

## Interrogating Privileged Subjectivities: Tensions and Dilemmas in Writing Reflexive Personal Accounts of Privilege

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I regard writing as a form of activism and political practice. I write to motivate people to take action against some form of injustice. I want to inform and engage readers so that they feel compelled to become involved in social action for change. So I am interested in writing as a site of resistance, where I can express my political commitments. In this paper I want to explore the politics of writing about privilege by reflecting upon my use of memory-work, autobiographical memoir and participatory experiential research in my academic writing and research about and against privilege.

Most of my writing since I was an undergraduate student has been grounded in my personal experience. I first became aware that this was contentious when I handed in an assignment on the meaning of community as part of a subject in my undergraduate social work degree. We were all asked to undertake a community study to explore the meaning of community in the lives of people who lived in a particular geographical area. At the time, I was living in an urban commune with ten other adults and two children in an old two-storey mansion. This household was a political collective and an alternative community. Most of us were involved in activist politics of one kind or another and we were trying to live our lives in ways that prefigured the social arrangements we were striving for in our political action. We were opposed to the nuclear family, marriage, sexism, coupleism, monogamy and heterosexism.

We had rosters for cooking and housework, intense house meetings where we discussed tensions and conflicts in the house and open relationships and multiple partners.

Given the lives we were living, it just made sense to me at the time to go no further than my household to explore the meaning of community. So I interviewed my cohabitants about their politics and their personal lives and I explored my own narrative of coming to this particular place in my life. The academic staff member did not quite know what to make of this personal account of communal living. It thus became clear to me then that I had violated the expected academic form of writing.

My second conflict with the academy in relation to forms of academic writing occurred when I undertook my Masters thesis. The purpose of the thesis was to explore the potential and limitations of developing a radical social work practice by self-defined radical social workers. I set up a collaborative inquiry group of radical practitioners and involved them in the project of researching their own practice (Pease 1987; 1990).

When I applied to upgrade my thesis from Masters to PhD, there were concerns expressed by some academic staff in the School about the collaborative and experiential form of inquiry and the focus on radical practice. It soon became clear that there were parallels in the attempts of radical practitioners to enact a radical practice in their work settings and my attempts to employ a collaborative experiential methodology in my thesis. So I withdrew from the upgrade and included in my thesis, my conflict with the University about the project as a case study of trying to live out one's political commitments within organisational settings.

It was during this time that I started exploring non-monological forms of writing (Mulkay 1985). In the final chapter of the thesis, I wrote a one-act play, creating fictional characters who all took on particular radical perspectives and I had them engage in conversation with each other. All of the examiners said that it should have been a PhD.

## I. WRITING MEMORY WORK IN PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH WITH PROFEMINIST MEN

When I did undertake my PhD some years later on the issues facing profeminist men (Pease 1996), I used a similar form of collaborative inquiry. I was interested in exploring what it meant to be a profeminist man. Profeminist politics by men was seen to be paradoxical. There seemed to be no basis for men to organise against a system that operated in their favour. How do these men develop a self definition to confront their political position. I was interested in what these men's experiences told us about re-forming men's subjectivities and practices towards gender equality. So I set up a collaborative inquiry group of profeminist men who were active in taking a public stance with their profeminism.

Doing this research was when I first encountered memory work. In my search of the literature on memory-work at that time, I was struck by the dearth of accounts of men using this method. Those accounts that were inspired by Haug's (1987; 1992) political project always focused on the internalised gender identities of the oppressed and not on the dominant and privileged group. What would it mean to use memory work to explore accommodations and resistances to privilege and social dominance? Some memory-work writers raise the question of whether men can use the method as effectively as women and whether men's use of the method negates its designation as a feminist method.

I used the method to explore men's socialisation into dominant attitudes and practices and to explore resistances to the dominant ideology. In the context of my project, we developed four memory work projects to explore aspects of internalised domination. These projects focused on father-son and mother-son relationships and experiences of homophobia and sexual objectification of women (Pease 2000b; 2000c; 2008).

