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Theories of Understanding

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<center>Positionality and Identity in the World</center>

An example from my life that reflects my identity happened after high school. One of my classmates wrote an email to the administration of our high school. I live in Freeport, Maine, a small town twenty minutes away from Portland. The population of my hometown and state is overwhelmingly white. My classmate is Vietnamese and was one of the few people without white skin in our school of six hundred. She wrote about the representation of multicultural literature in our curriculum or should I say, the lack of it. She highlighted how the authors and books we read were mostly written by white authors. This email was sent to the staff of my high school about a year after we graduated. This instance made me reflect on my own social identity. I had never worried about who was writing the stories we read for school. The literature was always applicable to me, and the people who wrote these stories looked like me. Our school followed a traditional literature curriculum where we read books like *The Great Gatsby*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *Huckleberry Finn,* and *Fahrenheit 451*. Little in my educational experience did I remember stories from people who had completely different lives than me. My classmate's email was a time in my life where I truly reflected on my social position in the world. It was the start of an analysis of the institutions in my life, especially school, and if those institutions met everyone's needs, or primarily my own.

There were times in high school where I could be somewhat self-reflective on my social position, but the only times I remember this happening was during my sociology class. I felt

included, represented, involved and heard in the vast majority of situations in my life. I never remember having thoughts of who my authors were or what they looked like. I remember never feeling targeted for how I looked or what I wore or how my hair looked or what language I spoke. I am extremely privileged to have never felt these things. I am a part of social groups that largely benefit in American society and the world as a whole. I am a cis-gender, white man. My identity has given me opportunities that many others do not have. I have benefited greatly from the way that I look and my gender identity. I really haven't faced any discrimination because of my social identity.

My experience in college has opened my perspective on my identity. Critical thinking is a skill that college develops far better than most public schools. The courses I've taken in college have focused much more on critically evaluating the institutions that have socialized us and the consequences and outcomes of this socialization. I've grown up in a primarily white place surrounded by a society that favors whiteness. Coming to college and partaking in critical analysis helped illuminate my positionality and how my institutions functioned in favor of white individuals. College also helped show me all the other ways my social identity has influenced the world. My education experience lacked perspective however, college has helped introduce me to perspectives I had not been exposed to before particularly, different school experiences. An education class I took freshman year, *Public Schools and Democracy*, was very formative in understanding my positionality. Students in the class often engaged in discussion about their own schooling experience and for the first time, I heard real stories about how other people's educational experiences were different from mine. Of course, I knew that my education experience wasn't the same for everybody, but the exposure to other real stories and narratives was greatly lacking. Exposure to other narratives allowed me to dive into true human experience

and emotion in ways that weren't my lived experience. The majority of media I was exposed to in school came from a white-male perspective. The media shadowed the experiences of white stories and room for other stories was nonexistent. Public Schools and Democracy also took a critical evaluation at public schooling in the U.S. Past narratives and primary source documents were analyzed with the goal of showing how schools were founded on the ideas white patriarchal supremacy.

I've talked a lot about privilege, but not much about how privilege is recognized in society. The fact is, many aren't aware of their social identity and the privilege that may come with that. White privilege is a great example. Many white Americans don't believe in white privilege. The ones who deny their privilege lack critical thinking skills. They don't see how their social position has been an advantage to them because it takes some analysis and reflection. Privilege isn't something that can easily be explained or measured. When people see statistics on how black and white individuals and families differ in net worth, health outcomes, education, and many other sectors of life, they place blame on the individual, not the fact that society might be structured to keep certain demographics of people at the top and others at the bottom. Realizing one's own privilege or lack thereof can be a tool for social change. If those with privilege saw the ways they have benefitted in society from their social identity, progress could be made into why certain groups have more privilege than others. The goal in this analysis would be to change the systems, institutions and people that reinforce these systems of oppression.

Agency is directly connected to the idea of recognizing privilege. Realizing your position and social identity in the world can be a form of agency. Going through the process of analyzing your role in various systems of oppression can lead to changing them because you realize you

have some part in the system. Whether it's from a privileged perspective or a non-privileged one, analyzing why the system functions that way can be a form of agency.

There are many pieces of my social identity that influence my place in the world. I could write pages and pages more about all the different sectors of my identity and how it intersects with others to create my position in the world. But overall, I come from a social identity that experiences privilege in this world.

Critical Theory of Social Inequity

When I think of structure versus agency relating to social inequality in my life, one example sticks out. I've worked at a middle school as an ed-tech and substitute for two years in Maine. Last year, a program started in Maine in which displaced people mainly from Angola would be provided housing in Maine. These refugees were housed in state-funded hotels all across Southern Maine. Most of the New Mainers did not speak much English upon arrival, so districts across the state hired more English Language Learners teachers, including my mom. This program is struggling in many places across the state. The state has stopped funding many hotels so the New Mainers are forced to move to another town and school. The families have no means of transportation and have been living in a hotel room ever since they arrived. The adults, parents, and guardians can not work or obtain income because they need to be in Maine for at least six months, so they can't leave the hotel in hopes of finding their own place. There is also an issue of food insecurity because the food comes from a state program. While the act of seeking refuge in another country shows remarkable agency and resistance to the circumstances they fled from, the program in Maine demonstrates a lack of agency in comparison to others in the state.

