Aine Sheehan

Professor Eric DeMeulenaere

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Theory of Understanding Paper

I was only in fifth grade when I began to think about the power that money can hold. A conversation I had with my oldest sister sparked this realization. I was heading to my room when I heard her crying. I knocked on her door to check in on her, knowing she was stressed from the college application process. She thanked me for coming to talk to her, but assured me I would not be able to understand her dilemma. I insisted and she began to explain the whole college process, specifically the importance of financial aid. She had been reviewing the overall cost with our father and knew that she would need to apply for external scholarships on top of her student loans. The pressure had begun to build up as she received inadequate financial aid packages. She was right, at the time I could not comprehend the full story she was telling me, but one message rang through: “If you don’t have money, you have to work much harder.”

Growing up in an immigrant household, I was raised to take pride in where my parents came from and the roots they planted in America. As a child, I was naive in my understanding of what this concept meant in the real world. I am able to recall the first time I thought critically about what being first generation meant, I was in middle school preparing to get into a NYC public high school. Since I was living in a lower income neighborhood, my district school was notoriously overcrowded and underfunded. My father pushed me to prepare for the SHSAT, a test that could grant me a seat in one of the best high schools in the city. The summer before my exam, I spent my free time taking practice tests, quickly resenting the whole process. My father

tried to remind me why it was so important, attempting to explain to an eleven year old that because of the world we live in, sometimes people have to work harder to even the playing field. He would often end these speeches with the same line, “I just want all of my children to be able to live comfortably,” something my parents were never able to achieve as immigrants. Through these conversations with my father I found another life lesson, “if you have less connections, you have to work harder.”

After I gained admission into the specialized high school, I felt as though I was being constantly reminded of how hard I had worked to get there. Based on their zipcodes alone, I knew many of my peers had been privileged enough to attend private SHSAT tutoring and better funded middle schools. Sitting in their classrooms, I did not feel privileged, but rather quite the contrary. It was not until half way through my high school career when I began to truly analyze my identities.

This understanding was developed during a conversation in my sociology class, surrounding neighborhoods and the power they can hold. We were asked to reflect on what our districts provided us and to think critically about how our identities played a role in these resources. I decided to look specifically at my co-op, Edgewater, which is predominantly Irish-American families. I had never thought much of the demographics of my neighbors because most of the Bronx is divided by immigrant groups. I had always assumed this was a choice, to raise your kids in cultures similar to your own. My parents chose to live near other Irish immigrants because of the opportunities in the neighborhood (there was Irish step dancing, Gaelic football, and several other cultural activities for us to take part in).

For the assignment I asked my mother what it was like finding Edgewater. She said they picked it for the culture but also because of how cheap the houses were. Since it was a co-op my

parents only owned the literal house and everything else (the yard, the streets, etc) were owned by the community board. This set up lowered the prices of the houses by nearly 50%, allowing my newly immigrated parents to find an affordable home. She did note that the application required two letters of recommendations from current residents. I was confused on how this could work considering my parents knew no one in the Bronx, but my mother explained that the people in the neighborhood were "happy to help out a fellow Irish immigrant and write a letter of recommendation." This process appears fine at first glance, but it is rooted in white privilege and structural racism. This co-op, which was in a "better" school zone (in comparison to some of the other immigrant neighborhoods in the Bronx) and provided more manageable mortgages, often did not accept anyone who was not of Irish descent, therefore highlighting the privilege my parents held as white immigrants. These opportunities were not and continue to not be as available for immigrants of color. This part of my identity, being the child of white immigrants, emphasizes the structural racism that can be seen through residential segregation. Although I may face difficulties due to my background, I also need to be cognizant of the opportunities I am given solely based on my race. Through this classroom conversation, I gained another life lesson, "my identities are complex and intersectional."

These three conversations all lead to me gaining consciousness around my identities and the power, or lack of power, they hold. The progression of my awareness begs the question: Why was I aware of my economic status before my white privilege? There is the obvious answer, that money is a constant part of human life and that I was bound to notice the power it held at a younger age, but there is also a privilege in my realization. The fact that I was not aware of my race, or rather what it meant to be white, was inherently a privileged position. I was conscious of my first generation and low income status because they inevitably formed roadblocks for me to

have to overcome but my whiteness was something I was not actively thinking of. My race is connected to my other identities and inherently privileges me.

Identities can influence your trajectory in the world through the doors of opportunity that may be open, closed, or locked, based on your personal positionality. I decided to discuss my life through the lens of being a white person from a low-income immigrant family because those are the three parts of my identity that I feel are most salient to me. However my identities, and everyone else's, cannot exist on their own. They are all interconnected and influence how we see the world and how the world sees us. My gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and education all influence how I move through life. Like a classmate of mine once said during a discussion regarding identity, "we are not a pie chart," we cannot be sliced into pieces because our identities are what make us whole.

In the present, as a student of academia aware of her identities and their complexities, I am then forced to question their very nature. If we are aware of the systemic racism, classism, and sexism that are rooted in our society, how can we solve them? What agency do we have in changing these systems? Who is responsible for fighting these systems? And although all of these questions are vital to properly grasp the reality of positionality, everyone involved in the system must be reflecting on their identities and how external structures uphold conceptions regarding social positions. Although I know, I alone, cannot solve inequality within our school systems and neighborhoods, individual reflection is a piece of the puzzle. Understanding my positionality and identity, as well as theorizing on how I can contribute to positive change, can help to tackle these structures of oppression and privilege. I hope to take my lived experiences, positionality reflection, and academic theories into my future career with youth. Through this I

will be able to provide change on a smaller scale, ensuring I am contributing to the disruption of the current educational system.