Pastoral and Spiritual Care across Differences that may Divide and Oppress

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Abstract This article provides theological, clinical, and theoretical resources for pastoral and spiritual care providers who wish to be effective in providing care across embodied differences such as sexuality, gender, race, and class. The article assists care providers in naming and resisting the oppressive inequities of power and privilege that accompany and complicate these experiences of difference. Resources to assist the care provider’s reflections on her or his own social location with regard to these differences are also provided.

Keywords Ally, five faces of oppression, intersecting oppressions, privilege, power, social identity development, sin, imago dei, relational justice, embodiment

A Case

George and Pearl are each 20 years old. They live in a metropolitan area in north Texas. They met at a local community college where George had enrolled in a computer technology program and Pearl was in a secretarial program. George and Pearl each identify as African American. They married last year after graduation from their programs and live in an apartment not too far from the airport where George has gotten a job with Thrifty Car Rental as a front desk customer service employee. Pearl has to drive about 30 minutes to an elementary school where she has a clerical job in the office.

George’s parents live in the city. George’s father is employed on an assembly line in the automobile industry as was his father before him. George’s mother is a cook in an elementary school. Pearl’s father is a plumber with a local company and her mother is a faculty secretary at

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the local community college. Pearl’s parents were not thrilled when she introduced them to George because they had hoped she would marry someone whose employment prospects were better. They worried that George would not be able to provide for her as her father had. George’s parents worried that Pearl might have ambitions their son would not be able to satisfy.

George and Pearl each worked while in their courses of study and lived at home to reduce costs, but their combined incomes after graduation only allowed them to rent an apartment. Pearl’s parents had other children to help, and they could not loan them any funds for a down payment on a small home or condominium. George’s parents had no extra savings. The rent and insurance take a third of their monthly income.

Pearl and George want to start a family, but Pearl cannot risk losing her job and childcare is too expensive to manage. Pearl has already begun to ask George about promotions at his work that would allow them to save for a down payment on a home or condo. George tries to describe the tension he feels at his job due to the working environment. His supervisor is Paulette, a 40 something European American woman. The others at the desk are Paul, a Korean American man who is getting a college degree while he works there and Theresa, a European American woman who just finished her community college program and started 3 months ago. George thinks promotions will be tough to come by given the tightening competition in the industry. He also worries that Paulette has some bias against him since she repeatedly points out small ways he can improve. She is less critical of Paul and is forgiving of Theresa’s efforts as a new employee. He worries that Paul will get the Assistant supervisor promotion that should be coming up soon. He knows he can’t prove any bias even though he thinks it is there. George doesn’t want to whine at home, but the anxiety about work is always on his mind. Pearl is the only African American in the office at her school. She also acknowledges unease in her setting due to the comments
sometimes made about African American parents and children by others in the office. These are highly insulting. She knows that if she complains about the racist comments, her work environment would become much worse.

Pearl calls you, an EAP (Employment Assistance Program) counselor through the school system because she and George are beginning to take out their tensions about work on each other. They need their jobs, and they find the constant subtle and not so subtle racism on top of their economic worries is doing them in.

**Naming the situation**

As the counselor to whom this couple is referred, providing effective care will require several kinds of knowledge, including the implications of such knowledge for our own critical self-awareness about our embodied experience of differences such as gender, sexuality, race, and class. These intersecting differences are often treated oppressively in church and culture in the United States. As a provider of spiritual care, it also will be important to be familiar with the theological themes that inform the dilemma that Pearl and George are confronting. In particular it is crucial to recognize that embodied differences such as gender, sexuality, race, and class are not the problem but simply part of the context for the difficulties this couple are experiencing. This case illustrates the way in which brokenness arises as inequities of power and privilege insinuate themselves onto such intersecting differences. Inequities of power and privilege at personal, relational, systemic, and cultural symbolic levels will be part of our analysis. We will also identify useful theological resources for resisting the dehumanizing consequences of intersecting oppressions such as racism, sexism, and classism that we and our clients experience.
Strategies and Resources

