

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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Showering in Everyday Privilege: A Reflective Analysis

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Abstract

This piece utilizes critical reflexivity and an auto-ethnographical approach applied to the act of showering to analyze systematic intersections of privilege in daily acts. It examines how one of our most private/intimate experiences—showering—relates to ability, class, gender, and race and their attached privileges, and reinforces acts of social policing. Through this deconstruction this piece brings to light the ways in which the privilege has been socially constructed to connect to all areas of life, perpetuating societal norms and privileges. It highlights the importance of individual critical reflexivity and its connection to societal change.

Keywords: auto-ethnography, class status, ableism, critical reflexivity, privilege, gender

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My alarm goes off each morning with a buzzing tone that causes me to wake and start my morning routine. Each day starts the same: I get up, walk to the washroom, turn on the shower faucet, and begin the showering process. Showering is something most people in Canada do on a daily basis. Showering is seen as a natural process that can be completed without thought. I start by turning the faucet on, making sure to have a perfect balance of cold and hot water. I independently undress my able body and step into the warm water, taking my time in order to soak up the warmth and privilege that drips down.

The privilege I exercise in the showering process begins even before I step into the water. Undressing my body and preparing to shower is something I have done independently since a young age. My able body has always been capable of completing these tasks without aid, without thought, and without consideration for those who may not have this privilege to exercise. I subconsciously choose to shower over the option of a bath, with no conscious thought that some individuals may not have this choice. Some individuals live being policed by the medical model our system is based upon that labels their bodies as “abnormal,” a label I have never had to endure (Loja, Costa, Hughes, & Menezes, 2013). I step into my shower, designed so that one must have the capability to step over a large ledge to enter the stream of water. There is no hose extension on the showerhead, no railings to provide support, simply just minimal design meant solely for an able-bodied individual. These are aspects I never think about or consider, but instead are made invisible by the privilege I have experienced throughout the entirety of my life.

With each step my able legs take, even in the privacy of my own home, I am

perpetuating an ablest perspective that Campbell (2008) notes as being “associated with the production of ableness, the perfectible body and, by default, the creation of a neologism that suggests a falling away from ableness that is disability” (p. 153). Living in ignorance, I do not consider how the acts I am blindly completing out of routine are connected to privilege. Brod (1989) referenced this connection to privilege, noting that:

Privilege is not something I take and which therefore have the option of not taking. It is something that society gives me, and unless I change the institutions which give it to me, they will continue to give it, and I will continue to have it, however noble and equalitarian my intentions. (p. 280)

Even if I were to acknowledge the privilege that I hold, it would not change how it is rooted in the daily routine tasks I complete. My ablest actions are socially organized. It is a mundane activity that is taken for granted, and whose actions are socially constructed. My actions, although appearing to be a conscious choice, are truly governed by the power of privilege. As noted by Campbell and Gregor (2002), “it is only when something goes unaccountably wrong that we stop and notice the organized complexity of our lives that we otherwise navigate so easily” (p. 31). Unless my body’s ability is threatened or lost, even if I engage in the reflexivity regarding my privilege, I continue to perpetuate the standardized organization of privilege and oppression within society.

As the water runs down my body, I adjust the temperature to my liking—a small act that I am able to complete due to having

the necessary physical ability, as well as access to running water. With the simple turn of a knob, I am using my middle-class status, the payment of my utility bills, and the expectation of access to not just water but also to the ability to make it so hot that the steam engulfs the room. I continue to wash myself, not thinking about how I can afford to pay my bills, despite the fact that I do not work. Never do I worry about running out of hot water or having access to water in general. Water is one of the basic necessities of life; however, this does not mean that everyone has access to it. Reports have shown that only 57% of the world's population have access to running water (World Health Organization, UNICEF, & WHO/UNICEF Joint Supply and Sanitation Monitoring Programme, 2010, p. 13). To some this may seem like a large percentage, however, this means that 3.7 billion individuals live their daily lives without the luxury of running water—something many of us would find inconceivable. One major crisis that has been brought to light is that of Flint, Michigan, where elevated levels of lead were found in the drinking water, causing what researchers deem profound deleterious effects on the health and well-being of the community (Masten, Davies, & Mcelmurry, 2016). This is just one example of the reality for many Americans who do not have consistent access to clean drinking water. For myself, I have had the privilege of coming from an upper-class family that has supported me financially so that I may live independently with the continued expectation of clean, running, warm water. The consciousness of this is always constant, though subliminal, and reflects the status I have held for the entirety of my life.

