

Critical Reflection Paper  
EDLD 9435  
Rebecca Cofer  
Georgia Southern University

### **Part 1- My Social Identities**

The role social identities play not only in the experience of the individual but also of society cannot be understated. We exist not as singularly categorized beings, but as complex people who bring with them multiple identities based on different groupings from which they come. Human beings long to be part of groups, to belong to a group of others with whom they can relate. In their study, Greenaway et al. (2015) found evidence to support this idea, noting that social identity gains were related to fulfilling global psychological needs of humans. While social identities are an important part of the human existence, it is equally important reflect on these identities and the privileges that accompany them. As Adams (2018) explains in their chapter of *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, oftentimes an individual can possess identities of privilege and those that receive oppression. I am a young, white woman living an upper-middle class lifestyle, who identifies as a cisgender Christian who is able-bodied. By all respects, these identities have privilege that goes with them. What is less visible, though, are the social identities I possess that put me in the subordinate groups of society. I am from a blue-collar family and am a first-generation college student, who struggles with mental health. It should also be noted that my social identities “interact at all times although with different degrees of visibility or salience, depending on the setting” (Adams, 2018, p. 5). Privilege and oppression associated with social identities vary over a lifespan and by context.

The first of my social identities, my race, is visible regardless of what I wear or do. And this social identity, I believe carries the most privilege with it. Prior to my experience at college, I can not say I really thought about my race as a social identity. As Lipsitz (2018) words it, “Whiteness is everywhere in U.S. culture, but it is very hard to see” (p. 87). I believe when I attended college in the South, I began to be exposed to more people with racist ideas. Growing

up in New Jersey, there was always diversity in school and social groups; I was not “color blind”, but I knew that not many folks around me who looked like me- African American, Polish, Italian, White, the race diversity was evident everywhere around me. In my academic career as an English major and graduate student, I was exposed to race theory and feminism, which provided the reality of the privilege I have as a white person. Recently, the racially-motivated killings of Black people and even the immigration policies have made me hyper-aware and sensitive to my privilege. As Coates (2018) argues in his letter addressed to his son, “there is nothing uniquely evil in these destroyers or even in this moment” (p. 133). If I am honest, I know that I have been surrounded by racism my life but as a privileged race, I was not fully aware of the reality. While my race identity has not changed over my lifetime, my awareness regarding this identity has increased.

My class identity, by comparison, has changed over my lifetime, as I was raised in a blue-collar family and have since risen above this category to move into the upper-class sector of society. I was raised around the myth of the American meritocracy. My grandmother came to America as an Italian bride seeking a life with her new husband. While my parents did not go to college, they knew the value of education and insisted on their children attending college right out of high school. Even with my blue-collar upbringing, I still felt a part of a privileged group. I did not differ from many of my friends, whose parents also worked manual labor jobs. I was raised to believe that “hard work and talent are inevitably rewarded by economic success” (Adams et al., 2018, p. 165). My father operated a forklift for his job, but my mother worked hard without a college degree and moved from secretary to human resources director at a major shipping company. After graduate school, I married a man who earned his Ph.D. and now works as a high-level administrator at a state university, earning above average pay. I also am working

toward my doctorate, but earn significantly less than my husband. My awareness of my privilege in the class bracket I occupy is not lost on me, as I grew up without regular family vacations or new cars. At the same time, though, I began my marriage in a much lower economic bracket, without health insurance and with six digits of student loans. I left graduate school believing, like Jaffe (2018) explains in her chapter, I would have a good job with a decent salary. My social identity in the area of class has changed throughout my lifetime, starting lower and then rising slowly. Even so, I know that my class identity is a privileged category because I was always able to pay my rent/mortgage and afford food.

One of my social identities that is less visible than others is my religious affiliation. Currently, I identify as a Christian, though I do not subscribe to a specific denomination within that category. Adams and MacDonald-Dennis (2018) offer a perspective of Christian nationalism, arguing that this idea is “based on the foundational belief that the United States is a Christian nation, an idea fundamentally at odds with the belief (also foundational) that the United States is a pluralistic nation” (p. 247). I recognize that my faith places me in a position of privilege in the U.S. because of this Christian nationalism. This privilege is only exacerbated by my living in the South, a predominantly Christian area of the country. My identity as a Christian has not changed throughout my life, but I have identified more as a Christian than a specific denomination in recent years.

When I reflect on privilege and oppression in relation to my social identities, the one aspect that comes to mind immediately as more oppressed is my gender. As Catalano et al. (2018) note, this oppression can be both conscious or unconscious, but sex is a major way that we are organized in society, possibly one of the first layers of labels we experience. Additionally, gender serves as a distinguishing social identity often in terms of the family, the work world, and

major institutions across society (Lorber, 2018). Although I identify as a cisgender female which is partly a dominant group, my gender as female puts me in the role of subordinate when compared to males. For instance, in my profession, my speaking up assertively for myself is viewed as being tyrannical but for men this action is seen as courage (Kirk & Okazawa-Ray, 2018). My sex, gender, and sexual orientation have not changed throughout my life. On one hand, I experience men explaining things to me often like Solnit (2018) describes; on the other hand, I am also part of a world that displays heterosexism in most elements of society. As such, I have many privileges not afforded to those in other social groups in this category, such as homosexual and bisexual individuals. Going even further, as Carbado (2018) explains, I experience heterosexual privilege in a different way than Black cisgender women.

