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The Praxis of Privilege: How Social Workers Experience their Privilege

Akin Taiwo
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THE PRAXIS OF PRIVILEGE: HOW SOCIAL WORKERS EXPERIENCE THEIR PRIVILEGE

by

Akin Taiwo

A Dissertation

submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

through the School of Social Work

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the

University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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Author’s Declaration of Originality

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Abstract

The social work knowledge base is steeped in discourse about oppression in terms of how it is created, sustained, and experienced, but there is less knowledge about privilege and how it is experienced. The purpose of this study is to explore how social workers in direct practice experience their privilege. To achieve this, the study utilizes the framework of social constructionism and the phenomenological method to describe, interpret, and understand the experiences of 20 social workers who have face-to-face interactions with their clients. Data analysis of the semi-structured interviews resulted in six themes, which are: (a) moving target, (b) the embeddedness of power, (c) variegated experiences, (d) assorted emotions, (e) reflection is not a priority, and (f) the pyramid will always exist. Findings indicate that privilege is not a uniform sociological phenomenon. By proposing privilege as a moving target, the study recognizes the different but fluid categories of social identities, professional status, sense of personal agency, and the contexts of social work practice, as well as the multiplicity of experiences of social workers. As the demographics of social workers become increasingly diverse, there is the need to recognize the privilege and vulnerabilities which simultaneously play out in therapeutic encounters. Social work agencies and organizations should provide space for open dialogue regarding privilege and power, and mitigate against the possibility of oppression of social workers.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my younger brother, Joseph Oluwaseun Taiwo (1969-2011): Gone too soon but now perfect. Wished you were here.

To my father, Elijah Olusola Taiwo (1920-1991): This work makes me a “doctor of books.” Wished I could feel your pride at last.

To my mother, Christianah Omolabake Taiwo: This answers your question: “When will you finish school?” This ends a chapter that confers a degree, but school never ends, and the destination is still a journey. Thanks for my foundational ethics, Iya Akin. You’ve been great!

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Finally, to my darling wife, Olusola Omotola Asabi Taiwo: Thanks for all you’ve done and not done. Yes, I love you.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

This explorative study examines the privilege experienced by social workers. The concept of privilege is multidimensional and has been used in common parlance to refer to preferences for, and access to certain people, places, or things in society. Formally, it refers to confidential information or communication shared both between professionals and clients, as well as among professionals (Waddell & Rothstein, 2010). In the social science and social work literature, privilege is largely defined as an unearned asset or status that is based on social identities, which translates into advantages, opportunities, benefits, or access to societal resources for those to whom it is assigned (Bailey, 1998; Black & Stone, 2005; Ferber, 2003; McIntosh, 1998; Mullaly, 2002, 2010; Mullaly & West, 2018). Social identities are based on membership in various social groups or categories consisting of people who share a range of physical, cultural, and social characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, gender, age, disability, and class (Cudd, 2005; Howard, 2000). When individuals or groups benefit from institutional practices such as rules, laws, expectations, behaviours, or norms that harm others, they are said to have privilege (Cudd, 2005; Mullaly & West, 2018).

In social work, privilege is often discussed in the contexts of inequality, oppression, social justice, multiculturalism, and diversity (Cagle, 2010; Carniol, 2005; Johnson, 2001; Lee & Diaz, 2009; Segal, Gerdes, Stromwall & Napoli, 2010; Shibutani & Kwan, 1965). The call for critical awareness and self-reflection regarding privilege and its place in social work practice (Cagle, 2010; Carniol, 2005; Johnson, 2001; Lee & Diaz, 2009; Segal, Gerdes, Stromwall & Napoli, 2010) makes this study highly relevant for social work practitioners, students, educators, administrators, and professional organizations.
The Problem

Some scholars have argued that social work has not paid enough attention to the issue of privilege as much as they have been addressing oppression (Ferber, 2003; Mullaly, 2010; Mullaly & West, 2018). They claimed that social work practice is performed within a system of power and oppression that confers privilege on social workers (Baines, 2002; Dominelli, 2002; Ferber, 2003; Leonard, 1997; Rossiter, 2001; Slay & Smith, 2011; Smith, 2008; Weinberg, 2012). As such, social workers should be more aware of how they are implicated within this system (Ferber, 2010; Mullaly, 2010, Mullaly & West, 2018). Indeed, some scholars have recommended that social workers should confront, challenge, and dismantle their privilege because it is potentially harmful to clients (Cagle, 2010; Curry-Stevens, 2010; Ferber, 2010; Greene, 2010; Holody, 1998; Jones, 2010; Lopez, 2010; Mullaly, 2010; Mullaly & West, 2018; Nicotera & Kang, 2009; Vodde, 2001). However, there is a paucity of empirical studies to justify these recommendations.

There may be merit in confronting and challenging privilege, but if privilege is part of one’s being as it has been defined (Kimmel, 2010; McIntosh, 1998; Rocco & West, 1998; Wise, 2005), how can it be dismantled? Those who have made the recommendations have not adequately demonstrated how to dismantle or relinquish privilege. Neither have they proposed a workable alternative that is not imbued with privilege (Kimmel, 2010; Kruks, 2005, Mullaly & West, 2018). The need arises, therefore, for social workers to first understand the complexity and lived experience of privilege before investing themselves in the task of dismantling it.

Social workers may, indeed, not have studied privilege compared to how they have studied oppression. However, an alternative could be argued; namely, that because of their training and understanding of social justice, social workers realize that they practice within the
system of power. Therefore, they could be more aware of their privilege in comparison to other professionals (Mindrup, Spray, Lamberghini-West, 2011). However, despite the challenge to binary thinking for social workers (Chambon & Irving, 1994), the prevailing discourse on privilege in social work is still steeped in the critical perspective, which reinforces binaries, dichotomies, and hierarchies that are not easily delineated in life or practice (Jupp, 2005).

For instance, from my observation, social workers confront issues regarding who in society is privileged or not, who benefits at the expense of whom, who is dominant or subordinate, who is an agent or target, and who is marginalized by, or excluded from the social system based on their social identities and differences in terms of race, sex, gender, or class (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Carniol, 2005; Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Dominelli, 2002; Jupp, 2005). The effects of privilege on the binaries and categories of male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, young and old, and White and non-White have also been examined with the recognition that privilege has been used not only to confine or restrict people, but also to label, objectify, and dehumanize them based on the value society placed on these different social identities (Curry-Stevens, 2010; Holody, 1998; Lopez, 2010; Mullaly, 2010; Shibutani & Kwan, 1965; Vodde, 2001). Though these dichotomies may make privilege visible as one compares individuals and groups to each other (Johnson, 2001, 2010; McIntosh, 1998; Weinberg, 2012), they do not explain privilege as experienced by individuals in different contexts.

In addition, there are some conceptual and practice problems with the way privilege is currently understood in social work practice. For instance, there are problems regarding privilege as defined in terms of unearned advantages in relation to social identities. This is because identities are not static, as originally believed (Shibutani & Kwan, 1965; Witkins, 1999). Categories like race, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability keep on expanding and
contracting in society with implications for the privilege attached to them (Gordon, 2004; Ignatiev, 1995; James, 2010; Oliver, 1990; Phillips, 2010; Roediger, 1991, 2005). Likewise, social identities overlap and intersect with the potential to deconstruct what privilege means in the context of multiple identities (Collins, 1990; Jones, 2009; Mandell, 2007; Witkins, 1999). I submit that the fluidity of identities make rigid categories problematic as each attribute of identity interacts with others in ways that will make people’s experiences unique and render the concept of privilege suspect or problematic (Collins, 1990; Mandell, 2007; Ray & Rosow, 2012).

Furthermore, social workers are not a homogenous group; they and their clients may share some social identities, though separated by professional status. This implies that some social workers may also be labelled and objectified alongside their clients based on some categories of identity (Riggs, 2011; Smedley, 1993; Swigonsky, 1996; Tehranian, 2000). This, in turn, may result in different manifestations and experiences of privilege that researchers have not explored. Similarly, professional and personal privilege overlap and are often inseparable (Badwall, 2014; Rocco & West, 1998), suggesting that these identities, embodied by social workers, may have to be negotiated to cope with whomever they interact with in daily practice. For instance, will a White heterosexual male social worker experience privilege the same way as another White male social worker who has a disability? Or do racial minorities experience the same privilege as their White colleagues in social work practice? Within the context of social work, it appears that multiple identities may create different experiences for social workers as well as tensions and contradictions in their practice (Hole, 2007; Holody, 1998; Weinberg, 2007; Witkins, 1999). As some scholars argued regarding the use of self in practice, power and privilege may ultimately depend upon, or be mediated by the social worker’s personal and professional identities (Arnd-Caddigan & Pozzuto, 2008; Collins, 1990; Zufferey, 2012).
Moreover, defining privilege as unearned advantages also excludes the advantages that are earned by education, qualification, accreditation, and employment, which could confer more unearned advantages on professionals (Bailey, 1998; Bourdieu, 1986; Rocco & West, 1998). Though one could argue that access to education itself could be considered an unearned advantage depending on a person’s circumstances, the connection between what is unearned and earned should be explored for a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon of privilege (Rocco & West, 1998; Weinberg, 2012).

There are also more conceptual limitations in the study of privilege as it is linked to the concept of power that is based on the nature of the social workers’ professional position or role (Curry-Stevens, 2010; Rossiter, 2000; Weinberg, 2007). The critical perspective has perpetrated the hierarchical nature of the social workers’ power, perceiving it as dominance, which is supposedly manipulative, harmful, and oppressive (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Mullaly, 2002; Pansardi, 2012; Rosigno, 2011). Yet, it has been highlighted by some scholars that the regulator of power (i.e. the professional) may not be the one who is inherently in control (Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson & Hardiman, 2009) and also that some professionals could use their power collaboratively (Chang, Scott, & Decker, 2013; Hick, 2010; Weinberg, 2012). Rosigno (2011) suggested that a comprehensive analysis of power should include the consideration of its use, potential, and manifestation. The critical perspective seems inadequate to address the different dimensions of power that are related to privilege in social work practice. An alternative framework will, therefore, be utilized in this study for a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon of privilege.

Linked to the aforementioned conceptual problems of privilege are the tensions regarding the use of power and the possibility of oppression in social work practice. The social work
literature is suffused with the critique of the dual role of social workers, in terms of their ability to promote social justice or exercise social control in the lives of their clients (Baines, 2002; Orlie, 1997; Rossiter 2001). Doubtlessly, social workers can promote clients’ rights, self-reliance, self-determination, and independence (Addams, 2002; CASW, 2005; IFSW, 2005; NASW, 2008; Wakefield, 1998). Conversely, they can also exercise social control or dominance on behalf of the state or an agency, thereby increasing the burden of suffering and oppression on their clients (Foucault, 1997; Margolin, 1997; Orlie, 1997; Rossiter, 2000, 2001). Many scholars have accused social workers of doing more of the latter (Floersch, 1999; Handler, 1973; Lubove, 1965; Wakefield, 1998), although social control could also be geared towards the protection of vulnerable persons and the betterment of the collective (Addams, 2002; Hick, 2010). This dual role should be questioned in relationship to privilege in social work practice.

I contend that it is problematic to assume that social workers use privilege to dominate their clients because I believe that this kind of discourse feeds into the clients’ helplessness instead of reinforcing their strengths, their potential for change, as well as their creativity and ability to resist (Leonard, 1997; Leonardo, 2004; Marsiglia & Kulis, 2009; Pease, 2010; Zufferey, 2012). It should be noted that clients are not just considered passive receptors of social workers’ power as they have their own power and agency (Foucault, 1980); neither is the power differential between social workers and clients uniform or necessarily oppressive (Blum, 2008; Jupp, 2005). It is not yet clear from the literature if social workers with marginalized identities have the same power and privilege as White social workers who form the majority of practitioners in the profession (Burns & Ross, 2010; Underliner, 2000; Slay & Smith, 2011; Weinberg, 2012). Weinberg (2012) argued that privilege is constructed by those dominant in the profession but may be problematic for those who are not in the dominant groups. Indeed, some
scholars have explained privilege in terms of Whiteness (Adams, 2006; Bourdieu, 1977, 1979; Frankenberg, 1993; Gordon, 2004; Phillips, 2010; Roediger, 1991; Walter, Taylor & Habibus, 2011), but that excludes the voices and experiences of those practitioners with minority and racialized statuses that are already marginalized in society. The need arises to represent the perspectives of these social workers in the literature of privilege in order to understand the multiplicity of views on this phenomenon.

Lastly, there has been a preponderance of negative emotions about privilege in the literature, making the conversation about it a “difficult dialogue” (Watt, 2007, 2009, p. 144). Some of the identified emotions are anger, shame, sadness, fear, guilt, and embarrassment (Choudhuri, 2011; Logue, 2005; Mindrup, Spray, & Lamberghini-West, 2011; Pinteris, Poteat & Spanierman, 2009). These emotions do not conform to my expectations of what people should feel when they are loaded with advantages and opportunities over others. This indicates the likelihood that there is something missing about the understanding of this complex phenomenon. It is my view that the recommendations to confront, challenge, and dismantle privilege (Cagle, 2010; Curry-Stevens, 2010; Ferber, 2010; Greene, 2010; Holody, 1998; Jones, 2010; Lopez, 2010; Mullaly, 2010; Mullaly & West, 2018; Nicotera & Kang, 2009; Vodde, 2001) is somewhat premature until one explores the experience of social workers to arrive at the various manifestations and emotions associated with privilege.

In sum, the social work knowledge base is steeped in discourse about oppression in terms of how it is created, sustained and experienced, but there is less knowledge about privilege and how it is experienced by social workers. Before asking social workers to dismantle privilege, we first need to understand how they experience it particularly in their practice. However, the critical perspective that currently dominates the discourse may not be the most helpful or
accurate portrayal of privilege. The reality of privilege needs to be understood in a way that honours the diversity of experience of social workers.

Understanding the phenomenon of privilege is relevant to professional social work practice because privilege goes to the core of personal and professional identities of social workers as they interact with their clients (Kimmel, 2010; Rocco & West, 1998). The subject of privilege is also important because self-awareness about it increases the effectiveness of the social worker’s practice, their professional competence, and personal growth (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005; Greene, 2010; Marsiglia & Kulis, 2009).

Theoretical Framework of Social Constructionism

The theoretical foundation for this study is social constructionism. Social constructionism is a theory of knowledge that proposes that meanings, understandings, and social realities are created within social interactions and through language conventions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 1995; Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Hacking, 1999; Stam, 2001). With roots in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and symbolic interactionism, social constructionism posits that the world is too ambiguous and the process of knowing is too convoluted. Therefore, a social phenomenon has to be created, institutionalized, maintained, and reaffirmed in order for that phenomenon to exist or persist (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Durkheim, 1985; Harre, 2002; Hart & McKinnon, 2010; Pearce, 2009; Smith, 1990; Stam, 2001). From this perspective, there is no absolute or objective truth, only different interpretations of truth (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Stam, 2001).

This perspective also holds that there is no reality outside of human experience, therefore, the meanings people assign to their experiences are important (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). As explicated by Hacking (1999), what is socially constructed applies to what is taken for granted,
as if its existence is inevitable, yet it needs not to have existed at all, or exist in its present form, or could be transformed or eliminated altogether. The implication is that what is socially constructed is neither natural nor inherent, but contingent on socio-historical processes and highly dependent on human judgement (Hacking, 1999). Though Hacking (1999) accepted that there might be a legitimate basis for a phenomenon or concept to exist by itself, he held that our ideas, perception, understanding, or conceptualization of that phenomenon would be socially constructed.

The critical perspective has been the primary lens to analyze privilege in social work literature and its contribution needs to be acknowledged (Baines, 2000; Dominelli, 2002; Ferber, 2003; Mullaly, 2010). Based on Marxist ideology, the critical perspective examines power relations and the structure of inequality in society that gives rise to privilege and oppression as a dialectic phenomenon (Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2010). Its goal is structural change, societal transformation, and the liberation of the oppressed (Freire, 1968). The premise of the critical perspective is that there is stratification (i.e., ranking and hierarchy) in every society that is based on social differences, such as wealth or class, race, sex, sexual orientation, age, ability, religion, and ethnicity. This stratification produces categories of people and groups, making some dominant and others subordinate (Baines, 2002; Carniol, 2005; Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2002; Hick, Fook, & Pozzuto, 2005; Mullaly, 2002 & 2010). Moreover, this perspective holds that the society is set up to protect the interests of the dominant groups and individuals to the detriment of subordinate groups and their members (Mullaly, 2010).

One of the limitations of the critical perspective, however, is that rather than considering the categories that result from stratification as fluid – as social constructionism does – it takes on essentialist features and subsequently considers them as natural, objective, and immutable, as if
people cannot escape the group or category into which they are assigned by society (Cudd, 2005; Heyes, 2000; Rocco & West, 1998). Furthermore, it promotes an either/or viewpoint, producing winners and losers, haves and have nots, and privileged and oppressed. This perspective assumes that all human transactions and interactions are a zero-sum game where the winner-takes-all (Coston & Kimmel, 2012).

Moreover, the critical perspective regards social workers as agents of the state, with power and privilege over their client systems (Ferber, 2003; Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2010). For instance, some critical theorists examined the ways in which some social workers, especially in child welfare agencies and social welfare service administration, have handled issues of privilege, and concluded that social workers can be oppressive in their practice (Baines, 2002; Dominelli, 2002; Leonard, 1997; Margolin, 1997). While this claim may be accurate in some instances, it does not represent the entire social work profession. Nevertheless, to its credit, the critical perspective has provided categories, which serve as starting points for understanding social divisions in society. It also has some explanatory power that could aid social workers’ understanding of the dynamics of privilege within hegemonic social structures.

Notwithstanding, a comprehensive discussion of privilege needs to transcend the rigidity, dichotomies, and essentialism of the critical perspective in a way that will inform and enrich the discourse; hence the utilization of social constructionism.

It is worth noting that social constructionism is not a single or unified position; rather, some scholars regard it as a position, movement, theory, or an orientation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Forster & Bochner, 2008; Gergern & Gergen, 2003, 2007, 2008; Stam, 2001). However, all of its approaches share similar ideas about the nature of knowledge, language, and reality. For example, Berger and Luckmann (1966) who popularized social constructionism in North
America posited that social realities have a degree of objectivity, which is produced interactively over time through language systems and other stories, routines, rules and practices. Within this framework, language is not only representational but also constitutive of reality. Some scholars stated that language could reveal or conceal, as it applies to both worldly items and our beliefs about them, all of which are shaped by social forces (Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Hackings, 1999; Pearce, 2009).

**Processes of social constructionism.** Berger and Luckmann (1966) identified the three processes of social constructionism as externalization, objectification, and internalization. *Externalization* is the process through which the social world is produced by routines, rules, practices, activities, symbols or meaning systems. *Objectification* is the way people perceive their everyday experience as objective, or as having a degree of objectivity because of the routines and activities that have been institutionalized or taken for granted. Finally, *internalization* is the process of socialization of people regarding the interpretation of events within the created social world. From these three processes, Berger and Luckmann (1966) concluded that human beings create themselves, their worlds, and the meanings they attach to all things through social interactions over time. I submit that these processes are useful for understanding the phenomenon of privilege as historically and socially contextual. To understand privilege, therefore, one would need to examine the contexts that produced it.

Moreover, closely relating to the processes outlined by Berger & Luckmann (1966) are different approaches or orientations of social constructionism identified by Cunliffe (2008), which are relevant to this study. The first she called the *subjective cognitive approach.* This focuses on how reality is constructed and objectified through interaction and discursive processes. Here, individuals perceive reality selectively, rearrange it cognitively, and negotiate it.
interpersonally. This provides a space, for instance, for social workers to explain their unique understanding of privilege. The second is critical post-structural social constructionism. This focuses on the macro-level where power infuses discursive practices and where individuals may be “objectified in social structures, relations and subjectivities” (Cunliffe, 2008, p. 128). This provides an opportunity to consider social workers’ diverse experiences that may be related to social structures or go beyond these structures to their interactions with social work agencies and clients. The third, which is the most relevant to this study, is relational social constructionism. This orientation focuses on the micro-level where people create meanings inter-subjectively with others through embodied dialogues, within particular settings or contexts. Relational social constructionism highlights four components that are relevant to this study of privilege (Cunliffe, 2008). First, it is intersubjective. That means it recognizes the interwoven-ness of life and interrelationships with others. Second, it is dialogical; meaning that it recognizes that conversations incorporate multiple ideas and voices. Third, it is embodied. That means it recognizes that people perceive and experience the world through their bodies; in other words, thoughts, feelings, behaviours and actions are grounded in bodily interactions with other people in various contexts. Lastly, it is dialectical. That means it recognizes tensions and movement between opposites, such as between speech and silence, speakers and listeners, body and language, worker and client, and self and others. All these components are relevant to the topic of privilege as they allow for the understanding of nuances and complexity in language regarding the interactions and experiences of social workers. Social constructionism also provides an avenue to understand the routines and activities that generate privilege for social workers, as well as the interpretations and meanings that social workers attach to their experience.
Critiquing social constructionism. The major criticism of social constructionism is its susceptibility to relativism. Foster and Bochner (2008), for instance, argued that social constructionism leads to relativism. They suggested that nothing would be real if everything is socially constructed. However, they admitted that relativism does not lead to retreat from life or political engagement. Similarly, Pfohl (2008) argued that the things we regard as real are not just seen as relative, but also relational and complex. Likewise, Cromby and Nightingale (1999) suggested that social constructionism may be relative but not arbitrary. It was their opinion that reality emerges through social processes that are already shaped by diverse influences, such as power relationships and material resources (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999).

Social constructionism has also been initially criticized for focusing exclusively on language and discourse without paying enough attention to embodiment, materiality, and power (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999). Cunliffe (2008) has addressed part of this critique with the introduction of the three orientations to social constructionism as identified earlier. In addition, I also agree with the critique that as much as language is central to everyday life and experience, not all things are reducible to language and discourse. The understanding of privilege will require that one considers the role of language and discourse, as well as that of embodiment, materiality, and power. I argue that it is through one’s physical body that worldly interactions are possible. This embodiment also provides the material preconditions for subjectivity, thoughts, emotions, and language. For this study, social constructionism provides a framework for privilege as a phenomenon that is relative, contextual, subjective, and capable of many descriptions. As Pearce (2009) stated, these descriptions are not neutral but interpretive. Social constructionism will enable us to understand that different realities of privilege may exist simultaneously (Hacking, 1999; Pearce, 2009).
**Researcher’s Social Location and Assumptions**

Many scholars have suggested that it is important for researchers to locate themselves within their topic of enquiry and make their starting assumptions transparent in the research process, especially when engaged in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Both my personal and professional interests brought me to the topic of privilege.

I approached the topic of privilege as a Black, immigrant male social worker with ten years of practice experience in Canada. Born and raised in a working-class family in Nigeria, my masters’ degrees in philosophy and political science afforded me the privilege of becoming a journalist. Having the ability to express my opinion through publications in national newspapers, I experienced as epistemic privilege (Kruks, 2005). However, the threats of a dictatorial military government in 1993 revealed the limitations of this privilege and became one of the push factors (Angell, 1992) for my migration to Canada.

As a Black immigrant who later became a Canadian citizen, I was ascribed a racial minority status in Canada. I experienced several disadvantages, especially in terms of employment opportunities and promotions at work. I also experienced discrimination, conscious and unconscious acts of hatred and avoidance, stereotypes, and objectification in the community (Cudd, 2005; Mullaly, 2010; Young, 2004). When I became a social worker in Canada, I realized that I did not experience the same kind of respect, prestige, or privilege that most of my racially White colleagues took for granted. For instance, I had a sense of power and privilege with some clients and not others. There were times when some clients refused to work with me because of my race, gender, or accent. Other times, simply upon hearing my name, clients scheduled to work with me would clearly express their preconceived opinions to my supervisor.
that I may not be knowledgeable about the dominant culture, or capable of helping them. Some
of these clients were uncooperative during counselling, while a few clients apologized for their
initial misjudgments of me at the end of our sessions.

