

The Limits of White Privilege Pedagogy: A Reflective Essay on using Privilege Walks in the College Classroom

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***Abstract:** The privilege walk is a pedagogical tool used to teach students about often-ignored aspects of privilege. Despite their popularity, privilege walks are under-examined in the scholarship of teaching and learning. This leaves open questions about the efficacy of the walk, and whether, and to what extent, the walk yields different results among students from different backgrounds. This paper critically examines the privilege walk by reflecting on our experience of teaching the walk and analyzing student learning reflections about the exercise. We draw on critical race theory to interpret our data and also to help introduce the concept of slippage. We use slippage as shorthand for systematic issues long described by critical race theorists, such as meritocracy, that are reframed as individual responsibilities. We conclude by discussing how educators might prioritize teaching about structural power by integrating ideas from critical race theory, and abandon intellectual traditions that center Whiteness or the individual.*

***Keywords:** Critical race theory, White privilege pedagogy, privilege walk, meritocracy, colorblindness, structural racism*

Introduction

With the aim of teaching students about social privilege,¹ many educators in the United States (U.S.) have conducted privilege walk activities (Pennington et al., 2012; Kumasi, 2017; Alexander and Herman, 2015). A privilege walk is a physical teaching and learning exercise meant to illuminate often-ignored aspects of privilege. Participants line up, then take steps forward (toward privilege) or backward (towards marginalization) as a facilitator reads questions aloud (e.g., “If your ancestors came to the United States by force, take one step back”). When the exercise concludes, participants are usually scattered throughout the room – an uneven result meant to represent a participant’s privilege in relation to their peers. While the exercise is common in educational settings, few empirical studies examine the efficacy of privilege walks. We suggest the walk deserves critical empirical investigation, particularly in the scholarship of teaching and learning, for several reasons.

¹ Social privilege involves receiving unearned advantages by being born into or a member of a specific group, such as a member of a particular class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, ability, sexual orientation, and more (National Association of School Psychologists, 2016).

First, there has been a renewed focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in educational settings. Social unrest following the murder of George Floyd highlighted inequities in American society, and it motivated and pushed students, educators, and administrators to talk about these issues in the classroom (Clayton, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic also highlighted and exacerbated ongoing educational inequities in the U.S. while addressing inequities in society and in education has been a part of university dialog and programming for years, the triple crisis of the pandemic, systemic racism made visible through police violence, and the intensification of educational inequities have increased the priority of DEI efforts across the educational landscape (Clayton, 2021). Educational settings have become central for discussions around DEI: higher ed administration, for instance, have rolled out efforts to attract racially diverse students and faculty (Nunes, 2021); students have led on-campus protests of economic and racial inequality (Hendricks et al., 2021); and critical pedagogical approaches, meanwhile, have become deeply politicized (Kim, 2021).

Second, the privilege walk is the most common tool to emerge from White privilege pedagogy in the 1980s, and is still prominent today (Tevis et al., 2022). White privilege pedagogy aims to have “White people explore the unearned social privileges they receive as a result of being White” (Cabrera, 2017, p.79). The privilege walk exercise has been described as an effective and transformative practice (Margolin, 2015; Kumasi, 2017), that is helpful for discerning personal privileges and biases (Siliman and Kearns, 2020), understanding positionality, and how Whiteness can shape approaches to teaching (Pennington et al., 2012). Education professionals suggest the exercise benefits aspiring teachers (Martinez, 2015) and school counselors (Rothman et al., 2012). Other studies explain that the walk fosters a nuanced understanding of how race and class shape life outcomes (Arapah, 2016; Hanasono, 2022), and that the exercise is especially useful for White students’ recognition of Whiteness as a racial category (Ford, 2012) and of racism writ large (Kernahan and Davis, 2007).

Third, an empirical, student-centered study of the privilege walk is useful because the exercise is contested. Despite its ongoing popularity, educators and scholars, particularly those of color, have challenged the utility and function of the walk for decades. Some critics of the walk question whether the walk is an effective tool to teach about privilege in the first place (Lensmire et al., 2013). Others demonstrate that the walk fails to situate White privilege in its broader context of White supremacy, and is therefore an inadequate pedagogical tool (Leonardo, 2004; Tevis et al., 2022). Studies have also examined the ways that privilege walks instrumentalize Black students (Foster, 2005) and other students of color for the express pedagogical benefit of White students (Sassi and Thomas, 2008; Magana, 2017).

Finally, our experience with the walk aligns with ongoing critique. We found that the walk led White students to conceptualize privilege in individual and superficial terms, and failed to teach students of all races to recognize structural conditions that make and remake privileged categories and life outcomes. The walk also animated race-neutral and universalized categories of difference, fostered an essentialized understanding of race, and advanced meritocratic standards. We use core literature within the critical race theory cannon to make sense of these outcomes and introduce the concept of *slippage* to signal where and how the privilege walk reproduced logics and perspectives long critiqued by critical race scholarship.

In addition to critical race theory (CRT), this retrospective study engages in scholarship of our own teaching and learning (SoTL). Following Cranton (2018), this study contributes to critical scholarship of teaching and learning because our pedagogical approaches were transformed during our experience with the walk. Through candid reflection on the outcomes of the walk, we offer an example of reflexive pedagogy (Fanghanel, 2013; Cook-Sather et al., 2019) in an effort to help teachers at all levels engage with their own pedagogy in rigorous and constructive ways.

Literature Review

This section outlines our theoretical framework, beginning with a brief introduction of White privilege pedagogy and the privilege walk. We then outline concepts rooted in critical race scholarship that have significance to SoTL and critical education studies literature. Finally, we re-examine White privilege pedagogy through the lens of critical race scholarship, and introduce *slippage*, a theoretical frame we use to illustrate the ways White privilege pedagogy decontextualizes racial structures, individualizes race and racism, and essentializes racial categories.