The social category of ability is more blurred for me than the other more obvious classifications under which I fall. A disability is defined as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities” (Ostiguy-Finneran & Peters, 2018, p. 467). Although not entirely recognized by every group, I fall in to a disability category because of my mental illnesses, namely general anxiety disorder and clinical depression. Mental health is a popular cause right now, but people still struggle to associate it as a disability. However, as the definition above states, it does significantly limit my life activities and requires I take medication to function as an able-bodied adult. Fenton (2018) says that “social forces maintain hierarchies based on able-bodied norms” (p. 483). This statement alone shows a discrimination since mental illnesses really aren’t related to the physical body disability. Because of this social identity, I have entered the field of education, hoping to help others that may struggle with this disability. My values center on self-care and the recognition that each unique ability and body brings value to the education experience. This particular identity did not become part of my existence until

2009 when I was diagnosed with both anxiety and depression. While I see evidence of my mental illnesses prior to 2009 in my behavior and experiences, I embraced it as a reality with these diagnoses. Even some family members tend to look down on the fact that I use medication to live a full life, showing yet again an ableist perspective. Fenton (2018) argues, “disability may be the last significant area of discrimination that has not yet been resolved” (p. 495). Mental illness within that identity is a subcategory recognized even less.

The final area of my identity, age, is a very fluid concept, as it has changed and will continue to change throughout my life. As I write this reflection paper, I am thirty-eight years old and feel as though this age places me in a more privileged group. Currently, my age has me in a sort of sweet spot, during which I benefit from being young enough to understand things like technology but not too young that I am not taken seriously because of this identifier. DeJong and Love (2018) define elder oppression as “the oppression of elders by youth and adults” (p. 546). Working in covid-19 times, I see elder oppression in a different, more drastic light, as the times are requiring more use of technology. Since my age changes so often, my identification as privileged or oppressed in this identity is not something I have considered often. Bell (2018) accurately explains age-based oppression “is relatively new and has not been widely accepted as a reality” (p. 554). The truth is that as I age in higher education, I will become part of the oppressed group, those thought of as less, incompetent, and infantile. Additionally, the privileges I possess will continue to change because each identity is so fluid as time goes on.

## **Part 2- Gender and Ability**

When considering my identities and the privileges or oppressions that go with each, I am drawn to two identities specifically, one immediately obvious and the other more discrete. My gender is one social identity that is immediately recognizable, but it is one that stands out to me

as an oppressed identity. Lorber (2018) opens her chapter about the social construction of gender saying, “Gender is so much the routine ground of everyday activities” (p. 354). Although it has always been the basis of my daily existence, since birth, I have become aware of the social construction of it later in my adulthood. During childhood, standard definitions of gender was always something strongly encouraged in my family, as my mother is still grounded in the socially constructed idea of femininity, refusing to dress me in “boy colors” like blue or brown. I come from a mother who considers herself to be a feminist, but who also holds firmly to socially constructed views of gender, which is a conflicting existence.

I’ve been aware of my identity as a female most of my life, but with this awareness has come the idea that women don’t take up too much physical space, that I am meant to be nurturing and maternal. West (2018) discusses her need to not fit a mold despising the “obsessing over our flaws rather than our power and potential” (414). As a woman in her thirties that has never wanted children, this idea conflicts with the stereotypical concept of women as recognized by others. Due to this, I am acutely aware of the unique existence every human being should have by choice; my personal beliefs on issues like abortion and the death penalty are shaped by this experience, as I believe all people have the right to their individual beliefs and actions. My experience as an oppressed person in terms of gender allows me to understand the experience of other oppressed people and take a keen interest in their advocacy, as is evidenced by my work as a Safe Zone trainer. As a woman, I truly do fight two battles- with the men who refuse to hear my voice and with the topics about which I argue (Solnit, 2018). This double battle has made me more aware of the political agenda of the current administration, forcing me to see the realities of patriarchy.

Moving forward in my profession has been a struggle; I have been looked over for positions that I was qualified for, passed up for a male who had no experience prior to his current position in higher education. I am very much aware that this will not be the exception but more the rule for my experience in higher education. Johnson (2018) explains masculinity and femininity on a sort of continuum with “womanhood and femininity relegated to the marginal position of “other” (p. 364). In reflecting on how this identity relates to both my career and my research, I think it is infused in all I do and am. I struggle daily to be taken seriously because as a woman I worry about coming off as a “bitch” when I am assertive. I have relied heavily on female mentors in the field and have also served as a mentor because I know firsthand the value of support for females by females. Related to my research goals. I focus on the unique experience of being a peer educator in the college learning center, but in the future, I hope to narrow down my research to the experience of the female tutor or Black female tutor. It is critical that I explore not only the individual experience of these oppressed groups, but also work through my research to end sexism in its structural, institutional, and cultural power (Catalano et al., 2018).