This was emotionally a very powerful method. There were many times that men broke down and cried, as they read out their memories to the group and other men reported tears running down their eyes as they wrote the memories down in preparation for the meeting.

What I found was that memory-work enabled the participants to connect with their emotional histories and it provided an opportunity for us to examine the emotional and psychological basis of our relationships with women and other men. By asking men to reflect on their understandings of the ways in which they accommodated to or resisted the dominant constructions of masculinity, we were able to understand the ways in which new subjectivities could be created. The memory work made more visible the ways in which our masculinities were produced and it assisted us to identify some forms of resistance to dominant masculinities.

## II. WRITING A BOOK ABOUT UNDOING PRIVILEGE

Since completing that project, I have become more generally interested in the construction and reconstruction of privileged subjectivities. I have recently completed writing a book titled *Undoing Privilege: Unearned Advantage in a Divided World* (Pease 2010). I have been exploring the construction of Eurocentrism, class elitism, hegemonic masculinity, white supremacy, heteronormativity and ableism as six intersecting sites of privilege.

Increasingly, one of the genres for interrogating privilege has been personal accounts of coming to terms with one's unearned entitlements. Individual authors write about the ways in which various forms of privilege have functioned in their lives (Berger 1999; Rothenberg 2000; Jensen 2005; Wise 2005). Through vicarious introspection, these authors provide accounts of their personal journeys to accept and challenge their own taken-for-granted assumptions about their privileged positioning. These books form

part of the emerging field of privilege studies which includes masculinity studies, whiteness studies, critical heterosexuality studies and studies in ableism. My own new book is a part of this genre.

In this paper, I want to explore the limitations and potential of this form of writing as a strategy for interrogating privilege. Given that we are told that sexism, racism, homophobia and class elitism etcetera also hurt those who hold privilege, how do members of privileged groups speak and write about their unearned entitlements without further inscribing their own privileged status? Before I do that I want to make some general comments about autobiographical and confessional writing.

### *1) Bringing the Personal into Academic Writing*

Most of us who have completed a PhD have had to learn a particular form of academese. That is the dense, dry, flat prose that dominates academic writing which so many people experience as alienating and disempowering (Tierney 1995). Emotional detachment is the cornerstone of this writing. Lerum (2001) uses the term 'linguistic armour' to describe the obscure language often used by academics which intimidates outsiders. Some academics believe that you will jeopardise your career if you write in a form that non-academics can understand (Graff 2003).

Graff (2003) in an apt-titled book called *Clueless in Academe* argues that academia reinforces cluelessness by making its ideas, problems and ways of thinking look harder to understand, narrowly specialised and more intellectually difficult than they are or need to be. He says that one of the most commonly-held beliefs in this culture is that only a small minority of people can understand the concerns of the intellectual world.

In response to this criticism, there has been an increase in first person narratives in academic books and articles. Increasingly, researchers and academic writers are placing themselves in their texts. Much of this work can be understood as a form of modern confessional writing (Gill 2006). Such writing is said to be therapeutic. Ellis (1997) promotes this form of scholarly writing as a form of healing. In confessional writing, there is not just a recounting of one's life but also a confession of one's sins. This is especially so in autobiographical accounts about privilege.

In my book on privilege, I write about the processes by which I have come to understand my own privilege as white straight male academic from a working-class background. I write about my experiences of growing up in a working-class family and leaving school when I was 14 to work with my father in a timber yard. At the age of 19, I went back to 'night school' to complete the last four years of high school to enable me to go to university. I was the first in my extended family to gain a tertiary education and notwithstanding the completion of four degrees, including a doctorate, I always felt that I did not quite belong in the middle class.

While I read widely in the social sciences at university, my general vocabulary was more limited and this would become evident in relation to the use and pronunciation of certain words. When I spoke, my class markers were often openly displayed. I continue to carry what Sennett and Cobb (1972) called the 'hidden injuries of class' associated with my previous class positioning.

