

Unpacking (white) privilege in a South African university classroom: A neglected element in multicultural educational contexts

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Multiculturalism currently aims for the political accommodation of difference instead of the subversion of the resulting privileges of difference. In the South African context such a distinction is especially important since the economic and symbolic subjugation of the majority of Black South Africans continues despite political transformation, and is exacerbated by an unwillingness to reflect on privilege and inequality. Drawing on Biko and Soudien's critique of multiculturalism and vision for anti-racist education, this paper describes a classroom activity set for 164 nationally and culturally diverse second year sociology students at a university in Cape Town, South Africa. The activity tasked students to reflect on texts by Peggy McIntosh and Khaya Dlanga (one canonical, the other contextual) and reports on these students' nuanced understandings of personal biography, experiences of privilege and self-reflexivity that connects personal experience to social structure and historical contexts. It concludes by offering modest implications for moral education in a multicultural university classroom.

Keywords: privilege, pedagogy, whiteness, multiculturalism, anti-racist education, South Africa, race

Two important contemporary debates in South Africa illustrate the importance of considering the issue of privilege (especially white privilege) in a multicultural society and classroom as an aspect of social transformation. The first concerns a growing tendency 'to forget the past and move on' as reported in a recent nationally representative survey conducted by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.

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The study reported that two thirds of South Africans across all historical ‘race’¹ groups agreed with the statement ‘Forget apartheid and move on’ with only marginally fewer Black South Africans (63%) than White South Africans (69%)² in agreement, and only 9% across all groups disagreeing (Wale, 2013, p. 37–38). Furthermore, White South Africans are less likely than other South Africans to admit the lasting effects of Apartheid’s legacy on current levels of impoverishment amongst Black South Africans. Only 33% of White South Africans agreed with the statement ‘Many Black South Africans are poor today as a result of Apartheid’s legacy’ compared to 77% of Black South Africans, 67% of Indian South Africans and 59% of Coloured South Africans (Wale, 2013, p. 37).

The second debate regards a growing call to frame redress in South Africa based on levels of poverty and inequality rather than on the causes of such structural stratification, as reported but not espoused by academics such as Steven Freidman and Zimitri Erasmus (2004, p. 346):

Framing redress in racial terms only is not the strategically most effective way of securing white people’s compliance ... [since] redress is least likely to face resistance where measures that serve to redress racial inequities can be phrased as anti-poverty measures rather than as means of reversing racial power and privilege.

Drawing on Crain Soudien’s (2004) critique of multiculturalism and his vision for anti-racist education, Steve Biko’s (1987) understanding of just integration in black consciousness and Swartz and Scotts’ (2012) articulation of the restitution of personhood as an integral part of social transformation, this paper describes a classroom activity set for 164 second year sociology students at a university in Cape Town, South Africa, to examine their privilege. The activity is based on two texts, that of US scholar Peggy McIntosh’s (1992) canonical list of ‘white and male privilege’ and that of social commentator Khaya Dlanga’s (2012) experience of being a young Black South African who finds it necessary to explain to White South Africans how Apartheid still affects levels of economic success experienced by different ‘race’ groups in South Africa. In describing our research, we begin with an examination of the aims of multiculturalism and juxtapose it with anti-racist education before turning to describe, more fully, the texts upon which the activity was based.

Multiculturalism and anti-racist education

According to Canadian political scientist Will Kymlica (2005, p. 82), the multicultural project aspires to accommodate ‘ethnocultural diversity’, protect ‘individual rights’ and promote ‘non-discrimination’. These aims are achieved through enacting various policies and practices of multiculturalism that offer ways to achieve social harmony and integration in diverse societies based on just principles of egalitarianism and equality (Modood, 2007). Meer and Modood (2012, p. 181) clarify this definition when they note that multiculturalism is understood ‘in Europe [and] ... throughout the English-speaking world and beyond, [as] the *political*

accommodation by the state and/or a dominant group of all minority cultures defined first and foremost by reference to race, ethnicity or religion' (emphasis added).

While multiculturalism traditionally speaks of political accommodation for minorities and equates minorities with subordinate groups typical of the Global North where the theory emerged, the South African context is somewhat different. Both Colonialism and Apartheid were systems where a small minority has dominated, subordinated and oppressed the majority. This state of affairs, while politically reversed in 1994 during South Africa's first democratic elections, has yet to lead to full economic and symbolic transformation.