White Privilege Pedagogy and its Discontents

White privilege pedagogy (Gillespie et al., 2010) and privilege studies more broadly (Lensmire et al., 2013; McIntosh, 1988a; McIntosh, 1988b) are largely associated with feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh. McIntosh's well-known essay, "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1988b) is a pedagogical tool that aimed to teach educators about aspects of their Whiteness (McIntosh, 1988b; Margolin, 2015; Crowley and Smith, 2020). The article is brief – only about three pages – and consists of 26 "I" statements (McIntosh, 1988b). The essay's expository tone encourages personal reflection about the ways Whiteness confers privilege in different contexts and settings (McIntosh, 1988b).

The article was adapted into a physical, cultural training exercise now known as the *privilege walk* (Leonardo, 2004; Lensmire et al., 2013) and became particularly popular in educational settings as a training tool for teachers (Pennington et al., 2012; Guillen and Zeichner, 2018) and students (Sassi and Thomas, 2008; Silverman, 2013). White privilege pedagogy and the privilege walk have remained popular in classrooms across the US partly because White educators find the walk useful for examining teaching positionality (Pennington et al., 2012; Brock et al., 2012; Chen, 2013) and internal biases (Sassi and Thomas, 2008: 25).

The walk has also attracted scrutiny. Recent SoTL scholarship, for example, notes common diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts center privilege, and in doing so, obscure broader systems of White supremacy (Mowatt, 2022). Meanwhile Sarigianes and Banack (2021), follow studies in social psychology (e.g., Leach et al., 2006) to demonstrate that any anti-racist potential of the walk is stymied by the walk's propensity to spark feelings of guilt and shame among White participants. The walk has been critiqued for fostering complacency to structural racism (Margolin, 2015), flattening difference (Siliman and Kearns, 2020), hampering meaningful dialogue about racism (Cabrera, 2017), and, similar to Mowatt (2022) insufficiently addressing broader social systems that are structured by White supremacy (Leonardo, 2004).

Concepts in SoTL from Critical Race Theory

Much of the privilege walk critique shares intellectual commitments with, and builds from, core concepts from critical race theory. Critical race theory (CRT) is a relatively narrow body of literature situated in American legal scholarship that examines the ways US law produces conceptions of race that benefit White people (Gillborn and Ladson-Billings, 2010; Delgado and Stefancic, 2013; Williams, 1991). Critical race scholarship began in the 1970s and examined how race-neutral or "color-blind" rhetoric is operationalized in US law, and specifically how such race-neutral ideals are mobilized to obscure the definitive role of race, racism, anti-Blackness, and White supremacy in the US legal system (Lawrence, 2001; Bell, 2004). In addition to law, CRT scholarship demonstrated that race and White supremacy are enshrined in different areas of policy, and, therefore, that race and White supremacy shape unequal social and economic conditions (Matsuda, 2018; Crenshaw, 2011; Harris, 1993; Crenshaw, 1997).

As race-neutral and color-blind rhetoric became prominent in US higher education in the 1990s (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Parker, 1998; Choi, 2008), critical education scholars integrated concepts established in critical race theory to make sense of the role and place of race in education (Tate, 1997; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). The critique of color-blind racism in CRT, for example (Hiraldo, 2010; Taylor et al., 2009; Lynn and Dixson, 2013), advanced critical education studies scholarship beyond studies of gender and class (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Parker, 1998; Choi, 2008). Additional concepts that examine the relationship between race and education like *multiculturalism* and *epistemological ignorance* have also had notable impacts for critical education studies.

Race Liberal Practices, or Multiculturalism, Meritocracy, and Color-Blindness

Race liberal practices articulate through race-neutral rhetoric and policies, which produce, mediate, and perpetuate White supremacy throughout society (Gallagher, 2003; Doane, 2017). Race liberalism is an ideology that nominally seeks redress for racial inequality, but in practice operationalizes race-neutral, color-blind, or “race-evasive” tactics that mute and diminish the significance of race and racism (Mills, 2008; Mills, 2017; Crenshaw, 2017; James-Gallaway and James-Gallaway, 2020). Critical theorists of race and culture have long demonstrated the ways that fictional color-blindness – or, inattention and/or active denial of racial social formations – enacts ongoing racial dominance and oppression (Hall and Gieben 1992). Positioning race as neutral helps to render racial categories and structures as natural, unpolitical, and normative. Critical race, Black studies, and other critical social studies scholars demonstrate that race and racial categories are socially constructed, geographically and historically contingent expressions of power (Hall 1980; Wynter 2003; Fanon 2008; Robinson 2020).

Multiculturalism is an ideology that formally promotes diversity and difference through rhetoric and practices that conceal the significance of race and racism (Appiah et al., 1994; Phillips, 2002; Melamed, 2006) in order to reproduce White supremacy (Hudson, 2020; Jay, 2003; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Scholars have long critiqued western education for its adherence to and reproduction of multiculturalist ideals, which render matters of racial difference neutral – and therefore inhibit recognition and critique of racial oppression (Gordon, 2005; Wang et al., 2014; Alon and Tienda, 2007). Critical education and critical race scholarship documented the ascent of multiculturalism and colorblindness in US education in the 1990s (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Parker, 1998; Choi, 2008), and assess ongoing impacts of race-neutral standards on education today (Villapando, 2004; Liu, 2011; Patton, 2016).

The institutionalization of race liberalism (also, “racial liberalism” (Crenshaw, 2017; Choi, 2008)) and “abstract liberalism” (Bonilla-Silva, 2017)) are also evident in meritocratic practices, sensibilities, and education policy. Meritocracy is theorized as a hegemonic or ideology that promotes liberal notions of equality, such as equal opportunity (DeCuir and Dixson, 2004; Villapando, 2004; Carbado, 2013). Meritocratic ideals like equal opportunity conceal power differentials (Bell, 1972 ; Slaton, 2015; Delgado, 1989) by centering merits (e.g., hard work, dedication) as exclusive factors in successful life outcomes (McNamee and Miller, 2009). Thus, meritocracy negates the ways race, gender, and class mediate structural advantages and proximity to power. Meritocratic standards obscure the role and place of race in society (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Neville et al., 2016). Meritocracy also abstracts the ways that advantage and disadvantage are historically, socially, and politically produced and articulated through ongoing, exclusionary regimes of wealth, property, and education (Liu, 2011; Mijs and Savage, 2020).