Having a middle-class status is something that many individuals are aware of, but rarely do we reflect on how this status is used. The Merriam-Webster

Dictionary (n.d.) defines the concept of “status” as, “a person or rank in relation to others.” By this definition, status is a human concept that is used to differentiate and compare individuals within our society. However, having a status does not necessarily mean that the individual has earned the status. As I stand in the water, my privilege showering down on me, I am basking in the status I have inherited. Research shows that intergenerational correlations for economic or class status is substantial. Children with access to parents living in the middle- to upper-class range tend to have more access to education, health supports, and financial supports (Bowles & Gintis, 2002, p. 4). However, those who do not have this privilege may enter a “spiraling crisis.” This term refers to the situation in which an individual may have started off with one issue—such as not having access to running or clean water—and this issue suddenly expands to incorporate many issues, such as health concerns or societal labeling and ostracizing (Rwigema, Udegbe, & Lewis-Peart, 2015, p. 39).

As I stand there in the shower, I am using my privilege to wash away the deviant labels of “unhygienic” or “dirty” that I have been conditioned to despise. With each swipe of body wash, and each squirt of shampoo, I am ensuring that my skin will be clean and my hair soft and am blindly following society's normalized standard for those with class. In this moment, I am ensuring my positive social identity. Rosenberg (1979) and Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher and Wetherell (1987) believe that social identity is the part of one's self-concept that derives from group memberships, being the groups with which the person identifies or to which the person is socially recognized as belonging. On the other hand, when an individual does not

belong to a dominant group, his or her self-esteem may suffer. Our society is quick to judge individuals who reside outside of the dominant norm. For example, hair that is perceived as unclean or body odors that are not seen as pleasant or typical generally lead to individuals being ostracized and ridiculed. Therefore, we spend numerous hours within our day ensuring that we fall within the social construct of what is acceptable. This reflects the concept that:

self-esteem is partially dependent on the perceptions and views of others is consistent with the theories of the “looking-glass self” (Cooley, 1922) and reflected appraisals (Mead, 1934), both of which state that conceptions of the self are highly dependent on others’ appraisals of oneself. We come to know how valued our social identities are by the reactions those identities elicit from others. (Galinsky et al., 2003, p. 224)

The soap that runs down the drain is a symbol of my conformity to the norm, as without the aspect of showering I would be labeled a deviant individual, and my social identity compromised.

As I run my finger through my hair, preparing it for shampoo and conditioner, I reach for a bottle of product that holds strong links to my race that I often overlook. On a bottle that is meant for hygiene, images of whiteness stare back. I do not typically purchase the same brands, but rather whatever I can find on sale, and all of these products have one thing in common: They advertise using primarily White women as models and occupy the majority of hair care aisles. Other than a small section that is indicated as carrying ethnic hair care

products, the only other time any individual of Color is seen is on bottles specified for frizz and curls. The hair care aisle is not the only time that colonization has taken over and oppressed individuals of Color, attempting to place them outside of the norm. In fact, “in an effort to dehumanize and break the African spirit, Europeans shaved the heads of enslaved Africans upon arrival to the Americas. This was not merely a random act, but rather a symbolic removal of African culture” (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014, p. 87). Although society may not be shaving the heads of individuals any more, they are ensuring that the majority of space is still occupied by the White majority.

I begin to shampoo my hair, not realizing that I could have chosen from more than 30 companies whose products are designed to appeal to individuals like me, White and unaware of the privilege that I hold. Never had I needed to think about what the product would do to my hair, nor had I noticed the images in the advertisements or on the bottles. Instead, I find myself at home, washing a product out of my hair that I know contained chemicals to tame frizz and create a soft wave that only naturally straight hair can achieve with ease. The chemicals normalize my hair to fit into the whiteness of society. As Weedon (1999) stated, “whiteness signifies an absence of colour” which can be connected back to the marketing, product development, and target market of the larger hair care companies (p. 154). As I run my fingers through my hair a final time to ensure that no product remains, I place the bottle of white privilege back in its original spot and continue on without a second thought.

