Chapter 4
Reframing White Privilege

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ABSTRACT

Three undergraduate social work faculty began discussions about diversity education and experiences in the classroom. Being from diverse races—African American, indigenous, and white, brought a uniqueness of perspectives about teaching primarily white students about human diversity. One stumbling block, white privilege, appeared to be a concept where open discussion was stilted or absent, students began to disengage, and the authors, as instructors, became frustrated. Research on diversity education revealed these reactions to be a common barrier in teaching cultural competency. This chapter addresses the challenges of defining, creating awareness, reframing, and calling for social action to work toward equality. The experiences, teaching techniques, and the cultural lenses of the authors are shared.

THE CONCEPT OF WHITE PRIVILEGE

As higher education professionals, this group of three faculty have a combined experience of over 40 years of undergraduate social work teaching. The authors comprise social workers of diverse backgrounds—three women of African-American, Native American, and white races. Cultural competence is an expected outcome of what is taught. As instructors bringing new information to college students on previously undiscussed concepts, the weathering of student feedback includes negativism and labeling of being racist, biased, too liberal, angry, etc. As colleagues, dialogues about the resistance and barriers experienced in the classroom began, especially as it came to teaching cultural competence, most frequently from our white students.
Reframing White Privilege

The topics of whiteness and white privilege were notably the point where the invisible walls went up in the classroom. The barriers to conversation about different perspectives were apparent. Students would shut down; silence would prevail. Most of our white students have simply not thought of their race prior to being asked to consider it through coursework. They rarely, if ever, use it as a self-descriptor. Abrahms and Gibson (2007) assert that for many whites, whiteness and white privilege are invisible. Indeed, they espouse “that although whiteness is the central norm against which all other ethnic and racial groups are defined, measured, and differentially rewarded, most white individuals cannot, in fact, identify how they experience their own white identity or acknowledge what being white means to them” (p.151). For some, their white identity may be equated to negative images of “white supremacy” or “white trash” (Case, 2012). Fuller (2016) notes her students were more sensitive to whiteness and social class, as her working class white students are able to access some aspects, but not all aspects, of white privilege.

When racism, discrimination, oppression, marginalization, and white privilege are presented in the classroom, responses can differ. In our discussions, we found the race of the instructor affected the student response. When the instructor was white, the white students’ feedback was often a strong negative emotional response such as guilt, shame, or anger (Todd, Spanierman, & Alber, 2010; Torino, 2015). Our African American instructor described the response from white students to be nonverbal behaviors such as avoiding eye contact, tense body language, and/or surprised or confusing looks. White students then refused to respond to or ask questions. This inter-racial dynamic merits further research.

To white students, the term privilege means wealth, not dominance or power. The challenge of more in-depth racial self-exploration and greater understanding of pervasive social inequities among white students may be facilitated by reframing the concept of privilege to one of dominance and power. Reframing the concept of white privilege to one of dominance is not an impossible task, however, it is a difficult one in a classroom predominated by white students.

The authors began to gather literature to gain insight into the effectiveness of cultural competence training. A review of fifty-four instruments measuring cultural competence in the health professions concluded diversity education often expects knowledge and self-confidence to be sufficient for change without considering power and social inequality (Kumas-Tan, Beagan, Loppie, MacLeod, & Frank, 2007). Millennial students who regularly attest they are aware of difference, have learned the golden rule, and are quite confident that their futures will not be impacted by any diversity issues. A recommendation of these reviewers is to develop measures (or in the case of the classroom, experiences/activities) designed to raise awareness of cultural humility and/or assess actual cross-cultural behaviors. The authors indicate such are needed if educators hope to help students understand, teach, practice, and evaluate cultural competence (Kumas-Tan et al, 2007). Other researchers used a pre/post self-report of 104 white undergraduate students and reported changes in their perceptions and understanding of white privilege throughout the semester of their multicultural psychology course (Heinze & DeCandia, 2011).

Diversity Education

Examining what it means to be white and confronting the implications of white privilege are essential to the development of cultural competency. Abrahms and Gibson (2007) propose that educators work toward an anti-racist model of instruction with a greater focus on these issues. They assert that with regard to the mechanisms of social stratification, there is an “invisibility of whiteness as a social category that permits white individuals to personally deny how white privilege benefits their own lives. People of color on