

**Evaluation of Awareness through Performance's Impact on Students' Awareness  
July 15, 2007**

**By Dr. Mark Malisa and Ms. Beth A. Hartung**

The study's aim was to inquire into how University Students' current professional and personal self-concepts and living practices relate to their understanding of power and privilege before, and after exposure to *Awareness through Performance*. Our findings leave us optimistic that progress is being made and that exposure to issues of power and privilege through *Awareness through Performance* enhance students' understanding of the two. This study also considers the level of students' understanding of power and privilege, and compares that with the level of understanding by students who did not attend *Awareness through Performance*. The depth of understanding is based on the responses that students submitted voluntarily. While *Awareness through Performance* is one of the campus-wide resources for teaching students about the relationship between power and privilege, the research highlights that educators need to carefully consider the strategies they use to develop and gauge students' understanding of power and privilege. The study examined the type of things/situations that students associated with power and privilege. It was predicted that *Awareness through Performance* would change the quality and quantity of students' understanding of power and privilege. This hypothesis was supported by the results from both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The implications of the findings are discussed in relation to existing theory and suggestions for subsequent research and professional practice are made.

Oppositional culture theory has been primarily used to explain race and ethnic differences in understanding of power and privilege. The underlying assumption, then, is that biological racial identity determines understanding of power and privilege.

Responses based on survey data fail to support the theory. In *Awareness through Performance* we examine race/ethnic and gender differences with respect to the two main components of oppositional culture theory: power and privilege. In our survey analyses, we found evidence that supports the thesis that oppositional culture accounts for race/ethnic differences in understanding power and privilege. However, oppositional culture does appear to play a key role in explaining why male students tend to fluctuate a lot in their understanding of power and privilege in situations that are similar to female students.

#### *Awareness through Performance*

The pedagogical underpinnings of *Awareness through Performance* resonate with what McLaren (2005) describes as democratic pedagogies. Included among the many intentions of democratic pedagogies is the social justice and equity, together with critical analysis and transformation of society. Most of the scenarios depict the existential dilemmas that permeate not only University life, but American society in general. While a number of scenarios portray dystopia, the overall intention is for the audience to rethink situations that make privilege and injustice possible, thereby inhibiting the creation and sustenance of a truly just community. Typical situations include homophobia, hate incidents, racism, classism, and xenophobia. In all circumstances, the intention is move the university community beyond practices that negate diversity and acceptance of human differences.

The situations and scenarios depicted are created by the students, and reflect their lived experiences in communities and societies where they have to negotiate and struggle to be treated as human beings. Nearly all the scenarios are created in community, and

allow for mutual critique and solidarity. Individually as well as collectively, the performers portray ways in which they work towards a better and human society. At times, visual images from different media, as well as music, reinforce the messages that the performers hope the audience will get.

Recent trends in post-secondary education have increasingly emphasized the overall campus atmosphere as the unit of change, and especially the importance of understanding the workings of power and privilege to the advantage and detriment of various groups. The theory underlying systemic or system wide educational reform is that powerful improvements in teaching and learning can come from developing coherence and alignment across the complex and different elements and components of an educational system, and that these help in the retention of predominantly underprivileged students and those considered minorities in predominantly White institutions. Most universities in the United States are involved in reform efforts aimed at creating hospitable campus climates in which human differences are valued and cherished. Such reform efforts and evaluations involve several distinct challenges for educators and administrators including capturing the system as the unit of intervention, assessing the alignment and coherence between components within the system, and identifying reasonable external comparison groups. This is particularly so with the University of Wisconsin System in its attempt to provide equitable education for all students.

It has also become a trend to have University students play an active role in creating a better and more welcoming campus climate for their peers and for others different from them. At the Campus Climate Office we believe student participation is an integral part of a university's self-understanding, and for the youth's understanding of

both power and privilege, and the attempts at creating a better society. For this reason, this study provides a different angle on the increasing involvement by young people, the evaluation roles they play, and draws conclusions from the said students understanding of power and privilege from their evaluation of a project intended to increase awareness of, and sensitivity to power and privilege.