Fortunately for spiritual caregivers there is a helpful convergence between theoretical resources and theological ones in identifying the origin and enduring character of the brokenness that is apparent in the experience of George and Pearl. For millennia, theologians in Christian tradition have identified the way in which the context of the human community into which we are born is already distorted by patterns of distrust and enmity that predispose human beings to reproduce these distortions, usually initially without awareness that we have been shaped by such destructive forces and subsequently with some level of awareness about our complicity (Augustine, 395/1964). Wendy Farley (1990) describes this process using the metaphor of “sin as lie.” She rightly notes that human freedom is not finally constrained from acting on behalf of an ethic of mutual love and care but, especially for those relatively privileged by patterns of inequity, making choices to resist such patterns is difficult. Fumitaka Matsuoka (1998) offers a slightly different metaphor for the effect of sin as lie: “the negation of relation.” His point is that when those with privilege accept the lie that the patterns of inequity in power and privilege are inherent and thus unavoidable in the human community, they negate God’s intention for a human community shaped by the ethic of neighbor love. Their behavior objectifies the other with all its related material and political and spiritual consequences. Unwittingly such behavior also diminishes the humanity of the privileged in whom God’s image is diminished. From the context of critical race theory, Bobbi Harro (1986) helpfully augments the work of and Farley and Matsuoka with her cycles of socialization and liberation. Like Farley, she rightly describes how our freedom to enter into relationships that cross differences such as gender, sexuality, race, and class that are deeply distorted is compromised by patterns of socialization that precede our
critical awareness. That means that everyone begins the work of resisting these sorts of oppression not from guilt but from a desire to be freed from the constraints of oppression and freed for love as mutual regard. Both theologians and critical theorists note that the goal of freedom from oppression is true whether persons find themselves in the position of victim marginalized by oppressive patterns of socialization or as those whose agency reproduces oppression wittingly or unwittingly.

**Social Identity Development Model**

Rita Hardiman and Bailey Jackson, III & Griffin (2007) articulate a social identity development model that well describes the possible developmental trajectory for persons who intend to resist their complicity in the oppressive treatment of one or more forms of difference. Like Harro, Hardiman and Jackson note that this process of intentional change happens, if it happens at all, when a person has one or more experiences that precipitate recognition of the possibility that the marginalization of some identified groups in culture is a “lie,” to use Farley’s language. When that happens the person moves from a status of active or passive acceptance of such status to passive (that is, not public) or active resistance of their earlier understanding. For persons who
may have enjoyed a privileged status vis-à-vis that difference this means deconstructing a privileged identity. For those who were victimized by such an identity, it means deconstructing their “victim” status. In either case, such work obviously would be difficult and more likely successful in the context of communities of confirmation and support. If they are successful in this resistance eventually persons find their energies more focused by redefinition from either privileged or victim postures toward embracing a commitment that all should enjoy full rights and privileges as equally valued members of the human community. This constructive process also requires considerable support. Eventually, the focused work of reconstructing an identity yields to a new identity in which a revised sense of self is internalized. This identity development model is highly valuable for teaching and clinical practice. Spiritual caregivers can identify the status of our own social locations and “homework” regarding our own processes for resisting differences treated oppressively. Similarly we can listen for the locations of those such as Pearl and George who seek our care and for whom such issues of difference are locations of brokenness. It is important to note that working one’s way through one aspect of difference such as racism or classism does not resolve the work of resisting oppression related to other types of difference. Janet Helms (1990) has developed helpful models for clinicians who may underestimate how important it is to be vigilant in addressing our own efforts to deconstruct internalized privilege or stigma and reconstruct an identity that is alert to the work of supporting those harmed by the oppressive treatment of difference. While her work focuses on differences between African Americans and European Americans, it is transferable to other racial groups and a wider range of experiences of oppression.

As the case of Pearl and George suggests, in lived experience intersecting differences inevitably give rise to a certain messiness in which we must find our way toward approximations
of just and loving outcomes. No person or group is immune from the distortions that arise in and accompany experiences of gender, sexuality, race, and class. For example, George and Pearl both know the oppression of racism. Their family backgrounds also reflect real socioeconomic class distinctions that have insinuated themselves into the African American community. For example, Pearl’s parents imagine Pearl has “married down” because she is marrying the son of a factory worker and cook while her father is a skilled craftsman and her mother a secretary in a college setting (Orr, 1997, 2000). The fact that neither set of parents can assist George and Pearl with a down payment on a house discloses a real economic consequence of marginalization and discloses a predictably diminished economic trajectory for George and Pearl that has long term consequences (Kliman & Madsen, 1998). As George’s parents feared, we find Pearl wanting her husband to “move up” the promotion ladder. George finds himself in a work context where he shares his work status with persons who have subtle differences in status from his by virtue of intersecting differences in race, class, and gender (Wimberly, 1997). Paul is working on a college degree and as an Asian American is associated with a more “successful” minoritized racial group while Theresa seems to share George’s class status and has her own minoritized status as a woman but the situation suggests her identity as a European American may be a benefit especially with a supervisor who may unwittingly identify with Theresa. George believes he is experiencing less equitable treatment from his Euro-American supervisor, but it may be too subtle to prove and too dangerous to name if he wants to keep his job. How can George convey the reality of the oppression he experiences and the support he needs to Pearl who is in a context where racism is not at all subtle?

