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Privilege as a Moving Target: Re-imagining Privilege for Social Work Practice

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Abstract

Linked to people’s social identities, privilege is largely understood as an unearned asset, which translates to advantages for those to whom it is ascribed. Drawing on a phenomenological research conducted with 20 direct practice social workers in Southwestern Ontario, Canada, this paper suggests an alternative theoretical framework of social constructionism for considering the evolving and shifting dimensions of privilege and its implication for social work practice. By proposing privilege as a moving target, study participants acknowledged the different but fluid categories of social identities and the different contexts of individuals in society. Participants also recognized the advantages that are earned by personal and professional characteristics, which can be experienced or deployed in multiple ways. They also identified internal characteristics such as a sense of agency or autonomy, which is the recognition of the individual as a self-propelling agent with choices even amidst adverse situations. Privilege as a moving target accepts the dynamic physical, ecological, political and sociocultural environments under which social workers operate. Understanding that privilege is a moving target is relevant to professional social work practice because privilege goes to the core of personal and professional identities of social workers as they interact with clients and in society.

Keywords: privilege, critical perspective, social constructionism, moving target, phenomenology
Introduction

This explorative paper examines the privilege experienced by social workers. The concept of privilege is multidimensional and has been used in common parlance to refer to preferences for, and access to certain people, places, or things in society. Formally, it refers to confidential information or communication shared both between professionals and clients, as well as among professionals (Waddell & Rothstein, 2010). In the social science and social work literature, privilege is largely defined as an unearned asset or status that is based on social identities, which translates into advantages, opportunities, benefits, or access to societal resources for those to whom it is assigned (Bailey, 1998; Black & Stone, 2005; Ferber, 2003; McIntosh, 1998; Mullaly, 2002, 2010; Mullaly & West, 2018). Social identities are based on membership in various social groups or categories consisting of people who share a range of physical, cultural, and social characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, gender, age, disability, and class (Cudd, 2005; Howard, 2000). When individuals or groups benefit from institutional practices such as rules, laws, expectations, behaviours, or norms that harm others, they are said to have privilege (Cudd, 2005; Mullaly & West, 2018).

In social work, privilege is often discussed in the contexts of inequality, oppression, social justice, multiculturalism, and diversity (Cagle, 2010; Carniol, 2005; Holody, 1998; Johnson, 2001; Lee & Diaz, 2009; Segal, Gerdes, Stromwall, & Napoli, 2010; Shibutani & Kwan, 1965). The call for critical awareness and self-reflection regarding privilege and its place in social work practice makes this paper highly relevant for social work practitioners, students, educators, administrators, and professional organizations (Cagle, 2010; Carniol, 2005; Johnson, 2001; Lee & Diaz, 2009; Segal et al., 2010).

The Issue with Privilege

Social workers confront issues regarding who in society is privileged or not, who benefits at the expense of whom, who is dominant or subordinate, who is an agent or target, and who is marginalized by, or excluded from the social system based on their social identities and differences in terms of race, sex, gender, or class (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Carniol, 2005; Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Dominelli, 2002; Jupp, 2005). They recognize that privilege has been used to not only confine or restrict people, but also to label, objectify, and dehumanize them based on the value society placed on these different social identities (Curry-Stevens, 2010; Holody, 1998; Lopez, 2010; Mullaly, 2010; Shibutani & Kwan, 1965; Vodde, 2001). However, some scholars have argued that social work has not paid enough attention to the issue of privilege as much as they have been addressing oppression (Ferber, 2003; Mullaly, 2010; Mullaly & West, 2018). They claimed that social work itself is performed within a system of power and oppression that confers privilege on social workers (Baines, 2002; Dominelli, 2002; Ferber, 2003; Leonard, 1997; Rossiter, 2001; Slay & Smith, 2011; Smith, 2008; Weinberg, 2012). As such, social workers should be more aware of how they are implicated within this system (Ferber, 2010; Mullaly, 2010, Mullaly & West, 2018). Indeed, some scholars have recommended that social workers should confront, challenge, and dismantle their privilege because it is potentially harmful to clients (Cagle, 2010; Curry-Stevens, 2010; Ferber, 2010; Greene, 2010; Hobgood, 2000; Holody, 1998; Jones, 2010; Lopez, 2010; Mullaly, 2010; Mullaly & West, 2018: Nicotera & Kang, 2009; Pease, 2010; Vodde, 2001). However, there is a paucity of empirical studies to justify these recommendations.
There may be merit in confronting and challenging privilege, but if it is part of one’s being (Kimmel, 2010; McIntosh, 1998; Rocco & West, 1998; Wise, 2005), how can it be dismantled? Those who have made the recommendations have not adequately demonstrated how to dismantle or relinquish it, nor proposed a workable alternative that is not imbued with privilege (Kimmel, 2010; Kruks, 2005, Mullaly & West, 2018). The need arises, therefore, for social workers to first understand the complexity and lived experience of privilege before investing themselves in the task of dismantling it.

