

Women's Studies, Community Service-Learning, and the Dynamics of Privilege

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Abstract

Drawing on the author's experiences of incorporating service-learning into Introduction to Women's Studies courses, this article demonstrates that community service-learning provides a critical opportunity to interrogate the privileges built into postsecondary education. The article asks, what do students understand as "privilege" and what do they come to understand about their positionality via service-learning?

Résumé

En se basant sur les expériences de l'auteure qui incorpore l'auto-apprentissage dans les cours d'introduction aux études sur les femmes, cet article démontre que l'apprentissage de service communautaire fournit une occasion unique de questionner les privilèges dans l'éducation post-secondaire. Cet article s'interroge sur la compréhension des étudiants du terme « privilège », et sur ce qu'ils viennent à comprendre de leur propre position par l'entremise de l'apprentissage de service.

This article began as a collegial conversation about how community service-learning in Women's Studies encourages students to recognize and examine privilege—their own and others'. Community service-learning is a pedagogical approach that integrates community-based activities, largely in non-profit organizations, with classroom learning. Privilege, defined as any unearned asset or benefit received by virtue of being born with a particular characteristic (McIntosh [1988] 2008; Rocco and West 1998) is, of course, a complex, multi-faceted concept. The generally accepted attributes that determine the function of privilege—gender, race, ethnicity, class, ability (or able-bodiedness), sexual orientation, age, and religion (Rocco and West 1998)—intersect structurally and in individuals. Students, therefore, enter the classroom already marked by diverse and often contradictory degrees of privilege and disadvantage, and with different knowledges, histories, and unequal relations to power, which necessarily complicates any neat rationale about the efficacy of service-learning as a tool for Women's Studies students to understand privilege and their social positions. Likewise, community organizations and their clients, with whom service-learning students work, are far from homogeneous. Having students think through their privileges and positions in relation to community members, who are also already marked by varied privilege and disadvantage, further complicates any straightforward account of how students can examine their privileges through service-learning.

What this article explores, then, is how privilege and power relations are related to established and emergent rationales for service-learning, particularly in Women's Studies curricula. Drawing on my own experiences of incorporating service-learning into Introduction to Women's Studies courses at the University of Alberta (Edmonton, Alberta) over the past three years, I demonstrate that service-learning provides a critical opportunity to interrogate

the privileges built into postsecondary education. I locate this discussion within a broader cultural, historical, and political context by suggesting that asking students to examine their privilege and positionality via service-learning within a Women's Studies curriculum takes on a new significance in the face of the current Canadian government's de-legitimation of an equality- or social justice-based agenda. For the purposes of this paper, however, I link Canada's current political climate to an established American rationale that touts service-learning as a way to foster democracy and promote engaged citizenship (Butin 2007). I frame the Harper government's systematic cuts to women's groups as a possibly distinct emerging rationale for engaging service-learning in Women's Studies in Canada, but this idea is a preliminary notion and a direction for future research.

This article is primarily concerned with broader questions about how students negotiate privilege in and through community engagement within Women's Studies curricula. While service-learning encourages students to realize their various privileges, often through assigning an encounter with the Other (Himley 2004), students are also variously "othered," sometimes explicitly, in their service-learning placements. What exactly do students understand as "privilege," and what do they understand about their own privileges and positionality by the end of their service-learning work and the course? Furthermore, once we have helped students recognize and describe privilege, what do we expect and enable them to do next? As Peggy McIntosh asks in her influential work, "White Privilege and Male Privilege," "What will we do with such knowledge?" ([1988] 2008, 69).

Service-Learning Rationale

While these questions obviously echo early and ongoing conversations about Women's Studies and feminist pedagogies, they take on a new relevance in Canada's current political climate. In May 2010, under the leadership of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, the federal government cut funding to eleven women's groups (Roman 2010). As some critics have argued, these cuts represent

an attempt to silence those who do not "share the government's [socially conservative] ideology" (Roman 2010, n.p.). The Harper government has been steadily undermining women's groups since assuming office in 2006. Perhaps most tellingly, in 2006, the Harper government "took all mention of 'equality' out of the terms and conditions of the Women's Program" (CRIA 2006, 2), the Status of Women Canada's grants and contributions program that "provides both funding and technical assistance to women's groups and other equality-seeking organizations" (Canada 2006, 1). These changes to the rules of the Women's Program mean that organizations can no longer use federal funds to research, advocate, or lobby for women's equality (CRIA 2006).

