

# Having, Being, and Doing Privilege: Three Lenses for Focusing on Goals in Feminist Classrooms

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## **Abstract**

Using two published accounts of teaching experience in Women's Studies classrooms by way of illustration, I argue that seeing privilege through three lenses—something one has, something one is, and something one does—can assist feminist educators in meeting diverse goals in their anti-oppression classrooms as they continue to grapple with the messy and often contradictory challenges of privilege.

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## **Résumé**

Selon deux récits publiés sur des expériences d'enseignement dans les cours d'études des femmes à titre d'illustration, je fais valoir que le fait de considérer le privilège sous trois aspects—soit quelque chose que l'on a, quelque chose que l'on est et quelque chose que l'on fait—peut aider les éducateurs féministes à répondre à différents objectifs dans leurs cours anti-oppression alors qu'ils continuent à faire face aux défis embrouillés et parfois contradictoires que pose le privilège.

## **Introduction**

Coinciding with an enormous reorientation in feminist scholarship toward intersectionality and multiple sites of difference and power (see Davis 2008), privilege has become a central concept in feminist academic circles. Scholars, like Peggy McIntosh (2012), have provided seminal contributions to an increasingly robust literature in "privilege studies" that connects Women's and Gender Studies with anti-oppression work in other diverse disciplines. As feminist educators, teaching students about privilege is necessary, but not enough. We also routinely encounter the effects of privilege as it operates in our classrooms and among our students, but responding to the challenges created by privilege is far from a simple pedagogical task. Our ideas about what privilege is are varied, and the stories we tell and the conclusions we draw are different because of the often unspoken assumptions embedded in our understandings of privilege. These contradictions and imprecisions often become most visible in teaching, where our practice must meet the unpredictability of our students. In one striking example, Mary Bryson and Suzanne de Castell (1993) and Jen Bacon (2006) published accounts exploring the problems and challenges that emerged from workings of privilege in their two Women's Studies courses. Both sets of instructors intended to engage students in anti-essentialist and poststructural approaches to sexual identity. Despite similar goals, Bryson and de Castell thought that privilege prevented some students from engaging in their project, while Bacon thought that it aided some students in doing so. These examples suggest that despite the pervasiveness of privilege across contexts, its effects can often be uncertain and even contradictory.

In this paper, I begin by examining the classroom experiences described by Bryson and de Castell (1993) and Bacon (2006), and the very different conclusions they drew about privilege based on their attempts to queer their Women's Studies courses. I then outline three lenses that educators can use to understand priv-

ilege—as something we have, something we are, and something we do, which I argue encourage us to look at privilege in different ways in our day-to-day practice. To demonstrate the features of these lenses and their applicability to anti-oppression educational practice, I apply them to each of Kevin Kumashiro's (2002) four approaches to anti-oppression education. Having explored the relevance of these three lenses of privilege for varied classroom goals, I finally apply the three lenses to Bryson and de Castell's and Bacon's analyses of their two queer-focused Women's Studies classrooms to illustrate how they can broaden the questions we ask about privilege in our teaching practice and refocus our attention on the choices we are making and the goals we have as educators.

### **Contradictory Conclusions in Two Women's Studies Classrooms**

Separated by an international border and more than a decade, Bryson and de Castell (1993) and Bacon (2006) wrote about their experiences with privilege in their respective Women's Studies classrooms. Despite having very closely related goals in their two courses on lesbian studies, their respective analyses of the effects of privilege in their classrooms came to nearly opposite conclusions. In this section, I introduce these two accounts in order to demonstrate that the problems privilege creates in our classrooms can be messy and even contradictory.

Bryson and de Castell (1993) examined privilege in the context of their Women's Studies course called "Lesbian Subjects Matter: Feminism/s from the Margins?," which they taught in 1991 at a "major urban Canadian university" (288). In doing so, they asked two main questions: "First, we asked whether the claiming of cultural representation and voice necessarily entails the inevitability of essentialism"; and "Second, we questioned whether a politics of identity—especially an identity constructed 'on the margins'—could be a viable strategy, either theoretically or politically" (289). In theoretical terms, the course addressed issues related to essentialism, identity fragmentation, and the politics of identity (288). In practical terms, students examined a series of "texts" and heard in-class guest presentations by diverse "lesbian subjects" (289). Given training in various audio-visual technologies of the day, students were asked to under-

take a project "exploring some aspect of lesbian identity/representation and making use of any appropriate technology" (289). Other required tasks included presenting their description of a hypothetical meeting between two famous lesbians (290) and producing their own journals (291).