*Awareness through Performance* was performed at different sites in La Crosse, Wisconsin. For most researchers, the evaluation of an exercise delivered across multiple sites over different periods presents a unique opportunity for evaluators to gauge the manner and degree to which each performance varies across implementation conditions and different target populations. In addition, gauging evaluations from multiple sites, while presenting the opportunity for more sophisticated impact assessment, also presents challenges when it comes to the analysis of results. In this study we were cognizant of the different sites. However, results of the investigation indicated that site/location did not affect significantly the understanding of privilege and power. Further, results indicated that exposure to *Awareness through Performance*, as well as race, class, sex, and ability had a significant role in students' understanding of power and privilege.

*Awareness through Performance* uses a set of scenarios derived from everyday life to present the challenges and opportunities that are faced by people from different ethnic, religious, sexual, cultural, and (dis)ability backgrounds. Each scenario depicts situations in which the participants deal with their everyday dilemmas. Most scenarios are from an interdisciplinary perspective, and thus offer opportunities for collaboration across disciplines from different departments in the university. Collaboration with other departments, especially while attempting to build a better campus climate, possesses a

strong capacity for addressing complex issues including power and privilege. For those concerned with improving the quality of institutions, system-wide collaboration has become no less than an imperative. Nevertheless, evaluators and administrators often struggle to ascertain the quality of collaborative dynamics and the advantages of collaborative structures. On a few occasions, students indicated they had come across discussions of power and privilege in other classes/courses.

Increasingly, universities, foundations, and others are asking societal focused agencies for more evaluation information. The answers to the questions in the survey are intended to serve as the basis for future discussions about building improving sensitivity and awareness of both power and privilege.

*Awareness through Performance* addresses real-life dilemmas faced by students from different backgrounds. The scenarios advocated for inclusion of diverse groups as well as the challenges that both dominant and subordinate groups face. Among the issues addressed in the scenarios were cultural and historical circumstances that determined perceptions of power and privilege. One of the intended outcomes of *Awareness through Performance* is awareness of the need to redress inequalities by giving precedence, or at least equal weight, to the voice of the least advantaged groups in society who may not have sufficient power for accurate representation among the dominant group. From the survey responses, we are better positioned to investigate and evaluate University Students' perceptions of power and privilege in a medium-sized Midwestern University.

### **Awareness of Privilege**

Student responses reflected differences in awareness of power and privilege, and often times there was a correlation ship between race, sex, class, ability, sexual

orientation and levels of awareness related to the workings of power and privilege. Although the majority of the respondents were white, many had not critically examined the advantages and privileges that come with being white in the Midwest prior to attending *Awareness through Performance*. Most of the respondents who did not attend *Awareness through Performance* viewed race as insignificant in determining power and privilege in American society. Most could not or chose not to say how they understood or defined privilege, could not explain how power and privilege are connected, could not or chose not to respond to the manifestations and effects of power and privilege in society and in the University setting, and generally had not taken any roles to combat both power and privilege. Within these respondents “whiteness is rarely assailed as a racialized practice of power and privilege...because of its ubiquitous and invisible presence,” (McLaren, 2005, p. 190). In a similar fashion, this sub-group showed little to no awareness of the political and social implications associated with racial identity. Many saw no connection between racial identity and social consciousness. Many who identified themselves as white in this sub-group saw themselves as under attack by minorities who were recipients of scholarships or other services that they could not apply for. For the most part, this sub-group viewed minorities as outsiders who were parasitic in their dependence on whites. Especially in the area of scholarships, many saw ethnic minorities as generally undeserving recipients of scholarships, and as people who had privilege by virtue of their ethnic identity.

In contradistinction, those who attended *Awareness through Performance* reflected a stronger grasp of the workings of power and privilege in American society. Even among those who identified themselves as white, there was an acknowledgement of

the socio-economic and political advantages associated with being white. Many acknowledged that because they were white, they were not subjected to ridiculous surveillances, could live in areas of their choice, could gain employment in areas where others would be disadvantaged because of their race and could celebrate Western traditions and holidays without being subjected to ridicule. Many pointed out the significance of being able to be excused from work during Christmas or Easter, and other Christian holidays. Even in the area of scholarships, those who attended *Awareness through Performance* had a different view of privilege and power. This subgroup viewed the scholarships that minorities received as a relatively small share compared with the privileges that the dominant group was exposed to. For this subgroup, there was a strong awareness of the need to contest both power and privilege, and often times both power and privilege were associated with race and the practice of racism. In general, this group had moved from a we-they mentality, (Sleeter, 1996).

