**Reflections on Exploring our Privilege**

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The members of PAA’s Social Justice, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Community of Practice (SJEDI-COP) are committed to regularly exploring our personal and professional privilege, and ensuring we practice from an actively anti-oppressive stance. We have found meeting together and going through Bobbi Harro's Cycle of Socialization and Cycle of Liberation (2018) very helpful in guiding our exploration of some of the impacts of socialization on different aspects and intersections of each of our identities - some where we hold an “Agent” or privileged identity, and some where we are part of a “Target” or marginalized group. We reflect on and discuss personal and professional changes and growth we have already made and set concrete goals of where we plan to make changes in the coming days to years. Harro (2018) states “We get systematic training in ‘how to be’ each of our social identities throughout our lives. The cycle of socialization that follows is one way of representing how the socialization process happens, from what source it comes, how it affects our lives, and how it perpetuates itself. The ‘Directions for Change’ that conclude this chapter suggest ways for interrupting the cycle of socialization and taking charge of our own lives.”

One of our members was first introduced to this process in a 12-month training and pilot project organized by Dr. Regine King (<https://socialwork.ucalgary.ca/regine-king>) in 2022/2023. Dr. King educated and supported 12 white settler therapists from the Lionheart Foundation and Alberta Health Services to explore their racial privilege, and to engage regularly with Black and racialized youth to explore and begin breaking down barriers in ourselves, in the biases inherent in our profession, our models of therapy and assessment, and issues of access. Dr. King gave her blessing to carry these tools forward and so in the fall of 2023 SJEDI-COP hosted a workshop to connect with other like-minded psychologists who wanted to explore their privilege.

We were excited about the level of interest in the workshop but kept to our initial plan of a small group to promote depth of exploration. We co-created guidelines for safe and accountable exploration of one aspect of folks' identity that located them in a position of an Agent identity. We agreed to challenge ourselves to be uncomfortable while staying inside our windows of tolerance, in order to promote deep, authentic exploration and emotional processing, learning and growth, and mindful goal setting. Some Agent identities explored by participants included being White, able-bodied, middle-class, a Registered Psychologist, Christian, and heterosexual.

We have shared the article links as well as examples of the reflection and discussion questions below.

**The Importance of Self-Reflection**

Arthur and Collins (2016, 2017) emphasized the importance of therapists being aware of, and paying attention to, the issues of relative privilege-marginalization between therapist and client and the power dynamics that emerge as a result of these dynamics. These differences emerge based on a variety of cultural identities and social locations and impact the therapeutic relationship as our own socio-cultural embeddedness imparts an implicit bias into the internalization of dominant sociocultural narratives and discourses. Exercises such as examining one’s experiences through a self-reflective exercise, such as Harro’s Cycle of Socialization, invite us to critically examine how each of us as individuals has a sociocultural construction of meaning that can lead to unintended marginalization and othering of our clients. It is incumbent upon us as professionals to become aware of and appropriately adjust and/or challenge these inherent biases in order to prevent harm and unintentional oppression in the therapeutic relationship. (Also see CAP Standards of Practice 18, 19.1 - 19.3, CPA Canadian Code of Ethics, 4th Edition (2017), the CPA policy and position [statements](https://cpa.ca/aboutcpa/policystatements/#Health-LGBTQI) and APA policy and practice [guidelines](https://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/transgender.pdf).

**Processing the Cycle of Socialization**

Read below to get a snapshot of some of the exploration we have begun to do:

***Shandra’s Process***

The Agent (privileged) identity I chose to work through Harro’s Cycle of Socialization was that of an able-bodied individual. I intentionally selected to explore this agent identity as it is an aspect of my life that I had not reflected on in any great depth. As I worked through the process, it impacted me on how easy it is to simply give no thought to one’s able-bodied capacity when you are part of the dominant, privileged identity. Looking at my upbringing, I considered how even my early socialization was heavily dependent on my being able-bodied. I had a very large extended family, with many very athletic family members; being strong, fast, and agile were lauded and praised regularly.

Looking at early socialization experiences, I began primary school at a time when children with physical or developmental disabilities were not present in the average classroom. My ability to learn to read and write was not hindered by poor, or absent, visual ability. My ability to be socialized to society’s cultural norms through play with classmates or friends was not hindered by a lack of accessibility to equipment, buildings, or even playgrounds. My ability to participate in classroom activities was not hindered by poor hearing or other aspects of physical ability. I had not given these privileges much thought prior to exploring the Cycle of Socialization, and upon reflection it is immediately evident how these early opportunities contributed to my future academic successes; school was not a place I experienced exclusion or hardship.

As I progressed into middle school, I remained part of the able-bodied majority and while the school system began to move towards more inclusive education, individuals with physical disability were rarely accommodated. Jokes about the “short bus” were commonplace amongst adults and peers alike. The first time that I recall experiencing my privilege of being able-bodied occurred when a classmate who was completely blind had difficulty acquiring the course materials and textbooks in braille, and as a result they struggled to keep up. Additionally, I recall the cognitive dissonance I felt when the day’s lesson was written on the blackboard, yet no one initially thought to share the information with our fellow student–this was likely the first time that the privilege of being able-bodied and the responsibility that this privilege affords was noticed.