Bryson and de Castell (1993) explained that they tried to use queer pedagogy "deliberately to interfere with, or intervene in, the production of 'normalcy' in schooled subjects" (285), but were disappointed with the results. They found that "white students who identified as heterosexual made, for example, lifeless presentations 'about lesbians' that bore painful testimony to their inability to imagine an encounter between, say, Audre Lorde and Mary Daly" (291). They also observed that, in class, their white heterosexual students mostly "'passed' as lesbian" and stayed silent (292). The authors soon realised that "in selectively focusing on lesbianism as a site for the construction of difference/s," they "had created an us/them structure" that prevented collaboration in exploring difference, even though such an exploration had been their intention (292). In the end, nearly all of their heterosexual students wrote "standard essays, created individually and produced on word processors in print form" that dealt with "topics of identity and difference by means of a critique of the heterosexism of institutional knowledges, such as other women's studies courses" (292). The authors believed that, for most of the straight-identified students in the class, the texts in question and the identity of lesbian became objects of distant inquiry and study, even though the instructors had explicitly warned against such an approach throughout the course (291).

As Bryson and de Castell (1993) further documented, only one heterosexual student, "a woman of colour" (292), joined the many lesbian and bisexual students who engaged thoughtfully and used various media in ways that meaningfully challenged the traditional "division of labour in classroom tasks," "power relations," and "received knowledges" (293). In short, the authors found that,

students usually given the space, voice, and liberty to speak and to be heard ended up in this course reverting to tepid, formulaic, disengaged essays, while students 'of difference' took permission to play with form, genre, substance, and personal/political purposes, and produced

what was undeniably outstanding, innovative, and, above all, engaged work. (293)

Due to the effects of privilege in their classroom, Bryson and de Castell indicated that all the energy of the class was used to deal with the discomfort of the heterosexual students (294). Based on their observations in this classroom, they came to the conclusion “that lesbianism, although it could of course be any other subordinated identity, is always marginal...and that lesbian identity is always fixed and stable, even in a course that explicitly critiques, challenges, deconstructs ‘lesbian identity’” (294).

Bacon (2006) taught her Women’s Studies course, entitled “Lesbian Studies” (270), with similar intentions, but with a different approach. As a new faculty member asked to teach the course for the first time, her goal was to disrupt identity fixity. She explained that she somewhat naively “assumed a Lesbian Studies course would be an interrogation of the category ‘lesbian’” (271). Unlike Bryson and de Castell, Bacon did not provide details about the assignments students were asked to tackle in the course and their reactions to them, but rather focused on her classroom approach and the progress of the class discussions.

Bacon (2006) began the course by sharing a standard “coming out narrative” based on her own experiences to which the students responded positively (272). At the outset, she found that both straight and lesbian students were comforted by the fixed and clear representation of lesbians about whom they could learn. Yet, this was just the beginning, as she explained:

In my classroom, I begin the semester presenting an identity that is static...I inhabit, and perform, a lesbian body. But as the course continues, the provisional and fluid identities...are going to appear, and it’s my job to make that overt and explicit for my students. (276)

Over time, then, Bacon intentionally performed “alternate versions” of her “coming out story” that showed lesbian identity as much more fluid and uncertain than her initial story (276). This gave her an opportunity to lead the class through contentious, but illuminating, discussions about power and identity and the role that privilege plays, for example, in disagreements over bisexuality (276-277).

While Bryson and de Castell (1993) found that it was the privileged straight students who resisted their attempts to queer the classroom, Bacon (2006) observed that her straight-identified students got her deconstructionist approach first (276) and her marginalised lesbian students were the ones who were most resistant to the project. By way of explanation, she highlighted the tension between “the LGBT classroom” where such students “might just get what they’re looking for” and “the queer classroom” where “this can be more difficult” (276). For lesbian-identified students, she noted, this was often their first time away from home and their first real opportunity to meet others with the same or similar identities. She also believed that they enrolled in a Lesbian Studies course because they were seeking to understand their own fixed identity and were not looking to unfix it. They were also seeking institutional legitimization. While heterosexually-identified students already experienced the privilege of legitimacy, those who did not understandably resisted attempts to destabilise what they had worked so hard to legitimise. “Our students want to be normal, too,” she stated, “because it is a measure of privilege to be able to shun the normal—to queer the categories of our lives for the delight of pushing our politics further than our bodies might readily go” (279). Thus, Bacon believed that some measure of privilege, and the security that comes with it, was a kind of asset for queer learners in her classroom.