**Conceptual and Practice Problems**

There are some conceptual and practical problems with the way privilege is currently understood in social work practice in terms of unearned advantages in relation to social identities. This is because social identities are not static as originally believed (Shibutani & Kwan, 1965; Witkin, 1999). Categories like race, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability keep on expanding and contracting in society with implications for the privilege attached to them (Gordon, 2004; Ignatiev, 1995; James, 2010; Oliver, 1990; Phillips, 2010; Roediger, 1991, 2005). Likewise, social identities overlap and intersect with the potential to deconstruct what privilege means in the context of multiple identities (Collins, 1990; Jones, 2009; Mandell, 2007; Witkin, 1999). As such, the intersectionality and fluidity of identities make rigid categories problematic as each attribute of identity interacts with others in ways that will make people’s experiences unique and render the concept of privilege suspect or problematic (Collins, 1990; Mandell, 2007; Ray & Rosow, 2012).

Furthermore, social workers are not a homogenous group; they and their clients may share some social identities, though separated by professional status. This implies that some social workers may also be labelled and objectified alongside their clients based on some categories of identity (Riggs, 2011; Smedley, 1993; Swigonsky, 1996; Tehranian, 2000). This, in turn, may result in different manifestations and experiences of privilege that researchers have not sufficiently explored. Similarly, professional and personal privilege overlap and are often inseparable (Badwall, 2014; Rocco & West, 1998), suggesting that the identities embodied by social workers may have to be negotiated to cope with whomever they interact with in their daily practice. For instance, will a White heterosexual able-bodied male social worker experience privilege the same way as another with a disability? Do racial minorities experience the same privilege as their White colleagues in social work practice? Some scholars argued that the use of self in practice is mediated by the social workers’ personal and professional identities (Arnd-Caddigan & Pozzuto, 2008; Collins, 1990; Zufferey, 2012).

Also, within the context of social work, multiple identities may create different experiences for social workers as well as tensions and contradictions in their practice (Hole, 2007; Holody, 1998; Weinberg, 2007; Witkin, 1999). Furthermore, defining privilege as unearned advantages also excludes the advantages that are earned by education, qualification, accreditation, and employment, which could confer more unearned advantages on professionals (Bailey, 1998; Bourdieu, 1986; Rocco & West, 1998). Though one could argue that access to education itself could be considered an unearned advantage depending on a person’s circumstances, the connection between what is unearned and earned should be explored for a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon of privilege (Rocco & West, 1998; Weinberg, 2012). Understanding the phenomenon of privilege is relevant to professional social work.
practice because privilege goes to the core of personal and professional identities of social workers as they interact with their clients (Kimmel, 2010; Rocco & West, 1998).

**Critical Perspective versus Social Constructionism**

The critical perspective has been the primary lens to analyze privilege in social work literature and its contribution needs to be acknowledged (Baines, 2000; Dominelli, 2002; Ferber, 2003; Mullaly, 2010). Based on Marxist ideology, proponents of the critical perspective examine power relations and the structure of inequality in society that gives rise to privilege and oppression as a dialectic phenomenon (Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2010). Their goal is structural change, societal transformation, and the liberation of the oppressed (Freire, 1968). The premise of the critical perspective is that there is stratification (i.e., ranking and hierarchy) in every society that is based on social differences, such as wealth or class, race, sex, sexual orientation, age, ability, religion, and ethnicity. This stratification produces categories of people and groups, making some dominant and others subordinate (Baines, 2002; Carniol, 2005; Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2002; Hick, Fook, & Pozzuto, 2005; Mullaly, 2002, 2010). Moreover, this perspective holds that the society is set up to protect the interests of the dominant groups and individuals to the detriment of subordinate groups and their members (Mullaly, 2010).

One of the limitations of the critical perspective, however, is that rather than considering the categories that result from stratification as fluid—as social constructionism does—it takes on essentialist features and subsequently considers them as natural, objective, and immutable as if people cannot escape the group or category into which they are assigned by society (Cudd, 2005; Heyes, 2000; Rocco & West, 1998). Furthermore, it promotes an either/or viewpoint, producing winners and losers, haves and have nots, privileged and oppressed, assuming that all human transactions and interactions are a zero-sum game where the “winner-takes-all” (Coston & Kimmel, 2012).

