

Critical Reflection #2

CSP 6035

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Who Am I?

Since first asking myself the question, “Who am I?” early in the semester, I continue to ponder the answer. I now realize that the answer does not only entail how I define myself as a member of privileged or subordinated groups or who I am in relationship to other people. Rather, it also includes the idea that I am part of the problem when it comes to issues of power, privilege, and difference.

In the book, *Privilege, Power, and Difference* (2006), author Alan Johnson said that it is common for white people to think that racism is a problem for people of color. Johnson shared that many people are aware that injustice and unnecessary suffering surrounds issues of privilege, power, and difference in the world related to gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability status, and social class. For all we know, however, he said we do not seem to understand the trouble in a way that allows us to do something about it. He stated very candidly that we are all part of the problem and when we understand that we are part of the problem, we can then become part of the solution. This was an “aha” moment for me. As a person of privilege, I must first develop a greater understanding of who I am, where I came from, and what privilege has to do with me. As a result, I can then recognize how privilege operates and affects people and actually engage in becoming part of the solution.

Again, I asked myself the question, “Who am I?” and this time I began to understand that who I am has much to do with my privileged family roots. I grew up in a white, middle class home with parents who held professional careers. My parents valued a college degree and made the decision to reside in a community with schools that had a reputation for excellence. As a child, I earned an allowance and learned about the value of money. I was encouraged as a teenager to secure part-time job and save. My parents helped each of their children purchase

their first car. College was not a choice for my sister, brother, and me. There was an assumption that we would attend college and that my parents would pay for our education. My parents also paid for my wedding and helped my husband and me with a down payment to purchase our first home. I realize that these are just a few of the countless ways that I am privileged that influence the person I am today.

According to Johnson (2006), my access to privilege as a white, heterosexual, able-bodied person is an asset that makes it more likely that my talents, abilities, and desires will be recognized and rewarded. Johnson defined privilege as existing when one group has something of value that it is denied to others because of the groups they belong to. I now recognize the privilege I grew up with regarding aspects such as education and class.

One of the things that I found intriguing in Johnson's book was the idea that we do not have privilege because of who we actually are as people (Johnson, 2006). What matters is who people think we are. We make assumptions all of the time about who we think people are based on things like the color of someone's skin or the clothes they wear, or the job they hold, or whether or not they are able-bodied. I am frequently catching myself in the act of making assumptions about people and awareness is an important step.

Like privilege, oppression results from the relationship between privileged and oppressed groups (Johnson, 2006). Oppression includes social forces that block peoples' pursuit of the good life, including things like avoidance, exclusion, rejection, unequal access to resources, and violence. In a system of privilege, oppression means you are on the losing end.

Johnson (2006) exposed the reader to new ways of thinking about the troubles associated with privilege, power, and difference. Johnson's comment that others' misfortune is our good fortune impacted me. For example, the fact that someone has to deal with racism everyday is

connected to the reality that I never have to deal with racism as a white person unless I choose to do so. Because privilege is always in relation to others, Johnson said that privilege is a problem for both people who have it and people who do not have it. Everything that is done to receive or maintain privilege results in suffering for someone. This made me think more about what it would be like to have to consider my actions and my words. I also thought about the challenges associated with people placing you in a situation where they are asking you to speak on behalf of all members your social group. Just as there are differences among individuals, there are also differences among individuals within social groups.

In the United States, privilege is organized according to race (Johnson, 2006). People are treated differently according to the social group to which they are assigned. Learning that race and disability were socially constructed was very insightful because I never looked at these two characteristics as actually being defined by dominant groups. In other words, dominant groups have great power in determining what is “normal.” Now I am beginning to despise the word “normal” because I do not think that “normal” even exists.

The “Isms”

Words such a sexism, racism, classism, and ableism name major systemic problems in the world (Johnson, 2006). We cannot get rid of one of the “isms” without doing something about the others because the system that produces one also produces the others and connects them.

