

Challenging Ourselves

Critical Self-Reflection on Power and Privilege

CHERYL A. HYDE

One of the more common, and mistaken, assumptions that community practitioners make is thinking that because they are “fighting the good fight,” they do not need to address issues regarding their own power and privilege. Yet engaging in practice under the banner of social justice (or any other “right reason”) does not result in an automatic community of shared interests. Nor does it inoculate against the dividends that one might accrue because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or other aspect of an individual’s cultural identity. Because so much of community practice is relational (see chapter 5), I suggest that it is essential for practitioners to undertake in some rigorous self-exploration as part of their broader anti-oppression work. In this appendix, I offer one approach to such critical reflection that I have used in teaching and training efforts.

Like many individuals who engage in anti-oppression teaching and practice, I ground much of my thinking in Peggy McIntosh’s (1989) classic essay, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” By delineating the many ways in which white individuals benefit from usually unrecognized or unacknowledged everyday expectations, rituals, and processes (e.g., “I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group” [11]), McIntosh connects the personal with broader structures that promote or protect racism and then issues a call to action: “A ‘white’ skin in the United States opens many doors for whites whether or not we approve of the way dominance has been conferred on us. Individual acts can palliate, but cannot end, these problems. To redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here” (12).

Part of the power of McIntosh’s essay is that the reader needs to contend with the cumulative impact that seemingly minor activities can have on the perpetuation of racism. In demanding that whites dissect their racial privilege, and then take steps to challenge it, she provided a foundation for much of the anti-oppression work that followed. Comparable examinations can happen for other

privileges based on class, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth; indeed, there are many, many examples in the literature (for varying approaches see Adams 1997; Connell 2005; Gerschick 1993; Goodman 2001; hooks 2000; Tappan 2006; Wallerstein 1999).

While McIntosh’s contribution to antiracism work cannot be underestimated, her approach does, I think, fall short in four important ways. First, it does not distinguish between how we see our own privilege and how others might perceive or experience our identity. McIntosh is focused on the former, yet those with whom we interact also bring to the encounters an awareness (or not) of privilege as beneficiaries or as those denied such benefits. Second, she is focused on race and racism, which is understandable, but incomplete. Race is not the only attribute that shapes how we negotiate the world. Third, because of this primary focus on race, McIntosh does not capture how different cultural attributes interact and differentially shape privilege. For example, a white middle-class woman and a white working-class woman both hold racial privilege, yet the manifestation of that privilege will present differently because of class. And fourth, even though McIntosh notes that “unseen dimensions” support societal structures, she nonetheless neglects the broad, systemic impact of labor market, educational, residential, and other forms of institutionalized racism (Jones 2000). Fundamentally, hers is an intrapersonal framework for addressing racism; certainly critical but not sufficient. Grappling with these points, while still employing the essential insights of McIntosh, became the catalyst for the approach that I use.

One Approach to Critical Self-Reflection

Before outlining my approach to a *critical self-reflection* for community practitioners, I want to emphasize, first, that this is a framework that I have found useful as a learner, teacher, trainer, and practitioner. It is not, however, the only model out there and it is well worth the effort to find a process that both works well and authentically challenges you as a community practitioner. Second, two assessments have been constructed for this appendix (see tables A3.1 and A3.2), but are adapted from tools that others and I have developed (Axner, n.d.; Burghardt 2011; Katz 1978; McIntosh 1989). These tools work best when the individual pushes him- or herself to honestly complete them and then when a group debriefing can support further exploration and exchange of ideas.

Step 1: Our Complex Cultural Selves

The first step in this process is to understand the basics of one’s culture and the impact on identity. Here, I am referring to the values, attitudes, beliefs, practices, and rituals that shape who we are and how we act, all of which flow from the various groups of which we are members. The primary cultural dimensions that I focus on are race, gender, citizenship status (in the United States), sexual orientation, class, religion, and physical/mental ability. There may be other

dimensions that are important to an understanding of the cultural self (e.g., region of the country or level of education), but I find that these are the significant ones and serve as important springboards to self-awareness.

