Implications for the Privileged Identity Exploration Model in Student Affairs Theory and Practice

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This article comments on the utility of the Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) model in student affairs theory and practice and draws upon examples from the preceding articles.

The work of facilitating difficult dialogue about privilege remains necessary among student affairs practitioners and educators committed to multicultural competence and social justice (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004). As the concluding article of this special edition on difficult dialogues, we comment on the utility of the Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) model in student affairs theory and practice, drawing upon examples from the preceding articles. Our perspectives are rooted in our work as student affairs faculty, our identities as an African American heterosexual woman (Dawn) and a White bisexual woman (Susan), and our commitment to learning how our various forms of privilege operate in our work.

The PIE model (Watt, 2007) is a much needed empirical addition to student affairs practice and theory. An important contribution of this research is the understanding that the defenses occurring during discussions of privilege and oppression arise principally out of fear, validating what many of us experience and observe in our work. Sue and Constantine (2007) identified fears among White people exploring their racial privilege, including fears of: (a) appearing racist, (b) realizing one's racism, (c) confronting White privilege, and (d) taking personal responsibility for change. In spite of the fears, exploring privilege is critical for White students to achieve multicultural competence (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000).

Dialogue processes encourage individuals from dominant groups to face their privilege (Watt, 2007), and are difficult experiences for many students and practitioners because of the discomfort that comes with acknowledging various forms of privilege. Understanding privileged defenses identified in the PIE model sheds light on the reasons for the difficulty and is a tool for improving dialogues. The case described by D'Andrea and Daniels (2007) exemplified the

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importance of engaging with others open to exploring privilege and illustrated that even senior administrators, not only college students, behave with privileged defenses. This example supports Watt's (2007) assertion that the exploration of privileged identities is a lifelong process.

Emotional Challenges of Difficult Dialogues

Experiencing difficult emotions is part of the process of identifying and unlearning our privilege (Johnson, 2006). Avoiding this process because of fear leaves us unable to understand how our identity shapes our responses to others and puts us at risk of doing harm (Watt, 2007). Henry, Cobb-Roberts, Dorn, Exum, Keller, and Shircliffe (2007) described a grievance process in which an African American female professor was harmed because a White male student and senior administrators failed to recognize the impact of their privilege by undermining the professor's authority. The student targeted the African American professor, allied with the administration (deflection), and blamed the professor rather than examine his own anxiety (rationalization).

Although anxiety is at the root of privileged defenses, it is possible to recognize and overcome anxiety. One way to address anxiety is by encouraging members of privileged groups to support each other in developing awareness about issues of oppression, privilege, and power (Johnson, 2006). As an example, in their work with college men who described feelings of powerlessness, Loschiavo, Miller and Davies (2007) articulated the distinction between the systemic power accessible to White men and the lack of personal power White men feel due to individual life circumstances. Such dialogues can alleviate some of the anxieties related to privilege and create a supportive environment for risk taking (also, see Reason, 2007).

Utility of the PIE Model

Watt's (2007) PIE model offers a tool to understand the apprehension associated with exploring privilege. The model identifies several defenses that arise during dialogues, helps to anticipate resistance, and encourages greater understanding of students. Furthermore, by normalizing the process of privileged identity exploration, the PIE Model may lessen the isolation experienced by students. The focus on understanding students places the PIE model in the student development tradition.

Although the PIE model is described as non-hierarchical, the exploration process appears to occur on a continuum. On one end is *recognizing privileged*

identity, a necessary first step in privilege exploration. In the middle is *contemplating privileged identity, while addressing privileged identity* is located on the far end. In addition, the eight defenses can be viewed as ranging from simple to complex. For example, simply denying that racism (and other forms of oppression) exists is a simplistic way to avoid privilege and requires little knowledge. On the other hand, making an argument that minimizes privilege and oppression may require some knowledge about social issues.

The PIE model, in conjunction with student development theory, can help practitioners better understand the process of facilitating difficult dialogues. When facilitators account for both students' social identity and cognitive development, they may more fully understand students' responses in multicultural dialogues (Adams, Jones, & Tatum, 1997). For example, the denial or deflection defenses may indicate a dualistic way of thinking (Perry, 1981); while students' racial identity development can influence their ability to recognize and discuss issues about race (Tatum, 1992). Helms (1995) argued that the primary task of White racial identity development is the "abandonment of entitlement" (p. 184); thus aligning the PIE model with White racial identity development theory provides insight into the status individual students may occupy in the privilege exploration process.

