

## Unpacking Teachers' Invisible Knapsacks

# Social Identity and Privilege in Higher Education

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A FEMALE GRADUATE STUDENT I know was harassed by a male student—who may have been mentally ill—during one of her first semesters as a teaching assistant (TA).

The student dominated class time with manic talking and borderline inappropriate comments, and he challenged her in class using a hostile, derisive tone. She communicated clear boundaries and expectations, but the disruptive and inappropriate behavior culminated one day when he came in late (again), scanned the room briefly, and then sat in her lap, rather than in the one available chair in the back row. Certain that this problem demanded more than classroom management skills, she reached out to a teaching mentor who intoned, “The camel does not stick his nose into the tent if the flap is not open.”

Being both new to the profession and self-reflective, the TA asked herself whether her behavior had contributed to her problem. Was she communicating accessibility inappropriately? Was she failing to exercise her authority? Was she vulnerable to this situation because she lacked some crucial set of teaching tools? She also started to wonder whether the student’s behavior, as well as the mentor’s response, was affected by her social identity as a young woman. Would the student have crossed the line so

dramatically with a male TA? Would the mentor have suspected a male TA of inviting a male student to breach his boundaries? As I have reflected over the years, I’ve concluded that not only was she at a disadvantage as a woman, but male TAs have an automatic, often unacknowledged, advantage.

Peggy McIntosh (1988) famously unpacked what she called an “invisible knapsack” of privileges socially conferred upon whites, men, and heterosexuals (1988). She argued that not only are women and minorities at a disadvantage, but those with social power enjoy benefits that are both unearned and unjustified. We often accept those privileges unconsciously, viewing our own experience as the norm or solely the result of our hard work. This denial, as McIntosh pointed out, keeps privilege “from being fully recognized, acknowledged, lessened, or ended” (1).

To counteract this unconsciousness, McIntosh made a thorough list of the privileges she enjoys as a white and heterosexual person, “conditions of daily experience which I once took for granted, as neutral, normal, and universally available to everybody” (10). For example, she can arrange to be in the company of people of her race most of the time. She can pay with checks, credit cards, or cash, never considering that her skin color will work against the appearance of financial reliability. When she is successful, she is not called a “credit to her race,” and when she swears or dresses shabbily, no one attributes her choices to the bad morals or poverty of her race. As a heterosexual, she can talk about her life partner

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in any social context without fearing rebuff. Her children are given texts that implicitly support her kind of family unit. McIntosh's list of privileges demonstrates the way some can "count on" social reactions and cultural systems that meet our needs or confirm our legitimacy or existence, while others cannot.

#### **Social privilege and higher education**

For the past few years, within the context of higher education, I've been leading dialogues about McIntosh's foundational work. What socially determined privileges and disadvantages have an impact on faculty as teachers and colleagues? Not all our social identities are obvious, but students and colleagues attribute various identities to us—including identities based on gender, race, class, nationality, ability, and sexual orientation. How they perceive us shapes their expectations of us, their interactions with us, and our experience of academic community.

I routinely mentor faculty of color, women in STEM fields, those who speak English as a second language, and physically disabled educators who must make sense of, and respond to, aspects of the professorial role that do not come automatically—classroom authority and legitimacy, supportive academic community, mentoring. I've also had conversations with faculty who wish their students would question them more, rather than defer to the socially conferred authority of maleness or whiteness.

For faculty from groups that have been historically underrepresented in higher education, an awareness of the effects of socially conferred privilege—and, with it, the knowledge that their experiences are likely not unique to them or caused by them—can be especially helpful. Such awareness is also a call to those of us who enjoy social privileges to recognize the contingent nature of such privileges, and to be more informed colleagues and supportive mentors to those

who face different challenges working in the university. Institutional leaders should consider designing faculty development or mentoring programs that explicitly address social privilege.