Hair is something that holds so much power, whether it is on your head, arms, legs, or any other area of the body. Historically, hair holds a connection to

gender that is still evident today, with an abundance of hair linking to masculinity and virility, and an absence of hair connecting to women, youthfulness, and passivity (Fahs, 2013). This connection to gender is what subconsciously pushed me to reach for my razor in an attempt to remove any indication of manliness from my body. Not only is the act of shaving indicative of my gender, but also the razor itself is plastered with symbols of patriarchy. Bright pink in color, with the word “Venus,” the name of the goddess of love and beauty, spread across the handle, this razor created for women not only represents conformity, but ensures that the ideal of what a true woman looks like prevails. I grasp my razor, my symbol of female beauty, in my hand and place my leg on the corner of the shower tub. The razor drags across the skin on my leg, ensuring that every last hair is removed, and society’s view of beauty is all that remains.

Since elementary school I have been shaving my legs and underarms, never questioning why. Having hair on my legs as a female reflects the negative, deviant quality of being unattractive and unhygienic. Despite the inconvenience it causes, I continue to shave my legs in order to avoid the discrimination that can come through deviating from this whitewashed example of female beauty. This can be echoed by Fahs and Delgado (2011), who note that the fact that “hair removal seems trivial and relatively unnoticed makes it all the more potent as a means of social control, as women adopt ideas about idealized femininity without considering the ramifications of those ideologies and accompanying practices” (p. 15). To deconstruct this idea further, Fahs (2013) conducted a study in which male participants were asked to reject the current gender norms for males, specifically the choice of whether or not to shave their body

hair, and adopt the societal feminine beauty standards of shaving all body hair for a period of 12 weeks. Despite only eight men participating in the study, the experiences recorded were shocking. Not only did Fahs’s (2013) study show an increase in appreciation by the men for the time and commitment women put in to conforming to this normative belief of hairlessness equaling beauty, but they also identified a double standard. A male participant described his experience with this double standard by sharing, “I know I can be manly with or without hair, but women can’t be feminine with hair. It is a double standard. I didn’t make it that way” (Fahs, 2013, p. 571). Although it is true that no one person created this double standard, many of us contribute to its continuation almost daily, including myself. I let gender define what I do both in public and in private. Society has made it exceedingly apparent that there are hygiene products that have been designed with specific binary genders in mind. Research has shown that humans have a fundamental desire to belong and fit in, which motivates us to avoid deviance through complying with societal norms, despite how inconvenient they may appear (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

I finish washing the soap from my body and turn the faucet off, preparing to exhibit my final act of compliance with societal norms. When I step out from behind the shower curtain, I instantaneously reach for my towel so that my nude appearance, including my breasts and vagina, are covered. The nude appearance has been labeled as overtly sexual and something that should remain private so that, even in our own homes, our sexuality remains concealed. The majority of the time we speak about objectification, we discuss how others, and not necessarily ourselves, objectify women. However, “sexual

objectification refers to the fragmentation of a woman into a collection of sexual parts and/or sexual functions, essentially stripping her of a unique personality and subjectivity so that she exists as merely a body” (Calogero, 2012, p. 574). It is a body that I have been conditioned to cover almost instantaneously, despite being the only resident in my household. By covering myself I am ensuring that I remain in the realm of privilege that only a true “lady” can obtain. As children, we are told to always cover ourselves after a shower, never let our “private” parts show, as it would be something that a “slut” or “whore” would do. Regardless of gender, this is a sexual norm with which we all comply. Some may follow these norms out of habit, others out of comfort, but regardless of the reasoning, following these norms perpetuates the dichotomy of “pure” individuals versus sexual deviants.

Every morning I used to step into the shower and subconsciously exercise my privilege. I receive much of this privilege by my ability to follow societal norms, even in a situation as intimate as cleaning my body. Despite being subconscious, it is a conscious choice each day to not question how our actions may be socially constructed. Many individuals still conform to the societal norms in order to keep access to their privilege throughout their lives in both public settings and the most private. It is the combination of subconscious and conscious decisions that work together to cause compliance with the societal norms and continuously enforce them as well.

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