

Building Racial Coalitions: Limitations and New Directions to Teaching “White Privilege”

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ABSTRACT:

In this article, I pull from critical race theory, psychology, and philosophy to deconstruct the underlying psychological components that lead to “white fragility,” and I explore the limitations in current pedagogical approaches to teaching privilege. I argue that we adopt a more nuanced and context based understanding of “white privilege,” one that breaks down the concept into its two constituent parts: the “privilege/adversity paradigm” and “colonizer alignment privilege.” In the former, basic human physical or cultural traits are presented to students as capable of being beneficial or detrimental depending on context. In the latter, the ways in which people create contexts to favor specific traits as well as the various contexts individuals shift between are analyzed. If done properly, these approaches can validate the personal struggles of all students, help them to acknowledge their advantages, and guide them towards overcoming the psychological hurdles that prevent effective coalition building.

KEYWORDS:

Critical Race Theory, White Privilege, Diversity, Inclusion, Coalitions

We've got to face the fact that some people say you fight fire best with fire, but we say you put fire out best with water. We say you don't fight racism with racism. We're gonna fight racism with solidarity.

—Fred Hampton, Black Panther Party, 1969, (qtd. in Sonnie and Tracy 2011, p. 66)

INTRODUCTION

Lecturing on white privilege is one of the most contentious topics professors can face in the classroom. The act of broaching it can create pedagogical bottlenecks that lead to poor student evaluations, impacting the career prospects of instructors. It has thus been labeled the “Kiss of Death” (Nast 1999, 105). These issues are exacerbated for minority and female professors who, research has shown, are more likely to receive negative feedback, even when all other factors are controlled. This reveals, among other things, that evaluations largely do not measure teaching effectiveness and are more likely to reflect prejudices (see Bavishi et al., 2010; Boring et al., 2016). The remedy for the implicit bias inherent in evaluations would be, ironically, for students to understand the way privilege functions. Yet, not only is learning about privilege—more specifically white male privilege—too uncomfortable for many, a recent study has shown that it can actually make white people less sympathetic to poor white people while not eliciting any greater levels of sympathy for people of color (Cooley et al., 2019). The outcome can then be a downward spiral particularly for female and minority professors who attempt to engage in the subject. As a result, instructors of all backgrounds tend to avoid the topic.

For those willing to teach this divisive content, further exacerbating the issue is a simple question: What do minority students gain when an instructor teaches white privilege? Conversely, what do female students gain when male privilege is taught? Oppressed people are generally not ignorant of their oppression. By and large, these students know, on some level, that they are being marginalized. This means, at best, during lessons on white privilege, the content is geared towards those with privilege, while the rest are expected to be content functioning as bystanders, watching their peers learn while thinking of their own plights. At worst, instructors use the struggles of students of color as props for the benefit of white students—examples of which I will delve into further on in this paper.

The solution I propose for this complicated and polarizing issue is to reorient our basic understanding of privilege. More specifically, in the following pages, I suggest that we no longer focus

our teaching on white privilege. Rather, I argue that we adopt a more nuanced and context based understanding of privilege that avoids the pitfalls associated with past strategies while eliciting the type of racial, gender, and sociocultural sensitivities that are at the heart of our ultimate goal. Pulling from critical race theory, psychology, philosophy, and pedagogy, I deconstruct the underlying psychological components that lead to “white fragility” and then speak to how current strategies on teaching privilege fail to address these psychological mechanisms. I move on to analyze the complexities of white privilege, breaking it down into its two constituent parts: the “privilege/adversity paradigm” and “colonizer alignment privilege.” In the former, basic human physical or cultural traits are presented to students as capable of being beneficial or detrimental depending on context. In the latter, the ways in which people create contexts to favor specific physical or cultural traits are analyzed through a colonial lens.

In my classes, I have noticed that this approach avoids many of the problems encountered with teaching white privilege and helps students of color understand how privilege functions and can be altered, all while succeeding in improving intercultural relations by prioritizing inclusiveness and cross-cultural understandings. A small disclaimer, though, the methods I am articulating here function best as parts of larger efforts, such as making the works of diverse scholars integral to the construction of a syllabus, studying subject matter from the perspectives of various populations, and a conscience effort from instructors to acknowledge and correct their implicit biases. The types of cultural sensitivities that lead to coalition building are not the product of one lecture, because coalition building is an ongoing process that seeks to put the contributions and obstacles of different populations in dialogue with each other.