So what exactly are the privileges? Over the years, several colleagues and I have read McIntosh's work together, and then we've rewritten her lists from our own perspectives as university educators. I share the collective insights here, using McIntosh's template, which states privileges in the first person.<sup>1</sup> To introduce the issues efficiently, I organize the lists below according to single identity categories (e.g., maleness, whiteness). It is worth noting, however, that black and feminist theorists especially have elucidated how social identities interact with each other in complex ways that can compound advantage or disadvantage (Weber 1989; Collins 1991; Crenshaw 1989). Individual experience depends on the particular confluence of social identities as well as the context of action. Not every white teacher can count on every white privilege on my list, and neither can every male teacher count on every male privilege listed. The experience of the male instructor who speaks English as second language or who is disabled may be determined more by his nationality and physical status than by his gender. And context matters. The male instructor's gender identity may be more salient when he's teaching a gender studies course, and speaking English as a second language may matter more when he's delivering a lecture to a large audience. Even as we consider the privileges that accrue to a particular identity, we should be mindful that other intersecting identities may either compound or counteract them.

### **The able-bodied instructor**

My colleague Tiffenia Archie always begins with the "able-bodied" category when teaching the concept of privilege, because the items on this list may be more immediately obvious. Brainstorming about the different ways mobility, speech, or sensory apprehension is constrained or unconstrained prepares students to consider the less physical, more socially constituted manifestations of privilege, such as those enjoyed by males and whites. With a firmer cognitive grasp of the concept, students are less likely to feel guilty or defensive. They can

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comprehend the broader social argument and their individual responsibility for understanding and responding to social systems without feeling individually liable for social inequality. This approach recognizes that students can be distressed by the idea that they personally benefit from

structures of inequality and that they can be uncomfortable with the argument that social identity can be an asset, contributing to success as surely as personality, skill, or experience.

In the case of the disabled professor, students might have respect for what they perceive as obstacles overcome. My colleague Carol Marfisi, who teaches from a wheelchair, read the list presented below and said she didn't recognize herself in it. She experiences her life as a norm and, like any good teacher, intentionally decides when her identity can be an asset for learning. Necessity can be the mother of invention; in a recent class, she asked students for their bodies in order to help demonstrate a point, enabling them to learn from kinesthetic engagement with an idea. She also argued that disability is a fluid social identity: most people will experience it in some form, at some point. Though not insurmountable, there are still unique challenges for the disabled academic.

Following is a list of privileges enjoyed by the able-bodied teacher:

- I can get to any classroom that is assigned to me.
- I can schedule classes or meetings back to back, because I can get across campus easily.
- I can reach and move all the equipment in all lab spaces.
- I can reach, see, and use the podiums, as well as instructional technology, in all classrooms.
- All documents, websites, and classroom management software are accessible to me, without accommodation.
- Students can submit their assignments to me in any paper or electronic format.
- I can stand up or move about the room in order to capture my students' attention, convey emphasis, or assert my authority.
- I can project my voice in order to capture my students' attention, convey emphasis, or assert my authority.
- I can circulate about the room when my students are doing group or lab work.

- My mental ability is never questioned because of my physical appearance or qualities.
- I am never asked to define or explain my “able-bodiedness.”
- I do not rely primarily on online forums to discuss the particular challenges I face; many colleagues are similarly situated and can reflect on institutional experience with me.
- I never wonder whether my positive student evaluations could reflect pity.
- I get honest feedback; there is no association between my physical vulnerability and my emotional vulnerability.
- I am not considered or called “an inspiration” for doing my job.

### **The native English-speaking instructor**

National identity and native language also affect the academic experience. There can be advantages to international identity. Students may assume that an international faculty member has sophisticated knowledge of global issues and is more qualified to teach international topics or foreign languages. International instructors are often highly valued members of diverse academic communities. Yet, there is a variety of advantages that come with speaking English as a first language in a US college or university. A telling series of experiments conducted by Donald L. Rubin (1992) arguably demonstrates that undergraduates “tune out” foreign-born instructors. His research team gathered American undergraduates inside a classroom and then played a taped lecture that was delivered in the voice of a man from central Ohio. While the undergraduates listened, they faced a projected image. Half the students viewed a white American man at a chalkboard; the other half viewed an Asian male teacher. When asked to fill in missing words from a printed transcript of the taped speech, students made 20 percent more errors when viewing the Asian man’s image. Being heard is just the first of many advantages for the native speaker of English.

