



## DEAR READER

This paper was originally published by Dulwich Centre Publications, a small independent publishing house based in Adelaide Australia.

You can do us a big favour by respecting the copyright of this article and any article or publication of ours.

The article you have read is copyright © Dulwich Centre Publications Except as permitted under the Australian Copyright Act 1968, no part of this article may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, communicated, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior permission.

All enquiries should be made to the copyright owner at:

Dulwich Centre Publications, Hutt St PO Box 7192, Adelaide, SA, Australia, 5000;  
email [dcp@dulwichcentre.com.au](mailto:dcp@dulwichcentre.com.au)

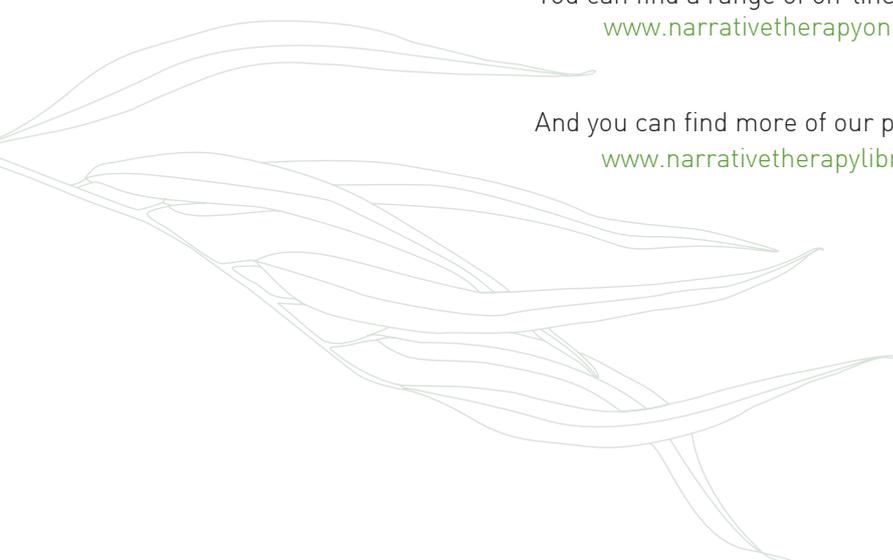
*thank you!*

We really appreciate it.

You can find out more about us at:  
[www.dulwichcentre.com.au](http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au)

You can find a range of on-line resources at:  
[www.narrativetherapyonline.com](http://www.narrativetherapyonline.com)

And you can find more of our publications at:  
[www.narrativetherapylibrary.com](http://www.narrativetherapylibrary.com)



# *An invitation to narrative practitioners to address privilege and dominance*

A document created from conversations between

Salome Raheim, Maggie Carey, Charles Waldegrave,  
Kiwi Tamasese, Flora Tuhaka, Hugh Fox, Anita Franklin,  
Cheryl White and David Denborough.

This document has been created by a group of therapists, community workers and educators from Samoa, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, USA and the UK. What we have in common is a deep sadness at much of what is occurring in the world and a commitment to play our part in continuing to foster communities of therapists and community workers in which broader relations of power are acknowledged and addressed in our work.

What we also have in common is that we have realised that we have not been doing enough to bring these considerations of privilege and dominance into our work. These are difficult topics and we are still finding our way in relation to them.

We have tried to create this document so that it is relevant to a wide range of practitioners. Obviously, your own context will influence how you approach these writings and you may need to adapt some of the exercises that are included here.

A number of the exercises that are included have been created out of conversations about understanding white privilege. This is a key focus of this document, but we also hope that these writings are relevant to looking at other relations of power.

If you are a white person then you may decide to use these writings to assist you to address white privilege; if you are heterosexual, you may use these writings to address heterosexual dominance; if you are a man, you may wish to focus on issues of gender; if you are highly educated and a professional person you may wish to focus on matters of class and professional privilege; if you are an able-bodied person you may wish to focus on matters of disability and the politics of accessibility, and so on.

We hope these writings and the conversations that flow from them may assist us to consider how we enact privilege in one realm or another. Over time, we hope that they assist us to consider all the relations of power in which we may be privileged.

These are not solely matters for us as individuals. In fact, individualism is one of the forces that makes it so difficult to come together to talk and address issues of privilege. We hope this document will act to link people together around these issues, to contribute to conversations and the building of ongoing relationships and communities to explore and face these matters together. To assist this, and to reduce the chance of people reading this document and feeling isolated in the experience, we strongly suggest that you read this with someone else - a friend, family member or colleague - so that you can begin conversations straight away!

We also recommend that prior to reading this document you identify a 'community', 'sphere of influence' or 'constituency' that you will be focusing on in relation to matters of privilege. This might be your workplace, your local community, or a club or society in which you are a member. If you keep this 'community', 'sphere of influence' or 'constituency' in mind as you read this document, it may assist you in exploring the questions contained here. It may also make it easier to imagine future conversations that you may wish to initiate, and further steps to take.

We hope that the writings here will contribute to conversations about these issues. We will be continually updating this document as it is a work in progress - so we welcome your feedback and contributions!

## **A note about the use of the word ‘privilege’**

In this document, the word ‘privilege’ is used in a particular way to describe unearned rights, benefits, immunity and favours that are bestowed on individuals and groups solely on the basis of their race, culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability or other key characteristic. The use of the word ‘privilege’ in this way has different histories in different local contexts. Here in Australia, it is a word that feminist women have used to try to articulate the experience of male privilege in a patriarchal culture. Similarly, Indigenous Australians have used the description of white privilege to focus on the discrepancy of experience between white Australians and those subject to racism, dispossession and colonisation. We encourage you to trace the history of the use of the word in your own context. One of the most significant reasons why we have chosen to use the word ‘privilege’ in this document is that it places the focus on members of dominant groups (white people, men, heterosexual people, able-bodied people, etc.) and our responsibilities to address relations of power.