While these three instructors aimed to destabilise rigid identity categories in their classrooms, their observations and conclusions about privilege and identity and the problems privilege posed in their teaching were starkly different. This comparison, of course, is not perfect. It is not possible to know exactly what happened in these classrooms or what queer pedagogy meant to each instructor. Queer theory also changed significantly between 1993 and 2006, as did societal attitudes toward sexual identity in Canada and the United States. Yet the comparison illustrates the significant extent to which privilege can have unpredictable and even contradictory effects on the pursuit of our teaching goals.

### **Three Lenses: Privilege as Having, Being, and Doing**

To respond to these sorts of contradictions, I suggest a theoretical model that allows us to see privilege through three different lenses: as something we have, something we are, and something we do.

## *Privilege as Having*

The first lens sees privilege as something we have. Linda L. Black and David Stone (2005) state that scholars tend to agree that privilege is “a special advantage” that “is granted, not earned,” and “is a right or entitlement that is related to a preferred status or rank” (244). They note that “privilege is exercised for the benefit of the recipient and to the exclusion or detriment of others” and “is often outside of the awareness of the person possessing it” (244).

Black and Stone’s definition begins to illuminate the ways in which privilege is thought of as a thing, substance, or entity. Adam Howard (2008) has characterised early scholarly understandings of privilege as follows:

what might be called the ‘first generation’ scholars have constructed *commodified* notions of privilege. Privilege, in other words, has been understood extrinsically, as something individuals *have* or *possess*...or something they *experience*, rather than as something more intrinsic, as something that reveals who they *are* or who they have *become* in a fundamental sense. (23)

It is unclear whether Black and Stone’s (2005) definition is consistent with such a commodified notion, though their description of a “special advantage” that can be “exercised” (244) suggests it could be. Nevertheless, the concept of privilege as a possession can be useful for conceiving of the sum of resources that some have, but others do not. For example, Howard (2008) describes his early school experiences as the child of parents with mental and physical illnesses living in poverty:

Ignoring the fact that most adults in our community could barely read or write, the school, even at the kindergarten level, expected us to be able, for example, to recite the alphabet, count up to a certain point, be able to write our names, and hold books the right way. Although my parents had a higher level of literacy than most in the community...they did not read to us and did not spend time with us rehearsing the alphabet or teaching us our numbers...they taught us different lessons about life that come from living in poverty. These learning experiences had no value in transitioning to formal schooling. (x)

Considering Howard’s story through a possession lens highlights how students living in poverty were not given the preparation consistent with the expectations of

the schooling system that was available to more affluent students. This lens sees privilege as something that is bestowed on a person or taken by them.

Thinking about privilege as something one has, then, can be useful for identifying particular advantages held by some and not by others. There is something eminently practical about such a conception. There are, however, limitations to the possession lens, which assumes that privilege functions largely as an external object and is similarly applicable in all contexts. In the latter case, it cannot account for the fact that a status that privileges a person in one setting might prove to be of no use, or even to be a disadvantage, in another setting. For example, a gay-identified white man may have privilege in certain queer communities, but he might not in a particular professional sports team. Thus, the possession lens does not draw attention to the multiple intersecting ways in which different identities and settings can interact to produce both privileged and oppressed statuses. Also, privilege understood as a possession does not address any interaction between privilege and other factors in one’s life and circumstances, such as one’s notion of self or views on the world. It implies that privilege is its own discrete entity that is fundamentally distinct from its context.

## *Privilege as Being*

Despite its usefulness in conceptualising some situations, scholars have challenged seeing privilege simply as something one has. Howard (2008), in his study of affluent students in private and public schools, explicitly breaks with earlier definitions of privilege as possession, instead advocating for a notion of “*privilege as identity*” (23):

As an identity (or an aspect of identity), privilege is a lens through which an individual understands self and self in relation to others...Social systems function in ways that support and validate the social construction of a privileged identity for some while limiting and discouraging its construction for others. (23)

In his view, privilege is a part of identity formation. Howard notes that “[a]lthough there is an important connection between what advantages individuals have and their identity (that is, how their advantages in life fashion a particular sense of the self),” he also aims to

“situate privilege in a more comprehensive framework by exploring the process by which privilege is constructed and reconstructed as an identity” (23). Howard’s work suggests a lens through which privilege is seen as not simply a matter of having, but rather a matter of being.