ORIGINS AND PITFALLS

W. E. B. Du Bois introduced the concept of whiteness as a “public and psychological wage” in his groundbreaking work, *Black Reconstruction in America* ([1935] 2007). With it, he created the theoretical bedrock through which later academics came to understand white privilege—notably among them being Theodore W. Allen with his work, *Class Struggle and the Origin of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race* (1975). Du Bois argued that whiteness provided meaningful compensation,

allowing poor whites to imagine that their station in life had value through the devaluation of blackness. This “psychological wage” effectively functioned to prevent or sever attempts at meaningful coalitions during Reconstruction in the South that could have been created within the southern working class, composed of black freedmen and poor whites, against the white propertied class who benefited the most from capitalism. Du Bois saw this failure at coalition building as enabling the racist politicians of the white Democratic Party to regain control of state legislatures, allowing them to pass Jim Crow Laws and effectively disenfranchise blacks and poor whites in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, although at different levels.

Recognizing and eventually naming these oppressive and divisive structures as

“white privilege” became an important step towards greater social equity, but teaching these structures creates a stumbling block. This is partly due to a psychological bias called the headwind/tailwind asymmetry. Pioneered by Shai Davidai and Tom Gilovich (2016), this theory argues that there is a bias in how people assess the benefits and barriers they encounter in their lives. Because we have to expend our energy to overcome our trials, we are more aware of our adversities than our advantages, similar to how cyclists can feel themselves struggle against a headwind impeding their speed but think little of a tailwind pushing them forward. Consequently, we are also more likely to see how others do not struggle with the particular issues that affect us, which may lead to morally questionable behavior as we attempt to even the scales. Davidai and Gilovich apply this model from things as diverse as understanding how siblings think the other has it easier to how Democrats and Republicans view the workings of the electoral map as skewing in favor of the opposing side. Relating this to our classrooms, it means that when we teach “white privilege,” we are asking white students to fight against this psychological predisposition, to be acutely aware of the advantages their ethnic group receives as well as the struggles other groups endure. This can be upsetting for many.

Attempting to get white students past this and to see that, in comparison, they have more unearned privilege than people of color, can actually lead to another problem: the backfire effect. Coined by Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, this theory stipulates that when presented with factual information that contradicts long-held views, people may actually recoil and “support their original opinion even more strongly” (2010, 307). Anyone who has ever argued about politics, especially in the past few years, has seen this occur firsthand. While it may seem counterintuitive, this recoil makes more sense when we

understand that the parts of the brain activated by physical pain are also affected by social pain (DeWall, et al., 2010). In the same manner our hands pull away after touching a hot stove, our minds recoil from painful information. When the topic of race is discussed, these psychological reactions working in tandem largely reveal themselves as “white fragility.”

This leaves educators in a difficult position. Using facts and research, we are expected to guide students to be as aware of their privileges as they are of their adversities, but doing so may contradict their long-held views of the seriousness of their own struggles, making them so uncomfortable that they psychologically retreat, digging back into their previous ways of thinking. To further compound issues, popular teaching methods for white privilege are largely ineffective or are, in themselves, unthinkingly racist. There are three activities I will evaluate here, which I label as: “The Trash Can,” “Stepping into the Circle,” and “The Race.”

The instructions on how to use the first method, “The Trash Can,” went “viral” due to an article published on BuzzFeed by Nathan Pyle (2014). Since then, this method can be found on numerous pedagogical websites, even being published in an instructional handout by the non-profit organization Empowering Education (2016). In it, a teacher places a recycling bin, or in some versions a trash can, in the front of the room, hands each student a piece of paper, and the students then have to wad up the paper and attempt to sink it into the trash from their seats. The idea is that the room represents the country, with the elite sitting in the front and the disadvantaged in the back, and even though everyone has the opportunity to make the shot, the privileged elite have a much easier time.

While a relatively neutral exercise, it does not teach students how to recognize and identify the social constructs in which they are privileged and why. Thus, it does not translate well to lived experiences. As Rebecca Y. Kim expresses in her article, “Teaching Race at Anti-Berkeley and Beyond,” white students will argue that due to affirmative action programs and scholarships earmarked for minorities and/or women, historically privileged students will see themselves as disadvantaged. As one of her students stated, “Now it sucks to be a white male” (qtd. in Kim 2008, 75). Insights from the headwind/tailwind asymmetry would have predicted such results, suggesting that white students could easily interpret this exercise to mean that people of color are sitting closer to that proverbial basket than they are, rendering the entire activity ineffective.