It is important to acknowledge that some of us experience privilege in a wide range of domains (e.g. white, professional heterosexual men experience privilege in relation to race, class, gender and sexual orientation), while others may experience privilege in very few, if any, domains of life. Responsibilities for addressing privilege are therefore not equal.

This document has been created for use by therapists and community workers. Because of this, the following exercises assume that the reader has some degree of privilege in some area of their life and work which would be relevant to consider.

Throughout this document we have used personal examples and invited the reader to consider how these issues are relevant in their own lives, families, workplaces and local communities. We have done so because these issues are personal: they influence and shape all our lives. However, relations of power and privilege not only shape individual lives but also institutional practices, economic structures, legal systems, professional knowledges, indeed *all* realms of life. In no way do we wish to reduce considerations of power and privilege to the realm of personal interaction and individual people’s lives. We hope this document will spark conversations that assist us to make links between our personal experiences and the experiences of others, and how we can play our part deconstructing privilege in its many different forms.

## **An invitation to talk about privilege From Salome Raheim**

*The relations and practices of power that influence our lives are often invisible to us. If we do not proactively look at how relations of power operate to create advantages for some and deny these advantages to others, it hinders our work as therapists and community practitioners. Without examining the operations of privilege, we are unable to see the circumstances that create constraints on other people's lives. We are unable to appreciate their daily efforts to work and live in the context of these constraints, or to resist them.*

*Furthermore, we are unable to see how our lives are made easier. We think that the ease with which we are able to operate in the world is the norm and become oblivious to the fact that everybody's life is not like our own.*

*What is more, unless we routinely examine the operations of power and our place within these operations, we fail to notice how we are liable to inadvertently impose our expectations, our cultural ways, our ways of thinking, on the people with whom we work. These impositions tend to diminish those who consult us, and they are destructive to the good work that we wish to accomplish.*

*This examination and deconstruction of the operations of privilege improves our practice as therapists and community workers. It is only when we recognise what people are up against that we can notice and invite people to richly describe their stories of resistance. It is only in examining the operations of privilege that we can become more aware of the potential for our practice to have negative consequences of inadvertently marginalising and diminishing people's lives and subordinating their stories.*

*This work has a particular resonance for those of us who are from marginalised groups. Examining the operations of power and privilege, renders visible the constraints upon our lives. It helps us to understand that these constraints are not due to individual deficits, group deficits, or cultural deficits. The problem is not located within us. This lessens the influence of shame and makes resistance more possible*

*And so, we invite you to participate in this new project. Over months we plan to place a range of writings on our website from practitioners grappling with the following questions:*

- *How does privilege influence our work as therapists and community workers?*
- *How can we notice the ways in which we inadvertently enact privilege in our work?*
- *How can we check out the effects of this?*
- *How can we respond when this occurs?*
- *How can we create processes of accountability to take care in relation to these issues?*

*We welcome your participation in this project!*

*Please write to us with your responses to these questions. The responses can relate to privilege in relation to culture, race, gender, class, professional identity, sexual identity, gender identity, age, ability or any other realm of privilege.*

*In the following pages, we have enclosed a range of exercises that we hope will assist in exploring these issues further. We would be delighted if you tried out these exercises and let us know how this goes. We would appreciate your feedback.*

## Why is talking about privilege important?

The following quotes have been drawn together from things that people have said in workshops on this topic about why talking about privilege is important:

- *As a woman therapist from a working-class background, until recently I had not thought a lot about how I walk through life with white privilege and how this influences my work. The turning-point was when a colleague, who is an Indian woman, pointed out to me how much of my life is the way that it is because I have white skin. She pointed out there is so much I do not have to think about in raising my children, in speaking up in professional contexts, in worrying how others might perceive me, etc. In realising this, I am now asking different questions as a therapist. Questions that inquire as to the skills and knowledges that people have developed in living in a racist world. As a therapy team we are also seeking consultation around these issues and trying to create changes to our practice so that we are more relevant to those who consult us.*
- *As an African American professor, I live with the consequences of racism, and yet there are also ways in which I am privileged. When I attended parent-teacher conferences about my son who was in elementary school, I recognised that my privilege as a highly educated person was at work. I knew that if I put on my business suit and made sure that the teachers were aware of my professional status, I would have automatic credibility in my parenting role. The teachers would assume that I cared about my child and would respect that my input about what was good for him was worth listening to. In contrast, I realised that single women receiving public assistance who may not be able to dress as well or 'wear their degrees in front of them' may not be accorded the same credibility and respect. Their input is often not valued. Sure, racism and white privilege disadvantage me in some situations. Nevertheless, my privilege as a highly educated person accords benefits for me that everyone should have, but everyone does not.*
- *Some years ago, my husband and I were having dinner with two gay male friends. It was a very sad evening, as we had just learned that one of our friends was dying of AIDS. We spoke at length about what this meant for both of them and their relationship and then we decided that we would all go for a walk down by the riverfront. I was close to tears at this stage and I went to hold my husband's hand. When I looked towards our friends, I saw them walking with upright backs a slight distance apart. I realized that even then, after the talk we had shared and all that they were going through, that they could not hold hands in public for fear of others' reactions. It was at that moment that I realised the meaning of heterosexual dominance. And I have tried to think about my privileges as a heterosexual person since then. Being able to talk with others about these sorts of things has been important to me. It's a way of honouring my friends, both of whom are no longer alive now.*
- *In offering training to other therapists and community workers, it was recently brought to my attention that, while the content of my teaching is very aware of relations of power and diversity, actually my teaching methods are not fully accessible to people with disabilities. I have taught about these issues but hadn't really considered my own privilege and lack of attention in my own practice. For instance, the handouts I create are all in small fonts which make them difficult for people with visual impairments to read. And I have never taken the time to ensure that the articles I prescribe in the training are available on tape. I am just now consulting with various organisations to get some ideas as to what action I can take about this. This is all due to the fact that others brought this to my attention. I now want to get together with my colleagues to take some responsibility around these issues.*
- *As a man, when I work with heterosexual couples there are numerous ways in which male privilege can inadvertently influence my work. There are so many dominant ideas in our culture that excuse men from responsibility in family relationships and at the same time place the responsibility for the maintenance of these relationships on women that, unless I am careful, I can contribute to a woman's perspective being marginalised. It is really only through sharing tapes of my work with my colleagues (who are women and men) and creating opportunities to thoroughly talk through how issues of gender influence our therapeutic practice, that I can begin to notice and respond to these issues. Thinking and talking about male privilege somehow puts the focus back on all our lives as men. It means I'm not just focusing on the men with whom I am working, but am also involved in conversations that explore how my life and work is shaped by relations of gender.*