We now shift the focus to how the state of Maine is trying to integrate the New Mainers. The biggest issue is housing. Living in a hotel with a large family and dozens of other families is not easy. The goal is to get the New Mainers into permanent housing, not in a hotel. The way to do that would be to help the Mainers get jobs, but it doesn't seem like that's a possibility, at least not for a while. There are also classes for adults to learn English. The goal is for the New Mainers to have more agency over their lives, but it is going very slowly. The systems of social inequality remain ever so present. Families don't have security in their living situations, or food situations and have little control over major factors in their life.

The example of the New Mainers is a clear example of agency vs structure. In Charles Payne's piece, "Black Bastard and White Millionaires", Payne highlights how blame works in society. Blame in this case is who and how people blame individual groups or the system for societal inequalities. Payne focuses on structure versus agency in his writing, stating "that they, even those at the bottom, have at least potentially some influence over the conditions in their lives" (30). To summarize, Payne is arguing that everyone has some agency and control in their lives. This assumption can be difficult to grasp. It is difficult to say you have some control over your misfortune because it gives responsibility. In comparison, blaming the system or structure defects personal responsibility and shifts focus on a higher power, hence the "White Millionaires".

The discussion is a challenging one. If solely the structure is to blame, then the agency is taken out of people's lives, inferring that they don't have any power to change the social inequalities in their lives. The opposite side suggests people are completely to blame for their misfortune, leading to negative and untrue assumptions about the character, intellect, culture, etc. of the people with agency. In my opinion, it makes sense to combine a perspective where both

structure and agency are present. However, I believe structure is the primary reason for social inequality by a significant margin, but the way people look at structure can be harmful. The harmful way people can look at structural oppression is through a lens that they don't also have a role in repeating the system of oppression. Payne gives a great example of this idea in his writing. He gives an example of a bomb process during the Vietnam War and how everyone in the process didn't feel responsible for the eventual killing because they had a small part in the process. This comparison can work in some circumstances but not all. Climate change is the main example that can be applied. People don't feel the responsibility or agency in the process of climate change because they play such a small part.

Connecting the New Mainer's situation to Payne's ideas, we see the New Mainers have little opportunity for agency. The structure is the reason the New Mainers are socially unequal. Blame can be put on the system and state who put the New Mainers in their current position. Opportunities to increase agency can be a way to possibly decrease the system of oppression. Giving the New Mainers more control over their lives can help aid the disparities.

Looking at society as a whole, we can see the systems of oppression are meant to reproduce themselves, sometimes by the people most affected by them. The opportunity to have agency for the oppressed is often taken away by the system of oppression. Examples of this can be seen in educational spaces, where the opportunity of realizing you're in an oppressive system should be discussed, but the curriculum doesn't focus on those issues to keep people passively in the system of oppression. When opportunity does arise, the structure can be so strong and intimidating, leading people to not even try. How society is structured is already against them, so they start to believe that's the way it needs to be because that's the way it's always been. This dialogue could be spoken on for a long time. My perspective on it is also not concrete, meaning I

have an opinion now, but that could very well change in the future because it's such a broad topic.

Personal Theory of Social Change

Oppression stems wide and far. There are many different areas to address. Certain areas that I have been drawn to are immigration rights and issues, role of power in schools, issues around low-income and food security. These are all areas of oppression that I feel connected to. There are many other areas of oppression that interest me other than the ones that I've listed.

For my paper on Critical Theory of social inequity, I wrote about youth I've worked with in Maine called the New Mainers. The New Mainers refer to people that have immigrated to Maine through a program the state adopted a year and a half ago. Most of the immigrants are from Angola and speak mostly portuguese. I analyzed the agency of the New Mainers in Maine and the issues around the program as well as some of the overarching struggles with immigrating to a new place. Some of the conclusions I drew were how the program allowed for a lack of agency for the New Mianers. This was shown through their forced living situation at a hotel without a kitchen or separate rooms. The lack of transportation for the New Mainers was also a factor for why the program is struggling. Of course, the language barrier is an issue for the New Mainers, but English Language Learning teachers have increased all over Southern Maine with the goal of integrating these youth into schools and life. Employment for the adults was also an issue, seeing as how you need to be in Maine for at least six months to be able to start working. Worcester also has a huge population of English Language learners and immigrants, so it would be interesting to do a project relating to work with students in Worcester.

When talking about power in schools, I have always been interested. How youth are controlled in schools has always been a fascinating area that contributes to an area of oppression. The role of disciplining children and how bad behavior is addressed often contributes to systems of oppression. An example of this is how Black children are much more likely to be suspended than White ones. Another area of power in schools I'm interested in is how teachers and staff redirect or direct "bad behavior". Connected to addressing "bad behavior", I also think it's interesting how teachers seek to control kids in classrooms. Mainly, how teachers control kids' bodies and movement. All of these issues around power between schools and children also intersect with other areas of oppression like systemic racism, the prison system and the banking model of education.