Epistemological Ignorance

Alongside multiculturalism, critical education scholars demonstrate the ways racial ignorance enacts racialized social systems (Mueller 2020). Theorized as *epistemological ignorance*, these perspectives describe the ways racial oppression, and White supremacy in particular, structure social formations and processes (Mills, 1998; Mills, 2012 [2007]). The dominance of White culture produces and enacts hegemonic, normative social formations (Alcoff, 2007; Mills, 2007 [2012]:28; Doane and Bonilla-Silva, 2013). The normativity of Whiteness ensures that the impacts, production, and even presence of White racial domination go unacknowledged and unrecognized (Mills, 2012 [2007]). In education and other sociopolitical processes, the prominence of White culture enables White people, culture, and social formations to remain willfully ignorant of White supremacy, despite its pervasive and detrimental presence (Sullivan and Tuana, 2007; Mills, 2012 [2007]; Mills, 1997). Scholars note that North American education practices are structured by epistemological ignorance and reproduce coloniality and other forms of racial violence (Calderón, 2011; Andreotti, et al., 2011; Stein, 2020, Cabrera, 2012). Others have described the ways diversity-centered professional development workshops in higher education typify epistemological ignorance (Grinage, 2020) and dilute anti-racist circular efforts (Tate and Page, 2018) by adopting neoliberal multiculturalism (Melamed, 2011).

The literature highlights that White people often separate themselves from the historical production of Whiteness and the ongoing impacts of White supremacy. Cabrera and colleagues (2016) argue that White college students enter college “not knowing” about the impacts of White supremacy because of structured ignorance. More specifically, Cabrera and colleagues contend that White college students tend to come from racially homogeneous (i.e. White) neighborhoods and high schools, and tend to enter racially homogeneous (i.e. White) college environments. This racial isolation builds an all-White social structure that ultimately protects socially constructed Whiteness. The insulation of Whiteness by way of racial segregation is an example of what critical race theorists term White ignorance, epistemological ignorance, or epistemological individualism; that is, limited racial interaction creates a type of ignorance about any culture/existence other than one’s own (Mills 2012; Mills 1997). Epistemological ignorance induces a slippage in understanding racism as a structural issue — and thus produces a slippage in scale, where the individual experience of Whiteness becomes a metonymic device for the actually existing, always racialized, production of uneven social hierarchies.

As Mills (2012) notes, epistemological ignorance works at multiple levels, and as Alcoff (2007) notes, there are multiple types of ignorance. These levels include historical regimes of US property ownership contingent on Whiteness and where Whiteness itself is instrumentalized as a metonymic device of property rights (Harris 1993); the arch of US civil rights progress and its contingency on what Bell (1980) calls “interest convergence”; the displacement of civil rights legislation in favor of race-neutrality (Crenshaw), and so on.

Race/Whiteness structure the very broadest aspects of life: social institutions like school, health and law; and therefore life expectancy metrics like generational wealth, homeownership, natal mortality and general healthcare; neighborhood policing and surveillance; transportation; environmental health, and more (Sze 2006; Gilmore 2007; Shabazz; 2015; Wang 2018; Yamahtta-Taylor 2020), and therefore structure both epistemologies and ontologies. What we think of as “slippage” applies when students begin to internalize these structures (ontologies) as individual *choices*.

Situating White Privilege through CRT and Slippage

Crucially, the rise of race liberalism in US social institutions was accompanied by the rise of White privilege pedagogy in US education. As discussed, White privilege pedagogy became prominent in US education during the 1990s as a tool to help White people reckon with and understand race-based

privilege. However, White privilege pedagogy is an insufficient tactic for teaching and learning about racially conferred privilege because, like meritocracy and multiculturalism, White privilege pedagogy is structured by and constitutive of racial liberalism (Solomoma et al., 2005; Crowley and Smith, 2020).

White privilege pedagogy centers and reifies Whiteness without an assessment of White supremacy (Leonardo, 2004; Tevis et al., 2022). By centering Whiteness without sufficient contextualization, White privilege pedagogy partitions the effects of Whiteness (e.g., privileges) from the causes of Whiteness (e.g., social institutions that are structured by White supremacy). As a result, White privilege pedagogy offers an incomplete and inaccurate perspective of race, racism, and racial dominance. Second and relatedly, White privilege pedagogy focuses on the individual and avoids explicit discussion of the structures that enshrine and reproduce race categories, enable racism, and animate racial hierarchies. As a result, White privilege pedagogy presents an underdeveloped and reductionist formulation of power. Three, in neglecting (or avoiding) the structural, contingent, historical production of race, White privilege pedagogy advances an overly essentialized conceptualization of race (Crowley and Smith, 2020). Under this view, racial categories themselves and membership to a particular social group is determined by underlying, biological, essential, and fixed characteristics (Wilton et al., 2018; McBride, 2004).

We shorthand the impact of these three outcomes of White privilege pedagogy – decontextualized racial structures, individualized race/racism, and essentialized racial categories – as *slippage*. By slippage we mean that the context of race and racism “slips” into an atomized and truncated formulation of race, that structural forms of power and racial domination “slip” into individual terms, and the historical production and flexibility of racial categories “slips” into fixed and essentialized terms. We argue White privilege pedagogy fosters a theoretical gap between understanding the individual repercussions of Whiteness (being White, having privileges) and the broader social scale of Whiteness as an historical institution of dominance and oppression, rooted in a constructed racial supremacy. This conceptual gap fosters a conceptual slippage in students’ (or any privilege walk participants’) grasp of privilege. The slippage occurs when matters of socially-produced, structural racism are internalized as individual, aberrant phenomena.

Slippage in the scale of understanding difference is thus part and parcel of collapsing difference; both are produced by interlocking factors. First, the privilege walk is set up to describe the outcome of structural racism as an abstracted, individual experience. Next, because that individual experience is attached to only students marked by their Whiteness, students mistake structures that create oppression as individual responsibility, or, confoundingly, shirk responsibility after identifying racism as an external event. This conceptual slippage is apparent in our findings, particularly where students internalize (take as a personal matter) the structural privileges inherent in Whiteness. Critical race theory helps us make sense of the elision of difference and the conceptual slippage between understanding, on the one hand, the *individual* as an agent of privilege, and conceptualizing, on the other hand, Whiteness as a *structuring logic* of society.

