When White Women Cry: How White Women's Tears Oppress Women of Color

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This article focuses on the tension that arises as the result of the intersection of social identities, namely gender and race. Through examination of a case study, I consider the ways in which White women benefit from White privilege through their interactions with Women of Color using the Privileged Identity Exploration Model as the tool for analysis.

Institutions of higher education in the United States emblematically represent privilege. Whether it be race, gender, sexual orientation, class, abilities, religion, and so on, universities have historically served White, Christian, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, male-dominated identities (Anzaldúa & Moraga, 2002; Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Lorde, 1984; hooks, 1981). If our institutions are rivers flowing in a specific direction, then the current of the river shaped by geography which enables the flow of the river and it represent the system of privilege. Consider a fish that must swim upstream versus a fish that swims with the current, arguably both fish could survive, but under what circumstances? Would one fish benefit from the flow of the current? As student affairs practitioners, it is our job to understand not only context for survival, but also the circumstances.

The notion of privilege is complex, especially whether we have privileged or we do not have privilege positions us to act in conflicting manners regarding oppression. This phenomenon is noticeable when Women of Color and White women dialogue about race and racism. While White women are members of an oppressed group based on gender, they still experience privilege based on race. This dual oppressor/oppressed identity often becomes a root of tension when White women are challenged to consider their White privilege by Women of Color.

The goal of this article is to highlight complexities that arise with the intersection of race and gender, using the Privilege Identity Exploration (PIE) Model (Watt, 2007). I begin the article by contextualizing how race and gender identities interact with one another and how these interactions shape our

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societal norms. Next, I offer a case study which identifies how White women manifest certain defense modes presented in the PIE Model when confronted with race conflict. Finally, I conclude the article with suggestions on ways to engage in difficult dialogue while authentically owning one's privileged identity.

The Intersection of Social Identities

All of our social identities inform and shape one another. One's identity as a woman is shaped by multiple factors in her life, including race, social class, sexual orientation, and so on. While sexism shapes the nature of womanhood, White womanhood looks very different than Asian American, Black, Indigenous, or Latina womanhood, because each woman's experience is shaped by the internal expectations and external perceptions of what it means to be a woman within each of these racial communities (Hernández & Rehman, 2002; Anzáldua & Keating, 2002). Comprehensive historical research explicates this notion of racial identity informing gender identity (Daniels, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; 1997). While White women have been depicted to be the foundation of purity, chastity, and virtue, Women of Color have historically been caricaturized by the negative stereotypes and the historical lower status position associated with their racial communities in American society (Hernández & Rehman, 2002; Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1984; hooks, 1981). Additionally, as Palmer (1994) states, "the problem for White women is that their privilege is based on accepting the image of goodness, which is powerlessness" (p.170). This powerlessness informs the nature of White womanhood. Put in simple terms, male privilege positions the nature of womanhood, while White privilege through history positions a White woman's reality as the universal norm of womanhood, leaving a woman of color defined by two layers of oppression.

As Dyer further elucidates, "White people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed" (Dyer, 2005, p. 12). As a natural outcome, when there is conflict among women, the norms under which these conflicts are managed are based on White societal norms. To illustrate, let us consider a conflict between two women, one Asian American and the other White. How might we assess the situation if we noticed that during this conflict the White woman was crying while the Asian American woman continues to talk without any noticeable change in her tone of voice? Our societal norms inform us that crying indicates helplessness, which triggers automatic sympathy for the White woman. Certain stereotypes of Asian Americans characterize them as unfeeling and/or devoid of emotion, therefore our norms also reinforce that the Asian American woman, showing no physical reaction, must not be experiencing emotion. As we piece together these observations to create "the

story," we might further conclude that the Asian American woman caused the White woman to cry, without regard for her feelings. As shown through this scenario, the White woman's reality is visible, acknowledged, and legitimized because of her tears, while a woman of color's reality, like her struggle, is invisible, overlooked, and pathologized based on the operating "standard of humanity."

One Up/One Down Identities

The challenge and responsibility of any person who has a "one up/one down" identity, with one identity that is privileged and another that is oppressed, is to recognize when their privileged identity is the operating norm. As Johnson reminds us, "when it comes to privilege, it doesn't matter who we really are. What matters is who other people think we are" (2005, p. 104). White women, having "one up/one down" identities as White and as woman, must recognize the power that comes with their Whiteness. Recognizing privilege means acknowledging that our societal norms allow White women to toggle their identities, meaning they can choose to be a woman and choose to be White. Combining these two social identities, White women can be both helpless without the helplessness being a reflection of all White people and powerful by occupying a position of power as any White person. Women of Color do not have the option of toggling their identities in this manner. When a Woman of Color acts, her actions at some level reflect upon her racial community, and she cannot centrifuge her racial identity from her womanhood. Through the presentation of a case study, I will delve deeper into how the "standard of humanity" privileges White women.