Moreover, this perspective regards social workers as agents of the state, with power over their client systems (Ferber, 2003; Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2010). For instance, some critical theorists examined the ways in which some social workers, especially in child welfare agencies and social welfare service administration, have handled issues of privilege, and concluded that social workers can be oppressive in their practice (Baines, 2002; Dominelli, 2002; Leonard, 1997; Margolin, 1997). This does not, however, represent the entire social work profession. Nevertheless, to their credit, they have provided categories, which serve as starting points for understanding social divisions in society. The critical perspective has some explanatory power that could aid social workers’ understanding of the dynamics of privilege within hegemonic social structures.

However, social constructionism helps to transcend the rigid dichotomies and essentialist nature of the critical perspective in a way that informs and enriches the discourse of privilege. Social constructionism is a theory of knowledge that proposes that meanings, understandings, and social realities are created within social interactions and through language conventions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 1995; Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Hacking, 1999; Stam, 2001). With roots in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and symbolic interactionism, proponents of social constructionism posit that the world is too ambiguous and the process of knowing is too convoluted. Therefore, they believe that a social phenomenon has to be created, institutionalized,
maintained, and reaffirmed in order for that phenomenon to exist or persist (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Durkheim & Thompson, 1985; Harre, 2002; Hart & McKinnon, 2010; Pearce, 2009; Stam, 2001). As explained by Hacking (1999), what is socially constructed applies to what is taken for granted, as if its existence is inevitable, yet it needs not to have existed at all, or exist in its present form, and it could also could be transformed or eliminated altogether. The implication is that what is socially constructed is neither natural nor inherent, but contingent on socio-historical processes and highly dependent on human judgement (Hacking, 1999). Though Hacking (1999) accepted that there might be a legitimate basis for a phenomenon or concept to exist by itself, he held that our ideas, perception, understanding, or conceptualization of that phenomenon would be socially constructed.

However, it is worth noting that social constructionism is not a single or unified position. Some scholars regard it as a position, movement, theory, or an orientation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Forster & Bochner, 2008; Gergern & Gergen, 2003, 2007, 2008; Stam, 2001), though, all its approaches share similar ideas about the nature of knowledge, language, and reality. For example, Berger and Luckmann (1966) who popularized social constructionism in North America posited that social realities have a degree of objectivity, which is produced interactively over time through language systems and other stories, routines, rules and practices. Within this framework, language is not only representational but also constitutive of reality. Some scholars stated that language could reveal or conceal, as it applies to both worldly items and our beliefs about them, all of which are shaped by social forces (Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Hackings, 1999; Pearce, 2009). Also, from this perspective, there is no absolute or objective truth, only different interpretations of truth (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Stam, 2001). This perspective also holds that there is no reality outside of human experience, therefore, the meanings people assign to their experiences are important (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The major criticism of social constructionism is its susceptibility to relativism. Foster and Bochner (2008), for instance, suggested that nothing would be real if everything is socially constructed. However, they admitted that relativism does not lead to retreat from life or political engagement. Similarly, Pfohl (2008) argued that the things we regard as real are not just seen as relative, but also relational and complex. Likewise, Cromby and Nightingale (1999) suggested that social constructionism may be relative but not arbitrary. It was their opinion that reality emerges through social processes that are already shaped by diverse influences, such as power relationships and material resources (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999).

Social constructionism has also been criticized for focusing exclusively on language and discourse without paying enough attention to embodiment, materiality, and power (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999). Cunliffe (2008) has addressed part of this critique with the introduction of the three orientations to social constructionism. I also agree that as much as language is central to everyday life and experience, not all things are reducible to language and discourse. However, the understanding of privilege will require that one considers the role of language and discourse in many contexts and societies. For this paper, social constructionism provides a framework for privilege as a phenomenon that is relative, contextual, subjective, and capable of many descriptions. As Pearce (2009) stated, these descriptions are not neutral but interpretive. Social constructionism enables us to understand that different realities of privilege may exist simultaneously (Hacking, 1999; Pearce, 2009).
Drawing on a research conducted with 20 direct practice social workers, the goal of this paper is to document the lived experience of social workers regarding their privilege and explore the meanings and understanding they ascribed to privilege. Research questions considered include: How do social workers understand privilege? What gives them a sense of privilege? How do they describe their experience of privilege in social work practice? How do their interactions with clients shape their experience of privilege? These questions were predicated on the assumption that individuals construct their own reality based on their lived experience viz-a-viz their social and professional context (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