## Some of the restraints to talking about privilege

Here are some of the conversational practices that people have identified that get in the way of talking about privilege. It is our hope that, in listing these examples here, it will assist us to notice when these practices enter conversations and will assist us in creating alternative ways of talking about privilege:

- *Making things equivalent*  
Some of us live with much greater privilege than others. If a conversation implies that the difficulties faced by those living with considerable privilege are equivalent to those faced by those living with considerably less privilege, then this can contribute to a mystification of power relations.
- *Confusing experiences of individual hardship with considerations of privilege*  
An individual's experience of hardship may or may not have to do with experiences of privilege. There are forms of hardship, such as loss, injury, sickness, etc, that are a part of people's lives with or without privilege. Sometimes our experiences of individual hardship can obscure for us how we are living with privilege in relation to race, gender, class, etc. One way to think about this is to try to imagine what our individual experiences of hardship would be like if we did not live with the privileges that we do.
- *Dividing from others: 'Somebody else is worse at this than us'*  
In our experience, when we are invited to consider our own privilege it is often much easier to focus instead on someone else's bad behaviour – to say that 'they do this worse than us'. It seems that as members of dominant groups we are very likely to divide from each other rather than talk about how we enact privilege. For instance, when men are invited to look at gender privilege they may be likely to point the finger at other men who display more blatant sexist attitudes. Or white people when invited to look at white privilege may divert the conversation to other people's racist actions, and so on.
- *Avoiding talking about it: 'Talking about this issue is divisive'*  
Sometimes, we have heard very privileged people say that 'talking about privilege' is divisive. This can be confusing. Some conversations about privilege *can* be difficult because these are painful issues and have real effects on people's lives. But what is definitely divisive are the systems of power that privilege some people over others. Not talking about these issues doesn't make the divisions go away. We are interested in finding ways to talk about these issues that contribute to us being able to take meaningful action.
- *Talking isn't enough: 'All talk, no action'*  
Talking about these issues seems really important as it can be a first step in building relationships and communities in which these issues can be addressed. And yet, conversation alone is never going to be enough to address these matters. Conversations around these issues need to lead to action, or to be accompanied by action. These actions don't necessarily need to be huge, but if we can all find ways to contribute to meaningful and sustainable action on these issues then talking about these matters will also become easier.
- *Competition / Comparison*  
Competition can get in the way of these conversations. We can get caught up in competing to 'get it right', or in competing that we have done it better, or that others are more dominant than us. This can shut down meaningful explorations of our own privilege.
- *Changing the focus of the conversation: 'It's class not race' (or any other variation on this theme)*  
Another obstacle that sometimes appears in conversations involves changing the focus of the conversation. Just when some attention is being brought to bear on one relation of power and privilege (e.g. a black woman is naming issues of race), a deflection may take place that moves the conversation towards another relation of power (e.g. a white person might say 'It's not a matter of race but of class' or 'It's not race but gender'). While it is often important to acknowledge various types of privilege and the links between them, for members of dominant groups to try to pit one form of privilege against another can shut down the possibilities for good conversation.