Through these experiences, I realized that clients could discriminate against their social
workers based on their social identities. Moreover, in spite of one’s professional status,
epistemic privilege may not be accorded to visible minority social workers, as these workers
have to routinely prove their competence to their clients. These realizations prompted me to start
questioning the assumption in the literature that all social workers have privilege or power over
their clients and can use their position to perpetrate oppression. My experience further revealed
that not all social work clients are susceptible to oppression. Indeed, some clients may enter
therapy by choice towards self-development without experiencing any kind of oppression.
Therefore, I started interrogating the binary of privilege and oppression in social work practice.

My practice experience also revealed that my identity as a social worker cannot be
separated from my identity as a Black male in the Canadian society. Indeed, I believe that the
multiple, intersecting identities, diversities, and subjectivities of social workers will affect how
they experience privilege because they interact with different clients in different contexts (see
Juhila & Abrams, 2011). I also believe that the lived experience of social workers would
influence how they perceive and exercise their privilege. Privilege, in this case, will always be
dynamic.

From the foregoing, my ontological perspective is that privilege is socially constructed,
and politically and culturally situated; as such, the context of one’s existence will produce the
reality of one’s privilege or lack thereof. My epistemological position is, therefore, that there are
multiple truths and multiple ways of understanding privilege. My assumption is also that
privilege is an ever-shifting and unstable concept, depending on one’s interaction with others. I regard privilege as relative and contingent on context, which, for the social worker, includes the specific circumstances of professional practice. I believe that privilege could affect issues of morality and ethics regarding how social workers make decisions (including decisions involving different clinical interventions), how they care for others or ensure equity and opportunity, and how much dignity and self-determination they accord to themselves and their clients. As a racialized man in the social work profession, it is my deep personal challenge to understand the lived experience of privilege by social workers and the way it manifests in their practice.

**Dissertation Overview**

The rest of the dissertation is organized into five chapters. The second chapter provides the literature review. The third chapter discusses the methodology of the study as well as the criteria for its credibility and trustworthiness. The fourth chapter is the thematic analysis of participants’ narratives, it examines similarities, contrasts, and nuances in participants’ experiences. The fifth chapter provides an extensive discussion of study findings in relation to existing literature. The last chapter presents the conclusion and implications of the study.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter explores the topic of privilege through a comprehensive assessment of the literature. To locate relevant articles, I conducted electronic searches on multiple databases including Social Services Abstract, Social Work Abstracts, Proquest Dissertation and Thesis, PsycINFO, Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, and Sociological Abstracts. The key words searched included “privilege,” “oppression,” “social work,” “power,” “social identity,” “social location,” “social justice,” and “critical reflection.” I also conducted author searches from the list of authors produced by the key word search. There were no timeline restrictions placed on publications, but I specified English-only books, dissertations, and peer-reviewed journals in my search strategy. This chapter is organized into two major sections that highlight both the conceptual and empirical literature. The conceptual review begins with an overview of the origins and purposes of privilege, and discusses the multidimensionality and complexity of privilege. The empirical review highlights the following four themes identified in the literature of privilege: identity and identity development, education regarding privilege and oppression, awareness and experience of privilege and oppression, and the emotionality associated with privilege.

Conceptual Literature

Origin and purpose of privilege. Kruks (2005) traced the notion of privilege to the term privilegium derived from two Latin words privus (meaning, private) and legis (law), which were initially used to exclude certain individuals from the dictates of the law. This legal exemption was predominant in medieval and pre-modern Europe. However, certain groups like nobility and upper echelons of the clergy appropriated the tag of privilege to represent advantageous social
status, and attributed this status to birth or family pedigree. This privilege of birth was challenged in the era of liberalism as people canvassed for equality under the law. Privilege then came to be used to signify class and occupational status, and also became regarded as a just reward for certain accomplishments. As a reward, privilege was understood as something earned, and society accepted degrees of privilege and disadvantages (Rawls, 1973).

Shibutani and Kwan (1965) traced the origin of privilege to the stratification in North American society. Stratification is the identification, classification, or ranking of human beings based on group attributes such as race, ethnicity, age, sex, ability, and class. Classification of human beings, Shibutani and Kwan (1965) declared, were “matters of social usage” (p. 45). It was used to determine the value, rights, and benefits, or burdens placed on individuals in different groups and categories. The individual’s social status was based on the social status of the groups to which they belonged. These groups had unequal access to the “goods, services and pleasures” of the society (p. 29). Shibutani and Kwan (1965) also postulated that “although systems of ranking may appear to be imposed upon community by those who benefit from them, in many cases the institutional arrangements are supported even by those who appear to be victims of exploitation” (p. 37). They stated that systems of social stratification rested on consensus though Sider (1987) later argued, in another context, that there may be no protest or resistance by the disadvantaged because people placed in the lower hierarchy of society might have embraced their own self-deception. Shibutani and Kwan (1965) contended that systems of classification would persist in society as long as they are useful.

Explaining privilege in North America, Spring (2001) narrated how the United States of America was a product of British colonial philosophy which placed the English on top of the social hierarchy in terms of race and culture. English people, phenotypically White, were
considered racially and culturally superior to the Irish, Asians, and Indigenous people, hence the notion of White supremacy and the privilege of White power holders to determine where others fit in society. Similarly, relying on the work of Zinn (1999), Pewewardy (2004) further explained that White supremacy is a grand narrative, an unquestioned way of looking at things, because the “concepts of progress and manifest destiny excused the annihilation of races and supported the telling of history from the colonizers’ standpoint” (p. 2). He defined standpoint as “a social position from which certain features come into prominence and other aspects of reality are obscured” (p. 2). Moreover, after citing Columbus’s genocidal treatment of Arawaks and the rapid growth of the American colonies, Pewewardy (2004) asserted that White privilege was solidified through “the powerful incentive of profit for slave trader and planter, the temptation of superior status for poor Whites, and the legal and social punishments of Black and White collaborators” (p. 18). This led to contemporary racial hierarchy, and underscored not only White privilege, but also socio-economic and class privilege attached to it. In fact, Dubois (1935, 1998) alluded to the notion of psychological wage that enabled poor Whites to feel superior to poor Blacks in the United States as they enjoyed public deference and courtesy in society because of their race. He argued that the value of Whiteness was related to the devaluation of Blackness, and being White was the non-monetary compensation and gratification for not being Black even though one might be poor.

Similar to Spring’s (2001) explanation of privileged status in the United States of America, Porter (1965) demonstrated that White people of British and French ancestry have established their hegemony in the business, media, political, and governmental structures of Canada. As a result of this, they enjoyed an inordinate amount of privilege vis-à-vis other races and ethnicities. Other scholars suggested that this group has lessened its grip on power since
1965 though still predominant in the sociocultural and economic affairs of the country (Helmes-Hayes & Curtis, 1998; Nakhaei, 1997). However, the system of stratification continues to constrain access and upward mobility to many other groups in society (Garcia & Swenson, 1992; Kendal, 2010).

At any rate, though most initial writings were based on racial privilege, Kruks (2005) explained that since 1955, privilege has covered not only the range of Whiteness but also of masculinity, heterosexuality, nationality, and able-bodiedness. This multidimensionality of privilege makes it a very complex phenomenon, which is further discussed below.

**Multidimensionality and complexity of privilege.** There is a consensus in the literature that privilege is attached to diverse categories of identity and difference in society. These categories – such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability- are regarded as the “primary axes of difference” in the North American society (Rosenblum & Travis. 2009, p. 2), and they profoundly affect how individuals perceive themselves. They are also master statuses, which describe an individual’s position(s) or social location in the society or within a social structure. It is on the bases of these differences that privilege is assigned and individuals are named, labeled, and stigmatized (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Carniol, 2005; Mullaly, 2010).

These categories fit into the critical framework as they are regarded as objective, unchanging, fixed, stable, and “empirically verifiable differences” that “exist apart from any social processes” (Shibutani & Kwan, 1965, p. 3; see also Black & Stone, 2005; Mullaly, 2010). However, social constructionists accepted that though individuals recognize these categories and differences, it is through social processes – legal, political, economic, scientific, and religious institutions – that meanings are created and assigned to these differences (Anderson & Middleton, 2011; Marshall, 1994; Reynolds & Pope, 1991; Roediger, 2005; Rosenblum &
Travis, 2009; Rubio, 2001; Smedley, 1993). Social constructionists further claimed that these categories are not homogeneous or stable but are fluid, shifting, and contextual, with a range of diversities within each (Harris, 2009; Phillips, 2010), hence the complexity of privilege.

For instance, race and ethnicity are both complex and expansive. There has been an expansion of White race and ethnicities in history by the inclusion of Italians, Irish, and Jews (Brodkin, 1998; Guglielmo & Salerno, 2003; Ignatiev, 1995; Roediger, 1991, 2005). Racial categories have, therefore, changed out of expedience, thereby confirming that these categories are not static (Shibutani & Kwan, 1965; Tamayo-Lott, 1998). Furthermore, it has been recognized that a person can also belong to more than one race or ethnic group at the same time (Crenshaw, 1991; deMontigny, 2013; Harris, 1995; Kerchis & Young, 1995; Lucas & Baxter, 2012; Tehranian, 2000). In addition, the intersections of race and ethnicity are also influenced by other categories of differences like class, sex, and gender (Baines, 2002; Collins, 1990; hooks, 2010; Wineman, 1984).

Class privilege is also complex and multidimensional as it can be achieved through education, income, and occupation (Bourdieu, 1986; Carniol, 2005; Kimmel & Ferber, 2010). At the same time, class is also ascribed by birth, in which case it is reproduced biologically and socially, especially by the wealthy who transfer their advantages to their children (Black & Stone, 2005; Kendall, 2010; Wernick, 2009). For those placed at the top of socioeconomic status, social class moderates or buffers the impact of race and gender, and ensures greater access to societal benefits (Black & Stone, 2005) while the working poor cannot fulfil most of their economic needs (Rosenblum & Travis, 2009). However, it has been observed that the neoliberal environment could most easily alter people’s fortune and make the social category of class
unstable as globalization exacerbates and conceals inequality in society (Kendall, 2010; Terry, 2005).

In the same vein, sexual privilege is ascribed to heterosexuals as the laws and conventions of many countries benefit them (Cole, Avery, Dodson & Goodman, 2012; Feigenbaum, 2007). Yet, privilege is more complex as sexual identity is multiple, fluid, and changing (Black & Stone, 2005). In addition, there is a range of people with non-heterosexual orientations like gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, and pansexuals (Blumenfeld, 1992; Bohan, 1996; Messner, 2010). The same fluidity and complexity exist in gender identities as people undergo sex-change surgery to align their bodies with their sense of identity (Bem, 1993; Furman, 2011; Good, Dell & Mintz, 1989; Rasberry, 1991; Swanson, 1992; Walls & Costello, 2011; Weedon, 1997; Woods, 2010). Furthermore, masculinity and femininity do not indicate or reveal sexual orientation, so privilege could not be easily assigned or denied to these differences (Black & Stone, 2005).

Other dimensions of privilege are equally complex. For instance, privileged status based on age is fluid, it can wax and wane with time. It can also vary across cultures. For example, Western and Indigenous cultures where value systems almost stand in contradistinctions to each other ascribe privilege to different age groups (Black & Stone, 2005; Rocco & West, 1998). Furthermore, the interaction of age with other diversities like race, class, and sexual orientation makes privilege complex (Rocco & West, 1998). Similarly, the privilege connected with able-bodiedness is also complex as social and physical environments complicate impairments that result in disability (Hick, 2010; Oliver, 1990). Moreover, not all impairments are visible, so assigning privilege becomes problematic as it relates to able-bodiedness (Black & Stone, 2005; Leslie, Leslie & Murphy, 2003; Oliver, 1990). Also, disability is related to age and other
categories of difference, which complicates the understanding of privilege (Charlton, 2000; Hicks, 2010; Rosenblum & Travis, 2009).

Lastly, religious privilege applies to dogmas and religions that have dominant positions in different countries, like Christians in North America as opposed to Muslims, Buddhists, or Agnostics. The faith or spirituality of Indigenous people have not been privileged in relation to Christianity either (Hick, 2010). Yet there are variations of dogmas and belief systems within the same religion that make privileged status unstable (Black & Stone, 2005; Said, 1978). For instance, Catholic and Protestant denominations have different articles of faith and access to societal resources like education funding in Canada (Beaman & Beyer, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2011). Moreover, the privilege based on colonialism is presently being contested and resisted by Indigenous scholars and academics who are allies of Indigenous peoples (Angell & Dunlop, 2001; Barker, 2009; Hick, 2010; Mercredi, 2007; Weaver, 1999), and this renders the stability of privilege questionable.

**Intersectionality.** Beyond the single strands of identities upon which privilege is based, intersections of identities and their social constructions are more prevalent in people’s experiences (Baines, 2000; Black & Stone, 2005, Tisdell, 1993, 1995). According to the literature, privilege is complex, and people generally have multiple and simultaneous identities which impinge on their sense of privilege and their status in society (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Dill, McLaughling & Nieves, 2007).

The idea of intersectionality emerged out of Black feminist experience as women of colour challenged White feminists’ monolithic conception of ‘woman’ and protested that their race and class had a bearing on their gender within the American sociopolitical and economic structure (Mehrotra, 2010). Collins (1990, 2010) has also been influential in developing
Intersectionality theorizing that is grounded in African-American women’s experiences, particularly through a framework of interlocking systems of oppression that demonstrates how interdependent forms of social inequality operate together to oppress women of colour. Intersectionality theorists assert that racial, gender, and class oppressions are interrelated, interdependent, and interlocked, and called for an integrated analysis of these multiple and simultaneous oppressions in their unique experiences (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984; Mehrotra, 2010; Razack, 1998).

Mehrotra (2010) identified four models or metaphors of intersectionality from different epistemological paradigms and proposed a continuum of intersectionality theorizing for feminist social work scholarship. She explained that while the additive model adds race, class, and gender together, the multiplication model combines race, class, and gender to create simultaneous experiences for women. The geometric model demonstrates the axes and dimensions of identities and oppressions, and the social constructionist model argues that systems of oppression “co-constitute one another in fluid, complex, and context-bound ways that cannot be captured by such fixed metaphorical images” (p. 421). Notwithstanding the philosophical and epistemological divides among these models, Mehrotra (2010) argued that strategically using them “along an epistemological continuum can help the field acknowledge the strengths and limitations of various paradigms without privileging any of them as most authentic” (p. 422). Borrowing from Mehrotra (2010) and applying the continuum to all genders provides a way for social workers to better understand the phenomenon of privilege since no single identity stands alone (Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Mandell, 2007; Ray & Rosow, 2012). For instance, we no longer recognize just Black/White, rich/poor, and male/female, heterosexual/homosexual binary identities, but multiple identities in a complex web, altogether
interacting, complementing or contradicting each other to produce unique experiences for individuals in diverse clinical, socioeconomic, and political contexts.

McIntosh (1998), in itemizing the benefits of the invisible knapsack of privilege, wrote about the complexity and interlocking nature of privilege. For example, she studied race and class, suggesting that both can create and sustain privilege. Likewise, Bailey (1998) posited that a racial minority social worker may be privileged in ways that might weaken his economic exploitation. Similarly, Kruks (2005) indicated that a White female social worker in a patriarchal society may still have the privilege of race, class, and sex, while a Black male social worker may have the privilege of gender, class, and ability. All these underscore the complexity of identities and the use of self with implications for privilege (Arnd-Caddigan & Pozzuto, 2008; Cagle, 2010; Collins, 1990; Heydt & Sherman, 2005; Mandell, 2007). This fits into the deduction of Tatum (1997) that multiple identities shape individual human experiences. As such, the experience and understanding of privilege would be different for each individual.

Privilege and oppression. What also makes privilege complex is its intersection with oppression. A number of scholars contended that privilege cannot exist without oppression as they are both produced by the same system of inequality in society (Cagle, 2010; Garcia & Swenson, 1992; Jones, 2012; McIntosh, 1998; McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1992; Mullaly, 2010; Mullaly & West, 2018; Swigonski, 1996). For instance, based on a synthesis of many studies and approaches, and drawing on the matrix of domination by Collins (1990), Ferber (2010) produced an intersectional model of oppression and privilege to underscore how privilege is discussed in the literature. The eight features identified are: (a) privilege and oppression are interlocked as two sides of the same coin and they should be examined together, (b) forms of privilege and oppression interact and intersect, thereby, exposing diversity within homogenous
groups, (c) social classifications are historically and culturally variable because they are social constructions that support “specific configurations of power” (p. 133), (d) privilege and oppression are inclusive, which means that everyone experiences privilege and marginalization as a result of their identities, (e) inequality is institutional, not characteristics of individuals, (f) inequality is harmful to all, including those who are privileged, (g) there should be ongoing self-examination because everyone in society is implicated in the dynamics of privilege and oppression, (h) we must all proactively focus on social change. These features are very relevant to the understanding of the experience of privilege by social workers, and shall be examined in the light of this study.

**Invisibility of privilege.** Some scholars have highlighted the invisibility of privilege and how this often masks the recognition of privilege in societal interactions (Bailey, 1998; Frankenberg, 1993; Johnson, 2001; Kimmel, 2010; Kimmel & Ferber, 2003; Mullaly, 2010; Rocco & West, 1998; Wise, 2005). For instance, Johnson (2006), Mullaly (2010), and Mullaly and West (2018) stated that those who are not aware of their privilege have the luxury of obliviousness. This luxury essentially applies to those individuals identified as having dominant statuses, which are social identities that are considered the standard, norm, or reference points against which others in society are compared and judged (Wildman, 1996; Wise, 2005). These include being White, male, heterosexual, and able-bodied. More importantly, these identities, described as “invisible mechanisms of privilege” (Bailey, 1998, p. 112) are only invisible to those who have them, which also protect them against discrimination or other disadvantages in society (Kimmel, 2010; Pewewardy, 2004).

Referring to these identities, Rocco and West (1998) argued that privilege is invisible because it “permeates our total being, often becoming part of our implicit knowledge, making its
discovery a strenuous exercise” (p. 173). They indicated that this obliviousness to privilege is further accentuated because the norms and standards devised by those with dominant statuses are institutionalized in laws and languages which are unconsciously learned and uncritically accepted by everyone in society. They further suggested that critical reflection and self-discovery are strategies for deconstructing and understanding privilege. In the same manner, Logue (2005) proposed that privilege should be interrogated and re-conceptualized, while Kimmel (2010) argued that privilege should be made visible so that it would not be taken for granted.

**Critical reflection.** Most writings on privilege suggested the need for critical reflection, reflection, reflexivity, critical consciousness or introspection -all terms used interchangeably- as the strategy for social workers to address privilege and improve their professional practice (D’Cruz, Gillingham & Melendez, 2010; Freire, 1968; Middleton, Anderson & Banning, 2009; Yip, 2006). Critical reflection involves the awareness of the self in relation to social structures, the role of the self in practice, cognition and emotion, and the practitioner’s action and power in knowledge creation (D’Cruz, Gillingham & Melendez, 2010; Middleton, Anderson & Banning, 2009). Noble and Sullivan (2009) stated that social workers use reflective practice methods to examine their practice in order to adjust to the complexities of clients’ realities and presenting problems while Fook (2002) suggested that reflective practice implies that practitioners are open to new ideas and are both willing and able to develop creative responses to these ideas.

In critical reflection, professionals engage in a process of critical self-evaluation, self-dialogue, and self-analysis about how their own practice, values, feelings, personality, interests, preferences, backgrounds and experiences are shaped by external social, political, cultural, and service contexts, and the impact of all these on clients (Yip, 2006; Noble & Sullivan, 2009;
Ferguson, 2003). As Pewewardy (2007) summarized it, critical reflection is a deliberate analysis of experiences that may lead social workers to a consciousness that deepens their understanding and choices about future thoughts and behaviors, especially as it relates to the exercise of privilege. Curry-Stevens (2010) proposed that social workers should reflect on the relations of dominance in the profession and society while Vodde (2001) asked social work educators to go beyond their personal comfort to sensitize their students to issues of power and oppression as well as their experiences with status differences and participation in oppressive systems. Nicotera and Kang (2009) suggested that critical consciousness can lead to a challenge of oppression and social injustice while Freire (1968) held that the conscientization that could result from a process of critical reflection or internal rumination could lead to societal transformation.

Reflection on personal and professional identities was also recommended by scholars, and the goal seems to be mainly for self-awareness. For instance, Greene (2010) suggested that social workers should acknowledge the different types of privilege they bring to their daily work and how these impact their professional worldviews and social work outcomes. As an example, they should reflect on their privilege of higher education, employment in a skilled profession, ability to financially provide for their families, and their professional expertise, all of which Lopez (2010) called middle class luxuries. Segal, Gerdes, Stromwall, and Napoli (2010) argued that workers should reflect on their middle-class identity which may confer racial and economic privileges on them. Like many scholars who provided narratives regarding how they became aware of their privileges (Anderson & Middleton, 2011), Ferber (2010) explored her own personal experience as a professional and what it meant to be an ally in order to undermine or disrupt privilege daily. For Mullaly and West (2018), awareness is a strategy for anti-privilege practice at the personal level. However, Greene (2010) and Lopez (2010) suggested that social
workers should go beyond awareness to question their personal biases and professional values and examine the complexity of working in agencies or institutionalized settings.

Jones (2010) wrote about how to deconstruct privilege through “intersectional reflexivity,” which requires scholars and citizens to acknowledge their intersecting and overlapping identities, whether privileged or marginalized. Personally, Jones (2010) expressed that his marginal identity as queer did not exist separately from his privileged identity as a White male, so he has been utilizing his White privilege, male privilege, ability privilege, and other social circumstances that he did not earn or have control over, to critique heteronormativity, fight against racism, sexism, and the medical model of disability. Jones (2010) warned against bracketing off personal lives from interpersonal relationships and hoped that White scholars, especially, could “peel off their layers of privilege” and engage in alliance with the oppressed (p. 23). He defined reflexivity as a “ceaseless process of reflection and refraction” which forces people to acknowledge where they are “complicit in the perpetuation of oppression” (p. 123) and enable them to advocate for coalition building that is targeted towards social change. Mullaly (2002) also defined reflection as continuous internal dialogue that should critique oppressive discourses embedded in one’s consciousness.

However, Watt (2007) warned that no ultimate level of consciousness can be attained regarding one’s privileged identity while Ixer (1999) argued that “there’s no such thing as reflection” (p. 513) because reflection, allegedly, has no adequate theory. Ixer (1999) argued that different paradigms of epistemology have offered divergent understanding of the concept and scholars do not know enough about it to assess it fairly. Nevertheless, a counter argument could be made that a lack of theory or the existence of diverse paradigms should not nullify the
need for reflection; rather, it should accentuate the need to provide a framework for the practice of reflection, especially regarding privilege.

**Case against privilege.** Basing their arguments on the critical framework of Whiteness, two scholars contended that there is no privilege because privilege is neither absolute, nor does it uniformly or universally apply to all White people (Gordon, 2004; Zack, 1999). Gordon (2004), for instance, stated that instead of privilege, there are rights and other social goods that all people in society aspire to obtain or accomplish and which no one should relinquish or be denied. However, Gordon (2004) interpreted some of these rights as opportunities and access to societal resources, which he admitted not all White people have. Nevertheless, this argument that was meant to deny privilege, underscored its complexity and multidimensionality as racial and class privilege do not always imply the same set of benefits.

**Empirical Literature**

The empirical understanding of privilege is still in its infancy in social work (Ferber, 2003; Franks & Riedel, 2008; Mullaly, 2010, Mullaly & West, 2018). Franks and Riedel (2008) stated that the study of privilege started in the late 1980s but it was not until 1995 that social work became involved in the discussion. As such, the empirical literature that informs this study represents mainly the fields of education and counseling psychology, although sociology, women's studies, anthropology, and social work are also represented. This literature consists of seven quantitative and twenty-eight qualitative studies, excluding books and narrative reflections of authors. Four themes are broadly identified. The first relates to identity and identity development, the second refers to education regarding privilege and oppression, the third addresses the awareness and experience of the multiple dimensions of privilege, and the last
involves the emotionality associated with privilege. It is, however, instructive to note that all these studies and themes are not easily separable, but are all connected.