**Methodology**

To understand participants’ lived experience of privilege, this qualitative study used the hermeneutic phenomenology of Van Manen (1997), which permits the researcher to answer broad questions involving both description and interpretation of a phenomenon. It also accepts multiple and conflicting interpretations of lived experiences as well as the co-construction of reality between researcher and participants (Van Manen, 1997, 2007). This methodology enabled the researcher to understand the multiplicity and nuances within the individual participant’s view on privilege as well as patterns and themes arising from the multiple views of other participants (Van Manen, 1997).

**Sampling**

I used purposive sampling (Groenawald, 2004; Patton, 2002) to collect data from participants based on a variety of demographic characteristics (e.g. age, race, sex, sexual orientation, gender, and religion) and professional characteristics (e.g. level of education, years of experience, context of practice and practice approach). In addition, I used snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) to expand the recruitment process by asking current participants to recommend others who were different from them in terms of gender, sexuality, race, practice setting and theoretical orientation. Sample frame included social workers in direct practice (defined as face-to-face interaction with clients such as individuals, groups, and families) across Southwestern Ontario. Excluded were social workers in indirect practice settings such as administration, policy making, program evaluation and research groups.

**Demographic information**

Of the 20 participants, 13 identified as female and 7 as male; 14 as White and racial diversity included Black (3), Indigenous (1), South Asian (1), and Latino (1). Their ages ranged from 25-60 years-old ($M = 37.5$) and years of practice experience 1 to 30 years ($M = 9.5$). Most participants (18) had a master’s degree in social work, and 2 held a Bachelor of Social Work degree. They worked in a variety of settings including youth justice system (4), hospital (4), child welfare (3), youth mental health (3), private practice (3), addictions (1), university student advising (1), and Indigenous and housing services (1).

**Ethics**

All ethical protocols (regarding informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary nature of the research, and lack of deception) were observed as approved by the Institutional Research Board. All participants received a $20 Tim Hortons’ gift card in appreciation of their willingness to
participate in the research (Largent, Grady, Miller, & Wertheimer, 2012). The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council supported this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Since the researcher is an instrument of data collection, interpretation, and analysis (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), I had the capacity to bring my personal and professional contexts into the research process. For this study, I reflectively employed all my subjectivities (Bradshaw, Armour, & Roseborough, 2007) as a Black male immigrant social worker to collect information from participants regarding their experience of privilege within the context of social work practice in Canada. As a first-generation immigrant and a racial minority, I came from a place of humility to inquire about the experience of others. I communicated my curiosity and eagerness to learn from my participants by my body language, posture and respectful attitude towards them.

I collected data through semi-structured, in-depth interviews (ranging from 51-115 minutes, $M$: 71 minutes), captured on digital tape and transcribed verbatim (Enosh, Ben-Ari, & Buchbinder, 2008). The questions were based on literature and practice wisdom. Probes were used to encourage participants to provide thick description regarding their experience of privilege. All interviews were conducted at participants’ offices.

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously (Penner & McClement, 2008). I used open, bottom-up coding in the first cycle to compile relevant and significant information from the transcripts based on the research question (Saldana, 2013). The second cycle was hierarchical coding whereby I re-arranged and refined the codes, expanding or collapsing them in categories and subcategories in an iterative manner (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). I used a qualitative data analysis software, Nvivo 11, to arrange, sort, and store codes for comparison, contrasts, and easy retrieval of data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). I also used memos to document my thoughts, questions, insights and observation about each interview and to reflect on my coding process.

Furthermore, I employed different strategies to ensure rigour and trustworthiness in the research process (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). For instance, I did within-case and across-case analysis to arrive at themes, which I then sent out to all participants for verification and member-checking as a means of ensuring credibility in the findings. I also used peer debriefing by asking colleagues who had experience with the topic area and method to provide feedback on the research process (Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006). This also met the criterion of confirmability as research findings were derived from the experience of participants and also confirmed by them and others who reviewed the results. Likewise, to test the transferability of findings, I engaged a diverse group of 25 MSW students in a course on social justice and social change to reflect on the findings as they relate to their own contexts or practice settings. Lastly, to ensure dependability, I maintained an audit trail and reflective field notes throughout the research process. The resulting themes identify broad agreements as well as variations and nuances in participants’ experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The major theme that emerged was a description of the essence of privilege as experienced by direct practice social workers in diverse practice settings.