Providing an example related to his own schooling experience, Howard (2008) explains how the incompatibility between his school’s expectations of his academic preparation and the reality of his life, as described above, resulted in his illiteracy and in teachers assuming he was a weak student (xii–xiii). While Howard’s story indicates that privilege encompasses particular advantages or experiences that one has, it can also show privilege to be a matter of something one is and what one has become through institutional and structural processes.

The conceptualisation of privilege as being has certain advantages over privilege as having, in that it accounts for the interaction between privilege and the self. Howard’s analysis suggests that privilege is related to how one sees oneself and that this interrelationship is shaped and negotiated through one’s ongoing experiences. This creates space to identify and critique the ways in which privileged identities are formed, which suggests that perhaps lasting interventions into privileged identity formation, and therefore privilege, are possible across situations and contexts. The lens of privilege as being also creates space for understanding the connections between privileged identities and the institutional and structural processes that create and reinforce them, including educational institutions (see, for example, Tisdell 1993).

There are also disadvantages to seeing privilege as being. Like privilege as having, it does not adequately address the multitude of ways in which privilege is situated, contextual, and enacted in particular locations and moments. While Howard’s (2008) analysis is certainly compatible with these observations, thinking about privilege as something one is suggests more stability than reality often allows. Contextual factors can play a significant role in the operation of privilege in particular moments. In the classroom, for example, this might involve the extent to which a student identifies intellectually or personally with either the instructor(s) or other students. The focus, then, on privileged identities instead of on contextual, situated privilege may unnecessarily limit efforts to minimise the workings of

privilege of some over others in particular contexts and institutional locations. While the integrated, overarching lens of privilege as being has the potential for systemic change outlined above, it also limits attention to the ways in which privilege in particular settings should be considered or mitigated.

### *Privilege as Doing*

There are some advantages, then, to thinking about privilege as something one has and something one is, but neither accounts well for the situated operation of privilege. For this, we need a conceptualisation of privilege as something one does. Working in a post-structuralist tradition, Kevin Kumashiro (2002) argues that “being privileged requires that a person thinks, feels, acts, and relates to others in only particular ways; it requires that a person be identified by others in only particular ways” (156). In this understanding, one must “constantly *become*,” for example, “privileged as masculine” and one can never fully be it; such privilege requires constant testing and proving of one’s masculinity and lack of femininity (156). Privilege, then, is something we must continually do.

It is important to note that Kumashiro (2002) and Howard (2008) are by no means incompatible in their approaches. They both acknowledge situated experiences and processes as crucial to the workings of both privilege and oppression. It is perhaps most accurate to say that their focuses are different: Howard concentrates on the creation of particular identities in certain structural contexts, while Kumashiro considers the operation of oppression in situated moments. These are related, but it can be useful to differentiate between the two, as they potentially have different implications.

Seeing privilege as something one does allows for detailed attention to the ways in which privilege is created, acted out, and contested. It also emphasises a situated understanding of privilege, which, as the rest of Kumashiro’s (2002) work suggests, can illuminate contradictory and contested ways of knowing and being. This conceptualisation is not, however, complete. Little can be said about systemic privilege using this lens, and by itself, it is limited in its ability to critique broader structural environments that lead to very different levels of privilege across contexts. It also lacks the benefit of seeing privilege as a possession, which can at times

provide us with the ability to see the concrete advantages that a person has in a particular situation or setting.

It is clear, then, that these three ways of conceptualizing privilege—as having, being, and doing—all have distinct advantages and disadvantages, but we need them all in order to deal with privilege in theory and in practice. People can “have” privilege. They are also affected by the ways in which they “are” privilege and the ways in which privilege helps to constitute their identities. Lastly, they can “do” privilege as they create, recreate, and constantly negotiate privilege through discourses and situated interactions.

### **Having, Being, and Doing Privilege in Anti-Oppression Classrooms**

In this section, I seek to flesh out the features of the three lenses pertaining to understanding privilege and to demonstrate that they are applicable to the practical concerns and goals of anti-oppression educators. As Jennifer M. Gore (1993) has noted, the Women’s Studies literature on feminist pedagogy has a long history of attentiveness to classroom practice. In keeping with this tradition, I apply the three lenses to some of the ways that feminist and other anti-oppression educators actually do anti-oppression education.

