Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Vol. 24, No. 1, March 2024, pp.76-100.
doi: 10.14434/josotl.v24i1.34707

The Limits of White Privilege Pedagogy: A Reflective Essay on using Privilege Walks in the College Classroom

Amy Dundon
Clark University

Elisabeth Stoddard
Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Geoff Pfeifer
Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Nestor Noyola
Clark University

Abstract: *The privilege walk is a pedagogical tool used to teach students about often-ignored aspects of privilege. Despite their popularity, privilege walks are under-examined in the scholarship of teaching and learning. This leaves open questions about the efficacy of the walk, and whether, and to what extent, the walk yields different results among students from different backgrounds. This paper critically examines the privilege walk by reflecting on our experience of teaching the walk and analyzing student learning reflections about the exercise. We draw on critical race theory to interpret our data and also to help introduce the concept of slippage. We use slippage as shorthand for systematic issues long described by critical race theorists, such as meritocracy, that are reframed as individual responsibilities. We conclude by discussing how educators might prioritize teaching about structural power by integrating ideas from critical race theory, and abandon intellectual traditions that center Whiteness or the individual.*

Keywords: *Critical race theory, White privilege pedagogy, privilege walk, meritocracy, colorblindness, structural racism*

Introduction

With the aim of teaching students about social privilege,[1] many educators in the United States (U.S.) have conducted privilege walk activities (Pennington et al., 2012; Kumasi, 2017; Alexander and Herman, 2015). A privilege walk is a physical teaching and learning exercise meant to illuminate often-ignored aspects of privilege. Participants line up, then take steps forward (toward privilege) or backward (towards marginalization) as a facilitator reads questions aloud (e.g., "If your ancestors came to the United States by force, take one step back"). When the exercise concludes, participants are usually scattered throughout the room – an uneven result meant to represent a participant's privilege in relation to their peers. While the exercise is common in educational settings, few empirical studies examine the efficacy of privilege walks. We suggest the walk deserves critical empirical investigation, particularly in the scholarship of teaching and learning, for several reasons.

[1] Social privilege involves receiving unearned advantages by being born into or a member of a specific group, such as a member of a particular class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, ability, sexual orientation, and more (National Association of School Psychologists, 2016).

First, there has been a renewed focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in educational settings. Social unrest following the murder of George Floyd highlighted inequities in American society, and it motivated and pushed students, educators, and administrators to talk about these issues in the classroom (Clayton, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic also highlighted and exacerbated ongoing educational inequities in the U.S. while addressing inequities in society and in education has been a part of university dialog and programming for years, the triple crisis of the pandemic, systemic racism made visible through police violence, and the intensification of educational inequities have increased the priority of DEI efforts across the educational landscape (Clayton, 2021). Educational settings have become central for discussions around DEI: higher ed administration, for instance, have rolled out efforts to attract racially diverse students and faculty (Nunes, 2021); students have led on-campus protests of economic and racial inequality (Hendricks et al., 2021); and critical pedagogical approaches, meanwhile, have become deeply politicized (Kim, 2021).

Second, the privilege walk is the most common tool to emerge from White privilege pedagogy in the 1980s, and is still prominent today (Tevis et al., 2022). White privilege pedagogy aims to have "White people explore the unearned social privileges they receive as a result of being White" (Cabrera, 2017, p.79). The privilege walk exercise has been described as an effective and transformative practice (Margolin, 2015; Kumasi, 2017), that is helpful for discerning personal privileges and biases (Siliman and Kearns, 2020), understanding positionality, and how Whiteness can shape approaches to teaching (Pennington et al., 2012). Education professionals suggest the exercise benefits aspiring teachers (Martinez, 2015) and school counselors (Rothman et al., 2012). Other studies explain that the walk fosters a nuanced understanding of how race and class shape life outcomes (Arapah, 2016; Hanasono, 2022), and that the exercise is especially useful for White students' recognition of Whiteness as a racial category (Ford, 2012) and of racism writ large (Kernahan and Davis, 2007).

