

Making Unseen Privilege Visible in Mathematics Education Research

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In this essay, the authors begin to “unpack the invisible knapsack” of mathematics education research privilege. They present short statements representing the multiplicity of their respective identities; acknowledging that efforts to understand privilege and oppression are often supported and constrained by identities. The authors then present three lists generated as they identify experiences as mathematics education researchers that they may have taken for granted; two lists are from the perspective of privilege and the other is from a position of marginalization. The multiple lists reflect that a person can be simultaneously oppressed in some ways and privileged in others. The authors conclude by inviting others to join the discussion about the invisible knapsack of mathematics education research privilege.

KEYWORDS: equity, mathematics education research, privilege

The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situation which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us.

– Audre Lorde (1984, p.123)

Mathematics education research in the United States, similar to all social systems, is embedded in interlocking systems of privilege and oppression. Generally in such systems, particular groups are granted privilege based on birth-right or other unearned means (as opposed to “effort” and/or “perceived” intelligence or ability) and privileged people begin to believe their personal qualities warrant inclusion in the group. In turn, lack of membership is viewed as lack of effort or personal flaw (e.g., the myth of meritocracy, Young, 1958). In other words, the unseen dimensions of privilege and oppression become normalized, dehumanizing both subordinate and dominant groups (Freire, 1970/2000) in ways that perpetuate the unjust systems of oppression and domination (Bell, 1997).

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We define *privilege* as unearned benefits and advantages granted to people in dominant groups at the expense of people in oppressed groups, “whether they want those privileges or not, and regardless of their stated intent” (Allies for Change, n.d., p. 1; as presented at PrOPMTE¹). Privilege plays out in particular situations in daily life as a result of a variety of systems. The way privilege operates within such systems often goes unseen and requires explicit unpacking from positions of privilege and marginalization (McIntosh, 2011). Scholars, such as McIntosh (2011), Scalzi (2005), and Schlosser (2010), have begun to list some of the associated privileges or marginalizations for the systems of race, class, and religion, respectively.

Similar to the way McIntosh (2011) “came to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which [she] can count on cashing in each day, but about which [she] was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (p. 121), we have come to see mathematics education research as a “package of unearned assets” that needs to be unpacked and exposed. It is our intention that exposing mathematics education research privileges will engender a sense of responsibility and accountability for mathematics education researchers to begin the process of dismantling and changing such systems by first acknowledging their many and vast unseen dimensions. In other words, mathematics education researchers need to understand how mathematics education research privilege plays out in order to begin to dismantle and disrupt oppressive systems.

Here, we begin to “unpack the invisible knapsack” (McIntoch, 2011) of mathematics education research privilege. First, we present short statements representing the multiplicity of our fragmented and continuously shifting and evolving identities, as our work to understand privilege and oppression is supported and constrained by whom we are. Next, we present three lists generated as we attempted to identify conditions of our experiences as mathematics education researchers that we may take for granted. Two are from the perspective of privilege and the other is from a position of marginalization. These multiple lists reflect that a person can be simultaneously oppressed in some ways and privileged in others (Freire, 1970/2000).

Our Positionalities

We cannot separate ourselves from whom we are, and we recognize that our worldviews influence the privileges that we see as well as those that we do not

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see. These positionalities are shaped by the multiplicity of our fragmented identities (e.g., along lines of race, class, sexuality, able-ness, etc.), including positions of power into which society has placed us as well as our personal life experiences within and around these identities (Maher & Tetreault, 1994). Specific to the work we present here, our life experiences impact the positionality we bring to this analysis, informing the questions we ask and the interpretations we draw (Foote & Bartell, 2011); thus, we share some information about our positionality.²

Tonya –

I am a White, able-bodied, heterosexual woman who grew up in a lower middle-class Catholic family in rural Minnesota. I taught high school mathematics for 6 years in both traditional and alternative public school settings. I have a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison; the National Science Foundation (NSF) funded my degree. I am now a tenure-track faculty member at Michigan State University; I am a Co-PI on an NSF-funded project. I am a mother, and my daughter is in kindergarten in a public school. My research focuses on the tools and experiences that can support teachers' development of equitable pedagogical practices with explicit attention to social justice, culture, race, and power in mathematics education.