Results
Privilege as a “moving target” is the foundational theme emerging from this study. Indeed, all participants expressed their understanding of the phenomenon of privilege within their own specific personal, socio-historical, economic, cultural, racial, and professional contexts. The idea of privilege as a “moving target” reveals that the phenomenon cannot be restricted to any single feature or characteristic. Each participant experienced privilege in various dimensions, and so, their definitions and descriptions of privilege were similar, yet diverse. They all agreed that privilege is linked or assigned to the various social identities of the social worker, such as race, ethnicity, age, disability, biological sex, gender, and markers of socioeconomic status (SES), including class. They expressed that these identities are dynamic as people interact in society. Furthermore, privilege as a moving target also applies to one’s achievements in the society and their ability for self-determination. With the use of pseudo-names, the following narratives express the different ways in which privilege is a moving target.

**Social Identities as Unearned Privilege**

All participants suggested that social identities constitute the differences that distinguish human beings in society, and these identities are targets of privilege. They include age and race, ethnicity and religion, sex and gender, sexual orientation, disability, and class, most of which are ascribed at birth. That prompted Heather, a 25-year-old White woman to say:

"I didn't really do anything to be born into the family that I was born, or the race that I was born, but other people view it as, umm, I guess being like… like above other people, without you intentionally putting yourself. So, I guess my access, my access to resources would maybe come more easily."  

All participants regarded privilege through birth as unearned. This easy access to resources because of one’s birth makes privilege lopsided, according to Tiffany, a 34-year-old, White woman with physical disabilities, who argued that privilege is neither authentic nor absolute.

"I think, for me, when I think of privilege in a traditional sense, I would see it as something very lopsided. Some people are born with myriad of choices and opportunities, and other people are born with… in poverty and abuse, or whatever, and what I'm saying is, as an adult I've come to the realization that those things can be evened out, more or less, because we can make a choice about our lives and what they are going to be shaped as."  

Tiffany declared that privilege fluctuates, while Trevor, a 25-year-old Latino man, regarded it as uneven because it is based on a different starting point for everyone, even those born within the same family. As he expressed it,

"Umm… it’s uneven because, not everyone starts at the same point, so privilege.... from birth, based on societal norms or on societal expectations, umm people are... at birth have different start off or different levels in life. And umm just because we have, you can have ten babies the exact same birthday, exact same gender, but they all would have different levels of privilege. So even from birth, you know, there will always.... people will have different levels of privilege depending on the routes, the process, or the journey of life they have.  

The privilege linked to social identities is not static, according to many participants. It “shifts according to history, culture…and new understanding in society,” said Alanna, a 58-year-old woman.
Taiwo

old White woman. Many other participants agreed with her. For example, Toni, a 50-year-old woman, suggested that birth is related to country of origin and the period of history to which one is born, as well as the rights and freedoms available in that era. This is corroborated by Jade, a 37-year-old White, woman who discussed the “social conditions” into which an individual is born as determinants of privilege. To Jade, these social conditions include the economic condition of the family, the value system regarding education, the advancement of technology, and social and historical advancements “like the recognition of women as persons – as compared to early 1900s.” Social conditions also include religious belief systems that could make people “healthier and happier,” as well as the social networks in terms of friends, neighbours, and neighbourhood. There is a consensus that these social conditions provide the context for privilege and could enhance or limit citizens’ participation in the society.

Many participants also understood privilege by comparing or contrasting individuals and groups of people based on their social identities. Some argued that most people who have privilege are usually unaware of it until it is brought to their attention. For example, Ajua, a 28-year-old Black woman, regarded privilege as “the ability to not have an awareness” of, or to take for granted something that gives a person or a group of persons an advantage over others. Likewise, Heather described privilege as possessing characteristics that place some individuals “a step ahead of others” and as “being met with positive prejudices.”

Finally, Joseph regarded privilege as the unacknowledged benefits of social identities that prevent or reduce barriers for some and provide opportunities for others. It is “not having to deal with adversarial challenges or situations or barriers” (Josh) or being able to “have a smooth experience in society” (Eva). Jody, a 31-year-old White woman, simply declared privilege as “just the way it is for me.”