As a student affairs practitioner, it is important that I choose not fear these words and the complex problems that these words point toward. These words often cause people to immediately put up their defenses. For example, some may consider racism as just a flawed part of one’s personality (Johnson, 2006). Racism, however, is an attitude, a group of stereotypes, a

bad intention, or a desire or need to discriminate or do harm to someone. Racism can include conscious or unconscious acts.

Talking about the “isms” is necessary, but can be challenging. Instead of talking about these “isms,” people talk about “diversity,” and “tolerance” and “appreciating difference” (Johnson, 2006). This can just mask the bigger issues. Denial and calling privilege and oppression something else often results in the notion that the status quo is best. The trouble that surrounds privilege not only affects individuals. It also impacts organizations, committees, and society as a whole.

Social Systems

Social life happens as people participate in social systems, such as families, schools, workplaces, and religious organizations (Johnson, 2006). When we participate in systems, paths of least resistance shape us and help us to maintain the status quo. In addition, systems expose us to ideas and images of the world. We then try to understand who we are in relation to the world and other people. As a result, we establish a sense of personal identity. Individuals make social systems happen and Johnson pointed out that this means individuals can also make social systems happen differently so that the consequences change. When we choose to follow paths of least resistance, we create and perpetuate all of the forms that privilege and oppression take. Good people with good intentions make systems happen in ways that produce all kinds of injustice for people in oppressed groups. Johnson cautioned that silence can be read as support. This made me realize that when I sit in silence and hear friends, relatives, and acquaintances make racial slurs or tell racial jokes I am actually perpetuating the cycle of destruction. What counts is not only what people do, but what they do not do. In addition, as an academic advisor I

should raise questions about why we only have two advisors of color on a staff of over forty people serving a very diverse student population.

With this new knowledge about the danger of silence, I have found myself in several uncomfortable conversations with friends and family members. I was recently sitting in a hospital waiting room and my brother-in-law made several racist remarks about something that happened on his job site. The remarks appalled me so much that I am too embarrassed to commit them to writing. When I decided not to sit in silence I knew it was risky. He asked us all if we understood what he was talking about and when I said that I did not understand and that I thought his comments were inappropriate I was seen by my husband's family as the bad person because I made my brother-in-law feel uncomfortable. I felt my face and neck get flush and I ended up having to walk away to prevent myself from breaking down in a public place. I realized I had just been triggered and with experience and time I will be able to better handle myself in these situations.

Another situation that stands out is a conversation I recently had with my mom about a student that I advised at Owens. I shared with my mom that the student I was advising was a male who was approximately forty years old. He arrived angry and insistent that he came to talk to an expert who would tell him what major to choose where he would be guaranteed a good salary in the future. The more I asked him about his interests and his background, the angrier he became. He started to use inappropriate language and I had to ask him to stop or I would need to end the meeting. As I was sharing this story with my mom, she said, "I bet the guy was black, wasn't he." I asked my mom why she would suggest that and she said it just sounded like he was a big black guy. I questioned her again on why she assumed this and she said she was sorry and she did not mean anything by it. I left the conversation sharing with my mom a little bit

about what I have been learning this semester. I told her that I, too, have made assumptions like this in the past based on stereotypes that I have of certain groups. The conversation with my mom was a teachable moment, but still left me feeling a little uncomfortable for speaking up. I trust that this discomfort will pass the more I choose paths of greater resistance.

Because systems of privilege focus on dominant groups, those who are not included often feel invisible, and in a social sense, they often are invisible (Johnson, 2006). In order to address problems associated with privilege and the power that maintains it, we must realize that change is rooted in social systems. Systems of privilege may look unchangeable, but no social system lasts forever. It is important that individuals be willing to contribute to change little by little by openly choosing paths of greater resistance. When we make better choices, others are likely to follow suit.

Multicultural Competence as an Educational Process & Outcome

Student diversity has become a key component of the teaching and learning mission of higher education institutions (Hurtado, 1996). This commitment to diversity in postsecondary education began in the 1960's with a focus on recruiting a diverse student population. With the increased enrollment of adult students, women, and racial/ethnic minorities, new academic support programs and student organizations developed, faculty and staff diversity increased, and the women's and ethnic studies programs were created. With these types of changes across college campuses, there was and still is resistance and conflict associated with diversity.