Low-income is an area of oppression that intersects with tons of other areas. I am very interested in low-income as an area of oppression because of how much it affects other systems of oppression. Relations with power, racism, food security, and educational attainment are all areas connected to income, as well as so many other things. For most of my life, my family has been on the cusp of being classified as low-income. My family has struggled with money for the majority of my life. I lived paycheck to paycheck for as long as I can remember and have had serious stress of food security, living situation and factors relating to money in general. However, my family's struggle with money didn't affect my trajectory. My parents were both teachers and I always felt connected to my community and classmates. I am interested in income and the cycle of poverty.

Since the start of the Covid pandemic, I started working in public schools in my hometown. I also started to coach baseball and basketball during this time and really enjoyed it. I've played these two sports most of my life and transitioning to coaching and conveying

knowledge and skills to other people interested me. Obviously, I have a ton to learn about coaching but it has become one of my passions relating to youth work.

Related to coaching is another passion I have, health and fitness. In general, I am very interested in exercise, specifically lifting. I've "coached" others who have shown interest in health and fitness and have really enjoyed it. It is another area of life where I love to inspire people and share and expand my knowledge.

In general, I also enjoy working with youth. It started as a job as a camp counselor in high school. The camp was an all activity camp that I had gone to for about ten years. I wanted to create the same sense of fun and enjoyment I had as a camper as a counselor. I realized that I loved to work with and guide such a hopeful, innocent group of people through being a camp counselor.

As mentioned in my positionality and identity paper, I come from a place of privilege. In these spaces where I am choosing to do activist work, I must constantly recognize that privilege to ensure I am in touch with the needs of whomever I am working with.

To be honest, I don't like being pushed out of my comfort zone. That statement is probably true for most people, but I feel like I need to be pushed out of my comfort zone to do really meaningful work in an activist setting. In general, I have anxiety about things and tend to overthink a lot. This leads me to not do things in fear of being uncomfortable, even though I know they would be good for me. An example of this happened a few days ago when I was speaking to one of the staff members at the Boys & Girls club. My goal was to try and figure out if there were areas that his sector in the club wanted or needed more. I was curious if there was room for improvement, in his eyes, as someone integral to the organization. I think I framed the question weirdly so I didn't get the response that was similar to my goal. It took me a bit to work

up the courage to ask him these questions because it felt uncomfortable for me. As a volunteer, it felt strange as someone who was partially an outsider asking what the needs of the club were. I also don't know this person too well yet, so asking questions like this gave me anxiety. But I think it will be integral to my activist work to be pushed out of my comfort zone. I think this is true for most people. The subjects that we deal with in this major are uncomfortable. They recognize systems and people are at fault and contribute to systems of oppression. Embracing some uncomfortability is necessary to address the issues and promote systems of change. Uncomfortability is something I'm trying to work on in all areas of my life, but it will be very important to my development as a Community, Youth and Education Studies major.

Another area of focus when considering my positionality is doing things for the right reason. To explain, I don't want to do this praxis project for mainly my benefit. The issues we often discuss in this major have not been my lived experiences. I don't want to come from a place of privilege and have a savior complex to the work that I hope to accomplish. This comes from my social identity and my role as a Clark student. To give another example, last semester in a youth work class, we were tasked with being connected to an organization that has us connected to working with youth. This is how I originally started volunteering at the Boys & Girls Club. During this process, it felt weird because I was there because I needed to be. I needed to be connected to an organization for my class, so it didn't feel like I was there for the right reasons. Of course, I was helping out the times I volunteered, but it seemed like the need was from my own need from class and not the need of the members involved in the club. This thought process also occurred when I was talking to the staff member at the club about areas for improvement or expansion. I struggled to try and convey that I wanted to make this a mutually beneficial experience, not just something I was required to do for a class. This connects to the

basis of praxis which is working together through a process of reaction and action. Overall, I don't want to come from a privileged position into these spaces and make the work about benefiting my own skills/practices while treating the needs of the others as lesser.

A student in our Socially Just Participatory Research class mentioned at the start of the semester that the class is not just another random class. By saying this, they meant it isn't something to be treated as simply schoolwork, but rather a place to develop practices, thinking and skills for life and careers. Their comment has really stuck with me. While most of school so far has felt like something I've been forced to do and not really been a central actor in, this semester has certainly changed that methodology of thinking. The courses are not just classes, but spaces to develop skills for life and social change. The work feels much more meaningful and less like class.

When examining all of the things said in this paper, it is difficult to come to a conclusion. There is a lot of ambiguity. I am unsure of where I'm at in my journey of theory of social change. What I need to do is get out of my comfort zone, continue to realize my privilege/positionality, and combine my passions with the areas of oppression.