Methodology

Introduction

In in the mid-2010’s², through an assessment of our first-year project-based program, we found that students of color who took the course were slightly more likely to leave the university. This data was distressing and surprising, as research shows that courses with high impact practices (HIPS), such as projects and teamwork, are more likely to retain historically minoritized and underrepresented

² These dates are approximate to protect student anonymity.

students (Sweat et al., 2013). SoTL research focuses on practice-driven inquiries about the classroom, curricula, or institution, with an explicit focus on transformation (Hubball and Clark, 2010). These iterative processes of inquiry are informed by multidisciplinary theories that shape the development of a hypothesis, hypothesis testing, planning, observing, analyzing, and acting upon the associated practice (Hubball and Clark, 2010).

As such, our SoTL research took place in two iterative phases. During the first phase 1) we inquired with students about team-based practices in our classrooms, as well as with the literature, about issues of bias and stereotyping on student teams and how this impacts student learning; 2) we went to the literature and to our diversity and inclusion professionals to learn about possible curricular and classroom interventions; 3) drawing on these, we developed a set of practices to help students learn about structural racism and bias, including the privilege walk. We hypothesized that the privilege walk would help white students recognize their structural privilege, see that underrepresented students got to the same place without the benefit of such structural privilege, and that this would help to reduce bias and stereotyping on student teams. In the second phase, we 1) tested our hypothesis by running the activity; 2) analyzed the outcome through student reflective essays; and 3) we acted on the results through another iteration of developing practices, hypotheses, analyzing outcomes, and so on. Through this process, SoTL provided us with unique opportunities as faculty to observe, analyze, and reflect on our practices, deeply engage with our students about their own learning, and to understand how these practices created harms and benefits. We used that evidence to re-design our curriculum to reduce harm and to better address issues of bias and stereotyping on student teams ([citation redacted for peer review]), and we continue to learn and re-design through this ongoing iterative process (Hubball and Clark, 2010). In the remainder of our discussion of methodology, we discuss the setting of our study, our participants, our data collection methods, and our procedures for data analysis.

Setting

Our university is a private, predominantly White and predominantly male science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) oriented university. Our university combines typical, American college learning with hands-on, project-based learning that is often completed in student teams. It is in the northeastern United States. Accepted students have an average GPA of 3.92 and an average class rank of top nine percent, and admissions are considered “most selective.”

Participants

Our student body is approximately 60 percent white and 62 percent male. The non-White student body is comprised of approximately 7.8 percent Latinx students, 2.9 percent Black/African American students, 8.8 percent Asian, 0.02 percent Indigenous American, 0.04 percent Indigenous Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 3 percent multi-ethnic, 13 percent international students, and 7 percent unknown.

Students that participated in this study were enrolled in 5 different first-year project-based seminar courses. A total of 69 students participated, and all were first-year college students. We broke the 69 students from 5 different courses into two mixed course groups to ensure even and sufficient participant numbers and to artificially construct more racial diversity within each participant group.

Data Collection

We collected data for this study in the mid-2010's³, when our research team implemented the privilege walk for the first and final time. The walk itself was designed in collaboration with our then-director and co-director of our office of multicultural affairs, and their associate director, whose expertise in this area was invaluable. They also facilitated the walks themselves, along with debriefing sessions directly after the walks.

The walk involved the students stepping forward or stepping backwards in response to different statements. For example, if you grew up in a house with more than 50 books, take one step forward. Or, if English is not your first language, take one step backward. Upon completion of the walk, students discussed their experiences in small groups, with prompts created by the then director and co-director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs. Afterwards, for homework, the students were asked to read literature on the benefits of diversity on teams, and how bias and stereotyping shape educational and professional group settings, particularly in STEM environments. Then, for homework, they wrote individual reflections about their experiences in the walk based on a set of prompts created by the faculty and facilitators. Data was collected with the approval of our Institutional Review Board (IRB) and with consent from participating students.

Analysis Procedures

Upon completing the reflections, participants uploaded their reflections to an online course management system (i.e., Canvas). Only our research team had access to the reflections. To protect participants' confidentiality, and aligned with our IRB guidelines, one member of the team alone deidentified all reflections (e.g., names and personal references) and gave each student reflection an identification number before the rest of the team formally analyzed the data. That same team member linked each student's identification number to students' self-reported data, including parental adjusted gross income, gender, first-generation status, and race, as well as additional categories students identified in their reflections, such as nationality and citizenship. All names associated with student quotes are fictional names we created and all identifiers have been removed to protect student confidentiality.

Data analysis has been led by two faculty members over several years, in partnership with several undergraduate and graduate students, including those on the authorship team. We used a mix of deductive and inductive thematic analysis (Hubball and Clarke, 2006). With the former, we had themes we identified from the literature that we coded for as we read and analyzed the students' reflections. With inductive thematic analysis, we identified themes that emerged, and then coded for them throughout the set of student reflections. Our analyses drew on concepts rooted in critical race theory, used CRT to analyze the student reflection data, the privilege walk, and white privilege pedagogy. We used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to help organize the data and to use the software's data analysis and visualization tools. We conducted regular research team meetings to discuss what themes were emerging, linkages to relevant theories and frameworks, as well as differing interpretations and analyses.

As we discuss our analysis of the student experiences, we want to underscore that we do not blame students for their responses, nor do we wish to minimize student agency. Rather, we acknowledge the complex relationship between students and their environments. We interpreted data from the perspective that the students made sense of their experiences with the privilege walk by

³ For the purposes of protecting our students' confidentiality, we offer a range of years instead of the precise year.

drawing on the literature and narratives provided by us, their faculty and facilitators, as well as from within their particular sociocultural and political environments.

Finally, we acknowledge the data analytic process is fundamentally shaped by the positionality of the research team. Undoubtedly, our research team's experiences in institutions of higher education—as researchers, teachers, graduate student workers, and, indeed, as students—have created complex situated knowledge that informed our interpretation of the data. Our own identities also shaped the ways in which we understood and interpreted the students' reflections and qualitative data. Our research team has a diversity of ethnic, racial, gender, and class identities and sexual orientations, as well as disciplinary backgrounds, and staff, faculty, and student positions. In our regular meetings, we discussed where our interpretations overlapped and where they differed. We discussed our analyses through the lenses of the literature and through the lenses of our various positionalities, and we drew our conclusions through this process (Holmes, 2020).