Privilege Manifested: A Case Study

A case study is presented below to illustrate how White privilege manifests. The PIE Model is used as a tool for identifying privileged identity behaviors (Watt, 2007).

Case Study

A group of student affairs professionals were in a meeting to discuss retention and wellness issues pertaining to a specific racial community on our campus. As the dialogue progressed, Anita, a woman of color, raised a concern about the lack of support and commitment to this community from Office X (including lack of measurable diversity training, representation of the community in question within the staff of Office X, etc.), which caused Susan from Office X, a White woman, to feel uncomfortable. Although Anita reassured Susan that her comments were not directed at her personally, Susan

began to cry while responding that she "felt attacked". Susan further added that: she donated her time and efforts to this community, and even served on a local non-profit organization board that worked with this community; she understood discrimination because her family had people of different backgrounds and her closest friends were members of this community; she was committed to diversity as she did diversity training within her office; and the office did not have enough funding for this community's needs at that time.

Upon seeing this reaction, Anita was confused because although her tone of voice had been firm, she was not angry. From Anita's perspective, the group had come together to address how the student community's needs could be met, which partially meant pointing out current gaps where increased services were necessary. Anita was very clear that she was critiquing Susan's office and not Susan, as Susan could not possibly be solely responsible for the decisions of her office.

The conversation of the group shifted at the point when Susan started to cry. From that moment, the group did not discuss the actual issue of the student community. Rather, they spent the duration of the meeting consoling Susan, reassuring her that she was not at fault. Susan calmed down, and publicly thanked Anita for her willingness to be direct, and complimented her passion. Later that day, Anita was reprimanded for her 'angry tone,' as she discovered that Susan complained about her "behavior" to both her own supervisor as well as Anita's supervisor. Anita was left confused by the mixed messages she received with Susan's compliment, and Susan's subsequent complaint regarding her.

Case Study Discussion Using the Privileged Identity Exploration Model

The PIE Model allows us to name the resistance that comes when people with privilege are challenged through dialogue (Watt 2007). What is especially useful about the PIE Model is that once we can recognize the defense mechanisms that come from such resistance, we can actually engage in authentic dialogue across social identities. Through this case, we are able to see the defense mechanisms manifested through Susan's actions, as informed by the PIE Model.

Initial Observations. In this case study, we have a White woman professional who felt challenged by a woman of color's criticisms of how a particular office met the needs of students of color. In this case, Susan assumed the persona of her office. While it was her office's practices that were challenged, she, in a sense, "became" her office and thus interpreted the "critique" of her office to

be a "direct attack" of her. The act of personifying one's office is commonly noticed among women in student affairs, likely due to their gender socialization of women as nurturers and providers of emotion-related support, which are also characteristics of the profession. Susan's Whiteness can be seen through this personification, because she is able to deny responsibility of racism by toggling identities-between her own individual identity and her self-as-conduit of Office X's identity.

Denial. Denial, as defined in the PIE Model, is the act of arguing against an anxiety by stating it does not exist. As would most persons who "feel attacked," Susan portrayed denial of any possible active or passive racism on the part of her office when it came to serving the racial community in question. Her active denial of Office X's responsibilities was based on her own personal experiences as a professional denying any ownership of personal racism, and yet her personal experiences also absolved Office X of any responsibility of owning racism, because she personified the office. Hence, "I do several diversity trainings," (code for "I am not racist") became Susan's foundation of her denial of the possibility that Office X was not meeting the needs of a specific student community (code for "therefore my office is not racist"). The act of toggling between self and office itself is a manifestation of denial of systemic racism.

Rationalization. As Susan defended her position, she also began to rationalize the status quo of her office. She admitted that the office did not have the funding to support the students in the way they needed, and therefore there was not much that could be done. Within our privileged identities, we often use rationalization as a tool to explain and justify the status quo, and because the argument we pose is 'rational," naturally those who challenge such a logical stance must be "irrational." Thus, in this scenario, Anita's criticisms became "irrational" compared to the rational argument presented by Susan.