There are two connections to service-learning, Women's Studies, and students' subsequent understanding of privilege to be made here. First, because these government-mandated changes depoliticize the responsibilities and roles of many women-centred non-profit organizations in Canada, students have fewer opportunities to experience feminist activism in their service-learning placements. As Lise Gotell and other feminist critics have remarked, non-profit organizations are compelled under neoliberalism "to adopt an individualized and depoliticized lens" on gendered social problems like sexual violence and the feminization of poverty (Gotell 2009, 2; Mailloux, Horak, and Godin 2002). At the same time, the non-profit sector has been forced to assume greater responsibility for the provision of social services. The neoliberal, anti-feminist political climate under which non-profit organizations are held largely responsible for the provision of social welfare (and, therefore, for somehow addressing, or at least "Band Aid-ing" social inequalities) in Canada affects students' understandings of the complexities of privilege, systemic inequality, and their own positions as social actors.

The second connection between the Harper government's cuts and changes to women's groups, Women's Studies, service-learning, and privilege hinges on a broader question of the relationship between service-learning and democracy. A central tenet of

service-learning is that it teaches students “what it means to be citizens in democratic society” (Trigg and Balliet 2000, 87). In fact, much American service-learning literature emphasizes service-learning as a possible corrective to the United States’ “crisis of democracy” (Rocheleau 2004, 15). In a social and political climate characterized by citizen apathy and cynicism, service-learning, suggests Jordy Rocheleau in “Theoretical Roots of Service-Learning,” “is seen as one way in which students might become motivated to be concerned with social problems, the plight of others, and politics in general” (2004, 14). Service-learning may renew a commitment to participatory democracy, “which calls for active citizen participation in identifying social problems and proposing and implementing solutions,” because students participate in “projects whose successful completion involves working and communicating with others, assessing their needs, and providing assistance” (Rocheleau 2004, 7). I appreciate this (albeit oversimplified) idealization of service-learning as a strategy to reenergize democracy, and I hope that teaching students to recognize their privilege(s) and its implications in systems of power are part of reinvigorating participatory democracy. Given the restrictions that the Canadian government has placed on the kinds of solutions to social problems that women-centred non-profit organizations can propose and implement, however, it seems to me that the question of what we expect students to do with the knowledge of their privileges and, indeed, the knowledge of how power functions, is all the more relevant. To put it another way: what if service-learning teaches students that “what it means to be citizens in democratic society” (Trigg and Balliet 2004, 87) is that society is not so democratic?

As Mary Trigg and Barbara Balliet remark, “Advocates of service-learning hope it will contribute to creating new generations of citizens who understand the way government [and I would add, institutions and power] work, and who will feel and act on their sense of responsibility to their communities” (2000, 87). Again, I appreciate these aspirations and consider them important, particularly given the political conditions that I have sketched

above. Having taught service-learning courses in different disciplines for a couple of years now, however, my reasons for continuing to incorporate service-learning into my Introduction to Women’s Studies courses are somewhat more modest. I see service-learning as an opportunity for Women’s Studies students to understand more fully the diversity of women’s experiences, to develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which gender roles have had an impact on the life choices available to women and the ways in which gender intersects with ethnicity, class, ability, and sexuality, and, then, ideally, to envision and engage in strategies that lead to social change, including a possible reinvigoration of participatory democracy. My broadest pedagogical goal is to have students learn how to revise theoretical frameworks on the basis of experience (Imagining America, n.d.).

Having students recognize their various privileges (ethnicity, class, economic, heterosexual, ability, gender, epistemological) is central to achieving these goals. For service-learning to be a reciprocal exercise—as opposed to charity or philanthropy with their explicit hierarchies of the server and the served—students must learn to critically reflect on their own social locations and to understand how power differentials operate in their relationships with community members. (By “community members” I mean people who access the community organizations’ services). As a pedagogical tool, service-learning plays a key role in helping students negotiate privilege, which, in turn, encourages students to develop a concrete understanding of various systemic constraints on not only the non-profit sector, but also on feminism, democracy, and our everyday lives.

