Difficult Dialogues, Privilege and Social Justice: Uses of the Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) Model in Student Affairs Practice

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This article will introduce the Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) Model. This model identifies eight (8) defense modes associated with behaviors individuals display when engaged in difficult dialogues about social justice issues. Implications for the model and ways it can be used to assist facilitators as they engage participants in discussions about diversity are discussed.

If student affairs practitioners are to foster more diverse and welcoming campus environments for our students, then we must find ways to have more meaningful discussions about diversity, privilege, and social justice. Our college campuses as well as the global markets for college graduates are becoming more diverse. Higher education administrators are searching for ways to prepare college students today to be productive workers in settings populated with individuals from various social, political, ethnic and racial backgrounds. While students attending college today may have been exposed to diversity (Coomes & Debard, 2004), they likely have not thoroughly explored their own identity and what it means to function honorably in a multicultural community. Therefore, America's higher education institutions need to encourage the youth of today to engage in *difficult dialogues* that help them to thoroughly examine their privileged identities.

The purpose of this article is to introduce the Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) model that represents behavior often presented by individuals when engaged in difficult dialogues about diversity, privilege, and social justice. I will begin by defining the terms diversity, privilege, social justice, multicultural competence, and difficult dialogues. Additionally, I will discuss the challenges I face when facilitating workshops and classes on the topic of diversity. Finally, I will introduce the PIE model.

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Diversity, Privilege, and Social Justice

There are many ways to define diversity. For the purposes of this special issue, the term *diversity* refers to raising awareness about promoting inclusion of historically oppressed groups (i.e. racial minorities, women, people with disabilities) and developing an appreciation of cultural difference (Goodman, 2001). Social justice goes beyond raising awareness and addresses "issues of equity, power relations, and institutionalized oppression" (Goodman, 2001, p. 5). Social justice requires that individuals challenge dominant ideology and advocate change in institutional policies and practices (Goodman, 2001). To advocate for social justice, individuals must raise their awareness and reevaluate the dominant value system that operates within the American culture. This awareness about diversity comes as one develops critical consciousness about his/her own privileged status. According to Freire (1970), critical consciousness is the ability to assess and take action against the social, political, and economic elements of oppression in a society. As Peggy McIntosh's (1989) essay entitled *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* has pointed out, critical consciousness about sociopolitical issues often comes when one confronts his or her own privilege.

Multicultural Competence and Critical Consciousness

There has been a significant amount of research in the counseling and student affairs fields that describes the route to raising critical consciousness (e.g. Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller, 2004; Arrendondo, 1999). Regardless of the route, critical consciousness does not come without one engaging in difficult conversations and facing what it means to be privileged. According to Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller (2004), a multiculturally competent student affairs professional is aware of his/her own assumptions, biases, and values; possesses an understanding of the worldview of others; is informed about various cultural groups; and has acquired the skills to develop appropriate intervention strategies and techniques. Additionally, he/she has the ability to integrate this knowledge throughout other core competency areas of student affairs practice (i.e. administrative and management, helping and advising, teaching and training, etc.). Extending that definition, I suggest that being competent in this area means that he/she also understands that one will never reach an ultimate level of knowledge and awareness about self and various cultural groups. One understands that his/her identity, awareness, and skills are constantly evolving in response to new information being received about the self or the other. Therefore, a multiculturally competent student affairs professional is continually seeking to raise his/her awareness and develop skills that help him/her to effectively address diversity and social justice issues. This requires that he/she develop the stamina to sit with discomfort, to continuously seek

critical consciousness, and to engage in difficult dialogues. In part, becoming culturally competent involves becoming aware of one's own privileged status in relation to racism, sexism, ableism, classism, etc. on a personal and political level. Most often, that awareness comes through having emotionally charged dialogue with others.

