

# THE PRIVILEGE OF TEACHING ABOUT PRIVILEGE

MICHAEL A. MESSNER  
*University of Southern California*

**ABSTRACT:** *A scholarly literature on the intersectional realities of race, class, gender, and sexual privilege exists, but professors often struggle with how to teach it, especially given our own (often) privileged positions. Here, the author describes how he uses self-reflexive story-telling as a point of entry to encourage students to think about their own lives within a matrix of privilege and subordination. He shows how stories can illuminate the central role played by ideologies of individual meritocracy in privileged peoples' narratives. The author argues that personal stories are limited unless they also are contextualized within structural analyses that illuminate collective agency. He ends by describing an undergraduate study of USC janitors that reveals how the institution constrains these low-wage workers, while putting into stark relief the relative privilege of students and faculty. He concludes that a pedagogy of privilege should always be grounded in the standpoints of subordinated groups of people.*

Keywords: teaching, privilege, intersectionality

*Arriving to my office at 7:30 a.m., I observe that the quiet halls are devoid of faculty, office staff, or students. I amble along the corridor and notice that the lights are on in our Sociology Center. From the hallway, I peek through the window and see one of the janitors who works in our building, standing in front of the chalkboard. A middle-aged mother of Mexican descent for whom English is a second language, she shows up for work five days a week at 5:00 a.m., cleans our hallways, offices, and restrooms. She empties our trashcans daily, and once or twice a year she can be seen on her hands and knees, scrubbing the black baseboards to a clean sheen, all the way down the long stretch of our hallways. She leaves the building by the early afternoon; faculty or students who are not "morning people" are unlikely to see her labor that keeps our workplace spanking clean. On this morning I view her through the Sociology Center window, and I pause to wave a friendly greeting. But she doesn't see me; she's standing perfectly still, her back to me, a long mop poised upright in her hand. She seems to be concentrating, reading the chalkboard, which is covered, side-to-side and top-to-bottom, with*

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Address correspondence to: Michael A. Messner, Department of Sociology, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-2539; e-mail: messner@usc.edu.

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*a professor's scrawlings from yesterday's theory lecture on Marx. Feudalism became capitalism; new social classes emerged; capitalists extracted surplus value and accumulated profits; an industrial labor class performed alienated labor. I proceed to my office, turn on my computer, and do a first sorting through today's e-mails. A few minutes later, I stroll to the restroom, and walking by the now-empty Sociology Center, I see that the chalkboard is now clean as a whistle, gleaming and ready for the next professor's lecture.*

How do we, in our daily lives, make sense of moments like this? In particular, how do sociology professors square this sort of daily experience with our work—our research and our teaching—that so often focuses on social inequalities? For the moment, I want to leave these questions, and the image from this story, as something for the reader to ponder. I will return to them later. And I promise, I don't have a clean and tidy answer.

### TELLING PRIVILEGE STORIES

Teaching is what first drew me to become a professor. When I attended my first Pacific Sociological Association meeting back in 1974 as a graduating senior at Chico State University, it was the organization's clear support for students and for the mission of teaching that I found most attractive. After a quarter-century of teaching there is plenty to ponder, but here I want to reflect on one challenge to which I have given a good deal of thought in recent years: how do I, as a white, male, heterosexual, tenured professor teach in a critical and self-reflexive way about privilege? Having identified myself in this way, as a member of a several cross-cutting axes of privilege, I want to recognize that most readers of this journal also teach—or will teach in the future—and since inequality is part of the central stuff of sociology, most of us also teach about privilege. But not every sociology professor operates from the same privileged standpoint as mine.

I learned years ago as a new assistant professor, team-teaching courses on gender with women colleagues, that students tend to view and judge women professors differently, applying a double-standard that worked to the benefit of the male instructor. And I learned during six years of serving as a department chair, and reading many student evaluations of my colleagues' classes, that students often impute "bias" to faculty of color who are teaching courses on social inequality, especially race. White, heterosexual, male professors, I learned, are usually assumed to be "objective" when teaching about social inequalities (Messner 2000; 2003). How do we use this privilege in the classroom?