The irony for me was that as I studied critical social theory, I became more closely identified with my working-class positioning just as I was moving away from traditional working-class labour. My father thought that I betrayed my class by going to university, just as I was becoming politically active for the first time on class issues associated with homelessness and unemployment.

In reflecting upon my own situation as an academic man from a working-class background, I had come to believe that I deserved whatever benefits and status I had attained because I had struggled for them. I was very conscious of the class barriers that I had to overcome but I did not always acknowledge how my gender and race facilitated my achievements.

### III. LEARNING ABOUT MALE WHITE PRIVILEGE

In the book I talk about being challenged by women about my entitlement as a man. Being in a relationship with a feminist woman in the 1970s, I was forced to confront some of my experiences of male privilege. My partner would come home from women's consciousness-raising meetings and challenge my limited participation in housework and my over-commitment to paid work at the expense of our relationship. I had to work out what these challenges would mean, not only for my personal relationship, but also for my chosen career of social work and my political activism on issues of social justice. As a socialist who was involved in community politics in relation to housing, unemployment and health issues, I found it relatively easy at the intellectual level to see the justice of the feminist claims and my own complicity in the oppression of women. At the emotional level, I was deeply threatened by it. In my writings about gender, I have always inserted myself in the text and grounded the ideas in my own experiences as a man.

I also write about my developing awareness of white privilege. I was thirteen years old when my older brother formed a relationship with an Aboriginal woman in Australia. When my parents became aware of this relationship, they became outraged and disowned him as a son. It would take some years before they were able to begrudgingly accept my brother's partner as a part of the family. Even then, though, they needed to exceptionalise her, to see her as somehow different than other Aboriginal people so that their views about Indigenous Australians were not disrupted by getting to know her as a person.

Encountering my parents' racism as a child was deeply shocking to me. No less so was the connection it would give me into the Aboriginal world of city slums and rural reserves where many Indigenous people lived. As I connected with some aspects of urban and rural Aboriginal culture in Australia, I developed a consciousness of being white. In my teens I did not have an awareness of how this experience of whiteness represented privilege. And while I was very critical of what I saw as the racist attitudes of my parents, the experience did not in itself lead me to a consciousness of my own internalised racism. All of this would come much later.

Although the book is not a memoir, it has elements of memoir woven in to the exploration of privilege. I have tried to illustrate the interrogation of privilege with my own experience. Of course first person accounts such as this generate some anxiety as you increase your own vulnerability. When I first disclosed vignettes from my personal experiences in published writing, I felt very anxious. In some instances, those who knew me well felt that I had made myself too vulnerable at times.

Critics of course argue that autobiographical sociology is self indulgent and inappropriately introspective (Mykhalovskiy 1996). However, ideally in such writing, the reader does not just learn about the individual author. Rather, through the experiences of the author, the reader learns something about the wider society. When it works well, auto-ethnography inspires readers to critically reflect upon their own life experiences within a socio-cultural context (Spry 2001).

As a teacher, I know that sociologically-informed personal stories are powerful ways to talk to students about patterns of privilege and oppression (Messner 2000). I have used personal stories to illustrate aspects of the social construction of dominant forms of masculinity, white supremacy and heteronormativity. Given that I am interested in writing as a form of political engagement, and that writing a book about privilege is itself an expression of privilege, I want to explore the politics of the use of personal experience in writing about privilege.

#### Writing Beyond the Academy

Critical forms of intellectual work that challenge orthodoxy or public policies are actively discouraged in neo-liberal universities (MacKinnon 2009). These writing practices are also challenged because they do not fit within university priorities of publishing in the top-ranked academic journals. In the University

where I work, even writing books is discouraged, let alone books that attempt to cross over into a wider reading market.