Furthermore, the multiculturalism project has conventionally focused on rights and accommodations for individuals and groups in terms of language, dress, cultural practices and religious freedom. What the multicultural project has focused on less are the effects of domination and subjugation that no number of accommodations and rights addresses, namely privilege and how this reinscribes domination and neutralizes multiculturalism's aims of egalitarianism through recognizing difference. In order to foster social transformation, we follow Crain Soudien (2004) and Steve Biko's (1987) call to examine privilege and related oppressions in order to foster social transformation.

South African educational sociologist Soudien (2004) provides a critique of multiculturalism as it pertains to the South African context in general. While acknowledging that a multicultural approach to education is at least better than one of complete assimilation in which values, traditions and customs of a dominant group are not only asserted but held to be superior and desirable, he asks whether a multicultural approach fares any better. His main critique of such an approach is that it assumes the playing fields are level to begin with, and argues that multiculturalism only pays lip service to the rights and abilities of subordinate cultures instead of resulting in true equality and inclusivity.

Black consciousness activist Biko (1987, p. 21) historically advocated for equality and integration to be achieved on the basis that each person and group 'rise and attain the envisioned self ... without encroaching on or being thwarted by another'. His *modus operandi* for achieving this 'true humanity where power politics will have no place' (Biko, 1987, p. 90) was to invite reflection among Black people on 'the cause of their oppression - the blackness of their skin - and to operate as a group to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude' (Biko, 1987, p. 91). Simultaneous to this Biko calls for White people to engage in their *own* reflections around systemic privilege thus allowing the two groups to meet on equal terms.

Both Biko and Soudien draw attention to the missing element in multiculturalism—that of interpersonal and intergroup self-examination with regards to the less visible aspects of inscribed social and political privilege. Consequently, they argue, making explicit these hidden and unearned advantages then allows societies to move beyond a political accommodation of difference to forging a just society based on lived experiences. Soudien further argues for anti-racist education (rather

than multicultural education) that overtly shows how people understand themselves to be positioned within their social and cultural group identities. Soudien and Biko's vision is in service of achieving a transformed society which in the words of Nigerian postcolonial scholar, Emmanuel Eze (2001, p. 223) 'imagine[s] a future when no one ... must automatically bear the privileges or the costs of a racial tag'. This spirit animates the examination of privilege we describe in this paper, inspired by the work done by Peggy McIntosh.

Using McIntosh and Dlanga as key reference texts to examine privilege

As the key texts, McIntosh and Dlanga's articles deserve a brief exploration before we move to clarifying our conceptual framework. McIntosh's (1992) article traces how she came to realize her own unexamined, unearned 'invisible knapsack' of privilege conferred by her (white) race in relation to her African American colleagues in a women's studies department at a US college. She lists over forty instances of how she experiences privilege in her life. These include the following (McIntosh, 1992; page references added):

- (1) 'I can go shopping alone most of the time, fairly well assured that I will not be followed or harassed by store detectives' (p. 73);
- (2) 'When I am told about our national heritage or about 'civilization,' I am shown that people of my color made it what it is' (p. 73).
- (3) 'I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race' (p. 74).
- (4) 'Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance that I am financially reliable' (p. 74).
- (5) 'I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race' (p. 74).
- (6) 'I can be pretty sure that an argument with a colleague of another race is more likely to jeopardize her chances for advancement than to jeopardize mine' (p. 74).
- (7) 'I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race' (p. 74).
- (8) 'I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race' (p. 75).

Aside from these daily experiences, she also writes about the way in which this privilege is rendered obscure by the structural inequality that holds it in place, protects her from having to engage with inequality, and allows her to take advantage of these 'unearned' privileges, blind to their consequence. McIntosh further argues that coming to be aware of privilege carries a moral responsibility to be accountable for it, and to act both to minimize it personally and transform the social structures that keep it in place.

