittington-Couse, who has been an OD facilitator and apprentice mentor since 2001.

Based on participant feedback and the emerging field of social identity development (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997; Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2001) and intersectionality (Adams, Blumenfeld, Castañeda, Hackman, Peters, & Zúñiga, 2013; Case, 2013; Crenshaw 1994; Ferber & O'Reilly Herrera, 2013), the workshop has evolved over the past 25 years. Though racism is clearly still a focus, it is seen as one of a host of oppressions based on social identities. The research on intersectionality has affirmed and validated this approach and expanded our understanding of how participants evolve in their multiple identities toward healthy self-actualization. According to Ferber and O'Reilly Herrera (2013) "an intersectional approach acknowledges that individuals and groups are multidimensional ... and that their experiences and concerns are not mutually exclusive" (p. 83). The activity that will be shared in this paper is a direct product of this shift to an intersectional approach to oppression. Looking at multiple oppressions and where they intersect allows for healing in all of our identities and creates the space for participants to become allies across multiple forms of oppression (Samuels, 2013).

## Workshop Methodology

### *Outline*

The activities in this workshop are designed to be developmental and based on oppression and liberation theories relative to power and difference and how misinformation is learned as a part of the socialization process in the United States.

The workshop activities align with the theoretical framework of the Cycle of Oppression (adapted and expanded by Castania in unpublished curriculum, 1992)

### ***Approach***

Throughout the workshop, facilitators methodically unwrap privilege, intentionally not naming it early on in the workshop in order to create readiness to address it later in a unit specifically focused on privilege. For example, during their introductions, facilitators present personal stories citing experiences both from their dominant identities (learned superiority), which illustrate privileges and entitlements, and from their excluded identities (learned inferiority), which illustrate oppression and the denial of privilege. In the description that follows, we address techniques and tools for creating a climate and the readiness that lessens resistance to the concept of privilege.

### ***Intersectionality***

Having participants examine practices that excluded them in one or more identities prior to working on privilege creates greater receptivity when the concept is explored deeply. Almost 20 years ago while preparing an OD agenda for a group of mostly White dairy farmworker women, we were concerned that they would experience resistance to the idea of their own privilege on race. These women were excluded in their communities as working poor. In addition, many had experienced domestic violence and sexual abuse. The facilitators decided to create an agenda that would primarily allow them to examine their experience with exclusion. By the time White privilege was introduced, the facilitators realized that the strategy had been effective. The women were open to

looking at White privilege and their role as White people in maintaining racism. Since then we have consistently given opportunities to explore exclusion before looking at privileges.

The Cycle of Oppression (the Cycle), a framework and tool used in the workshop, has evolved over time, based on the work of various oppression theorists, including Freire (1970), Sidanius and Pratto (2001), and Bishop (2002). The Cycle allows the participants to examine the dynamics that contribute to maintaining oppression—how we are individually taught, how oppression is reinforced institutionally, and the roles we are asked to play (this is where we lead the unit on privilege). The workshop moves through each section of the Cycle with specific activities intended to show how oppressive systems continue generation after generation. During each section, the participants are given discussion topics that reveal how they have been affected by being a part of an oppressive system. They are then encouraged to discuss what they can do personally to “break the cycle.” For example, during small group discussions on the first day, each participant creates an Identity Map of dominant and excluded identities (Castania, 1996; Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2013; Tatum, 2013).

This small group discussion is the first opportunity for participants to make visible the complexity of how intersectionality operates in their own lives. Often participants will reveal the ways that they have been taught to measure others based on their own and other group identities and apply status and privilege to these differences.

The two roles we examine in the workshop are: the Role of Oppressed, where we focus on excluded groups and identify

the dynamics of survival and internalized oppression; and the Role of the Oppressor, where we focus on dominant groups and identify the dynamics of privilege and pain. Within this paper, we describe how we have come to design the Privilege Unit in the Role of the Oppressor section in a way that lessens participants' resistance.

### ***Participants***

Currently, workshop participants in New York State are primarily from organizations that are working on systemic change and/or individuals who are committed to creating change in diversity aspects of their personal lives, workplaces, and communities. Since 2006, Opening Doors workshops have been provided at North Carolina State University, the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, and Michigan State University, where faculty and staff attend Opening Doors as a component of the institutions' overall diversity and inclusion initiatives.

### ***Facilitation***

As facilitators leading diverse participants through this workshop, we understand that our own identities impact participants and intersect with where they are in their own identity development process. All facilitators are required to have moved beyond stages of Active and Passive Acceptance and Resistance (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). With this level of self-reflection, we are aware of our own daily privileges and have the patience and understanding required to assist others to unveil their hidden privileges.