Moving through Harro’s cycle, I reflected on how distinct an advantage being able-bodied afforded me as I considered the educational, travel, and employment opportunities that availed themselves to me because I was not limited by my physical body. As a professional within the field, these experiences continue to be highlighted. With colleagues and family members who require wheelchair-accessible spaces, I am more keenly aware of limitations that our patients may have in accessing resources and services. I consider the impact that clinic space, intake forms, and assessment materials may have on those who are not able-bodied.

***Krista’s Process***

The Agent or privileged identity that I chose to reflect on was growing up in a Canadian-born Christian family. As I processed my upbringing through the model of the Cycle of Socialization, I realized how much I took for granted and the assumptions that I made as a youth coming of age in this particular context.

First, I learned from an early age not just that Christianity was the “correct” religion but that my family’s version of Christianity was the “most correct.” These views not only led to othering people who were not Christian but also othering those who were from a different tradition within Christianity. The way that various views within my tradition were enforced was through social pressure through the church community which included a fair amount of fear-based beliefs about right and wrong and the afterlife. I often simultaneously experienced self-righteousness by judging myself to be better than others who were not Christian, and at the same time, low self-worth because the belief system that I had adopted made me feel like I was never “good enough.” Cognitive dissonance began to set in as I attended university and learned more about diverse people and ideas. Additionally, I was also processing my own sexual orientation but coming to terms with this was very difficult given my narrow worldview. Meditation was also a channel through which I was able to learn more about myself and the world. Through new life experiences, meeting new people, experiencing suffering, therapy, accepting myself, and practicing meditation, I began to realize that the world was much larger, diverse, and complex than I had originally believed. Professionally, this personal growth has allowed me to be more sensitive to my clients’ experiences, accept differences in others, and feel more connected to my clients’ humanity as I work with them.

***Joanna’s Process***

I identify as a white, first-generation settler, middle class, able-bodied, queer, cisgender female. For the workshop, the Agent identity that I chose to unpack and explore through the Cycle of Socialization lens, was growing up in a middle to upper-middle-class family. As I began to reflect on the early impacts of socialization, I was aware of privilege even before birth, with my mother having guaranteed housing and food security, and access to quality medical care. In the first years of my life, there were more than enough financial resources to engage in enhanced early childcare activities and pre-school programming, transportation to get there, as well as an inherent entitled assumption that we as white heteronormative-appearing middle-class parents and children would be welcome wherever we went. I realize how much I took for granted, and how cut-off I was from experiences that could have created cognitive dissonance. In this middle-class bubble, schools, neighbourhoods, activities, friends, my path to post-secondary education, and my career in psychology, all reflected and reinforced what I assumed was “normal” and desirable and accessible to everyone. Each time I go through this reflective exercise, more layers unpeel. I realize also how magnified my experience of privilege was and is, due to the intersectional impact of the many privileged identities I hold.

The first externally triggered experience of cognitive dissonance that I can recall viscerally, came when I worked as a teen summer camp counsellor at a YMCA camp and met other counsellors from very different social locations than me, as well as campers on subsidy who had never been outside of inner-city Calgary. These campers used garbage bags to carry their few belongings on a day hike. From this moment on I became increasingly aware of opportunities throughout my education, career, and personal experiences to choose to either continue upholding and reinforcing the Cycle of Socialization, or to wake up over and over again and consciously choose to step onto the Cycle of Liberation. To unlearn and relearn, be uncomfortable and sometimes unsafe, make changes, and speak up. I am uncomfortably aware that having this choice to stay on or step off the Cycle of Socialization with minimal risk of social, financial, or institutional consequences is yet another privilege afforded to me. I feel a moral obligation to continue this lifelong process of aspiring to anti-oppressive practice and to working individually and in community to find ways to meet the responsibilities that accompany my personal and professional privilege.

**An Invitation to Reflect**

We hope that sharing our experiences exploring our privilege will encourage you, our fellow colleagues, to also reflect on your privilege. We encourage you to read both articles, the Cycle of Socialization and the Cycle of Liberation, and progress through each model choosing an agent/privileged identity to explore. Consider how your privilege impacts you personally as well as professionally. Reflect on the questions below and determine some actionable steps you can take to step off of the Cycle of Socialization and onto the Cycle of Liberation.

We also look forward to offering additional workshops in the future, so please join us if you are able.

**References**

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**Reflection Questions**

**Small Group**

1. Consider one of your agent identities and how you have benefited from it.

2. What are some things you learned during early socialization that you accepted without question?

3. What "rules" of society have you come to realize are not fair?

4. In an agent role, have you ever "paid the price" for not adhering to societal norms? What was that like?

5. What are some ways that you have failed to interrupt the cycle of socialization? What are some ways that you have attempted to interrupt it?

6. Did you find it difficult to explore your agent identity (identities)? Did you notice a tendency to default to a target identity when working through the cycle of socialization?

**Large Group**

1. What could you take action on within the next few days in your personal or professional life to step off the cycle of Socialization?

2. What aspects of the profession of psychology continue this cycle of socialization? Where could we advocate for awareness and change?

3. What may be some practical ways that we can support ourselves, colleagues, and students in the profession of psychology to tolerate the discomfort and explore more deeply the privilege of our agent identities?