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Conceptualizations and Experiences of Oppression: Gender Differences

Susan Hillock[1]

Abstract

Using an exploratory qualitative research design featuring semistructured interviews, the author asked a group of 10 male and female social workers to describe their conceptualizations of and experiences with oppression. This article presents the participants' social locations and identities related to their understandings and experiences of oppression and thoughts about processes of the internalization of oppression. The findings indicate that the male and female participants had different experiences, articulations, and conceptualizations of oppression. In addition, for the most part, they did not explicitly acknowledge positions of privilege and entitlement or articulate how these factors have played out in their clinical and personal relationships.

Keywords

feminist research, gender and identity, qualitative research, social work practice

Using an exploratory qualitative research design, featuring semistructured interviews, I asked a group of 10 social workers to describe their conceptualizations of and experiences with oppression from the perspective of both their personal and professional lives. To situate the individual participant in his or her particular social, economic, and cultural locations, I analyzed the participants' responses to explore gender, class, racial, and cultural similarities and differences in their conceptualizations, articulations, and experiences of oppression. This article analyzes the participants' social locations and identities related to their understandings and experiences of oppression and thoughts about the processes of internalizing oppression. My research on the participants' critical self-reflection, discussion, and debate about the meanings of oppression, in their personal and professional lives, also revealed questions about how social workers' worldviews, behaviors, and constructions of reality perpetuate social inequities. The findings are intended to assist the social work profession to build a stronger conceptual framework for understanding oppression and eventually to assist social workers to better name, recognize, respond to, and resist systems of domination.

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The Concept of Oppression

Oppression is not a static concept, nor is it "everything that frustrates or limits or hurts a person" (Mullaly, 2010, p. 40). Indeed, according to Frye (1983, p. 40), to understand oppression, "one has to look at the social context of a particular restriction, limit, or injury." Oppression is also more than a simple binary division of oppressors and oppressed because individuals can simultaneously occupy positions of both privilege and oppression. For the purposes of this article, oppression is viewed as systemic and structural patterns of disadvantage and privilege, operating through multiple axes of power (sexism, racism, classism, ageism, and so on) for the particular benefit of specific dominant groups. These unequal social and power relations both involve relations of subordination and domination and occur as "interactions between people, not only at the interpersonal level but the cultural and institutional levels as well" (Dominelli, 2002, p. 39). Ellsworth (1989) cautioned that depending on social locations, specific historical contexts, and situations, no individual or group is exempt from potentially becoming oppressive to others.

Intersectionality of Oppressions

The recognition of the simultaneity and nonsynchronistic nature of different forms of privilege and oppression has been a significant contribution of black feminist thought (Collins, 1991, 2000; hooks, 1989, 1993; Smith, 2007). According to Collins (1991, p. 18), the intersectionality of oppressions "refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation." In addition, Collins (1991, 2000) suggested that intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained within a matrix of domination. Within this matrix, or what Sisneros, Stakeman, Joyner, and Schmitz (2008) called a web of oppression and Condeluci (1995) described as a scale of oppression, both oppression and privilege occur at multiple levels and sites and are experienced relationally and dynamically between and among individuals, identities, and groups (Wineman, 1984). This analysis has often been referred to as intersectionality theory and has been adopted in much of the social work literature (Baines, 2007; Carniol, 2005a, 2005b; Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Dominelli, 2002; Gil, 1998; Marsiglia & Kulis, 2009; Mullaly, 2002, 2010; Shera, 2003; Sullivan, Steinhouse, & Gefland, 2000; Thompson, 2006). According to Collins (2000, p. 18), an intersectional analysis "reminds us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type and oppressions work together in producing injustice." By focusing primarily or exclusively on one axis of oppression, such as gender, we run the risk of minimizing or not grasping service users' and social workers' lived realities.

Furthermore, Irvine (2007) connected the idea of intersectional identities and multiple subject positions with acts of daily living. Day-to-day issues of identity and culture; power and difference; and oppression, conformity, and resistance and their meanings are continually "constituted through fluid negotiations of race, gender, sexual identity and other social categories" (Irvine, 2007, p. 422). An exploration of how individual social workers negotiate these complex intersections helps us to be cognizant of how we, as social workers, knowingly or unconsciously benefit from our social locations and relative positions of power and privilege and reproduce oppression through our beliefs, practices, and complicity with the "status quo."

