Conservation Biology

Diversity

Facilitating discussions about privilege among future conservation practitioners

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The world's resources are not equally shared among all people, and it has become clear that successful conservation must take this inequity into account (Houghton et al. 1997; UNFCCC 2016). It is thus important for current and future conservation professionals to think deeply about privilege and to consider its effect on their work.

Privilege refers to unearned advantages derived purely from attributes and identities with which we are born. Privilege is a difficult topic to engage with because it challenges the very notion of meritocracy. In a multidimensional social hierarchy, most people are simultaneously advantaged and disadvantaged by different aspects of their identities. Within the context of conservation, power dynamics associated with privilege have important consequences, from interpersonal to international scales.

Understanding how privilege differences affect interpersonal communication has been important in efforts to include and empower diverse stakeholders in conservation (e.g., Sundberg 2004; Oscarson & Calhoun 2007; Garzón et al. 2012). Ingrained, unrecognized social hierarchies can result in scientists failing to realize when they overlook or dismiss the needs and concerns of community members with relatively less privilege than themselves (Twyman 2000; Sundberg 2004; Oscarson & Calhoun 2007), making truly participatory conservation impossible. Even unintended oversight of stakeholders' opinions and concerns can lead to mistrust of scientists and thus thwart conservation efforts in all or part (Mehta & Kellert 1998; Twyman 2000; Sundberg 2004).

Conservation that addresses disparities in privilege can lead to productive outcomes. For example, representatives at the recent United Nations conference on climate change in Paris recognized and attempted to compensate for socioeconomic differences among nations by allowing developing nations greater flexibility than developed nations in achieving climate-change mitigation goals (UNFCCC 2016). Furthermore, livelihoods of people in developing nations are far more vulnerable to an unpredictable climate than livelihoods of people in developed nations, but developed nations have contributed more significantly to climate change (UNFCCC 2016). To settle on agreements, parties called on developed nations to provide financial and capacity-building support to developing nations for climate-change adaptation (UNFCCC 2016).

Given the practical and ethical importance of addressing privilege in small- and large-scale conservation efforts, opportunities for constructive discussion about privilege should be standard when preparing students for careers in conservation. Although conservation curricula often include discussions of socioeconomic factors, they are generally framed in terms of the poverty of others, rather than potential effects of privilege differences between conservation practitioners and stakeholders. However, students need practice thinking about this sometimes uncomfortable concept (Hardee et al. 2012). We therefore encourage educators to support their students by scheduling conversations specifically about privilege. Many conservation courses already include discussions on conservation values, into which discussions of privilege could fit easily. The purpose of these discussions is not to provoke guilt about having privilege or to instruct students on how to behave. Instead, the goal is to equip future conservation professionals with sufficient self-knowledge and awareness of privilege to facilitate productive interactions between scientists and stakeholders, ultimately leading to effective conservation efforts.

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Conservation Biology Privilege Walk

Instructions: If a statement is *true* in your personal experience, put a "+1" next to it. If the statement is *false* for you, put a "-1" next to it. Add them up at the end. Possible range of scores: -x to +x.

1. It is unlikely that I would be asked about my immigration status while hiking through deserts of the southwestern United States.
2. My experience with the outdoors does not consist of, in all or part, having to work all day in the hot sun, harvesting crops or tending someone else's lawn.
3. Land-conservation efforts (e.g., saving the rainforests) do not provoke me to worry that my own livelihood will be threatened.
4. When doing field work, if I encounter a man I don't know, I don't feel afraid.

...

x. If I am doing fieldwork after dark, I don't worry that people who encounter me may be frightened of me.

Figure 1. Sample true-false statements in the activity Conservation Biology Privilege Walk.

Here, we describe a case, drawn from H.M.B.'s teaching experience, in which discussions of privilege were incorporated into a graduate-level conservation biology course. We seek to facilitate a dialogue about the need for and methods of engaging students in discussions of privilege in the practice of conservation.

A 2-class framework for initiating discussions of privilege was designed and led by H.M.B. with input from A.K. and M.R. At the start of the first class, H.M.B. asked students to commit to confidentiality and civility (e.g., to listen without interrupting and to respectfully consider the origins of differing opinions). The discussion began with an emotionally neutral example: right-handedness (Gilbert 2008). H.M.B. replaced most of the right-handed desks in the classroom with left-handed desks, providing all with an opportunity to observe responses and expressions of right-handed students as they took their seats. Then, she initiated a conversation about how the world caters overwhelmingly to right-handed people. The class discussed how right-handed privilege is analogous to more consequential forms of privilege, including but not limited to race-, class-, and gender-based privilege.

Next, the class was asked to think of how privilege (or the lack thereof) can affect people's conservation priorities. One example was that parents worried about feeding their children may prioritize hunting any form of protein over considering whether or not the hunted animal is endangered, even if they agree in principle that endangered species should be protected. Students also discussed how privilege may have influenced their own conservation priorities. For example, privilege may influence what research they choose to pursue (e.g., socioeconomic concerns can influence whether studying reserve design or sustainable harvest methods is considered more urgent). Privilege may also influence where they choose to work. For example, Latina and Latino conservation professionals with brown skin may have greater reservations than white conservation professionals about conducting field work in parts of the United States where anti-immigration sentiments are high. Although several people in the class embodied some visible, less-privileged identities, we also recognized that because we were all teaching or learning at a U.S. university, we were privileged based on education level and country of residence relative to many actors on the conservation stage. This emphasized that privilege is multifactorial, and relative, which is an important consideration for students who are just beginning to contemplate the effect of privilege on their work.