Professional Status as Earned Privilege

Beyond the privilege that is attached to social identities, some participants discussed the privilege that is linked to the professional status of the social worker. This is the privilege that is earned, gained, or attained because of certain efforts or actions. For all participants, this effort is related to education. As Naomi, a 27-year-old White woman explained this,

Privilege I think is… it’s a really broad topic. Privilege is something, I think, that can be understood in a lot of different ways, you know. I think sometimes people think of it as sort of this set of assets that have been given to you, ah, without any merit or without earning it, but I think also privilege can be something, umm, that people strive towards as well. I think they can gain privilege that they may not have had before, and when I say that, I mean, you know, maybe coming from a family who didn’t have, ah, strong economic background or education, and so a child in that circumstance might not have that privilege growing up, but they can come into that privilege later on by working towards it.

Naomi recounted that she was the first person in her family to attain post-secondary education, and that she was proud to have a master’s degree in social work. Similarly, for Kevin, a 60-year-old White man, his graduate education in social work, in addition to his master’s degree in divinity, afforded him the privilege to practice social work. He characterized privilege as a gift, duty, calling, and “an obligation to service.” He further described it as the “opportunity to be
invited into people’s lives,” to listen to their stories and “to work with them around issues in their lives that they want to make some changes in.” Likewise, for Toni, privilege is simply “being a therapist.” For Richard, privilege “gives you a sort of credence and credibility to do or not do something” for the client. He suggested that social workers can “temper, adjust, or reset a relationship for the better” by their involvement with clients.

Referring to professional status, Monique, a 53-year-old White woman, emphasized that “privilege is the expectation of the client regarding the expertise of the social worker.” She explained that clients expect help from social workers and assume that social workers have the knowledge, skills and resources to provide relevant services for them. As Heather summed this up,

Being a social worker is a profession, and you get paid for helping others, so that in itself is power and it doesn't matter what race or gender or social class you come from, you automatically have more power over your client, and that's why your client is coming to see you, and they in a way, they need your power and that's why they're coming to you… If they, for example, for me I have access to the food bank, they need the food bank, so I… in my position of power I can help them access the food bank, and they, they need me to have that power or else there wouldn't be a food bank, … there needs to be that power differential or else we wouldn't have anyone helping anyone ‘cause nobody would have power and nobody would be able to, sort of, give someone an upper hand.

However, to the extent that privilege can be earned or gained by education and professional status, some participants suggested that privilege can also be lost. Tiffany argued, for instance, that privilege could be maintained only with “perseverance, efficacy, and drive.” She explained that a social worker can maintain privilege after accreditation by practicing competently and ethically, paying necessary professional dues, and being subject to the Social Workers’ Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. Tiffany pointed out that social workers are routinely disciplined for unethical practice and behaviours, so their privilege should not be taken for granted.

Privilege as Agency

Many participants referred to privilege as the ability to have a sense of agency, to make decisions in different situations, and exercise rights without being judged. Having a sense of agency for Michael, a 42-year-old White man, is “the ability to pursue goals and have one’s basic needs met.” Tyesha, a 39-year-old Black woman, regarded it as being assertive and independent, suggesting,

Like you are almost like your own person, you can do some…you don’t have to consider somebody else’s influence on your life, you can decide, I’m the captain of my own ship …and you can do that without the fear that somebody else is going to impose their own will on you.

Privilege as agency is one’s ability for self-determination. It is related to having a sense of freedom to live in society as desired. Michael illustrated this point by stating that “privilege enables the individual to maximize their potentials, pursue contentment, access opportunities, peace, safety and security, and live freely in terms of all their social identities.” For Michael,
privilege is the capacity to exercise rights and freewill without fear, having the freedom of choice, and being free from the judgement of others or from societal pressure.

In contrast to all the above, Richard, a 43-year-old Indigenous man, asserted that privilege “isn’t necessarily anything you obtained or earned... it just may be what people assume about you.” For Richard, society has a way of viewing individuals and making assumptions about them. He argued that these assumptions may change over time as people change their views depending on prevailing circumstances. As such, privilege itself will keep unfolding.

In summary, based on participants’ responses, there are numerous forms of privilege, manifesting in several ways in different contexts, including family of origin, race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and professional status. Privilege can also be earned and unearned, as well as gained or lost. It is subtle, uneven, mostly invisible and, therefore, unnoticeable for many who have it. It also fluctuates depending on contexts, circumstances, and period of history. In addition, not everyone is privileged the same way, and the different degrees and manifestations of privilege make it a moving target. As Trevor illustrated it,

So in one setting I may feel that my privilege may be beneficial, gain more control, more power, then in another setting it may not be. So even though I may have privilege in one setting, in the other setting I may have another privilege, someone else's privilege may trump my own privilege, which takes away the power or the control

That is perhaps why Josh said,

So now you're really just talking about it as a social construct, and how people view things and how they label things, and measure things, and judge people, and put, put those kinds of measures on things, umm, but not everybody is privileged in every area, I would say.