The theoretical foundations of service-learning that I have sketched here will sound familiar to feminist teachers and scholars. As Patricia Washington points out, there is a natural affinity between service-learning and Women’s Studies; namely, service-learning grew out of the same desire to address social inequalities that feminist pedagogies represent (2000). Feminist pedagogies and service-learning both strive for collaboration and non-hierarchical relationships and stress collective action rather than individualism (Trigg and Balliet 2000). Patricia Webb explains that

“current debates in both areas study power relations...Current examples of service-learning... [are] based in theories of activism that analyze power relations (as feminist theories do) and work to change current structures” (Webb 2007, 241). Like Women’s Studies pedagogies, service-learning encourages students to relate theoretical knowledge with personal experience, culture, and communities (Agha-Jaffar 2000). Service-learning shares Women’s Studies’ overarching commitment to connecting theory with praxis (Agha-Jaffar 2000).

Service-Learning Projects in Introduction to Women’s Studies

Introduction to Women’s Studies at the University of Alberta is a 14-week, semester-long course with an average enrollment of between 35 and 45 students. Although it is an introductory course, the majority of students take it as an elective in the final years of their undergraduate degrees. The “Intro” course is currently one of two Women’s Studies courses at the University of Alberta that routinely includes a service-learning component. In 2008, during a phase of strategic planning and renewal, our Women’s Studies Program made a commitment to offering a range of courses in which students would have opportunities to engage in community-based work in Edmonton’s non-profit sector.

The 20-hour community service-learning component in my “Intro” courses is always optional for students, and usually about half of the class participates. The projects, which are arranged in advance in consultation with the University’s Community Service-Learning Program, vary significantly, but they are all designed to serve women directly and/or address issues related to gender and sexuality. In 2007, for example, the class partnered with six women-centred community organizations, and students chose from programs and activities such as preparing meals and answering phones at a local women’s shelter; writing and producing a feminist radio show at the campus radio station; assisting with a media campaign for National Eating Disorders Awareness Week with an eating disorders recovery group; and researching programming opportunities for

women coming out of prison at the women’s reintegration chaplaincy. In another class, some students helped out with ESL classes at an organization for immigrant women; other students worked at the Women’s Centre Collective on campus, where one of them organized a pro-choice awareness campaign; one student screened films for selection for a local independent film festival; others researched barriers to education for girls in Africa with an international development organization; and still others worked with a campus-based institute on Sexual Minority Studies to theorize safe space. Admittedly, the variation of projects, organizations, and contexts also makes it difficult to generalize about students’ experiences and service-learning outcomes; I will describe some consistencies as well as contradictions in how students negotiate privilege in and through community engagement in the Introduction to Women’s Studies courses.

Conceptualizing Privilege

I want to describe briefly how the concept of privilege circulates within my “Intro” courses and within service-learning discourses. Like many Women’s Studies instructors, I introduce privilege early in the term with McIntosh’s “White Privilege and Male Privilege” ([1988] 2008). Students generally find McIntosh’s metaphor of the invisible knapsack of privilege illuminating. They learn fairly quickly, largely by mimicking McIntosh’s list, to itemize the “unearned assets that [they] can count on cashing in each day” and “the special circumstances and conditions [that they] experience that [they] did not earn but that [they] have been made to feel are [theirs] by birth, by citizenship, and by virtue of being a conscientious law-abiding ‘normal’ person of goodwill” (McIntosh [1988] 2008, 62, 63). In fact, at the end of the term, when I ask students to recall course material that stood out the most for them, many cite McIntosh and earnestly profess that they will never look at “flesh”-coloured bandages or blemish cover (McIntosh [1988] 2008, 65) without being reminded that these everyday things signify white privilege. (That students most strongly associate white privilege with these examples of consumer goods is fodder for another

paper.) Although students often visibly resemble each other (the majority are white, able-bodied, young women), I try to illustrate that the assumption of sameness is part of how privilege works.