Identity and identity development. Ten studies were located that addressed issues of identity as related to privilege. Eight of these studies were qualitative (Archer, 2011; Baines, 2000 & 2002; Giesler, 2006; Jones, 2009; Slay & Smith, 2011; Moss, 1998; Watt, 2007) while the rest were quantitative (Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007; Pratto & Stewart, 2012). These studies highlighted the importance of social context in the development of personal and professional identities, and maintained that identities are linked to status and privilege in society. These studies also identified the categories of identity such as race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, and explained how these categories are privileged or marginalized in different contexts, which influence how different people recognize and present themselves to others in society.

For instance, Lowery, Knowles, and Unzueta (2007) who, in their quantitative study, randomly sampled 199 self-described Caucasian/White individuals, and Jones (2009) who, in her qualitative study, purposefully sampled eight participants, half of whom identified as White and Black respectively, found that identities are constantly being constructed within the dynamics of power, privilege, and socio-economic contexts, and individuals define themselves in multiple ways. These contexts, in turn, affect one’s perception of self and others (Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007). In addition, Moss’s (1998) qualitative study of an unidentified number of poor White people in an urban setting in the USA also found that there is a constant dialectic as these identities unfold in subjective and objective forms, making privilege paradoxical as it is affected by social, cultural, and historical experiences.
In her qualitative study, Watt (2007) analyzed the personal narratives of 74 helping professionals after a course in multiculturalism and found that some identities are linked to socio-political advantage in North America, and the exploration of these identities is usually through an ongoing socialization process. These privileged identities include racial (White), sexual (heterosexual), gender (male), and ability (able-bodied), the discussion of which caused discomfort and defensive reactions in her study participants who had dominant statuses. In contrast to Watt (2007), Pratto and Stewart’s (2012) qualitative study examined how subordinated groups were more aware that they had socially problematic identities and were not privileged in terms of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Using seven random samples of students (N = 3382) in private and public universities in two USA cities within a ten-year period, they found that subordinate group members were more likely to view group advantage as privilege while dominant group members viewed them as normal. They concluded that the invisibility of privilege, therefore, made group identities more salient for individuals in marginalized groups than those in dominant groups.

Giesler (2006), in a qualitative investigation, examined gender identities and professionalism of 12 male participants - 10 Caucasians, 2 African-Americans, 4 homosexuals, 8 heterosexuals of various ages in the USA. He found that gender biases may have an impact on the participation of males in social work practice. Giesler (2006) discovered that male social workers negotiated their status as gender minority in ways that both sustained and challenged hegemonic masculinity. For instance, he pointed out that though the profession of social work has a female majority, it is male dominated as males tend to earn more salary and have more power and prestige than female social workers. Similarly, to explore the identities and educational practices of minority ethnic, middle-class parents, pupils and young professionals in
England, Archer (2011) sampled 36 participants who were Black, Asian, and Middle-Eastern. He found that race and ethnicity complicate feelings of class authenticity, especially in fragmented labour market conditions, so most of his participants could not feel or identify themselves as middle class.

The two qualitative studies by Baines (2000, 2002) used an intersectional approach to examine how identities (specifically race, class, and gender) affect social work practice. The first study (Baines, 2000) purposefully sampled 21 self-defined progressive social workers 86% of whom were female, 14% male, 71% White and 29% people of colour. She found that social workers regarded race, class, and gender as objective, concrete, absolute, and quantifiable categories of difference and social experience, and that social workers stressed the need to use one’s privilege and power in an agency or society to effect social change. However, Baines (2002) sampled another 21 self-defined left-of-centre social workers from two grassroots social work organizations. She found that race, class, and gender were not bland, flat, and limited labels. Rather, they were interactive, contested, and overlapping sets of relationships and social processes, though the extent of that intersection was not fully explored. However, Baines (2002) underscored the importance of the context of practice on identity. She found that single strands of identity limits social workers’ capacity to discuss social relations linked to the system of power and oppression. She also found that social workers employed in politically engaged community settings would more likely formulate race, class, and gender in more dynamic ways than workers employed in bureaucratic settings who are more used to limited and fragmented formulations of identities.
Education regarding privilege and oppression. The second theme in the empirical literature relates to education about privilege and oppression. All the eight relevant studies were qualitative. Three of them were based on a sample of educators and applied to educators (Henze, Lucas & Scott, 1998; McCann, 2012; Pewewardy, 2004). Four sampled students (Bozalek & Biersteker, 2010; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005; Cullen, 2008; Welliver, 2011); and the last one was based on a specific population of affluent youth volunteers (Nenga, 2011). All of these studies underscored the necessity of education in the proper utilization of privilege.

Relating to educators, for instance, Henze, Lucas, and Scott (1998) explored why it is difficult to have open dialogues about power, privilege, and racism in the classroom and society. They did a participant observation of 60 teachers from California elementary and high schools who assembled to discuss student-centred teaching. They found that there are challenges because of the silence and denial surrounding the issues of privilege among educators. They also found that people who have some degree of power and privilege may not fully enjoy them when they become aware of the unfair system that created power and privilege (Henze, Lucas, & Scott, 1998). They recommended that teachers must gain sociocultural consciousness, recognize student diversity and the political nature of schooling. Similarly, McCann’s (2012) qualitative study examined the experience of five White principals in understanding their privilege and power as they worked to implement socially just and culturally proficient schools in the USA. McCann (2012) found that knowledge gained by these principals in equity training contributed to an understanding of White privilege and White identity for them, and that understanding helped them in their interactions, relationship building and ally-forming with parents and students of colour. Likewise, Pewewardy’s (2004) qualitative investigation sampled seven social work educators who had taught extensively on social justice, privilege and oppression. He found that
contemporary discourse about White privilege could be used in social work education to promote individual and collective social and economic justice.

With a sample of 141 students of different races, culture and gender, who enrolled in an undergraduate multicultural education course, Chizhik & Chizhik (2005), in their mixed methods’ study, explored students’ preconceived notions regarding privilege and oppression in social justice education. They also explored how students defined privilege and oppression, whether they considered themselves privileged or oppressed, and how they viewed others in terms of privilege and oppression. They found that White students, especially males, viewed privilege and oppression differently from people of colour. They also found that students were resistant to multicultural education when they held different definitions about privilege and oppression from their instructors. Furthermore, some students reportedly downplayed the importance of oppression in society while some feared the responsibility for change or engagement in social justice activism.

Likewise, with a sample of 105 senior undergraduate students in psychology, social work and occupational therapy, Bozalek and Biersteker (2010), in a qualitative investigation, found that teaching about power and privilege enabled student-participants to understand power relations, social inequalities, diversity and inclusion. In this study, which was an analysis of reflective essays and drawings, students were able to discuss their social locations and histories across race, class, and gender. It was noted that students’ participation in this study contributed to their understanding of others and knowledge about anti-oppressive practice.

Cullen (2008) extolled the role of education in forming an anti-racist identity among five participants, all White graduate students. In this participatory action research, he found that through authentic group dialogue and personal actions, an all-White professional group of
individuals could facilitate White privilege awareness and confront racism and racial privilege in their own practice. Similarly, Welliver (2011) recognized some impediments in the quest regarding how to build an anti-racist character for people who are conferred with multiple dimensions of privilege. His 13 participants in this autoethnographic inquiry included seven female and six male, six Caucasians, six Blacks, and one Latina. The impediments highlighted include socialization into privilege, difficulties in nurturing relationships, a constantly evolving image-building enterprise, and an addiction to control. Welliver (2011) concluded that building or nurturing a White privilege-cognizant anti-racist character can only be meaningful as part of a larger quest for social justice.

Lastly, Nenga (2011) who did an ethnographic study of 40 affluent youth volunteers revealed that responses to privilege are usually not universal because there are different forms of privilege. In her study of how affluent youth volunteers responded to class privilege, she found that youth who have volunteered for long periods of time and completed training regarding the structural causes of poverty were more likely to challenge class privilege than those who did not. In this and other studies discussed above, education was a vehicle through which students were taught about privilege and nudged to use their privilege to advance socioeconomic change in society.

**Awareness and experience of privilege.** Many empirical studies focused on the awareness of privilege, proposing that this awareness leads to an acknowledgment of privilege in various contexts. For instance, six studies examined privilege in connection to race (Iezzi, 2009; Manuppelli, 2000; Mindrup, Spray, & Lamberghini-West, 2011; Ray & Rosow, 2012; Rios, 2010; Stewart, Latu, Branscombe, Phillips & Denney, 2012). Ray and Rosow (2012) found that there were mechanisms and institutional arrangements that sustained White privilege and the
salience of race. In their qualitative study of 52 male students from three fraternities with both White and Black members located at a predominantly White university in the USA, they reported that the institutional arrangements that privileged White fraternity men constrained Black fraternity men. Iezzi (2009) did a convenience sample of eight White counsellors and examined how they became aware of White privilege and how that awareness impacted their work with clients from ethnic minority populations. Iezzi (2009), in this qualitative investigation, found that self-awareness of White privilege is an important multicultural counselling competency. Iezzi (2009) also explained that this awareness impacted the participants’ counselling as some could view clients in their unique cultural contexts, not stereotyping or judging clients, adjusting treatment approaches and validating racism. In contrast, those who were not aware of their White privilege participated in the racism inherent in their privilege. Likewise, Mindrup, Spray, and Lamberghini-West (2011), in their quantitative study utilized a convenience sample of 298 White-European American graduate students in clinical psychology and social work to examine the association between White privilege attitudes and multicultural counselling. They found positive association between awareness and multicultural counselling competencies, and, indeed, that White privilege was a core component of multicultural awareness. To attain competency in multicultural counselling, they found that self-awareness regarding racial privilege is a fundamental need for all counsellors.

The literature also indicated that there are different levels of awareness, as Ancis and Szymanski (2001) discovered in their qualitative study with a convenience sample of 34 White master’s counselling students in the USA. Lack of awareness and denial of White privilege was the first level of awareness they identified. Awareness of, but unwillingness to engage in actions to challenge or dismantle privilege, was their second level. Higher order awareness and
commitment to action was the third level, which included the understanding of the pervasiveness of privilege in society. They also found that the awareness of privilege is connected to the level of education and years of experience of those who are working as helping professionals. Similarly, Loya (2007) in her quantitative study explored the relationship between the level of social work education and racial attitudes among 179 self-identified White social workers recruited through a disproportional stratified random sample method. She found that BSW level social workers were less aware of colour-blind racial attitudes and less culturally aware than MSW level social workers. Mitchell (2009) examined the perception of White privilege held by seven educators and how that impacted their teaching and administrative roles. In this qualitative study with a purposeful sampling method, she found that though educators implemented principles of multicultural education in implementing their roles, the perception of White privilege differed greatly between novice teachers and experienced educators who were more aware of the power they possessed because of their privilege. Because of this, they were more sensitive to certain aspects of the lived experiences of their diverse students and their families.

Additional studies examined the awareness of privilege in relation to gender (Johnson, 2010) and theory of practice (Ewashen, 2003). Johnson (2010), using purposeful sampling for her qualitative study, examined the experiences of five female social workers in a First Nation community in Northern British Colombia, Canada. She found that female social workers could experience two simultaneous realities -the privileged reality of being White and the oppressed reality of being women in a patriarchal society. Yet, these social workers could not acknowledge their personal and professional oppression (in terms of inadequate financial compensation for their work) when working with highly oppressed individuals. Ewashen (2003) used a theoretical
sample of four White professors of social work who self-identified as privileged and who adopted the theoretical perspective of structural social work to examine how they understood privilege and structural social work practice. She found that these professors developed an awareness of privilege within the context of family environment. They also embraced the contradictions of their social locations and attempted to use their privilege to advocate for others.

Three studies used psychometric measures with student participants to determine how conscious they were regarding their social identities and the effect of these identities on their actions (Black, Stone, Hutchinson & Suarez, 2007; Montross, 2003; Pinteritis, Poteat & Spanierman, 2009). For instance, Black, Stone, Hutchinson and Suarez (2007) developed a scale to measure the dimensions of White racial privilege called the Social Privilege Measure. Montross (2003) used the Awareness of Privilege and Oppression scale to measure people’s awareness of societal privileges and oppression. Pinteritis, Poteat and Spanierman (2009) developed and validated the White Privilege Awareness scale to assess the dimensions of White privilege attitudes. All these scales had acceptable levels of reliability (alpha = .95, alpha = .83, and alpha = .84 respectively), and they were all relevant as beginning points towards the understanding of the lived experience of privilege by helping professionals.

attitudes of 42 undergraduate students, Stoudt, Fox, and Fine (2012) analyzed “more than 100” youth and adults, ages 14-21 years old in five boroughs of New York, USA. Wernick (2009) studied “about 1000 young people” 18-35 years old in a qualitative study that addressed how organizations can work with wealthy young people to develop critical consciousness around issues of wealth, power, and privilege. All these scholars found that self-reflection could heighten one’s awareness of privilege and lead to transformational learning about one’s position in society.

The emotionality associated with privilege. The fourth theme that emerged from the empirical literature relates to the emotionality associated with privilege. This theme was present, to some extent, in all the studies already cited. Privilege is an emotional topic and is, therefore, considered a “difficult dialogue” (Watt, 2007, p. 114) that is sometimes greeted with silence and denial (Henze, Lucas & Scott, 1998; Watt, 2007, 2009). Participants in seven studies were reported to have struggled with privilege and experienced personal discomfort in terms of how privilege manifested (Briscoe, 2011; Cullen, 2008; Ewashen, 2003; Manuppelli, 2000; Mindrup, Spray & Lamberghini-West, 2011; Pinteritis, Poteat and Spanierman, 2009; Watt, 2007). For example, some participants reported struggling with the feelings of guilt and shame (Lowery, Knowles & Unzueta, 2007; Mindrup, Spray, & Lamberghini-West, 2011), while some experienced internal struggles and tensions, including guilt and hopelessness (Ewashen, 2003; Manuppelli, 2000).

Other emotions and feelings associated with privilege included but were not limited to embarrassment, anger, remorse, resentment, apathy, hostility, resistance, helplessness, frustrations, and feelings of vulnerability by professionals (Henze, Lucas & Scott, 1998; Mindrup, Spray, & Lamberghini-West, 2011; Pinteris, Poteat & Spanierman, 2009; Watt, 2007
It is worth noting that only one study (Iezzi, 2009) reported any positive emotions relating to the awareness of privilege. Based on a convenience sample of eight White counselling psychology doctoral students, interns, and psychologists, Iezzi (2009) examined how White counselors became aware of White privilege and how that awareness impacted their work with clients from ethnic minority populations. While the findings corroborated the negative emotions identified by other studies, it also highlighted that some participants felt good about their awareness of White privilege. They reported that the awareness of White privilege by these professionals gave them the confidence in working with others, and had a positive effect on their work with clients from ethnic minority populations. This study indicates that there are possibly other unexplored emotions with the experience of privilege.

**Conclusion**

This review has highlighted the origin of privilege and its purpose as a strategy for distributing advantages and high status in society. It has identified the multidimensionality, intersectionality and complexity of privilege as it relates to social identities. It has also drawn attention to why privilege is invisible to some people with particular social identities while it is observable to others without those identities. However, the current conceptualization is too narrowly defined based mainly on the critical perspective. There is need to expand the framework to accommodate other views regarding privilege.

Consistent with the conceptual literature, the empirical literature suggests that privilege is linked to diverse identities, which also relates to the use of self in different contexts. The empirical literature also suggests that professionals have challenges discussing issues relating to privilege as it is associated with power and oppression. As such, students and professionals need more education about privilege and oppression in order to enhance their sense of social justice.
Furthermore, whether using psychometric scales to measure the general awareness of privilege or connecting the awareness to specific factors like the level of education, years of experience or practice theory, many authors highlighted the need for critical reflection on privilege. Lastly, the literature revealed that privilege is an emotional topic evoking tensions, resistance, and defensive behavior.

The major limitations of these studies are that most of them are based on, or organized around university students and their education regarding privilege. There is a paucity of studies on professionals in practice, especially in social work. Furthermore, most of these studies were also deliberately racially based, as they examined White privilege relative to professional status (Adams, 2006; Bourdieu, 1977 & 1979; Walter, Taylor & Habibus, 2011). Yet, professional status incorporates but also goes beyond Whiteness, as many professions have members who are racially non-White and whose experiences of privilege have not been adequately represented or understood in the literature. Moreover, beyond White racial privilege in the professions, there is a paucity of research regarding multiple identities, intersectionality, or the interaction of various identities among social workers as they relate to privilege. Lastly, most of the studies were also conducted in the USA, with only a few conducted in Canada (Baines, 2000 & 2002; Briscoe, 2011; Ewashen, 2003; Johnson, 2010). It is conceivable that Canadian social work professionals may have different experiences and understanding of their privilege.

The goal of this project is to document the lived experience of social workers regarding their privilege, explore the meanings and understanding ascribed to privilege in relation to power, as well as outline the emotions attached to privilege. By exploring the lived experiences of professional social workers in Canada, this study contributes to social work knowledge, and
expands the literature in several areas, such as the awareness of and reflection on privilege, identity development and emotionality as it relates to privilege.

Research Questions

The main research question is: How do social workers in direct practice experience their privilege? The sub-questions include: How do social workers understand privilege, power, and the relationship between privilege and power? What gives them a sense of privilege? How do they describe their experience of privilege in social work practice? How do their interactions with clients shape their experience of privilege? What kinds of emotions do they feel when they think, talk about, or experience privilege? How do they find opportunities for reflection on privilege and power in the context of their work? How would they confront, challenge, or dismantle their privilege? These sub-questions are predicated on the assumption that individuals construct their own reality based on their lived experience viz-a-viz their social and professional context (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).
Chapter 3

Methodology

To gain an in-depth understanding of participants’ lived experience of privilege, this study utilized the phenomenological method (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Van Manen, 1997). The goal of phenomenology is to describe, interpret and understand meanings of experiences (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Cohen and Omery (1994) identified three types of phenomenology, one of which is the most relevant to this study. The first is the eidetic phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, which asks the question of what is known. This is a purely descriptive exercise that excludes the assumptions of the researcher from the research process (Cohen & Omery, 1994). The second is the ontological phenomenology of Martin Heidegger that uses the researcher’s interpretation of experiences to arrive at an understanding of a phenomenon. This is a purely interpretative venture. The third is the hermeneutic phenomenology of Van Manen that combines both features of descriptive and interpretive phenomenology. It allows the researcher to answer broader questions involving both description and interpretation of a phenomenon. This study employed the third type, the phenomenological methodology of Van Manen (1997) because it provides a more holistic understanding of the subject of privilege.

Rationale for Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Van Manen’s (1997) phenomenology, known as hermeneutic phenomenology accepts multiple and conflicting interpretations of lived experiences. It also lends itself to a deep understanding of the human experience within larger social and cultural contexts thus allowing for questions regarding human subjectivities (Van Manen, 1997). Additionally, hermeneutic phenomenology not only assumes a co-construction of reality between researcher and
participants, it also allows for the researcher’s interpretation of a phenomenon beyond participants’ description of that phenomenon (Van Manen, 1997). This methodology enables the researcher to understand the multiplicity and nuances within the individual participant’s view on privilege as well as patterns and themes arising from the multiple views of other participants (Van Manen, 1997).

Furthermore, hermeneutic phenomenology describes specific phenomena from a participant’s lived experience (Creswell, 1998). Lived experience is “simply experience-as-we-live-through-it in our actions, relations and situations” (Van Manen, 2007, p. 16). In this methodology participants would supply diverse and multiple classifications, interpretations and narratives to make sense of what they know in their everyday lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Van Manen, 1997). Equally important, the active participation of the researcher is crucial to the construction and understanding of the participants’ responses, and the researcher’s presence is a part of the shared encounter with the participant in the creation of meanings (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Goffman, 1959; Van Manen, 1997).

Like social constructionism, hermeneutic phenomenology accepts that reality is multiple, complex and contextual (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Foster & Bochner, 2008) and that there are multiple ways of knowing and perceiving (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Foster & Bochner, 2008). Hermeneutic phenomenology also accepts that all knowledge is time-bound and, therefore, ever changing (Gergen & Gergen, 2007). Hermeneutic phenomenology particularly provides room for an emerging understanding of a phenomenon or a subject matter (Van Manen, 1997). Instead of imposing a schema on lived experiences, it admits that life is always more complex than all the meanings that could be derived from any number of descriptions and interpretations of events. It also recognizes that language is at once powerful
and limited and that “full or final descriptions are unattainable” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 18). Van Manen’s admonition that researchers should stay open and be sensitive both to the “subtle undertones of language” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 111) in the research process and the possibility inherent in “moments when meanings could emerge” (p. 114), was instructive to this present study. This encouraged me to be present to the moment while taking adequate note of what was unfolding during the research process (Van Manen, 1997).

**Sampling and Recruitment**

This study utilized purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method that collects data from a specialized population of people who are knowledgeable about the subject under investigation (Groenawald, 2004; Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling gave me the ability to increase the diversity of participants based on a variety of demographic characteristics (e.g. age, race, class, sex, sexual orientation, gender, and religion), and professional characteristics (e.g. level of education, years of practice, context of practice, and practice approach). Purposive sampling also provided for a diversity of views on the phenomenon of privilege in a way that contributed depth to the study. Through purposive sampling, I was able to recruit the first eight participants, all female social workers in diverse fields of practice (see Appendices A & B for letters of consent to participate in research).

This study also used snowball sampling. Snowball sampling expands the recruitment process by asking current participants to recommend others for the study (Babbie, 1995; Patton, 2002). To prevent homogeneity of views and perspectives (Kumsa, 2004), I encouraged participants to recommend others who are different from them in terms of gender, sexuality, race, practice setting, and theoretical orientation. Through snowball sampling, I was able to
recruit six male social workers from practice settings as diverse as addiction services, a hospital setting, Indigenous and housing services, and child welfare services.

The sampling frame included social workers in direct practice in multiple settings drawn from across Southwestern Ontario, covering Chatham-Kent, Sarnia-Lambton, and Windsor-Essex, the latter being the fourth largest ethnically diverse community in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011). I defined direct practice as face-to-face interactions with clients such as individuals, families, and groups in publicly funded agencies, institutions or organizations, or in private practice. The entire sample included participants in settings such as hospital, corrections and probation facilities, and those at mental health and child welfare agencies, and gerontology services. Excluded were social workers working in indirect practice settings such as administration, policy making and evaluation, program evaluation and research groups.

Regarding the recruitment process, I sent out letters of request for participants through two avenues. First, I recruited participants by posting my study flyer on the Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW), Southwestern Ontario website. The flyer provided a link for interested participants to contact me (see Appendix C). Secondly, I sent an introductory letter to social work field supervisors in both the on- and off-campus social work programs at the University of Windsor. They circulated the study information by forwarding it through email to the social workers in their organization. Interested social workers were asked to contact me directly via the email provided in the study flyer (see Appendix D).

Sample size. There is no consensus in the literature on what constitutes an adequate number of participants for research in qualitative methods (Sandelowski, 1995). For phenomenological studies, however, Morse (2003) suggested a minimum of six to ten participants while Creswell (1998) recommended between five and 25 participants. Guest,
Bunce and Johnson (2006) found that saturation, or the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data, occurs within the first 12 interviews, although they argued that most themes could be determined by the sixth interview. In consultation with my dissertation research chair and committee, this study included 20 participants to ensure maximum variation of participants, with the purpose of ensuring sufficient diversity of views regarding the phenomenon of privilege (Groenewald, 2004; Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006).