Since we are specifically addressing White privilege in this paper, it is important to note that the White facilitation team members represent a range of diverse

experiences with Whiteness. These range from being raised in the Christian South, to Northern homogenous suburban communities; and from growing up as a gay man in a Northeast prep school, to a working-class woman in a metropolitan Italian neighborhood. These represent only some of our childhood experiences, and they all have informed our process relative to privilege as we became deeply aware of our Whiteness in relation to People of Color and each other. Facilitators of Color also have a range of diverse identities—male, female, Puerto Rican, Mexican, African American, Northern, Southern, heterosexual, Evangelical, Christian, Catholic, urban, rural, middle class, working class, and working poor. Consciousness of these multiple identities creates opportunities to understand the uniqueness of our denial of privilege based on the intersectionality of other identities (McCall, 2005).

### ***Techniques and Tools***

In order to create a climate where participants willingly engage in a dialogue on difficult topics like privilege, before and during the workshop facilitators strive to create a supportive yet challenging learning community, free of blame and guilt, allowing participants to be open to self-reflection and change. Key techniques that lay this foundation include:

- Pre-workshop readings.
- Establishing Working Agreements.
- Facilitating an activity that allows participants to recognize and appreciate their multiple group identities.
- Doing dyad/pairings throughout the workshop.
- Identifying Forms of Resistance (Johnson, 2005; Tatum, 1992; Tochluk, 2008; Wise, 2011).

- Sharing facilitators' Foundational Beliefs.

### **The Privilege Unit**

The Privilege Unit is facilitated during the Role of the Oppressor section of the workshop. The goals of the Privilege Unit are (Castania, 2011):

1. To provide the social context for learning a dominant role.
2. To explore two critical dynamics that we experience in our dominant identities: privilege and pain.
3. To introduce the developmental journey from agent to ally.
4. To create a list of ally behaviors.

### **Unfolding Privilege**

From the onset of the workshop, the facilitators build a foundation for exploring dominance and privilege. Years of witnessing participant resistance to acknowledging their own dominant identities have led us to design the beginning of the Role of the Oppressor section to clearly separate “the person” from “the role.” Facilitators explain “what is true” and “what happens” to people in dominant groups. “What is true” is designed to remind people of their full humanity, and “what happens” gives voice to the socialization process that creates a climate for how we all adopt roles as “agents” of oppression.

The two or three facilitators of this unit each share one of their dominant identities, providing the participants with many examples of privileges from multiple identities and the intersection of oppressions. This way, facilitators model how they learned and continue to work on

unlearning an oppressor role in their own lives.

During this unit facilitators call attention to the pre-workshop reading from *Privilege, Power and Difference* (Johnson, 2006) and the analogy Johnson uses to describe privilege as being like a “key card” that members of dominant groups are given at birth. After this introduction, participants are asked to watch one of several short documentaries illustrating the privileges of one group. They are instructed to focus on how privilege is normalized and made invisible. This is done intentionally to shift the participants’ focus to include an understanding of oppression from what is granted to some, as well as what is taken away or denied to others.

We have come to understand over time that the participants’ focus on the denial of privileges, rather than the privileges that are granted, keeps their privileges invisible to them as members of dominant groups. With the intentional shift of focus provided by the facilitators, participants increase understanding of how privilege works. They are given an opportunity to practice recognizing privileges through the short documentary and then talking about them in the discussion.

Although we are intentionally refocusing people to see privilege, most participants have an immediate strong reaction to the injustices they just witnessed in the video. We have realized that it is important to provide them a time and space to voice these immediate reactions before moving on to exploring privileges. As a result, the first thing we do following the video is to provide an opportunity for expressing these feelings by inviting them to either share them with another participant or

journal them alone and then return to the large group to briefly process their feelings.

### ***Meeting in Excluded Groups***

Over years of workshops where participants continued to resist the concept of privilege, we decided that an additional step was needed to create more readiness and openness before asking them to engage in exploring their dominant privileges further. We then provide an opportunity for participants to first meet in one of their excluded groups. We instruct them to meet together to answer the following questions:

1. How do members who are in the dominant group to your excluded group have privilege? For example, women meet to discuss male privilege, People of Color meet to discuss White privilege; lesbian, gay, and bisexual people meet to discuss heterosexual privilege, etc.
2. How would you like people in dominant groups to use their privilege to facilitate the elimination of oppressive practices?