While McIntosh's model is particularly revelatory for white students who recognize that their previous inattention to their whiteness is a reflection of white privilege, students of colour also reflect actively on their privilege in class discussion and written reflection. Last term, for instance, one woman of colour puzzled over how her lack of white privilege intersected with her economic privilege. Her relative affluence, she wrote in her journal, protected her from having "to wonder whether [her] race worked against [her] and...whether people mistrusted [her]." As she perceived it, her upper-middle-class status allowed her to get along in the world just fine. Another woman of colour described her youth as a kind of privilege, problematically intertwined with norms of femininity, she noted also in her journal.

One of the difficulties the class often encounters during these discussions of white privilege is that students tend to rank the attributes that function as determinants of privilege (gender, ethnicity, race, class, age, able-bodiedness, sexual orientation), rather than seeing these attributes as forming interlocking systems of oppression. As the above example of the student who understood her economic or class privilege as a kind of protection from questions about her race arguably demonstrates, students tend to set up hierarchies of privilege that obscure the interconnections between types and systems of privilege. Patricia Hill Collins' criticism of additive analyses of oppression illustrates this tendency; she writes, "We must be careful not to confuse this issue of saliency of one type of oppression in people's lives with a theoretical stance positing the interlocking nature of oppression. Race, class, and gender may all structure a situation but may not be equally visible and/or important in people's self-definitions" ([1993] 2009, 77). In my experience, and perhaps not surprisingly given the prevalence of neoliberal discourses that construct consumerism as an expression of democracy and individualism, students often regard their economic or class privilege not only as more salient than other types of

privilege, but also as desirable—an idea to which I will return shortly.

Economic Privilege and White Privilege

When I refer to students' economic privilege, I mean that they have been raised in "socioeconomic conditions that are markedly more financially stable and secure than the socioeconomic conditions of the community with which [they] engage in their service-learning sites" (Dunlap et al. 2007, 19). Economic privilege is closely tied to class privilege. Put simply, class refers to the status that an individual or group has by virtue of its economic strength. But class is also determined by the influence that an individual or group has among other individuals or groups and, by extension, the power to affect change in a community of choice as determined not solely by economic means, but also by cultural capital. Class privilege reflects a conceptualization of class as a worldview that is closely related to classism, which contends that people should always strive to improve their social position and sees upward mobility as the norm (Lui, Pickett, and Ivey 2007). In their article, "White Students' Experiences of Privilege and Socioeconomic Disparities," Michelle Dunlap and her co-authors suggest that "the realization of social and economic privilege can be difficult to accept for those in the early stages of privilege awareness or racial identity development" (2007, 19–20). On the contrary, I have found students are better able to recognize economic privilege than white privilege or sexuality- or ability-based privilege. While this observation may again suggest that students tend towards separating attributes of privilege, I do not mean to hierarchize one attribute of privilege over another. At a basic level, I would suggest that students more readily recognize economic privilege because they perceive economic privilege as having more visible, tangible indicators and implications than other kinds of privilege. That is, they recognize economic privilege as signified by consumer goods and, whatever the degree of their economic and class privilege, students are proficient readers of signs of material wealth. This is not to say that privilege attributes, such as whiteness, are not at stake here; indeed, that white

students more readily acknowledge economic privilege may be read as a reflection of the continued privileged invisibility of whiteness.

Early in the term, I ask the service-learning students to describe the process of getting to their community placement for the first time and to record their initial observations about the surrounding built environment. One of the goals of this brief, informal written assignment is to encourage students to think about how social differences are reflected in material practices and spaces. I also want students to begin to analyze the politics of space in their placements, to recognize how power is manifest spatially in the organizations, and to understand the complexities of being an insider or an outsider (Bickford and Reynolds 2002).

Last year, a student wrote a detailed description of her search for a parking spot near her placement at the Women's Emergency Accommodation Centre. Neighbouring a ponderous pink glass government building and one of the city's most expensive restaurants on the west side, and a long block of decaying brick buildings that house peep shows and sex shops on the east side, the Women's Emergency Accommodation Centre is located in a part of downtown Edmonton with which most university students are unfamiliar or uncomfortable. As this student describes her anxiety about finding a safe place to park her car, she uses her own physical and geographical space to begin to locate herself socially in relation to the women with which she will work at the Centre. She comes to realize that her search for a parking spot symbolizes her economic privilege: "Most women staying at the shelter," she speculates, "probably don't need to find parking." She then wonders whether her mobility—her ability to come and go freely from the Centre as symbolized by her car and economic privilege—will affect how women at the Centre perceive her. This student realizes that her economic privilege bestows power that (over)determines a dynamic between her and the women at the Centre even before she meets them.