It seems clear to me that if we are concerned with social change, we have to find ways of writing that reach beyond the academy. Some of my most effective pieces of writing have not been in refereed journals but in the opinion pages of newspapers and magazines. The more accessible your writing is, the greater the chance of inspiring people to make changes (Kleinman 2003). One of the purposes of personal writing is to reach out to multiple audiences. By writing in a non-academic voice, there are more possibilities of bridging the cultural and linguistic gap that separates academics in the ivory tower from others (Foley 2002).

If you can reach diverse audiences with your writing, there is greater likelihood that you can encourage a critical literacy about received ideas. You can give people a new language with which to view their experience. Because the resources to write are unequally distributed, sometimes, academics can use their privilege to disseminate ideas that others have written about which may not reach larger audiences. Writing that will have an impact on people must engage their emotions. You have to make what is of concern to the writer, a concern for the reader as well. You need to touch the reader in some way (Gregg 2008).

#### IV. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING AS SITUATED

One of rationales of writing personally is that it is situated. (Willard-Traub 2007). When we write autobiographically, we illuminate our subject position as a writer. Generally, when white straight men write they do so as a form of objective truth. The point of view of men in dominant groups have led to the view of Western thought as universal, Our ways of knowing and seeing the world inscribe a particular form of epistemological dominance, what Ryder (2004) calls ‘epistemological imperialism’.

This is particularly so when we define the experiences of others rather than talking about ourselves. I believe that it is fundamentally important that academics keep issues of power, privilege and positionality at the forefront of our analysis (Johnston and Goodman 2006). We all need to recognise the multiple subjectivities we inhabit and to locate ourselves in relation to privilege and oppression in our lives. Those of us who are most unmarked, white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied men, need to understand how our subjectivities are constructed.

Thus, when straight white men write, it too is socially situated and partial. Naming it as such undermines its claim to universality. However, in articulating our positionality, and in demonstrating reflexivity about it, we need to be clear that this does not get rid of our power and privilege. Ahmed (2004) refers to this as a ‘politics of declaration’ where individuals can admit to their privileged and partial perspective and this admission itself then protects them from being criticised.

I also find that when I use my own experience in the classroom and in my writing, I find that this increases my power and influence (Messner 2000). By revealing my personal experiences and sometimes my vulnerabilities, my status is actually enhanced because students and readers appreciate my ability to talk and write about such things.

What impact does autobiographical academic writings by privileged academics have on those who are marginalised? There is a cartoon that has been around for a while in anthropological networks, where a postmodern anthropologist is involved in a dialogue with a Trobriand Islander. The caption in the cartoon quotes the Trobriand Islander as saying ‘But enough about you. Why don’t you ask me a question about myself and my people?’ (Tierney 1995).

If it is intellectual elites who are telling stories about their experiences, how does this impact upon the capacity for those who do not have power and privilege to tell their stories? Critical forms of research have historically been involved in providing space for marginalized and oppressed people to tell their stories (Brown and Strega 2005). We have to be careful that we do not end up with a situation where our research will primarily be about elite academics writing narratively about their lives and nothing more. This may

contribute to the silencing of other voices. We have to find ways to open up spaces for marginalised people to tell the stories about their lives.

## V. THE POLITICS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

We also have to be careful not to assume that simply inserting the author in the text is necessarily progressive. We need to be clear about why we have inserted ourselves in our writing (Tierney 2002). From my point of view, it needs to contribute to a progressive politics rather than becoming an exercise in intellectual narcissism.

Critical autobiographical writing as a politically progressive form of writing is best known through the writings of identity-based anthologies in the 1980s. In anthologies such as *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) there was a paradigm shift in academic writing that opened up spaces for disempowered groups to give voice to experiences of discrimination and marginalisation. This form of writing was an important expression of oppositional politics. But what does it mean when autobiographical writing is coming from those in privileged positions?