One starting point in thinking about this question is to familiarize our students with the burgeoning sociological research on inequalities and, in particular, the recent development of what Goode (1982) called a sociology of superordinates. There is of course a long tradition of research on the upper classes (e.g., Domhoff 1967; Marx 1867/1974; Mills 1956). By the late 1980s, the feminist creation of women's studies also germinated a critical study of masculinities and male privilege (e.g., Connell 1987; Kaufman 1987; Kimmel 1987). Sociologists of race and ethnicity have contributed to the more recent scholarship on white privilege (e.g., Lipsitz 1998; O'Brien and Feagin 2004), and to the burgeoning critical study of heterosexuality and heteronormativity (e.g., Ingraham 2004). And of course, sociologists have

been in the forefront of developing analyses of intersectional (race, class, gender, sexual) privilege (e.g., Collins 1991; Ferber 1998; Kimmel and Ferber 2003).

How do we introduce this excellent research on privilege to our classrooms? Many teachers have utilized Peggy MacIntosh's "Invisible Knapsack of Privilege" as a point of entrée for classroom consciousness-raising exercises that illuminate the often-subtle interactional dynamics of privilege (MacIntosh 1989). After an engaging discussion of MacIntosh, a next logical question from students who have just "discovered" privilege is, "What do I do with my unearned privilege? Give it away? Relinquish it?" A sociological perspective, I tell my students, shows us that it is not likely that an individual can simply "give up" his or her privileges. Privilege is not merely an individual attribute, like a pair of shoes one can remove and discard; it is also built into the fabric of institutions and organizations. And privilege operates interpersonally—as Cecilia Ridgeway (2009) has shown in her work, gender is "framed before we know it," serving as a kind of background substructure that shapes our reactions to and interactions with others. One way I convey this idea in the classroom is by telling stories from my own life, stories intended to illustrate the less-than-fully visible scaffolding underlying my own privilege. The following story about my summer job when I was a college student illustrates how a patriarchal dividend sometimes just "happens"—how men sometimes simply have to show up to reap its benefits:

*During my junior year in 1973, I took a course at Chico State University on social stratification that focused mostly race and class inequality. There was scant research available as yet on gender, but my professor did include a short segment on the pay gap, illustrating that in the United States, women full-time workers earned about 59 cents to the male worker's dollar; even when doing the same jobs, women were routinely paid less. I was surprised by these data, and decided to write my term paper on this topic. I concluded the paper with an impassioned statement that, in America, everyone should be given equal opportunity and equal pay for equal work. I got an "A" on the paper. And I was proud of the position I'd taken; I was now a liberal.*

*That summer, I was back in my hometown, working my usual summer job for the Salinas Recreation and Park Department. Every summer, perhaps a dozen college students like me were hired to run programs for kids in the local parks. Most of my colleagues were young women, and they were routinely given assignments at the smaller parks that were only open 20–30 hours a week. Dave and I, the two men, were given 40 hour per week jobs at the larger parks. Frequently, at our weekly staff meetings, our supervisor would invite Dave and I to do extra work on a Saturday, so we'd routinely rack up 42–46 hours of work a week, which was great for saving money for September, when we'd head back to college. One day during a staff meeting, the supervisor said, "Mike, Dave, can you come down to the Center on Saturday morning?" Before I could say "yes," our colleague Susan interrupted and said, "I don't know why Dave and Mike always get the extra hours. We women can do those jobs as well as they can, and we need the extra hours and money as much as they do." A moment of uncomfortable silence settled on the room. And a defensive feeling, a sense that something was being taken away, crept up on me. I whispered to Dave—way too loudly, as it turned out—"Who does she think she is? Gloria Steinem?" Without missing a beat, Susan placed both arms on the table and said, "Mike, don't talk about something you don't know anything about." I thought to myself immediately, "Gee I do know a lot*

*about this topic; I just wrote this great paper on it!" Fortunately I had the sense to keep my mouth shut and not say it.*

I am happy to report that the blatantly unfair privilege informally bestowed upon men workers by the Salinas Recreation and Park Department in the summer of 1973 ceased immediately, once it was publicly named and confronted. But it was not I, or another male worker, who named or confronted it. And I learned an important lesson: it is one thing to take an academic position against the unfair treatment of women workers; it is yet another to align myself with feminist women in a situation where change might actually threaten to take an unearned privilege away from me.