So turn to the Cultural Identity Inventory (table A3.1) and consider the first three columns: "cultural dimensions," "manifestations," and "interactions." For each dimension, indicate *what you are* (note any conflicting messages or challenges

TABLE A3.1.
Cultural Identity Inventory

| Cultural Dimension | Manifestations | Interactions | Domination/ Subordination | Vantage Points |
|--|--|--|--|---|
| Indicate for each (note any conflict concerning this identifier) | What values, actions, or messages are associated with the dimension? | Does the effect of this dimension interact with any other dimension? How so? | If dominant—what privileges do you have? How have you responded? If subordinate—what have you been denied? How have you responded? | How do you understand this aspect of yourself? How do you think or experience the way others see you? |
| Gender | | | | |
| Race | | | | |
| Class | | | | |
| Sexual orientation | | | | |
| Citizenship | | | | |
| Religion | | | | |
| Physical/mental ability | | | | |
| Other? | | | | |

Review and reflect on your inventory. Consider these questions:

1. What are your overall reactions to this information (any affirmations, surprises, points of confusion)?
2. Does any dimension stand out as particularly important to your overall cultural identity and why?
3. What have you learned about yourself? What next steps in this process do you see yourself taking?

to this self-identification) and whether there are any important values, messages, or actions associated with that dimension. For example, if you are a lesbian, did you receive messages of acceptance or condemnation? Or if you are a male, were you told that certain emotions, or displays of emotion, were not manly (i.e., unacceptable)? As you start this inventory, you may be able to see how different affiliations influence one another; for example, how messages about being female are shaped by one's religion. You should note these connections as they became apparent. What should begin to become apparent is that we are more than just one or two cultural attributes. The foundation of our cultural selves is the complex whole that is generated from these dimensions.

It also is important to understand that the level of influence exerted by these dimensions on one's cultural self may not be the same, and may vary over time. You may even want to note if a particular dimension is exerting a relatively strong (or weak) effect on you, and why. If we imagine these dimensions arrayed in a pie chart, some wedges will be larger than others; and sometime in the future, these wedges could be resized. This is one reason why it is unwise (and even foolish) to assume that you know a person's culture based on just one or two characteristics. What is important to you may not be as significant to another, because that individual is perhaps more concerned with, or influenced by, a different cultural dimension. There is fluidity to the components of one's identity, depending on specific challenges of a given time and place, as well as negotiating daily life.

Step 2: Privilege and Power

Within each of these dimensions there is a dominant and a subordinate group (see table A3.1, column 4). A dominant group is one that *as a group* has access to economic, social, political, and civic privileges. This access is temporal and systemic, and the privileges may be consciously sought or unconsciously acquired. The point is not whether each individual in a given group always (and knowingly) enjoys privilege or even wants it (or asked for it). It is about the *societal group*, which, through its collective activity, turns that privilege over time into societal power. So in twenty-first-century America, the privileged groups include men, whites, the middle/upper classes, heterosexuals, citizens, the able-bodied, and Christians. Continuing with the Cultural Identity Inventory, indicate whether you are a member of the dominant or subordinate group for each cultural dimension in column 4.

Individuals who find themselves mostly or exclusively in dominant-status groups are not bad or evil. Rather, by virtue of these group memberships, they have benefited from various societal "perks," whether they asked for them or not. But once such privilege is revealed, these individuals have an obligation to question, challenge, and otherwise act in good faith to work toward the dismantling of a system that generates such disproportionate rewards based on group membership. And the key here is taking action; wallowing in guilt or engaging in excessive

handwriting does nothing to contribute to anti-oppression work (indeed, such responses just further underscore one's privileges).

Conversely, the individuals who find themselves mostly or exclusively in subordinate-status groups do not have license to claim victimhood and then withdraw from any constructive action. The tasks for those with less privilege is to understand the injuries, hidden or explicit, that group subordination may have caused (for an excellent analysis of this, see Sennett and Cobb's (1972) classic work, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*). How, for example, has one addressed internalized oppression? Individuals from subordinate-status groups also need to take action against oppressive structure and processes, though their paths to, and strategies for, that action will likely differ from the work that dominant-group individuals undertake.