- *Debating the terms of the discussion: 'This isn't the right conversation to be having'*  
Sometimes, as members of dominant groups, rather than looking at our own privilege, we are likely to debate the terms of the discussion. In this way, the entire energy of the conversation is diverted into talking about whether we should be talking about it...!
- *Undermining the messenger: 'I'm not sure if you are doing this the right way'*  
When a facilitator invites a group to consider the issues of the participants' own privilege, sometimes group members turn on the facilitator, criticise their presentation style, or in other ways undermine their credibility. This can be particularly true if a person of colour is inviting white people to look at white privilege; or a gay or lesbian person is inviting a heterosexual group to look at heterosexual dominance; or so on.
- *Having to pretend you know*  
Sometimes in the professional world there is an unspoken assumption that we are 'meant to know' all about these sorts of issues. If we feel as if we have to pretend to know more than we do, then this can get in the way of good conversation.
- *Shame, guilt, sadness*  
While there is a valid place for shame, guilt and sadness (see exercise below), if individuals from dominant groups begin to centre our expression of shame, guilt and/or sadness then this can greatly reduce the possibilities for meaningful conversation.
- *A lack of awareness of the effects of the conversation on other people in the discussion*  
Talking about issues of power and privilege in groups can be complicated when there are people from different cultural groups in the room and/or people who may be privileged in some realms while others are marginalised. Finding ways to remain aware of the effects of the conversation on everybody in the room seems vital.
- *Individualism: 'I'm not connected to this'*  
Trying to think about privilege in relation to issues of gender, race and culture, etc, involves considering ourselves as members of certain dominant groups (white people, heterosexual people, professionals, able-bodied, men, etc). But this can be complicated if we are not used to thinking about ourselves in this way. If we are only used to considering ourselves as individuals (as is common within western culture), it can be difficult to realise that we are part of broader collective groups and that we therefore have broader responsibilities.
- *Heroic accounts*  
In talking about privilege, sometimes it can be tempting to tell stories that put us in a good light – the times we have responded to other people's bad behaviour; the friends that we have from marginalised groups; the sacrifices we make to look at these issues. And yet, retelling these sorts of stories can make it more difficult to look at the mistakes we may still be making, the things we overlook. Often talking about our mistakes, what we are not so good at, can open space for more constructive conversations.
- *Obscuring personal prejudice with relations of power and privilege*  
Whereas everyone has personal prejudices, things that they like and don't like, this is very different from broader operations of power and privilege. Whereas an individual woman may for whatever reason have a personal dislike of all men, or a person of colour may have rage that is sometimes directed at white people in general, this is not equivalent to sexism or racism. Sexism, racism and other relations of power and privilege shape institutional practices, economic structures, legal systems, family relations and all other realms of life. While anybody can be prejudiced, that doesn't mean that their prejudice is supported by broader institutions and discriminatory discourses. It also doesn't mean that they are privileged by the colour of their skin, gender, sexual orientation, or so on.

This list above is not complete, it is just offered as a starting point for discussion. If you and your colleagues can think of any other restraints to talking about privilege we'd love to hear from you about this.

Interestingly, in any conversation, some people may identify that some of these restraints are in operation while other people may have very different views of what is happening.

Sometimes talking about the restraints first can then make it easier to have a good conversation about our own privilege and dominance.

Here are a few questions that we have found helpful to consider. If possible, we suggest you share the above list of restraints with a friend, colleague or family member and then work through the following questions:

- Are any of these above restraints relevant in your situation? If so, which ones?
- Have you slipped into some of these practices at times in the past? If so, which ones?
- If so, what would contribute to you being able to resist doing so next time?
- What do you think is the most likely restraint to you thoroughly identifying the ways in which privilege and dominance act in your work and life?

We would appreciate hearing from you about your experience of considering these questions. Thanks!

## **What sustains us in talking about privilege?**

These issues can be complex. They involve facing and coming to terms with injustices and hardships in people's lives. They also involve conversations across difference. This can sometimes be difficult and even painful. On the other hand, joining with others and making a contribution to addressing these issues is one of the most rewarding and meaningful aspects of our lives. The following exercise seeks to open space to consider what sustains us in looking at these issues. If possible, we suggest you find someone whom you trust and use these questions as a guide to interview each other:

- Why are you interested in exploring these issues related to privilege?
- Is your interest connected to any particular hopes for your work, for your life, for the world in which we live?
- If so, what would you call this hope?
- What is the history of this hope?
- To look thoroughly at these issues requires a significant commitment. Would you say that you have a commitment to look at these issues? If so, what would you call this commitment? What is its history? If it is relatively new, what has sparked this commitment? If it is a long-term commitment, what has sustained it over the years?
- Who is this commitment connected to? Is there a particular person / relationship / experience that has been significant in encouraging you to look further at these issues? If so, what did you learn from this person / relationship / experience? Why is this significant to you?
- If this person(s) was present now, what would they say about your current commitment and how you are enacting this commitment in your work and life? What would they be happy about? In what areas might they invite you to take a further step?

## **Identifying our own privileges**

It can sometimes be difficult to begin to identify how our lives are shaped by privilege: especially when we may be struggling with various hardships of our own. It can also be confronting to come to terms with how differently we experience life from one another. Our experiences of school, family, work, play, loss and life are so powerfully influenced by race, culture, gender, sexual identity and material privilege (and other relations of power).

The following exercise invites us to try to speculate as to how our lives are different from the lives of others due to the privilege with which we live. Of course, we cannot really know about the experiences of other people unless we hear from them directly. As you try to respond to the questions below, if you get stuck and cannot think of how your life experience may differ from the lives of others, then perhaps there are some further steps that can be taken. On whichever question you get stuck, perhaps it may be possible to consult with an appropriate person so that you can come to learn more about the operations of that particular form of privilege. This exercise can be done in small groups. Whether each of these questions are relevant to you will depend upon your gender, race, sexual identity, ability, etc. Please just answer the questions that are relevant to you.

- How might your experience as a white person differ from the experience of a person of colour in:
  - applying for a job?
  - passing police on the street?
  - preparing your child to go to school for the first time?
- How might your experience as a heterosexual person differ from the experience of a queer person in:
  - expressing affection, love and comfort in public?
  - preparing to introduce your partner to your family of origin?
  - seeking counseling for assistance in your couple relationship?
- How might your experience as a non-Indigenous person differ from the experience of an Indigenous person in:
  - seeking assistance from welfare workers or social workers?
  - attending a workshop on grief?
  - reading a book or seeing a film about the history of the country in which you live?
  - planning what you will do when you retire?
- How might your experience as a professional wage-earner differ from the experience of an unemployed person in:
  - attending a parent-teacher night?
  - seeking assistance from a therapist?
  - attending a school reunion?
- How might your experience as an able-bodied person differ from the experience of a person with a disability in:
  - getting yourself to work each day?
  - negotiating where the annual work dinner is to be held?
  - how people interpret any expression of anger or frustration?
- At this time, how might your experience as a non-Arab person differ from the experience of a Arab person in:
  - attending high school?
  - getting on a plane to travel to a professional conference ?
  - seeking assistance in a hospital emergency ward?
- How might your experience as a male therapist differ from the experience of a woman therapist in:
  - running therapeutic groups in a men's prison?
  - working with women survivors of sexual abuse?
  - working with heterosexual couples?