Results

Our analysis revealed that the walk resulted in three significant outcomes. Students: 1) collapsed and depoliticized difference 2) advanced meritocracy and colorblindness, and 3) deferred to epistemological ignorance of Whiteness. We examine these outcomes by analyzing student reflections on the privilege walk, and draw on critical race scholarship to frame our analyses. We shorthand the themes we imported from CRT as *slippage*, in order to discuss how these ideas are operationalized in our student reflections. Slippage helps identify how the privilege walk fostered the tendency to decontextualize racial structures, individualize race and racism, and essentialize racial categories, and leading to student understanding of race and racism as merely individualized, epiphenomenal, and aberrant.

Collapsed Difference

Students often minimized the impact of, and therefore collapsed, salient facets of difference (e.g., race, ethnicity). We interpret this phenomenon as an expression of race liberalism, diminishing the significance of race and racism (Crenshaw, 2017). Students also collapsed difference by flattening categories of difference into a universalized conception of *being different*, which is an example of a conceptual slippage. An example comes from Dan, a White male student, who expressed that being in university provides all students with a “clean slate” that is no longer shaped by privilege:

Now that we are [in university], I feel that we can start on a clean slate. What got everyone here now does not matter. History, other than how it shaped us into who we are today, has no impact anymore. It is all about what we do here [in university], with this opportunity.

Dan both acknowledges that ‘history’ shaped his and his peers’ development, while simultaneously dismissing any impact of this ‘history’ by claiming that higher education provides a level playing field for all students. The notion of an ‘equal playing’ field qualifies as a transhistorical interpretation of privilege. We interpret Dan’s collapsing of difference as an articulation of slippage. That is, Dan, renders structural, historical, and systematic forms of difference (e.g., class, race, and gender differences) into individual terms; oppression can be overcome, because of the shared/same experience of attending college, which offers a “clean slate.” The “from now on” sensibility minimizes and individualizes power hierarchies embedded in racism, classism, and gender inequality.

Similarly, José, a Latinx student with dual citizenship, minimized and collapsed difference by emphasizing college as a universalizing destination:

While it is true that maybe our parents or ourselves had to leave our home countries at some point and that adjusting to a new culture and lifestyle was not easy, we still had managed to be at the same place as those who were considered more “privileged” [...]

José acknowledges that achievements, like attending college, are easier for some students than others. José also suggests that difference can be overcome through achievement, a perspective that conceals the significance of race and racism (Phillips, 2002; Melamed, 2006). Collapsing difference in this case functions to neutralize the meaning, impact, and significance of difference, and offers an example of how students conceptually slipped between recognizing and acknowledging differences between structural and individual forms of oppression.

A final example of collapsed difference comes from Tyler. Tyler is a White male student that identifies as highly privileged. For Tyler, the privilege walk opened his perspective of privilege. He says:

Suddenly all the challenges I was facing -homework, living in a new place, and meeting new people- seemed so insignificant when weighed against all my good fortune. Nonetheless, at the end of the exercise almost all of the participants had made the journey to the circle’s center, suggesting that from a privilege standpoint, [our college] is uniformly fortunate.

Tyler, like José and Dan, seems to acknowledge the ways social formations structured in racial dominance (Hall 1980) confer uneven and unequal privileges. For Tyler, his whiteness, class, and gender bestow him with “good fortune.” However, as Tyler reflects on the results of the walk – that most of his peers are also privileged – his recognition of difference slips from structural to individual terms. Moreover, the assertion of “uniform” privilege or fortune indicates that the walk rendered significant aspects of difference neutral and trivial.

Depoliticized Difference

Students also commonly depoliticized difference, specifically racial differences. Depoliticizing difference is an expression of race liberalism, where a muted conception of difference obscures the relationship between privilege, race, and power. An illustrative example comes from Anna, a first-generation, working-class White female student who was apprehensive about the exercise but felt relief that the privilege walk integrated differences other than race:

Before going to the privilege walk I had very reserved and negative feelings about going to this event. With all the controversy about racism in the world, and especially over the “Black Lives Matter” group, I automatically assumed that this would focus more on “White privilege” and racism. However, thankfully it didn’t focus on that one topic [...] I liked the questions that were asked; they were not focused on one certain thing, but of a very broad span of privileges.

Importantly, despite asserting that she “liked” that a variety of privileges were addressed in the activity, Anna minimized the role of power, oppression, and privilege later in her reflection, and expressed a negative sentiment toward comparison:

Factors like race, religion, sexuality, money, gender and other things discussed all affect our lives- some more than others. We live in a society where we are educated about our differences and most people are accepting about it. So, this [privilege walk activity] didn’t dredge up any deep emotions inside of me, it just reinforced my belief that everyone is different because of their backgrounds, and for that reason we shouldn’t be comparing ourselves to others.

While Anna's attention to a range of privileges appears to be a positive outcome of the privilege walk, , Anna's omission of *race* while discussing privilege is a troubling example of race liberalism. Anna's response also articulates semantic strategies examined by Bonilla-Silva (2002), which avoid any direct mention of race itself when discussing race or racism. For Bonilla-Silva, these "Anything But Race" strategies protect White people from direct engagement of race and avoid potential accusations of racism, while working to render race invisible, apolitical, and inconsequential to everyday life (2002).

Covert references to race were common in our data. Students expressed preference for discussion of social privileges rather than race, a type of rhetorical move akin to the "Anything but Race" strategy described by Bonilla-Silva (2002). Instances of "Anything but Race" in our data revealed that White students who expressed a preference for addressing a wide range of social privileges also tended to ignore race, racism, and White privilege in their reflections altogether. This suggests White students engaged in discussion of privilege to avoid or depoliticize race. Indeed, Anna, despite expressing approval for questions on different sources of privilege, later disclosed general disapproval of focusing on difference:

Yes, it's good to be sympathetic of [sic] those who are less fortunate than yourself, but people [should] not feel guilty for the privileges that they were born with. I am a firm believer that we should embrace the privileges that we have, and not focus on what we don't have.