Next, each student filled out the worksheet Conservation Biology Privilege Walk (adapted from [Pachamama Alliance 2012]) (Fig. 1). The worksheet is based on an exercise in which privilege is likened to an "invisible knapsack" everyone carries that is filled with attributes and experiences that grant unearned advantages (McIntosh 1988). Class ended with students privately tallying their privilege walk scores and reflecting on how this information might inform their interactions with people whose conservation-related priorities differed from their own. Students were asked to share their thoughts if they felt comfortable doing so. One student commented:

> Before the activity, I was aware of my privilege and conscious of very obvious indications of privilege bias in our field, particularly that a majority of faculty and students in our department are Caucasian males from stable socioeconomic backgrounds. However, the activity . . . forced [me] to consider what about our field in particular excluded (intentionally or otherwise) other members of society from participating and how unreasonable it is for this extremely narrow group of people to be the driving force behind research, management, and conservation practices that affect all of the world's citizens.

Students were asked to bring a peer-reviewed paper that described an example of scientists and communities working together toward a conservation goal to the next class. Using such case studies can be effective because it allows students to think critically about privilege without feeling as vulnerable as they might if they were talking specifically about their experiences (Gillespie 2003).

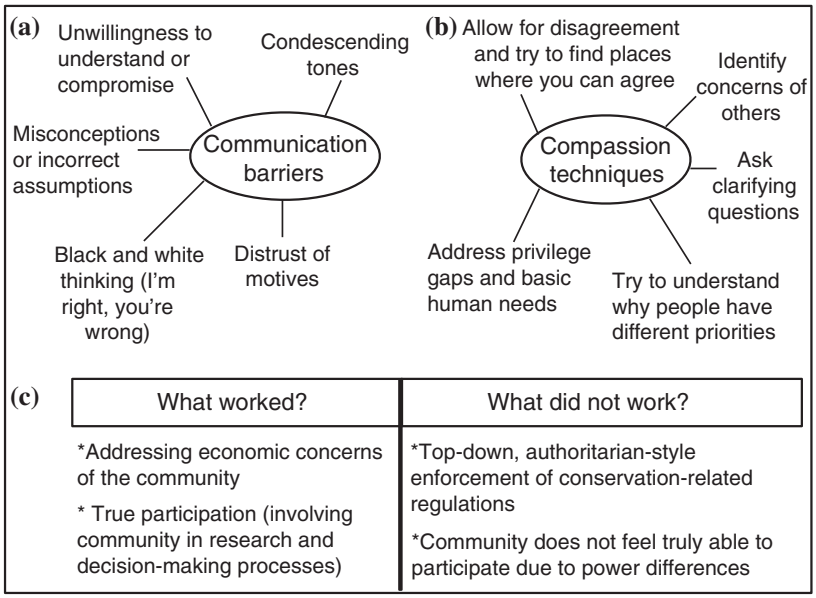

Figure 2. Sample responses for (a) ways in which classifying people as outsiders to conservation can cause communication barriers, (b) (compassion) techniques one can use to facilitate productive interactions when stakeholders have different conservation priorities, and (c) the nature of communication as described in peer-reviewed papers that examine effective versus ineffective conservation efforts.

In the following class, students were asked if they were aware of any groups of people that conservationists might categorize as outsiders due to differences in conservation priorities and therefore implicitly or explicitly condescend to (adapted from [Rakestraw 2013]). This led to a discussion on how considering people to be outsiders can contribute to communication barriers and may lead to continued monopolizing of decision-making power by the party with relatively more privilege (Fig. 2a). The class was then asked if they could think of ways in which conservation practitioners could facilitate productive interactions with people who have different conservation priorities (i.e., compassion techniques), especially in cases where those priorities may be related to privilege differences (Fig. 2b).

Then, using the peer-reviewed papers, students created a table characterizing the nature of interactions between scientists and local community members in successful versus unsuccessful conservation efforts (Fig. 2c). Students almost immediately commented that successful efforts (e.g., Oscarson & Calhoun 2007; Kross et al. 2011) used many of the compassion techniques, whereas unsuccessful efforts (e.g., Mehta & Kellert 1998; Twyman 2000) did not use any of them (Figs. 2b & 2c).

Discussing privilege can be challenging (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung 2009). However, in anonymous evaluations, students strongly agreed that these discussions were productive. One student later commented:

> " . . . the main thing I took away was that, when it comes to issues that are controversial (including climate change or biodiversity preservation), approaching those who might oppose ecologists with an understanding of my own privilege and how it differs from the background of others can help me to open myself up to innovative solutions, instead of imposing my beliefs on others."

The irony of a discussion about privilege being led by an instructor who holds some power—or privilege—relative to students was not lost on us. Nonetheless, we argue that it is an appropriate and productive use of power over classroom time to provide students with an opportunity to think about the relevance of privilege in conservation. We believe that awareness of how privilege influences conservation practice and outcomes will be an invaluable asset as cooperative conservation efforts are engaged in locally and globally.

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Supporting Information

Discussion plans and a summary of assessments of learning goals (Appendix S1) are available online. The authors are solely responsible for the content and functionality of these materials. Queries (other than absence of the material) should be directed to the corresponding author.

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