**Description of participants.** Sixty-five percent of participants (n = 13) were female and 35% (n = 7) were male. Most participants were White (70%, n = 14) and racial diversity included Indigenous (5%, n = 1), Black (15%, n = 3), South Asian (5%, n = 1), and Latino (5%, n = 1). Most participants were Christian (75%, n = 15), while the remaining participants were Atheist (5%, n = 1), Jewish (5%, n = 1) or Spiritist (5%, n = 1) and 10% (n = 2) reported no religious affiliation. Participants’ ages ranged from 25-60 years-old (M = 37.5), with years of practice experience ranging from one to 30 years (M = 9.5). The majority of participants were legally married (65%, n = 13) while fewer were in common law relationship (10%, n = 2). One participant (5%) was divorced and four (20%) were never married. All participants identified as heterosexual. Most participants (90%, n = 18) had a master’s degree in social work, and the remaining participants held a bachelor of social work degree (10%, n = 2). Of the participants who held a BSW, one also had a graduate degree in business administration and the other had a Child and Youth Worker Certificate. Participants’ work settings included: youth justice system (20%, n = 4), hospital –specifically adult mental health and discharge planning departments (20%, n =4), child welfare (15%, n = 3), youth mental health (15%, n = 3), private practice (15%, n = 3), addictions (5%, n = 1), advising at the university level (5%, n = 1), and Indigenous and housing services (5%, n = 1).
**Ethical Considerations**

The University of Windsor’s Research Ethics Board (REB) approved this study. Consistent with Bailey’s (1996) recommendation about informed consent, my recruitment letter laid out the title and purpose of the research, the procedures, risks and benefits, and the voluntary nature of the research. The recruitment letter stated that participants had a right to withdraw (self-determination) from the research at any point and without any repercussions to them (see Appendix B). To protect confidentiality, no identifying information was written or recorded on any form or digital recording. Participants’ names were also deliberately not mentioned in or during any of the interviews; hence, all the audio recordings were anonymized. Furthermore, participants were not required to sign any document as their participation itself was deemed as the expression of their informed consent.

Moreover, there was no deception of any kind used in the study. Instead, to be transparent, the recruitment letter included some of the main interview questions. Lastly, though participants had the right to withdraw at any time without penalty, none of them did. In fact, two participants had more to say after the interview and I sought and received their consent to turn the digital recorder back on (see Appendix E).

All participants received a $20.00 Tim Horton’s gift card at the beginning of the interview, irrespective of whether or not they completed the interview. This gift was in appreciation of their willingness to participate in the research and compensation for their time, rather than an inducement to participate in research (Largent, Grady, Miller & Wertheimer, 2012). The Social Science and Humanities Research Council, SSHRC (Grant # 618555) supported this study.
**Data Collection**

In qualitative studies, researchers are regarded as instruments of data collection, interpretation, and analysis and they have the capacity to bring personal contexts into the research process (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2001; McPherson & Thorne, 2006). Personally and professionally, my experience of privilege is ambivalent. My multiple and simultaneously interacting identities make privilege an unstable phenomenon in my life. In Nigeria where race was not a factor because everyone belonged to the same race, I was a beneficiary of privilege in certain settings, especially in terms of education, but also deprived in terms of ethnicity. However, my master status as a Black person in Canada has not provided any privilege for me. For this study, I reflectively employed all my subjectivities (Bradshaw, Armour & Roseborough, 2007) as a Black male immigrant social worker to collect information from participants regarding their experience of privilege within the context of social work practice in Canada.

As a first-generation immigrant and a racial minority, I came from a place of humility to inquire about the experience of others. I communicated my curiosity and eagerness to learn from my participants by my body language, posture and respectful attitude towards them. I enunciated my words to ensure that they could understand my Nigerian accent. I acted pleasantly and courteously, utilizing my active listening skills. My background as a journalist and clinical social worker made me more comfortable in the interview settings and I believe that it put my participants at ease too.

Though my research interests informed my chosen methodology, sample strategy, and data collection and analysis procedure, I started the interview process as a learner, determining to honour the unique contributions of my participants as we interacted in a meaning-making
exercise (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Gubrium & Holstein, 1998, 2000; Saldana, 2013). My identity as a Black man compelled me to create a space in which the voice of visible minority social workers would be cultivated and heard. The experiences of two participants (visible minority men) played repeatedly in my mind for a few days after their respective interviews because I could identify with them most. Only one participant (the East Asian female social worker) appeared tentative during the interviews as she wondered aloud if she was providing the right responses. I assured her that I had no preconceived assumptions about what was right but just wanted her to share her perspective and experience. She commented that she should have studied the interview questions. I maintained a reflective journal throughout the process to document my experience.

I reckoned that my White participants did not perceive me as challenging their White privilege (as I assumed they might) but as trying to understand it in consonant with other privileges. I did not observe any anxiety, defensiveness or cynicism but experienced warmth and openness. I believe that they responded to my sincere interests in their views, lives, and practice. I cherished the time they spent with me to enhance my knowledge, and I complemented them for it. I have endeavoured to report this inquiry in a way to give transparency to the research process and my own interpretation of participants’ experiences are in the findings of the study.

**Demographic information.** Self-administered demographic questionnaire included questions pertaining to participants’ age, race, ethnicity, biological sex, sexual orientation, gender, religion, level of education, context of practice, and theoretical/practice approaches (see Appendix F). This information provided context to the participants’ responses to the interview questions and enabled me to analyze and compare data and themes within and across multiple demographics.
The interview. The primary data for the research were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with participants. This information was captured on digital tape. A second tape recorder was used to avoid losing interview data due to possible malfunctioning of one recorder. Luckily, there was no malfunctioning, thus, all duplicate information was promptly deleted.

This study used a semi-structured interview format to facilitate the co-construction of knowledge with participants (Enosh, Ben-Ari & Buchbinder, 2008), because social constructionist interviews are dialogical performances and co-facilitated knowledge exchanges (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008). A semi-structured interview provided an overall focus rather than a rigid structure for the interview (Moustakas, 1994). It also ensured that the study was “interviewee oriented” rather than “instrument oriented” (Fraser, 2004, p. 184). Interview questions covered concrete details of participants’ experiences of privilege and participants’ reflection on the meaning of these experiences (Seidman, 1998). These questions were based on literature and practice wisdom (see Appendix G). Probes and prompts were used to clarify or expand on responses and meanings as well as to encourage participants to provide thick or in-depth description of the phenomenon of privilege (Penner & McClement, 2008).

All interviews were conducted at participants’ offices, which were places of employment, clinical practice offices or home office. The duration of the interviews varied across participants, as some needed more prompting questions than others. The total of all 20 interviews lasted 1,425 minutes, which is 23 hours and 45 minutes, and were conducted within 36 days. The shortest interview was 51 minutes while the longest was 115 minutes \( (M = 71 \text{ minutes}) \) (see Appendix H). Except on one occasion when a participant’s dog barged into the home office
(where the interview was taking place), all the interviews were free from possible noise and interruptions.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. After transcription and a member of the dissertation committee verified the audio/digital recordings, the interviews were deleted. Participants were assigned anonymous names and I ensured that data could not be traced to them. All data (the transcripts and demographic surveys) were kept in a digital form on a computer that is password protected.

**Bracketing and Reflective Field Notes.** To ensure accuracy and quality during the interview process, I used a number of key techniques, such as bracketing and reflective field notes, as outlined by Van Manen’s (1990, 1997) methodology. Bracketing (also referred to as epoche) is a key practice in phenomenology (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Van Manen, 1997). It is when researchers set aside their preconceived opinions, beliefs, knowledge, and ideas in order to understand how participants perceive or experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). To do this, I listened attentively and non-judgmentally. With every participant, I set aside my personal views in order to avoid any inappropriate subjective judgement regarding their opinion or experience (Groenewald, 2004). I asked clarifying questions to expand participants’ explanations and description of the phenomenon. I did not use any presuppositions, beliefs, interpretation, or theory to impose meaning on participants’ information. I also kept reflective field notes (i.e. engaged in journaling) as a reflective process that is key to bracketing (Van Manen, 1990). I did my journaling before and after the interviews. In journaling, I examined, documented, and set aside my preconceived notions, theoretical assumptions, and my own lived experience so that I could
pay full attention to participants’ experiences and realities and not negatively impact the process of data collection.

I recognized a benefit to my bracketing effort when two participants commented after the interview that they expected some kind of negativity with my questions regarding the topic of privilege, but were surprised about how “balanced” the interview was. Perhaps the social constructionist framework, which allows for multiple viewpoints regarding a subject, makes bracketing easier for the researcher.

In addition to the above techniques outlined by Van manen’s (1990, 1997) methodology, I recorded my detailed observations of the interview process by adapting what Corbin and Strauss (2008) described as descriptive field notes.

**Descriptive Field Notes.** Descriptive field notes enable researchers to document their progress and observations during the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These notes could include the researcher’s thoughts and reflections, how they integrate the literature, theories, and research framework with the data being collected, as well as how they pay attention to the mannerisms of the participants as co-researchers (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saldana, 2013; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). These notes usually provide context for the interviews upon transcription. I engaged in writing descriptive field notes during the interviews to record observations like participants’ gestures, body language, mood, as well as office artifacts, if any, without distracting participants. After the interviews, I also recorded the ways in which the data being collected either illuminated or differed from the literature.

**Transcription.** Transcribing interviews involves translating oral language into written texts. Kvale (1996) described transcripts as interpretative constructions and “representation of some original reality,” as well as “decontextualized conversations,” a living, ongoing, fleeting
conversation frozen into static written words (p. 165-167). To have the most accurate representation of the interviews, I resolved to have an orthographic transcript (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is a verbatim, detailed account of all verbal and sometimes nonverbal utterances. I also employed two transcribers for the project. They were both informed about confidentiality of the research and research participants, and signed the Confidentiality Agreement for Transcriptions form (see Appendix I). They agreed to destroy the audio files and copies of transcripts after the completion and submission to me. I provided for them anonymized audio files on a Universal Serial Bus (USB) storage devise. This was to ensure that they would not need to download anything on their own computers. The first transcriber completed six interview transcripts and the second completed eleven. I transcribed three interviews.

Verifying all the transcripts by matching them, line by line, with the participants’ voices proved to be a painstaking endeavor. Though there were a few substituted words, which I corrected, the biggest difficulty was the place of punctuations in the flow of conversation. To follow speech patterns, cadences, and voice inflections, I listened very carefully to the interviews and adjusted the punctuations accordingly. I could argue, following Bazeley (2007), that I was “as true to the conversation as possible, yet pragmatic in dealing with the data” (p. 45). For instance, I used ellipses for pauses, and incomplete thoughts. I also used ellipses for a change or switch in the direction of thought, a break in the train of thought, and for abrupt stops in the middle of sentences. I did full, rigorous, thorough, and detailed transcripts, including all the ‘umms,’ ‘ahhs,’ and ‘you knows,’ which were a pattern of speech for some, but also an indication of how specific participants were thinking through what they were saying. Furthermore, incomplete sentences were retained, as participants may stop mid-sentence or switch their original thought pattern. Likewise, when poor grammar occurred, I did not correct
or sanitize, in order to capture the form or style of participants’ expressions. Moreover, interruptions were also noted such as when a dog burst into the interview room in a home office on one occasion. In addition, non-verbal communication and emotions were acknowledged, including silences, long pauses, and laughter, raised eyebrows, and breaking voices. I can confidently say that my transcription verification and audio-text corroboration was part of my immersion in the data. The process lasted about three months.

To ensure dependability of the transcripts, a member of my dissertation committee verified the accuracy of five randomly selected transcripts with the accompanying audio files. “The transcripts seem superb to me,” the member wrote in an email and asked if I used speech recognition software. I explained that speech recognition software would be problematic because of the different accents in conversation, especially mine. He commended the detail orientation of the transcripts.

Data Analysis

Data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously. I constantly assessed the interview questions to determine that they adequately addressed privilege, and to ensure that sufficient data were being collected regarding the various dimensions of the phenomenon of privilege. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded, and entered into a qualitative data analysis (QDA) software program called Nvivo 11 (Pro for Windows version) for sorting and organizing.

Memos. Birks, Chapman, and Francis (2008) regarded memos as part of data to be analyzed. Memoing involves making notes of thoughts, impressions, and initial comments on the margins of interview transcripts (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). I engaged in the process of memoing during and after the completion of all interviews and verification of interview
transcripts. This aided my immersion in the data. Memoing also allowed me to freely associate transcripts with existing literature and ideas regarding the subject matter. It also permitted the documentation of patterns that emerged within each interview (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). Memoing enabled me to document my reflections, questions, insights, and observation about each interview, thus confirming the notion by Clarke (2005) that “memos are sites of conversation with ourselves about the data,” (p. 202). Memoing also provided for me the initial ideas for codes, facilitated data analysis, and helped in the identification of themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Furthermore, I wrote memos and annotation on codes, and also used memos to reflect on my coding process. The process of memoing on all the interview transcripts took four weeks.

**Coding.** Coding is a method of data management by which researchers classify and tag texts with labels (Bazeley, 2007; Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). For this phenomenological study, I used codes to compile relevant and significant information from the transcripts based on research questions. With the aid of qualitative data analysis (QDA) software, Nvivo 11, similar codes were put into specific containers identified as nodes, which are labelled descriptively for easy retrieval and analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Each code is a reference in Nvivo 11, and code references are the number of significant information dropped into a node. During the first iteration of my coding, I had 2,141 individual references across 91 nodes, a particularly large amount of codes. These nodes were later hierarchically arranged into parent and child nodes, the software’s terms for categories and subcategories. In other words, parent nodes were categories under which child nodes were classified as different but related aspects of the same theme (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013. See Appendix J for initial nodes/codes).
For this project, major nodes arose as natural categories and general constructs based on the research and interview questions, such as the definition, including descriptions and metaphors of privilege, participants’ experiences, emotions and feelings, as well as reflections on privilege. The presented data were later categorized to form themes and subthemes.

The full transcript of each interview was coded. However, regarding the unit of analysis, because of its tendency to lead to fragmentation and excessive volume, I did not do word-by-word coding. Neither did I do paragraph coding because, in addition to having problems of reliability, it would have been too broad and lose coding details (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Instead, I coded phrases and sentences as they were large enough to constitute units of meaning and small enough to be understood within the context in which they were intended.

I engaged in two cycles of coding. The first cycle was open coding, which was inductive, bottom-up, and data driven (Saldana, 2013). Here, I engaged in a process of coding, re-coding, and un-coding, as well as memoing and annotation, simultaneously (Bazeley & Johnson, 2013; Saldana, 2013). The second cycle was hierarchical coding. It included the arrangement and rearrangement of codes and nodes, refining, expanding, and collapsing of categories in an iterative manner (Bazeley & Johnson, 2013; Saldana, 2013). In hierarchical coding, data displayed in coded forms were re-examined, some categories were split into subcategories, linked together, or renamed as needed (Saldana, 2013).

For example, to the extent that the Nvivo software arranges nodes alphabetically, I felt that I should bring similar concepts together in order not to lose track of meaning and context. As such, a node called "unscheduled visits" was rearranged under "Privilege, unscheduled visit" to signify its larger meaning in connection to the interview guide. "Dismantling privilege" became "Privilege, dismantling," while "Sharing Stories" became "Privilege, Sharing Stories." I
also rearranged emerging concepts under “Reflection,” bringing individual nodes such as
"Alone, isolation" or "Needs and opportunity for Reflection" to "Reflection, Alone, isolation"
and "Reflection, Needs and Opportunities" respectively. Likewise, the node "No time for
reflection" became "Reflection, No time." These nodes were split into categories and
subcategories to exhibit similar meanings and nuances. Moreover, I rearranged the node
"Sharing knowledge" under "Intersubjectivity, Sharing knowledge," as participants were trying
to distinguish how they related to diverse clients who also had different subjectivities. This
streamlining of open codes and nodes became the beginning stage of the second cycle,
hierarchical coding. As a result, the coding structure was not static, but reflected the back-and-
forth, iterative effort to determine themes from the experiences and viewpoints of participants as
well as existing literature and theoretical approach. My interpretation of participants’ stories
through coding is my major contribution to this study as a co-constructed, meaning-making
exercise (Saldana, 2013).

Themes. A theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection
(Saldana, 2013), which enables researchers to capture the phenomenon under study (Van Manen,
1990). Following Butler-Kisber (2010), Saldana (2013) explained that a theme consists of
extracting significant statements from the data and formulating meanings about them through the
researcher’s interpretations, as well as clustering these meanings into a series of organized
themes, and then elaborating on the themes through rich written description (Saldana, 2013, p.
176). To arrive at themes, I thoroughly familiarized myself with each transcript –initially
listening to the interviews alongside the transcripts, writing memos on transcripts, coding phrases
and sentences, noting patterns - as a way of being immersed in the data. After which, I
performed a significant step in phenomenological reduction, called horizontalization, by writing
out each participant’s experience of privilege (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1997). Horizontalization allows the researcher to expose each relevant aspect of each participant’s experience in order to recognize that “each phenomenon has equal value as we seek to disclose its nature and essence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95). The actual procedure of horizontalization, Anderson (2007) explained, is “to reduce each transcript to its essential, nonrepeating phenomena.” (p. 58). I sent to each participant this summary description and analysis of their interviews with rich representations of their voices, and solicited feedback about their accuracy.

I also engaged in across-case analysis, which is the composite description of the experiences of all participants in order to present the essence or the “essential, invariant structure” of the phenomenon of privilege (Creswell, 2007, p. 62). I used what Van Manen (1990) regarded as the detailed approach to finding themes by examining various texts, comparing and contrasting them to each other to identify points of convergence and divergence. However, because Van Manen (1990) did not provide specific direction on data analysis, I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. First, I familiarized myself with the data, as already explained. Second, I generated initial codes as I observed emerging patterns in the data, and these codes were stored in nodes for easy retrieval in the QDA software, Nvivo 11. Third, I searched for themes by collating codes into potential categories and subcategories on which interpretations were made. Fourth, I reviewed the themes to see if categories could be broken down further or merged together. Fifth, I named, defined, and produced narrative for the themes. Lastly, I produced a report to represent participants’ lived experience. It is worth noting that, my descriptive-analytical interpretation of data conforms to the social constructionist position as this analysis did not have any pre-existing codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Rather, it was open, inductive, bottom-up and data-driven even though I had to
later collapse some headings to link some content of my interview guide (see Appendices K and L).

**Emotions in data analysis.** Some scholars have suggested that researchers should acknowledge their emotions during the research process in the same way they observe their participants’ emotions (e.g. Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saldana, 2013). A range of emotions was involved in my data collection and analysis process. Positive emotions, such as joy, elation, and gladness were linked to different stages of my data analysis. Often, I also experienced a sense of frustration, confusion, boredom, tiredness, and tedium especially regarding how long and time consuming each stage became. Therefore, I gave myself the space to be reflective and I regularly retreated to review what I was doing, ensuring that I was not paralyzed by the process. For example, I often went for brisk walks, wrote memos, interacted with my colleagues, and sought advice from my committee members. All these positively impacted my work. I was able to refocus, ask deeper questions and make stronger connections across various aspects of the data.

**The use of Nvivo 11 software.** I did not have a preference for using qualitative data analysis software (QDAS), over manual methods but I was impressed by the ease of organization in Nvivo during a short demonstration by a guest researcher in my doctoral qualitative analysis course. Within that class, I did a 15-minute interview of two participants using the manual method. I generated so much papers, as I printed multiple copies of the interviews, cutting and pasting, arranging and rearranging them in order to organize the themes. Working with Nvivo 11 not only simplified the organization of materials, but it was also environmentally friendly.

Although Bazeley (2007) argued that the use of software could contribute to a more rigorous analysis, Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggested that no software package would do
analysis by itself. Nvivo 11 did not do the analysis for me but made it easy to code, uncode, re-code, categorize, and re-arrange data without decontextualizing or losing participants’ information. The heuristic value of Nvivo 11 was its ability to store, sort, organize, and retrieve data as needed.

**Ensuring Trustworthiness and Credibility in the Research**

There seems to be an agreement among qualitative researchers that a study is rigorous or valid when the thoughts, feelings, experiences, and meanings of participants are reflected or represented in the findings of an investigation (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006; Padgett, 2008; Sandelowski, 1986; Shenton, 2004). This present study addressed the four generally accepted criteria – of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability -proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research.

**Credibility.** Credibility is the extent to which research findings correspond to the views and realities of participants, as opposed to the biases of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I addressed credibility by engaging in strategies of member checking and peer debriefing.

**Member checking.** Member checking is the process that enables participants to provide feedback regarding how accurately the researcher understands the participants (Buchbinder, 2010). Member checking was done throughout the interview process, as I used probes to clarify participants’ responses. I also formally presented, to all participants by email, the themes and findings from the interviews (see Appendix M). This facilitated the opportunity to confirm, modify or challenge the thematic analysis or identify areas that may have been missed or misinterpreted (Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006). That also gave them the opportunity to identify which aspects of the analysis fit or did not fit their perspectives (Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006).
The table of themes had five columns: the title of the theme, how the theme was understood by researcher, how the theme represented participant’s experience, how theme did not represent participant’s experience, and other comments about the theme by participants. Participants were given two weeks to provide feedback, as indicated in the Research Ethics Board’s approval of the study, after which data analysis would continue.

Two out of the 20 participants could not be reached for comments as their emails bounced back. Thirteen participants responded to the themes, all offering more examples of how these themes fit their experiences. Two participants provided additional comments about how, since the original interview, they had been engaging in reflection regarding their privilege in practice settings. There were no objections or discrepancies by any participant regarding the interpretation of any theme. In fact, all the 13 participants who responded validated my interpretation of the themes.

Additionally, participants also received a summary of themes as well as individual transcribed narrative of their interviews, which reflected their voice. Some participants commented on the accuracy of the documents. For instance, a participant expressed that I captured her “thoughts accurately, which I think at times weren’t too coherent hahhahah. Great job!” Similarly, another participant wrote, “I thought you did a splendid job of writing up the interview and made me sound quite good… (except for all those “uummmms” that I didn’t realize were going to be in the text!!!). Something for me to work on, for sure!!” I thanked them in return, offering an idea that most people speak in poetry instead of prose.

Peer debriefing. To ensure credibility I also used peer debriefing, which is the process of asking colleagues who have experience with the topic area or method to provide feedback on the research process (Armour, Rivaux, & Bell, 2009; Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006). This peer
debriefing included three doctoral students who were able to ask questions about my research process and check the progression and fit of my codes, categories, themes, and findings to ensure that the research was credible (Krefting, 1990). In addition, I used my codes and categories to illustrate how to implement an Nvivo project as a guest lecturer for two cohorts of students in the PhD data analysis course taught by a member of my dissertation committee. Peer debriefing, as described here increased the rigour and trustworthiness of this study by having others question my assumptions and views, offer alternative views, confirm my themes and provide feedback on my findings.

*Transferability.* The criterion of transferability is the extent to which the findings of the study could be applied to other situations (Shenton, 2004). To achieve this, I endeavored to maximize the range of participants in the study in terms of demographic characteristics, contexts of practice, and different theoretical viewpoints (Armour, Rivaux, & Bell, 2009). Their theoretical viewpoints included critical, humanistic, narrative and eclectic. Collecting data from these diverse participants provided breadth and depth to the study findings and facilitated a thorough description of the phenomenon of privilege in the hope that it would have broader applicability (Penner & McClement, 2008).

Sufficient contextual and demographic information, as well as thick descriptions of data were also provided to enable the reader to relate the findings to their own contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), thick description is a way of achieving external validity in qualitative research. It is about providing an account of the phenomenon in sufficient detail so that the reader is able to perceive its possible meanings and how the conclusions drawn are transferable to other settings or situations (Erlandson et.al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ponterotto, 2006). Thick description often includes an exposition of
contexts, voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of participants (Ponterotto, 2006), which “brings the reader vicariously into the context being described” (Erlandson et. al., 1993, p. 33). To ensure thick description, I used participants’ actual words and voices—both in long quotes and short phrases—to describe the actions, emotions, and meanings they ascribed to their experience of privilege.