For most of us, however, it isn't a matter of being in either all-dominant or all-subordinate groups. Instead, our cultural identities are composed of a mix. So we might have access to racial or gender privilege, yet be in subordinate groups for religion and sexual orientation. To further complicate this understanding, as noted above, not all dimensions have equal "weight" on our overall identity. We should not, however, let this complexity become an excuse for not owning the privilege that we may have. Yes, I may need to contend with a disability or gender discrimination, yet I also need to be mindful that as a white, professional person, I benefit from race and class privilege. Moreover, these societal dividends provide me with some resources with which to address or cope with subordination that results from membership in other groups. It is essential that we push ourselves to understand the implications of this complexity.

Step 3: Understanding Different Vantage Points

A final factor that I consider in this particular approach to understanding cultural identity focuses on how we see ourselves versus how others perceive us. While it is tempting to think that we have primary or sole control over the making of our cultural identity, we do not. When we interact with, or are simply in the presence of, others, our cultural identity is being shaped by that individual's ideas, beliefs, attitudes, experiences, and so forth. This may not always be fair, but in relationship building, we are always negotiating the perceptions and reactions of others and hopefully in the process can address any misperceptions.

Referring again to the Cultural Identity Inventory, column 5, push yourself to consider your subjective (self-)understanding of each cultural dimension and then the understandings of others. If you are white, how do you view this and how do you experience others viewing that? If you have a disability that is not readily apparent, how do you understand this and how might others (if at all)? The point of this aspect of the inventory is to understand that how you move through life does not necessarily correspond with how others see that journey. What you think might be central to your identity may not even register with someone else. Conversely, what you minimize (such as racial privilege) may be of central import

to others. Making the genuine effort to understand how others experience you is critical to relationship building and essential if you want to deconstruct and challenge your own societal privileges.

Step 4: Synthesis and Next Steps

Now comes the difficult work—digesting and then acting on what you have uncovered by virtue of doing this inventory. Consider these three questions: (1) What are your overall reactions to this inventory? (2) Does any dimension stand out as particularly important to your overall cultural identity and why? and (3) What have you learned about yourself and what next steps in this process do you see yourself taking? In other words, the inventory, in itself, does not constitute anti-oppression work. It is the precursor to anti-oppression actions. If you have pushed yourself to be honest and reflective thus far, then you have laid a foundation for considering what you need to do. Perhaps education is needed—if so, how will you go about getting it? Maybe an important relationship needs to be repaired—how might you take the steps to make amends? Or perhaps the inventory revealed that some skills, such as assertiveness training, are needed—where will you obtain this? Did you become aware of new potential problems or challenges for other groups, and if so, how might you respond?

It is tempting, and perhaps even human nature, to try to minimize the inventory messages that we don't want to know. It is not easy to think of oneself as "privileged," particularly if we don't ask for it or believe we use that privilege to our advantage. Often, we become more focused on those parts of our identity associated with subordinate-group membership and then don't see the privilege we might have. We also run the risk of becoming paralyzed by building an identity of victimization. Self-awareness, flexibility, empathy, and openness are essential; but perhaps most important is understanding that anti-oppression work takes time (Burghardt 2011; hooks 2003). Be patient with yourself and others as more authentic relationships are built.

Connecting to Community Practice

Community practitioners would be wise to take a page from the training manual of most clinical social workers, therapists, and counselors who are trained to be cognizant in the "use of self." *Use of self* may be defined as the knowledge and skill sets employed by the practitioner in such a way that he or she becomes an instrument to facilitate change (Heydt and Sherman 2005). Within the parameters of the therapeutic relationship, the practitioner is able to model and reflect transformative possibilities for the client. Yet this approach is not without its dangers, and considerable self-awareness is necessary if the practitioner wishes to minimize unnecessarily complicated or messy relationships with clients. As part of this training, these practitioners learn to recognize and address the emotions generated in the therapeutic relationship; identify what client/actions might

"push buttons"; negotiate expectations of the client, including the maintenance of "appropriate" boundaries; and work through resistance and reluctance. The cultural selves of both practitioner and client significantly affect these dynamics, as cultural variations in seeking help, dealing with authority and power, and building relationships come into play (Heydt and Sherman 2005; Reupert 2006). Thus, the *use of self* is actually the *use of the cultural self*.