Similarly, a handful of students who worked at downtown organizations in parts of the city to which they usually did not travel described feeling conspicuous because of

their clothing, which, some explained, signified a higher status than that of those standing around outside the buildings. Again, students read visible, material signifiers, in this case clothing, as indicative of economic privilege. Once they are inside some of these buildings, especially downtown drop-in centres and other organizations that address issues of homelessness, poverty, and criminality, however, students' attention often turns to the fact that the majority of people accessing these services are Aboriginal. Many students initially respond to this realization by simply asking why. Why are the majority of Edmonton's homeless women Aboriginal? Why are so many women in the criminal justice system in Edmonton Aboriginal? Why are so many women who experience violence Aboriginal? The vast majority of students who pose these questions are white students, and although these questions do not necessarily signal students' recognition of white privilege, they do illustrate students' realization of a dissonance between what they thought they knew and what they are finding to be true, which is an early stage of negotiating privilege (Dunlap et al. 2007). I use these kinds of questions to have students develop feminist critiques of colonialism and discuss the contemporary legacy of colonialism in Canada, through which they begin to realize the interconnectedness of systems of oppression. (It is worth noting here that in the five times that I have taught "Introduction to Women's Studies," only two students self-identified as Aboriginal. While there may have been other students who chose not to publicly identify themselves as Aboriginal, my point is that I cannot suggest how Aboriginal students might conceptualize these kinds of service-learning experiences and/or complicate white students' understandings of white privilege).

Service-learning encourages students who experience economic security as the norm to realize that it is, in fact, not the norm (Dunlap et al 2007). Ideally, this recognition leads students not only to question the status quo (Dunlap et al. 2007), but also to see how socioeconomic status is intertwined with race. When students initially recognize their economic privilege, however, they often express gratitude and/or guilt for being "more fortunate" than

the people with whom they are working in the community. Gratitude and guilt are reasonable early responses to students' recognition of their privilege and the implication of privilege in the oppression of others, but we need to assure that these responses are not immobilizing (Dunlap et al. 2007). One student, who initially felt guilty about her economic privilege when working with women experiencing homelessness, dealt with her guilt by actively attempting to gain a more complex understanding of women's homelessness. She asked her community supervisor to explain who accessed the shelter and learned that women become homeless because of experiences such as domestic violence, untreated mental illness, addictions, and unemployment. Introducing these circumstances into the issue of women's homelessness gave this student a broader understanding of not only homelessness, but also of the interconnectedness of class and gender. This student's increased awareness of the complexity of women's homelessness did not mitigate the way in which she experienced her privilege as complicit in systems of oppression; rather, her privilege awareness motivated her to better understand these systems, and service-learning provided a way for her to explore and witness the systemic effects of privilege and oppression.

Institutional and Epistemic Privilege

Even when they are not or do not characterize themselves as middle- or upper-class, students often recognize that their institutional role as students in a university class confers on them some kind of privilege, a privilege they usually assume community members interpret as economic privilege. One student who was working with "at risk" teen-aged girls at an inner-city school explained that the girls already knew it cost a lot of money to go to university and felt that university was prohibitively expensive for them, and so assumed that this student enjoyed financial security. During a class discussion, the student told us that she had difficulty explaining to the girls that she did not come from a middle-class household or have a lot of money: "Being a university student means that I have 'enough money' and 'enough money' means that there is enough of a class difference between me and the girls that I worry that

they think of me as an authority, in a bad way." Both the service-learning student and the girls conflate "university student" and economic and class privilege, and cannot seem to move beyond this conflation in this instance. The "at risk" girls recognize the service-learning student's cultural capital—i.e., university education—while the student tries to convey to the girls that her education is not the result of coming from an affluent background. To avoid the automatic but uneasy equation of being a university student with economic privilege, I encourage students to think about "the position of epistemic privilege produced by their institutional role" (Himley 2004, 426). To put it simply, I ask them to consider what it means to be a university student working in the community.