To further test the potential for transferability of my research findings, I engaged a group of 25 MSW students in a course I was teaching on social justice and social change to review the findings as a reflection exercise. Most of them found the theme of privilege as a moving target “really fascinating” and true to their lived experience. The self-identified racial diversity of the class included White, Black, Middle Eastern, Asian, and Latino. Religious diversity included Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Agnostics. Sexual minorities included gay and queer. The range of diversity represented in this group indicated that the findings of this study have the potential for transferability.

**Dependability (audit trail and reflective field notes).** Dependability refers to the coherence and consistency of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability calls for the processes of the study to be explicitly detailed so that future researchers could possibly replicate it or arrive at similar findings (Shenton, 2004). To ensure dependability, I maintained an audit trail that described research procedures and documented analytic and other decisions made along the way so that other researchers can appraise the trustworthiness of the research process (Padgett, 2008; Shenton, 2004). In audit trail, I maintained a chronological record of activities, which outlines the sequence of events throughout the research process.

I also used reflexivity as a strategy for dependability. Reflexivity is the use of reflection or “an attitude of attending systematically to the context of knowledge construction” (Malterud,
2001, p. 484) throughout the research process (see also Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006; Shenton, 2004). As previously mentioned, this was done by maintaining reflective field notes, in other words journaling my thoughts, feelings, assumptions, values, social location, personal beliefs and biases as well as my personal and professional experiences, motivation and keeping descriptive field notes about various theoretical perspectives as the research unfolded (Malterud, 2001; Miles & Hubermas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990, 1997).

**Confirmability.** The criterion of confirmability is to ensure that research findings derive from the experiences of participants, and can be confirmed by others who read or review the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). To achieve confirmability, I aligned my themes with quotes from participants. Participants were also able to indicate, through written feedback that the findings confirmed and highlighted their experiences (see Appendix M).

I also maintained my audit trail as part of confirmability. Erlandson et. al. (1993) suggested that “confirmability, like dependability, is communicated through an audit trail” (p. 35), and that “the audit trail that was established to ascertain dependability by looking at the processes that were used in the study also enables an external reviewer to make judgments about the products of the study” (p. 35). Through the audit trail, readers or reviewers can note the sequence of research activities and determine if the conclusions drawn are traceable to their sources and supported by the inquiry.

In addition, I presented some of the themes to an audience of 17 scholars at the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE) conference in Calgary on June 1st, 2016 (Taiwo, 2016). The findings were well received as participants acknowledged the tightness of fit between the themes and the raw data, which are participants’ actual quotes; therefore, supporting confirmability. I observed a great deal of affirming body language during the presentation and
many positive comments afterward. Furthermore, the presenter after me, in the conference room, referred to different aspects of my findings in her own presentation and engaged in email correspondence with me thereafter (J. Finn, personal communication, June 7, 2016). Finally, as a guest lecturer, I also presented some of my findings to two graduate social work classes (i.e. Advanced Direct Social Work Practice, and Social Justice and Social Change). Based on their lived experiences, students could easily identify with study participants’ quotations, further confirming the connections between their lived experience, participants’ quotations, and broader themes. Students also engaged in several questions about the research process and implications of the findings for their own social work practice. Thus, according to Miles and Huberman (1994), these confirmations indicate that the findings that were derived from participants are “not wholly idiosyncratic” (p. 172), but could also be relevant to many practitioners in diverse settings. As such, students not only helped to demonstrate the potential for transferability of the findings, they simultaneously supported the confirmability of the study’s results.
Chapter 4

Organization and Analysis of Themes

This chapter identifies the essential themes, which form “the infrastructure for the descriptive and interpretive dimensions” of the lived experience of privilege (Van Manen, 1990, p. 107). The themes identify broad agreements as well as variations and nuances in participants’ experiences. The six themes that emerged from this study are: moving target, the embeddedness of power, variegated experiences, assorted emotions, reflection is not a priority, and the pyramid will always exist. These themes are formed by grouping units of meaning together (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994), and these units of meaning have significance for our understanding of privilege. This chapter illustrates the meaning of each theme in order to reveal the essence of privilege as experienced by direct practice social workers in diverse practice settings.

Theme 1: Privilege as a “Moving Target”

Privilege as a “moving target” is the foundational theme emerging from this study. Indeed, all participants expressed their understanding of the phenomenon within their own specific personal, socio-historical, economic, cultural, racial, and professional contexts. The idea of privilege as a “moving target” reveals that the phenomenon cannot be restricted to any single feature or characteristic. Each participant experienced privilege in various dimensions, because of which, their definitions and descriptions of privilege were similar, yet diverse. They all agreed that privilege is linked or assigned to the various social identities of the social worker, such as race, ethnicity, age, disability, biological sex, gender, and markers of socioeconomic status (SES), including class. They expressed that these identities are dynamic as people interact in society. Finally, privilege as a “moving target” also applies to one’s achievements in the
society and their ability for self-determination. The following narratives express the different ways in which privilege is a moving target.

**Social identities.** All participants suggested that social identities constitute the differences that distinguish human beings in society, and these identities are targets of privilege. They include age and race, ethnicity and religion, sex and gender, sexual orientation, disability, and class, most of which are ascribed at birth. That prompted Heather, a 25-year-old White woman to say:

I didn't really do anything to be born into the family that I was born, or the race that I was born, but other people view it as, umm, I guess being like… like above other people, without you intentionally putting yourself. So, I guess my access, my access to resources would maybe come more easily.

All participants regarded privilege through birth as unearned. This easy access to resources because of one’s birth makes privilege lopsided, according to Tiffany, a 34-year-old, White woman with physical disabilities, who argued that privilege is neither authentic nor absolute.

I think, for me, when I think of privilege in a traditional sense, I would see it as something very lopsided. Some people are born with myriad of choices and opportunities, and other people are born with… in poverty and abuse, or whatever, and what I'm saying is, as an adult I've come to the realization that those things can be evened out, more or less, because we can make a choice about our lives and what they are going to be shaped as.

Tiffany declared that privilege fluctuates, while Trevor, a 25-year-old Latino man, regarded it as uneven because it is based on a different starting point for everyone, even those born within the same family. As he expressed it,
Umm... it’s uneven because, not everyone starts at the same point, so privilege.... from birth, based on societal norms or on societal expectations, umm people are... at birth have different start off or different levels in life. And umm just because we have, you can have ten babies the exact same birthday, exact same gender, but they all would have different levels of privilege. So even from birth, you know, there will always.... people will have different levels of privilege depending on the routes, the process, or the journey of life they have.

The privilege linked to social identities is not static, according to many participants. It “shifts according to history, culture…and new understanding in society,” said Alanna, a 58-year-old White woman. Many other participants agreed with her. For example, Toni, a 50-year-old woman who is a first-generation White Canadian, suggested that birth is related to country of origin and the period of history to which one is born, as well as the rights and freedoms available in that era. This is corroborated by Jade, a 37-year-old White, Canadian-born woman who discussed the “social conditions” into which an individual is born as determinants of privilege. To Jade, these social conditions include the economic condition of the family, the value system regarding education, the advancement of technology, and social and historical advancements “like the recognition of women as persons –as compared to early 1900s.” Social conditions also include religious belief systems that could make people “healthier and happier,” as well as the social networks in terms of friends, neighbours, and neighbourhood. There is a consensus that these social conditions provide the context for privilege, and could enhance or limit citizens’ participation in the society.

Many participants also understood privilege by comparing or contrasting individuals and groups of people based on their social identities. Some argued that most people who have
privilege take it for granted, or are usually unaware of it until it is brought to their attention. For example, Ajua, a 28-year-old Black woman, regarded privilege as “the ability to not have an awareness” of, or to take for granted something that gives a person or a group of persons an advantage over others. Likewise, Heather described privilege as possessing characteristics that place some individuals “a step ahead of others” and as “being met with positive prejudices,” while Naomi explained that:

With privilege there is… there is merit given, there’s access, there’s resources, there’s status, there’s social recognition, there’s all those attributes that go along with privilege, and that’s against somebody who would not otherwise have that. I think… I think privilege means something over somebody else who does not have whatever that attribute may be.

Finally, Joseph regarded privilege as the unacknowledged benefits of social identities that prevent or reduce barriers for some, and provide opportunities for others. It is “not having to deal with adversarial challenges or situations or barriers” (Josh), or being able to “have a smooth experience in society” (Eva). Jody, a 31-year-old White woman, simply declared privilege as “just the way it is for me.”

**Professional status as earned privilege.** Beyond the privilege that is attached to social identities, some participants discussed the privilege that is linked to the professional status of the social worker. This is the privilege that is earned, gained, or attained because of certain efforts or action. For all participants, this effort is related to education. As Naomi, a 27-year-old White woman explained this,

Privilege I think is… it’s a really broad topic. Privilege is something, I think, that can be understood in a lot of different ways, you know. I think sometimes people think of it as
sort of this set of assets that have been given to you, ah, without any merit or without earning it, but I think also privilege can be something, umm, that people strive towards as well. I think they can gain privilege that they may not have had before, and when I say that, I mean, you know, maybe coming from a family who didn’t have, ah, strong economic background or education, and so a child in that circumstance might not have that privilege growing up, but they can come into that privilege later on by working towards it. I think that privilege can be something that in some circumstances is earned but in other circumstances it’s something that were… it’s part of who we are, you know.

Naomi recounted that she was the first person in her family to attain post-secondary education, and was proud to have a master’s degree in social work. Similarly, for Kevin, a 60-year-old White man, his graduate education in social work, in addition to his master’s degree in divinity, afforded him the privilege to practice social work. He characterized privilege as a gift, duty, calling, and “an obligation to service.” He further described it as the “opportunity to be invited into people’s lives,” to listen to their stories and “to work with them around issues in their lives that they want to make some changes in.” Likewise, for Toni, privilege is simply “being a therapist.” For Richard, privilege “gives you a sort of credence and credibility to do or not do something” for the client. He suggested that social workers can “temper, adjust, or reset a relationship for the better” by their involvement with clients.

Referring to professional status, Monique, a 53-year-old White woman, emphasized that “privilege is the expectation of the client regarding the expertise of the social worker.” She explained that clients expect help from social workers and assume that social workers have the knowledge, skills and resources to provide relevant services for them. As Heather summed this up,
Being a social worker is a profession, and you get paid for helping others, so that in itself is power and it doesn't matter what race or gender or social class you come from, you automatically have more power over your client, and that's why your client is coming to see you, and they in a way, they need your power and that's why they're coming to you… If they, for example, for me I have access to the food bank, they need the food bank, so I… in my position of power I can help them access the food bank, and they, they need me to have that power or else there wouldn't be a food bank, or there wouldn't be counselling services, so in a way, there needs… there needs to be that power differential or else we wouldn't have anyone helping anyone ‘cause nobody would have power and nobody would be able to, sort of, give someone an upper hand.

However, to the extent that privilege can be earned or gained by education and professional status, some participants suggested that privilege can also be lost. Tiffany argued, for instance, that privilege could be maintained only with “perseverance, efficacy, and drive.” She explained that a social worker can maintain privilege after accreditation by practicing competently and ethically, paying necessary professional dues, and being subject to the Social Workers’ Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. Tiffany pointed out that social workers are routinely disciplined for unethical practice and behaviours, so their privilege should not be taken for granted.

Privilege as agency. Many participants referred to privilege as the ability to have a sense of agency, to make decisions in different situations, and exercise rights without being judged. Having a sense of agency for Michael, a 42-year-old White man, is “the ability to pursue goals and have one’s basic needs met.” Tyesha, a 39-year-old Black woman, regarded it as being assertive and independent, suggesting,
Like you are almost like your own person, you can do some…you don’t have to consider somebody else’s influence on your life, you can decide, I’m the captain of my own ship. I can decide today what I want to do with my life today, so …and you can do that without the fear that somebody else is going to impose their own will on you.

Privilege as agency is one’s ability for self-determination. It is related to having a sense of freedom to live in society as desired. Michael illustrated this point by stating that “privilege enables the individual to maximize their potentials, pursue contentment, access opportunities, peace, safety and security, and live freely in terms of all their social identities.” For Michael, privilege is the capacity to exercise rights and freewill without fear, having the freedom of choice, and being free from the judgement of others or from societal pressure.

In contrast to all the above, Richard, a 43-year-old Indigenous man, asserted that privilege “isn’t necessarily anything you obtained or earned… it just may be what people assume about you.” For Richard, society has a way of viewing individuals and making assumptions about them. He argued that these assumptions may change over time as people change their views depending on prevailing circumstances. As such, privilege itself will keep unfolding.

In summary, based on participants’ responses, there are numerous forms of privilege, which manifest in several ways in different contexts, including family of origin, race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and professional status. Privilege can be earned and unearned, as well as gained or lost. It is subtle, uneven, mostly invisible and, therefore, unnoticeable for those who have it. It also fluctuates depending on contexts, circumstances, and period of history. In addition, not everyone is privileged the same way, and the different degrees and manifestations of privilege make it a moving target. As Trevor illustrated it,
So in one setting I may feel that my privilege may be beneficial, gain more control, more power, then in another setting it may not be. So even though I may have privilege in one setting, in the other setting I may have another privilege, someone else's privilege may trump my own privilege, which takes away the power or the control.”

That is perhaps why Josh said,

So now you're really just talking about it as a social construct, and how people view things and how they label things, and measure things, and give value to things, and judge people, and put, put those kind of measures on things, umm, but not everybody is privileged in every area, I would say.

In conclusion, the theme of privilege as a moving target is, therefore, about recognizing and appreciating what Jade called the “variances in privilege.”

**Theme 2: The Embeddedness of Power**

The relationship between privilege and power is another theme that emerged from this study. While some participants attempted to identify the difference between privilege and power, many were unable to distinguish the two, concluding that they are interconnected and inseparable. However, there were different understandings of the power that is embedded in privilege. Some participants regarded power as externally directed based on one’s position in society, while others perceived it as internally directed, built on the ability for self-determination. Additionally, some proposed that power is not necessarily negative, depending on how it is used. The dominant viewpoint, however, was that social workers, because of their position of privilege, exercise power in social work relationships, and that can have an impact on clients, depending on the needs or presenting problems of clients.
Externally directed power. Power as externally directed is the first subtheme of power. According to participants, externally directed power occurs when social workers use their position of authority to influence their clients. Many participants related power to having authority and control over others. “It is the ability to influence people, get services for clients, (and) network with other professionals” (Heather). It is to “lead people in a certain way, or direct them based on your influence as a person” (Olivia). Jody, similarly, announced that power is having the ability “to provide service to one’s benefit or the benefit of others.” Trevor viewed it as having “a sense of control, the authority to do various tasks.” While Tyesha regarded it simply as the “ability to use leverage to accomplish a goal,” Jody reiterated that power is a “tool to guide clients.” As understood by many participants, power “flows” from the “one-up position,” of the social worker (Alanna), and it gives them control over their clients. Sometimes this control may involve force, according to Josh, or manipulation, according to Ajua. Yet, based on agency or organizational mandates, social workers can use power as “control and dominance,” or as empowerment to “teach or help draw answers and solutions” for clients, according to Olivia.

The consensus among all participants is that power comes with the type of position held by the social worker, and the type of job performed in an agency, organization, or community. Participants agreed that social workers personify the power of their agencies, with authority emanating from their position. They also recognized that there is a variety of social services agencies, all of which have different mandates. These mandates determine the type of power a social worker can wield.

For instance, Monique indicated that “power feels different depending on one’s organization.” She also suggested that being a social worker in a mandated agency can create
more power for the occupant of that position than those in a non-mandated agency. As a former social worker in a child welfare setting, Monique recalled that her sense of power and authority was different from her present position in a voluntary agency. She also expressed that clients could have different expectations depending on the agencies with which they are interacting. Tyesha also held this perception regarding clients in non-voluntary agencies,

Because they are mandated, they have to be there… If they are court-ordered, they have to follow the court order. If they’re not court-ordered, then they’re working voluntarily with you, it’s not really voluntary ‘cause you’re saying ‘Well, if you don’t work with us then we’ll go to court,’ and so court is really this big axe that is waving over their head, so they say ‘Yeah, we’ll do it, we’ll work with you, but it’s because they don’t want you to be, what’s the word, they don’t want you to become more intrusive.

The idea shared by many participants, is that, in a mandated agency, clients may cooperate with their social workers to avoid negative consequences. Toni confirmed this view by declaring that the role of the social worker is “lumped with government,” as social workers have the power “to make or break someone’s life or take their kids.” “It’s a lot of policing involved,” Tyesha concurred. Kevin recalled the story of a client who soberly informed him of his power. As he recalled,

I had a client last week tell me, “Kevin, you have a lot of power over our lives right now”. He’s on an undertaking from the court, without giving too much information, Umm-- not allowed by the court to live with his wife as a result of a domestic violence situation and that he’s now before the court on. And, at one point last week he said to me, “Kevin, you’ve got to give me a letter so that I can go back home and, and, live with my wife again. You have a lot of power over my life right now. And… and I didn’t like the feeling of that,
you know? It’s sort… I tried to sort of umm… respond to him in a way that, that, tried to diminish some of the negativity around that, you know. I’m going to be able to get a letter for him, but, but, I didn’t want him feeling like, like he was sort of a puppet and, and I was sort of the puppeteer, umm, you know, managing his life, you know. Umm, I was trying to help him understand what sort of power and influence he has in his life to make some changes so that I can write a positive letter (*Chuckles*). Umm, umm, that he can change his behaviour so that he can be less controlling, and less abusive, and less physical with his wife, right? Umm, but, the message that I get from him was I have the power. And, I know that there are times in my life, working with people, that I do have power umm, but some of it is not always a very comfortable feeling for me, for whatever reason.

Similarly, in a moment of epiphany Michael recounted his experience with power.

Power for me in a lot of ways is associated with trauma and abuse, working with the clients that I work with, right? It’s always a person in power, and a position of privilege and power that has abused the clients that I’ve worked with, whether it be an employer, a parent, uncle, a priest, a doctor, whatever, right? So, so that word for me is very touchy because of my personal experiences with it. Not personally as in my upbringing, but personally in my practice. It’s always someone in a position of power that abuses, so that’s why it’s dirty to me, and I just realized that now.

In a low, broken voice, Michael contended that power “can seriously hurt people, whether it be unintentional or intentional, and damage them for a long, long time. It can create a lot of pain.” Olivia agreed with Michael, stating and warning that social workers can lose their position “when power goes wrong.”
Conversely, some participants highlighted the idea of power as empowerment. This happens, according to participants, when social workers use their power as “persuasive influence…to collaborate together” with clients (Kevin). This also happens when social workers “work together for common goal… to facilitate, coach” (Ajua). It is about “giving back power to clients” (Josh), or having a sense of “we’re in this together” (Tiffany). Two participants narrated this best. For instance, Alanna stated,

It's a privilege every day to be at their side, to be in that interview, to become… I always think about …coming alongside people, it's always my philosophical thing that I talk about with parents about coming alongside and, umm, so I'm not pushing and I'm not pulling. I'm walking with them.

Tiffany explained this finding metaphorically,

I think making clear, making more clear, because I always try to make it clear that we are in this together, as far as I'm concerned we're on pretty equal footing here, because yeah, I know some things that you don't know, but so do you. So we're in the same boat here, you know, I’m not in a kayak over here rolling by myself, and you're in a kayak over there; we are in a canoe and we're trying to row in the same direction.
**Internally directed power.** The second identified subtheme of power is that which is “internally directed.” Each participant had a slightly different definition of what constitutes internally directed power. For example, Michael defined it as “the ability to have control over oneself,” because “external power may not translate to internal power.” Alternatively, Richard explained it as having a sense of agency, choices, and self-determination, and Tiffany suggested it was “the ability to stand as a self-determining individual to respond to the world.” It is about actualizing the self, having a sense of control over one’s affairs, and “having a sense of integrity, self-confidence, and self-efficacy,” according to Jade.

This internally directed power “enables people to get things done” (Josh). According to Jade, it is also the ability “to rise above one’s circumstances in life to inspire others,” claiming that “the greatest power” is that of accomplishment after applying oneself to a task. Internally directed power is also “personal power that is not nullified by professional power” (Kevin). Tiffany acknowledged that there are power structures in society, but they can be questioned and held accountable “when we claim personal power.” Quist referred to internally directed power as “strength, the ability to do something.” Personal power, according to these participants, can reside both within the professional and within clients.

**Power: Not always negative.** The third subtheme, discussed by only a few participants, is that power, or the use of it, is “not always negative.” Rather, power could be used positively or negatively depending on the motivation, values, needs, and beliefs of the social worker. Whether used constructively or harmfully, depends “on the end game or purpose of the wielder,” said Tyesha. For Trevor, power is akin to “positive and negative energy” and can be used to “attempt or complete a task or resolve a situation.”
Some participants maintained that power could be real or imagined, and used to help or hurt clients. In addition, power could be “good or bad or just be,” in which case it is dormant until it is used, according to Naomi. The idea here is that power is neither positive nor negative but it could be neutral or dormant until it is acted upon, and social workers can act either way depending on their different contexts and their clients’ circumstances.

**Interconnectedness of privilege and power.** All participants attested to the interconnectedness between power and privilege, concluding that there cannot be power without privilege and vice versa. In fact, many participants suggested that privilege and power relate to, and reinforce, each other. They are both very cyclical and inseparable as “sides of the same coin…and you’ve got to have both sides of the coin because they’re connected in a way…. It’s hard to describe one without kind of getting into the other one” (Joseph). This is because, according to participants, “privilege gives you power” (Toni), or “access to power” (Tyesha and Heather). Additionally, “privilege sets up power” (Alanna), or said similarly, “privilege is an avenue to power” (Trevor).

Many participants described the interconnectedness of privilege and power in metaphors to paint a vivid picture in the mind. For instance, Kevin said that with privilege comes a sense of power, as “they go hand-in-hand.” Naomi suggested that “privilege is fuel to power,” which implies that power is more endemic, or privilege exacerbates power. The imagery is that of privilege providing sustenance to power. “Privilege depends on how you use power” (Toni), and “power is what you do with the privilege you have” (Naomi). Similarly, “power surrounds privilege and those who have opportunities and privilege have power” (Joseph), and “one’s position of power could lead to one’s possession of privilege” (Grace). This loop of privilege and power is the reality for many participants who affirmed that those two concepts are
inseparable. For instance, Alanna reported that “power arises out of position or professional role sanctioned by government and those roles and positions create privilege.” To underscore this, she expounded,

> We have so much power especially in child protection. I can take your kids. I can come in and I can take your kids, you know, and so, umm. I mean, talk about power. I mean, even here in the Mental Health Act, we have so much power. So you know when you say is it power is it privilege, but by virtue of my role, which is, I think, creates some privilege, I have tremendous power.

Furthermore, while privilege and power are interconnected, a few participants suggested that they are not the same. They regarded privilege as a milder or subtler form of power, which is not easily observable, and requires no force for it to be exercised. In contrast, they held that power is tangible, manifest, and observable in action, and it requires force or control to be exercised.

Jody, for instance, related privilege to luck and power to choice. Privilege, she proclaimed, is “being lucky,” as it is linked to things one did not choose, and over which one has no control, such as race, family of origin, and parental SES; whereas “there is choice in power” as it relates to what one does with their titles and position in the community. Grace added that one could get into a position of power without initial privilege, so power and privilege are “not always necessarily connected.” As she further explained it,

> For example, maybe they had to pay their way through school or work lots of jobs in order to get to the position that they’re in today, so someone may not see them as having as much privilege as someone who maybe had their education paid for, or knew
somebody at the position, and that’s how they got the job, or that’s how they moved up the ladder. So, I think they can be separate, but they can also be together.

For all participants, however, privilege and power are interlocked in social work practice. Depending on the context of their practice, it is generally agreed that all social workers will experience a degree of power and privilege.