How does this translate to community practice? The strategic use of self is concerned with relationship building that encourages constructive change, which in many respects is the core of community practice. In order to be an effective community organizer or other practitioner who can build the relationships necessary for increasing community capacity, that individual needs to understand how his or her cultural identity affects facilitating and sustaining relationships. The

TABLE A3.2.

Assessment: Connecting Cultural Identity to Community Practice

| Cultural Dimension | As strength/asset to my community practice | As challenge/concern to my community practice | What do I need to continue my development? |
|-------------------------|--|---|--|
| Gender | | | |
| Race | | | |
| Class | | | |
| Sexual orientation | | | |
| Citizenship | | | |
| Religion | | | |
| Physical/mental ability | | | |
| Other? | | | |

Note the ways in which the different components of your cultural identity have influenced you as a community practitioner. Specifically, record how that attribute has (1) given you strengths/assets and (2) provided challenges/concerns.

A. Indicate what you need to continue your development (i.e., how can you build upon your strengths or address concerns).

B. How does this assessment inform your cognizance of "use of self"?

Adapted from M. Axner, *Diversity and Community Strengths* (Lawrence, Kan.: Work Group for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas, 2011), Community Tool Box, http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/sub_section_tools_1170.aspx. Used with permission from the Work Group for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas.

assumption is that if one does not acknowledge or address the affect of privilege, then one risks poisoning this critical aspect of practice. Moreover, the ability to build authentic connections rests on how well one understands oneself. Many practitioners want to move quickly to finding commonalities, but the realities of oppression—including the personal side—need to be addressed first (Burghardt 2011). Time, patience, and humility are essential ingredients in this process.

Building on the insights from the Cultural Identity Inventory, one needs to turn to making connections between that awareness and community practice. For this, another assessment is suggested (see table A3.2). Adapted from Axner's (n.d.) exercise, the goal is to identify how one's cultural identity helps and hinders one's community practice abilities and then extend these findings by determining what one needs to continue with his or her development. This information is then linked to an emerging use of self. By systematically engaging in this self-assessment, one will not only understand how cultural attributes of the practitioner become part of practice (for better or worse), but also begin to think strategically about how to maximize the assets and minimize the concerns.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Community practitioners typically are concerned with, and adept at analyzing, the power structures and processes that affect their constituencies. In this appendix, I have challenged practitioners to look at a more personal aspect of power—the privileges derived from membership in dominant-status groups. I have argued that one's cultural identity largely is determined by these memberships and I have highlighted the need for reflecting on the multiple and often intersecting identities we hold (woman, Latina, middle class, etc.). With a more comprehensive understanding of our cultural identities, including the ways in which the various dimensions can change and be challenged over time, we are better situated to build authentic relationships with constituents and community members. In more fully understanding how we benefit from oppressive systems, we are more likely to find the tools to dismantle the attendant structures and processes. This is a critical aspect of "fighting the good fight" and takes time, self-patience, and an openness to continued learning. In doing so, we forge better bonds with our partners and allies and, ultimately, create better communities for us all.

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APPENDIX 4

A Ladder of Community Participation in Public Health

MARY ANNE MORGAN

JENNIFER LIFSHAY

The Ladder of Community Participation illustrates a range of approaches that can be used to engage diverse communities around traditional and emerging public health issues. The Ladder provides a conceptual framework to help public health leaders plan and evaluate community engagement efforts. It can be used to stimulate internal dialogue and frame discussions with community partners about how to work effectively to accomplish shared public health goals. Contra Costa Health Services developed the Ladder based on more than ten years of experience with engaging the local community in a range of public health issues. It also builds on earlier work in the field (e.g., Arnstein 1969; Chess et al. 1995). More information about the Ladder of Community Participation and its application is available in the article "Community Engagement in Public Health," which can be found at http://cchealth.org/groups/public_health/pdf/community_engagement_in_ph.pdf.