With more diverse student populations, institutions with a desire to improve student learning outcomes are helping faculty develop a range of teaching methods to meet the needs of a multicultural classroom. Goals for enhancing student learning and development include, among others, higher education institutions collaborating with K-12 schools to develop a broad

approach to education in low-income and racially/ethnically diverse communities and campuses and exploring ways to assist students in conflict management and building relational skills to improve communication across cultures. In addition, creating a student-centered campus, where faculty value students as learners and the curriculum and the institution place an emphasis on diversity also leads to improvement in the learning environment. Interestingly, my CSP 6890 class just did a site visit to Owens Community College. One of the questions someone asked centered on what specific things Owens is doing to meet the needs of a diverse student population. Our Associate Vice-Provost said that diversity is something that is very important to the institution, but she was sorry to say that the college did not have any specific programs in place at this time to focus on the needs of a diverse student population. She went on to explain that issues around diversity often must come from the top leadership and the college has been without a President for several years. This was interesting to hear because as an intern at Owens, the college certainly seems to talk about the importance of diversity throughout the college marketing literature and website. I realized that this was a great example of diversity as an espoused value and not an enacted value.

Diversity is not just about access to higher education (Mohanty, 2010). It also has to do with creating an inclusive learning environment for different kinds of learners. Mohanty suggested that there is an urgent need to coordinate efforts to re-create campuses to restore social trust among a diverse student population. While this goal seems lofty, Mohanty argued that the challenges posed by diversity in higher education stand to produce a more democratic future nationwide. On a small scale, I have witnessed the challenges of attempting to bring diversity training to the advising office at Owens. I asked my supervisor about doing Safe Zone Training with the staff and after weeks of asking her about it and reaching out to Human Resources to see

if they already had training in place, my supervisor told me that her boss wanted to table this because the college was not moving in this direction. I thought it was a very vague way of saying that diversity training is not a priority right now.

Multicultural student services offices on college campuses often use two major perspectives to guide their practice with students: a multicultural competency approach and a social justice advocacy approach (Reason & Watson, 2011). The multicultural approach focuses on both personal development and skill development. On the other hand, the social justice perspective emphasizes social action and change due to inequitable distribution of resources. Some fear that a social justice approach might create a disjointed environment that puts too much focus on the support of liberal values. In addition, social justice advocates may engage in controversial methods and interrupt the status quo to create a more equitable and safe campus environment.

Reason & Watson (2011) argued that a blend of the two approaches that balances advocating for social justice with building one's multicultural skills is best for improving engagement across cultures. As a student affairs professional, I agree with Reason and Watson that a developmental approach is best, where we meet students where they are and work toward the goal of increased multicultural competence and social justice. This allows faculty and staff to challenge and support students to grow and develop.

Internalized oppression is something we all suffer from and is the result of our mistreatment from the real external oppression we experience (Reiser & Mason, 1990). It is the pain, memories, fears, negative self-images, and low expectations we re-injure ourselves with frequently. About ten years ago, I worked for a man who did not think highly of women. He saw me as capable of little more than menial administrative tasks and I knew I eventually had to

leave the company because of the way he treated me and other women in the organization. To this day, derogatory things that people say about women trigger me and I think about the painful memories of how poorly my old boss treated me. It is as though I feel this responsibility to prove my old boss and others like him wrong. As a student affairs professional, it is important to realize that the students I work with also have internalized oppression and things that trigger them from their past. I need to help students to understand why people act in the manner that they do. It is important for faculty and staff to be aware of the ideas, behaviors, attitudes, feelings and core values at an individual, group and organizational level of the institution where they work. In doing so, one can see more clearly the different dimensions of diversity and it can help to make sense of challenges we experience on campus.