The extra hours and more pay I received in this instance were unearned privileges from which I benefitted, just for showing up to work as a male. Peggy McIntosh's "knapsack of privilege" exercise helps to illustrate how and why this sort of privilege often remains "invisible" to those who benefit from it. But my story also makes me wonder: How invisible really is privilege? Was I entirely unaware of my unearned privilege? Or was I simply turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to an unfair practice that benefitted me? Talking about privilege as "invisible" is a good strategic starting point for teaching about it, but perhaps also it is the flip-side of viewing subordinates as dupes who suffer from false consciousness. After all, it is in the interests of the privileged to appear to be blind to the sources and consequences of our privilege: But maybe I *did* see the unfair treatment of my women colleagues. How, really, could I *not* have seen it, especially having so recently written that impassioned sociology paper on the topic? My sense of entitlement to unearned privilege allows me to look the other way—away in 1973 from my women colleagues who were not getting the same opportunities to earn money as I was; away today from the janitor who dusts and vacuums my office; and away too from the growing class of adjunct, part-time faculty who increasingly shoulder the teaching burden in our colleges and universities.

### THE SINCERE FICTION OF INDIVIDUAL MERIT

What is it that allows us to look away from something that threatens our vested interests? Perhaps it's our sense of ourselves as good people—our belief in what O'Brien and Feagin (2004) call "sincere fictions"—the idea that *we* are fair-minded in our treatment of others, that *we* do not discriminate. But more broadly, sincere fictions are more than rosy self-deception. Their power and depth lies in their grounding in shared ideologies. Particularly important in this regard is the widely held commitment to the belief in individualism and meritocracy. Another personal story I convey to my students is intended to shine the light of intersectional analyses of inequality on my own immersion in an ideology of individualism and meritocracy.

*I completed my master's degree in 1976, and dreamt of landing a job in a community college, at a time when few colleges were hiring. I was lucky to get an interview for a job as a full-time one-year replacement for a professor who was going on sabbatical from her job in a team-taught experimental college. I went to a daylong interview that included several one-on-one talks with faculty and a dean as well as a grueling two-hour interrogation from*

*half a dozen faculty and students. When challenged about my inexperience, I thought I responded well in delivering an impromptu riff on how Paulo Freire's theories could be put into play for liberatory pedagogy in the experimental college.*

*A couple of weeks later, I received a phone call offering me the job. I was happy, but not shocked. I really thought I'd wowed them at the interview. I was perfect for the job. I ended up doing the yearlong gig, and then hung on for another year, teaching sociology classes part-time, before getting laid off in the wake of California's Proposition 13, which eventually chased me back to graduate school.*

*A few years later, I was having dinner with a professor who had been among those who interviewed me back in 1976 at the experimental college. He said, "Did I ever tell you how you got hired?" "No," I said," but I am curious." "Well, he said, "We interviewed two other people. One was a black male, the other a white female, and both had more experience than you. For a full day, we debated which of those two we should hire; we were split down the middle, and the split was threatening to get ugly. So at one point, somebody said, 'Hey, how about this guy Messner?' We looked around at each other; we were tired, and it seemed nobody objected to you. So that's how it happened."*

That's not the story I had expected to hear. I thought he'd explain how I'd emerged as clearly the most qualified candidate, or that maybe he'd gush about how my mini-lecture on Friere had sealed the deal with the search committee. I knew that I had worked hard in college, and figured I'd fully earned that job. Landing that job, I had thought, was a logical moment within my own developing narrative of hard work, individual merit, and well-deserved upward mobility. But with this added information a few years later, I began retrospectively to re-read my getting that first job as a moment where intersectional privilege had operated in my favor. I entered the academic labor force in the mid-1970s, a contested moment of turbulent racial and gender relations—in particular, a time during which tremendous tensions had built between an ascendant feminist movement, led mostly by white, middle class women, and a fragmenting black power and civil rights movement, many of whose male leaders held conservative views on gender. I don't know the whole story, but it's reasonable to speculate that this very tension, in local microcosm, produced me, the white guy, as the compromise candidate least likely to ignite an already-simmering race-gender conflagration.