False Envy. Susan claimed to understand discrimination because she had close friends and colleagues who were people of color. False envy is often a common defense tool, as it positions the person with White privilege, Susan, as not only someone who understands difference across race but also someone who transcends it, because she has positive relationships with people of color. As the PIE Model explains, false envy oversimplifies the complexity of the dialogue by assuming that it is merely about like versus dislike, while also removing the role that power might play in the dialogue.

Benevolence. Susan used her volunteer work with people of color to show her sensitivity to the community. Her emphasis on being on the board of a non-profit organization that serves this community also reinforced her commitment

to communities of color. Within the difficult dialogue, benevolence as a defense tool shifts the conversation to make the person with privilege, and her good intentions, the central focus of the discussion, further privileging her identity.

When Race and Gender Collide

These particular defense mechanisms could apply to any difficult dialogue across race without regard to gender. The collision of racial and gender identities becomes evident in the case study when the focus of the meeting shifts to consoling Susan after she starts to cry. Since Susan's emotional reaction aligned with the "standard of humanity" which is rooted in White norms, she received consolation, absolution of guilt, and ultimately, validation of her position, without a critical inquiry of the situation. From the point that Susan started crying, she was no longer held responsible for her actions, which also relieved Office X of its responsibilities; yet Anita was held accountable for causing the entire situation.

The PIE model serves as a tool to recognize the natural reactions that people with privilege have while engaging in difficult dialogues surrounding social identities. As educators, we have a responsibility not only to recognize these defense modes, but also to understand how they play out in relation to our other social identities. Perhaps the most effective use of this model is for self-evaluation so that we can recognize when we as educators exhibit these defense modes when our sense of entitlement based on privilege is challenged.

Strategies for Healthy Difficult Dialogues

As student affairs practitioners, we are the instruments through which we do our work. We take pride in our ability to understand the human spirit. While academic literature has certainly defined White privilege, how do we move from understanding the definition to applying this understanding as we negotiate difficult dialogues surrounding White privilege? Liberalism encourages us to embrace a color-blind paradigm without considering how White norms become universal norms (Cochran, 1999). Using these universal norms as our barometers for assessment of leadership, success, and conflict resolution, we further perpetuate a system of White privilege, despite our best intentions. If there is one thing I have learned as a practitioner in student affairs, it is because of my best intentions that I actively choose not to recognize how I use my self-as-instrument to protect and sustain my own privileged identities. Based on the discussion presented, I offer four strategies to foster healthy difficult dialogues:

1. In difficult conversations, remember the goal of the conversation. White privilege allows you to shift the conversation about you and your feelings and away from the original goal of the conversation.
2. Instead of blanketing "assumption-observations," be specific about your observations. Rather than "You are angry," be specific about your observations- "I noticed that when I said X, you were impacted in Y manner." Be clear on not only naming emotions, but the cause/root of those emotions. We often do not hold ourselves accountable for our actions within our privileged spaces which leads us to the underlying assumption that things just mysteriously "happen."
3. Privilege is not just about our social identities, but associated with the behaviors that are normalized within those social identities. Which behaviors do you privilege (crying, lower tone of voice, direct eye contact), and which behaviors do you punish (anger, raised voices, indirect eye contact)? Recognize how certain preferred behaviors are associated with Whiteness, while problem/questionable behaviors are associated with different communities of color. Learn to recognize when you are in a position to be an ally, or a more effective administrator, by not assuming that because someone is crying they are helpless or innocent, or that because someone is using a raised voice they are uncooperative and unprofessional. Try to remove the value judgments that we have been taught to associate with specific physical representations of emotions.
4. Understanding race and healing racism are deeply connected, yet entirely different concepts. Create active dialogue spaces to recognize the differences and inter-relatedness of these concepts. White people should also actively talk about White racism in safe, separate, spaces to challenge themselves, their peers, and/or their staffs. This process should be rooted in empowerment, not guilt.

Conclusion

While these strategies are basic, they can assist in creating a healthy environment to have difficult conversations surrounding oppression and privilege. Applying these strategies, using the PIE model as a tool for self-assessment, can also change the institutional culture surrounding difficult dialogues further contributing to a campus environment where critical thinking is cultivated and encouraged at all levels. Our responsibility as educators committed to social justice, is to reframe our "standard of humanity," so that we are asking different questions, treating the actual cause of the conflicts presented to us and not their external symptoms, and challenging our own notions of "normal."

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