McIntosh explicitly identifies how historical forces have assisted in shaping the current reality in the US, while Dlanga's (2012) opinion piece does the same thing in a South African context. Titled 'Why we still talk about Race and Apartheid' he highlights that despite changes for a few in a post-Apartheid context, the overwhelming majority of White South Africans continue to benefit from inherited privileges, while the majority of Black South Africans continue to suffer within Apartheid-created cycles of poverty and oppression. Dlanga also emphasizes, if we are interested in transforming our society, that 'White guilt' is not a useful reaction to Black people asserting this reality, neither is the claim that Black and White people are the same (the so-called colourblind stance), or that White people are now discriminated against through affirmative action.

These texts, and the compulsory assignment that accompanied it, formed part of a second year 'Race, Class and Gender' sociology course at a university in Cape Town, and followed a series of lectures on the social constructions of race, class and gender and the intersections between these categories. Drawing largely on work by Crenshaw (1991) and Hills Collins (1998) students had already focused on the need to examine these social categories together rather than separately, recognizing their interdependent and mutually co-constructive nature. Our aims were to encourage students to recognize that privilege and oppression are related, that they are context-specific, and can be complex. So although the major texts focused on race (McIntosh, Dlanga, Soudien and Biko), the scope of enquiry for the assignment was expanded to include class, gender and sexuality as equally important categories for thinking about social transformation.

Conceptual framework, context and methodology

Before considering the outcomes of this activity, we briefly outline our emerging conceptual framework relating to social transformation and the need to restore personhood following oppression and injustice. We then locate this moral education activity in the South African context and describe the specifics of the city and university where the exercise took place, before outlining how we conducted the classroom exercise and analysed the resulting data.

Social transformation and the 'restitution of personhood'

In contexts of inequality and its impact on the lives and dignity of people the emphasis is often on the experience of oppression. In the South African context, it has been argued that Apartheid damaged the human spirit, and has resulted in ongoing social ills such as violence, crime, addictions, joblessness, educational failure, poor physical and mental health, and senses of social inferiority along with enduring economic deprivation (Swartz, Hamilton Harding, & De Lannoy, 2012). However, the impact of inequality on people in positions of privilege has been given less emphasis, though it does exist. While it cannot be compared in scope and severity, aspects of these include indifference, the normalization of inequality,

the numbing to and fatigue of need, along with the lack of ability to connect, listen and empathize (Davis & Steyn, 2012). Conceptualizing a pedagogical approach that might foster social change or transformation in this context is understandably complex, and what we present here is tentative and subject to further investigation.

As Soudien and Biko, and also Nancy Fraser (1995) point out, multiculturalism's call for 'recognition' of harm and of those affected needs to be accompanied by redress and a vision for a future different to either assimilation or annihilation. It is within this context that Swartz and Scott (2012) speak of the restitution of personhood as a contribution to social transformation. Their developing theory posits that redress and transformation need to occur on interpersonal and communal levels in which everyday people can and ought to be actors and agents, in addition to structural action that leaves change to political institutions. Restoring humanity or personhood requires that actions of solidarity (Juul, 2010) be taken in the areas of remembering past injustices, working towards human dignity, fostering active senses of belonging (including citizenship and equality) and implementing strategies towards physical and psychological flourishing. Examining privilege therefore falls into this interpersonal and communal sphere.

Such an understanding of restitution and social transformation comprises a number of elements, summarized in Figure 1. The three elements include the following:

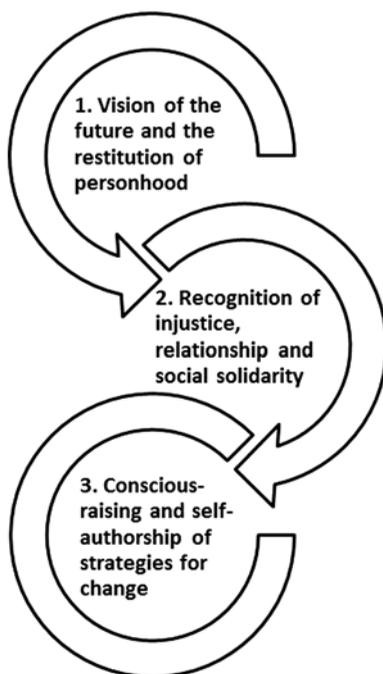


Figure 1. Theorized elements which contribute to social transformation

- (1) formulating and subscribing to a vision of a transformed future based on equality which commits to making restitution for past wrongs;
- (2) recognizing the ongoing effects of past injustice and developing social solidarity through relationship and contact; and
- (3) developing action strategies based on consciousness-raising and self-authorship of all players.