In conclusion, the theme of privilege as a moving target is, therefore, about recognizing and appreciating what Jade called the “variances in privilege.”

**Discussion**

Study findings suggest that it is difficult to define privilege. The overwhelming word, as revealed by Nvivo 11 software, in a text-search query, was “Umm,” with attendant pauses and silences that ranged from participant to participant. I regarded these silences as moments for introspection regarding participants’ perspectives and experiences.

Many participants explained that they had never attempted to define privilege as it related to their own experience. This could be because privilege is usually not a topic that naturally comes up for discussion at work, or as Watt (2007) argued, it is a difficult subject to discuss, assumedly because it is charged with negative emotions. It may also be because privilege is denied (Wise, 2005) or taken for granted by those who have it (Mullaly, 2010; Rocco & West, 1998). This invisibility or obliviousness of privilege is what one participant described as “not having an awareness.” This study supports the notion that those who are most aware of privilege are those to whom it has not been ascribed. In this study, a White female participant narrated how an “outsider” enabled her to look inwardly to identify all the markers of privilege in her life. In contrast, visible minority participants, irrespective of their sex and gender, stated that they
were often aware of their racial differences and the privilege they did not have. Furthermore, while the literature suggests there is an aspect of obliviousness to privilege (McIntosh, 1998; Mullaly & West, 2018), it is particularly interesting that some study participants who were White, easily acknowledged their privilege and spoke about having a sense of gratitude for it. This suggests that the acknowledgement of privilege is on a spectrum ranging from denial and obliviousness to acceptance and gratitude, as social workers examine their social identities.

**Privilege of social identities.** By describing privilege as part of lived experience that is connected to one’s family of origin, race, class, sex, gender, and the “start off circumstances” that enable people to have “a smooth experience in society,” many participants confirmed privilege as unearned advantages and entitlements “granted solely as a birthright” (Black & Stone, 2005, p. 243; Mullaly & West, 2018). This routine privilege (Segal et al., 2010) is endemic and systematically entrenched in society, providing status and benefits to individuals belonging to certain groups that are valued in society. From this description, people may have or lack privilege, depending on their social identities, as understood through the critical perspective. However, in addition to the above, privilege is found to be a relative phenomenon, in which case one could have more or less of it depending on circumstances. What is demonstrated here, therefore, is that even though the concept of privilege is challenged within all its categories, the term could not be eliminated, but seen as fluid and uneven.

Two participants pointed out the unevenness of privilege when they cautioned that people born in the same household with virtually all the same attributes, may not have the same privilege. As such, even within the same context, the description of privilege shifts from the stability of social identities, which the critical perspective assumes (Black & Stone, 2005; Kruks, 2005), to the variability of social identities, which social constructionism promotes (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Jones, 2010; Lopez, 2010). The multiplicity of identities and contexts, therefore, makes privilege a dynamic concept. The implication is that though privilege may be more salient for specific identities, one may not necessarily be stuck with or encumbered by it; rather, depending on contexts, the label could be assigned, reassigned, shed, or resumed.

**Moving target.** The understanding of privilege as a moving target is a unique contribution of this study to the literature as it underscores the dynamism of what privilege is connected to, such as social identities, professional status, and a sense of agency. For instance, it suggests that social identities are not static but are fluid and evolve over time. Participants revealed that identities such as race and ethnicity, as well as sex and gender, shift “with new understandings” and according to history, prevailing values, culture, and even with technological advancements in society. Participants also maintained that identities morph into and shape each other, making privilege very dynamic in participants’ lived experiences. For instance, nuances of identities that affect one’s sense of privilege include but are not limited to the ranges of race (uni-racial, biracial, and multiracial), the variabilities of sexuality (homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, pansexual, and asexual), the progression or appearance of age, the visibility and invisibility of disabilities, the fluidity of gender, and the dynamics of class in a neoliberal society. All these could shape or change the experience and subjective meaning of privilege. To the extent that all these identities are complex and uneven, the privilege attached to them becomes relative and sometimes intractable. The fluidity of these identities makes privilege a moving target.
Furthermore, this study revealed that privilege is also a moving target because it goes beyond social identities to apply to professional status. This is consistent with Rocco and West (1998) that the intersection of earned and unearned assets is “countless and complex, affecting the discussion of privilege in too numerous ways” (p. 173). However, professional privilege as the earned dimension of privilege, gained through education and employment, is more recognized by scholars in sociology, adult education, and political science, than social work (Bourdieu, 1986, 1989; Curry-Stevens, 2010; Rocco & West, 1998; Weinberg, 2007; Wendt & Seymour, 2010). Though professional privilege is earned, participants in this study demonstrated that their unearned privilege had an impact on their professional status and practice. Moreover, unlike the unearned privilege of social identities, professional privilege cannot be taken for granted. It can be lost if not appropriately maintained. Nevertheless, what is largely unknown is how to demarcate when unearned privilege crosses over to earned privilege or when earned advantages compound unearned advantages.