Anna mobilizes "less fortunate" as a proxy for difference. Noting that privileges are immutable characteristics, or aspects of identity one is "born with" Anna's discussion of privilege here is alluding to, but actively avoiding, race and racism. Anna argues that sympathy for the underprivileged is permitted (to a degree), and that one should not feel guilt for unearned privileges, and, ultimately, that students should *not* focus on differences. Similarly, John, a White working-class male student reported that the privilege walk left students feeling "divided." In particular, he highlighted that the exercise accentuated differences between students on campus in antagonistic ways:

[The privilege walk] was well intentioned, yet it did more harm than good for the majority of the participants [...] Talking to many of my classmates, after the walk people felt more divided than anything else and felt that it was either a waste of time or sending the wrong message. I believe some of the reasons for this were because people already recognized the differences between their classmates' situations and their own and did not appreciate a reminder and visual representation of these differences. During the walk, I thought the questions were interesting, yet I did not feel moved or touched by any of the proceedings.

John appears to reject the exercise and claims it may be harmful because of the ways differences are highlighted and politicized. His argument that the divisiveness of the walk outweighs any benefit qualifies it is an example of depoliticization of difference: John already knew and recognized differences among his peers, and did not approve of a direct mention of difference or privilege. These kinds of negative reactions, as Leach and colleagues (2006) explain, are common in situations where dominant racial and cultural groups are confronted with inequality. Individuals in the dominant racial group commonly manage the discomfort of such confrontation through a focus on the individual, rather than structural inequality. John and Anna, like other White students, responded to the privilege walk with "negative" reactions because of the politicization of race.

Dhruv, a South Asian male student with dual citizenship, like Anna and John, responded to the privilege walk by depoliticizing difference. Unlike his peers, Dhruv depoliticized difference in a way that generated feelings of comradery: for Dhruv, recognizing difference, when sufficiently

depoliticized, was an overall positive experience. Going into the privilege walk, Dhruv reported he was nervous that he would be ‘put on the spot;’ he noted that in the past, he had experienced harassment from his American peers because of his race. He then noted that he was surprised and relieved to discover that he was not the only person who was “different”:

At first, I was afraid of sharing my life experiences with complete strangers. I believed that I would stick out like a sore thumb or even worse, get picked on for being “different.” However, I found it oddly surprising that I wasn’t the only person who was “different.” Looking around, everyone had some level of uniqueness.

Carolina, a first-generation working-class Latinx student, collapsed different aspects of her own identity in order to depoliticize markers of her difference. Carolina reported feeling out of place on campus, and that the privilege walk allowed her to find community in other students with similar experiences as hers:

My first week at [university] I felt like I didn’t fit in. I felt everyone was smarter and had rich parents; and there was me: worried about how to get good grades to maintain my scholarships. Even though my parents aren’t poor they work very hard for the money they make and having four kids brings a lot of expenses. Being able to be part of this privilege walk I saw that there were other students who are just like me. I was able to see that not everyone had the perfect family or highest social class. Many students have been through similar situations too.

Carolina was able to reflect on feelings of alienation rooted in her race and class as a result of the exercise. However, Carolina appears to frame her multidimensional experience (as working-class, as Latinx, as first-generation, as a woman) into a strictly *class-based* experience that she shares with her working-class peers. Carolina’s class-based, reductionist analysis can be interpreted as an erasure of her complex identity. On the other hand, Carolina reports to have found community through the exercise.

As with Carolina, David, a Black male student reports initial feelings of alienation and instrumentalization provoked by the privilege walk, which are then mediated by the collapsing of difference:

One of the leaders of the walk instructed us to form a circle. 2 minutes passed and we had succeeded in making a haphazard oval. We were then instructed to listen to different privilege statements, such as “I have never been afraid of loving my significant other in public...” or “I never have to worry about a cop following me because of my complexion,” and to take a step for each one that applied to us. Without even saying a word I was giving a mass of strangers insight into my life. It felt as if with each step I was removing a piece of clothing. Nude. Bare. Exposed. I remember when they stopped reading the statements and told us to look around and compare where people had started and ended. I was surprised that I was one of the people closest to the front. Being a black young man I thought I would have been close, if not completely, at the back of the crowd. It made me become aware of the fact that I do have some privileges that I take for granted. I can love who I want to in public, I have two supportive parents, and the list goes on. I know now that we all have some type of privilege in our lives, whether it may be visible or not. Societal norms and expectations effect all of us negatively in some shape or form because we are human. Humans are not one dimensional, they have depth.

While uncovering community seemed to benefit some historically minoritized students as

partially demonstrated by these examples, it is important to note that this benefit exists because our campus, like other institutions of higher ed, is structured by Whiteness. As Dhruv, Carolina, and David note, their discomfort and fear of judgment was experienced in the context of a predominantly non-Latinx White student group (according to university data, over 60% of students on campus are White). Many White students reacted negatively to this exercise and, in particular, to its effect of exposing and politicizing Whiteness. Thus, the experience of finding community reflects the ways the culture of Whiteness shapes higher education and perpetuates marginalization among historically minoritized students.

Our student responses also reveal that claims of victimhood depoliticized difference and privilege. The tendency to express victimhood is a noteworthy pattern: it appeared almost exclusively among the White middle- and upper-class male students who felt targeted in the privilege walk. For instance, recall John, a working-class male student that had a generally negative reaction to the walk. John described himself as a victim of the privilege walk and noted a concern for how others – especially marginalized students – may see him:

The activity seemed directed at me, pointing out how I was in the wrong for being privileged. I didn't choose to be born into a well-off family. Even though I may not have had as many hardships as others, I don't want to be looked down upon.

John focuses on how the privilege walk negatively impacted him as an individual. As McIntosh explained, privilege refers not to “earned strength” but instead refers to “unearned power,” including the “privilege to ignore less powerful people, distort the humanity of the [privilege] holders as well as the ignored groups” (1988b, 7). Importantly, McIntosh warns us that what may look like earned strength may actually be “permission to escape or to dominate” (1988b, 6) We see this in John’s reflection: John centers himself and presents the “fact” that he has not done anything “wrong” – he was merely born into privilege – and that recognizing his privilege will make others “look down” upon him – something that will hurt him.