The South African context

Apartheid legislation defined Coloured as anyone who was not Black or White, the category included descendents of Malay and Indian slaves, Khoisan (indigenous) people, and those of ‘mixed race’. Dlanga (2012) alludes to the stark material and symbolic inequalities that still adhere along racial lines in South Africa. This is supported by research which shows that despite government policies drawn from the constitutional mandate to redress past imbalances and heal past wounds, with regards to material inequality (such as poverty and unemployment), race is still the main predictor of privation. The issue of unemployment serves to illustrate this inequality with four times as many Black South Africans being unemployed as White South Africans (Statistics South Africa, 2013). In addition, recent studies show how attitudes about redress differ along race and class lines, with middle class White people showing less interest or desire for redress and reconciliation (Molefe, 2012; Roberts, 2013; Wale, 2013).

Within this country context, the ‘racial’ demographics in the Western Cape³ province of South Africa, where the university is situated, are somewhat different to the rest of the country. There is a larger population of Coloured⁴ (42.4%) and White (15.7%) people here compared to the national statistics (8.8% Coloured and 9.2% White) (Statistics South Africa, 2012), which leads many to consider Cape Town a privileged city and one ‘not friendly’ to Black people (Surtee & Hall, 2010).

Participants and university context

The university is a historically Whites-only institution; one continually involved in public and private debates regarding racial transformation. For students, these debates have revolved around its admissions policy, which uses race as a marker of advantage and disadvantage. A current practice uses different admission standards, with non-White students having lower requirements than White students. This has provoked ire from across the racial and ideological spectrum, and is a frequently cited factor when students are asked how race impacts their lives (Erasmus, 2012). One hundred and fifty-two students in the second year undergraduate course participated in this analysis. Study participants were well aware of these debates, and thus issues of race and privilege were everyday rather than theoretical matters.

From an age perspective, the majority of students in the class were aged between 19 and 24, with a few mature students. We describe our class as multicultural since the university attracts many 'semester-abroad' students along with students from other parts of Africa. This class comprised 62% South Africans, 12% from African countries besides South Africa, 16% from the USA, 8% from Europe and 1% each from China and Russia. (Seventeen percent of the class identified as male and 83% as female.)

Procedure

From an ethical perspective we followed the university sociology department's stated protocol at the time of seeking approval from the head of department. Students were notified that their responses would be analysed for publication, they were ensured of confidentiality, and offered the option to be excluded from the research report but not from completing the assignment. Assignments were submitted electronically and exported to a qualitative analysis software program. Out of a class of 164 students, 152 students' assignments were analysed; exclusions were due to not handing in their assignment, handing it in late, or opting out of the research.

The 'privilege' assignment

Students were given an assignment that comprised reading the previously described McIntosh and Dlanga articles, and writing a reflection that contributed to their final grade. The assignment comprised three sections, namely location, privilege and reflection. In the *location* section, students were asked: 'How does society identify you in terms of race, class, gender?', and were given examples of categories. Students were also asked to make a list of at least five ways in which they were *privileged* in relation to another group of people by their race, class, gender or sexuality. We added 'sexuality' as a fourth major axis of oppression in recognition that there were likely to be students who would identify themselves as 'oppressed' in race, class and gender terms but who might see themselves privileged in terms of 'sexuality'. However, in the case that some might not identify themselves as privileged in any way, we included an option to write about their perceptions and observations about those they considered privileged. Finally, students were asked to briefly *reflect* on their experiences of writing the assignment.

Findings

Along with the stated axes of difference (sexuality, race, class and gender) for examining privilege, students raised additional locations of privilege. These included ability, nationality, cultural capital, safety, education and language,

accent, religion and temporality (namely growing up after Apartheid). The complexity and variety of data is worth examining further but for the purposes of this paper we will concentrate on an overview of student's race and class location with only a brief examination of gender-related findings. Students' listings of privilege will be presented before analysing the reflexive aspect of students' responses in order to explore the question of the value of this kind of approach for moral education, its contribution to social change, and its place in social justice education in the context of a multicultural classroom and country.