Conceptualizations and Experiences of Oppression

The following section emphasizes how the social workers in the study articulated their conceptualizations of and experiences with oppression. In addition, the following areas are highlighted: (1) the participants' characteristics, (2) men's experiences and conceptualizations of oppression, (3) men's denial and white privilege, (4) women's experiences and conceptualizations of oppression, and (5) processes of internalizing oppression.

Characteristics of the Participants

For this research, I interviewed 10 social workers (5 women and 5 men). Seven of the 10 identified as Caucasian. In addition, 8 of the 10 came from what I would describe as middle-class families of origin (earning $21,000–$40,000 annually). Eight of the 10 were aged 40 or older. All the participants identified as heterosexual and able-bodied.

Men's Conceptualizations and Experiences of Oppression

The male participants struggled with naming an experience of personal or professional oppression. In fact, they had extreme difficulty identifying or recognizing when they had been oppressed or describing any incident of oppression that they had experienced in their lives. As two participants commented:

> Oh, I've got a charmed life! O gosh, maybe we can come back to that because .... other than watching the news every night, I'm not affected by that kind of oppression.... Anything related to oppression that I might experience, maybe this is why I have trouble coming up with an example, because I would feel guilty or I'd feel like I'd be whining if I was to really force myself to think about situations where I've been oppressed because like comparatively, I'm not.
>
> Well, I don't think I've experienced very much oppression personally, and I'm not sure that's good or bad; it's just what it is. I think sometimes it's hard to understand until one feels, until one senses, not just cognitively, but one has it in a deeper place in one's life to be able to really know it. So I'm not sure that I really truly understand true oppression because I can't think of a time ..... Have I observed it personally and seen it? I'm not sure that I have.

One male social worker did share the following story that he stated *might* be labeled oppression, although he did not label the experience as oppressive:

> There was a group that I was involved with that I initiated and set up and facilitated and supported a group for people who were having a long-term experience with [names the type of medical problem] support group as it were. The group itself went quite well and involved about two hours a week of my clinic or direct time. One of the directors of services had a patient involved in the group. The feedback that the director got from the patient was that the group was not particularly effective or helpful for the patient. People were challenging doctors' decisions, questioning medications that they were prescribed, trying to find ways to advocate for better responses by public systems, and were complaining about being mistreated or not having their concerns addressed when they were in the hospital. In other words, there was a little bit of consciousness-raising happening in the group.
>
> The director then took that information and came directly to me and said, "I don't think this is a good way to spend your clinical time. You've got a lot of patients that you have to deal with, sometimes you're not able to get to all those patients or do all the things that you want to do with them, and you have made complaints about your workload from time to time. So, this is a group experience that I don't want to sanction you doing in a clinical capacity." The dilemma there, I mean it was interesting because that was a direct exposure to, "I'm the boss, I have the power to tell you that you can do this work and you can't do that work." I don't know whether one would conceptualize that as oppression or whether in looking at labor laws, there certainly wasn't any other way that I found that I could protest that. If I framework it or conceptualize it that way, yeah [it was] disempowering, devaluing, immobilizing. It certainly was like an invitation to me of why are you working so hard?

The participants' previous comments and the foregoing story left me wondering about differences in the way that men and women perceive, think, articulate, and report their experiences. Overall (1998) addressed the issues of men's experiences with oppression. She remarked that "individual men may be oppressed on the basis of their sexual orientation, their class, their race, their disability, or their religion, but they are not oppressed as men" (p. 65).

When I further explored the reasons why the male participants had difficulty articulating experiences of personal oppression in the interviews, I found that these explanations were offered:

> The reason for that partially is I don't see myself as being in a particularly disadvantaged class or age, or there's nothing typically stereotypically about me that would put me in a position where I think that I would be likely to be discriminated against or oppressed.
>
> If I'm experiencing oppression, one of the criteria that I'd have for experiencing it is that I wouldn't be able to do anything about it or that it would affect me in an immobilizing way. So for me to classify something as oppression, it probably would either have to be something that I'm not aware of or that's not in my immediate scope or one where I have tried and failed utterly at addressing the power structure that's behind it.