**Privilege, power, and oppression.** The last sub-theme concerns the relationship between privilege, power, and oppression. While some participants believed that there can be no privilege and power without oppression, others argued the opposite. From the responses of participants, there is no resolution regarding the polarity of privilege and oppression in social work practice. Rather, the consensus is that privilege and oppression are on the same continuum. Three sets of viewpoints illustrate this theme.

First, to the extent that “privilege has hierarchies depending on group membership” (Trevor), there cannot be privilege without oppression. Trevor maintained that “the exercise of privilege creates oppression.” Joseph also insisted that “oppression is the lack of privilege.”

Occupying the middle ground of the argument of privilege-oppression divide, Richard explained that privilege could be a factor in oppression “when one extracts more than is needed to the detriment of others.” Ajua also stated that privilege could “lead to oppression” when it is “used to keep others down or control them.” For these participants, privilege could support, create, or foster oppression.

Lastly, some participants argued that not all privilege is connected to oppression, citing the privilege of education which gave them the opportunity to become professional social workers. “So, if someone has the privilege of education, can they use that for positive change?
That wouldn't necessarily be oppression,” Alanna both queried and insisted. Tyesha also explained,

In terms of my getting an education, umm, as a privilege, it doesn't… I don't think someone else has to be oppressed for me to do that. So it depends, for me, like if, if, I see, umm, living in a good home, having access to medical care, having access to clean water, umm, somebody else does not have to be oppressed for me to be able to access those services and to me those… that's privilege; because there are people who don't have access to that and because of that their lives are limited in a way that, umm, would not have been if they had those access to those services.

Furthermore, some participants critiqued aspects of social work education, which focuses on oppression. While it is instructive to study oppression and those who are structurally disadvantaged in society, they argued that social work education should not be weighted too heavily on “oppression, oppression, oppression.” As Joseph contended and concluded, “privilege is kind of the idea that we really need to focus on as social workers ‘cause it’s more of our privilege reflecting back on that oppression.”

**Theme 3: Variegated Experiences**

This theme of variegated experiences illustrates how participants accounted for their miscellaneous types of privileges in social work practice. Participants reported that they have multiple and contradictory experiences because of their positions of power. Some shared how their positions made them a ‘gateway’ to programs and services in the community. Through their positions, they also became witnesses to the lives and situations of their clients. At the same time, because of their privilege, some participants reported experiencing disconnections from some clients as they could not relate to their clients’ lives and experiences. A number of
participants shared how de-sensitization occurred and how through reflection, they became more sensitive to the plights of clients. Participants also acknowledged some of the barriers they faced with some clients and how they addressed these barriers. Other subthemes include how participants embodied the profession of social work, and how their interactions with diverse clients shaped their experiences of privilege. These subthemes will be described and illustrated.

**Privilege as a gateway.** According to study participants, most clients may not know about, or have access to necessary social services within the community without their social workers. Facilitating access as gatekeepers or those with the power to “open doors” (Grace) became an experience of privilege for many participants. Most participants submitted that they used their privileged positions or leverage their professional and social networks to shorten wait times and mobilize resources for their clients. For instance, Grace and Eva illustrated this differently:

I have power over all of the clients that come in because I’m basically the gateway to them accessing services … so they have to basically sell why I should refer them to a specific program before I’m gonna refer them there; it’s my job to indicate whether or not it’s an appropriate referral, so I’m not going to sign off on something if I don’t think it makes sense (Grace).

Using her extensive networks for her clients, Eva commented,

Based on my privilege and my power… I was able to have people I knew who worked for certain agencies… I could network with them. Either I worked with them or I went to school with them, or I knew how to maneuver around the red tape. I knew how to get around political kind of systems or manipulate the system, umm.
Many participants reported that making these connections within and beyond their agencies can accelerate the process of meeting clients’ needs. Some participants used their personal social networks at critical times for the benefit of their clients. “It might be taking who you know to help somebody,” Josh said, “because you have that privileged relationship, they say ‘Yeah’… I think that’s where privilege is a good thing,” he surmised.

However, the privilege to be the “gateway” also implies that a social worker may choose not to “open a door.” This does not necessarily imply that they would not provide needed services, but that they would not go beyond the confines of their offices to provide these services. Grace demonstrated this by saying, “it’s just that kind of going above and beyond stuff, like that goes outside of my regular job… depending on whether I like the family or not.” For this participant, there was a recognition that her personal affinity for particular clients enabled her to organize extra support for them. No other participant admitted such an action or viewpoint. Grace also suggested that privilege is also having the ability to decide not to see a client on a particular day. As she expressed it,

I mean, I’ll tell you like, sometimes clients will just sort of show up, and then like they’ll call me, and I’ll be like ‘No, I’m not seeing them today’ (laughs). Like you know, like that kind of thing, I guess, could be privilege.

The privilege of sharing stories. The privilege of sharing stories is about social workers being a witness to the specific circumstances of their clients. To many participants, it is a privilege to hear clients’ personal and intimate stories, and to provide an avenue for these clients to vent about their pain, sorrow, or challenges. Some participants interpreted this role as providing safety and comfort, while some equated it to being trusted and respected. Referring to the honour of being trusted with clients’ stories, Naomi said, “sitting with clients when they go
through that difficult time is a privilege,” one she admitted feeling and expressing gratitude toward.

Just the fact that I am on that end … that person who is the listener, that person who is gathering that person’s story, that experience… I’m always aware of how privileged I am to be in that moment, and I kind of ask myself why…why am I here?” it is ‘like an honour’ to hear them (Naomi).

For several participants, a sense of humility and honourability accompany the privilege of hearing about clients’ lived experiences. For example, Quist suggested that social workers do not have a right to hear those stories, “maybe that’s how…where privilege comes in. We are privileged to get people’s history, real life history.” Toni suggested that “there is a humbleness and an embarrassment that comes with sharing your life with another person that you’ve never met.” In addition, the social work profession, according to Tiffany, offers “a platform from which to operate” in order to hear these stories, “it is a privilege to be led into other people’s lives. That's what I would think gives me a sense of privilege as a professional.”

Participants admitted, however, that hearing clients’ stories is not always comfortable, yet social workers should “sit in discomfort” and just be “a presence” (Kevin). Kevin also suggested that social workers can “be sabotaged by a sense of powerlessness” when unable to help their clients. “Sometimes the only real power I have is the power of presence and being with somebody,” whether they are going through “terminal life-threatening illnesses… or suffering.” This sentiment was also endorsed by Toni when she said she would simply “sit with clients” who are hurting and be what Naomi called “the outlet” for “their emotional release.”

Richard, however, used the term “presence” in a slightly different way. To him, it signified the effect that he had on a client’s situation during a meeting. As he reported it,
The meeting went a lot smoother … a lot more, uh, polite; there was more requests made and there was a lot more negotiation going on back and forth than before they brought me in to be a support person with them. So, umm, you know, I think that, you know, I lent some sort of, just by being there… kind of, uh, you know, tempered their relationship. And I don’t know if it’s that just another person, or if that’s because of, you know, uh, of them knowing that it was another worker in the community as opposed to, you know, a neighbor or just anybody else that they would bring with them for support.

As Richard narrated above, his presence with a client at another agency became a catalyst for the services provided for that client.

Beyond listening and bearing witness to clients’ stories, participants remarked that social workers also help clients to process emotional issues, empower them to find solutions to their challenges, mobilize their strengths, lessen their feelings of distress, and, according to Josh, help them to “re-engage with the systems that are available to them.” Privilege could be “quite beneficial,” Monique remarked, as some clients would express gratitude for the help and support they received from their social workers.

**De-sensitization towards clients.** For many participants, there was a recognition of judgemental attitudes that social workers may have regarding their clients’ lives, lifestyles, and how they could have actualized their potentials. Some participants argued that the experience of privilege by social workers could de-sensitize them towards their clients. Specifically, participants suggested that social workers may sometimes assume that their clients have the same opportunities in society, which they have not utilized, and can, therefore, become judgmental towards clients. As Grace elucidated,
I put myself through university, so when I have, uhh, a single mom in my office who has been on *Ontario Works*, is there an element of me thinking like ‘Really, why couldn’t you have just done this?’ But it’s because she didn’t have the same privileges and opportunities that I had, umm, so I think that that can be playing a role in it.

In the illustration above, what emerged is the way prevailing values of the society might affect the judgment of social workers, and according to Alanna, “render them blind to the meaning of life for someone else.” Eva regarded this kind of “behind the scenes judgmental thinking” as “what stands between us (social workers) connecting with clients.” Likewise, as a professed feminist, Alanna declared that she was “raised in this patriarchal society, so you know, I can be as patriarchal as anybody else.” She explored this thought further, suggesting that though social workers are allowed into clients’ lives, they may not be as sensitive towards their clients as they should. As a hospital social worker, she wondered,

Do they really allow us? I can go to the bedside right now… by virtue of my role, I can knock on a door with my referral and enter, you know, seek consent to enter the room, but they’re lying there, can’t get out of bed, how are they going to get away from me?

She submitted that rather than being allowed, social workers “take the opportunity” to be in clients’ lives, in the course of fulfilling the role of a professional. She expressed the hope that social workers will be sensitive to their delicate role, as “it's a privilege every day to be at their (clients) side.”

**Barriers from clients.** The subtheme of barriers from clients addresses the circumstances and obstacles between social workers and their clients, which impede therapeutic rapport. Sometimes, these barriers prevent effective communication and progress. Identified barriers include the social identities of social workers, especially regarding age or appearance,
gender, and race, in addition to life experiences and professional status. The following narratives illustrate each of the identified barriers.

**Age/Appearance.** Some participants expressed that they felt judged by clients based on their age or youthful appearance, which some clients supposedly equated to inexperience or incompetence. All of the participants who talked about age discrimination were between 25 and 37 years old, both men and women. For instance, Grace, age 32, reported,

> So I have been faced with a barrier where parents won’t think that I’m competent to help them, given my age or family status, so I’ve had comments from parents like ‘What do you know, you’re probably like in your twenties, there’s no way that you could help what we’re going through because you haven’t been in the same situation yourself.’

Grace explained that it took her a while to start responding to clients in a metaphoric way. “You don’t have to have cancer to find a cure, right?” she would rhetorically ask, diminishing some of the opposition. She divulged that she recognized that some of the objections regarding her age may be based on clients’ fear that they may not receive adequate services. She resolved to not reflect the same fear back to her clients.

**Gender bias.** Some female participants reported their struggle against gender bias in their social work practice mostly with male clients. Some of these clients allegedly demonstrated a lack of respect –mostly through verbal aggression- in the way they interacted with participants. Eva, a 29-year-old woman, spoke about her capacity to endure through these types of struggles with clients. She reported, “I work in a very male dominated organization, and I'm a female in power, so it can be something that I need to kind of assert my ground in what is expected behaviour when interacting with me.” Eva’s strategy was to be consciously assertive with clients and to meticulously document her interactions in case notes for her agency.
Racial bias. For many racialized participants, there was a recognition that the resistance they experienced from their clients was related to their visible minority status. For instance, as Trevor, a 25-year-old Latino male social worker expressed,

Sometimes you know we talk about social work that we have to be neutral and often times it's very hard to be neutral and unbiased. We’re always going to carry around bias no matter how much we realize it, and sometimes people don't realize their reactions they have, so it's almost… I've had certain reactions to certain people professionally just because of my skin color or my racial background. So often times I'm not shocked by it, maybe someone else who's with me maybe shocked by it, because they are not exposed to that level or not exposed to that everyday life, but often times I find that I have to juggle that, and often times if I see that reaction I'm like ‘This person has this sort of assumption, this person maybe has this certain views,’ so how am I gonna juggle so I can achieve this role professionally?

While not singularly dwelling on race as he narrated his encounter with a White male client, Quist, a 49-year-old Black man in child welfare also pointed at resistance of clients to the process of child protection. Quist recounted an incident where his client, a former convicted felon called him “a nigger” and allegedly threatened to kill him. As he explained,

So, he said those things. I didn’t take it personally when he was telling me those things on the phone. I was just listening because I want him to vent. There is something that I detected, he must say all… in my head...as a social worker, I have to allow him to say all those things that he wanted to say. He did not have the chance…we call it privilege, to work as a social worker like me. He did not, he was a criminal, so to speak. So, listened to him, he vented, and I put the thing down and we did our thing. The following day, he
called me and said “Umm, and I was calling you names and you never said a word? Listen, I don’t mean what I said, I was only blowing hot airs.” Those were his own words, and he was surprised about the fact that I was not shaking when he was saying all those things. I never responded. He used the ‘N’ word and things, and I never responded, I only listened. Following day, he called me, apologized, he was not going to do anything, he was only blowing hot air. So, the honesty I saw in that guy, the truthfulness, the apology that I saw in that file; he just showed it to me. He said all kinds of words that made everybody… police were called, they came here, and then he quickly called me the following day and apologized.

As Quist further explained, “You could get staunch resistance from clients… so even though you think you have the right or privilege to work with them, they can resist, so, so that’s the challenge you can get.” Because of this, Quist had occasionally involved the police when doing home visits with some of his clients.

Likewise, Ajua and Tyesha—both Black female participants—recalled having to, on several occasions, contend with White clients who, in their opinion, would neither recognize nor respect their qualifications and competence as social workers based on their racial or ethnic differences. Working with a White male client who resisted and allegedly assaulted her, Tyesha reported that, The agency actually acknowledged that half of that was because of my race. That he was… because he had… although initially it wasn't a gender thing because all the workers that he was working with were all female, but he would… other people were like: he really hates you, it was more than the, umm, CAS worker-client, umm, acrimony… it was more than that. It was more on a personal level. And the only thing, umm, that I could think of, I think, that made it worse was that that I was in that position coming into his home and
telling him how he needed to raise his son. And it was funny, I wasn't even the one who mentioned it, it was somebody else who brought it up, and so, you know, this is why, because I tried as much as possible not to go there first, not to think somebody's reaction to me is solely because of what is obvious, my skin color.

Both Tyesha and Ajua also reported that their agencies had responded uniformly by removing and replacing them with White social workers on separate occasions without necessarily addressing or reprimanding these clients for racist attitudes and behaviors. These participants acknowledged that it was difficult to admit to having professional privilege with the occurrence of this sort of incidence. Notwithstanding, Quist maintained that, as a Black man, he would probably have no privilege in Canada apart from, or outside of his job.

Attesting to discriminatory practice by clients, Jade, a White social worker disclosed that most of her clients (especially those over the age of 65) had “more of a negative view of somebody who isn’t necessarily Caucasian.” For this reason, she said that she worked hard to educate these clients (those who expressed racist comments) about the value of diversity and respect for professional status.

Lastly, participants expounded that it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between age and race as different reasons for discrimination by clients. Olivia, a 29-year-old woman of Asian descent explained it this way, “Some people have challenges with race… I’ve never experienced that like professionally, but the age thing has been mine.” Howbeit, she interpreted the under-estimation of her age with her race and “skin tone” which, she said, made her look younger.

**Life difficulties.** A number of participants noted that having life experiences that are different from their clients’ could constitute a barrier for some clients. They shared that some clients would assume that the social worker must have experienced or overcome similar
challenges in their own lives, otherwise, their helping ability would be doubted and their efforts could be resisted. Participants in child welfare reported, for instance, that they were routinely questioned about their children or family status, and those in probation services were asked if they ever had problems with the law. Relating her own experience, for instance, Jade, a 37-year-old White woman in gambling and addiction services, remarked,

They discriminate based on appearance, right? ‘So you’re too young, what can you know? You barely worked here. You don’t have an addiction. I don’t want to talk to you or tell you anything.’ So I mean, that would be a negative experience.

Participants acknowledged that it was difficult to answer some of these questions because they had to determine whether or not self-disclosure was necessary in such instances.

**Professional status.** Apart from age, race, gender, and life experiences, some participants also reported that some clients were unhappy with their social worker strictly because of the workers’ position of power. Though it is ironic that the social worker’s position is meant to assist clients, some clients resented the social workers’ ability to help. This point was illustrated by Jody, a White social worker,

Some of the clients would, you know, become upset because you – you can make that phone call to get them into OW (*Ontario Works – social assistance*), you can make that phone call to get them into their doctor’s appointment faster. Umm, you know, so they think, “Well, why does it require you? Why are you better to be able to get that? Why are you able to do that and I can’t? Because you have this position of power, essentially, right?

Jody, therefore, found it hard to sometimes admit to experiencing privilege in her practice.

Alternatively, Michael reported that he felt “privilege working against” him whenever he could “not answer all their (clients’) questions at all times.” Similarly, Kevin said that he sometimes
felt “beat up” by clients, calling this the “negative sense of privilege.” That usually happened whenever he confronted clients about their inconsistencies during clinical sessions. For Toni, however, the social workers’ “duty to report” on problems such as abuse or risk of harm, suicidal ideations, amongst other issues, distanced her from some clients. According to Toni,

It is part of what we need to do, it’s ethical, and we’ve committed our lives to supporting people and keeping people safe. Sometimes it doesn’t have positive outcomes in terms of the therapeutic relationship… it ruins your working relationship with family, or the individual… because they no longer like you or trust you.

**Embodying the profession.** Several participants reported that they experienced privilege just by being social workers. For them, the personal has become the professional, as their family members, friends, and acquaintances do not make any effort to distinguish their private from their professional identities. The implication of this, for some, was the constant request by acquaintances for opinions on diverse issues, including personal problems. It also includes the assumption that the social worker is always evaluating or analyzing them. Olivia, for instance, talked about the difficulty of giving personal opinions, calling it the “flipside of privilege.” “I feel almost like taken back. Like I’m not at work in that moment.” She asked rhetorically, “so why can’t people just separate me from the profession, and as just a person, right?” Nevertheless, Olivia suggested that it may not be possible since people may be curious about what others think of them.

This subtheme about embodying the profession was echoed by some other participants like Michael, who reported enjoying a good reputation in the community, especially in the field of addictions and mental health advocacy. Toni also reported being proud about the “word of mouth” advertisements of her services in the community. “It is a huge privilege,” she beamed.
Colonial versus Indigenous privilege. Three participants regarded their embodiment of the social work profession as colonial privilege. They reported that their professional status enabled them to work in Indigenous communities in Canada, though they initially felt ill-prepared for the task. They reminisced that the only option for resolving their “blatant colonial privilege” was to earn the trust of the community. For one of them, that took a few years. Naomi, a White woman who worked at an Indigenous community in Nunavut narrated it this way,

I have people come into the office sometimes and they would just say to me, ‘You don’t have any idea of what I am going through,’ and you know what? I don’t. I don’t, and I think, right from the onset then, my privilege is blatant… Coming in as somebody who doesn’t have these experiences or values, you know, or even understanding what that culture is based on, but then to have to make these life changing judgments based on what I feel is right, I think… I think it’s questionable to people I am working with, you know. It’s only after I’ve gone back to that same community, you know, a second, or a third, or fourth time that they start to, maybe, have a bit of trust in who I am.

Alternatively, apart from being a male social worker, Richard revealed that he experienced privilege “as a Native.” He explained that this privilege consisted of being able to “side-step” political conversations regarding issues such as immigration and refugee. He stated,

Because I’m Native, I can kind of… I can, I can avoid some conflicts that way… You know, if anybody’s got a problem with it (i.e. immigration), it probably should be us, but I don’t feel that way, I feel that we should allow more – more people into Canada…There are some conversations that I probably short circuited that way.
He also suggested that people generally assumed that he knew more about spirituality because of his “Native status,” yet he claimed that he did not. However, he remarked that people avoided confrontations with him because of the legend that “native men are skilled brawlers.” He counted this as part of his “Native privilege” in Canada.

**Multiplicity of identities.** Participants reported that while they have different social identities, such as age, race, gender, and sex, they have diverse experiences of privilege as these identities are combined in different contexts and with different clients. For instance, Josh beamed about his race (White), gender (man), and professional education (MSW), as “the characteristics and variables” that gave him privilege. “I think those are probably the major ones, of what gives me privilege,” he declared. On the other hand, Eva also mentioned her White racial identity, alongside her middle-class status, and being Canadian-born: “I experience privilege quite highly more than those in most other communities,” she affirmed.

In contrast, Ajua talked about her racial and gender identities as a Black woman as “statuses that will never change even though they ignite certain feelings of anger and hatred in other people.” She acknowledged her “minority status as a Black female… in a diverse city” where there is “a lack of acceptance or tolerance when it comes to race, or even age, or gender as well, in working with certain populations.” Similarly, Trevor, a Latino man, explained that it was difficult growing up as a visible minority “because of my skin colour or my racial background, so often times I’m not shocked by it.” Trevor reported that he saw himself both as a Canadian (in terms of being born in Canada) and not Canadian (in “the perceptions of the Canadian society”). He called this his “personal juggle” or challenge that he often carried, “even professionally.” Yet he felt that his “male privilege trumps the visible minority in that sense, and
often times it’s, if they do reject, it’s more because they have a very strong overt racism or discrimination.”

Participants also noted that their interactions with clients shaped their own experience of privilege, causing them to recognize and appreciate their placement or social location in society. For example, Eva’s clients were all men, most of whom were culturally different from her (e.g. Indigenous peoples, refugees, and new immigrants), and all of whom were much younger, which to her was a “generational kind of a gap” between her and them; and her lived experience was admittedly very different from theirs. Likewise, Heather described some of her clients as having “very strange family relationships, friendships, struggles… a lot of hardships.” She admitted that this gave her a “reality check” regarding what some clients experience or endure in the course of their lives. She reported that this made her thankful for her privilege.

Similarly, Olivia stated that she experienced privilege with “younger individuals, young adults, even like young couples,” who she felt are “more open and relate better” to her. She also experienced privilege with clients from her East Asian cultural background and religion, as well as other visible minorities. She stated that “some visible minorities feel more comfortable with social workers who look like them.” This point was echoed by Ajua, a Black woman who reported experiencing this type of privilege with “racially diverse populations,” especially young Black women who saw her as someone they could relate to, and “someone who can help them… to assist them in a meaningful way, without seeing me as a threat either.” She claimed that most of her racialized clients regarded her as an ally and a resource.
Male Privilege. There appears to be both advantages and drawbacks that accrue to male social workers, according to a subset of seven male participants in this study. Four of them were White, and the three racial minorities were Indigenous, Latino, and Black respectively. The consensus is that male privilege is complicated or intricate in social work practice because it is sometimes difficult to unravel or hard to understand. For most participants, however, the benefits of male privilege include more employment opportunities, the ability to play unique roles in various agencies, having more positive client interactions or responses, and having more opportunities for promotion at work. The following narratives illustrate the different benefits.

Employment opportunities. There are differing perspectives on men’s employment opportunity and reasons behind them. All the male participants agreed that being a man in the profession of social work is a rarity because there are not many of them in different agencies or organizations. This reportedly gave them a sense of self-importance, self-regard, and the feeling of being exceptional. Some of them reportedly assumed that they received preferential treatments in hiring decisions. For instance, Joseph stated,

I’m a White male, and that’s somewhat rare in our field, you know… And I think that gives me opportunities that somewhat aren’t present for other females. And it’s just because of the rarity and people go, ‘Oh well, we need a male staff on staff,’ so sometimes I’m just kind of that token male (Chuckles). So and that…but it gives me an opportunity that maybe, you know, we… it differentiates me from kind of the pack a little bit.

Some participants suggested that men were hired to increase diversity in the workplace.
Unique roles. Participants expressed the belief that men add value and bring certain personalities and perspectives to their social work practice. “Men bring qualities that are huge for the clientele,” Kevin exclaimed. Male participants also revealed that they were assigned more aggressive cases. As Trevor reported, for instance, “I receive the more complex cases, or the more violent cases, just for the fact that I’m male… So it’s not based on my experience, it’s just based on my gender.” The last unique role identified by participants was the incessant request for male input. “Everyone wants you in their committees,” Richard explained, “there is not a lot of us, as they say, the male perspective.” Participants reported that their unique roles gave them more experience, boosted their self-confidence, and made them feel more valuable and indispensable to their agencies.