Race and class location

Students' racial categories included historic South African classifications of Black, White, Coloured and Indian, along with a few other descriptions. Sixty-three students described themselves as Black (41%), 52 as White (34%), 22 as Coloured (14%), two self-identified as 'mixed race', and one student each described her/himself as Asian, Chinese, Brown and Latina, respectively. In addition to this, a number of students described themselves as 'able to pass as more than one race', which introduced an element of ambiguity into their reflections, and highlighted the social construction of these categories. Some said they might pass for one race until they spoke—their accent, not skin or other markers, being the main identifying criterion for their racial positioning. For those students who lived and originated in other parts of the world, they might be classified in different ways depending on context-specific definitions of race (for example, a light brown-skinned US student is seen as Coloured in South Africa but may be White or Hispanic in the US).

Class seemed the least clear location to describe. Students variously described themselves as 'rich', 'well off', 'comfortable', 'struggling' or 'dirt poor', and invariably chose multiple descriptors. Many also used more conventional categorizations such as 'upper-middle class', 'fairly wealthy', 'affluent', 'up-and-coming black middle class', 'middle', 'working', 'poor' and 'lower' class. Since these definitions are subjective, and often a category may include just one person, we grouped these

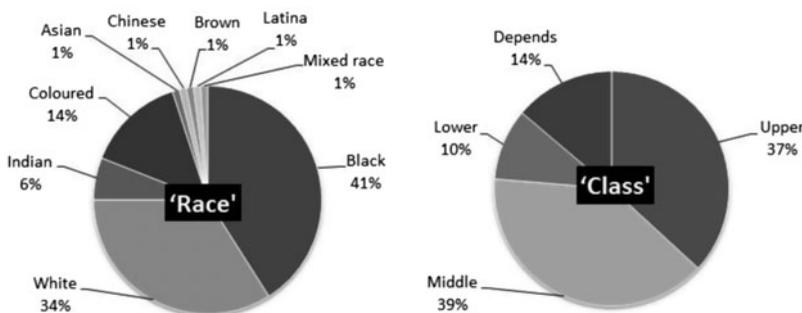


Figure 2. Student demographics by class (author-summarized) and race (self-described)

descriptors into broad categories of Upper (37%), Middle (39%), Lower (10%) and Depends (14%) for the purposes of reporting. Figure 2 portrays these categorizations of class and race graphically.

These ‘locations’ of class and race demonstrate the diverse composition of the classroom, and immediately called into question the relevance of McIntosh and Dlanga’s article of a specific experience of one major axis of stratification (race) to such a diverse audience. However, the reflections that follow indicate the ease with which students made contextual and personal translations of both lived and observed privilege.

Experiences and observations of privilege

The task of listing daily and experienced privileges in relation to another specific group elicited some expected and some insightful responses. Many Black, Indian and Coloured students—those located in relatively oppressed positionalities—listed numerous privileges. These included ease of access to and movement through primarily Black neighbourhoods and being able to make racist comments without fear of censure since ‘Black people can’t be racist’. By far the most frequent privilege listed by Black students over conventional oppressor positionalities revolved around Black Economic Empowerment (BEE)⁵ and affirmative action as described by a Coloured South African female student: ‘With post-Apartheid policies such as affirmative action and BEE, people of colour get an advantage over ‘White’ individuals in terms of admissions into universities, as well as employment in the workplace’. Some students raised the unintended negative consequences of such privileges: ‘Now I am aware that some might think that the only reason I roam the corridors of ... [this university] is because of my race’ (Black South African female student).

Often, Black students did not confine their observations of their privilege to their own experience, comparing their affirmative action gains to observations of White privilege, including the assumption of intelligence, access to education, being able to pay for tertiary studies, and daily treatment in restaurants and shops, and by public officials such as police.

White students’ experiences to a large extent confirm Black students’ observations; they listed financial resources, education, healthcare and treatment in public spaces and by public officials as unearned privileges. They also reflect similar kinds of privileges to those raised by McIntosh pointing to the ways in which White privilege could be conceived of as a global shared experience with local iterations. This is supported by the lack of examples specific to the South African context with only one White South African female student noting that: ‘I can also ignore protests and strikes of people demanding better sanitation as it does not directly affect me. I can afford to be oblivious of other cultures practiced and languages spoken in my own country without any consequences for this oblivion’.