Effective care for this couple will require that a spiritual care provider be able to draw on several aspects of critical theory. For example, critical pedagogy resources such as the Group
Membership Profile help us recognize that each person’s apparently personal identity is in fact a dynamic composite of multiple dimensions of social group identity: ethnicity, race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and so forth (Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2007). These are not benign differences. Rather, they predictably disclose our vulnerability to the distortions of inequities in power and privilege as patterns of dominance and oppression play out. Moreover, as George and Pearl’s experiences demonstrate, these differences modify one another such as class differentiating within race. It is helpful for persons offering skilled care to be well acquainted with the way these competing differences arise and complicate personal and interpersonal experience as well as distorting the possibilities for structural and systemic justice. Of course, alongside noting how the identities of persons such as George and Pearl reflect this complex construction, it is also crucial that caregivers consider the construction of our own identities. The group membership column is self-explanatory. The status column may be less so. In this column we note whether a person’s particular aspect of social group membership is targeted or privileged by the prevailing norms of the dominant culture. In some cases status is dynamic such as with age and ability/disability. In other cases status is nuanced such as for Pearl’s status with her gender. Clearly women continue to have a marginalized status in this culture. However, Pearl is well aware that her status as an African American woman differentiates the status of her gender relative to the European American women in her work environment. Similarly, George recognizes that his status as a man is modified by his racial status and his class in his work environment. As these illustrations suggest, this model offers multiple resources for caregiving. For example, it gives helpful insight into the internal experiences of individuals and couples. It also assists them in identifying ways larger structural and systemic forces that carry the “lie” of stigma and privilege predictably become internalized in persons’ sense of self and in their
relational systems, as we see with this couple and larger family system. Further, this model helps caregivers do the important work of identifying relevant dynamics in their own lives and relational systems so that they are more likely to be effective with those who seek their care. Hopefully, such a model also encourages caregivers to accept opportunities for advocacy and for resisting oppressive structures and systems as allies.

**Group Membership Profile**

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A spiritual caregiver working with George and Pearl may well invite them to explore the dynamics of class and race in their own experience. Perhaps such exploration may help diminish the way the internalization of class differentiations seems to be problematic in their marriage and larger family context. Alongside such exploration, the “status” column of this chart will allow the couple to identify ways they can externalize possible internalization of stigma. George, for example, may more confidently recognize the external factors operative in his office setting and act strategically regarding his hopes rather than internalize shame. Pearl may also recognize how her expectations and pressures about promotion deny the oppression George is experiencing. Each may be able to support the other in the oppressive struggles that characterize their work environments. Caregivers whose group memberships and status vary from those of George and...
Pearl will find this model useful as it points them toward information and possible consultation in order to be effective. For example, resources on African American marriages and families such as those authored by Nancy Boyd-Franklin (2003) and W. Sue and D. Sue (2008) and those written by pastoral theologians such as Edward Wimberly (1997), and Lee Butler (2000) will be important to review. Similarly, resources on socioeconomic class will also be valuable, such as those found in Rothenberg’s *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States, 8th Edition* (Rothenberg, 2009), Kliman and Madsen (1998), Leondar-Wright and Yeskel (2007), and the work of the late pastoral theologian Judith Orr (1991, 1997, 2000).

Hopefully any caregiver, and certainly spiritual caregivers, will realize that care for persons who describe the pain of differences treated oppressively cannot be offered from a stance of neutrality. As Edward Wimberly rightly notes, care is a political act (Wimberly, 2006). This pain arises from systemic, structural injustice that is felt at individual and relational levels as well as among entire identity groups. Theologically, the negation of relation describes ontological loss that includes as well losses related to political, material, and economic rights and resources. Offering care to persons experiencing oppression calls for the readiness to accept the role and privilege of being an “ally.” When persons who experience privilege in one or more aspects of their identity choose to support those for whom aspects of identity are treated oppressively, such a choice opens the door both for personal transformation described above in the social identity development model and for advocacy regarding change in the structures and systems that maintain such inequities. Allies will not be effective who do not recognize and step into a process of transformation of their own identity and behavior. Similarly, allies do not empower others but rather support those who experience oppression in the process of retrieving their
rightful agency. To be an ally is to work for everyone’s agency including a revised experience of one’s own (Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2007).