Meritocracy and Colorblindness

John’s response is not uncommon. John, like other students, engaged the rhetorical tool of projection (in John’s case, projection of blame), which is characteristic of colorblindness and meritocracy (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Quizzically, John claims that he, rather than his peers of color, is a victim. This move is characteristic of leveraging Whiteness and gender to escape accountability or recognition of privilege and, ultimately, to center Whiteness. Cabrera (2017) suggests centering Whiteness to avoid accountability is a common strategy among White men on college campuses who claim victimization in response to discussions of race and racism. We understand such reactions, whether claiming victimization or centering one’s Whiteness, as expressions of race liberalism that simultaneously minimize difference and promote, however superficially, notions of equality.

Minimizing difference was consistent among students of different races and income brackets. Students of color, for example, reported that despite initial worries about being exposed to judgment from more privileged students, the focus on privileges helped create a more inclusive social environment. However, this privilege-based camaraderie was achieved by collapsing distinct, race-based privileges into more general or class-based difference. Following critical scholarship of race, we suggest generalizing identity obscures and negates social and political processes that make and remake identity, the co-production of difference, and the ways particular identity markers (e.g., race and class, gender and race, etc.) are entangled with one another (Gilmore, 2008; Hall, 1980; Gilroy, 1993; Omi and Winant, 1986).

We understand the superficial conceptualizations of difference to be a major flaw of the privilege walk, despite apparently positive reports of inclusivity in the classroom. Relatedly, students tended to collapse or depoliticize difference through appeals to meritocracy. Meritocracy is a key tenet of abstract liberalism that is based on the assumption that systems reward people based on their abilities rather than other factors like race and social class (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). We find that this undermines the aim of the privilege walk because it reinforces fictional, race-neutral colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). For José, the Latinx student we discussed in a previous section, experiences with social adversity allowed him to develop assets:

At the beginning I thought privilege was having nice things and having a life where everything was given to you and not earned. I thought that people with these qualities were ahead of the game because they had power over others in society. In reality, it was the whole opposite. The people who have had more handicaps and obstacles in their life were actually way ahead of the people whose lives were facilitated by others. The individuals who had more obstacles to avoid had been more prepared for life and the future. They are more experienced in tackling problems and that is why every time that they fall, they will get back up because they know that in the end all the work they put in is worth the fight.

In José's previous response, his focus on success in spite of differences in hardship ("while it is true that maybe [...]"), minimized the significance of race and racism. Here, we understand that the emphasis on hard work and resilience, and particularly linking hard work and resilience to success, appeals to meritocracy. To be sure, José is communicating a praiseworthy pride in the strengths he and his peers developed in the face of these hardships, but the coupling of hard work and achievement in José's response obscures the fact that hardships are socially patterned. Here, meritocracy (expressed as "despite of") detracts from understanding structural forces, rather than individual effort, determine the likelihood of achievement. While José later asserts that students who have enjoyed less privileges are 'actually way ahead' of students who have enjoyed privileges, this sentiment does not capture the complexities of historically minoritized students' experiences with oppression. Like colorblindness, meritocracy is a common ideology promoted in education, despite research that demonstrates the ways "opportunities for merit are themselves determined by non-meritocratic factors" (Mijs, 2016, p. 14)

Epistemological Ignorance

Scholars have demonstrated that epistemological ignorance aids the naturalization of Whiteness, and that White people often separate themselves from the ongoing social, political, and economic violence of White supremacy (Matias and Boucher, 2021; Cabrera, 2022). The privilege walk provided White students with the opportunity to move beyond epistemological ignorance. In their reflections on the privilege walk, several White students noted that although their understanding of privilege did not change, the privilege walk gave them a 'better' perspective or increased awareness of the 'effects' of privilege. For instance, Johanna, a non-Latinx White female student, noted that she grew up in social environments where Whiteness was the norm. Moreover, she noted that although she 'knew' about her privileges, the privilege walk allowed her to gain a deeper understanding of them:

I was born and raised in the small suburb ... a mere twenty-minute ride from [city] yet sheltered from any hardship or struggle that city living may be accompanied by. The majority of my classmates were just like me: White, middle-class students with two parents who worked and lived in nice homes on tree lined streets. Like all kids, we complained about what we didn't

have and begged for what we wanted, however, I was never ignorant of the fact that I had it better than most children my age [...] even so, I don't think one can really understand their privileges until they take a step back and actually look at them face to face.

As seen in Johanna's reflection, despite the fact that she never felt 'ignorant' about her privileged social position, because of structured ignorance (i.e., being raised in a small suburb, being 'shielded' from hardship, attending a predominantly White middle-class school, etc.) she had not previously been able to come 'face to face' with the privileges she has enjoyed -- and been aware of. In a similar manner, Doug, a White male student who described himself as, "quite literally, a part of every privileged group there is", explained that although he was aware of privilege, the privilege walk helped him gain a better perspective on the realities of oppression:

While my understanding of the definitions of privilege, power, and marginalization did not change after the privilege walk, my understanding of their effects in practice did. I was aware that there were a large number of people who are marginalized by society, but the privilege walk put those numbers into perspective. I was able to see just how many people were affected by marginalization, and yet we were biased towards those with privilege.

Both Johanna and Doug claimed to be aware of oppression and its harmful impacts prior to the privilege walk. Yet, their reflections demonstrate that this 'awareness' did not equate with actual understanding. Additionally, Johanna and Doug indicate a slippage in conceptualizing individual and structural articulations of racial difference. We might think about this slippage as a variant of epistemological ignorance—or, what critical race theorists discuss as the ways that ignorance (of life experiences, cultures, perspectives, and hardships outside of one's own) can be structured, political, managed, nuanced, and tantamount to privilege (Sullivan and Tuana 2007). As evidenced in Joanna and Doug's reflections, the privilege walk can reify the individual rather than address structural matters of privilege – and contribute to a slippage in students' understanding of structural forms of race and racism.