Kumashiro’s (2002) work on approaches to anti-oppression education is ideally suited to this purpose for two reasons. First, Kumashiro is sharply focused on what educators do in the classroom and the goals they pursue, and not just on the theories underpinning their broader commitment to social justice. Second, he connects these practices and goals to relevant theories of oppression, which allows us to more thoroughly examine the connections between those theories and the three lenses of privilege. In short, Kumashiro’s work allows me to connect the three lenses to theories of oppression and to the details of practice. In the following discussion, then, I examine his four anti-oppression education approaches through the three lenses of having, being, and doing privilege in order to expand on the theory behind these lenses and to show their applicability to practice in feminist classrooms. Kumashiro’s four approaches include “education for the Other, education about the Other, education that is critical of privileging and Othering, and education that changes students and society” (31).

### *Education for the Other*

Education for the Other focuses on the needs of those who are marginalised or harmed in educational settings through such means as direct violence and harmful assumptions made by peers and educators (Kumashiro 2002, 33-34). This approach suggests that schools must be transformed into safe spaces for all students and that students who experience oppression must be given particular spaces that provide both safety and resources (34-35). Kumashiro sees strength in this approach because it draws the attention of educators and institutions to the problems of oppression within educational settings, highlights the diversity of students within schools, and focuses on student needs that are not being met (36-37). One weakness he identifies is the practical difficulty associated with defining marginalised groups and assessing their specific needs. He also maintains that this approach does not adequately take multiple sites of oppression into account (37-39). It also focuses on the Other as the problem and ignores the fact that “Oppression consists not only of the marginalizing of the Other; it also consists of the privileging of the ‘normal’” (37). Kumashiro notes that privilege is largely left out of this approach, as the focus is placed solidly on the Other and not on those against whom the Other is juxtaposed (37).

Though education for the Other does not seem to leave much space to consider privilege at all, it is most closely connected to seeing privilege as something one has. Within a particular classroom, education for the Other asks educators to work to identify and meet the needs of marginalised students, particularly with regard to harm to, and assumptions about, the Other. In this way, privilege is potentially visible as the norm from which oppressed students are excluded by the unfairness of the educational system. This approach seeks to compensate for privilege, by giving Othered students resources and by trying to keep teachers and other students from taking their resources away through insensitive or abusive behaviour.

While education for the Other does not focus on privilege, this should not be considered solely as a disadvantage. While privilege must certainly be a consideration in the anti-oppression classroom, an overemphasis on privilege, and those who have it, can result in insufficient attention being paid to the needs of those who are Othered. This approach demands concern for

the needs of the Other and, in this way, the absence of attention to privilege can have its uses as well.

### *Education About the Other*

Education about the Other sees oppression as growing out of “partial” knowledge about the Other, which is “based on stereotypes and myths” (Kumashiro 2002, 40). Since the problem is ignorance, the goal of the educator should be to make student knowledge more complete by providing information about the Other, both in individual lessons or workshops and through full integration into the curriculum (41). Thus, education about the Other seeks to encourage both empathy and the acceptance of the Other as “normal;” its additional strength is that it is directed at all members of a diverse classroom, not just the oppressed (41-42). However, as Kumashiro explains, providing information on the Other can become a “dominant narrative,” in which the experiences of a particular group are understood in a singular way as *the* experience of all members of that group. This approach also requires using “the Other as the expert,” as marginalised students are asked and expected to speak on behalf of an entire group (42). Both of these practices, he argues, can help to reinforce divisions between “us” and “them.” Education about the Other also does not recognise that knowledge is always situated and that, in practice, it is impossible to teach students everything about everyone (42). Kumashiro recognises that this approach, like education for the Other, does not sufficiently consider the ways in which privileging is as important as Othering in the formation and maintenance of oppression.

Despite its lack of overt engagement with privilege, education about the Other might be most attuned to privilege as having, since teaching about the Other could peripherally raise questions about advantages that the Others in question do not have. Yet, this is decidedly not its focus. Privilege as being is even less of a consideration in education about the Other than it is in education for the Other. Given that the Other must be identified to be studied, questions about identity are a significant component of education for the Other; however, there is a danger that such education would identify the Other in terms of particular characteristics that are understood to be inherent and not in terms of constructed identities based on the oppression of some and the privileging of others.