Another challenge that accompanies care in the context of forms of oppression lies in the realization that there are multiple, intersecting, often competing forms of oppression, as the story of George and Pearl illustrates. How do we learn to see oppression in its complexity and avoid reducing that complexity by forcing it to be one or another manifestation? Iris Marion Young (1990) addresses this well in her essay, “The Five Faces of Oppression.” Young notes that these five aspects of oppression are at once interdependent in effect while each on its own is oppressive. This means there is no hierarchy of oppressions though we caregivers may find an accrual of consequences across various forms of oppression that creates a more problematic effect. She identifies five “faces” or aspects of oppression that assist caregivers in naming, assessing, and responding to experiences of oppression. Exploitation describes a structure of inequitable exchange in which the labor of one group benefits another. Marginalization describes the structural effects of refusing whole categories of persons’ meaningful participation in the culture. Powerlessness negates the authority and status of persons at institutional and structural levels. Cultural Imperialism has a structural and symbolic consequence in that the history and identity of a group become relatively invisible. Finally, violence, which intersects with one or more of the other four aspects, allows random, systemic violence against some identity groups without accountability on the part of perpetrators and their dominant group. These five “faces” of oppression offer caregivers a helpful frame for effectively engaging the complex intersections of oppression such as the ways in which we find marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism especially evident in the experience of Pearl and George.
Theologically, we have earlier identified several relevant theological themes that inform social science and critical theory resources in the work of caring for those who experience oppressive treatment of difference. Because I have developed these theological themes elsewhere I will address them only briefly here (Ramsay, 2010). The themes of Imago Dei, love, relational justice, sin, and embodiment are certainly central resources for spiritual caregivers.

Foundational in Christian and Jewish sacred texts is the claim that human beings are made in the image of God for relationships with our neighbors that are shaped by mutual regard and care. We are essentially relational so that what diminishes one diminishes the other. This insight that our well-being is so intertwined as to function ethically is also evident in critical theory sources about the work of being allies with those experiencing oppression. Allies recognize that their freedom is intertwined with that of others who experience oppression. Neutrality is not an ethical option.

The idea that our human relationality has ethical force is reflected in the sacred texts of the three Abrahamic faiths. We read in each about the ethical centrality of hospitality. As early as Leviticus 19 we find the imperative for neighbor love and the reminder that we will find ourselves in the face of the stranger/alien. Christian scriptures also point to our inextricably connected well-being through the three-fold command to love God, self, and neighbor.

Relational justice is now a well-established norm in pastoral theology (Graham, 1995). When Larry Kent Graham first coined this phrase, he challenged spiritual caregivers to recognize the intimate connection of love and care with justice. Justice emerges as the ethical trajectory of our claim of the imago dei. Justice seeks to make neighbor love possible. The phrase relational justice helps underscore the work of allies who join in the struggle of transforming public policies and practices that reproduce material and political inequities such as Pearl and George
encounter. Linking justice with love also reminds us that power is a deeply theological concept. Relational justice is the telos of human agency as it shapes our energies in behalf of love.

Much earlier in this article I noted the relationship of oppression and sin, and I suggested the helpfulness of two metaphors for sin: “sin as lie” and sin as “the negation of relation” that describe the ways human beings who enjoy privilege obscure our complicity in the oppression of others (Farley 1990; Matsuoka, 1998). Both these metaphors point us more toward sin as omission; sin as the unwitting participation in the oppression of another. Iris Marion Young (1990) helpfully differentiates oppression and dominance. Dominance, she suggests, is intentional action to control and limit another. Farley’s typology of sin as a progression of rationalizations (lies) that protect us from our witting participation in the suffering of others discloses how effectively privilege functions to protect us from the obligations of neighbor love. Our work continues in finding and refining metaphors that will be effective in disclosing the seamless way oppression slips into dominance.

The theme of incarnation in Christian sacred texts points us toward embodiment as an important aspect of differences that function oppressively. Gender, race, and sexuality, for example, are aspects of creation that reflect the creative imagination of God. Class does not arise as an embodied difference. Rather it reflects the practices and consequences arising from various economic policies. However, the relational consequences of differentiations among persons based largely on arbitrary economic policies does quickly and indelibly shape embodied experience in ways that privilege some and oppress others. Clinicians and pastoral theologians have helped us recognize how class shapes/distorts self-understanding and relational expectations (Orr, 1991, 1997, 2000; Kliman & Madsen, 1998). The consequences of oppression and domination disclose how differences in embodied experiences particularly as the absence of
privilege may well have serious consequences. For example, inequities in health care, education, and housing predictably lead to lifelong physical, material, and political inequalities.

**Concluding reflections**

These brief explorations surrounding experiences of difference treated oppressively underscore for spiritual caregivers the priority of equipping ourselves to discern the markers of oppression and privilege and to develop the skills and resources to walk beside those who seek release from the painful consequences. It is equally apparent that to be effective in such care, we need to embrace the journey of deconstructing sources of stigma and privilege that limit our own freedom to offer love and seek relational justice.

**References**