Difficult Dialogues

A *difficult dialogue* is a verbal or written exchange of ideas or opinions between citizens within a community that centers on an awakening of potentially conflicting views of beliefs or values about social justice issues (such as racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism/homophobia). Discussions about diversity, privilege and social justice are often sources of discomfort for faculty, staff, and students on college campuses. Student affairs professionals are the appropriate campus constituents to lead these discussions and must search for ways to effectively facilitate these uncomfortable dialogues. This type of discomfort often leads to one feeling that he/or she is being attacked and the need or requirement to defend oneself or one's views. To do so, student affairs practitioners must be able to assess and manage defenses used by those engaged in these exchanges. Defensive behaviors related to a privileged identity can be displayed in reaction to protecting one's existence not only with regard to race, but also other dominant identities such as a being heterosexual or able-bodied. These defensive reactions often surface during workshops or courses where individuals are in training to increase their multicultural competence. As student affairs professionals, we have seen individuals both engage in and retreat from these conversations. Those who facilitate these difficult dialogues about racism, homophobia, and ableism in educational settings often feel helpless when conversations become heated. Since dialogue is so necessary to critical consciousness, student affairs practitioners need to expound upon ways to facilitate difficult dialogues between constituents in educational settings so that environments are made more welcoming. There are, however, many challenges one faces when facilitating discussions that contribute to raising critical consciousness.

Challenges in Raising Critical Consciousness

As a student affairs practitioner and faculty member for over 10 years, I have facilitated a number of workshops and taught many courses on topics of diversity and social justice. Although I have taught courses on these topics in two regions of the United States (South and Midwest), my classes primarily include students who are White, middle-class, heterosexual and, often, female. I face challenges in teaching a homogeneous group of students with chiefly dominant identities. Being both African American and female, I deal with the negative perceptions associated with both my race and my gender, which often

motivates students to undermine me despite the power that is inherent to my professor/workshop leader role. I manage resistant and emotionally volatile reactions of students who are not culturally used to dealing with discomfort as it relates to their social or political identity. Facing these challenges prompted me (1) to search the literature for practical strategies to approach teaching the topics of diversity and social justice, and (2) to conduct research that examined participant reactions to difficult dialogues.

In reviewing the literature and conducting my own research, I learned that it is difficult for students to separate how they evaluate the learning experience from how they personally feel about the instructor and the course content. My experience was supported by research concluding that in many situations, female, gay/lesbian, or racial minority instructors are often rated lower on course evaluations than their counterparts and this can be linked to perceptions of instructor attributes (Nast, 1999; Steiner, Holley, Gerdes, & Campbell, 2006; Williams, Dunlap, & McCandies, 1999). Approximately 8% of the faculty teaching at universities today are racial minority (Wilson, 2002). Therefore, most college students have been primarily exposed to faculty who are White and male. Given that many students have had limited exposure to female, gay/lesbian, or racial minority instructors, it is not surprising that their perceptions of the instructor and the content of these courses becomes intermingled. These intermingled perceptions can motivate students to respond with resistance to class discussion that creates dissonance and introduces uncertainty about how they view the world. I discovered through conducting research that participant responses to difficult dialogues have patterns (i.e., Watt, Curtiss, Drummond, Kellogg, Lozano, Tagliapietra, Nicoli, & Rosas, in preparation). I learned that if I can anticipate these patterns, then I can be better prepared to respond in a productive way.

Resistance can be expected, especially when teaching homogenous groups of students with primarily dominant cultural identities (i.e. Goodman, 2001; Mio & Awakuni, 2000). There are frameworks that help practitioners understand students' reactions during difficult dialogues about the differences between those with dominant and marginalized identities. For instance, Bennett (1986) developed the Intercultural Sensitivity model which describes a range of responses individuals have to difference. My review of the literature affirmed that creating experiences that draw a connection between emotion and intellect is a necessary part of unlearning social oppression (Young and Davis-Russell, 2002). While it is often uncomfortable to experience, I find that the most effective teaching strategy is to stimulate students to both think and feel.
Next, I will describe the background of the model, its underlying concepts, assumptions, and definitions and present examples of typical reactions.

Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) Model

The Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) model identifies eight defensive reactions which occur when one is being encouraged to reflect on their social, political, and economic position in society (see Figure 1). The term *privileged identity* refers to an identity that is historically linked to social or political advantages in this society. Privileged identities include not only racial (White), but also sexual (Heterosexual), gender (Male), and ability (Able-bodied) identity.

The PIE model is designed to assist practitioners who are using strategies that are focused on raising individual's critical consciousness by encouraging them to dialogue about their privileged identities. Practitioners can use the model as a tool to help them anticipate defensive behaviors and devise a strategy to prevent productive dialogue from being derailed.

Background. This model is based on the results of research that examined participant responses to difficult dialogues about racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism (Watt et. al., In Process). From 2001 to 2006, the research team collected qualitative data including personal narratives and reaction papers (over 200 papers) written by seventy-four helping professionals in training before, during and at the end of an annual offering of a course in multiculturalism. The research team assessed the reactions to difficult dialogues about social justice issues for master's level helping professionals in training. This preliminary investigation included nine participants and their twenty-seven reaction and narrative papers. The research question addressed by this analysis was: In what ways do students express resistance in reaction to difficult classroom dialogues about racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism? The results of the study indicated that there were eight identifiable behaviors or defense modes displayed by these participants.

Theoretical Foundation

Defense modes are primal responses as defined in psychodynamic theory and the work of Sigmund Freud (1937). In other words, defenses are displayed to protect the ego when one has a provoking experience that puts one's conception of the self into question. The PIE model is a conceptual framework that is grounded in psychodynamic theory in that the eight behaviors identified in the model are primal responses one has to cognitive dissonance introduced by a new awareness (dissonance provoking stimuli) about self or the other. Cognitive dissonance, as described by Festinger (1964), refers to the tension one feels when holding at the same time two incompatible cognitions. Figure 1 depicts a relationship between the defenses and a new awareness that is not hierarchical, but is directional. In other words, it does not describe a series of

defense modes displayed by those who are beginners in exploring their privilege and another set of defenses used by those more experienced at exploring their privilege. Instead it identifies primal responses individuals have when being introduced to a new awareness about an issue related to diversity and social justice, regardless of their years exploring these issues.

Fear and Entitlement. The concepts of fear and entitlement undergird the entire conceptual framework and are the base of the figure (see Figure 1). Fear and entitlement are considered innate responses to the threat of change to one's conception of his or her social role. Fear is "to be afraid or feel anxious or apprehensive about a possible or probable situation or event" (Wordnet). In the PIE model, fear is the reason one may avoid and ultimately defend against going deeper in exploring their privileged identity. Entitlement is "an attitude that presumes ownership and power based on social/political contracts" (Watt, 1999). In the PIE model, entitlement can be viewed as another version of fear. When facing what it means to be privileged, individuals may unconsciously fear giving up power, and use defenses to retreat back to the comfort that exists within their dominant identity. Entitlement may also explain why individuals present defensive behaviors during dialogue. They view their participation in the exploration of their privileged identity as optional. In other words, they do not have to go deeper in exploring their privileged identity and they use defensive behaviors to avoid it. Fear and entitlement are underlying motivators for defensive behaviors presented during difficult dialogues. Thus fear and entitlement are the motivators, albeit unconscious, for presenting a defense mode.

Six Assumptions. There are six assumptions to the PIE model. 1). The exploration of privileged identity is an on-going socialization process. 2). There is no ultimate level of consciousness that can be reached regarding one's privileged identity. 3). Engaging in difficult dialogue is a necessary part of unlearning social oppression (i.e. racism, sexism/heterosexism/homophobia, and ableism). 4). Defense modes are normal human reactions to the uncertainty that one feels when exploring their privileged identities in more depth. 5). Defense modes are expressed in identifiable behaviors. 6). Expressions of defense modes may vary by situation.

Categories and Defense Modes

The eight defense modes are described below categorized by behaviors one exhibits when *Recognizing, Contemplating, or Addressing* his or her privileged identity. As you can see in Figure 1, the defenses are presented over a range in response to an initial presentation of new and dissonance provoking awareness and continue through taking socially just action related to this new awareness.

