



Privilege, shame and supremacy

Dwight Turner explores a recent encounter with privilege in the therapy room

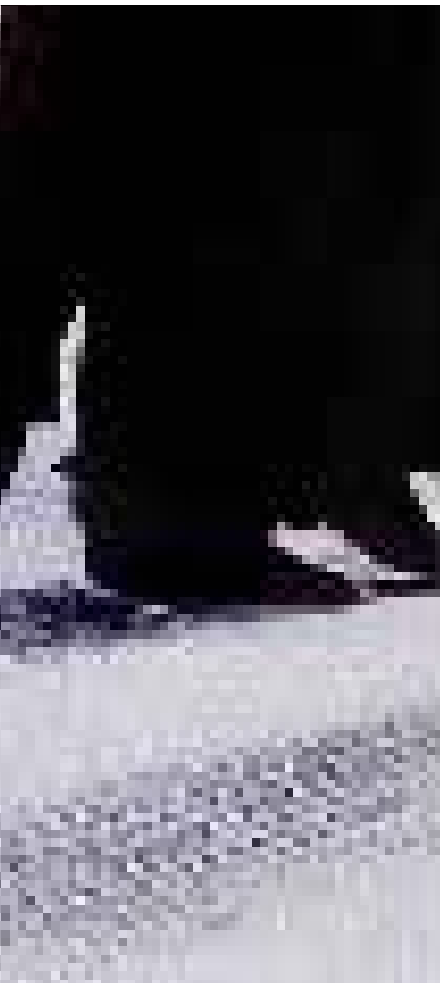
Mitchell was a 35-year-old white man, born in London, with a five-year-old daughter from a previous relationship. He presented in therapy following a physical altercation with his current partner of three years, who was of African descent. It had led to him spending a night in the cells of the local police station. When he came to see me, he told me he felt mortified, not only about his physical aggression towards his partner but also by some of the things he had said to her and his daughter at the time. For example, at the height of the argument, his daughter had begun to cry, prompting Mitchell to shout at her.

When his partner had said he shouldn't speak to his daughter like that, he turned his anger on her. He told her he could say what he wanted because he was the child's father, and that she (his partner) should shut up because she wasn't even the child's step-mother. He then went on to berate her for her cultural background, especially in comparison with his.

While his behaviours undoubtedly raised serious issues about domestic violence and physical and emotional abuse, my interest here is in Mitchell's choice to come to me, a therapist of colour, and how the issue of privilege and its links to supremacy and narcissism became an important aspect of our work together.

Understanding privilege

Although we may not recognise it as such, we all come into life with some sense of privilege. For example, Jensen¹ considers whiteness a form of privilege, and his work explores how his race leads to the suppression of racial others in his community. While many writers tend to focus purely on white or class privilege, it is actually intersectional: patriarchy, heteronormativity and ableism are all forms of privilege, and an individual may benefit from more than one form at the same time. Logie and Rwigema,² for example, discuss the privilege of whiteness and the marginalisation of BME groups within the LGBTQ community,



but Case and colleagues quite rightly argue that privilege extends beyond the more traditional understanding of white privilege to that of gender, sexuality, gender identity, religion and social class.³

What this means is that, just as difference is intersectional, so too is the means of oppression of the other. For example, although I am a black heterosexual male, this does not mean I do not enjoy any privilege at all. My sexual orientation alone, in relation to colleagues, students or others who might be LGBTQ, for example, means that I may inadvertently oppress, other or discriminate against those I see as clients.

Much of this discussion, though, is taking place within the field of psychology. Studies about privilege have been around for a while, but counselling and psychotherapy have been suspiciously robust in resisting any recognition of privilege as a precursor to the oppression of the other. This means there has also been a failure to explore how privilege unconsciously resides within psychotherapy trainings, where the vast majority of trainees are white, middle class, able bodied and heteronormative. Yet, given the heightened relevance of otherness in the world today, with movements from #me too to Black Lives Matter challenging their varying experiences of privilege and abuse, there is a need to explore this issue more widely. Psychotherapy acts as a microcosm of interactions with the other, making it increasingly important to recognise the impact privilege can have on the various minorities who work as counsellors and psychotherapists. And, if privilege is a constant, then it is wise to recognise there is another layer as well that is socially constructed out of the societal, cultural, racial, gender and other identities we function within.

However, I strongly believe this multi-layered aspect to privilege has an unconscious component. In my work with Mitchell, he recognised that he wanted to be with someone 'less challenging', which led him to choose a partner who was not of his culture. So, whenever he displayed his anger at his partner for speaking up for her step-daughter, what he was really saying was that she wasn't allowed a voice, as his position as the child's father meant he had the right to do what he wanted - that he had a layer of patriarchal or cultural privilege over his partner. Unconscious privilege, therefore, is more than the overt model discussed above; it is also the unknown scripts we hold within ourselves that say we have the right to do things, to dominate another, and also that we are better than them.