Getting that first job sparked future successes in my academic career, including giving me two years of teaching experience that helped me to build a solid resume that got me admitted to the Ph.D. program at U.C. Berkeley. But like most "lucky breaks," this one was not random; it was rooted in the dynamics of the historical moment. Contextualized this way, my story hints at the shortcomings of using individual stories in sociology classes, the risk being that we can too easily lose the idea of *the social*, an idea that is, I believe, our most radical contribution in the face of beliefs in individualism and meritocracy.

## INDIVIDUAL STORIES AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Using personal stories in the classroom has the benefit of "connecting" students to ideas, and can encourage them to think about their own lives in historical and social context. When doing this, it is crucial to contextualize personal stories in



a structural perspective—to illustrate the connections between what Mills (1959) called biography and history, between choice and constraint. I regularly teach large (150 students) classes that meet my university's General Education requirement for a "social issues" class, as well as the university's requirement for a "diversity" class. In these classes, I introduce the idea of structure to my students with a simple exercise:

*I briefly introduce the exercise by creating a dichotomy between individualist views of absolute freedom, contrasted with views of social determinism. I then ask everyone who believes they chose to take this class to stand. Nearly all of the 150 students normally stand. Then, I say, "This class meets the university requirement for a diversity class; if the class did not grant diversity credit, please remain standing if you would still have decided to take this class." Under those conditions, maybe twenty students sit. Then I say, "This class meets the university's General Education requirements for a 'social issues' class. If it did not meet that GE requirement, please remain standing if you would still have decided to take the class." All but perhaps thirty students normally take their seats. I then say, "When you pass this class, you earn four units. If there were no units for taking this class, and all you got was the pleasure of sitting in this room three hours a week, listening to me lecture, please remain standing if you would still have decided to take the class." At this point, all or nearly all of the remaining students sit. I then explain how, when seen collectively, their individual choices to take my class illustrate structured social action—collective agency, operating within a social structure that both constrains and enables their choices.*

I always conduct this classroom exercise on structure and constraint early in the semester, and touch back on it periodically when I discuss issues like family divisions of labor, workplace inequalities, or poverty issues. It is a pretty innocuous way to introduce the idea of structural constraint, particularly as it has nothing necessarily to do with inequality. But it's a useful starting place, because teaching structural perspectives risks engendering feelings of disempowerment and cynicism in our students. I learned this firsthand during my early teaching years in California Community Colleges, where I taught Bowles and Gintis's (1977) *Schooling in Capitalist America*, essentially a Marxist critique that illustrates how the U.S. education system is rigged to reproduce class inequalities. Try teaching that idea to a group of middle-aged working class people who are taking your three-hour long night class after a long day's work, in hopes of earning a college degree and eventually gaining some upward mobility for their families.

I find that thoughtful new college students often initially embrace hopeful views of individual freedom, couched within a meritocratic ideology of individual hard work and upward mobility. By the time they are juniors, after a few sociology classes, they can become pessimistic structural determinists. To counter the potentially disempowering impact of coming to grips with a sociological perspective, it is crucial not to stop with the idea of structure simply as constraint; our teaching must also make visible how past collective agency created this moment's structure, and in so doing, imply the ways that we are all historical agents. Thus, I always emphasize that good structural theories are always dynamic, emphasizing the centrality of collective agency in reproducing structure, or in changing structure, which in turn constrains and enables agency in new and different ways.