Kate –

I am a White, Hearing,³ heterosexual, upper middle-class, adult-convert Mormon woman. I am an only child. My father served in the United States Navy until I was 25 years of age. I have a master's degree from the University of Pittsburgh in the education of students who are deaf and hard of hearing and taught high school mathematics for 4 years at a school for the deaf. I have attended Michigan State University for my doctoral studies. Some of my degree has been funded through working on an NSF-funded project. I have accepted a tenure-track assistant professor position to begin fall 2013. My research focuses on mathematics teachers' identities in the context of learning about and teaching mathematics for social justice.

² For additional details about the positionality we bring to this work, please contact us by email. Note that one danger of sharing our positionality briefly and somewhat categorically is that we are not able to fully unpack the ways in which our positionality plays out in the analyses presented. We acknowledge that these statements are necessary but not complete elaborations of our positionality.

³ The capital letter "H" on *Hearing* is one way to acknowledge how deafness can be viewed as a culture (as opposed to as a medical condition) (cf. Padden & Humphries, 1988; Lane, 1992).

Generating Lists of Privileges

Drawing on the work of McIntosh (2011), we generated three lists as we attempted to identify conditions of our experiences as mathematics education researchers that we may take for granted. The first is from the perspective of the field of mathematics education and considers the privileges we believe all mathematics education research shares (as opposed to social studies or English education research, for instance). The second is from the perspective of institutional privilege and considers unearned privilege granted through institutional association, both from the perspective of being a faculty member employed at a privileged institution and from the perspective of being a doctoral student at that institution. The third list illuminates privileges in the field of mathematics education research from our position as researchers who study a traditionally marginalized body of work.

In creating these lists, we aimed to consider privilege and oppression in relation to the identity of a “mathematics education researcher.” Though compelled to include additional items on our list explicitly related to race, class, gender, religion, age, ability, sexual orientation, and language—and these factors are still present, as systems of oppression are interlocking (cf. Hardiman & Jackson, 1997)—we felt that a focus on mathematics education researcher privilege in particular was important. Certain statements such as “I can say mathematics education research historically publishes research about people like me” did not make the lists, as this privilege is not reflective of privilege earned from being a mathematics education researcher, but rather from being a *White* mathematics education researcher. Systems of privilege and oppression are the subject of some research in mathematics education; however, the privileges associated with the community of mathematics education research itself are rarely considered.

Additionally, the first two lists begin with “I can” statements, while the third list begins with “I cannot” statements. That is, here we write wearing two hats (at least): (a) as mathematics education researchers who have benefitted from institutional and field privilege within mathematics education, and (b) as mathematics education researchers whose work has been too often marginalized within the field.

Our method of compiling the lists is not the only way one could or should examine privilege in mathematics education research. On the contrary, much work is needed in mathematics education research that explicitly names and unpacks systems of oppression (cf. Gutstein, 2006) and also interrogates systems of privilege, such as using Whiteness theory to explore researcher identity (cf. Gregson, 2011) and questioning the privileging of English in mathematics education research (cf. Meaney, 2013) (Bartell, Bieda, Breyfogle, Crespo, Dominguez, Drake, & Herbel-Eisenmann, 2013).

The Field of Mathematics Education Research

- I can be sure funding is available for my field.
- I can be sure there is a job in my field.
- I can tell people what my field is and they think I'm really smart.
- I can go into a classroom and evaluate a teacher's practice.
- I can work the educational system to privilege my child.
- I can be sure travel funding is available to travel to conferences around the world.
- I can attend multiple conferences in any given year because there are a variety of conferences in my field.
- When I'm told about the institution of schooling, I can be sure the people in my field built it.
- I can go into a pre-K–12 school and see the content of my field being taught.
- I can get a mortgage because there's job security in my field.⁴
- I can be sure the content of my field is represented in a major portion of various standardized tests.
- I can see my field represented in general public discussions of education issues.

Institutional Affiliations⁵

- I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the “person in charge” I will be facing a person from an institution similar to mine.*
- I can turn down jobs because there are so many available to me.
- I can be asked to chair any dissertation committee based on my pedigree.
- I can be sure of my preparation to be a faculty member in my field because of the graduate institution I attended.
- I can publish in the top-tiered journals in my field because of the institution in which I work.
- I can attend multiple conferences because there are institutional funds to support me.
- I can access grant-writing support in various forms.