### *Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering*

Education that is critical of privileging and Othering suggests that radical educators should provide “not knowledge about the other, but knowledge about oppression,” and that they should “teach a critical awareness of oppressive structures and ideologies, and strategies to change them” (Kumashiro 2002, 45). Kumashiro associates this approach with the consciousness-raising strategies advanced by Paulo Freire and some feminist educators, in that it advocates for “un-learning or critiquing what was previously learned to be ‘normal’ and normative” (46). One of its strengths, in Kumashiro’s view, is that educators are called on not just to change the attitudes of or create opportunities for individual students, but also to teach students to think critically about themselves and the social world (47). It also calls on students to understand their own complicity in systems of oppression (47). Because of the structural focus of this approach, however, the different ways in which people experience oppression, even though they may be members of the same identifiable group, can become obscured (47). Education that is critical of privileging and Othering also assumes that knowledge about oppression will lead to student action against it, without necessarily assessing the relationship between knowledge and action (48). Finally, Kumashiro identifies this approach as vulnerable to the pitfalls of the modernist tradition, as “consciousness-raising assumes that reason and reason alone leads to understanding,” even though the ideal of “rational detachment” serves to “perpetuate a mythical norm that assumes a White, heterosexual, male perspective” (49).

Moving beyond the individualistic limitations of the first two approaches, education that is critical of privileging and Othering is more likely to address privilege, as it recognises that oppression consists not only of the denigration of some, but also of the elevation and privileging of others. This approach has strong ties to the lens of privilege as being. Howard’s (2008) work, which is consistent with privilege as being, suggests that privileged identities are not pre-existing and must be formed through interactive processes. However, seeing privilege as something that one is and something that is part of one’s identity suggests a fairly fixed, systemic approach to identity that is recognisable across contexts. Thus a systemic approach to oppression can accommodate a systemic approach to privilege. Kumashiro (2002)

critiques the third approach for its structural understanding of oppression, which he argues insufficiently grapples with the “contradictions” and “diversity and particularity” associated with multiple identities (47). As such, it likely contains a similarly structural, and therefore less situated and multifaceted, understanding of privilege. Given this somewhat fixed approach, education that is critical of privileging and Othering is perhaps more apt than other approaches to encourage student awareness of the role of privilege in oppression. It is possible to say something substantial about privilege within an approach that can generalise across structures and systems. Yet structural approaches can lead to static understandings of both oppression and privilege, and it might be tempting to presume that we, as educators, can predict the effects of privilege in our classrooms based on students’ identities alone. This is an important danger of seeing privilege as being and only as being.

Education that is critical of privileging and Othering also has important affinities with seeing privilege as having. Pedagogies in the consciousness-raising tradition often explicitly aim to empower those taught (Kumashiro 2002, 46). As Gore (2003) notes, the notion of empowerment generally presumes “a notion of power as property” (333). If power is seen as property, privilege is likely to be seen in similarly discrete terms and perhaps as something that can be given through empowerment. Thus privilege can be seen as something one is or something one has in this approach.

#### *Education that Changes Students and Society*

Kumashiro’s (2002) main focus is on his fourth approach, “education that changes students and society” (31), which uses “poststructuralist theories of discourse” (50). It is based in queer and feminist approaches to psychoanalytic theory and poststructuralism, and emphasises the importance of recognising partiality in the classroom and the resistance of students to learning that contests their own understandings of themselves; it also stresses the need to give students opportunities to work through various crises generated by challenges to their worldview and sense of self (53-68). A major strength of this approach is that it acknowledges the situated, shifting workings of oppression and identity (53) and thus, it does not attempt to create an educational model to be applied in all cases (68). Another strength is that it problematises oppression itself and asks educators and theo-

rists to be explicit about how their understandings delineate what is considered and what is not, and with what effects (68-69). Kumashiro does, however, recognise that poststructuralism and psychoanalysis have grown out of Western thought, perspectives, and experiences (69). As such, they are not neutral and do not account for the concerns of other epistemological traditions (69).

This approach to anti-oppression education addresses privilege in decidedly different ways than the others. Not surprisingly, education that changes students and society understands privilege largely as Kumashiro does: as something that one must constantly work to create in varied, situated contexts. In this instance, the educational goal is that students come to comprehend themselves in new ways, particularly through the “paradoxical, discomfiting condition” of crisis that necessarily accompanies the process of unlearning oppressive knowledges (Kumashiro 2002, 63). It also asks students to consider how different ways of “reading” various stories and texts and one’s “investment in privilege” shapes one’s own understandings of the lessons learned (151). As such, Kumashiro draws attention to how certain ways of thinking are discursively privileged over others, and seeks to challenge and trouble privileged views and understandings.