People often do experience institutional structures as intransigent, fixed obstacles to action. But structure is actually moving, re-shaping in response to peoples' actions. I illustrate this point in class with a story about USC's family leave policy:

*I recently had lunch with a new colleague, a junior faculty member whose wife, also a faculty member, was currently taking a semester off for family leave, and was also requesting the additional benefit of having her tenure clock stopped for a year, following the birth of their child. The next semester, he planned to take his semester's paid family leave too. I commiserated with him how it was hard, with two faculty jobs, to have a young child. But it struck me that, for he and his wife, the USC family leave policy exists as a given part of the structure within which they navigate their work and family lives. In the early 1990s, around the time my wife Pierrette and I—then both untenured assistant professors—were having our two children, there was no family leave policy. But a savvy and energetic faculty and staff feminist alliance formed (led in part by then-USC professor of sociology and gender studies Barrie Thorne), and over the course of two or three years, the alliance pressured USC to adopt a progressive system of family leave for faculty or staff with newly born or adopted children. Those who shaped the policy wisely chose to apply it equally to both women and men. In the ensuing years, I have occasionally heard some women faculty wonder if this policy might be allowing new fathers who are not the primary caretaker of the infant at home to take a semester off, and with their tenure clocks stopped, simply hunker down and finish their book, thus creating a new kind of advantage for men. But I have never heard one of these women conclude that the family leave policy should only be for women. They understand that extending the policy to men creates a necessary (though not sufficient) structural condition for more egalitarian family divisions of labor; and they also understand that when men take family leaves, it contributes to a shift in the cultural values of the workplace, in effect de-stigmatizing family leave when women take it.*

I use this story to illustrate how structures create strains and tensions, which in turn can evoke collective actions that change or alter the structure. When collective agency creates a new structure, however, this never fully "resolves" the tensions created by social inequality; history does not stop. Instead, an altered structure creates new situations that differently constrain and enable actions—in this case, situations were created that both support the public empowerment of women, while not eliminating, but instead re-positioning, male privilege. Family policy—created by active group agency—substantially alters the field of action in ways that create possibilities for more equal work and family divisions of labor. But they do so within a larger field of social relations that still privileges men. Every time an "involved father" today receives unearned kudos for simply showing up in public with our kids in tow, we benefit from the asymmetrical cultural context that supports continued work-family inequalities.

### CONTRADICTIONS OF TEACHING ABOUT PRIVILEGE

To this point, I have made a case for the importance and utility of professors—especially those like me who are members of privileged social groups—to use our own stories to lay bare some of the underlying structural and interactional foundations of privilege. Having read this, some readers might very well offer a skeptical

rejoinder, suggesting that no matter what I do in the classroom, I end up looking good—that I reinforce my own white male heterosexual tenured professor privilege in the very act of being so “open minded,” of making myself so “personally vulnerable” in front of my students. This is absolutely correct. And I would observe that this is yet another way that privilege operates. A graduate student I work with, Tal Peretz, coined a term for this: when men openly support feminism, we benefit from what he calls “the pedestal effect” (Peretz 2010). The question for me then is, What do I do with this? Part of the answer is to be reflexive not only *about* my teaching (like writing about it in this journal), but also *in* my teaching. For example, I tell my classes about how student evaluations seem to hold women professors and faculty of color to different standards, benefitting white male professors, and I present this to them as a problem to be discussed and analyzed. This invites students to look at their own gendered and raced assumptions about professors.

Ultimately, though, I come up against the limits of being the white heterosexual guy with a secure job, trying to teach about privilege. And here I want to return to the hallway outside my office, and to the question I raised at the outset: What do we do with moments when we experience so starkly our own privilege, as I did when I saw the USC janitor pausing to read about Marx, before cleaning the chalkboard that a professor had left for someone else to erase? In this same hallway last semester, I ran into a student who had taken my class the previous spring. We said hello, and I asked her what she was doing this term. She said that she was taking her research methods class from one of our new assistant professors, Veronica Terriquez. Curious, I asked her how the class was going. “Oh,” she replied, “It’s the most exciting class I’ve taken so far at USC.”