“Stepping into the Circle” does more to address the specific contexts surrounding individual struggles, but it is also deeply personal. Students are directed to stand in a circle, and a teacher reads from a list of identifying characteristics or personal struggles, such as race, gender, sexuality, poverty, etc. Each time a student hears something that corresponds to their lives, they step into the circle, then step out. Instructions on how to perform and analyze this activity in the classroom are published on the website of the Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work at the University of Southern California (Goldbach 2019). This activity is meant to help students see the various ways we all struggle, but, in practice, it asks students to engage in a process of disclosure, to be vulnerable for the benefit of the class. The problem is that the people who struggle the most, largely students of color, are the ones who are most vulnerable, meaning that they are sharing their pain to show others, mostly white students, the various ways they have privilege.¹ Yet, what are these students getting from this emotional labor? Expecting them to perform this act of disclosure for the benefit of white students is deeply unfair and troubling, and may even be traumatizing for the students involved.

The last activity, “The Race,” is similar to “Stepping into the Circle,” but it is by far the most injurious. Adam Donyes, founder and president of Link Year—a Christian program for high school and college students—made this method famous in a video first posted on YouTube in September of 2017, garnering over 35 million views.² It was even tweeted by talk show hosts Ellen DeGeneres and James Corden. In it, Donyes stands in front of a diverse group of college-aged youths and tells them that they will race for a hundred dollar bill. He positions them at the starting line, but before they begin, he tells them that they can take two steps forward for each time they identify with a series of statements: parents still married, have access to private education, do not need an athletic scholarship to pay for college, do not deal with food insecurity, etc. While he does not directly mention race in these initial statements, the subtext of white privilege is clear. By the end of his statements, he asks the students in front, all white males, to turn around and look at how far ahead they are of the overwhelmingly black students in the back. He then pontificates on the unfair nature of privilege, and states, “The reality is that if this was fair

¹ This is not unlike the ways in which professors of color who teach on their cultural background are expected to engage in personal disclosure for the benefit of the students as an effective means to ease anxiety (see Sue et al., 2011).

² While the original has been taken down, the video has been reposted numerous times and a high quality version can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdNvJr9z2BU>.

race and everybody was back on that line, I guarantee you that some of these black dudes would smoke all of you!”

In the comments section of the video, many people talk about how inspiring they found this method, and then, of course, others point to the few white students in the back as proof that white privilege does not exist. When I first saw this video, my jaw dropped. Not only were the students in the back expected to reveal very personal information—such as not having food in the fridge—the extent of their struggles physically materialized in front of them as an expansive distance to traverse. This could encourage these youths to see themselves as victims, as the gravity of their challenges seem that much more overwhelming, that much more impossible to overcome. To have the white men in front turn around and look at them was to ask those students to pity them. People of color who are struggling do not need pity—our society needs equity. As one last testament to inequity, Donyes still had them run this race. The least he could have done was have everyone turn around and run in the opposite direction so those in the back could have had a better opportunity to win the money and those in the front could see how hard it is to run a race from so far behind.

Even with all of this effort, a recent study suggests that these lessons do not actually increase sympathy by white people for the plights of people of color. Rather, such lessons have no impact on social conservatives, while social liberals, in particular, are simply less likely to empathize with poor white people, viewing their shortcomings as resulting from their own failures (Cooley, et al., 2019). This creates further divisions between white communities while not encouraging productive coalitions between races, coalitions that Du Bois saw as necessary to securing equality.

These are the disheartening realities of the tribulations we face teaching white privilege, but there is no reason we must continue this way. Rather than teach privilege by attempting to force unwilling students to see the racially hierarchical nature of our society or pushing emotional labor onto our students of color, I argue that we need to deconstruct white privilege into its constituent parts, teaching it as two separate theories: the privilege/adversity paradigm and colonizer alignment privilege. If done properly, it can validate the personal struggles of all students, disempower, the backfire effect, and open the door for students of all backgrounds to see how their advantages and hurdles materialize differently depending on context, as well as how they can change those contexts.