Male Privilege

The previous response is interesting because the social worker presumed that, as an actor, he has the ability, skills, opportunity, and power to change his circumstances (and, as a man, he may be correct). At the same time, he seems to have limited recognition (at least as articulated in the interview) that his power to do so may be linked to his privilege, gender, race, and/or socioeconomic class. There is also minimal recognition of how dominant–subordinate personal, cultural, and structural relations of power within patriarchy and capitalism serve to benefit men. The latter comments support McIntosh's (2007) observation that this type of denial, including neglecting to identify or acknowledge privilege, is common among men. McIntosh commented about her experiences in academia:

> I have often noticed men's unwillingness to grant that they are over-privileged in the curriculum, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. Denials that amount to taboos surround the subject of advantage that men gain from women's disadvantages. These denials protect male privilege from being fully recognized and acknowledged, lessoned, or ended. Only rarely will a man go beyond acknowledging that women are disadvantaged to acknowledging that men have unearned advantage or that unearned privilege has not been good for men's development as human beings or for society's development, or that privilege systems might ever be challenged and changed (pp. 344–349).

Male Denial and White Privilege

This male denial and belief in agency could be compared to white privilege and entitlement. As McIntosh (2007) explained:

> I was taught to think that racism could end if white individuals change their attitudes; many men think sexism can be ended by individual changes in daily behavior toward women. But a man's sex provides advantage for him whether or not he approves of the way in which dominance has been conferred on his group. Individual acts can palliate but can not end these problems. To redesign social systems, we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silencers and denials surrounded privilege are the key political tools here (p. 351).

McIntosh furthered her exploration of the implications of her whiteness and compared it to male unconsciousness:

> I understood that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious. Then I remembered the frequent charges from women of color that white women whom they encounter are oppressive. I begin to understand why we are justly seen as oppressive, even when we don't see ourselves that way. I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture (pp. 344–346).

Women's Conceptualizations and Experiences of Oppression

The female social workers' ways of expressing their experiences of living, recognizing, understanding, and articulating oppression were different from the male social workers'. Each woman could easily name several examples of multiple oppressions. Listening to the women's stories, I was struck by the sense of loss, the grief, and the multiple little deaths experienced by the women in the study.

On being dead meat. How oppression and inequality are played out on the bodies of women and the colonized is a significant aspect of our gendered experience. As Burstow (1992) stated:

> We are not seen as a living being with directions and functions of our own but as a collection of parts that exist to serve and please the male. Women lose in all this because our bodies are divided, degraded, damaged, and stolen from us (p. 4).

One female participant aptly described the following experience within a social work setting as oppressive:

> I had a unique experience because I went through years of working under a tyrant. This person was well known and would demonstrate her *lack* of respect. Other people were mostly silent. And even the guys who came in were contract workers, they were silent. But I noticed that she would very much alter her behavior around people who were leaders or whom she perceived to be able to affect her position. There was no room for opinion or discussion or coming up with problem solving or anything. It was, "This is the way it is; go do it." And so I was *dead meat* after that. She turned around and just screamed at me for the next 45 minutes. I heard all these terrible things about myself that were not even mentioned in my appraisal. And I was in a state of shock. I felt completely immobilized. And I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. Because when you're in it, you're just trying to survive.

On being a piece of meat. Sexual assault and violence are all too common occurrences for women (Avis, 2006). One female participant shared her painful story:

> When I was 16 years old, I was raped. I was camping with my family and my [relative], and I met these two older men on the beach one day. We spent some time with them that afternoon, and they invited us to come to their campsite that evening for some beer. Pretending to go to bed, we snuck out to go on this adventure. After numerous drinks, somehow a decision was made that my [relative] and one of the men were going to go for a walk along the beach, and the other man and I stayed put. To this day, I cannot remember all the details of how I ended up on the floor and this man being on top of me, taking away my virginity ..... I do not remember my [relative] and the other man returning and vaguely remember us walking back to our campsite .... I responded with silence. I did not tell my [relative] when she and the other man returned. I tried to pretend nothing had happened. As I said previously, the progression of events is pretty blurry, but I do remember not saying anything to this man. I left just wanting to disappear. I did not tell my family about this until 16 years later, when I was finally able to acknowledge that this was a rape and sought counseling to come to terms with what had happened.