### **Other domains of privilege**

We encourage you to adapt this exercise so that it is most relevant to you. Perhaps in your context it is most relevant to consider privilege related to language, religion or national differences. For instance, if you are a Christian in a predominantly Christian country and you are working with Muslim families or

Jewish families, the key issue may relate to the implications of long histories of religious-based persecution. If you are working with refugee populations, the key issues may relate to citizenship rights. Alternatively, if you are a gay man or a lesbian woman working with transgender and bi-gender people, you may be needing to think through matters of privilege related to gender identity.

If this exercise needs adapting in order to be relevant in your particular context, please make the changes required and then let us know how you have done this. We'd appreciate the feedback! Thanks.

## **Focusing on white privilege**

The following two exercises are specifically designed to address matters of race and cultural privilege. They are specifically for people from dominant cultural groups.

### **(i) The values of our ancestors**

This exercise was originally developed by the Just Therapy Team, from The Family Centre in Wellington, New Zealand. It was specifically created for Pakehas (New Zealanders of European descent) to explore the values that their ancestors brought with them to New Zealand, and to open space to consider how these values continue to influence Maori (the Indigenous people of New Zealand). It is designed to encourage appreciation of the best qualities of Pakeha identity and values, while at the same time enabling a critique of Pakeha dominance. It has been used mostly with Pakehas, however, on a few occasions Maori people who also have Pakeha heritage have deliberately engaged with this exercise and these people have said that they appreciated the conversations that were crafted.

The exercise has been slightly altered for this context.

- Please name one of your ancestors who came to New Zealand as settlers (whether this is someone of your parent's generation, or grandparent's or great-grandparent's generation, etc)
- Please think of the sorts of values that they brought to this land and name these.
- What were they looking for in this land, what were their hopes?
- Which of the values that you have identified are you proud of, and would you want to continue for yourself and pass on to your children? Why?
- Which of these values do you *not* wish to continue? Why?
- Why was it, do you think, that many of the values brought by settlers subjugated the values of the Indigenous people of this land?
- What do we need to do now to ensure that values of 'settlers' do not continue to subjugate the values of the Indigenous people of this land?
- What do we need to do to ensure that our work and workplaces respect the values of the different cultural groups who seek consultation? (These different cultural groups include the indigenous people with their particular relationship to the land and the settler groups.)
- What processes might we need to put in place to ensure that we do not privilege one cultural way of being, and one cultural way of healing, over others?

We will be interested to hear from people about ways of adapting this exercise for different contexts. Hugh Fox from the Centre for Narrative Practice in Manchester, UK, is currently working on a version that would be appropriate for the English context.

## **(ii) Appreciating cultures**

We are interested in how we can develop an appreciation for particular cultural practices: both those of our own cultures and those of other people's. This exercise has been created with this in mind. We look forward to hearing from you about your experience of considering these questions:

- What are the things you treasure and appreciate about your own cultural heritage?
- Why is this important to you?
- What are some of the things that you treasure and appreciate about others' cultural heritage?
- Why is this important to you?
- How do practices from your own cultural heritage influence your work?
- How does your appreciation for particular practices of other cultures influence your work? Are there things that you have learned from your relationships with people from other cultures that now influence your work practices?
- How can we ensure that our appreciation of our own cultural heritage enhances rather than reduces our appreciation of the cultural heritage of others?

## Developing knowledge and skills about recognising and responding to our privilege

In talking with others, we have come to understand that there are a number of different categories of knowledge and skills that we need to develop in relation to our privilege. We have tried to list some of these different categories below. We have then repeated the questions with an example of someone responding to the exercise.

The different categories of knowledge about our privilege include:

- i) Knowledge about different forms of privilege in our own lives and in our workplace: How are our lives and work practices shaped by privilege in relation to gender, class, race, culture, sexual identity, age, ability, etc?
- ii) Knowledge of the ways in which we enact privilege: How do we enact privilege in our personal relationships, in our workplace, in our counselling and/or community work?
- iii) Knowledges and skills related to noticing when we are enacting privilege: when are we most likely to enact privilege? In what sort of circumstances? How can we tell when we are enacting privilege?
- iv) Knowledges and skills in noticing when others are trying to let you know that you have enacted privilege: What do we listen for? What makes it more likely for people to be able to tell us?
- v) Skills in how to respond to situations when we have enacted privilege: How can we develop skills in acts of genuine apology and redress? How can we develop ways of learning from mistakes? How can we create structures and processes to ensure learnings are carried into the future?

### An example of a response:

We hope that the following example makes it easier to think through how these matters might apply to your life and work. The example we offer here relates to a white person considering the different forms of knowledge they are trying to generate about white privilege, but we could just as well have included an example of a heterosexual person thinking about heterosexual dominance, or a man thinking about issues of gender, and so on.

- i) Knowledge about different forms of privilege in our own lives and in our workplace: How are our lives and work practices shaped by privilege in relation to gender, class, race, culture, sexual identity, age, ability, etc?