Hearing Others/Our Paradigms/Liberal & Conservative Voices

Manning (2009) argued that every student affairs professional or faculty member has a view on diversity that serves as the foundation for their work in higher education. She identified seven possible positions concerning educational practice and difference: political correctness, historical analysis, color blindness, diversity, cultural pluralism, anti-oppression, and social justice. At this point, the one that I most identify with is political correctness. In other words, this position is one in which someone talks the talk, but does not necessarily walk the walk. As a former special education teacher, I recall going through a change in the language that I used. I referred to the person first, for example and the disability second. While changing the language is a first step, it does not result in transformation of systems of privilege and difference. I aspire to be a student affairs professional who advocates for equality and justice. Manning pointed out positive and negative expressions of each of the seven positions and does not state that one position is necessarily better than another. In my opinion, however, I aspire to embody

characteristics of the anti-oppression and social justice positions. I want to help transform inequitable systems by working directly with students.

One of my biggest fears is knowing how to become a social justice advocate. I consider myself someone who is open and accepting of others, but one of the things I struggle with is how my Christian values fit with many of the liberal values prevalent on college campuses today. I want to promote multicultural competence and refrain from making judgments about people's values. For example, when we did the Likert-scale activity in class and we were to move positions based on whether or not we agreed or disagreed with certain topics, I was unprepared to consider so quickly my position on some of the questions such as same-sex marriage and birth control. The activity made me feel uncomfortable because for the first time, I was being asked to confront these issues in front of my peers. I am part of a church that believes that same sex marriage is a sin. When asked the question about whether or not I support same sex marriage, I started to view it through the lens of a student affairs professional. I felt conflicted, and to be honest, I am still struggling with it. After class, I reminded myself of what I wrote about in my initial reflection regarding understanding that one's beliefs are not *the way*, but *a way* of viewing and responding to life (Pieterse & Collins, 2007).

Stewart (2008) discussed the importance of cognitive development in developing multicultural competence. Cognitive development deals with the structure of knowing and not the content of those judgments. When viewed from this perspective, one can disagree with another's ideas while still respecting the person because they develop an understanding and respect for how the person arrived at their conclusions. This was important to my understanding that my ways are not right and others ways are not wrong. What is important is not so much *what* we think about certain diversity issues, but *how* we think about the issues.

Nash (2010) introduced five communication styles for becoming a social justice advocate: a *radvocate*, a *advocate*, a *sadvocate*, a *fadvocate*, and a *gladvocate*. I want to be a *gladvocate*, one who educates others by invitation and is persistent in their commitment to have all voices heard. In doing so, we have the potential to discover similarities among others' views. In addition, it might be possible for diverse individuals to work together to solve problems. While *gladvocacy* may not be possible in all circumstances, Nash pointed out that it is important to know when other types of advocacy will be most and least effective. He also touched on strategies to use when having moral conversations, such as identifying clear themes for discussion and helping students "unpack" the difficult issues, being prepared for the unpredictable "discussion bombs," maintaining a sense of ease and poise as the facilitator, avoiding indoctrination, trusting the process, and asking good questions. What I also realized after participating in a difficult dialogue at a recent diversity workshop that I attended is that the audience needs adequate time to engage in the dialogue. Participants need to feel that they are part of the conversation and that the facilitator is not doing most of the talking. Allowing adequate time to wrap-up the discussion so that it does not end on a low note is also critical.

In Tim Wise's book, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race From a Privileged Son* (2008), written from a liberal perspective, he recalled his own personal experience growing up as a white male in a predominantly black community. Reading his book really opened my eyes to racism and the fact that institutionalized racism is in our schools, our jobs, our financial system, our housing systems, our police departments, etc. Essentially, there is no place that is absent of some form of institutionalized racism. Wise talked about how our history books portray White people as heroes and often do not mention the bravery of Black people, as one example of racism. With

a systemic problem this complex, it is difficult to imagine how to overcome institutionalized racism.