As compared to my oppressed identity as a female, my identity as an able-bodied person places me in a position of privilege. Although I do believe myself to be on the edge of oppression because of my mental illnesses, I feel I’m more privileged. Due to my previous work experience in disability services, I am cognizant of the ease with which I go through life. A disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment that significantly impacts everyday life (Ostiguy-Finneran & Peters, 2018). Using this as a basis, I am an able-bodied woman that can go through life with all the privileges afforded to people without disabilities. I don’t think I was always aware of the privileges I did have in relation to this identity, but since my work in



disability services, I became ultra-sensitive to the plight of this group. I was not a minority in my previous state of being, as those with disabilities are often disregarded by society. Davis (2018) accurately explains the way that people's ability identity is pushed to the margins of their existence by society, as "disability occupies a different place in the culture at this moment" (p. 495). Due to my reflection on those with disabilities and even my own mental health struggles, my personal belief system centers around accessibility for all, whether that be for someone in a wheelchair or someone with depression. I now am hyper aware of people parking in spots reserved for those with disabilities or even language that is not people-centered ("disabled people"). Even though I am a member of the privileged group in this identity, my work experience has me aware of the issues that come with inaccessibility.

Since working with people with disabilities in 2009, my career focus has shifted to include research related to those with disabilities, as I attend and lead trainings about working with students with disabilities. Currently, I serve on the suicide prevention team at my institution, as recent experiences with a friend's suicide have led me to awareness of this issue in higher education. My long-term goals in higher education will hopefully have me back working directly with students with disabilities, whether they be veterans or students in a specialized tutoring center. As Davis (2018) argues, "disability may be the last significant area of discrimination that has not yet been resolved" (p. 495). I hope to help in this fight with both my career and my research in higher education. Grasgreen (2018) goes into detail about the struggle students with disabilities have, explaining that even receiving required services feels like a luxury to the students, a true indictment of the level of services not being provided for this oppressed population. *The Transition Guide* (2020) from the Department of Education states that students with disabilities wanting to pursue higher education should focus on institutions that

provide the best educational program and support services. However, shouldn't all schools offer the same level of exceptional services to these students? Even though I am not part of the oppressed group in this identity, I strive to keep inclusivity and access as part of my daily actions because of the way my own philosophy has been shaped by the work experiences I have had previously.

My social identities and the ways they change are complex topics that remain fluid throughout my life and the lives of all people. Tatum (2018) states it well saying, "Whom am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am" (p. 7). Whether examining my gender, my class, race, or even ability, the ways in which I am privileged and oppressed change throughout my life. It is critical to examine these areas of privilege often to best reflect on the ways I add to systems of oppression and the ways I can work against those systems.

## References

- Adams, M., Hopkins, L.E., & Shlasko, D. (2018). Classism: Introduction. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W. Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Adams, M. & MacDonald-Dennis, C. (2018). Religious oppression: Introduction. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W. Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Carbado, D.W. (2018). Privilege. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W. Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge
- Catalano, D.C.J., Blumenfeld, W.J., & Hackman, H.W. (2018). Sexism, heterosexism, and trans\* Oppression. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W. Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge
- Coates, N. (2018). Letter to my son. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W. Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Davis, L. J. (2018). Go to the margins of the class: Disability and hate crimes. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W. Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge.

- DeJong, K. & Love, B.J. (2018). Youth oppression and elder oppression. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W. Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Fenton, Z.E. (2018) Disability does not discriminate: Toward a theory of multiple identity through coalition. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W. Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Grasgreen, A. (2018). Students with disabilities frustrated with ignorance and lack of services. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W. Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Greenaway, K.H., Cruwys, T., Haslam, S.A., & Jetten, J. (2015). Social identities promote well-being because they satisfy global psychological needs. *European Journal of Social Psychology*.
- Jaffe, S. (2018). Is the near-trillion-dollar student loan bubble about to pop? In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W. Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Johnson, A.G. (2018). Patriarchy, the system: An it, not a he, a them or an us. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W. Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Kirk, G. & Okazawa-Rey, M. (2018). He works, she works, but what different impressions they

- make. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W. Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Lipsitz, G. (2018). The possessive investment in whiteness. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W. Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Lorber, J. (2018). "Night to his day:" The social construction of gender. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W. Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Ostiguy-Finneran. & Peters, M.L. (2018). Ableism: Introduction. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W. Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Solnit, R. (2018). Men explain things to me. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W. Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- United States Department of Education. (August 2020). *A transition guide to postsecondary Education and employment for students and youth with disabilities*. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.  
<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/postsecondary-transition-guide-august-2020.pdf>
- West, L. (2018). Bones. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfield, D. C. J. Catalano, K. DeJong, H. W.

Hackman, L. E. Hopkins, B. J. Love, M. L. Peters, D. Shlasko, & X. Zúñiga  
(Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed.). Routledge.