Privilege as agency. While existing literature identified birth, race, class, and other social identities as markers of privilege (Black & Stone, 2005; Kruks, 2005), it did not give enough attention or adequate recognition to individual efforts, choices, or the agency of individuals to change their circumstances. Privilege as agency, according to participants, is the ability to make autonomous decisions in different circumstances, being able to exercise rights and freedoms, pursue contentment, and access opportunities while utilizing one’s voice and maximizing potentials. Having the capacity to be self-determined with the resources to live the quality of life that is important to someone as an autonomous person is an important dimension of privilege.

Undoubtedly, the conceptualization of privilege as agency is compatible with the notion of agency and self-efficacy proposed by Bandura (1997), who defined agency as the “power to originate actions for given purposes,” with self-efficacy being a constitutive factor in agency (p. 3). However, agency in social work is normally described in terms of self-determination regarding clients (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005). Study participants made it very clear that the social workers’ agency is very important in the determination of what constitutes privilege in the social workers’ practice.

The analogy of privilege as a moving target also calls into question the idea of agent and target statuses as if these statuses are permanent (Adams, et al., 1997; Carniol, 2005; Mullaly, 2010). Though the theme of privilege as a moving target does not totally nullify agent and target statuses, it disrupts the stability of those terms and draws attention to the variabilities and multiplicity of identities.

By proposing privilege as a moving target, study participants acknowledged the different but fluid categories of social identities and the different contexts of individuals in society. Participants also acknowledged the advantages that are earned by virtue of personal and professional characteristics, which can be experienced in multiple ways. Privilege as a moving target accepts the dynamic physical, ecological, political and sociocultural environments under which social workers operate. It also goes beyond existing literature to acknowledge internal characteristics like a sense of agency or autonomy, which is the recognition of the individual as a self-propelling agent with choices even amidst adverse situations.

From these findings, I am led to believe that the fixed and essential notion of privilege – as something someone has to the detriment of others – obscures the diverse meanings of privilege
for social work knowledge development and could block the holistic understanding of the phenomenon. The essence of privilege is the advantages it creates and confers on individuals and groups in diverse contexts and circumstances. Without specific contexts, privilege can never be what it is.

**Conceptual and Theoretical Contributions**

By exploring the lived experience of professional social workers in Canada, this study contributes to social work knowledge and expands the literature on privilege. Findings from this study suggest that it may be important to include more content on privilege in the social work curriculum, especially for contemporary social work practice. The Canadian Association for Social Work Education’s (CASWE, 2014) *Standards for Accreditation*, for example, states that understanding issues of diversity is a core competence required of all social workers. One of the core learning objectives for students is that they must “recognize diversity and difference as a crucial and valuable part of living in a society” (CASWE, 2014, p. 11). Findings from this study can inform this guideline. For example, privilege should not only be taught from the critical perspective but also from the social constructionist perspective. Students need to understand privilege as a relative phenomenon that one could have more or less of depending on context. They should also know that the intersections of identities and contexts make privilege a dynamic concept. It is therefore imperative that social work students and practitioners understand the multidimensionality of privilege as a moving target so that they can pay close attention not only to their own social identities but also their contexts of practice, their own sense of agency, autonomy, independence, and self-reliance, as well as their clients’ multiple identities and how these may affect presenting problems.

Using social constructionism, this study has provided a more comprehensive understanding of privilege, as that which is complex, relational, multidimensional, and contextual. This study has generated new knowledge about privilege as a moving target by proposing that privilege is not only connected to social identities, which are unearned, but also to earned professional status, and to personal agency, irrespective of, or in addition to, social identities and professional status. As social workers increasingly practice in a multicultural context, learning about the multidimensionality and complexity of privilege will become part of their cultural and professional competency and personal growth (Greene, 2010; Heydt & Sherman, 2005; Marsiglia & Kulis, 2009; Yan & Wong, 2005).
References