*I am a social worker and the very profession that I am a part of has played an extensive role in the subjugation, dispossession and marginalisation of indigenous peoples and people of colour. We don't have to dig very deep or look back very far to find explicitly racist assumptions in our 'canons' of knowledge. Our concepts of what it means to be 'human', what it means to be an individual of moral worth, our concepts of intelligence, our concepts of 'self-actualisation', our concepts of the proper relation of individuals to the collective, are all deeply bound up with our history of racism. As a white social worker working with people who have recently migrated here I think I need to look very closely at the effects of applying these concepts to people of other cultures in my professional work.*

- ii) Knowledge of the ways in which we enact privilege: How do we enact privilege in our personal relationships, in our workplace, in our counselling and/or community work?

*In my consultations with people from different cultures, I routinely forget that the ways of communicating I take for granted may not have the same meaning for them. For instance, within many indigenous cultures there are different understandings in relation to not making eye contact when talking about significant issues; or realising that some things are not to be talked about between men and women; or not mentioning the name of a person who has recently died. There are also different appreciations for periods of silence in communication. But I forget all these things and I know that I have made people feel really uncomfortable at*

*times. I know that our workplace really values western ways of communicating and this means it is less accessible to people of different cultures.*

*There are also times when I inadvertently assume that people from different cultures can or ought to relate to the world similarly to the ways I do! For instance, I assume they can answer questions about what they might want from a situation, whereas for them such considerations involve taking into account many differing relationships. Or I assume that they ought to want the same things out of life that I do. Some of the programs, such as our parenting programs, can also depict that there is a 'correct' way to parent, and inevitably this 'correct way' looks very similar to a particular white, middle-class way of relating.*

- iii) Knowledges and skills related to noticing when we are enacting privilege: When are we most likely to enact privilege? In what sort of circumstances? How can we tell when we are enacting privilege?

*I find that I am most vulnerable to enacting privilege when I am rushed, when I am certain about things, and when I haven't created opportunities for feedback on my work. As a man, I can find myself taking individual action, forging ahead and just trying to get something done, and it's in these times that I generally mess up on the process! I guess they are some of my 'risk' factors.*

- iv) Knowledges and skills in noticing when others are trying to let you know that you have enacted privilege: What do we listen for? What makes it more likely for people to be able to tell us?

*This can be complicated. While I have tried to set up structures so that I can hear direct feedback on my work, there are still many situations in which I need to be alert to clues as to when I may have replicated dominance. For instance, if I find that I am doing all the talking and others are now being quiet, or if people stop turning up to meetings, then it's often a sign that I need to review what I have been doing. It's also a sign for me to have some conversations with other people: both colleagues, friends and consultants, to think through what has been going on.*

- v) Skills in how to respond to situations when we have enacted privilege: How can we develop skills in acts of genuine apology and redress? How can we develop ways of learning from mistakes? How can we create structures and processes to ensure learnings are carried into the future?

*When it is pointed out to me that I have been thoughtless, or inadvertently racist, I always talk with others about what would be the best ways forward. These aren't situations that I am good at handling on my own. Initially I can feel ashamed and a good conversation with my colleagues often assists in making a plan of action. We try and work out exactly what assumptions we have made and how it is that we have been thoughtless. Sometimes we write a letter of apology and spell out what steps we are taking to redress the situation. Other times talking directly with those concerned works best. Sometimes the best way forward is simply to change the ways we are working, and it isn't until later that a verbal acknowledgement takes place. Every situation is different, but ensuring I am not alone in the process is very important for me.*

These different forms of knowledge are in some ways highly personal. They are different for all of us. And the contexts of our work will obviously affect the sorts of issues we most urgently need to address. The best way that we have found for these different types of knowledge to be generated is through discussion and reflection with people who we trust. We suggest that you read through the above list with a friend or colleague and take it in turns to talk about each of these different categories and how they apply to your life and work. We suggest you do this in relation to race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, professional privilege, etc (whichever realms in which you experience privilege).

## **Exploring the history of this knowledge:**

It can also be illuminating to share stories about the history of how you have acquired these different forms of knowledge on particular issues. For instance, if you are a man:

- How, where and from whom did you learn about how male privilege shapes your life?
- How, where and from whom did you learn about the ways you inadvertently enact male privilege?
- How, where and from whom did you come to learn to notice this?
- How, where and from whom did you learn to notice when women are trying to point out to you that you are enacting male privilege?
- How, where and from whom have you learned to respond to these situations?

## **Responding to other therapists and community workers**

Part of developing a consciousness of our privilege and how we belong to certain dominant groups involves thinking through how we respond in our professional networks to others like us who replicate privilege. For instance, how do we respond as men when another man makes a sexist remark; or as white people when something racist is spoken, or as able-bodied people when a thoughtless act results in a training session being inaccessible to people with disabilities? These can be complex matters. While there can be times when we simply must respond in whatever way we can in order to interrupt harassment and hostility, there are other times (when talking with colleagues, friends, family members who may be replicating dominance through ignorance rather than intent) that it can be important for us to find ways of raising issues that are not self-righteous and that somehow acknowledge that we sometimes make similar mistakes. The following questions are offered in the hope that they will assist teasing out some of the complexities involved in responding to situations in our workplaces and other professional contexts in which others like us may be replicating dominance.