This was the first time I had ever heard a student use the words “exciting” to describe a methods class. She went on to explain that Professor Terriquez had the class divided into small groups, doing community research projects. Her group was focusing on the USC janitors, with a particular focus on their educational aspirations for their children. The students surveyed the janitors, and the result was a research report, “Beyond the Mop,” that garnered considerable attention across the USC community (Vargas-Johnson, Silverman, Marcus, Simmons, Gallardo, Gholani, and Juarez 2009). The report described the janitors’ own educations and explored their aspirations for their children’s educations. In the report, the students did their historical research too, pointing out that in 1995 the university had subcontracted the janitors. When the janitors lost their USC employee status, they also lost one of the most plum benefits of USC faculty and staff: free tuition for our children. In subcontracting the janitors, the University had in effect shifted the institutional context, creating new structural constraints within which the janitors and their children exercise their educational aspirations and choices.

I sat down and interviewed four of the students from Veronica Terriquez’s methods class. I explained that I was interested in learning from them how their project might have made visible the often invisible work of janitors, and also how the research might have led them to reflect on inequalities on campus, and their own privileged positions as students. One of the students punctured the assumption implicit in my question, that USC students all come from privileged backgrounds:



I am from a low-income family, honestly because of that I've always been really social with everybody, like in high school I was always good friends with the janitors and the gardeners. So it's always been the same here at USC . . . to me [the janitors] were never invisible, but I know for a lot of people they are, and it's evident when you see how people treat the campus, when it's littered with garbage or you see the classrooms and there's trash, like people just leave their cups and you know they don't care because they know someone's going to pick it up—they don't know who, but they know someone's going to pick it up.

Another student in the group who described himself as coming from a middle class family did experience the study as an eye-opener:

I actually was blown away by some of the statistics we gathered. . . . The tuition remission, I didn't know anything about that. . . . Janitors may be living from paycheck to paycheck, or having trouble trying to pay their bills, but they don't get that incentive [of tuition remission for their children], and I thought wow, that surprised me. I was blown away by that. Some of the children of people who work here, they go to overcrowded schools. I saw the enormous amount of inequality.

Yet another member of the research group said that she experienced the study as an inspiration to change the goals and culture of the university, in order to shift the existing reality of unfairness and inequality toward a vision of social justice:

[Doing the study] really made me question the whole culture of USC as a university, and what it means to be a center for education. And I think for a lot of children of privilege who become students here, I feel that USC for them is not so much about the education, it's a necessary step in their path of career. . . . So to call USC an educational institution and have 250 workers, none of whom have college degrees, is like a clash between what should be and what is. I really gained a lot from doing the survey because it's like giving us a chance to use sociology as a way to make the dreams of the janitors—like getting their children into college—first of all, it puts that on the table: this is a goal. But in order to make that happen, things have to happen.

A fourth student in the research group had concrete ideas about what had to happen next, linking the research findings to her activism with the Student Coalition Against Labor Exploitation, a longstanding student organization that supports laborers on campus:

[We need to ask next about] the actual wages of the janitors, and why do they have to be subcontracted? Why can't they be USC employees? It'll be cool once the contract negotiations are happening that students can get involved. I'm involved in SCALE and we are getting more involved with the union these days . . . This [research] project laid a foundation and has opened a lot of doors to make change and make this better, and in a really productive way I think, because we have the findings to back up all of our initiatives, so it's definitely taught me the power of social research.

Few sociology professors, I would think, could read that last line—"it's definitely taught me the power of social research"—and not think about her teaching, "mission accomplished."

And here I believe I have brought us full circle in thinking about how to teach about privilege: To remain critical, a sociology of superordinates needs, still and always, to be grounded in the standpoints of subordinate groups of people. It is crucial continually to remind our students and ourselves that privilege is always a relational concept; the workings of privilege are illuminated when subordinate groups of people organize to improve their lives. It never would have occurred to me during the 1970s to question male privilege, or to even think about the social construction of masculinity, if I had not first heard feminist women talking about gender oppression. I can't begin to understand the full range of privilege that is implied in the simple phrase that "Pierrette and I are married," without first having listened to sexually subordinated groups of people who still lack the legal right to marry. And I can't know the first thing about my own white privilege without first developing some empathy and understanding of the lives and experiences of racially subordinated peoples. There's a lot that I can't know, on my own, based simply on my own experience. And there's a good deal that, humbly, I must admit I am unable alone to teach to my students.

However, in the end, and at the very least, I can begin by erasing my own chalkboard.

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