On being a brood mare. The female participants reported receiving oppressive messages about "knowing one's place" and being pressured to accept proscribed gender norms. The following comment demonstrates this experience:

> The childhood that I had was in a very traditional home, patriarchal. Expectations were that if you were a woman, you were going to get married and have children. I'm the eldest of four children, so there are two females and two males, and being a reasonably well off middle-class family. And my father's saying, "Well there's going to be money for your brother's education and that's being put aside, but because you're a girl, you'll just be getting married and having kids. That would really be a waste for you to go on after high school." And so the internalized oppression was, "Oh, OK; I agree." I mean, I'd understood that; it made sense to me, but, yes, I mean there's this money, but it would be better invested in my brother's education. So now many years later, the irony is that I'm the only who has any university education.

On not being "Grade A Beef". Similarly, the female participants frequently told stories about being treated as second best or not being good enough, as the following comment illustrates:

> I think it was related to my role in my family because I was very conscious that females were second class. It was a very traditional military family; my dad was like God, and my mom was fairly subservient. Like in sports, I was always a really good athlete and was always playing on boys' teams, and I *always* had to prove myself.

On being as dumb as meat: Second-guessing. Of particular relevance to this discussion is something else I noticed from the findings, a phenomenon I call "second-guessing." The female participants who identified as having been oppressed described having to deal with their own sense of internalization, shame, and blame over their experiences of oppression, the actual oppression from others around them, and emphasized a psychological phenomenon in which they felt compelled to second-guess their every reaction to see whether their feelings, thoughts, and reactions were valid. In other words, these particular social workers reported being engaged in a continual ongoing internal process of evaluating and validating their own experiences and feelings to find the courage and confidence to act on these conditions.

To illustrate the nature of women's experiences of oppression and the phenomenon of second-guessing, as well as some of the challenges in social work, I present the following story about a female social work field instructor and a social work practicum student:

> I had taken her to a [specific agency] meeting with me, and this was the first meeting we were going to together. I was trying to say what I wanted to say, but I'm not good at interrupting, and that's one of the things that I struggle with being from my grandmother. You know *that voice* always pops in as if to say something like, "If what you have to say is meant to be heard, it'll be heard, and you don't interrupt people when you listen to people, and listening is better than speaking cause you learn more," all this kind of stuff. So anyway, the facilitator of the meeting, who knows me well, popped in and said, "OK, I know [name] is trying to say something, so what do you have to say?" So then I said what I had to say. By this time, what I had to say was already previously voiced, so I just kind of agreed with that person and added something to it, and that was about it.
>
> When the meeting ended, I stayed behind to speak to some people about whatever and told the practicum student that I'd meet her back here. So I came back here and was walking through, and she was sitting out there. I just said to her, "What did you think of the meeting"? She said, "Well you were quiet as a church mouse." And I became offended and I said to her, "I'm not quite sure what you mean by that." So then I asked her to come in so we could talk about it. And she said, "Well you didn't say

> anything." And I said, "I was attempting to." Then I said, "What did you mean by that"? And she said, "I didn't see you as representing the [specific race] community when they were talking about marginalized people." And so I said to her, "I work predominately with [specific race] people, and in this case, I'm not seeing them as marginalized. OK, yes in the broader society but not in this instance that we're talking about" but *again justifying*. I found myself justifying, and then I thought to myself, "Why am I justifying my behavior to her"? But here I am justifying myself and so, anyway, that was surprising to me, and I let her know that I thought she could be a little more sensitive and that we had worked through it, and that was fine.
>
> But I thought that it was fine. I got home that night, and it didn't hit me until I was lying in bed. And then all this old stuff started happening. And I realized to what extent I had been triggered, and it brought out all that stuff about the times that I'd heard that in the dominant society "You're real quiet" or "you never have anything to contribute" or those kind of messages. And I was struggling with a "How do I fit in?" and "Where's my place?" kind of thing. And sometimes it was avoidance, like just don't go there because it's not comfortable and then lots of work around being able to come to a place where it's OK just to be who I am, and when I have something to contribute, I always do, and if it's something that's really dear to my heart, I will. So there again, I was ... in my bed going through all this stuff.