Third, an empirical, student-centered study of the privilege walk is useful because the exercise is contested. Despite its ongoing popularity, educators and scholars, particularly those of color, have challenged the utility and function of the walk for decades. Some critics of the walk question whether the walk is an effective tool to teach about privilege in the first place (Lensmire et al., 2013). Others demonstrate that the walk fails to situate White privilege in its broader context of White supremacy, and is therefore an inadequate pedagogical tool (Leonardo, 2004; Tevis et al., 2022). Studies have also examined the ways that privilege walks instrumentalize Black students (Foster, 2005) and other students of color for the express pedagogical benefit of White students (Sassi and Thomas, 2008; Magana, 2017).

Finally, our experience with the walk aligns with ongoing critique. We found that the walk led White students to conceptualize privilege in individual and superficial terms, and failed to teach students of all races to recognize structural conditions that make and remake privileged categories and life outcomes. The walk also animated race-neutral and universalized categories of difference, fostered an essentialized understanding of race, and advanced meritocratic standards. We use core literature within the critical race theory cannon to make sense of these outcomes and introduce the concept of *slippage* to signal where and how the privilege walk reproduced logics and perspectives long critiqued by critical race scholarship.

In addition to critical race theory (CRT), this retrospective study engages in scholarship of our own teaching and learning (SoTL). Following Cranton (2018), this study contributes to critical scholarship of teaching and learning because our pedagogical approaches were transformed during our experience with the walk. Through candid reflection on the outcomes of the walk, we offer an example of reflexive pedagogy (Fanghanel, 2013; Cook-Sather et al., 2019) in an effort to help teachers at all levels engage with their own pedagogy in rigorous and constructive ways.

Results

Our analysis revealed that the walk resulted in three significant outcomes. Students: 1) collapsed and depoliticized difference 2) advanced meritocracy and colorblindness, and 3) deferred to epistemological ignorance of Whiteness. We examine these outcomes by analyzing student reflections on the privilege walk, and draw on critical race scholarship to frame our analyses. We shorthand the themes we imported from CRT as *slippage*, in order to discuss how these ideas are operationalized in our student reflections. Slippage helps identify how the privilege walk fostered the tendency to decontextualize racial structures, individualize race and racism, and essentialize racial categories, and leading to student understanding of race and racism as merely individualized, epiphenomenal, and aberrant.

Collapsed Difference

Students often minimized the impact of, and therefore collapsed, salient facets of difference (e.g., race, ethnicity). We interpret this phenomenon as an expression of race liberalism, diminishing the significance of race and racism (Crenshaw, 2017). Students also collapsed difference by flattening categories of difference into a universalized conception of *being different,* which is an example of a conceptual slippage. An example comes from Dan, a White male student, who expressed that being in university provides all students with a "clean slate" that is no longer shaped by privilege:

> Now that we are [in university], I feel that we can start on a clean slate. What got everyone here now does not matter. History, other than how it shaped us into who we are today, has no impact anymore. It is all about what we do here [in university], with this opportunity.

Dan both acknowledges that 'history' shaped his and his peers' development, while simultaneously dismissing any impact of this 'history' by claiming that higher education provides a level playing field for all students. The notion of an 'equal playing' field qualifies as a transhistorical interpretation of privilege. We interpret Dan's collapsing of difference as an articulation of slippage. That is, Dan, renders structural, historical, and systematic forms of difference (e.g., class, race, and gender differences) into individual terms; oppression can be overcome, because of the shared/same experience of attending college, which offers a "clean slate." The "from now on" sensibility minimizes and individualizes power hierarchies embedded in racism, classism, and gender inequality.

Similarly, José, a Latinx student with dual citizenship, minimized and collapsed difference by emphasizing college as a universalizing destination:

> While it is true that maybe our parents or ourselves had to leave our home countries at some point and that adjusting to a new culture and lifestyle was not easy, we still had managed to be at the same place as those who were considered more "privileged" [...]