THE PRIVILEGE/ADVERSITY PARADIGM

In her seminal essay, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” Peggy McIntosh describes white privilege as “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks” (1989, 10). She viewed privilege not as an unearned advantage but as the act of conferring dominance over other groups. This articulation is similar to how Du Bois theorized the concept of a psychological wage, meaning that privilege is the result of positioning people in a hierarchical system. McIntosh, however, also recognizes the existence of multiple hierarchies and sees them as interlocking: “Since race and sex are not the only advantaging systems at work, we need similarly to examine the daily experience of having age advantage, or ethnic advantage, or physical ability, or advantage related to nationality, religion, or sexual orientation” (1989, 12). As a white female scholar, McIntosh could analyze, from a first person perspective, the benefits conferred on her due to her skin as well as the hardships endured due to being a female in the academy, which gave her an important vantage point in examining how multiple systems of power navigate privilege and oppression.

Being aware of the different systems we operate in and the manners in which our physical or cultural inheritance positions us is foundational to a productive discussion of privilege. The concept of hierarchy early on, though, limits the type of conversations we can have as it instantly encourages individuals to find themselves within that structure, often leading to defensiveness or accusatory statements. By temporarily removing hierarchies from our analyses while maintaining conversations on how we move between different social contexts, I argue that we can create a dialogue with students that is not polarizing.

I do this through my theory of the privilege/adversity paradigm, which stipulates that each aspect of who we are creates certain privileges and adversities depending on the context. Contrary to McIntosh, the definition of privilege I use removes the concept of oppression, as that suggests hierarchy. I view privilege as an unearned right, a special advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group of people. By extension, I define adversity as a state, condition, or instance of serious or continued difficulty. Suggesting that every trait we have has both upsides and downsides lowers the affective filters of students, making them more willing to contemplate the idea.

In my classes, I then take a relatively neutral characteristic, something less likely to carry an emotional or racial charge, and I trace it through different contexts. Height, for instance, carries a visible advantage. Studies have shown that height correlates with earnings and socio-economic status, with taller people seen as attractive, successful, and as authority figures (see Case and Paxson 2008; Judge and Cable 2004; Stulp et al. 2012; Turrell 2002). These people, however, also deal with countless issues: clothes cost more as they often need to be special ordered; houses with low ceilings cause them to stoop; showerheads tend to be positioned too low, making them shower while crouched; airplane seats do not have enough legroom; and strangers may find their presence on the street at night more intimidating. In class, I like to show an image of a college freshman trying to use an elliptical machine in his dorm room, but due to his considerable height, he had to remove the ceiling tile to keep from bumping his head, meaning we do not see his head in the image as it is literally in the ceiling. The laughter the image generates relaxes students, primes them to see the various ways a physical characteristic can be both good and bad, and it makes it easier to bring in weightier material, as we move away from analyzing race neutral physical characteristics and towards the treatment of cultural traits.

I choose to bring in my own personal experiences to show how culture works in the same manner, but instructors should do whatever they feel to be most comfortable. I detail how—as a native Spanish speaker who learned English in school—American society is simply not set to handle bilingualism. Although I was born and raised in California, schools kept trying to take me out of mainstream classes, even though I spoke impeccable English and regularly scored among the highest in my grade in standardized tests. Throughout my life, I have been asked by people of authority if I spoke English, and my doctoral program required me to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), even though I have a bachelor's degree in English and comparative literature from a US based university—the argument for this being that I could not have two native languages. Yet, speaking both English and Spanish also meant that I was more desirable as an applicant for service industry jobs in California. Since Spanish is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, traveling internationally became much simpler. Speaking Spanish even made it easier to learn French, since the two languages share roots. Monolingual people are often acutely aware of these latter benefits of being bilingual, especially when applying for jobs, but few would consider the drawbacks I listed. Conversely, many Spanish-speaking students have shared these same struggles, so hearing of the advantages that

come with bilingualism, especially in international contexts, can be a source of empowerment, helping to balance the struggles.

Most importantly, in using this method, it is important to validate everyone in the room. I tell them that everyone has struggled—that things like addiction, depression, or suicide affect all populations, and when we think of ourselves as having privilege, it does not negate the real hardships we have endured in our lives, however unequally those are distributed among populations. Conversely, we have also all had moments where we have benefitted from our contexts, whether it is because of our height or our language abilities. With that lesson, students are more likely to see the basic components of their physical and cultural selves as equals, as capable of giving them advantages or problems depending solely on context. The privilege/adversity paradigm then encourages them to be grateful for the advantages they receive, and studies have shown that gratitude is good for our emotional well-being (Watkins, Woodward, Stone, and Kolts, 2003).