Conclusion

When designing and conducting the privilege walk, we hypothesized that the privilege walk would help white students recognize their structural privilege, see that underrepresented students got to the same place without the benefit of such structural privilege, and that this would help to reduce bias and stereotyping on student teams. However, our data and analysis demonstrate that while students express a range of reactions to the privilege walk, the exercise encouraged a flattened conception of difference, resulted in them focusing on individual rather than structural power, and alienated students of color. We discuss each of these shortcomings in this concluding section.

Many students reported a depoliticized and flattened conception of salient identity-based difference after their participation in the privilege walk. The tendency for students to elide, collapse, minimize, or ignore race-based differences creates the opportunity to reinforce the uneven power dynamics that we aimed to interrupt by conducting the walk. For instance, students of all racial backgrounds collapsed difference, differed to fallacies of equality, and reified meritocracy; many White students internalized the walk in a way that sparked feelings of anger, guilt, or victimization.

The feelings that White students commonly expressed in relation to the privilege walk exercise demonstrate that the activity tended to generate (or reinforce) an individualized conceptualization of racism. The feelings of guilt, shame, and other negative emotions indicate that the walk has a tendency to activate conceptualizations of difference that are characteristic of liberal ideology. Liberal ideology

in student response manifested through an adherence to meritocratic standards of success, the erasure of race and race-based difference in favor of class or gender, and the operationalization of race-neutral narratives. These responses reveal the ways that engaging in the privilege walk allowed students to conceptualize difference, power, oppression, and race in ways that actively displaced any notion of structural power. This is a disappointing outcome given our intention of aiding student understanding of the structures of power that shape society.

We also note that within our predominantly White institution, the walk served White students only. This result is partly because by design: White privilege pedagogy is an instrument *meant* to teach White people about their Whiteness (Margolin, 2015; Cabrera, 2017; Lensmire et al., 2013). Positive impacts, however, were limited. Many White students reflected on the exercise with strong negative emotions. For most White students, the focus on Whiteness and privilege failed to meaningfully impact, teach, or change perspectives of power or privilege.

The aggregate impact of the walk on our students is troubling, and we are particularly discouraged about the walk because of the care and attention with which we constructed the exercise. We recognize there are other forms or modes of privilege walks, such as privilege walks conducted as individual, written exercises; “blind” privilege walks that assign fictional privileges students at random; and walks that center the assets of students, rather than describe deficits (e.g., Stevens et al., 2019; Oropeza et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2019).

Other educators and university administrators might assume that the “right” privilege walk could mitigate the harms of the traditional exercise while fostering the benefits. Some might suggest anonymous privilege walks (conducted individually, on paper; or, “blindly” with fictional privileges allotted randomly to students; with a focus on assets rather than deficits, and so on—see Stevens et al 2019; Oropeza et al 2016; Parker et al 2019). The different iterations of the privilege walk still facilitate a slippage between individual and structural matters of race. However, we believe that at its core, the privilege walk fails to create transformative learning about race and power. The shortcomings of the walk, despite our best intentions, suggest that the exercise is an inadequate pedagogical tool for understanding difference, power, and privilege, and race and racism in particular. Given these results, we suggest White privilege pedagogy, including the privilege walk, should be replaced with pedagogical approaches that center race and racism in a structural context, while assessing the role of race in shaping everyday life. We find critical race theory a more appropriate and effective perspective to help students learn about race, power, and difference because much of the literature in CRT explicitly identifies and names White supremacy.

Additionally, SoTL studies have demonstrated that integrating readings from CRT into the classroom can help students connect broader, “real life” processes of racism to the ways that racism shapes education (Parker and Stovall, 2004), helps educators better understand the ways racism shapes education policy (Gillborn, 2007), and can help White educators understand and combat racism in the classroom and on campus (Bergerson, 2003). Concepts rooted in CRT can also aid in teaching about race, privilege, and power in ways that frame societal privilege and disadvantage from a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” perspective. For example, readings and exercises that explain how multiple and overlapping facets of identity shape life outcomes could benefit White working-class students in critical reflection about the ways race and class *intersect*. Such a perspective encourages more flexible thinking about how identity can produce positive and negative experiences – that race and class contribute to experiences of *both* advantage and disadvantage in higher education and in other spaces.

While the one-off event of a privilege walk can feel more manageable to educators like us, who are new to these literatures and pedagogies, we advocate for educators to acquaint themselves with literatures that explain race as a historical and structural process. We find critical race theory is an effective alternative to performing White privilege pedagogy. As fellow educators, we also find critical race theory key to informing our understanding of our students’ experiences during the

privilege walk, as well as in our understanding of why this approach was problematic for us to roll out. As such, we find this literature is a foundation for informed pedagogy and praxis moving forward. We suggest that faculty spend some time with this literature (much of which we cite above) and have students also engage with some of it.

For good places to start with both students and faculty in mind, we recommend in particular, literature around race liberalism cited above, such as Crenshaw's 2017 "Race Liberalism and the Deradicalization of Racial Reform", Mills' 2007 "White Ignorance" and his 2008 "Race Liberalism" to be effective, short, and accessible readings for students to help get them started in thinking about structural racism, its impacts, and the ways that whiteness and privilege allow some people to ignore the ways they are implicated in the racial hierarchy even without intention. These readings, along with others like Yosso's much cited 2005 article, "Whose Culture has Capital: A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth" and the Introduction and first few chapters of Keeyanga-Yamahtta Taylor's *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Taylor, 2016) can give students necessary background for both understanding some of the racial history that has led to the current conditions and also help them see the ways privilege and oppression are unevenly distributed by systems and structures which helps push back on the kinds of slippage we describe above. Further, if faculty have the time and the space in the classroom, we also recommend viewing the California Newsreel's fantastic three part documentary series, "Race: The Power of an Illusion" as another way to help students understand this complicated history and the ways it reverberates in their own lives (Pounder et al, 2003), and the University of California has also created a very nice companion website to the documentary with a lot of material and activities that can be used in the classroom (see: <https://www.racepowerofanillusion.org/>). These suggestions are offered in hopes that they provide an alternative starting point for both faculty and students lacking expertise in these areas to begin to work through issues of race, power, and privilege in a way that does not bring with it the problems inherent in the privilege walk activity that we have identified above.

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