Client responses. All male participants, apart from Quist, who is Black, noted that clients, irrespective of their gender, responded better to them than to their female colleagues. From their observations, they pointed out that most clients were courteous, more respectful, attentive, and more careful with them compared to their female colleagues. As Michael shared,

I don’t know if it’s that they take me more seriously or that there’s just more fear there… I think it all relates to personal experiences, right? For example, I’ve had female clients come in, and the way they talk to a female therapist is much different than the way they talk to me.

From this illustration, Michael was not sure if clients were just fearful of him, or not being authentic and genuine with him as they would with a female colleague. However, his observation regarding fear and lack of authenticity was not shared by other male participants.
Benefit of promotion. Apart from Quist, all male participants agreed that compared to women, men are more likely to have the benefit of promotion at social work agencies because of their gender. However, there was a variation in this agreement as illustrated by three participants, thereby underscoring the intricacy of male privilege. “It’s a lot easier as a male to move up the ladder,” Trevor pronounced, more out of observation than experience. “It’s easier to reach director role because there’s not a lot of males, so they try to take the opportunity to have that one male there.” By “one male,” Trevor, who is of Latino descent, clarified that he was referring to the White male.

Alternatively, Josh, a White male, was ambivalent about the ease of male promotion in social work agencies, contending that he was as hard-working, even if not more hard working than any female staff, thereby deserving of his promotion.

It’s tricky because I try… I try to really just be me regardless of gender and be the best me I can be in terms of supporting my colleagues, being available as a resource, umm, being friendly, being helpful to a team, male, female, it doesn’t matter. Umm.. but at the same time it’s real, I’ve been confronted with it several times …with females, umm, whether it was applying for a promotion, or something like that; and a female coming up to me and saying, you’ve only… you only got the position because you’re a guy.

Lastly, Quist who is a Black man, explained that it is easier for a White man to be promoted, but much more difficult for a Black or visible minority man. From his experience, he reminisced that racialized men would face systemic discrimination from management and clients. He argued that privilege “sometimes doesn’t apply to certain people in certain contexts.” Regarding his own potential for promotion, he lamented,
Not that I cannot be. I can be. I have the merit, the qualifications. But certain privileges are impeded by something or someone or by circumstances, then you can’t get it. So, you may think you have the privilege, if you want to call it the right to do certain things, to aspire to certain levels, but privilege can be curtailed by different things and by different circumstances, different situations; that’s the point I’m trying to make.

Quist further explained that though there are fewer Black men in the profession, which should somehow enhance their opportunity to be hired in different agencies, they are, allegedly, not given the opportunity to aspire to management positions. He particularly felt “stuck on the frontline.” Quist did not feel that he had any male privilege at work, compared to his female colleagues. Touching his dark skin, he argued, “Because of this… and because people think you speak with accent, you know that they would use those things against you, not openly but indirectly, so...so yes, I consider some of them (female colleagues) more privileged… it kills your spirit.”

**Drawbacks.** All male participants agreed that there are drawbacks for male privilege. They identified six points. The first drawback was the capacity for emotiveness or demonstration of emotions. For instance, during the study interviews, naming emotions was hard for them. Kevin suggested that “there is room for improvement in this area.”

Second, some participants agreed that the discussion of male privilege came with an assumption that sex is equal to gender when both could differ in reality and in the lived experience of some people. Trevor cautioned that “there are other people who are sex male or female but identify with the opposite gender. So it’s a lot of assumptions in that.” These assumptions simplify what could be a more complicated identity issue.
Third, participants pointed out that the assumption that some clients may need to work with male therapists may be counterproductive. This is because, according to Kevin, “so many people have been damaged by men in their lives.” Neither would some clients automatically connect with a male therapist as a result of their history, Trevor added. As he further elucidated this point,

I'm not gonna fill that void of them saying male figure, right? Just because I'm a male and there's no male doesn't mean I can fill that void. There's a lot more complexity to that. So I find that sometimes that those assumptions, umm, can negatively impact the client because we don't know where the client is. We don't know what... what the past is, we don't know what's behind the veil. So just because I'm a male and jumping in, and you think a male might be beneficial does not mean the client may see it as beneficial.

Fourth, participants highlighted the issue of maintaining proper boundaries in counseling situations, and indicated that having male therapists in agencies could restrict how much services can be provided. They argued that male social workers may not be always efficient or beneficial for an organization. As Joseph illustrated,

There’s a lot of judgment when it comes to male social workers, umm, we have to do certain things in order to protect ourselves a little more especially in one-on-one counsellings or, umm, with female… with female counselling clients, right? There’s a certain understanding that we might have to, you know, have certain students sit in with us or have, you know, somebody around our counseling area just to kind of provide a little bit of safety net against allegations or anything like that. When I worked with the youth, you know, there was a whole group home we couldn’t work at, you know, it’s… we were
allowed to work at the boys’ home and sometimes females and the female ones were female only… just to prevent allegations or to prevent problems because of my gender.

Fifth, some participants contended that the need for a ‘male perspective’ in social work agencies may be over-rated because a few men cannot adequately represent the diverse views of men in general. Furthermore, some male participants recounted that they deliberately said less, and were more careful in the way they presented themselves at work because they were easily misunderstood. For instance, Richard said, “there are times when I’m not entirely comfortable.” Similarly, Josh confessed, “You’re almost reluctant to even put your opinion out there, umm, in some settings, umm, because you’re a male… I’m also additionally cautious too, with what I say, umm, and when I say things and that sorta stuff.”

Lastly, some participants suggested that it may just be an assumption that men get promoted above their women colleagues merely because of gender. If this were true, it would affect workplace interactions. As Trevor (who was not promoted) elucidated,

And often times they can create that inner turmoil or jealousy from others ‘cause others may be working… more appropriate for the position, they may have many more years of experience, or are… have a lot more training than I do, so they are more appropriate for the position but just because I’m a male so often times they just try and fill that void because they just want a male, so often times it creates some very strong tension.

Beyond all the benefits and drawbacks of male privilege, Trevor, the Latino social worker, expressed that his privilege was both “a blessing and a curse.” He explained that in a prior social work agency, he experienced “diminished privilege” with his female colleagues, and found himself “walking on eggshells” around the agency. He surmised that male privilege for him created “a target on my back.” As he concluded, “my privilege as a male is diminished in
social work overall, on average… than compared to the society, Canadian society.” The idea of male privilege as complicated or intricate was thus further confirmed by Trevor’s prior work experience.

**Theme 4: Assorted Emotions**

The theme of assorted emotions addresses the miscellaneous feelings, moods, and sentiments identified by participants based on their lived experience of privilege. Participants identified emotions that ranged from positive to negative, with ambivalent emotions straddling both extremes. Majority of participants discussed both positive and negative emotions, while just a few spoke about ambivalent emotions. The following examples illustrate the different kinds of emotions experienced by participants.

**Positive emotions.** Participants in this study identified multiple positive emotions relating to their privilege. These included feeling good, having a sense of purpose, fulfillment, and accomplishment. For instance, Ajua, claimed that it “feels good” to be in a position of privilege, which gave her a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction in her career. She usually left the encounter with most of her clients feeling like she had “accomplished something.” She attributed this accomplishment to the role she played in most clients’ lives, the connections she had with them, and the authority she wielded in the community. Helping her clients to create meaningful change in their lives also brought her “a lot of satisfaction and self-fulfillment.”

Participants also reported experiencing gratification, happiness, and joy, as well as excitement. For instance, Eva explained that, though she was frustrated by the structure of the society that made it impossible for clients to autonomously maximize their potential, nevertheless, she felt “happy, excited, proud and elated” to be able to “use my name … to get a client what they deserve and always should have gotten from day one.” Likewise, Eva, talked
about “feeling very good,” even “feeling phenomenal” when able to help a client achieve a goal based on the resources she provided.

Other reported emotional states included feeling powerful, fortunate, grateful, and respected. For instance, while Heather felt “good and fortunate” by her choice of career as a social worker, Jade talked about having a sense of validation and respect from her clients. As she expressed it,

I’m glad that I can be there to help foster that, you know. Of course, umm, it makes my job feel like it’s worthwhile, like I actually made a difference because sometimes I’m with clients, and I see them for forever, and I’m like ‘I don’t even know why you come to see me,’ ‘I don’t even know what the hell I did.’ You know, so sometimes I’ll ask, like, you know, ‘Why do you keep coming here? Like what, what is making a difference or whatever?’ And sometimes they’ll say, you know, ‘Just someone to listen to me,’ you know. But when I see those concrete changes, of course I feel, you know, I feel really good, you know, like I’m not an idiot (Chuckles). Like this actually has some meaning, and perhaps I do know what I’m doing.

Participants suggested that positive emotions arise when social workers are able to “connect” with their clients in the therapeutic encounter, enable clients to access needed resources, and able to assist clients in achieving their goals. For instance, Trevor asserted that privilege boosts one’s confidence, “especially professionally,” and felt a sense of achievement whenever he could “click” with his young clients and their parents, especially after they have gone through multiple services without resolving their challenges or receiving the help they needed. His interactions with these clients were tantamount to “having the right key for the right door.” Tyesha added that privilege provided her with a sense of purpose. “I guess ‘cause in your
head as a social worker, you’re meant to be a helper, and so, if you’re able to help, you get that professional satisfaction of ‘I’m doing what I’m meant to be doing.’”

Another positive emotion mentioned by several participants was relief, which is a kind of relaxation that follows a successful client interaction. Two participants illustrated their relief slightly differently. For example, Kevin talked about a “double edged relief.” He explained that he felt relief when he perceived that through his work, clients were able to have “a chance to rebuild their lives” or “they can breathe…. But it is also my own relief too in knowing that now they can focus on taking care of themselves.” However, when Richard used the word, relief, to describe his emotions, his own relief was admittedly attached to not having to find another solution to clients’ problems if his initial effort failed. For him, relief is “like a win… like you’ve won something for somebody, you know.” This also gave him a sense of fulfillment.

Negative emotions. The subtheme of negative emotions refers to the unpleasant mood or sentiments that are invoked in participants because of their privilege. Participants highlighted several emotions, which include anger, anxiety, regret, helplessness, and hopelessness. Participants also mentioned having a sense of defeat, fear, disappointment, and demoralization, as well as shame, stress, and sadness. Others reported feelings of isolation and incompetence. According to participants, these feelings came at various times during and after work, during and after therapy sessions, and when discussing or reflecting with other social workers. The following narratives describe some of these feelings and the different contexts in which they arose.
**Role/Function.** Most participants reported that they had negative feelings whenever their role or position was perceived negatively by clients. They reported, for instance, that clients routinely stereotyped all social workers as child welfare workers who are “sort of snobby and judgemental” (Grace). This stereotype often made client engagement more challenging for social workers as some felt “so hurt and slighted” (Ajua). It also led to emotions of sadness and anger as some participants reported feeling defeated, hopeless, and helpless. As Eva, who works in the Youth Justice System, recounted,

A social worker in the past could’ve, let’s say, removed them (clients) from their home, umm, the child, the youth has genuine feelings of hurt and upset, and they’re entitled to their feelings, but they never had a chance to kind of resolve those, and they take it out on me, umm, because I’m a social worker as well. So they come to that stereotyping that all social workers are all the same, or I would say that that would probably be a negative experience … is based on the fact that I’m assumed to be the same as all social workers.

**Social identities.** Some participants reported experiencing vulnerability and negative emotions based on their social identities, especially regarding race, gender, and socio-economic status. Some racialized participants recalled that they were slighted, snubbed, ignored, insulted, and considered unimportant by some clients. Ajua, a Black woman, for instance, narrated the story of a deliberate discourtesy by a White male client because of whom she became fearful of bodily harm. She disclosed, “I wouldn’t put it past him to, umm, cause harm to me if I did return to the home. Umm, or maybe if I saw him in the community, umm, so I mean that did elicit some fear.”

Similarly, Quist, a Black man, also reported that he experienced stress as a result of working with some White clients. “Yeah, it takes you through some emotional rollercoaster,” he
submitted.

However, fear was the emotion initially displayed by Naomi, a White woman working in an Indigenous community. As she recalled,

I think I got scared because as much as the community didn’t trust me, I think I was probably scared on what does that imply about, you know, my own physical safety as well…so I think that fright was a huge emotional reaction at first.

Creditably, however, Naomi was able to establish rapport relatively quickly with some elders in that community to the extent that they started inviting her to their homes and traditional events.

For Josh, a White man who works in addiction services, his “unhappy feelings” were linked to his socioeconomic status (SES), as perceived by some clients who were “affluent and educated.” Josh reportedly felt “dumbfounded and defensive” when he and his other clients were “subjugated as inferior.” Josh recalled that

It was not a good feeling … I felt that sense of oppression to others … that feeling of being either part of it or in the middle category… The uncertainty was I didn’t know how to respond to it because it was a situation I never really encountered before until that time.

Josh was later able to defend himself and his other clients by explaining that “no client is less than other clients.”

Still regarding SES, the privilege of class, for a participant like Heather, a White woman who works in the Youth Justice system, made her feel “a little embarrassed” when compared to her younger, culturally diverse clients. As she illustrated it,
I’m not gonna wear my fanciest clothes around them because I don’t want to set that barrier or make that gap bigger…. I don’t talk too much about myself or my life but I try not to because I don’t want to separate us or put that gap in between us.

**Working with clients.** Participants also reported experiencing some negative sentiments such as frustration and disappointment when working with various clients who may be uncooperative or challenging. As exemplified by Joseph,

Sometimes clients aren’t ready, and a lot of times when we get frustrated and feel like we’re working hard or we’re not doing enough or we’re being rejected or the client is not doing what we want them to do. And I think it leads us to being more, maybe angry or frustrated with the population which, in turn, over time, builds into kind of feelings of burnout and not caring and kind of disconnecting from our passions.

Finally, participants reported negative emotions related to their workplaces. For example, in multidisciplinary teams/agencies where social work was the primary profession, participants expressed that social workers could experience isolation and resistance from their colleagues. For instance, Eva reported that her position of influence as a supervisor did not endear her to her colleagues in allied disciplines. She experienced “isolation from them as well as fear and paranoia regarding making a wrong decision and misleading others.” Similarly, fear and paranoia also occurred when participants had the feeling of “being watched” in the workplace. As Tyesha shared,

I was under this giant microscope because then it became… it became all kinds of stuff… my files were pulled, all kinds of things were happening, but I felt like I was being punished in a way for what I was doing. Umm, and then it also made me step back and think about how much I needed to invest my emotions in my work.
A similar experience left Toni “disempowered and conflicted,”

Well, I think you feel disempowered and you feel conflicted in yourself… ‘Did I do the right thing?’ If you don’t watch it, you will get very jaded and you will get very cynical. If there aren’t positives in that whole ball of wax, I can see people burn out very easily. I can see a very high level of compassion fatigue and the vicarious trauma that goes with constantly seeing people hurt and with the negativity that comes with that

**Ambivalent emotions.** Ambivalent emotions illustrate mixed emotions whereby participants’ feelings are simultaneously positive and negative. This subtheme underscores how emotions regarding privilege are never lineal or consistent, but multiple and sometimes contradictory. A few participants reported this mixture of emotions, which made them at once “validated and gratified” as well as “surprised and unsure” (Josh). Josh also characterized this as “the incongruence of what you should feel.”

Similarly, examining her practice, Jody, for instance, embraced her ability to help clients but lamented that they needed help from her. Referring to a client situation, she said,

It’s a good feeling to know that I was able to help her, you know, with that process.

However, it also becomes frustrating that it requires me for her to get in, you know, that I needed to be the one to do that.

Ambivalent emotions also apply to what Kevin called the “fragile edge to privilege,” whereby clients had the opportunity to confide in their social worker while, at the same time, relating to these workers in negative, confrontational ways. For Kevin, this is about “walking a fine line” regarding the social worker’s relationship with clients.

However, it was Naomi’s story that best illustrates the subtheme of ambivalent emotions. Naomi reportedly experienced confusion and anger, mixed with hope at a point in her practice.
Working in an Indigenous community, she lived in a government sponsored housing unit with all needed conveniences, whereas the general population of her clientele lived in cramped, inadequate housing where they lacked basic essentials, including furniture. Yet, there was a policy that required that the furniture in apartments like hers had to be disposed every five years by burning, to make room for new furniture. Regarding this as a waste, she appealed to the authorities to reverse this policy. She was then able to organize the community to use these items as a fund raiser, with the proceeds donated to establish a food bank. She empowered the youth in the community to manage this fundraiser. As she summarized her emotions,

At first I was... confused, you know, like I tried to make sense of why is this happening?... And then I think I felt a bit angry because I had to jump through hoops just to get these furniture re-routed, just to try to justify what seemed really obvious to me, umm, but it happened and so I think at that point, umm, I felt hopeful, and you know, there was a lot of learning curves for me along the way.

In conclusion, there are complex, assorted emotions relating to the phenomenon of privilege. Participants demonstrated that it is important to be mindful of all these emotions because they affect social workers in their practice. As Toni put it, “it is something I think about at the end of the day, I think there… as professionals, we are trained not to, you know, they talk about self-care, they talk about transference issues, but umm, you know, it affects you, of course it does.”
Theme 5: Reflection

While recognizing the value of reflection in social work practice, participants in this study reported that reflection on power and privilege was not a priority for them in their daily practice, unless they encountered difficult client situations. A number of participants remarked that they did not think of privilege or reflection until they received the request for participation in this study. Others contended that there was no time for reflection because of their busy daily schedule. Yet others argued that social workers may be reflecting too much in comparison to other helping professionals. Participants also shared the various ways by which they reflected when they did, including reflecting alone, reflecting with colleagues, supervisors, and clients. Furthermore, participants identified some of the benefits of reflection. The following narratives and quotations demonstrate participants’ viewpoints regarding reflection.

Reflection: Not a priority. Some of the phrases used by participants to underscore the fact that they did not reflect on the concept of power and privilege include “No, rarely,” “not at all,” “not a lot,” and “not often.” Some participants admitted that they started reflecting on power and privilege only after receiving the request to participate in the study. For instance, Monique said, “Well, it’s funny,” … until I got the umm, request from you, I hadn’t really thought of privilege a whole lot, umm, so that’s interesting.” Likewise, Grace said, “I really didn’t until now, to be honest with you, I hadn’t really.”

Similarly, Jade stated “When I’m done with a client, I’m kind of done. Like I – I’m not attached to them emotionally where it would sit with me and I would think about them, umm, if that’s what you meant.” Jody also stated, “I don’t necessarily reflect on it, you know, as much as you do in your going through school.” These quotes demonstrate that some social workers do
not make it a priority to reflect on their power and privilege within the context of their practice, and some reasons were adduced for this.

*No time for reflection.* Participants proposed that the primary reasons for the lack of reflection were limited time and extensive caseloads. For instance, Kevin who described himself as a “pretty reflective person” confessed,

I work alone here, I, I, my practice is hugely busy, umm, and I tend to, kind of, move from one client situation to the next, and by the end of the week sometimes…on Friday night, I’m asking ‘What happened this week?’

This viewpoint was echoed by many participants with busy schedules and long wait-lists, who had to “move clients along” as they “just had to keep up” (Richard). “There’s just no time to have that reflection and that debrief, unless something’s like really upsetting” (Grace).

Participants revealed that depending on their contexts of practice, social workers only have just enough time to interact with one client before moving on to the next client or crisis. Moreover, in some agencies, reflection appeared as program review or service planning, in which case social workers were considering the effectiveness of their jobs much more than their power and privilege. As Heather expressed this,

In terms of our reflection, it's mostly on how an event went, or are we really filling the gaps? Are we meeting the needs? Are we… is there anything else that we should, you know, do to make things more accessible or more far reaching? It’s not really about ourselves, I guess, we kinda leave ourselves out of the equation a little bit, it's more about the success of what we're doing.
Fear of reflection. Participants also identified fear as a reason for why reflection on power and privilege was not a priority for many social workers. They argued that since social workers are trained to help clients, they focus more on their clients’ challenges than on themselves. There is a fear or difficulty of focusing on oneself. As Richard expressed this,

If you’re talking about your privilege and …. how your privilege and power potentially affects umm, your client, your relationships, the interaction with your clients, umm, your practice…then you gotta look at yourself. And to be honest, I don’t think, I think people in general, people in the helping profession, particularly mental health, are …very busy, too busy looking at others, right?

Reversing the focus on the social worker, therefore, becomes more problematic as introspection is difficult. For instance, Michael remarked,

It’s easy for me to put a mirror in front of you and say, ‘take a look at yourself,’ but it’s very difficult for me to put a mirror in front of myself and say, Take a look at me, what am I doing?

The fear associated with putting that mirror on the social worker is that of exhibiting or displaying emotions, according to Trevor,

“It’s hard to… sometimes it was hard, like you need those debriefing moments of how to release those emotions because it was hard not to sometimes not to feel… sometimes you feel happy, sometimes there were many success stories, some people who, you know, took some tools and some resources and were able to use them effectively, and some moments where there were some very bad negative umm, umm, clients or stories or experiences that you just … it was hard not to, like… I would sometimes, as much as I would, not try to take those emotions home sometimes it's hard, like you would feel sad, you would feel
upset or disappointed. And it's hard not to reflect those, like you have to keep, like I felt like I constantly had to keep myself in check about how not to reflect those emotions sometimes.

According to participants, the fear of reflection is also related to the workplace. They explained that when questions arise relating to the position and processes of social work practice in particular agencies, finding answers to those questions may incur the wrath of supervisors or management, thereby putting the social worker’s position or employment in the agency at risk. Michael called this the “fear of repercussions from management.” As he recounted,

I’m afraid to get into more work right now if I were to bring something like that up… Ah… and I would say in the past it would’ve been due to fear of repercussions from management, but now I don’t care about that. That doesn’t bother me. But I do think that, at least, it needs to be an agenda item, and it needs to, at least, be brought up in some level of discussion to start… to have some dialogue and raise people’s awareness about, you know, how our privilege and our position impacts our clients… because I think that we don’t really take the time to look at that.

Though he admitted that reflection was valuable, he maintained that it was “not valuable to do right now.”

Too much reflection. Some participants wondered if social workers reflect too much on their power and privilege in comparison to other helping professionals, like nurses and psychologists. Two participants, especially, pointed out that to the extent that reflection is a major component of social work training, they had their share of reflection –in terms of writing reflection papers and assignments during their training. “I don't know that other professionals
have had quite as much reflection on their power and privilege as, say, a social worker has,” Heather submitted. Naomi added,

We did so much journaling. I think I got sick of it by the end of it… it felt like it was too much reflection…. But now that I am having this conversation, I’m removed from the educational context of things. I really see the advantage to having those conversations.

Naomi expressed that she would engage in more reflection after the interview.

Ironically, after providing various reasons for why reflection was not ordinarily a priority, some participants went on to explain how they reflected on privilege and power especially after encountering ‘difficult’ or challenging clients and situations.

**How social workers reflected.** Participants proposed diverse ways of reflection on power and privilege. Most of them revealed that they reflected alone, and some reflected with colleagues, supervisors, and clients. Yet many participants combined these separate ways of reflection on their practice without preferring one way to another. The following examples describe each of these methods.

**Reflecting alone.** Most participants reported reflecting alone because they worked alone either in their social work agencies or private practices. Quist regarded this self-reflection as introspection, a process he explained as “go(ing) into yourself and saying ‘Oh, did I do something really wrong?’” Likewise, Grace explained that she reflected alone most times because “there’s just nobody around,” and this, for her, sometimes resulted in isolation.

I don’t think that as social workers, we always do as much reflection as we should, you know, especially in the job I have now it’s a very individualized position, so I have all these clients that I see, and I make my own assumptions about it, and I write my own recommendations and reports, and then sometimes it’s not even until a year later that they
see any other worker. So it’s like, literally, just me the entire time, so I don’t always
debrief with someone else or reflect with anyone else and get other people’s opinions
‘cause I’ve been doing this for a while now. So I like to think that I do a pretty good job,
and I trust my own instincts, so I don’t often build that in probably as much as I should,
especially when we see the type of complex, traumatic situations as we do. It probably
would be helpful to reflect, umm, and debrief a bit more than I do.