Internalization of Oppression: On Being "Other"

As I listened to the social workers' stories, it became clear to me that the participants who spoke from the social position of "other" identified differential responses to oppression. The female social workers, particularly the racialized women, reported reactions to oppression and processes that they described as the internalization of oppression. They identified internalizing a feeling of being different—alien, being a minority, the experience of otherness—and spoke about feelings related to this experience, such as alienation, depression, and rage. According to Overall (1998), these feelings and reactions are common:

> Minority status often results in a kind of self-consciousness—not through any inherent wisdom or epistemic insight of the minority group person, but because a deviant social status tends to create self-consciousness. Marylyn Frye astutely observes, one of the privileges of being normal and ordinary is a certain unconsciousness. When one is that which is taken as the norm in one's social environment, one does not have to think about it (p. 178).

Consistent with the literature, the idea of an unconscious taking in of oppressive ideas, beliefs, attitudes, stories, social norms, and patterns of behavior was repeated by more than one female participant (see also Kellner, 2009; McIntosh, 2007; Mullaly, 2010). This finding is supported by Bartky (1988, p. 77) who theorized that "something is 'internalized' when it gets incorporated into the structure of the self."

Internalized scripts. The female participants spoke about lifelong messages and beliefs about self—their negative broken records—which resulted from the internalization of oppression. According to Burstow (1992, p. 56), these messages, broken records, or "scripts are a function of oppression and our own internalization of [them]." As one participant maintained, this internalization process changes people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors about themselves and others: "When the oppressed have come to believe whether they are aware of that or not but believe what the oppressed have been telling them through either verbal or nonverbal messages, it becomes part of their belief system." Raheim (2002, p. 95) explained this internalization process this way:

> These mechanisms of oppression may result in internalized oppression, whereby target-group members come to believe the prevailing stereotypes and negative valuations of themselves (Frye, 1983) .... This

> internalized oppression may lead to hopelessness and further disempowerment, disconnecting them from the knowledge of their strengths, capacities, and internal resources.

Internalized shame. The female participants reported internalizing feelings of shame connected to their experiences of oppression. One woman, who identified as "other," had this to say:

> This explains why Native people in communities are experiencing what they are and the whole reserve system. I took that as a personal shame when people were saying, "Oh they're dirty, and their reserves are nothing but all these broken-down cars, and all they do is drink" and all that. I took that as a personal affront basically and internalized that shame. I had internalized all those messages. Otherwise, why would I have felt ashamed of being Native? My mother telling us, "You're not Indians" and having her own internalized oppression being played out by putting down Native people herself when she also had that parentage . . . . I have an assumption or an understanding, I choose to call it, that addiction where they're at today is linked to that whole legacy that Aboriginal people have experienced. And I believe that it's passed down, that internalized oppression, that shame is passed down.

Another woman emphasized the lasting effects of an internalized sense of shame and blame from the aftereffects of a sexual assault:

> To this day, I still get angry thinking about this and the impact it has had on my life. Despite this, I have come to a place where I no longer believe this situation was my fault and with this, my shame and guilt have lessened. However, this experience has had a life-long impact that I will continue to evolve from. Not only has it influenced how I relate to and interact with men, but it left a sort of legacy of victimization. Believing that not all men will hurt me continues to be something I work at. There are times in my life when I recognize that I fall into feeling like a victim; for instance, bringing this scenario to the forefront of my mind elicits feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness. I continue to work toward eradicating this subconscious, entrenched state of being and consciously remind myself to make that shift to believing that I have control and choices.

Disowning of self and passing. The female participants also reported that this sense of internalized shame, the message that one is not good enough or that one is "other," had led them to what I describe as the "disowning of self": As one participant stated:

> I experienced a lot of discrimination and tried a lot of the time to pass for being non-Native and was able to do that a lot of the time. I would say I was anything except Native. I didn't understand while I was doing that what it was all about. It just didn't feel good. So it was like I wasn't being who I really was because I was ashamed and hiding a part of my heritage. And, I mean, I got that from my mother as well. Not wanting to admit that because it just wasn't OK. So there was a long sort of legacy that I had adopted just through being in that family, and so lots of dissonance and just not being who I truly was meant to be. Carrying a lot of shame and feelings of less than and just those messages from society. I remember several times sitting in a group of people or whatever and hearing negative talk about Natives—"Oh those drunken Natives" or whatever. Feeling in the pit of my stomach, "Oh, I hope they don't find out I'm one." Sitting there and actually experiencing discrimination but keeping silent not saying anything.