Following is a list of privileges enjoyed by teachers whose first language is English:

- Students do not assume that I am unintelligible and give up on comprehension.
- If students don’t understand a concept, they won’t blame it on my accent.
- My student evaluations do not mention my accent or verbal fluency.
- I can ask probing or clarifying questions without students assuming I lack comprehension.
- Students and colleagues speak to me at

an authentic pace, and do not exaggerate their pronunciation of long or complex words.

- Students do not question my expertise as a teacher of North American or English history, culture, or linguistics.
- Students assume that I am qualified to assess their written work in English.
- People correlate my fluency in English with my mental acuity.
- I am likely to “get” my students’ cultural references, humor, and slang.
- I can read most academic documents and student work quickly and easily in my native language.

### **The male instructor**

While a male faculty member often has the benefit of the host of privileges listed below, there may be pedagogical costs to this social identity. As I mentioned above, some male faculty would like their students to question them more, and some regret that students seem less likely to seek help from them. These considerations, along with those below, give a window into how gendered identity can matter for teachers in higher education.

Following is a list of privileges enjoyed by male instructors:

- Students almost always address me as “doctor” or “professor,” rather than “mister” or by my first name.
- Students tend not to question my expertise in my field or challenge my authority.
- I can impose class policies or grade rigorously without students feeling I am insufficiently nurturing.
- If I am passionate about an issue in class or in departmental or university meetings, I will not be judged “emotional” or “irrational.”
- I assume that my voice will be heard in meetings; I may repeat comments made by women colleagues and get credit for their ideas.
- I can dress informally, or even sloppily, for work and be taken seriously.
- I never consider whether any of my work clothing might be perceived as sexy or frivolous.
- If my work schedule adjusts around childcare duties, people will admire me for my priorities.
- If I work around the clock, I am unlikely to be judged negatively for putting my family second.
- Curricula in my discipline have always testified to the contributions of my gender.
- Colleagues and students assume I was hired



because of my merit, not because of affirmative action.

- My male colleagues and I are paid competitive salaries (AAUP 2010).

### **The white instructor**

Over the years, I and others have found that white Americans are more likely to resist the idea of white privilege than the other types of privileges addressed thus far. As I noted, it can be disorienting, even painful, to recognize the unearned asset of whiteness as a “bonus” that compounds the impact of our intelligence, skill, or hard work. We may also feel guilty about these

advantages we never asked for, yet nevertheless enjoy. Those from ethnic groups that have experienced historical discrimination and devaluation (e.g., Jews or Italians) or who have a working-class background may argue that they are “less white.” This argument has some basis; whiteness is not a simple matter of skin tone, but is a social construction whose content is, by and large, about the privileges that define it. Historians have written about how the Irish, Jews, Italians, and even Asians and Latinos have “become white” (Ignatiev 1996; Brodtkin 1998; Roediger 2005; Yancey 2003). But more often than not, we cannot opt out of the white identity conferred upon us.

As a Jewish and Italian woman, I know that my grandparents' experience was different from mine. Yet, after two generations of upward social mobility for Jews and Italians, as well as an influx of "new" immigrant groups with lower social status, I now experience most or all the privileges on the list below. It is also possible, in many cases, for ethnic, working-class, or gay whites to pass as middle-class, white, or heterosexual, if they so choose. An individual may identify more strongly with an ethnic or sexual identity than with whiteness, but the critical factor here is how *others* perceive us—and this is socially overdetermined.

I believe that one can more easily recognize and work against white privilege by finding a way past personal guilt. Years ago, when I was working as the sole white professor in an African American studies program, I had a conversation about white guilt with a black colleague. While she appreciated it when whites recognized white privilege, she noted that guilt did not help solve the problem. Instead of feeling guilty, she suggested, whites should align with her by being "outraged and resistant." We could use awareness in productive ways; for example, if we were in a faculty meeting together and her comment was ignored, but then somehow heard when it was articulated by me or another white colleague, I could speak up. Arguably, writing this article is a use of my compounded privilege. As a white, middle-class, able-bodied, straight woman, I can write this argument without most of you, my readers, thinking that I am oversensitive about racial issues, self-interested, or radical.

