

Rhodes University Imbizo, 27-28 July 2011

– *Presentation by Sally Matthews forming part of a Panel Discussion on Institutional Culture*

Writing about privilege in the United States of America Michael Kimmel says:

To run or walk into a strong headwind is to understand the power of nature. You set your jaw in a squared grimace, your eyes are slits against the wind, and you breathe with fierce determination. And still you make so little progress.

To walk or run with that same wind at your back is to float, to sail effortlessly, expending virtually no energy. You do not feel the wind; it feels you. You do not feel how it pushes you along; you feel only the effortlessness of your movements. You feel like you could go on forever. Only when you turn around and face that wind do you realize its strength.¹

He then uses this image of the wind to speak about how being white or male or heterosexual in the United States is like running with the wind at your back. He stresses that when you have the wind at your back it doesn't feel like you're being aided, you just feel like you're moving effortlessly forward.

Institutional culture can be a little like the wind. If it's at your back (in other words, if you fit in with your institution's culture) you probably don't notice it and you don't realize how it helps you move effortlessly forward. But if you're running into the wind (in other words if you don't fit in with the prevailing institutional culture) it can feel as if moving even slightly forward requires incredible effort and determination.

My current research explores the idea of privilege and I've been asked today to use some of the ideas from this research to think about institutional culture at Rhodes. One of the most read articles on privilege is Peggy McIntosh's essay² in which she tries to unpack the 'invisible knapsack' of white privilege. What she tries to do in this essay is to reveal how white people in the United States are privileged in ways that are probably not visible to them most of the time. As she puts it 'White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks'. She draws up a list of these privileges to try to make them visible in order to help white people recognise the ways in which they are privileged in the USA. To give you some idea of what she's getting at, let me list some of the (very varied) privileges she includes in her list:

- I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
- Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of my financial reliability.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
- I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.

¹ Michael S. Kimmel, 2010, Introduction: Toward Pedagogy of the Oppressor, in *Privilege: a reader*, edited by Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber (Boulder: Westview Press), pp. 1-10.

² Peggy McIntosh, 1988, White Privilege and Male Privilege, Working Paper 189, Wellesley College. This essay has been reprinted and circulated in various forms. One version is available electronically at http://www.oregon.gov/DAS/HR/LO/docs/WhitePrivilege_PeggyMcIntosh.pdf?ga=t. I list only a few of the 46 items included in McIntosh's list of privileges.

- I can choose blemish cover or bandages in “flesh” color and have them more or less match my skin.

Other authors have drawn up similar lists to try to reveal the privileges which heterosexual people or men have.

I wonder if we can draw up a similar list to reveal ways in which some academic staff members might experience Rhodes as a more comfortable and easy place to be than other people. Louise Vincent has said quite a bit about students, but I’ll focus on academic staff here, although of course academics are only one small constituency at Rhodes. I’ll focus on academics here both because, as an academic myself, I feel more able to speak to the way that Rhodes institutional culture affects academics and also because most of those here today are academic staff and so this is of most interest, perhaps, to this audience.

According to fairly recent statistics, more than 80% of those described as ‘instruction and research staff’ at Rhodes are white. A disproportionate number of these staff members, especially at associate professor and professor level, are male. I would also imagine that most of these staff members come from fairly affluent backgrounds and that most are heterosexual. Rhodes’ institutional culture has gradually over the years shaped itself in such a way as to make its predominant community feel welcome and at ease. It has become a ‘home’ for this community, but how do we manage to make it a ‘home for all’?

When thinking about this question, those who are the predominant community within the community of academics at Rhodes (the straight, white men of a middle class background) might rightfully ask: ‘In what ways am I privileged in this space? Where is this ‘wind at my back’ that you refer to?’

In order to try to make this wind visible, let me try to unpack the invisible knapsack of privilege that those who look like a ‘typical’ Rhodes academic carry around with them. Here are some of the ‘special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks’ that the straight, white, middle-class, male academic may carry in his weightless invisible knapsack. Before making the list, let me also stress that those of us who don’t fit all the descriptions of this ‘typical’ Rhodes academic may nevertheless carry, perhaps slightly lighter, invisible knapsacks with some of these tools in them.

1. My students are not surprised to find someone like me lecturing them and tend to accept me as an authority on my subject.
2. If I forget my staff card, I can probably convince the library staff to let me into the library and issue me books.
3. The texts I prescribe for my students tend to be written by people who look pretty similar to me. It’s clear to my students that people like me are experts on my subject.
4. No one complains about my ‘funny accent’.
5. Even if I don’t have a PhD from a prestigious university, my students tend to accept that I’m qualified to teach them.
6. When I attend a faculty meeting, there are lots of other people there who look like me and who come from a similar background to me.
7. When I’m invited to dinner by my HoD (who probably comes from a background not that different from mine) I’m familiar with the general etiquette that goes along with such events – I know whether or not to bring along a bottle of wine and which wine might be seen as decent.
8. Support staff often offer to do things for me.

9. I'm accustomed to people cleaning up after me and the people cleaning my office are accustomed to cleaning up after people like me.
10. Tutors and teaching assistants usually help me out without complaint or resentment.
11. I understand the jokes made during staff meetings and I find them funny.
12. Students are wary of complaining about me to the HoD. They assume the HoD will side with me.
13. If I forget to arrive for a particular lecture or arrive unprepared, I know my students will forgive me and just see me as a 'nutty professor', rather than run to the HoD and complain about my incompetence.
14. When I arrive to invigilate at an exam venue, the exam commissioner does not angrily tell me 'Go sit down, only staff are allowed here at the front'.
15. I understand (at least a bit) Rhodes student culture because I went to Rhodes or to a similar institution.
16. I feel comfortable at the local pub where some staff and students hang out after departmental seminars.
17. If I make a mistake, I don't worry that my mistake is going to confirm a stereotype others have about people of my gender or race.
18. I'm not worried that people think I was appointed just because of my race or gender.
19. My mother tongue is spoken all day at my workplace.
20. My children are able to go to excellent local schools in which there are plenty of role models of the same race as them.