José acknowledges that achievements, like attending college, are easier for some students than others. José also suggests that difference can be overcome through achievement, a perspective that conceals the significance of race and racism (Phillips, 2002; Melamed, 2006). Collapsing difference in this case functions to neutralize the meaning, impact, and significance of difference, and offers an example of how students conceptually slipped between recognizing and acknowledging differences between structural and individual forms of oppression.

A final example of collapsed difference comes from Tyler. Tyler is a White male student that identifies as highly privileged. For Tyler, the privilege walk opened his perspective of privilege. He says:

> Suddenly all the challenges I was facing -homework, living in a new place, and meeting new people- seemed so insignificant when weighed against all my good fortune. Nonetheless, at the end of the exercise almost all of the participants had made the journey to the circle's center, suggesting that from a privilege standpoint, [our college] is uniformly fortunate.

Tyler, like José and Dan, seems to acknowledge the ways social formations structured in racial dominance (Hall 1980) confer uneven and unequal privileges. For Tyler, his whiteness, class, and gender bestow him with "good fortune." However, as Tyler reflects on the results of the walk – that most of his peers are also privileged – his recognition of difference slips from structural to individual terms. Moreover, the assertion of "uniform" privilege or fortune indicates that the walk rendered significant aspects of difference neutral and trivial.

Depoliticized Difference

Students also commonly depoliticized difference, specifically racial differences. Depoliticizing difference is an expression of race liberalism, where a muted conception of difference obscures the relationship between privilege, race, and power. [...]

John appears to reject the exercise and claims it may be harmful because of the ways differences are highlighted and politicized. His argument that the divisiveness of the walk outweighs any benefit qualifies it is an example of depoliticization of difference: John already knew and recognized differences among his peers, and did not approve of a direct mention of difference or privilege. These kinds of negative reactions, as Leach and colleagues (2006) explain, are common in situations where dominant racial and cultural groups are confronted with inequality. Individuals in the dominant racial group commonly manage the discomfort of such confrontation through a focus on the individual, rather than structural inequality. John and Anna, like other White students, responded to the privilege walk with "negative" reactions because of the politicization of race.

Dhruv, a South Asian male student with dual citizenship, like Anna and John, responded to the privilege walk by depoliticizing difference. Unlike his peers, Dhruv depoliticized difference in a way that generated feelings of comradery: for Dhruv, recognizing difference, when sufficiently

[...]

Our student responses also reveal that claims of victimhood depoliticized difference and privilege. The tendency to express victimhood is a noteworthy pattern: it appeared almost exclusively among the White middle- and upper-class male students who felt targeted in the privilege walk. For instance, recall John, a working-class male student that had a generally negative reaction to the walk. John described himself as a victim of the privilege walk and noted a concern for how others – especially marginalized students – may see him:

> The activity seemed directed at me, pointing out how I was in the wrong for being privileged. I didn't choose to be born into a well-off family. Even though I may not have had as many hardships as others, I don't want to be looked down upon.

John focuses on how the privilege walk negatively impacted him as an individual. As McIntosh explained, privilege refers not to "earned strength" but instead refers to "unearned power," including the "privilege to ignore less powerful people, distort the humanity of the [privilege] holders as well as the ignored groups" (1988b, 7). Importantly, McIntosh warns us that what may look like earned strength may actually be "permission to escape or to dominate" (1988b, 6) We see this in John's reflection: John centers himself and presents the "fact" that he has not done anything "wrong" – he was merely born into privilege – and that recognizing his privilege will make others "look down" upon him – something that will hurt him.