Franklin (2009) is interested in exploring the politics of academic memoirs, especially by progressive academics who in their more traditional academic work, engage in structural analyses of power. She argues that academic memoirs can reinforce individualism and can perpetuate class, race and gender inequality and other systems of privilege. Franklin notes that many academic memoirs neglect politicised understandings of power. Sometimes focussing on feelings and emotions can shift attention away from the structural analysis and the author's own institutional privilege. She raises the question whether the genre can sustain a politics that is not primarily focused on the individual self. Do personal narratives end up supporting individualistic agendas?

I do not believe that a focus on the individual necessarily neglects wider political concerns. It seems to me that personal narratives are neither inherently conservative nor inherently progressive. How can we use them to promote an oppositional politics? I think that they have progressive possibilities when the aim is to communicate a political agenda or an institutional critique in a way that will appeal to a wider non-academic audience.

The academic memoir is shaped by institutional privilege (Franklin 2009). If it is to have progressive potential it must unmask and interrogate that privilege and explore how dominant identities are constructed. However, there are dangers here as well that we need to engage with.

## VI. INTERROGATING PRIVILEGE WITHOUT RECENTRING IT

In recent years we have witnessed the emergence of a new field of scholarship called 'whiteness studies' or 'critical studies of whiteness' (Roediger 2006). Unlike the usual focus of race studies on the problems facing culturally diverse groups, this field of study involves an investigation of the experiences and behaviours of white groups.

The most widely cited premise of critical studies of whiteness is that white people do not recognise their unearned white privileges. The task then identified by many anti-racist activists and scholars is to make whiteness more visible. Just as feminism has challenged men to critically reflect upon their masculinity, so anti-racism challenges white people to reflect upon what it means to be white. Just as men have been challenged to not take 'male' for granted, so white people have been challenged to not take 'white' for granted. For white men, of course, this involves a double challenge.

However, we should remain alert to the possibility that whiteness studies may reproduce white dominance rather than unsettle it. How are we to discuss whiteness without once again putting it in the centre? Some critics have argued that whiteness scholarship creates new forms of white privilege because it opens up new opportunities for white academics. In North America, African Americans are concerned that whiteness studies may be 'a sneaky form of narcissism' and that it may shift 'the focus and the resources back to white people and their perspective' (Omi 2001: 226). In some multi-cultural conferences in North

America, discussions about whiteness dominate the discourse about race (Clarke and O'Donnell 1999). Gillborn (2006: 319) regards it as a move to bring the voice of white people back to the centre in terms like: 'But enough about you, let me tell you about me'.

We must also be aware of privileged speaking positions. What does it mean when profeminist men who challenge patriarchy are listened to more than feminist women who challenge patriarchy? It has been argued that this is a way of using privilege to challenge privilege. Men are likely to be perceived by other men as more credible and thus they will be listened to more. However, this can in fact reinforce those barriers that prevent women from having their own voices heard. When feminist colleagues and I have presented papers together on men's responsibility for challenging male violence, I have been concerned when my voice has been given more credibility than theirs.

I am also conscious that when I write or talk about white privilege as a white academic, it is likely to carry more credibility than if a non-white person raises these issues. This is one of the consequences of privilege; the views of the privileged are more likely to be listened to. There is power in speaking from the dominant position, in part because I benefit from the privileges that I critique.

There is also the question of where autobiographical writing sits within the wider context of global inequalities. What does it mean to spend so much time on writing style when global capitalism is expanding across the world? How does personal writing style illuminate our critiques of power, privilege and oppression? We need to locate our discussions about representation in the text in the context of new imperialism and neo-liberalism (Bourgois 2002).

Notwithstanding the tensions and dangers that I have discussed, I believe that politically-conscious auto-biographical writing has something important to contribute to social justice struggles. Being critical about the structures of privilege and oppression in the world can sit alongside writing in a personal voice. In fact, interrogating privilege from within requires it. The transformation of oppressive structures will mean that privileged individuals will need to be willing to forego and challenge their privileges. Autobiographical writing about privilege provides an insight into the extent to which that is possible.

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