⁴ We recognize that property values in many geographic areas make mortgages unavailable to many professionals, but the point here is that in comparison to other fields, mathematics education researchers are better positioned to obtain mortgages. We acknowledge and understand that getting a mortgage is also mediated by race, language, and other factors, as is each statement on these lists, but this statement is meant to describe the ways in which job stability and security (again in mathematics education research in contrast to other fields such as social studies or English education) can facilitate one's ability to obtain a mortgage.

⁵ Asterisks reflect statements created directly from McIntosh's (2011) list.

- I can be pretty sure I'll be asked to give a colloquium at another institution.
- I can be assured that my institutional infrastructure can support external funding.
- I can get a job regardless of my area of research.
- If I wish to switch institutions, I can be sure that all other institutions are still options for me.*
- I can be pretty sure that my colleagues at this new institution would respect me.*
- I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people from an institution similar to mine at mathematics education research meetings most of the time.*

Mathematics Education Research

- I cannot publish without first debunking the presumed cultural neutrality of my field.
- I cannot open the table of contents of top-tiered journals in my field and see research that legitimates my own.
- I cannot be sure funding is available for my work.
- I cannot publish without justifying “where’s the math” within a particular framing of what mathematics is and what counts as mathematics.
- I cannot remain unschooled in the language of the dominating discourses about mathematics education research.
- I cannot generally look at the work of those with authority in my field and see work similar to mine.

Discussion

The above lists were created in an attempt to make unseen privilege in mathematics education research visible. Though these statements are written as “I” statements, it should not be taken to mean that they are only personal. Rather, they reflect broader systems of privilege and oppression in which all people operate. These systems play out in personal ways, such as in conscious or unconscious actions or attitudes that maintain oppression. These personal interactions, however, are shaped by institutional policies and procedures as well as by society’s cultural norms, which can perpetuate implicit and explicit values (e.g., definition of “good” or “normal”) that bind institutions and individuals. It is the interactions of these multiple levels simultaneously that create interlocking systems of oppression which serve to normalize unseen dimensions of privilege. It is these systems that we aim to illuminate and, in turn, begin to disrupt and change.

As mentioned previously, these lists are a sample of possible lists. For the sake of our argument—an attempt to make visible privilege within mathematics education research—we chose not to include additional items specifically related to factors such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and language. This is not to say that these factors do not exist or are not at play. Rather, they are always present and intersect with mathematics education research privilege in various ways. For instance, a Latino faculty member with a Spanish accent who conducts research in an area traditionally marginalized in the field may not only have to prove “where the mathematics is” (see Martin, Gholson, & Leonard, 2010) in their research but also that they are competent in mathematics. Thus, it is impossible to separate these roles.

It is important to highlight that these lists are specifically focused on mathematics education research and the privilege therein. These lists do not consider the ways in which mathematics education research might not have privilege (e.g., in relation to mathematics as a discipline), which would be an interesting and important analysis to conduct. Caution is necessary, though, as it might be easy to dismiss mathematics education research privilege when one also notes how mathematics education research is oppressed, thus never unpacking the privileges. For example, sometimes White people dismiss examinations of their privilege related to Whiteness because they instead associate with their marginalization as poor people (or other areas of oppression), perhaps feeling that the focus on race “invalidates their oppressions” or that these “oppressions make them ‘less’ racially privileged” (DiAngelo, 2006, p. 52). Thus, we cautiously encourage continued exploration of the ways mathematics education is not privileged as well as the ways in which it is.

As we worked to create these lists, we experienced some discomfort. For instance, we found it easier at times to talk about marginalization than to talk about privilege. Perhaps this ease of naming marginalization is because when speaking from a place of marginalization it is made apparent that we are part of a group that has some solidarity or connectedness through such marginalization. In contrast, when speaking from a place of privilege there is a sense of “othering” marginalized groups, or engagement in a process, either unwillingly or willingly, that steals others’ humanity (Freire, 1970/2000). We both noted that we felt ill several times as we created these lists. We recognize that we, too, live within and are constrained by systems of social oppression that “trap” us and “confine us to roles and prescribed behavior” (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997, p. 20). But that acknowledgement doesn’t make it any easier to stomach. At the same time, speaking from a place of marginalization was uncomfortable, in that it is scary to speak from a place where you do not hold power. Yet, part of the reason we were able to speak from that position was because of the institutional privilege from which we benefit.