Along with the disowning of self, the foregoing participant also described her experiences of "passing." Overall (1998, pp. 156–158) defined passing as the "concealment of a stigmatized identity, often through the assumption of a counterpart non-stigmatized identity . . . . The reason people pass, or attempt to pass, is that there are penalties for possessing or being perceived to possess a stigmatized identity and rewards for successfully presenting oneself as not having it."

Assessing Social Locations and Identities

In terms of antioppressive social work practice, Carniol (2005a, p. 159) emphasized the importance of "social workers assessing their own social locations . . . and the social location of the people we work with." In this study, I was interested in discovering if the participants would explicitly acknowledge their situated positions of privilege and entitlement or identify and articulate how these factors play out in their clinical and personal relationships. In terms of their social locations, some participants did demonstrate an awareness of what Ward (2007, p. 194) called "the triad of race, class, and gender oppression, or 'triple jeopardy.'"

On class. As I mentioned previously, the majority of the participants could be classified as coming from a middle-class upbringing. These participants recognized that their middle-class upbringing had placed them in privileged positions in Western society. This recognition was demonstrated in the following statement:

> I consider myself privileged, not individually or . . . in a better-than-thou sense, but as a whole. I have to appreciate more of what's happened and what I have or what I've been allowed to have—not for the sake of possessing, but for the safety. I mean safety seems automatic. That's not so in a lot of the world. So I guess I'll try to be a little more thankful for what I do have versus what I don't have because it appears that we seem somewhat caught in our culture of what we don't have and what we could have and that striving to work harder to get that. I'm really questioning that more and more. So that process is going on. I was thinking the privilege of not worrying about food, generally speaking, not worrying about shelter. I'm not saying that everybody in this country is that way, but the bulk, I guess you can say, "How good's the food and how good's the shelter"? But that the basics for many in the country are met, and I'm saying that's a privilege.

On being racialized women. Only two participants described themselves as belonging to the working class or being poor in their families of origin, and it is not surprising that both of them were racialized women. They also specifically described and experienced their multiple oppressions "as layered, or additive" (Ward, 2007). For example, one participant commented on her layered experience of being an immigrant and being identified as "other" because of her race: "We have some immigrants here, but they are still white. So they still fit with the rest of them. But when you are an immigrant and not white in this community, Yeesh!"

On being a middle-class woman. Although it seems futile to debate about which oppression ranks as more destructive than another, I noted a sense of certain privileges trumping specific oppressions. One woman recognized that even though she had been sexually assaulted, her class, being white, and heterosexual privileges had trumped her gender oppression:

> What have been some experiences when I felt oppressed? And it's funny because none automatically came to me. So, that's interesting, that as a woman, I feel like I am in a fairly privileged position. I am a single woman, and in my professional career, I haven't really gotten tied down and have felt the freedom to be able to do lots of things. So that's the biggest thing that's at the forefront of my mind, my privilege. I feel really privileged to have the position I have. As a white, middle-class, heterosexual social worker, I've experienced little oppression in my own life, apart from patriarchy, and it would be misleading to say that because of my experience [sexual assault], I know what it feels like on a day-in/day-out basis to live under oppression. It gives me only an inkling.

On being male. As I previously mentioned, the male participants had extreme difficulty identifying any experiences of oppression. However, one man acknowledged his position of privilege as a white middle-class able-bodied male within patriarchy:

> I go back to that idea that I had it reasonably well growing up, and I have it very well as an adult. And I'm white, I'm male, I'm able bodied, and a lot of that's come not because of my own hard work, but a lot of it was the cards that I was dealt. You realize that some things are given to you, and I think I've become more aware of how privileged my life has been. Listening to clients and listening to other people's stories about their growing up and how they got to where they are now, watching TV at night, reading novels, and so on have helped to reinforce for me that compared to most of the rest of humanity, I've got it good. Again I go back to the idea that I had a reasonable good start in life, made some good choices myself, and have had enough privilege and a combination of hard work and other things to have created a life for myself that is really, really good. It's made me grateful or appreciative of the things that were handed to me, a bit more humble about that.