Predictably, then, education that changes students and society shares a significant limitation with the lens of privilege as doing: there is a degree to which both actually do not allow one to say much that is definitive about privilege at all. Both are, on the one hand, acutely aware of privilege within the realm of discourse. On the other, given their refusal to universalise, they cannot comment on privilege across situations and contexts. Kumashiro’s fourth approach resists advocating for specific methods of teaching across classrooms or singular understandings of interactions or texts. Kumashiro (2002) argues that “those who propose antioppressive approaches need to refuse to speak as the authoritative voice” and should “enact different antioppressive forms of education while troubling those very forms” (202). This approach, then, might suggest ways of challenging privileged readings of a particular classroom or interesting ways of reading privilege in different classrooms, but it does not allow for generalizable theoretical prescriptions to combat privilege.

Education that changes students and society relies significantly on privilege as doing in its use of the

concept of resistance. As Kumashiro (2002) explains, “[w]e resist learning what will disrupt the frameworks we traditionally use to make sense of the world and ourselves” (57). Such resistance can be a significant barrier to anti-oppression education efforts (57) and itself can be a way of doing privilege. Effective implementation of poststructuralist anti-oppression education approaches requires a great deal of thought about the ways in which persons in privileged situations and with privileged identities might grapple with this sort of crisis in situated moments and how it contributes to their resistance or openness to critical learning.

Privilege as being, perhaps appropriately, has a contradictory relationship with education that changes students and society. On the one hand, privilege as an identity implies stability that is not consistent with this approach’s insistence on fluid, constantly constructed meanings or its refusal to generalise across cases. On the other hand, privilege as being could recognise that privileged identities are constructed by various everyday interactions that reinforce them and, in this way, privilege as being can be tied, albeit more loosely, with a poststructuralist approach to anti-oppression education.

It is clear, then, that the three lenses of having, being, and doing privilege are applicable to both the practical classroom goals of anti-oppression educators and to the theories of oppression upon which those goals rely.

### **Three Lenses of Privilege in Two Women’s Studies Classrooms**

Considering the three lenses through which we can view privilege and the connections I have drawn to various kinds of anti-oppression classroom practice, I now return to the two Women’s Studies courses discussed above. Bryson and de Castell’s (1993) and Bacon’s (2006) different observations and conclusions about privilege in their classes can be further illuminated by exploring what lenses of privilege were embedded in their assessments and by considering them in light of their specific pedagogical goals.

Both sets of authors were explicit about their desire to enact queer pedagogies against more essentialising or structurally fixed ideas about identity and oppression. They were largely working toward education that changes students and society. After all, Kumashiro’s fourth approach is based in queer theory,

which seeks to destabilise categories that reinforce oppression. While elements of the three other approaches to anti-oppression education can be detected in their analyses, the fourth appeared to be their explicit aim and we are left with the impression that they wished to queer their classrooms. Given this commitment, we might expect that the instructors would have embraced a situated and shifting understanding of privilege and approached privilege primarily or exclusively as something one does. However, their pedagogical methods were much more mixed.

Bacon’s (2006) analysis implies the use of all three lenses of privilege. From one angle, she might have seen privilege as something one has. She described the privilege of her heterosexually-identified students as a resource that allowed them to abandon with some gusto the commitment to a discrete category of lesbian. This is evident in her statement that, “Our students want to be normal, too, because it is a measure of privilege to be able to shun the normal - to queer the categories of our lives for the delight of pushing our politics further than our bodies might readily go, and they are in the process of acquiring that privilege” (279). From another angle, Bacon might have seen privilege as something one is. She hinted, for example, at the ways in which some students had been socialised to understand themselves in privileged or marginalised terms based on their sexual identities and their suburban Pennsylvanian upbringings (275), which speaks to the process through which privileged identities are created. From yet another angle, she might have seen privilege as something one does. Bacon described the upending of traditional arrangements of privilege in her classroom, which privileged homosexuality over heterosexuality (275). She said that her lesbian-identified students were looking for a place where they could develop their identity, see examples of others with that identity, and feel comfortable in that identity (276). This observation suggests that her lesbian-identified students understandably wanted to use her classroom space to do privilege in a rare case where they were afforded the opportunity.