But if we accept (and make visible) the privileges that some of us have when moving around on Rhodes campus, what then do we do about this? What do we do if we find ourselves at a disadvantage in this space? What do we do if we recognise that we are advantaged in this space? Do those who are disadvantaged just throw up their arms in despair or rage? Do those who are advantaged just say 'So what?' or quibble and try to insist that they are in fact not advantaged at all?

I want to think very briefly through some possible ways that we can move forward once we've recognised that Rhodes is not a place that makes everyone feel equally comfortable and I want to do this from the perspective of both those made uncomfortable and those made comfortable, with perhaps a little more focus on the latter.

Firstly, what can those who find themselves ill at ease do about this? As someone who for the most part (excepting my gender) is made to feel comfortable at this institution, I'm in some ways uncomfortable about answering this question, because of my own relatively privileged position, but let me try to advance a few possibilities, drawing quite a bit on my own experiences as a female academic both at Rhodes and elsewhere. Here are some possibilities I raise for further discussion.

- Carve out comfortable spaces, some 'breathing room' – create spaces in which those who feel uncomfortable at Rhodes feel comfortable. I think, for example, of the Women's Academic Solidarity Association.
- Tell some new stories to shift what Louise Vincent calls Rhodes's 'story stock'.
- Make visible the ways in which others are privileged – sometimes gently, sometimes more assertively.
- Seek out mentorship from others who have faced similar discomfort to find ways to resolve issues.
- Participate, actively, in attempts by the department to build a more diverse staff and student body.

But what about those who are privileged by our institutional culture? What do we do if this is a space we feel welcome and comfortable in, but we recognise that not everyone feels comfortable here and that there is something unjust about this.

To think about what those who are in an advantaged position might do with this privilege, I'd like to use the work of the white American philosopher, Alison Bailey.³ Responding to recognition of her own privileged position as a white American, she writes the following:

The inescapable character of white privilege initially presented itself to me in the form of a dilemma. On the one hand, to use Judith Levine's (1994) phrase, "privilege is written on my skin". As a white woman I am stuck with privilege because I can't take off the invisible, weightless knapsack that grants me privilege.' On the other hand, if I am stuck with this knapsack, then I worry about whether its contents can be used safely. If this dilemma is real, I face a kind of political paralysis: I can't divest myself fully of privilege, and its use only fortifies the system I want to demolish. I can't lose it, and I don't want to use it. Where do I go from here?

Bailey slowly works through this dilemma, coming to the conclusion that privilege can be used as a resource to bring about social changes that will result in a more just situation. The example that she uses in showing how she comes to this conclusion is very instructive when thinking about university institutional cultures. Bailey provides us with the following dilemma: She is approached by Nina, an African American student who has just been notified that she has been awarded a full scholarship. Nina goes to the administration building to pick up her cheque, but discovers that her name is not on the database of registered students (even though she did register) and is told that she can't get the money as they've had problems with 'students like her', who drop out but still collect their scholarship cheque. The administrators treat her as suspicious and so Nina asks Bailey, her white professor, to come with her to help her convince them that she is a bona fide student. So, asks Bailey, what should she do? If she marches in to the admin office and insists that they treat Nina properly, she'll probably get Nina's problem solved, but only because a white professor has come forward to vouch for her. As Bailey puts it: 'My playing the white faculty card-intervening on behalf of Nina does not give the staff in the Financial Aid Office a lesson in how to treat students of color in a way that is not rude, neglectful, or suspicious.' But if she doesn't help Nina, then she's being pretty insensitive to her student and Nina may have to spend hours of time to get the problem sorted out. Here the problem is as follows: 'If I decide not to use privilege for fear of buttressing the system that gives privilege currency, then I get to decide what aspects of oppression get addressed. My decision is based not on Nina's needs but on my comfort.'

After careful consideration, Bailey decides to sit together with Nina to try to decide how best they can get the university administrators to recognise the inappropriateness of their response to Nina and to correct their treatment of her (while hopefully also becoming a little more cautious about treating other black students in this way). Bailey hopes that in this way she can use her position of privilege in order to try to advance the interests of those who are not in the same position of privilege in the institution she works. Privilege, she argues, can be used as a resource for social change.

We could think of many similar examples. What I hope to illustrate with this example, is that those who are privileged can also play a role in changing practices and attitudes that disadvantage others. Instead of reacting defensively, those who are privileged by the current institutional

³ Alison Bailey, 1999, 'Despising an identity they taught me to claim', *Whiteness: feminist philosophical reflections*, ed. by C.J. Cuomo and K.Q. Hall, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield), pp. 85–107.

culture at Rhodes can opt to recognise this privilege and find ways to use it so as to create an institutional culture that is more welcoming to others.

I end off with a quote from Audre Lorde:

... those of us who have benefited from class privilege or white-skin privilege are often reluctant to look at [it]... lest we find ourselves morally or socially obligated to give them up or share them. We are therefore also reluctant to use those benefits and privileges in the service of what we believe needs being done, because to use privilege requires admitting to privilege, requires moving beyond guilt and accusation into creative action. And, of course, unused privilege becomes a weapon in the hand of our enemies ...⁴

⁴ Quoted in 'Despising an identity they taught me to claim' by Alison Bailey, in *Whiteness: feminist philosophical reflections*, ed. by C.J. Cuomo and K.Q. Hall, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999.