The racial category of Coloured is one that carries specific connotations in the South African context. This uniquely constructed positioning raised interesting

observations of privilege. Similar to examples raised by Black students, the ability to avoid being an obvious victim of crime in gang-ridden neighbourhoods was raised as a privilege. Drawing on BEE and affirmative action policies for educational and job access was another similarity. However, there were a few examples that were quite specific that point to the historical legacy of being used by the Apartheid government as a ‘buffer’ in geographical and political ways between White and Black people. These students reflected the common view that their status under Apartheid was ‘better than black, not as good as white’ (Erasmus, 2001):

‘As a Coloured my voice is more likely to be heard when speaking out about issues, such as rape and abuse, than that of a Black individual while still less likely than that of a White individual’ (Coloured South African female student).

‘Being a Coloured person can also be seen as being privileged ... Coloured people were treated more *leniently* during the Apartheid years ... coloured people also benefit from redress actions such as sport quotas or certain job occupations’ (Coloured South African male student).

Student’s descriptions of their class were often difficult to categorize during analysis. A strong sentiment that emerged was students feeling that class was always ‘relative’ to context. It was, however, the place where intersections with other categories became more visible in the privileges listed. For example:

‘The way society perceives my economic class allows me to enter certain spaces that may be difficult for those who are seen to be ‘struggling’. Even with my disadvantage carried by my racial category, I was able to learn and execute confidence in spaces that are seen to be associated with the “rich” or “White”’ (Coloured female South African).

There was some evidence of the post-Apartheid shifts in opportunities which impact on a small minority of Black people:

‘I was raised by a single mother who was a high school Xhosa teacher and afforded us the best education. My mother went from being a working class woman to being a middle class woman because of her education. She was able to send me to better schools than she went to and provide me with better opportunities’ (Black South African female student).

Overlapping with race, many of the class-based privileges involved financial security, access to education, health services and a variety of consumer goods and services.

Though examining gendered privilege is not a focus of this paper, this social category raised two important implications for the project. Firstly, the gender-based privileges often reinforced gender stereotypes and upheld patriarchy (for example, a female student writing that having a door opened for her is a privilege of her gender). Thus the exercise can serve to merely reinforce social stratification. The second potential flaw is the denial of privilege that can come about through the focus on individual experience, for example:

'As for male privilege, this is non-existent in my eyes, in fact, female privilege is more prevalent as females are treated with more respect within South African societies ... be it in simple gestures of giving up seats for females, to grander gestures such as getting free services' (Coloured South African male student).

This is a perfect example of how someone in a position of privilege can be blind to that privilege (McIntosh, 1992), and points to one of the risks involved in the exercise; using McIntosh's list focuses thinking on the individual, thereby masking structural privileges. These two factors have implications for considering the value and contribution of the exercise to social change.

Reflecting on the value of the exercise

There is no doubt that the majority of the students found value in completing the exercise, despite finding it challenging and discomfoting. As Davis and Steyn (2012) point out, this kind of discomfort should be welcomed as part of a process that challenges oppression within an educational space. For many students, their reflections included the value of using the lens of 'privilege' rather than the more easily accessible 'oppression', as it forced them to think about social stratification in new ways. As one Coloured South African female student concludes: 'I think I was not overtly taught to recognise the advantages and privileges I had, but rather to see the disadvantages I did have'.

In the South African context the ongoing emphasis on the disadvantages that link race and class in ways that are detrimental to Black people raised interesting responses with a focus on privilege. As one student writes: 'We want White people to admit that they had unearned privilege and be grateful' (Black South African female student). Another student writes of the impact of hearing this acknowledgement: 'It was sort of a relief that White people do recognize they are privileged' (Black South African female student). This 'conversation' between people occupying positions of relative privilege and oppression is one of the valuable outcomes of an exercise like this in a diverse classroom.

Though there was some resistance to the idea that an individual's opportunities and actions may be shaped by historical forces, for others this realization provoked difficult emotions, frequently correlated with individual's positionalities. Those in positions of relative privilege raised feelings of guilt and shame, and often cited Dlanga and his sentiment that 'White guilt won't solve the problems of this country'. Students identifying as oppressed often raised emotions such as anger, hurt and even woundedness: 'I haven't learned anything new from this exercise; in fact it has only managed to remind me of what it means to be a Black woman daily' (Black South African female student).