In contrast, Bryson and de Castell’s (1993) description of what occurred in their classroom was based on a more fixed and less situated idea of privilege, one much more in line with privilege as being. They often identified “white straight-identified women” (291) as

the students who were privileged in their classroom and emphasised the “continuous and inescapable subtext of white heterosexual dominance” (294). Their explanations of the effect of privilege in their classroom relied heavily on identities formed outside the classroom, suggesting privilege was something their students experienced as being.

There is certainly room in Bryson and de Castell’s (1993) analysis for considering privilege as doing. They recounted, in some detail, the ways in which their privileged students acted to recreate privilege, either by refusing to situate their own experiences (294) or by choosing to write detached academic papers instead of engaging in the more subversive coursework options (292). The authors’ story, written differently, could provide an interesting and insightful account of how students do privilege by performing it. In the end, however, Bryson and de Castell seemed to fall back on the idea that it could not be otherwise; one gets the sense that these students were doomed to repeat the excesses of privilege based on their training as privileged subjects. This is particularly evident in their conclusion that “lesbianism...is always marginal, even in a lesbian studies course, and...lesbian identity is always fixed and stable, even in a course that explicitly critiques, challenges, deconstructs ‘lesbian identity’” (294).

I do not mean to suggest that Bryson and de Castell should have seen privilege differently. I would argue that we need all three conceptualisations of privilege, but I do not think we must use them all in all instances. The choice to look at privilege as being, as fairly static and predictable and as homogeneous across white heterosexual students, can be a strategic one. But, as feminist educators, recognising that we have a choice about how we look at privilege means opening up the possibility of looking at privilege differently and asking different questions. At issue, then, is whether the choice to see privilege as being in this classroom setting was the most effective one, given the goals set out by the instructors.

These two case studies might initially have seemed incommensurable, given that these teachers described nearly opposite effects of privilege in their two Women’s Studies classrooms. However, the three lenses of privilege open up different questions and refocus attention on our goals. Were Bryson and de Castell’s aims best served by seeing privilege as something one is? Might they have opened up more space to pursue their

poststructuralist goals by trying to understand privilege as something one does and considering new strategies to challenge that doing? Might such an approach have helped them to reach their goal to analyse the “tensions between post-structuralist theories of subjectivity and the political/pragmatic necessity of essentialist constructions of identity” (Bryson and de Castell 1993, 285)? Similarly, might Bacon’s goals have been better served by focusing on one aspect of privilege, instead of all three, in her assessment of her classroom? Which of these might have helped her to support her LGBT students in following her deconstructionist performance, and/or to challenge her straight students?

By focusing on pedagogical goals and on the different options we have for thinking about privilege, we might ask the following kinds of questions about any of our classroom spaces: What should my goal(s) for this specific Women’s and Gender Studies classroom be? Given those goals, am I best served by thinking about privilege as having, being, or doing in this context? What is illuminated by thinking about privilege in this way? What is obscured? Am I really using only one of these lenses or are others imbedded in the way I think about and act on privilege? How do my assumptions about privilege affect the choices I make as a teacher? How might they affect the way I reflect on my teaching? These kinds of questions focus attention on our practice and on the choices we can and do make every day as educators. They remind us that we are not simply trapped in classrooms where privilege is an obstacle to our aims; we can decide how we want to see it in a particular setting, given what it is we want to do. For the many feminist educators who are already working hard to address privilege, thinking about privilege as something one has, something one is, and something one does can help us reflect on the choices we make in responding to oppression and privilege in classroom settings.

## Conclusion

In our most despairing moments, as Bryson and de Castell (1993) found, privilege can seem to be an immovable and monolithic barrier to our best feminist aims. In the classroom, privilege can be a stubborn and visible constraint, but we can also find concrete opportunities to disrupt or work through it. Being more explicit about what we mean by privilege and what our goals are for our classrooms can help us to see possibil-

ities and not just roadblocks. Seeing privilege as having, being, or doing can help us to do that.

While these three lenses can be useful in a variety of contexts, I focus here on the classroom because I believe it is one of the most important feminist spaces. It is also one of the most challenging spaces where we confront both expected and unexpected elements of privilege in our day-to-day work as feminist academics. It is my most fervent hope, then, that these three lenses can help to open new possibilities for how we see our classrooms and for reaching our goals within them.

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## Acknowledgement

This work was completed with the support of an Ontario Graduate Scholarship and a Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship. I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to Dr. Eleanor MacDonald at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario for her skillful supervision of my Master's research project, which was the origin of this paper. I also wish to thank the anonymous *Atlantis* reviewers, whose insights have greatly assisted me in strengthening this work.

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