- If you see a member of your own social grouping replicating dominance (e.g. if you are a heterosexual person and you hear another heterosexual person speak in homophobic ways), what is your immediate response? What do you feel? What do you think? What images are evoked for you?
- How would you most like to respond in such situations? What principles would you like to inform your responses?
- In these situations, what might be the forces at play that encourage us not to say anything, not to 'rock the boat'? What are the forces at play that discourage us from raising issues of dominance with our own?
- If it is possible in the circumstances, how could you respond in a way that made it clear that you do not agree with such statements without adopting a position of one-up critique? What would you need to do in your response that would acknowledge that in some respect we are in this together?
- Are there ways of talking with colleagues and friends about these issues, ahead of time, so that together you can try to explore ways of responding to these situations? If so, how could you go about setting up such a conversation?

## Unpacking shame and guilt

When people first begin to look at issues of privilege this is sometimes accompanied by experiences of shame, guilt and/or sadness. We believe it can be significant to think thoroughly about the meaning of these experiences so that shame and guilt do not paralyse us from taking responsibility to address issues of privilege. Here are some questions that we have found helpful to consider:

- What is it that you are feeling ashamed, guilty and/or sad about?
- Often when someone feels shame and/or guilt, this shame and guilt represents certain values that you feel you have let down, that you have strayed from. What values do you think you have strayed from?
- Why are these values significant to you?
- What is their history?
- Are there other people you know who share these values, and/or who would respect these values that you hold?
- If so, is there some way of initiating a conversation with these significant others about how these values could possibly shape a response to your new learnings around these issues? Is there some way that these values could assist in shaping a collective response in your family, friendship network, workplace etc?

## Next steps

Reflecting upon and responding to considerations of privilege and dominance is an ongoing, life-long process. As these issues are so much broader than our own individual lives, there is no way that we can hope to 'resolve' them. We can however join with others and keep taking steps in thinking about and responding to these issues. The following questions are offered as a guide to assist in working out next steps in our work and in our broader lives to try to address issues of privilege:

- What will be the next steps of learning more about matters of power and privilege?
- What will be the next steps of considering how relations of privilege influence your work?
- What resources will you dedicate to these issues?
- Joining with others with similar hopes and values can make an enormous difference. Who will you be linked with in these next steps?
- How will these relationships sustain your next steps?

## Some further reflections

To end, we have included here some quotes from people talking about what they have found helpful in considering their own privilege. We look forward to adding your quotes in here too.

- Relations of power and privilege shape institutional practices, economic structures, legal systems, family relations, the theories of family life we studied, the ways in which we interact with people in the waiting room, indeed *all* realms of life. I have found it necessary to think through where and how I ought to focus my energies in responding. I have decided to start with my own practice and the ways in which I may be inadvertently contributing to the marginalisation of others. A small group of workers at our agency is also looking at the broader question of how we distribute the physical resources as well as our time and energy in our workplace. Is our agency accessible and relevant to those groups of our local community that are economically marginalised? If not, who might we consult in the local community to assist in changing this? We also wish to think about how, as a workplace, we might start to make more of a contribution towards enabling the voices of those with whom we work to influence decisions in our local area. This is how we are starting to try to address these issues. There are openings at all these different levels.

- Once in a workshop around issues of racism, I asked a question about how as a white woman I could learn more about these matters and my responsibilities. The facilitator of the group asked me a question in return. She said, 'How do you normally go about finding out about things you do not know?'. This was really helpful to me. My favoured way of learning things is to do so with others. So I approached my sister and asked if she would be interested in joining with me in this process. Together we then talked about the skills and experiences we do have in seeking out knowledge, in talking with people, in reading books, watching films, in seeking out relevant training programs. I know that I learn best from conversations so it made us think about how we could build relationships in which we could keep talking about these issues. This is not the first area in which we have needed to learn about the world anew. The facilitator's question helped me to think about how it's our responsibility to seek out more information and learning in this realm.
- Quite simply, to address these issues will involve a commitment of resources – including financial resources. There's nothing mysterious about this. We may need to employ consultants to offer feedback on the work that we do. We may need to pay the airfares and accommodation of a colleague from a marginalised group to present with us at the next conference we attend. We might need to offer scholarships to people from marginalised groups. We might need to work an extra day a week to educate ourselves on these matters or to volunteer at an agency addressing these matters. If we are holding an event we may need to go out and consult with a range of community members to find out what would make this relevant to people from marginalised groups. These acts involve time and work and financial resources. There's nothing too complicated about this. It's a matter of making a commitment and doing it. This is true for us as individuals, as groups, as workplaces, and as local communities. We can all make these decisions and therefore make some contribution.
- I once believed that the only way I could understand other people's experiences of marginalisation was if I focused on those elements of my own experience in which I have felt marginalised. Although this can be helpful for some people, I've discovered recently that actually it is through understanding more about my own privilege that has opened possibilities for me to recognise other's experiences. Realising what I don't know has meant that I am trying, with my colleagues, to create relationships of partnership – in which I can get regular feedback about my practice. I need this feedback. I need relationships that are sturdy and equitable enough for me to get to hear tough feedback about how I am going. I know I am going to keep making the occasional blunder. I see it as progress now that I get to hear about these blunders more often...! And I am getting better at responding to them. I don't seem to be making the same mistakes over again. It's just that there are things I don't see. What I do see, is that it is only through regular consultations with people from marginalised groups, it is only through these relationships of partnership, that I can hope to keep my practice relevant and engaged with these issues. These relationships are my antidote to complacency.
- It was only when a gay couple came to our workplace to seek counselling that I realised that in the waiting room all the images and pictures are of heterosexual families. Even the logo of our organisation clearly depicts a man, a woman and child. Inadvertently, I realise now that these images clearly welcome some people more than others.
- It has come as something of a shock to me to realise that the expert knowledges which I have been trained in may not only be unhelpful in trying to interact with people of other cultures, they may also be disrespectful and even damaging. I have been trained to believe that 'knowledge' is what appears in books and in journals and in university curricula. The more I try to deconstruct professional privilege, the more I come to see that there are other forms of knowledge too: insider knowledges, knowledge about culture or gender or sexual identity. As a professional person I am meeting with colleagues now about how to ensure that we create space for these sorts of insider knowledges to be a part of our counselling conversations. That's a big change.