Many students initially express anxiety about being an outsider in the community and not knowing enough about the specific issues that their organization addresses. Some students maintain this sort of humility as an outside learner in the community throughout the course. This role may seem benign, or, even better, it may seem like students recognize that privilege problematically bestows credibility and an assumption of capability, but it also reminds us of what Margaret Himley calls the "exchange value" of service-learning (2004, 432). As Himley notes, students benefit professionally from service-learning; they are well aware that they are volunteering (at least initially) for a grade, and they often acquire highly commodifiable skills through service-learning (2004). I am not suggesting that we should not incorporate service-learning into our classes because it can be professionally beneficial for students, of course, but, I am suggesting that the "exchange value" of service-learning affects the dynamics of privilege and raises questions about the degree of reciprocity between students, who represent the university, and community organizations.

More commonly, students' epistemic privilege is reflected in their understanding of themselves as "the one who provides the service, as the one who donates time and expertise" (Himley 2004, 430). I should note, however, that I cannot recall any Women's Studies student being this explicit about her

epistemic privilege and describing herself as an expert or a caregiver. Students do recognize that, as university students, they bring a socially and culturally valid kind of knowledge to their placement. Assumptions about the students' roles as server and expert emerge more often in students' descriptions of the people with whom they are working in the community. As Himley points out, certain tropes often appear in students' reflections that reinforce the community members' otherness; for example, students describe the community members as "genuine, appreciative, inherently intelligent, closer to the heart of life" (2004, 430).

It may be, however, that students' persistent othering of community members is part of the dominant rhetoric of community service, which relies on the hierarchy of the helper/helped. (And it may be that this hierarchy is reproduced by having a program on campus that organizes service-learning opportunities for students.) Indeed, critics often charge that service-learning comes too close to replicating the hierarchies of philanthropy and charity (Morton 1995; Bickford and Reynolds 2002; Meisel 2008). Michelle Camacho reminds us that "both charity and philanthropy...are situated in a history of power and domination, serving to regulate class difference and ensure privilege" (2004, 33). Deborah Mindry describes the essence of philanthropic power: "The language of privilege and responsibility to others is deeply imbued with a sense of hierarchy and superiority. Philanthropic work reinscribes the privileged status of those engaged in such work by emphasizing their superior position in relation to those who become the object of their caring" (1999, 188). Mindry argues that philanthropy does not empower; rather, it legitimizes social hierarchy (1999). She writes, "It reinscribes the social order or, at best, seeks to change things in ways that do not substantially threaten the existing order, and in fact make the dominant order seem morally worthy and a standard to be emulated" (1999, 188). Drawing on this conceptualization of philanthropy to explore community service-learning, Cynthia Rosenberger asks, "To what extent does service learning, although intended to meet community needs, and promote active

citizenship, sustain the hegemony of the elite and perpetuate the status quo of privilege and oppression created by the economic and educational opportunities of class, race, and gender?" (2000, 24).

This context is all the more significant to Women's Studies students given that "service [in North America] has roots in the volunteerism of white, middle- and upper-class women, where hopeful and idealistic (and perhaps naïve) volunteers went out into poor working-class neighborhoods to improve the material and moral lot of the less fortunate" (Himley 2004, 419). As Himley explains,

These volunteers had the social capital to move close to these strangers in order to re-script their lives within dominant discourses and values.... Through service projects, these women also achieved a measure of public stature and power by representing their work to public audiences and themselves as "good citizens" taking care of those who were weaker and more vulnerable and (believed to be) dangerous. (2004, 419-20)

This history of women's roles in charity in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and its relation to feminist activism is useful in the "Intro" classroom; it allows us to discuss the history of women's organizing and raise issues of power and privilege dynamics as they might also function in service-learning placements. I use the history of women's volunteerism and its hierarchical models of service to encourage students to examine their motivations for participating in service-learning. I ask them to consider, for example, what assumptions and power relations are at play when they articulate their motivation for volunteering as "giving back" to the community. What privileges are implicit in this notion of "giving back"? And do they see themselves as part of (white, middle- and upper-class) women's history by participating in service-learning? As students, what does it mean to them that the university might be participating in the reiteration of a hierarchical model of service? The historical context encourages students to interrogate their assumptions about service and their positions

without making them defensive about their privilege(s).