In addition, respondents in this group were aware that there were social, economic, and political consequences that went with being non-white/powerful/privileged. For example, many remarked that they could afford to live in places of their choice, could work where they desired, and had an advantage when it came to applying for jobs as most employers would feel comfortable with hiring someone like them. In other words, even though they disliked the association of power and privilege with racism, they were also aware of the fact that they benefited from a racist society.

Awareness of power and privilege was stronger in those who identified themselves as minorities, or whites who are in interracial families, have friends who are

from different (no-white) ethnic groups, or are in interracial relationships. Among the respondents who identified themselves as white, those who were in interracial relationships or had multiethnic families identified the ways in which being white gave them certain advantages over their non-white partners or relatives. Some gave specific examples of the ways they saw non-whites treated differently by society and the public system. Among the examples were treatment by the police, by classmates and educators. Most noted that traffic police were more likely to stop minorities than whites, and that whites could easily get away from having tickets issued to them. White respondents who attended *Awareness through Performance* were also cognizant of the ways in which power and privilege continue to play an important role in the life of the university. Some pointed out that college Republicans have more power and opportunities to have their voices heard compared with college Muslims.

Respondents who identified themselves as minorities, and who attended *Awareness through Performance* gave more detailed responses related to power and privilege in American society. While they saw their being enrolled at institutions of higher learning as a privilege, they did not associate that with power. Many stated that countless and more deserving minority students were unable to afford higher education because of the limited opportunities and scholarships available to them. As such, they did not necessarily equate privilege with power.

### **Class, Power, and Privilege**

Most respondents were aware of the role of economic class and the way money is related to power and privilege. Of those who attended *Awareness through Performance*, many indicated the ways in which social class was self-perpetuating, and that those who

were born into privilege and power were likely to have better chances when it came to options regarding opportunities. For example, many observed that those with enough money could afford private schools and colleges, whereas the poor had to depend on what the public or government could offer for education. Class also had an effect on consumption and living patterns, as well as options for luxury and recreation. As such, those who had more money could, according to the respondents, afford better education, or could afford to spend more time in schools.

### **Sex, Gender, and Privilege**

Most respondents identified power and privilege with being male and white and wealthy. As such, many saw femininity or being women as a deficiency that hindered them when it came to job opportunities or options in careers. In addition, those who attended *Awareness through Performance* saw heterosexuality as a privilege and associated it with power. Being homosexual or lesbian, on the other hand, was rarely discussed, and when it was, it was presented as a liability, taking away from both power and privilege. Even women respondents who saw themselves disadvantaged by virtue of their being women saw themselves as stronger if they were in heterosexual relationships, or came from families with parents from both sexes.

### **Whiteness and Privilege**

Although the survey/questioner did not refer explicitly to issues of race and/or whiteness, most respondents associated privilege with whiteness. Even in circumstances where respondents viewed themselves as differently disadvantaged, they saw whiteness as changing circumstances for the better.

The association of whiteness with privilege has several implications for the university community, especially looking at the demographics. The first is whether the vast majority of the community members (who happen to be white) are willing to contest and challenge the privileges that give them unearned advantages over other people. What kind of circumstances would make those who identified themselves as white to deliberately choose against whiteness for the good of the community? Is there such a desire among those who identified themselves as white? And, equally significant is whether many respondents understand the ways through which whiteness is constructed, and the consequent implications. Second, is the reality that most students come to college already aware of the workings of power and privilege outside the classroom context. Those fearful of radical curriculum changes will be surprised by realizing that street knowledge and street discussions of power and privilege transcend ordinary conventions. And, third is the need to be cognizant of the growing weariness of the underprivileged having to constantly educate the privileged about the social, emotional, economical, and psychological cost of power and privilege in American societies and the university community in general.