Recognizing Privilege Identity describes reactions when individuals initially are presented with anxiety provoking stimuli about social injustice. They include *Denial, Deflection or Rationalization. Contemplating Privileged Identity* explains participant reactions when they are beginning to think more intently about stimuli related to diversity and social injustice and they may display *Intellectualization, Principium, or False Envy* defenses. *Addressing Privileged Identity* portrays behaviors of participants who are attending to their dissonant feelings about social injustice related to this new awareness, and are involved in some action to resolve the issue. They may express the defenses of *Benevolence or Minimization.* Once these defenses are presented, they can hinder productive dialogue about issues related to diversity and social justice. Below I will describe each defense mode and give an example of the behavior.

Recognizing Privileged Identity

Denial. A Denial defense can be identified by a person arguing against an anxiety provoking stimuli by stating that it does not exist. This defense is usually precipitated by receiving information about an injustice done in American society to a particular group. Persons displaying Denial may acknowledge the injustice, but make contradictory statements that indicate that they are having difficulty accepting it as a reality. For instance, in response to hearing new information about how skin color can gain or deny a person access to resources in American society, one might say "I worked hard for where I am today and deep down I don't really want to recognize my White privilege because I don't want to have this White privilege and I am not sure it exists. I just don't believe it exists, I mean look at how many Blacks are on television today." This defense describes a primal response where the individual is having difficulty processing the difference in her reality and that of people of color in America, therefore denying the information she is receiving by stating evidence to the contrary.

Deflection. A person employing a Deflection defense may make a comment that avoids coming to terms with the realities of racism or heterosexism by deflecting the focus toward a less threatening target such as a parent or the school system. For example, in response to being introduced to a thought-provoking article about racism, an individual might state, "One thing I can say for sure is I have some anger at the school system for not teaching me about multicultural issues. We were never taught about the privileges White people have. In fact, as I grew, I rarely thought about racism unless I heard or read something that had to do with it which wasn't very often." This person's primal reaction is to focus on the school system as the cause for her dissonance and to explain why she was not taught this information earlier.

Rationalization. A Rationalization defense can be identified by behavior in which an individual supplies a logical response regarding why atrocities happen in the realm of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism. An individual might present an alternative reason that does not require him or her to explore the roots of injustice in more depth. In response to a discussion about injustice done to sexual minorities, a person might respond,

> A lesbian friend of mine says it hurts that I can't accept all of her. Her sexual identity is important to her and it causes her pain that my not accepting this part of her puts a blemish on our friendship. I too say the same thing about my religious beliefs and yet by saying so I am branded intolerant and ignorant. The opposite side needs to accept the idea that others can like them and not accept this part of them.

A primal response in this case included a comparison and a contrast of experiences to attempt to resolve the dissonance brought about by this conflict.

Contemplating Privileged Identity

Intellectualization. An Intellectualization defense can be identified when a person avoids feeling dissonant by focusing on the intellectual aspects associated with the topics of social injustice. For example, one person might state, "I realize that racism exists and that Latinos experience racism. But it is just a matter of numbers and American jobs. If we focus on making the climate better, then more illegal immigrants will come to America and that will make it so that there are less opportunities for Americans and enough of our own are unemployed and homeless." This person's primal response is to attempt to resolve the dissonance by presenting intellectual arguments to explain why this injustice is happening.

Principium. A Principium defense can be identified by behaviors where one is avoiding exploration based on a religious or personal principle. A person using this defense might state, "I find it upsetting and disheartening that homosexuals, or anyone for that matter, would have to bear such injustices. However, I do not believe that it is an injustice or discriminatory act to not allow homosexuals couples to cross the threshold of qualifications to be married." The primal response in this defense is based on a principle and that rule is used to explain the contradiction of feelings and to attempt to alleviate the conflict.