Another man spoke about how his white middle-class privilege had trumped his experience of being a minority—a white child in a (specific race) school system:

> Not necessarily enjoyable experiences, but, at the same time, it was maybe population or numberwise we might have been in a minority in that context. Yet at the same time, people in authority or teachers, they were all white. We were sort of picked on, to a certain extent, but then at the same time, we were sort of protected, too. I wouldn't say I had the experience of being a minority in the same context because as far as within the authority time lines or the authority figures that were there, they were definitely on our side.

Privilege, Entitlement, and Oppression

Some participants recognized a sense of entitlement that came with their positions of privilege from their middle-class locations within Western capitalism. Allison (1994, p. 33) defined *entitlement* as "a matter of feeling like 'we' rather than 'they.' You think you have a right to things, a place in the world, and it is so intrinsically a part of you that you cannot imagine people like me, people who seem to live in your world, who don't have it." One participant commented on his participation in the North American hierarchy of privilege and class, "Well, I think by definition of who I am in this society, I participate in that, in ways that are probably unconscious to me .... I believe that to the degree that we live in a capitalist North American society that uses 97% of the world's resources, I'm part of that whether I say I am or not. I mean that's just the way it is."

Another participant described what it was like when a social work student came into a (specific race) service organization with a sense of entitlement:

> Comments from someone who I think was not understanding cultural or was insensitive looking at life through his own lens and not being sensitive to what others may experience. I think that's part of oppression, having a sort of a sense of entitlement. Like coming into the organization and having a sense of entitlement, just an expectation that things will just sort of fall into his lap. And this was a [specific race] person. And he had made some comments that were, well, I was very offended by one, and there were other people who were offended just by some of his behaviors and an attitude that he was displaying. That was the hard part to explain to him. That it was sort of an attitude that when people put a name to it, words like *condescending* and *entitlement* came up. So this person had come in and wasn't asking basically for materials or whatever but just sort of demanding. People were thinking he was very pushy. Like this person's sense of entitlement coming into the organization. I think that's oppressive.

Does this sense of entitlement for people with privilege cause them automatically to be oppressive? Does it logically follow, then, that to keep what we have, we have to oppress others and ignore inequality? One participant mentioned that privilege sometimes acted as a buffer, protecting the participant from seeing, knowing, and experiencing oppression:

> Those who have, feel entitled to it and above and somehow safer than those below them. It's like we unconsciously keep them down, perhaps because we know how precious our own position is. We fear what they live, so we push them away and further down and blame them for their place in society.

Implications for Social Work

What are the implications of social work practitioners not experiencing oppression; not being able to identify personal experiences of oppression; not recognizing the various sources, forms, and levels of oppression; and perhaps denying positions of entitlement and privilege? When we cannot identify personal, cultural, and structural forms of oppression, perhaps we are then left with trying to imagine what oppression is. When asked, in an interview, to imagine oppression and what it might look like, one male participant replied:

> Third World countries maybe or ethnic groups who are minorities in certain places. Maybe the gay population, I don't know, I'm sure they feel oppression .... I imagine that those times when I may have had something close to oppression, ... so I'm just processing as we talk here .... I can't, it doesn't surface to me that there have been times where I've been oppressed. I can't think of many times in my own personal life that I felt really oppressed. Or what I imagined deep oppression to be.

Although there is some recognition that racism and heterosexism may be sources of oppression, this male social worker struggled with understanding the concept of personal, cultural, or structural forms of oppression. In addition, the findings indicate that, for the most part, the participants did not explicitly acknowledge positions of privilege and entitlement or identify and articulate how these factors played out in their clinical and personal relationships.

As social workers, we need to be concerned about the implications of this denial for social work and antioppressive practice; critical thinking; and clinical assessment, decision making, and intervention. In today's world, social workers need to develop their abilities to think about and act in response to oppression. To do so, their conceptualization of oppression would benefit from a recognition and understanding of the complexity of multiplicative and intersecting oppressions. In addition, the identification of a matrix of systems of domination and oppression (Collins, 1991, 2000) can help us, as social workers, to deepen our comprehension of how diverse groups of people recognize, conceptualize, and experience oppression. In addition, without explicit recognition and understanding of our own privilege and oppressive behaviors, we also run the risk, contrary to the Code of Ethics (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005), of continuing to perpetuate inequality and oppression.

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