Following is a list of privileges enjoyed by white instructors:

- Students are not surprised that I am their instructor; I am what they expect for most classes.
- Students do not question my expertise in fields that are not race studies.
- I can speak passionately about racial inequality or injustice without being perceived as "angry," "oversensitive," or "radical."
- I can teach courses in African American, Latino, or Asian American studies without students or colleagues viewing me as self-interested rather than scholarly.
- Curricula in my discipline have always testified to the contributions of my race.
- I never question whether my student evaluations are affected by my race.<sup>2</sup>
- Students and colleagues assume I was hired on the basis of merit, not because of affirmative action.
- I am not repeatedly photographed for university publications because I diversify the public face of the institution.
- I will not be overwhelmed with service requests because I am one of the few faculty members who can diversify committees.
- I will not be in danger of being denied tenure because of the service burden I carry.<sup>3</sup>
- I can count on having departmental colleagues of my racial identity.<sup>4</sup>
- When searching for positions, I don't have to consider whether I would be one of few people of my race in my new town, if hired.
- It is easy to find mentors who share my social identity and understand the particular challenges I face.
- My tenure file will most likely be reviewed by colleagues having the same racial identity as mine.
- If someone says I'm articulate, it is an uncomplicated compliment.
- I assume that my voice will be heard in meetings; I may even repeat comments made by colleagues of color and get credit for their ideas.
- My accomplishments are not perceived as representing the potential or the successes of my race.
- I have never been mistaken for housekeeping, physical plant, or secretarial staff.
- I have never been questioned by campus security while moving electronics or books out of my office.
- I can often choose whether to reveal my social identities that come with disadvantages or less status.

### Conclusion

Liberal education promises to expand students' worldviews; to help them develop the ability to engage issues, questions, and problems from diverse perspectives; and to provide opportunities for students to learn from and work with people from a variety of social and global locations. Through its Liberal Education and America's Promise initiative, the Association of American Colleges and Universities calls on institutions to help students develop personal and social responsibility, a complex outcome that includes "civic knowledge and engagement—local and global" and "intercultural knowledge and competence" (2007, 12). We are preparing students for both responsible citizenship and a global economy. To this end, many US colleges and universities seek to diversify student bodies as

well as faculties. But as we know, recruitment is not enough. Retention and success initiatives for first-generation and underrepresented students are a priority in many colleges and universities; foundations are expressing this priority in countless calls for proposals.

We must be similarly intentional about nurturing and retaining our diverse faculties. Ideally, more faculty members from groups that have been historically underrepresented in higher education will enter the profession aware of and prepared for some of the differences and disadvantages they will have to negotiate. It would also help to have colleagues, and especially leaders, who “get it,” who are conscious of the network of privileges and disadvantages attendant to social identity, and who can then provide informed support and mentoring. Awareness of these differences could also inform policies for the hiring, retention, and promotion of diverse faculties. These steps would help create a more richly inclusive intellectual and educational environment. □

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## NOTES

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2. An analysis of almost seventeen thousand evaluations found that minority faculty members are rated significantly lower than white professors, even after controlling for tenure status and course type (Hamermesh and Parker 2005). An experiment asking students to evaluate professors based on curricula vitae found that students evaluated black professors as significantly less competent and legitimate than their white and Asian counterparts (Bavishi, Madera, and Hebl 2010).
3. Turner, González, and Wood (2008) found that “service can be detrimental to faculty of color as they progress toward tenure and promotion.”
4. In 2005–6, approximately 5.4 percent of all tenure-eligible and contingent faculty members were African American, 4.5 percent were Hispanic, and 0.04 percent were Native American, even though these groups represented 12 percent, 14 percent, and 0.8 percent, respectively, of the total US population (AFT 2010). Underrepresented minority faculty members from minority groups that have been historically underrepresented in higher education are also less likely to be retained (Moreno et al. 2006).