Yet, throughout our work, there was one aspect that concerned me: his denial of any responsibility for the impact of his words on his daughter - she too just had to listen to him, or else. This was when my research took me in the direction of linking privilege to supremacy.

Privilege and supremacy

The problem with linking privilege with supremacy is that, if we are all born into some degree of privilege, irrespective of who we are, at what stage does this develop into a sense of superiority? There are many possible answers here, and many involving uses and abuses of power, but one factor that is also important in answering this question is the role of childhood experience. In his book on boarding school survivors, Duffel⁴ considers the top-down nature of Western schooling, suggesting that the archaic, yet still prevalent aim of boarding schools is to produce generations of people to lead colonial Britain. So, out of a system where our leaders are moulded emerged not only those who built the British empire but also those who provide the rules of and route towards privilege for the rest of the population. The problem here, though, is the broken attachments that led to this formation of superiority over the other. Schaverien's work⁵ succinctly explores how the pain of separation from primary care-givers and the often-oppressive nature of the boarding school system lead to the formation of a harsh, sudden, false self, built for survival in a hostile world environment.

Interestingly, Adler's notion of the inferiority complex is also relevant here.⁶ Although not directly linked with broken attachments, the idea that we envy that which we perceive the other to have, thereby leaving us in a projected inferior position to them, begins to build a bridge to understanding just how such an ancient educational system as the boarding school works to fashion such a sense of

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supremacy.⁷ This sense of superiority, however, emerges out of a coping mechanism that Adler called the superiority complex - a complex that works to compensate for the unconscious envy and sense of inferiority that the client can no longer contain. Superiority, therefore, is a psychological defence against shame.

Supremacy by its very nature, therefore, involves the quest to be seen as more than just average, and one means of achieving this is by using our power to oppress others. For some, thus, supremacy and privilege walk hand in hand, with a need for constant but unsustainable validation of worth. For others though, these are distinctly different positions. For example, for some born into privilege, the urge for supremacy is tempered by a sense of humility and the absence of a need for additional mirroring from the other.

White privilege, heteronormative privilege and the privileges embedded within patriarchy and ableism are all part of the notion of normality - that there is one right way of being. So, for the supremacist who fails to recognise their own shame, the other - be they of colour, female, less able bodied or of a different sexual orientation - is not only other but also less than. This does not mean that supremacy is intersectional, like privilege - if it were, we would all suffer from grandiosity. What it does mean is that the combination of privilege with an unreconstructed sense of loss of early attachments (in this example) can be a route towards developing a defence that protects us against feeling less than, and we use others for this purpose.

However, exploring this unconscious position of supremacy with Mitchell meant he had to acknowledge that some of his actions towards his partner, and also (interestingly) towards his daughter, were rooted in subtle lessons that he had received from his family and his upbringing. Once this was acknowledged, other subtle actions came to light, such as his various micro-aggressions towards me - subtle put-downs about my way of working, criticisms that there was no change, and shouldn't I be doing something more to assist him. The unconscious supremacist had entered the therapy and was asking to be seen.

Privilege and narcissism

In considering envy, one must also recognise its link to narcissism, where the narcissistic need to avoid the pain of envy leads the

THE PRIVILEGE WALK

The Privilege Walk is a group exercise designed to help participants explore their own privilege. Participants line up across a large room. The facilitator then asks them a series of around 35 questions and instructs them to step forwards or backwards, depending on their answers.

Questions might include: 'If you can show affection for your romantic partner in public without fear of ridicule or violence, take a step forward'; 'If you have ever been the only person of your race/gender/sexual orientation in a classroom or workplace setting, take a step back'; 'If you have ever been bullied or made fun of, based on something that you can't change, take a step back'; 'If you were ever offered a job because of your association with a friend or family member, take a step forward.'

At the end, participants are invited to reflect on their experience of the exercise in relation to themselves and to those standing ahead of and behind them.

This experiential exploration of both privilege and difference, I believe, offers a structured, safe and contained way of working with otherness. For trainee counsellors and psychotherapists, exercises like

this bring into focus the close, unconscious interrelationship between privilege and difference and how their own privilege might impact or oppress the other in the therapeutic space.

You can find many examples of the Privilege Walk on YouTube.

There are also numerous online privilege tests that use similar questions to provide a personalised assessment of the person's privilege status and can be used one-to-one situations or with students who find the walk too exposing.

Below are the results of a privilege test I took for this article on 29 March 2018.

Dr Dwight Turner

You live with 38 out of 100 points of privilege.