### **Implications for future study**

One of the many strengths of this study is the way it gauges students' responses and evaluations on the meanings and implications of power and privilege. The responses come from a diverse body of students, and as such, it is a useful study for not only improving the overall campus climate, but for advocating for a more just society. Indeed, while the local university is still grappling with addressing issues of diversity, of creating a more welcoming environment, and of marketing itself as an institution that desires to be

part of the global community the question of privilege and power will have to be recast to include issues of global and national citizenship, and the implications of those. While many of the students are from the neighboring states and cities, a few international students, and the many students who have studied or lived or visited abroad should be able to address or question the relationship between power and privilege on a more international level. In addition, the cultural, economic, political, and social space occupied by international students and workers provides fertile ground for further exploring issues of power and privilege in ways that subvert dominant Manichean or oppositional discourses. A few of the performers have also studied abroad, and with that experience comes ways for internationalizing counter-hegemonic contestations of power and privilege. In addition, their experiences abroad provide an avenue for challenging assumed notions of power and privilege as universal, while, in fact, they are determined by local/national socialization processes.

The local/global dimension also has the potential of opening up dialogue and conversations that acknowledge the many global roots of peoples in the United States. Indeed, the United States has often been described as a nation of immigrants, whether these be Asiatic, Black, or Caucasian. While whiteness makes it easier for peoples of Caucasian descent to band together, this is not necessarily the case with other groups. Many people from subordinate groups are quick to want to dust off any traces of their associations with other subordinated groups, rendering the quest of emancipation nearly helpless in the face of united privilege.

What emerged from the students' responses was the way they generally identified power and privilege with being white, middle class, protestant, and heterosexual. To a

certain extent, this is also what most students seemed to view as the good life. As such, one of the ways this study could grow in the future is to explore ways for contesting dominant forms of what constitutes the ideal life. What would it take to challenge the construction and social meaning of power, privilege and whiteness so that they do not remain “the default setting for so much of mainstream American culture, social relations, and intellectual activity?” (McLaren, 2005, p. 191). An examination of this issue would also aid in questioning the many ways in which racialized and class/national relations have become normalized, and also lead to the questioning of the linkage among the same processes.

Because of the technological set up, it was possible to gauge the amount of time some respondents took in reading and answering the questions. In general, both white and non-white students who attended *Awareness through Performance* spent considerably more time in responding and answering the questions, compared with white respondents who did not attend *Awareness through Performance*. On the other hand, minority students who did not attend *Awareness through Performance* spent significantly more time than white students who did not attend. What are the possible implications for this when it comes to contesting privilege, racism, and power? Will minorities and subordinate or underprivileged students and communities consistently have struggle to integrate into mainstream values, and are these values really desirable?

The many opportunities for getting responses from international students also make it possible to enrich the discussion on power and privilege to include not only resources/economics, but to engage issues like the environment, international politics and trade, and global justice. This will only add to the growing awareness of power and

privilege, although bringing in an international dimension. And sharing this with the campus wide community will help create a better campus climate sensitive not only to its needs, but that of the global community.

One of the many strengths of *Awareness through Performance* the way it acknowledges the importance of identity politics without obliterating the social and political. For example, the performances seek to foster a community that rejects homophobia, xenophobia, privilege, and racism. The goal is for an affirmation of individual human rights without negating or discounting the existence of the social or the community. In other words, individual victories do not necessarily translate into social or political victories at all.

Because of the use of drama/performance, *Awareness through Performance* combines both theory and practice, and it is ideally positioned to generate more theories that inform and relate to the conceptualization of the ideal society in La Crosse and the United States in general, (and hopefully, at a global level). The current strength of *Awareness through Performance* lies in the ways it seeks to conscientize the university community about the historical situations that hinder the creation of a just society in the United States. One of the steps ahead is to realize that both power and privilege have to be contested even, or more so, at a global level. If the struggle is seen as isolated from the rest of the world, it might be difficult to envision how to surmount entrenched injustice. The varied and various experiences, local and global, afford the community an effort to critically reflect upon, and to challenge both power and privilege. Part of preparing for the future, of course, implies anticipating resistance to a world that is envisioned in *Awareness through Performance*.