The current marginalization and depoliticization of women-centred non-profit organizations arguably shifts the way students negotiate their positions as service-providers in relation to this history, however. Students suggest, for instance, that very little “public stature” is attached to working in the non-profit sector for long hours and little money, and in a culture that largely accepts the post-feminist notion that women have achieved equality. Late in the term in a final journal assignment, one student revisited the history of women’s volunteerism as she was contemplating what she had learned in her service-learning placement: she wondered if neo-liberalism’s emphasis on the individual as responsible for his or her problems (in this case, poverty was the “problem”) affected the way we perceive the value of social welfare provision. Instead of being seen as taking care of “the weak” or “the vulnerable,” this student suggested, the non-profit sector is seen as taking care of those who will not help themselves and, hence, it is not a well-respected job. This interpretation may underestimate the persistence of cultural narratives of the “deserving poor” and the “good citizen,” but that students perceive a historical shift in the power dynamics of service provision here is noteworthy, particularly as it influences their understandings of their own roles.

Mindry’s description of “the language of privilege and responsibility to others” as “deeply imbued with a sense of hierarchy and superiority” raises another facet of students’ epistemic privilege (1999, 188). Paradoxically (and troublingly), I have noticed that students who become fluent in discussing their privilege(s) seem to imbue their supposed privilege recognition with a sense of superiority and academic achievement. Furthermore, while these students use the concept of privilege—often very effectively—to think about power differentials, they do not always avoid thinking of privilege as “something everyone must want,” despite McIntosh’s clear assertion that privilege “should not...be referred to as a desirable attribute” (McIntosh [1988] 2008, 66). In other words, the dominant rhetoric of philanthropy echoes here, too, with

modernist ideals of “progress” and “betterment.” Students may come, through service-learning, to change their negative views and stereotypes of marginalized groups, but they do not necessarily challenge their assumptions of what marginalized people should “aim for” or want to become. In senior-level courses, I have seen service-learning students challenge notions of betterment and progress, noting that these cultural narratives are largely capitalist-driven; it might be, therefore, that this kind of conceptualization of privilege as a desirable attribute is an early characteristic of students’ grappling with understanding their own privilege(s).

Conclusion

Although I have been troubling the dynamics of privilege as they can play out in service-learning, I do not intend to give up on service-learning because, in Himley’s words, “it is one of the few places where we encounter one another in ways that may disrupt the production of the stranger” (2004, 433). Women’s Studies is particularly well-suited to addressing and hopefully pre-empting some of the problems that can arise with service-learning. Donna Bickford and Nedra Reynolds explain that how students respond to the encounter with difference that characterizes service-learning “will depend on whether the designs have emerged from a belief in service or activism. Roughly speaking, service addresses people, and activism addresses structures” (2002, 231). Discussing privilege not as an individual attribute but, as McIntosh writes, as “unearned power conferred systematically” ([1988] 2008, 66) and helping students understand how feminist theory works to disrupt conventional power structures helps make service-learning a useful pedagogical tool.

As for the question of what students do with the knowledge of their privilege(s), I am optimistic that service-learning provides students with models of accountability through people and organizations that are committed to changing our present hierarchies and inequalities. Granted, the non-profit sector, and particularly women-centred groups within the sector, face many material and ideological constraints, as exemplified by the Harper government’s recent cuts to women’s groups.

And I would suggest that we need to consider whether we are asking students to join the ranks of underpaid and overworked women in the non-profit sector. I would also suggest, however, that we cannot neatly separate service provision from activism. As a handful of students argued last term, the commitment of women working and volunteering in the non-profit sector signifies more than an obligation to fulfill a civic duty; though forced to adopt an outwardly depoliticized stance (Gotell 2009), their commitment is a politics of resistance that provides students with a model of what to do with the knowledge of their privilege(s).

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