Lastly, the PIE model problematizes privileged behavior and provides useful language for members of targeted groups about their dialogue experiences with privileged groups. Individuals from targeted groups can be empowered to name the process by understanding that unlearning privilege is a process and by being able to anticipate how to respond to the privileged defenses. This shift allows everyone in the dialogue process to engage in reciprocal efforts to understand privilege identity (Pieterse & Collins, 2007). Such proactive participation is a better alternative to the seething silence or eruption of rage that can occur in dialogues between targeted and privileged groups (see Tatum, 1992).

A challenge in responding to privileged behaviors occurs when individuals operate from both privileged and oppressed identities. Accapadi (2007) described a situation in which a White woman drew upon a privileged and stereotyped behavior (crying) and the associated group response (sympathy) to avoid a difficult dialogue on race. This behavior is an example of deflection by focusing upon the less threatening identity (being female) rather than the privileged identity (being White). In considering the multiple aspects of identity, Jones and McEwen (2000) found that the relative salience of identity depended on the context and that privileged aspects of identity were least understood by those who most benefited from their privilege. Thus it is important for facilitators and participants to understand how privileged and oppressed identities intersect in the dialogue process (Accapadi, 2007).

Dialogues about sexuality and religion are another context for considering multiple aspects of identity. The privileged defense of principium is especially helpful in understanding dialogue about gender and sexual identities. Both Agans (2007) and LePeau (2007) found principium operating in their dialogues, the former in dialogue about transgender identity, and the latter in dialogue about religious perspectives about LGBT people. Watt's (2007) identification of principium as a defense strongly associated with privilege is a powerful contribution of the PIE model.

LePeau (2007) provided an example of principium operating with silence in dialogues about religion and sexuality and noted that students said they were silent because they were afraid and uncertain of their beliefs, an indication of their potential cognitive dissonance. However, the meaning of silence is difficult to interpret, particularly when it comes from privileged students. Silence is an aspect of privilege (Johnson, 2006), allowing individuals to disengage from the challenges of dialogue. Silence can be a defense mechanism or indicative of the defenses associated with the PIE model. Explaining the PIE model to students with privileged identities may help them overcome their silence.

Implications for Practice

The PIE model offers several implications for student affairs practice. It provides clear language and concrete examples that identify and describe the barriers to acknowledging privilege that occur during difficult dialogues. The model offers a useful tool to explore the resistance that surfaces in journal entries (Fairchild & Blumenfeld; LePeau, 2007) and can help practitioners acknowledge our struggles with privilege and identify our reactions. Discussing the model with students can help them understand their role in the group process, particularly when the privileged defenses threaten to shift the focus of the dialogue group. Finally, the PIE model encourages practitioners to develop empathic listening skills to better manage defensive reactions and allow for the care and engagement of the whole student. Use of the PIE model in these ways allows for dialogue processes to become reflective and constructive for both students and practitioners.

While different facets of social justice issues were addressed in this special issue, those related to disability and social class were not directly discussed. However, the PIE model can be applied to issues related to ableism and classism. Future research on the PIE model using specific examples directly related to dealing with these forms of oppression and privilege would enhance the model's application to practice.

Conclusion

In our experience, it is natural to be frustrated with students, colleagues, friends, and ourselves around the issues of privilege. The Privileged Identity Exploration model moves us toward greater understanding of this challenging process and can enhance our compassion for one another. Through the PIE model, we can better anticipate, respond to, and understand students' process of unlearning their privilege. Thus the PIE model is firmly grounded in our professional philosophy of student development and learning.

We recognize that through empirical research, the PIE model identified defensive rather than productive behaviors. We look forward to research that uncovers positive behaviors that inspire us to be proactive with our privileged identities. This can happen when new behaviors are modeled by leaders with privilege. Coming to terms with our privilege is hard work that we often would rather avoid. But the rewards that come from this work include developing greater awareness of ourselves, understanding how we can disrupt oppression, and having honest, authentic, and meaningful inter-racial relationships. We think the rewards are worth the struggle.

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