COLONIZER ALIGNMENT PRIVILEGE

Colonialism creates a new cultural context—it is the means by which privilege becomes hierarchical. Thus, when it comes to broaching the topic of racial privilege, colonialism must be discussed, for it frames the world we move within through subjugation, domination, and the delineation of power dynamics. Colonialism is inseparable from conversations on privilege, and its impact is not limited to only issues on race. The end result of settler colonialism is to create an environment where the social groups of the colonizers benefit the most. Those who are physically, culturally, or socially aligned with them reap these benefits as well. For example, the founding fathers of the United States of America were largely upper class, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, white men. The privileges created by this structure are regularly encapsulated by the concept of white privilege, but that term fails to recognize the multivocality of oppression and its systems that are often not concerned with race. Poor white men had to fight for the right to vote, as did black men, and white women, and women of color. In fact, every population that did not simultaneously fit into each of the overarching identity categories of the founding fathers has had to fight for some semblance of equality, many even engaging in compounded struggles

because of multiple systems of oppression acting upon them, which is discussed in more detail within the foundational article on intersectionality by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989).

When we introduce privilege in terms of whiteness to our white students, they intuitively touch on all of the ways they still struggle due to poverty, gender, sexuality, physical ability, and so on, leading them to see white privilege as a straw man argument. Conversely, the concept does not help our students of color recognize the ways in which their gender, or sexuality, or physical ability privileges them in this world. White privilege is an imperfect concept to adequately encapsulate intersectional systems of oppression, so I suggest that we recognize this limitation and instead use the term colonizer alignment privilege to represent the various seen and unseen ways in which a person derives privilege due to how aligned they are with the colonizers of an area. After all, even citizenship in the United States is in alignment with the colonizers and that status is a source of privilege for many.

The concept of colonizer alignment privilege also opens up a more nuanced discussion on how the effects of colonialism are consistently being renegotiated by the various actors involved. Aboriginal scholars Pat Dudgeon and John Fielder highlight these shifting dynamics in their article, “Third Spaces Within Tertiary Places,” where they apply Michel de Certeau’s articulations of “place” and “space” to understanding Australia as a colonial construct (2006). de Certeau sees place as “an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability” (2011[1984], 117), and it is managed by “strategy” dictated by the people in power. Place is then negotiated by two factors: an ingroup and control. The problem, however, is that control is never absolute as situations are always changing, which means aspects of the strategy regularly become obsolete and are slowly adjusted. Space, by contrast, deals with how places are actually being used, principally through “tactics,” which he describes as actions that are instantaneously being reassessed and corrected. In other words, a city designs infrastructure, but citizens decide if and how they will use it. While strategy is the domain of the powerful, tactics are the purview of the non-powerful. Using city parks as an example, the planned walkways are an instance of strategy, but the desire paths—unplanned footpaths communally created through the soil erosion caused by foot traffic—are the tactics by which the non-powerful negotiate space. They reveal how people are actually walking in the park. In de Certeau’s words, “Space is a practiced place” (2011[1984],117). According to Dudgeon and Fielder, colonialism is “where the

dispossessed have no choice other than making some ‘space’ in a ‘place’ now owned and controlled by the colonisers” (2006, 399). They go on to show that:

Colonisers use military, economic, cultural and social strategies to establish an imperial order that is managed and maintained. The idea of emphasizing the oppositional power and agency of the relatively powerless highlights how survival, making do, invisibility, secrecy, passive resistance, and so on, function tactically as ways of making space within this imposed order.... Relatively powerless groups have to operate tactically to simply survive and ‘make do’. This occurs at both an individual and collective level (Dudgeon and Fielder 2006, p. 399).

Using Homi Bhabha’s conception of the “third space,” Dudgeon and Fielder go on to argue that Indigenous Australians are creating space in the colonial structure of academia as part of a long-term goal of cultural renaissance. I expand on their argument by stating that through concerted and effective tactics, people who have been relegated to a seemingly powerless position can assert themselves and move from creating space to claiming place within a larger structure—they are finding ways to pave their desire paths.