Thus it needs to be acknowledged that although the exercise was transformative for many, it also served to reinforce social stratification, and that this can be a negative experience for some. This was somewhat mediated by the inclusion of aspects of theory relating to intersectionality. Within this theoretical framework, students often reflected that privilege and oppression cannot be viewed

simplistically; rather that the experience of privilege and oppression are context-dependent, relational and fluid, and that an individual most likely occupies a position that is privileged in some ways and oppressive in others. In other words, the reflections of students often showed the development of nuanced thinking as illustrated by this Black Sierra Leonian female student:

‘Through this exercise I came to understand that privileges are relative not absolute entities. For example I may be disadvantaged based on my race but at the same time I can wield lots of privileges because of my class and sexuality.’

There were a few students who recognized that the privileges that they listed from their positions of blackness could not be compared to the kinds of structural privilege afforded to whiteness, as one Black South African female student eloquently wrote: ‘Being able to avoid sunburn is not exactly the same as having easy access to a good and funded education.’

These examples demonstrate the complexity of conducting an exercise like this in such a diverse classroom, and that asking students to reflect personally within the context of academic material is emotive in ways that need to be carefully thought through and space allowed for processing. It also demonstrates that the combination of personal reflection that Dlanga (2012) and McIntosh (1992) speak about, along with reflection on the context that creates them, are invaluable opportunities for applying theory. As one White South African male student reflected: ‘It is a painfully complicated and a potentially undermining process to examine your privileges. It challenges accepted features of your identity by connecting those features to a broader web’.

Though the reactions varied, some students also had strong negative reactions to being ‘forced to undertake self-reflection and introspection’ (White South African female student), while others such as this Black South African male student indicate the profound impact such reflection can have at the individual level:

‘The subject of this paper has shaken my inner consciousness, a world which I hardly share with anyone. For me it was a good experience. I don’t remember writing such a sensitive paper to my inner self in university and I wanted to write more ... This exercise has given me a platform to feel the real me ... I feel like I have liberated myself from thoughts of imperfection’ (Black South African male student).

Discussion

We began this paper by noting that the process of transformation in South Africa was being jeopardized by an unwillingness to reflect on the past and by a growing tendency to ignore issues of power and privilege and instead employ pragmatic approaches to address poverty. We also noted that what was needed in the South African context was more than a mere multicultural accommodation of difference. We asked whether using both a canonical and contextual text in a diverse university classroom could be effective as a component of transformative (antiracist) moral

education. We now conclude by turning to this question as well as offering modest implications for the future use of such an activity.

Does thinking about privilege contribute to transformation?

The levels of reflection exhibited by these second year students were clearly impressive, despite the discomfort evident. Students definitely demonstrated that the exercise brought to the surface elements needed for social transformation to take place, such as ‘recognition’ as illustrated by this White South African female student: ‘We are responsible for trying our best to integrate with and understand the unique situation of every individual, resisting the urge to use our own life as a baseline’.

Another student includes elements of a vision for the future of South Africa, as well as understanding the necessity of consciousness-raising and connecting the present to a historical context: ‘I get inspiration to act for the equity of all people. To illuminate my White and otherwise privileged peers to the very unearned advantages of which McIntosh speaks in her piece and to help educate young Black people about the complex system of privileges and disadvantages in which we live as a legacy of Apartheid’ (Black South African female student).

A Coloured South African female student (echoing McIntosh) raises the moral obligation to now enact some sort of change as a result of coming to realize the level of privilege she experiences, and the importance of the act of reflection as a first step: ‘Now that I have acknowledged my privileges I feel a moral obligation to ensure that I try to not always unintentionally cash in on it ... it is something that one does not know the depth of, unless one confronts it and looks.’

Raising the consciousness of White people about the impact of inequality was a task that Biko (1987) highlighted as an essential part of building a future for South Africa. It was evident amongst students from South Africa and from abroad: ‘This assignment encouraged me to go beyond my usual lens of oppression and really examine all the ways in which I am privileged. There is so much that must be changed within our society and the first step is to acknowledge the divisions. This assignment definitely helped me see inequalities I have not confronted before, which will allow me to better understand and fight for equality’ (White US female student).