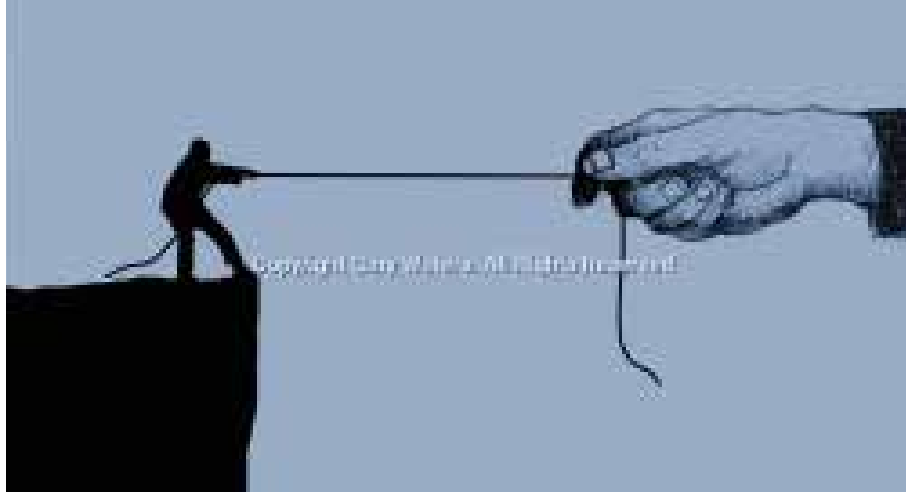
You're not privileged at all. You grew up with an intersectional, complicated identity, and life never lets you forget it. You've had your fair share of struggles, and you've worked hard to overcome them. We do not live in an ideal world and you had to learn that the hard way. It is not your responsibility to educate those with more advantages than you, but if you want to, go ahead and send them this quiz. Hopefully it will help.

individual to paper over the crack in their false self's façade and seek reflected validation of themselves as special, unique, brave and worthy to mitigate their sense of shame and inferiority.

In our client work, Mitchell's narcissistic grandiosity acted as a shield against his feeling the full force of his shame about the physical and emotional abuses he inflicted on his partner and daughter. Conversely, our sessions often left me with the sense of shame, as if I had done something wrong - a shame prompted by Mitchell chiding me for some imagined slight or his need to correct me for not using the right word when reflecting his meaning back to him. These micro-aggressions

were designed to wear me down, probably much as he wore down his partner, until I submitted to his supreme egoic will and experienced his shame in the process.

Whitford,⁸ in writing about the work of Irigaray, unconsciously, I believe, tied narcissism to patriarchal privilege. This aspect cried out to be explored in my work with Mitchell, where privilege was an aspect of grandiose narcissism, relieving the individual of responsibility for the other. This barrier of narcissism is an issue I have explored in a previous article in *Therapy Today*,⁹ and that I now recognise is sustained by a combination of unreconstructed privilege and supremacy.



Much like any type of shadow work, it was very painful for Mitchell to recognise these aspects of himself that he tried so hard to deny. When challenged in therapy about the damage he was causing through his beliefs and behaviours around gender and culture and their impact on his relationships with the two main women in his life, he broke down - his sense of shame finally returned home. At this point, our work really began.

Conclusion

Both Hegel and Fanon argued in their own ways that both participants in the subject-object dyad need each other, but that, while the subject holds responsibility and power over the other, the other, in order to feel free, needs to take up the responsibility and power it has unconsciously given to the subject.^{10,11} An exploration of the role of privilege through the lens of psychotherapy, however, introduces the idea that this subject-other dyad resides within each of us, all of the time, and is actually

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a projection of a relationship rooted in our own minority/majority identity. This means, if we have been educated to be seen as superior, then we will reject the idea that we are the other and make someone else fulfil this role, and vice versa. Moving beyond this dyadic position to achieve a personal sense of unity requires the privileged other to recognise their privilege with humility, thereby staving off the grandiosity inherent in that position.

I am often asked by students of diversity, and occasionally by psychotherapy trainers, how to approach difference. I could give them all of the stock, politically correct answers, but asking groups, students and trainers to consider the issue of privilege (be it their own or not) offers an interesting route towards self-knowledge and acceptance. Privilege questionnaires, where students are asked a number of questions intended to put them in touch with their own position of privilege, or performing the ‘privilege walk’ - an experiential exercise where students together experience their sense of privilege in relation to their peers - are both excellent exercises in this regard.¹²

The benefit of this exercise is that, for those who function from a position of difference, the popular misconception that, if you are the other, then you have no power is challenged when we add in the idea of an intersectional layer of privilege in their daily interactions. It is an awareness of these extra aspects of working with difference that I believe counselling and psychotherapy trainings could deliver well, were trainers themselves willing to explore their own privileged positions. The danger in my ideal, though, is that this ignores the fact that, as with Mitchell, doing so - truly bringing into focus their own sense of otherness - brings them in touch with their own sense of inferiority, shame and anger, thereby altering their cultural identity forever. Yet, we are all on a route towards self-knowledge, so should we not all be brave enough to do this? ■

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