Meritocracy and Colorblindness

John's response is not uncommon. John, like other students, engaged the rhetorical tool of projection (in John's case, projection of blame), which is characteristic of colorblindness and meritocracy (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Quizzically, John claims that he, rather than his peers of color, is a victim. This move is characteristic of leveraging Whiteness and gender to escape accountability or recognition of privilege and, ultimately, to center Whiteness. Cabrera (2017) suggests centering Whiteneness to avoid accountability is a common strategy among White men on college campuses who claim victimization in response to discussions of race and racism. We understand such reactions, whether claiming victimization or centering one's Whiteness, as expressions of race liberalism that simultaneously minimize difference and promote, however superficially, notions of equality.

Minimizing difference was consistent among students of different races and income brackets. Students of color, for example, reported that despite initial worries about being exposed to judgment from more privileged students, the focus on privileges helped create a more inclusive social environment. However, this privilege-based camaraderie was achieved by collapsing distinct, race-based privileges into more general or class-based difference. Following critical scholarship of race, we suggest generalizing identity obscures and negates social and political processes that make and remake identity, the co-production of difference, and the ways particular identity markers (e.g., race and class, gender and race, etc.) are entangled with one another (Gilmore, 2008; Hall, 1980; Gilroy, 1993; Omi and Winant, 1986).

We understand the superficial conceptualizations of difference to be a major flaw of the privilege walk, despite apparently positive reports of inclusivity in the classroom. Relatedly, students tended to collapse or depoliticize difference through appeals to meritocracy. Meritocracy is a key tenet of abstract liberalism that is based on the assumption that systems reward people based on their abilities rather than other factors like race and social class (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). We find that this undermines the aim of the privilege walk because it reinforces fictional, race-neutral colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). [...]

Conclusion

When designing and conducting the privilege walk, we hypothesized that the privilege walk would help white students recognize their structural privilege, see that underrepresented students got to the same place without the benefit of such structural privilege, and that this would help to reduce bias and stereotyping on student teams. However, our data and analysis demonstrate that while students express a range of reactions to the privilege walk, the exercise encouraged a flattened conception of difference, resulted in them focusing on individual rather than structural power, and alienated students of color. We discuss each of these shortcomings in this concluding section.

Many students reported a depoliticized and flattened conception of salient identity-based difference after their participation in the privilege walk. The tendency for students to elide, collapse, minimize, or ignore race-based differences creates the opportunity to reinforce the uneven power dynamics that we aimed to interrupt by conducting the walk. For instance, students of all racial backgrounds collapsed difference, differed to fallacies of equality, and reified meritocracy; many White students internalized the walk in a way that sparked feelings of anger, guilt, or victimization.

The feelings that White students commonly expressed in relation to the privilege walk exercise demonstrate that the activity tended to generate (or reinforce) an individualized conceptualization of racism. The feelings of guilt, shame, and other negative emotions indicate that the walk has a tendency to activate conceptualizations of difference that are characteristic of liberal ideology. Liberal ideology in student response manifested through an adherence to meritocratic standards of success, the erasure of race and race-based difference in favor of class or gender, and the operationalization of race-neutral narratives. These responses reveal the ways that engaging in the privilege walk allowed students to conceptualize difference, power, oppression, and race in ways that actively displaced any notion of structural power. This is a disappointing outcome given our intention of aiding student understanding of the structures of power that shape society.

We also note that within our predominantly White institution, the walk served White students only. This result is partly because by design: White privilege pedagogy is an instrument *meant* to teach White people about their Whiteness (Margolin, 2015; Cabrera, 2017; Lensmire et al., 2013). Positive impacts, however, were limited. Many White students reflected on the exercise with strong negative emotions. For most White students, the focus on Whiteness and privilege failed to meaningfully impact, teach, or change perspectives of power or privilege.

The aggregate impact of the walk on our students is troubling, and we are particularly discouraged about the walk because of the care and attention with which we constructed the exercise. We recognize there are other forms or modes of privilege walks, such as privilege walks conducted as individual, written exercises; "blind" privilege walks that assign fictional privileges students at random; and walks that center the assets of students, rather than describe deficits (e.g., Stevens et al., 2019; Oropeza et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2019).

[...]