One passage that really stood out to me in the book had to do with the power of socialization. Resisting socialization requires the ability to choose (Wise, 2008). Wise shared a story about his grandmother who was committed to standing against racism and near the end of her life was suffering from Alzheimer's. In her rage, she used the word "nigger" to refer to her black nurses. While this was completely out of character for her, she had lost her ability to remember people, places, and things, yet she knew what she learned at an early age to call black people. Wise looked at this experience as a gift because it reminded him that rather than apologies, people who experienced discrimination deserve an end to the viscous system.

Another interesting passage from the book was Wise's discussion of a training session where White people were asked about what they liked about being white and Black people were asked what they liked about being Black? People of color listed attributes about their personal strength. The White list, on the other hand, listed attributes that had nothing to do with what White people liked about being White. None of the attributes on the White list had to do with internal qualities of character. The list was really a collection of things that White people liked about not being a person of color. This shows that White peoples' identity is rooted in the oppression of others. Being White means that one has advantages in comparison to a person of color and without racial privilege there is no whiteness (Wise, 2008).

After reading Wise's book, I felt compelled to enter the conversation and help to articulate the problem with racism among my peers, colleagues, and my family. I want to put the knowledge I am learning into action and I realize that this starts with me making small changes in what I say and do.

After the excitement I felt reading Wise's book, Shelby Steele's book, *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*, written from a conservative perspective, was surprising to me. Steele, an African-American male who grew up with a fair amount of privilege, wrote about racism from more of a perspective that people of color just need to "pull up their boot straps" and take personal responsibility to do better for themselves. He said that blacks needed to take responsibility for bettering themselves and not fear ambition. Steele felt that hidden racial anxiety is one of the strongest obstacles to blacks participating in the American mainstream society. He explained that black identity does not entail a strong individual responsibility for one's own fate. He introduced the term "race holding," the idea that someone uses race to keep from looking at themselves and holding themselves accountable. He feels that fear triggers "race holding" and creates self-defeating attitudes that prevents people of color from moving forward. The fact that Steele grew up in a middle class family made his experiences different from people of color who grew up in a lower class. He had access to privilege in ways that likely helped him to be successful. I do not believe that all blacks can simply look beyond their victimization and rely on their own efforts to succeed today. This type of thinking does not address the complexity of the issues of institutionalized racism.

Steele is not a proponent of programs that include special entitlements based on color. Again, I believe that coming from a more affluent background may be a factor in Steele's strong opinion on this. People of color do not have equal access to the same opportunities as White people, so I am a proponent of programs such as affirmative action. I do agree, with Steele, however, regarding the need for programs to help develop people of color.

Multicultural Competence & Its Application to My Career in Student Affairs-

As a student affairs professional, it is critical to stay engaged in issues of privilege on an ongoing basis because I have had access to so much privilege (Johnson, 2006). My own awareness of the unacceptable nature of privilege, power and difference is a key step in attacking the issues of racism, ableism, heterosexism, and classism. These issues exist on college campuses and in our personal lives. If we are not aware of these issues, then we will likely not be tolerant of hearing about these troubles. An increased awareness, on the other hand, is likely to propel us to do something about the problems. As Johnson (2006) suggested, I plan to make reading about privilege and oppression a part of my life so I can continue to understand how it operates in society. In addition, I want to pay attention to privilege and oppression and look for opportunities to do something about it.

It is also critical to realize that I am responsible for the consequences of what I say and do as a student affairs practitioner (Johnson, 2006). Having a deeper understanding of differences among individuals from different social groups will allow me to be more effective in my role as an academic advisor. I want to continue to look for ways to openly choose and model alternative paths. I realize that I cannot change people, but I can change my own actions and behaviors and refuse to sit in silence.

Conclusion

While there is much to consider when it comes to achieving multicultural competence, I am encouraged to continue exploring my own values, thoughts, stereotypes, and assumptions. In learning about myself and how I arrive at my own conclusions, I will better be able to assist students in their journey of gaining multicultural competence (American College Personnel Association and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2010). This is one of

the basic characteristics of the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion competency area for student affairs practitioners. I need to engage in asking myself where I stand on particular issues before I will feel comfortable and confident asking students to do the same.

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