Whilst the majority of students reflected positively on the experience, and demonstrated some shift in consciousness, there were a few dissenting voices. The most striking of these defied any hope of social change: ‘These social constructs are so deeply embedded in us and our systems that such change seems nothing more than a hopeful, far-fetched dream’ (Black South African female student).

The outstanding question, however, that remained for those who were impacted by the exercise was a question about how to affect change: ‘To be honest, I’m not sure exactly how this can be done; the idea of simply knowing my privilege frustrates me. I hope that an answer will surface’ (Coloured South African female student). Thus the exercise can be considered to have been successful to a certain degree in promoting social change in some form, though as some students pointed

out, this consciousness-raising exercise is only the first step. Perhaps this can best be summed up by a White South African male student who pointed to the circumstances that would allow the exercise to promote social transformation:

‘Either you blindly and passively accept those parts of yourself that have been handed down to you and which are oppressive and natural and normal or you resist and actively try to reform society so that you do not perpetuate the structural violence done unto others. This is the moral miracle that reflection and reflexivity can work if a sincere receptivity exists on the part of the one engaged in reflection’.

In other words, the individuals in the class need to be willing to become aware of, and acknowledge, inequalities and their impacts; be open to overcoming shame, blame, hurt and anger; and be willing to engage in the process of learning which connects personal experience to social structure and historical contexts. In turn, the context in which the exercise is conducted should ensure that opportunities for restoring personhood in all its dimensions are afforded; that visions for future solidarity are offered; and that ongoing spaces for discussions on how to move forward are created.

Implications for moral education

The activity we have described in this paper can be broadly categorized as anti-racist education, which is undoubtedly a moral endeavour and a laudable goal for moral education, one which takes a step beyond a merely multicultural approach. There are a number of practical and theoretical lessons for moral education we draw from the exercise. The first concerns the use of sources in the classroom. Using McIntosh as a primary text, and then inviting participation, critical thinking and subjective application, is a useful methodology for contextualizing, talking of and disrupting privilege. It clearly translates theory into practice. Furthermore, combining canonical texts with local, contemporary and non-academic texts, such as that of Dlanga, can result in deep experiential learning. In a multicultural classroom such as the one described in this paper such combinations work well together, and are not frequently done. South African students related best to the local text, international students to the canonical text, and both were helped to take another’s perspective. Key in the endeavour was offering the whole class feedback from the activity, and allowing for further discussion.

The activity has itself raised ethical questions about ‘using’ course content in a university setting in the service of moral education. Some students (a small minority) expressed reluctance at being coerced to do an activity for grades. This concern was addressed in some measure by paying specific attention to ensuring that assessments were fair, and that grades were allocated for completing the exercise and following the instructions of the assignment rather than critiquing the levels of engagement, self-disclosure or reflexivity of conclusions reached by students. However, this discomfort on the part of the course conveners about ‘using the classroom’ as a venue for social justice education requires further consideration,

especially given the increasing relationship between education and economic outcomes for students. Such a commodification of moral education has yet to be explored.

Finally, the requirement for students to offer concrete examples from their own experience also served to level the playing fields since speaking of experience rather than opinion has the effect of humanizing large theoretical concerns with racism, domination and oppression. While concentrating on privilege can obscure and minimize experiences of oppression, this was not the case in this activity since students made the connection quite clearly between the two. The activity also allowed for a movement from multiculturalism's political accommodation of difference to reflecting on and subverting the privileges of difference frequently experienced as domination and oppression.

Notes

1. We use South African historical 'race' categorization for descriptive purposes without subscribing to its ideology or reality. We intentionally capitalize these descriptors to indicate historical provenance. According to the Apartheid population group system of classification, 'Black' South Africans are typically of African descent, 'Coloured' South Africans are either of mixed race, or indigenous first peoples or of Malay descent, 'White' South Africans are of European descent, and Indian South Africans are of Asian descent, including from the Indian subcontinent.
2. 73% of Indian South Africans held this view while 67% of Coloured South Africans did so.
3. The students in this study are from Cape Town which is in the Western Cape province.
4. Coloured and Black are different (in the USA these terms have been used interchangeably).
5. Black Economic Empowerment is a government policy aimed at redressing past imbalances by improving Black economic access and material wealth through promoting Black business ownership and supplying incentives for procuring goods and services from Black-owned businesses.

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