When excluded groups complete their meetings, they return to the large group to share a few examples of what they discussed. Participants readily share long lists of privileges enjoyed by the dominant group. Facilitators have observed that participants in these groups are engaged in lively conversation, are eager to add to the discussion, and have no resistance to the concept of privilege. At the end of this phase of the unit, the facilitator asks the participants how it felt to engage in this exercise and why it is important for people in dominant groups to know they have privilege. Participants generally share that they feel positive about the experience and that it feels good to be with others in their

group talking about the privilege of members of dominant groups. They also share that it is difficult to be around people who do not recognize that they have privilege. Additionally, we get rich examples of ways they would want members of dominant groups to act as allies by using their privilege to eliminate oppression.

### ***Meeting in Dominant Groups***

The participants are then asked to convene in dominant groups, based on the primary dominant identity they self-identified earlier in the workshop. Again, groups are asked to have a discussion using these three questions:

1. How do you have privilege in your life as a member of this dominant group? Share a recent example of a privilege that you received because of this identity.
2. How does it feel to know that you were granted these privileges?
3. How can you use your privilege to facilitate the elimination of oppressive practices?

From years of observing how participants respond in these groups, it is clear to us that this section of the unit is faced with more difficulty than when people meet in their excluded groups. Struggling with identifying their own privileges, participants may feel uncomfortable or inept, and this can hamper their ability to engage the concept and often leads to a heightened desire to resist. The practice of meeting first in excluded groups facilitates their engagement with the concept of privilege, so that they experience less resistance to owning it when they meet in their dominant groups.

At this point in the unit, privilege has been named, discussed, and—most importantly—made salient by seeing how it applies to dominant identities. This strategy provides a reprieve from their feelings of guilt, shame, and incompetence. Participants for the most part are no longer challenging the concept or word “privilege” when meeting in dominant groups; however, they do continue to struggle with trying to identify their own personal recent examples of having experienced privilege. They seem to understand it at a theoretical level, but have difficulty applying it to their lives. Also, participants who appear to be at later stages of social identity development engage more in the group discussion, while others listen attentively, trying to learn and then search their own experience for something to contribute. Over time, many of our participants become more comfortable with applying the concept of privilege to their own lives.

When the participants reconvene in the large group to share, they are again asked how it felt to work in dominant groups to identify privilege. This time we hear things such as: It was hard; I couldn’t think of anything; it helped to hear others in our group share examples, so that I could come up with a few. Facilitators then remind participants that in dominator systems, privilege is meant to be invisible, and that is why it is so difficult to come up with recent examples. We do this intentionally to lessen the participants’ feelings of guilt and shame for not knowing.

From our observations, most participants struggle with the concept of privilege; thus, by focusing on multiple identities throughout the workshop, all participants are encouraged to think about their own dominant groups’ privileges. As Keating (2007) and Luft and Ward (2009)

found, failing to adopt an intersectional approach to social justice interventions may further marginalize individuals and groups and may also lead to increased backlash. Our workshop, particularly in this unit, uses intersectionality to examine both dominant and excluded identities simultaneously—e.g., People of Color meeting in their dominant groups such as religion, education, and sexual orientation struggle in parallel with White people, who are also having difficulty recognizing their privileges as White people.

### Conclusion

White privilege is a critical construct that impacts and informs the political, economic, and social policies in the United States. The methodology that is used in the workshop has its foundation in much of the research and the many approaches, models, and curricula that have been developed to transform learning into a force to create social and political change.

Working on the intersection of multiple identities with participants allows them to see diversity as not something for “the other” but also for themselves. In addition, the workshop provides space for each participant to examine the ways in which they have navigated these multiple identities—some dominant and some excluded—and how these social identities have intersected in their own lives and the lives of others. Then, continuously creating a vision for change, one we call the Partnership Model (Eisler, 1988), we use strategies consistent with social identity development theory to encourage the development of new skills and attitudes.

We have presented an intentional and evolving approach used in the Opening Doors workshop that methodically unwraps

the complexities of privilege with the aim of defusing resistance. Through our participatory action research process, the curriculum has evolved over the past 25 years. We have observed and experienced that for participants to learn and explore the concept of privilege, they must first see it through the lens of their own excluded identities. It is predominantly through the lens of exclusion that participants can name the privileges they have been denied. During this Privilege Unit in the workshop, participants become receptive to examining

their own privilege through the lens of their dominant identities.

As a result of participating in the workshops, participants move beyond consciousness-raising by learning tangible strategies and skills to engage in action—behaving as allies and increasing their ability to be aware of their privileges so they can use them when standing up for social justice.

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