We also found that we could at times abate our discomfort with some items that we could choose to admit to or not based on our position of privilege as mathematics education researchers in an institution with privilege. We reflected on the fact that in some contexts, we do not acknowledge what we study (be that a focus on mathematics education or a focus on social justice). For example, the privilege grants us the choice to say that we study teachers instead of saying that we study mathematics teaching and learning, so that we don't have to hear the negative discourses back (e.g., "I hate math," "I was never good at math"). We are denying our privilege to align ourselves with the marginalized field of teaching in order to not have to deal with the negative reactions. Alternatively, we might frame our work as focused on mathematics education, and omit that race and class are central ideas in our research. Perhaps this omission is part of what made it possible for us to write this piece—we come to these lists both from positions of privilege and of marginalization.

Moving Forward

Understanding and acknowledging privilege is not enough. When mathematics education researchers have not critically examined their own place in the systems of privilege and oppression, they frequently bring a deficit model and exhibit behaviors that are patronizing because they view this work through a lens of charity rather than justice. (Bartell et al., 2013, p. 227)

Although tacitly identifying the ways in which systemic privilege exists is a necessary condition, it is not sufficient. Mathematics education researchers must illuminate how privilege plays out on a more personal level by examining one's position of privilege, both by reading lists such as those presented here or looking closely at one's own work. Without this type of critical examination, individual researchers in particular, and the field in general, risk bringing a paternalistic view to teachers and students. This view can often be seen in research that does not respect the work and practices of teaching or focuses on illuminating what teachers and students do not know. Instead, we posit that the field needs to *both* acknowledge (or make visible) the privilege from which it benefits *and* then consider how to disrupt the perpetuation of privilege. At the same time, for those traditionally marginalized in various ways, the privilege bestowed upon mathematics education researchers is an important and often strategic tool used to address inequity and injustice and serves as a means to push from the margins. It is therefore also important to consider how one might use one's privilege for positive change. We liken the duality of raising awareness and taking action to the notion of reading and writing the world with mathematics that Gutstein (2006) described. To that end, we see two sets of actionable items. First, we wish to specifically invite others to dialogue with us about the invisible knapsack of mathematics educa-

tion research privilege described here. We acknowledge that our positionality has affordances and constraints in illuminating these unearned assets. Therefore, we wonder:

- What are we missing as White people? As women? As “insiders”? As people who view our work as marginalized?
- What might other marginalized mathematics education researchers notice?
- What would discussions with colleagues in other content areas illuminate?
- What additional privileges would people in other disciplines see?

Second, we wish to encourage ourselves and other researchers to consider possible ways to disrupt and dismantle privilege. McIntosh (2011) asked: “What will we do with such knowledge? ... [Will we] choose to use unearned advantage to weaken hidden systems of advantage? ... [Will we] use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base?” (p.125). In the context of mathematics education research, these questions provoke a related set of ideas. Here, we raise a few questions and speculate some possible answers:

- How might mathematics education researchers come together to think about understanding and confronting privilege afforded the field of mathematics education research? We might encourage interdisciplinary work or drawing on and citing research outside of mathematics education. We might develop ways to spread the access to funding we have across other disciplines.
- How might we begin to dismantle and disrupt institutional privilege? We might consider making curriculum vitae and cover letters institutionally blind during the hiring process. We might consider not including institutional affiliation on nametags at conferences.
- How might we begin to dismantle and disrupt privileging certain mathematics education research? We might consider abolishing “special issues” so as to reframe all research as central. We might consider amending the peer review process in an effort to broaden “what counts” as mathematics education research (cf. Martin, Gholson & Leonard, 2010).

The questions posed here are intended to move our discussions forward and invite others into this conversation. Every mathematics education researcher, we be-

lieve, is actively benefitting from the privileges we describe here and, therefore, has a responsibility to engage in disrupting these simultaneously oppressive systems.

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