False Envy. A False Envy can be identified by behavior that displays affection for a person or a feature of a person in an effort to deny the complexity of the

social and political context. For example, a person might respond to a discussion about racial injustice by stating, "Sometimes I wish I were a different race. Yes, being White is nice sometimes, but I think that people of other races are cool. They have an identity to claim as unique, that bends the social rules of normal, yet they are still normal and very strong. And what I wouldn't give to have a tan all of the time". A primal response in this defense includes a shift toward various surface-level admirations and an avoidance of a deeper exploration of the complexities of race in society.

Addressing Privileged Identity

Benevolence. A Benevolence defense is when one presents behavior that displays an overly sensitive attitude toward a social and political issue based on a charity act. The following statement is an example of this defense, "I have attended numerous fundraisers to help members of my community who are ill, disabled or have suffered some type of devastation. Each time I have felt overwhelmed by the feelings of support and gratitude expressed by those receiving the help. I know that injustice exists, but I feel like if I keep helping those who are less fortunate than I, then I can make a difference". This primal responses focuses on acts of goodwill rather than how reaching down to help those less fortunate than yourself can contribute to maintaining the current dominant society structure. These responses avoid exploring how acts of charity are centered on both the power of the giver and the powerlessness of the target population.

Minimization. A Minimization defense can be identified by comments that reduce the magnitude of a social and political issue down to simple facts. In response to a discussion about cross-cultural values, a person might respond, "I would like to learn about other cultures, what they want to be called, whether or not to maintain eye contact, and what some of their values are. It seems like if I can learn some of these details, and then I will know what to do in cross-cultural situations". A primal response in this defense shifts the focus away from wrestling with the magnitude of social injustice and toward sharing a recipe for cross-cultural interaction.

General Practical Suggestions for Managing Defensive Reactions

Managing defensive reactions effectively results in deeper and more meaningful discussions about diversity and social justice. In general, the PIE Model reminds us that there are patterns in human behavior. While the model does not describe all reactions, it does identify a subset. Student affairs practitioners can use what we know about human behavior in this realm, anticipate reactions, and devise strategies to respond to difficult dialogues. Broadly, the PIE model and other similar frameworks (i.e., Bennett, 1986) help remind practitioners how difficult and complex a process it is to raise critical consciousness.

The PIE model assists me as a facilitator in three ways. The model helps me to remember that the defenses my students display are primal and normal. Therefore, it is imperative that I generate unconditional positive regard and non-judgmental understanding for my students. Second, the PIE model helps me to bear in mind that the journey to critical consciousness can be fatiguing. As a facilitator who is charged with the primary responsibility of managing these defenses, I have to monitor my own energy. I have to not only recognize these defenses in others, but I may display them myself. It can be exhausting to manage the many reactions presented during these dialogues. Therefore, I need to acknowledge and affirm the fatigue expressed by my students and felt by myself. While I acknowledge fatigue as a legitimate feeling, I also keep at the forefront of my mind that being tired does not excuse any of us from doing the work necessary for creating a climate on our campuses that is more welcoming for students of all races, genders, sexual orientations, and abilities. Third, I view the PIE model as a step toward moving the conversations about diversity and social justice forward. The model attempts to define behaviors that have the potential to stagnate these conversations. Peggy McIntosh (1989) defined White privilege and identified acts. Prior to her list, this very important concept remained in the abstract. Once she illustrated White privilege, conversations about race and racism began to move forward. I must remember that we need to continue to dissect the process for raising critical consciousness to provide stepping blocks to a forward-moving conversation about diversity and social justice.

Conclusion

Discussions about diversity are often sources of discomfort for students. However, students' awareness of their social and political identity increases once they engage in discussions about diversity, privilege and social justice. This increased awareness often inspires them to be better citizens of the campus community. Student affairs practitioners must continue to effectively

facilitate these uncomfortable discussions and engage students in creating a welcoming multicultural environment. The PIE model helps practitioners to understand the reactions of colleagues (and ourselves) as we engage in difficult dialogues. The model provides a framework for practitioners to anticipate these reactions which afford them an opportunity to be prepared to respond in effective ways.

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Figure 1

The Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) Model