Scholars have discussed place with this type of framework in other disciplines (Douglass and Friedmann 1998; Friedmann 2002; Holston 2008; Holston and Appadurai 1999, Rios 2010). Research on “insurgent citizenship,” for instance, shows how individuals on the margins of society force the state to provide them with infrastructure, access to health services, schools and childcare—insurgent citizenship “does not seek power for itself but an enlargement of the spaces of democracy” (Friedmann 2002, 75). Michael Rios uses this understanding in his conception of “assertive space,” defining it as a means of challenging existing codes or symbols by anchoring a sense of group or ethnic solidarity in an urban environment. As examples of assertive space, he uses Los Angeles’s Old Plaza and Olvera Street as well as Paseo Boricua in Chicago’s Humboldt Park neighborhood (2010, 103). His research on assertive space shows that a colonial structure can be home to numerous different conceptions of place, each reflecting the voices of those who inhabit it, who have a hand in molding the place through the specific tactics of insurgent citizenship.

This corresponds with research by Margaret Rodman, who argues that places “are not inert containers. They are politicized, culturally relevant, historically specific, local and multiple constructions” (1992, 641).

With this research as a framework, I delve into my larger argument—that various populations can create different articulations of place within a larger colonial structure. Through counterhegemonic practices, these populations are, essentially, colonizing their own “pockets” in larger spaces, creating new contexts that benefit different groups of people, which can take shape as ethnic enclaves in cities, cultural centers, or even scholarships earmarked for specific populations. The pairings of place/strategy and space/tactics can create heterotopias, worlds existing next to and within other worlds (Foucault 1966).

An example of this can easily be found on a university campus, namely student cultural centers. During graduate school, I was lucky enough to be a part of the Latino Cultural Center, and I saw the multiple layering that occurs within the university. Through the advocacy of students, faculty, and staff the university acquiesced to creating the center in the 1970s, which was designed to cater to the needs of Latino and Latin American students. In my time there, our director, a Latina, had an astute understanding of the strategies used to maintain the place that constitutes the university, and she knew how to navigate through them in order to secure funding for programming and to create a constructive place to facilitate the academic and emotional growth of the students. These students then utilized the culture center, and through tactics, created their own space by deciding how they would operate within the strategy of the center. I saw students go as far as developing their own cultural organizations, under the umbrella of the center, and during their meetings, they would articulate their own strategy for the place, forming worlds within worlds.

What this means for lessons on privilege is that people are moving between “pockets” designed for them and not for them. If we view colonialism as the creation of new cultural contexts designed to benefit specific populations, then these “colonial pockets” can exist while operating within a larger colonial construct. These pockets then create contexts where power structures are reoriented.

When paired with the privilege/adversity paradigm, this means that as people move between these colonial pockets, their physical, social, and cultural traits engender different privileges and

adversities. Problems then arise as individuals become acutely aware of the various adversities they might encounter in these contexts but remain unaware of the privileges bestowed by the larger colonial construct, because they are overly focused on the immediate adversity of the context they are in. This reaction is elegantly explained by the headwinds/tailwinds asymmetry discussed earlier.

In teaching this material, I do not delve into the more nuanced arguments of space/place and strategies/tactics. Instead, I make it a point to explain that immediate contexts are consistently shifting, which can make it hard for us to keep sight of the larger structures we benefit from. By seeing colonialism as a heterotopia, with different hierarchical structures at each level, we can validate the perceptions a student has of their struggles and lead them to become aware of their overarching privileges. We can also encourage marginalized students to make greater use of the pockets carved out for them and to show them that they are capable of carving out new areas for themselves.

THE POWER OF COALITIONS

My immediate objective with this article is to introduce new methods and theories to teach the complex realities of privilege to students, but my larger goal is to increase the propensity for society to engage in the meaningful building of coalitions. With the methods and theories outlined in this article, we can better prepare our students to engage in introspection and empathize with the plights of those around them, priming them to form the types of coalitions that can tackle larger social issues.