- These considerations are very relevant to my everyday conversations with people. For example, I meet with people who describe to me how conditions of poverty have put them in the clutches of loneliness. And loneliness (plus forces of sexism, racism, etc) leaves them vulnerable to self-hate. It seems very important that I find ways to acknowledge that these life experiences are largely the result of broader inequities, broader social injustices and, at the same time, find avenues in conversation to acknowledge the unique outcomes, the ways in which people are staying true to their own values, and together trace alternative story-lines that will alleviate the sense of failure that is often the outcome of these injustices. I do not have answers to these matters, but I certainly know that I want to be talking with others about this.
- The biggest single thing that has assisted me in looking at these issues is that we have developed collective processes in our workplace. I don't ever have to think that it's just up to me to understand an issue. We have set up ways of asking for and receiving feedback collectively – so that members of the less powerful group can make challenges or criticisms with a collective voice, which is less personally risky than doing it as an individual. Also, members of the dominant group can hear the challenges or criticisms as a group, take care of each other in the process, and take collective responsibility for making sense of them and addressing them. I can honestly say that I am not up to dealing with the complexities of these issues on my own, but I can make a contribution to a collective process. This is what works for me.

### **Recent quotes in response to an initial draft:**

- I have found it helpful to try to develop a definition of what it is that we are aiming for in doing this work. For me, I have realised that I am aiming for the creation of a 'Diverse Community of Caring'. This is my working definition: A diverse community of caring results from a group of diverse people (based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, national origin, geographical origin, language and spiritual values, etc.) coming together in honest discussion and love to ensure that the concerns of all members are expressed and validated, and that consideration of these unique perspectives are reflected in the allocation of power and resources within the community. This is my vision for the world. (Vanessa Jackson, USA)
- Where I have done most work specifically on issues on privilege and dominance is on the relationships between the different professions in health care, and how the struggle for dominance, especially by doctors and my own profession, psychologists, have negative effects for our clients. One example is that in order to stay in a dominant position, some psychologists seems to define psychotherapy in a very rigid and 'thin' manner. To bring forth psychotherapy in this manner has a tendency in my experience to marginalise clients, for instance young people who are 'acting out' (as they are labeled), and also other professions like social workers, nurses and others. Unpacking these views on therapy very often lead me to see questions of privilege and dominance as the 'driving force' rather than the wellbeing of clients. I am interested in finding ways to talk about these matters. (Rolf Sundet, Norway)
- I have found it helpful to consider what will be different in my life if I commit myself more to addressing issues of privilege in my work, my life, my community. And also to think more about what is the impact of my behaviour (passive or active) on people who are marginalised. How does their status, their dreams, possibilities and externally imposed limitations affect my life? How would my life change (if at all) if these barriers were removed? How are our hopes and dreams similar? How are our fears similar? What are commitments I can make personally and professionally to foster more equality? To whom will I be accountable for the changes I pledge to make? These are questions I continue to ask myself and I find them helpful companions on the journey. (Vanessa Jackson, USA)

- I think there are some very powerful values within dominant culture that are being transgressed by these conversations. Dominance and privilege are maintained by a refusal to recognise their existence, and are undermined by naming them and exploring the ways in which they operate. This is a major reason why “political correctness” has been so strongly attacked over the last 10-15 years by conservative academics and media commentators. We are now living in a context of conservative triumphalism, where any self-examination over issues of privilege is inevitably dismissed and ridiculed. In this context it is not surprising that these conversations can initially feel somewhat unnatural or forced, and make people feel uneasy. There is nothing in the dominant culture which is encouraging us to have these conversations, and there is a great deal that is telling us that if we do we are being “goody two shoes”, self-righteous, pompous, irrelevant and in danger of looking ridiculous. Unless the transgressive nature of these conversations is named, people are likely to believe that their discomfort is their own personal “problem”, or that there is indeed something “wrong” with the conversations themselves. Indeed, I think people should be encouraged to see that there is an element of courage involved in having these conversations in the present political climate, and to feel excited about the possibilities that can come from them. I see conversations about privilege as having profoundly exciting and expansive possibilities. They enable us to explore the ways in which we are limiting ourselves and being limited by our social contexts. They enable us to explore our own preferred stories about who we are and who we want to be in the world. They enable us to expand our horizons of where we belong and who we can connect with and stand with. In fact, they enable us to live in this world with our eyes open, not shut. As far as I am concerned, this is something to celebrate, not be afraid of. (Chris McLean, Australia)

## **Looking forward to hearing from you...**

This is an ongoing project and we are all very much still learning about the best ways to explore and talk about these issues. We will be updating this document in response to feedback and also adding new stories and reflections as people send these to us. We would like to hear from you about your experience of engaging with these exercises, what they evoked for you, etc. And we'd also be interested to hear of any ways in which you have adapted the exercises to make them more relevant to your own context. What is more, we would welcome your ideas about specific exercises to deconstruct any of the particular forms of privilege referred to in this document (e.g. gender, heterosexual dominance, professional privilege, class, white privilege, ability etc). We would also welcome ideas about ways of addressing other issues that we did not address in any detail here, such as gender identity, religion, etc.

We look forward to hearing from you!