Du Bois' claim that the real success of the white Democratic Party of the time was the prevention of meaningful coalitions through turning whiteness into a "public and psychological wage" continues to resonate as true. Our academic research on white privilege has not done much to address this, to disempower the psychological racial divide. In fact, the idea of white privilege is regularly used as fodder to further the rift between ethnic groups. The divisiveness of the issue manifests within larger national politics as conservative commentators, such as Tucker Carlson, pose the question: "How can an unemployed white person in middle America have white privilege?" (Schwartz 2017). This idea that white struggle goes unrecognized is pervasive. In an article by *National Public*

Radio, sixty-eight year-old Tim Hershman stated, “If you apply for a job, they seem to give the blacks the first crack at it, and, basically, you know, if you want any help from the government, if you’re white, you don’t get it. If you’re black, you get it” (qtd. in Gonyea 2017). This same attitude is expressed by our students, such as when Rebecca Y. Kim’s student said, “Now it sucks to be a white male” (qtd. in Kim 2008, 75). The idea that white people are the ones truly struggling is perhaps nowhere more palpable than in the rallies of Donald Trump, which were part of one of the most divisive and racially tinged election cycles of American history. Yet, would this type of discourse still exist if conversations on privilege acknowledged how moving between different contexts results in consistently shifting social hierarchies? Could the acknowledgement that the majority of us are, to some extent, oppressed by overarching and dominating power structures lead us to unite against those structures?

When people reach across various social schisms to accomplish a greater good, progress occurs. The Rainbow Coalition of the late 1960s and early 1970s stands as a testament to Du Bois’ argument, showing the changes that could happen when impoverished communities unite across color lines and against systems of power. Active in Chicago, Illinois, the organization’s platform addressed the need to end political corruption, police brutality, urban renewal, and gentrification, putting the needs of neighborhoods over the desires of Mayor Richard Daley. They did this through grassroots organizing, teaching communities self-empowerment, and a commitment to ending race-based divisions in politics. They thus united poor ethnic groups from diverse backgrounds: the Illinois Black Panther Party (ILBPP), a political organization fighting against corruption; the Young Lords, a socially conscious Puerto Rican youth movement; the Young Patriots Organization, composed of Appalachian White Migrants; Black Student Unions from various campuses; and Rising up Angry, a subculture of disaffected white youths. Led by Fred Hampton of the ILBPP, their efforts created free breakfast programs for all disadvantaged children,³ free legal consultation, and eventually led to the election of Harold Washington, the first African American mayor of Chicago. Jakobi E. Williams even argues that the presidential election of Barack Obama in 2008 would not have been possible without a direct link to the Rainbow Coalition’s efforts in Chicago towards working across racial and class lines (2013, 2). The Rainbow Coalition was so effective at challenging power dynamics that FBI Chief John Edgar Hoover launched the Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) to take them down, resulting in the

³ This program was so effective that the City of Chicago began using federal funds to provide hot breakfasts to lower-income children across the city, and it ultimately led to the federal Child Nutrition Act (Williams 2013, 193).

assassination of Fred Hampton, lessening the strength of this coalition (Williams 2013). In the process, they proved du Bois correct, showing that meaningful coalitions could pose real and existential threats to systems of power.

A more nuanced and inclusive understanding of privilege could begin in our classrooms and radiate out. It could allow us to disempower the divisive rhetoric of extremist politicians who benefit from having a strong and devoted base predicated on antagonism rather than progress. It could show our students that the institutions we are born into do not have to define us. It could generate empathy by elucidating how most of us encounter real struggles in our daily lives—help us be aware of the psychological triggers that prevent us from acknowledging our privileges or recognizing the adversities faced by others.

I have been testing out this material and these approaches in my classrooms for six years, and I have never had a student complain or walk out upon encountering this material, even though I have been teaching in largely conservative areas, such as Indiana and Utah. Students have enrolled in my courses wearing the infamous MAGA hats, and, in the end, chose to remove them, not because they abandoned their worldview or switched to being

Democrats but because the rallying sentiments of “us against them” no longer held resonance. My classes do not shy away from politics, nor do I avoid discussing my own politics. Rather, I lean in to controversial topics, stating my opinions but also, when possible, acknowledging the valid viewpoints of the opposing side, demonstrating that discord often arises from different perspectives rather than inherent animosity. This allows students to more easily broach any and every controversial subject, from privilege to politics, feminism, racism, police brutality, systemic violence, gentrification, and so on— all of which my course “Latino Gangs and Cartels: Crime, Culture, and Social Networks” deals with directly. In the end, I am able to avoid the “kiss of death” in my evaluations, instead receiving comments, such as “I liked that the instructor challenged our worldview and introduced new ways of thinking” (Fall semester 2018). Universities are environments where our minds are meant to be challenged, and it is up to educators to find the best ways to do so.

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