Most participants revealed that they reflected alone through documentation and journaling.

**Reflecting with colleagues.** Many participants reflected with their colleagues both
formally, as in group settings, or informally, as in individual, casual interactions. Group settings
include group meetings, peer supervision and consultation, case conferences, and special
committees. For example, Ajua reflected on power and privilege as part of an anti-oppressive
practice committee at work, where they engaged in reflective and critical writings about their
interactions with clients and families. Monique also talked about experiencing a “huge free flow
of ideas” in peer supervision as colleagues discussed what could be done to improve client
situations. Furthermore, some participants in private practice reportedly found opportunities
sometimes for peer consultation and reflection, and as Toni stated, “to keep each other humble
(and) also to keep ourselves being effective, stretching ourselves.”

Two participants extended the term “colleagues” to include some family members in the
social and “public service realm” who “often times encounter the same struggles” (Trevor). “We
talk about ‘How can I do this?’ Or, how to be aware of this… talk, maybe say this instead. So
it's always, always talk about it with others” (Trevor). Likewise, Eva’s colleagues included her
“social support network,” prominent among whom was her social worker spouse who practiced
in another agency.
Moreover, participants suggested that informal reflection through individual, casual interactions include having a few chosen and trusted colleagues with whom one could vent. For instance, Tiffany reported enjoying “reciprocity and interaction” with some colleagues who understood and would provide her with uncensored input.

**Reflecting with supervisor.** Participants reflected with supervisors mostly at scheduled supervisory meetings. However, most participants reported that reflection with supervisors did not happen as regularly or as proactively as they would prefer. “There’s seven million meetings that the managers have to go to that are more important than their workers,” Grace attested, so clinical supervision is often rescheduled or cancelled. Other participants argued that supervisors were usually too busy even when available, as such, social workers were left to figure out their own paths. They noted, however, that supervisors were usually available during crises and would address social worker-client interactions.

Some participants pointed out that student supervision has become an integral part of their opportunity for reflection. They revealed that social work students in placement often asked questions regarding values, biases, ethics, skills, intervention processes, client backgrounds, and practice dilemmas, which would literally propel reflection with their supervisors. As an example of using students as a “pathway” to reflection, Joseph reminisced,

I do reflect on privilege especially with my students, ‘cause they initiate discussion, they ask questions, and when you have somebody there asking you questions, and you're like ‘Oh, I kind of took that for granted, that's how I do things, rather than why I do things,’ and I think that's a big part of reflection: the why rather than the what.
Lastly, some participants combined all the different methods of reflection because they did not find it necessary to demarcate when they reflected alone from when they reflected with others. Tyesha expressed this best when she stated,

I do self-reflecting and I also, umm, with my peers, my colleagues, we do that a lot here. Umm, we also do that in supervision, umm, you know, if you having… you’re really struggling with a particular file, you can talk to your supervisor, you can talk to your peers, you can do that on your own, umm, yeah, so I have those three.

Lastly, some participants also highlighted that social workers engage in reflection with their clients as an evaluation of service. This is usually at the end or termination stage of therapy. Most agencies have standardized process or forms for this evaluation. Though power and privilege has never been the focus of this particular exercise, but the feedback of clients may indicate some issues to consider or areas of improvement for the social worker and the agency as a whole.

**Benefits of reflection.** Several participants outlined the benefits of reflection. For them, reflection increases awareness, promotes empathy and humility, de-stresses the practitioner, and enhances practice. With respect to awareness, participants reported that through reflection, they were able to recognize and understand more about their social identities, as well as their professional power, relative to their clients’. For instance, Tiffany said she became “more mindful” and considered her “vantage point” as a result of reflection. Similarly, Joseph said reflection “opens your brain up, or kind of opens your mind up… to accept different information and not to be trying to put your bias into place when you’re talking and directing… working with clients.”
Second, reflection allows for sensitivity, empathy and humility. For instance, Eva stated that she could put herself in her “clients’ shoes” and this made her humble as she considered their unique challenges. She was also able to examine, reduce, or resolve barriers between her and her clients. “I would say it makes me more humble,” she conjectured. Similarly, Monique said reflection made her more sensitive and responsive to her clients and colleagues, and rhetorically asked, “We can all enhance our sensitivity, right?” However, Quist introduced another dimension to humility when he said that he could “be fired” if he did not perform his duties effectively. Because of this, he admitted to reflecting often in his “mind and head” about how he could ethically fulfil all his social work obligations regarding clients.

Third, according to some participants, reflection helps to “slow down” the pace of work and de-stress the practitioner. Alanna claimed, for instance, that it would be devastating not to reflect on her power and privilege within the hospital system where she works. “If I don’t reflect on it, it kicks me in the butt,” she noted. “I know I need to do it… otherwise, bang, bang, bang… the day is gone.” Also referring to reflection as a means of stress-busting, Alanna explained,

Yeah, like we were just talking in a committee meeting last week about, umm, post-traumatic stress, vicarious trauma, that kind of stuff, and the impact that dealing with complex traumatic situations has on like the social worker, and like it can lead to some really bad psychological and physical implications down the road for people in helping professions, and I think that if you built more time for debriefing and reflecting into your practice, then that can help mediate and medicate some of those issues.

This participant reiterated that reflection enables social workers to debrief and release their own emotions.
Lastly, participants reported that reflection enhances social work practice by enabling social workers to be more effective in identifying and implementing successful interventions. For instance, Toni said reflection can “guide your practice,” explaining that reflection has made her a better person, beyond being a professional, and that she continued to strive more, “wanting to be a better worker, wanting to be a better human being, wanting to… find ways to support people.”

Similarly, while reflection helped Tyesha to “work through” her self-doubt, it enabled Michael to question what I’m doing, and look at ways of improving it instead of looking at the client, or the people coming in to see me. Looking at what we do, what we don’t do, how we need to strengthen our program, how we need to make it more…client-friendly.

For most participants, there was no specific time set aside for reflection. However, reflection occurred with all participants and in all agencies during crisis moments. Many participants suggested that social workers should have an open dialogue about power and privilege and social work agencies should endeavour to incorporate reflection into their weekly schedule. Regarding open dialogue, Michael, for instance, said

We have to acknowledge the fact that the reality is that what we do and don’t do impacts our clients; the approaches we use, the way we talk to them, the way we interact, the programs in place…all that stuff.

Regarding weekly schedules for reflection, Grace, for instance, suggested that social work agencies should designate “about half an hour after each session…an hour at the end of the week, or something like that… whether that be like group or individual, or written or verbal or whatever.” Doing this, she declared, would enable social workers to improve and have more satisfaction in their practice.
Theme 6: The Pyramid Will Always Exist

This theme reveals the broad consensus about the need to confront and challenge privilege, and the difficulty of dismantling it. Majority of participants proposed that privilege cannot be dismantled because it is connected to the structure and organization of the society and the social identities of people. They proceeded to argue that it should not be dismantled because social workers need privilege to be able to practice effectively. What should be dismantled, participants suggested, is the way people perceive and utilize their privilege. The following narratives explore this theme.

Dismantling privilege. For many participants, there was a recognition of the inevitability of privilege based on the way society is structured. They pointed out that the socio-economic and political system have not been designed or organized to equally benefit all citizens in society. The inequality that arose as a result of this structure made privilege unavoidable in society. As Heather expressed it, privilege is “deeply entrenched and you can’t erase history.” There would be no need for power and privilege in society, if everyone were to be equal, participants argued; but “there’s a lot of inequality, and power, and privilege differentials,” Josh declared. “The pyramid will always technically exist” Eva asserted, as long as there are different groups and populations with different levels of privilege and power in society. Participants argued that it will be impossible to deconstruct privilege to the point where it will no longer exist in society. For Eva, to dismantle privilege will only “shift who is at the top of the pyramid” but not offset the infrastructure of society.

Many participants expressed that hierarchy is needed for society to function properly and that the profession of social work occupies a space in that hierarchy to ameliorate the circumstances of clients. They insisted that social workers need privilege to perform their roles.
As Monique explained this point, privilege cannot be dismantled because “there’s an expectation of a certain amount of privilege when a client comes in.” Participants indicated that privilege will only be a barrier to therapeutic alliance if it prevents connection between worker and client, but instead of dismantling it, social workers should be aware of it, and use it to the benefit of others. As Eva admitted, “I do have more power and privilege over my clients, so I’m, I’m a fool to pretend that I don’t, but when I use it for betterment, then I’m using my power for good.”

Some participants conveyed that social workers cannot challenge privilege alone, or dismantle the structure of privilege in society because social work is only one profession, albeit with “a limit of reach,” as Heather purported. “We are not gonna level this world,” Alanna proclaimed. What social workers can do, in the words of Joseph, is to “build privilege for their clients” by exposing them to opportunities that will benefit them.

Participants who talked about the inevitability of privilege because of its connection to social identities argued that social identities are inescapable, and so was the privilege attached to them. Heather submitted, for example, “Like you can’t really change your colour, or gender, or your race, or you’re not really gonna change your intersection of yourself. But you can think about how that affects who you’re working with.” Jody suggested that social workers should be more educated about their “own backgrounds, experiences, biases, stereotypes, and values.” Sensitivity to these identities, participants said, is necessary so that social workers can have connections with their clients despite these identities, and break down the barriers of social differences that may impede rapport with clients.

For Tiffany, for instance, dismantling privilege, is therefore, about “dismantling how we think about privilege. Participants suggested that privilege should be understood in terms of its richness and potentiality, but “not be wielded as a sword,” according to Alanna.
Challenging and confronting privilege. Whereas most participants argued that privilege cannot, and should not be dismantled, they were all unified in proposing that it can be challenged and confronted in order to eliminate or reduce its negative effects. Participants suggested various ways in which this could be accomplished on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

Some participants suggested challenging privilege on the micro level by making social workers aware of their own social and professional identities and the possible impact of these identities on clients. Asking questions regarding social workers’ stereotypical views, is a way to challenge privilege in order to ensure that “privilege does not become ego” (Michael). Privilege becomes ego, according to Michael, when social workers want to be perceived in a certain way, or when they seek their own benefits at the expense of clients’. Participants agreed that questioning stereotypical views can reduce distortion in the way social workers relate to their clients.

Participants further suggested that confronting privilege should involve examining, evaluating, and reflecting on its meanings and effects in order to have better therapeutic outcomes for clients. It should also involve recognizing and highlighting the privilege of clients. This is how Tiffany, for instance, suggested that social workers can “democratize and even out notions of privilege.”

On the mezzo and macro levels, participants proposed that social workers should become activists who are involved politically in society. They suggested that advocating for the marginalized is one way to do this, as well as becoming allies with those who are disadvantaged at different times. Becoming allies involves “breaking the hierarchies of us versus them,” as
Ajua indicated, whereby social workers remove barriers and see everyone as deserving of “living peaceful and meaningful lives” in spite of social differences. She submitted that,

Forming allies and working together to… fight oppressive systems and oppression in general are, umm, very important, and I think that will take us from a level of, of intolerance to a level of, of, umm, acceptance and a level of, umm, inclusiveness (Ajua)

Tyeshia went a step further to propose that the group that is disadvantaged from certain privilege should determine how that particular privilege should be confronted.

According to some participants, another way of confronting and challenging privilege on the mezzo and macro levels is through education and training, which Trevor described as “planting a seed of awareness.” Participants proposed that there should be training regarding privilege, oppression, and the proper utilization of privilege so that social workers can know the breadth of their advantages in order to practice ethically. Education allows each social worker to articulate their own privilege experience. For example, Jody said, “If social workers appreciate how they are privileged, they can better assist their clients in the ways that they’re oppressed or the ways that they’re privileged.” Participants proposed that social work students should be taught about their potential influence, power, and privilege as well as their responsibility to fight for social justice, or fight against injustice in society. Participants recommended that social workers should discuss privilege with one another in order to challenge the status-quo and create change.

In conclusion, regarding the inevitability of privilege, to the extent that privilege is multidimensional, participants expressed that it is difficult to dismantle what keeps changing in different contexts. There was a general agreement that social workers should acknowledge and
embrace their privilege, while exerting more effort towards reducing and removing barriers in order to help clients actualize their own potentials.

**Summary of themes.** The six themes of this study are connected based on the narratives of the personal and professional experiences of participants. Privilege is a moving target because it is a phenomenon that kept unfolding depending on the participant and context. Privilege applies to social workers’ unearned social identities and earned professional status, as well as their ability for self-determination. It also fluctuates according to prevailing circumstances within different social work agencies and the larger community.

Second, privilege is also interconnected with and inseparable from power. Indeed, there are different forms of power embedded in privilege. Social workers, because of their position of privilege, exercise power differently in social work relationships. Third, social workers have variegated –multiple and contradictory- experiences of privilege, and their interactions with clients, agencies, and community shape these experiences. Fourth, these interactions also result in miscellaneous emotions, some of which are positive, negative, or mixed.

Fifth, though participants reflected on their practice, reflection on power and privilege was not a priority unless they encountered difficult client situations. However, they had different ways of reflection with attendant benefits. Some of the benefits are that reflection increases awareness, promotes sensitivity, empathy, and humility, de-stresses the social worker, and enhances practice. Lastly, there was a consensus that privilege is inevitable. As such, social workers should understand and embrace their privilege rather than dismantle it because they need privilege to practice effectively in a hierarchical world.
Chapter 5

Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of this study in relation to existing research literature. It identifies many points of convergence and divergence as well as introduces new areas worthy of further explorations. Through these findings, this study fulfills its mission of answering the research question of how social workers in direct practice experience their privilege, and highlights the nuances, multiplicity, and complexity of that experience.

Defining a Difficult Concept

Study findings suggest that it is difficult to define privilege. The overwhelming word, as revealed by Nvivo 11 software, in a text-search query, was “Umm,” with attendant pauses and silences that ranged from participant to participant. Unlike MacLure, Holmes, Jones, and MacRae (2010) who suggested that silences in dyadic interviews are a possible means of resistance to questions, I interpreted these “umms” and silences as spaces for thinking through responses. I also regarded them as pauses for introspection regarding participants’ perspectives and experiences.

A large number of participants explained that they had never attempted to define privilege as it related to their own experience. This could be because privilege is usually not a topic that naturally comes up for discussion at work, or as Watt (2007) argued, it is a difficult subject to discuss, assumedly because it is charged with negative emotions (also see: Logue, 2005; Pinteris & Poteat, 2009). It may also be because privilege is denied (Wise, 2005) or taken for granted by those who have it (Mullaly, 2010; Rocco & West, 1998). This invisibility or obliviousness of privilege is what one participant described as “not having an awareness.” This study supports the notion that those who are most aware of privilege are those to whom it has not
been ascribed. In this study, a White female participant narrated how an “outsider” enabled her to look inwardly to identify all the markers of privilege in her life. In contrast, visible minority participants, irrespective of their sex and gender, stated that they were often aware of their racial differences and the privilege they did not have. Furthermore, while the literature suggests there is an aspect of obliviousness to privilege, it is particularly interesting that some study participants who were White, easily acknowledged their privilege and spoke about having a sense of gratitude for it. This suggests that the acknowledgement of privilege is on a spectrum ranging from denial and obliviousness to acceptance and gratitude, as social workers examine their social identities.

Privilege of social identities. By describing privilege as part of lived experience that is connected to one’s family of origin, race, class, sex, gender, and the “start off circumstances” that enable people to have “a smooth experience in society,” many participants confirmed privilege as unearned advantages and entitlements “granted solely as a birthright” (Black & Stone, 2005, p. 243; Mullaly & West, 2018). This routine privilege (Segal, Gerdes, Stromwall & Napoli, 2010) is endemic and systematically entrenched in society, providing status and benefits to individuals belonging to certain groups that are valued in society (Carniol, 2005; Cudd, 2005; Dominelli, 1997; McIntosh, 1998; Mullaly, 2010). From this description, people may have or lack privilege, depending on their social identities, as understood through the critical perspective. However, in addition to the above, privilege is found to be a relative phenomenon, in which case one could have more or less of it depending on circumstances. What is demonstrated here, therefore, is that even though the concept of privilege is challenged within all its categories, the term could not be eliminated. Rather, it could be understood as fluid and uneven.
Two participants pointed out the unevenness of privilege when they cautioned that people born in the same household with virtually all the same attributes, may not have the same privilege. As such, even within the same context, the description of privilege shifts from the stability of social identities, which the critical perspective upholds (Black & Stone, 2005; Kruks, 2005), to the variability of social identities, which social constructionism promotes (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Jones, 2010; Lopez, 2010). The multiplicity of identities and contexts, therefore, makes privilege a dynamic concept.

**Moving target.** The understanding of privilege as a moving target is a unique contribution of this study to the literature as it underscores the dynamism of what privilege is connected to, such as social identities, professional status, and a sense of agency. For instance, it suggests that social identities are not static but are fluid and evolve over time. Participants revealed that identities such as race and ethnicity, as well as sex and gender, shift “with new understandings” and according to history, prevailing values, culture, and even with technological advancements in society. Participants also maintained that identities morph into and shape each other, making privilege very dynamic in participants’ lived experiences. For instance, nuances of identities that affect one’s sense of privilege include but are not limited to the ranges of race (uni-racial, biracial, and multiracial), the variabilities of sexuality (homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, pansexual, and asexual), the progression or appearance of age, the visibility and invisibility of disabilities, the fluidity of gender, and the dynamics of class in a neoliberal society. All these could shape or change the experience and subjective meaning of privilege. To the extent that all these identities are complex and uneven, the privilege attached to them becomes very relative and sometimes intractable. The fluidity of these identities makes privilege a moving target.
Furthermore, this study revealed that privilege is also a moving target because it goes beyond social identities to apply to professional status. This is consistent with Rocco and West (1998) that the intersection of earned and unearned assets is “countless and complex, affecting the discussion of privilege in too numerous ways” (p. 173). However, professional privilege as the earned dimension of privilege, which is gained through education and employment, is more recognized by scholars in sociology, adult education, and political science, than social work scholars (Bourdieu, 1986, 1989; Curry-Stevens, 2010; Rocco & West, 1998; Weinberg, 2007; Wendt & Seymour, 2010). Though professional privilege is earned, participants in this study demonstrated that their unearned privilege had an impact on their professional status and practice. Moreover, unlike the unearned privilege of social identities, professional privilege cannot be taken for granted. It can be lost if not maintained appropriately. Nevertheless, what is largely unknown is how to demarcate when unearned privilege crosses over to earned privilege or when earned advantages compound unearned advantages.

**Privilege as agency.** Another contribution of this study to social work literature is the sense of privilege as agency. While existing literature identified birth, race, class, and other social identities as markers of privilege (Black & Stone, 2005; Kruks, 2005), it did not give enough attention or adequate recognition to individual efforts, choices, or the agency of individuals to change their circumstances. Privilege as agency, according to participants, is the ability to make autonomous decisions in different circumstances, being able to exercise rights and freedoms, pursue contentment, and access opportunities. It is also the ability to utilize one’s voice and maximize one’s potentials. Having the capacity to be self-determined, and having the resources to live the quality of life that is important to someone as an autonomous person is an important dimension of privilege.
Undoubtedly, the conceptualization of privilege as agency is compatible with the notion of agency and self-efficacy proposed by Bandura (1997), who defined agency as the “power to originate actions for given purposes,” with self-efficacy being a constitutive factor in agency (p. 3). However, agency in social work is normally described in terms of self-determination regarding clients (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005). Study participants made it very clear that the social workers’ agency is very important in the determination of what constitutes privilege in the social workers’ practice.

By proposing privilege as a moving target, study participants acknowledged the different but fluid categories of social identities and the different contexts of individuals in society. Participants also acknowledged the advantages that are earned by virtue of personal and professional characteristics, which can be experienced or deployed in multiple ways. Privilege as a moving target accepts the dynamic physical, ecological, political and sociocultural environments under which social workers operate. It also goes beyond existing literature to acknowledge internal characteristics like a sense of agency or autonomy, which is the recognition of the individual as a self-propelling agent with choices even amidst adverse situations.

The analogy of privilege as a moving target also calls into question the idea of agent and target statuses as if these statuses are permanent (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Carniol, 2005a; Mullaly, 2010). Though the theme of privilege as a moving target does not totally nullify agent and target statuses, it disrupts the stability of those terms and draws attention to the variabilities and multiplicity of identities.

From these findings, I am led to believe that the fixed and essential notion of privilege – as something someone has to the detriment of others – obscures the diverse meanings of privilege
for social work knowledge development, and could block the holistic understanding of the phenomenon. The essence of privilege is the advantages it creates and confers on individuals and groups in diverse contexts and circumstances. Without specific contexts, privilege can never be what it is.

**Power and Privilege**

A major finding of this study is that power and privilege are related concepts with overlapping meanings. They are correlative and complementary, yet – to paraphrase Kumsa (2004) – they are not separate from or reducible to each other, but operate simultaneously in social work practice.

Power and privilege “go hand-in-hand,” said a participant; and “privilege is fuel to power,” said another, metaphors that demonstrate how these concepts are mutually reinforcing. A few participants who attempted to distinguish the two concepts proposed that privilege is a subtler and milder form of power because while privilege is latent, power tends to be manifest as it is based on the social worker’s position. A couple of participants suggested that privilege could exist without power. Notwithstanding, a significant contribution of this study is that it makes the operation of power explicit in the definition of privilege and aids further understanding regarding the complexity of privilege.

**Definition of power.** Historically, power has been well defined by social work scholars, but this definition has been mostly unidimensional. It has been regarded as a top down phenomenon predicated on someone having dominance over others (Handler, 1973; Lipsky, 1980; Lubove, 1965; Margolin, 1997). Consistent with the literature, many participants defined power as having authority, control, and influence over someone or something and that includes the ability to influence other people’s decision-making. This fits the critical framework, which
focuses on the dialectical operation of power (Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2007) and its capacity to maintain and reproduce patterns of inequality and dominance in the society (Baines, 2002; Baldus, 1975; Cagle, 2010; Holody, 1998; Mullaly, 2002, 2007 & 2010; Potts & Brown, 2008; Vodde, 2001). In social work literature, the critical framework regards social workers as agents of the state with the power to dominate their clients (Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2007). However, while admitting that social workers have power to a large extent, study participants critiqued the idea of power in the classic Marxist and dialectical sense as inadequate to explain the dynamics within the social worker-client relationship. Rather, study participants’ definition of power included not only the ability to dominate but also the ability to guide and provide services for clients, the ability to network with other professionals on behalf of clients, as well as the ability to maintain a persuasive influence on clients. As such, power, according to many participants included empowerment, collaboration, coaching, and teaching of clients to enable them to achieve certain goals. This finding supports social work scholars who have defined the dual role of social workers and acknowledges that social workers can be both the agent of social control and social care (Rossiter, 2001; Weinberg, 2005; 2012).

In addition, many participants in this study also held the view that power is not absolute, and neither is it strictly the commodity or possession of certain people or groups to the exclusion of all others. Rather, they contended that power is ubiquitous in society, some of it based on the position and authority of the social worker, though social workers do not experience that power uniformly. This study found that power could be externally directed towards influencing others; and it could also be internally directed, based on the social workers’ and clients’ self-determination and sense of integrity. Finally, participants indicated that power can be positive, negative, or dormant until it is utilized by specific actors.
**Bases of social work power.** In terms of externally directed power, consistent with literature, all participants acknowledged that power emanates from the position of the social worker, as their professional role is regulated by a professional body and the government (Smith, 2008; Weinberg, 2005, 2012). This role, in turn, creates privilege for the social worker. This finding is congruent with the characterization of professional status by deMontigny (2007) as that which is “made possible by virtue of formal, institutionalized education, credentialing, employment and performance at work, repeated day after day by cadres of similarly organized others” (p. 183); and it also fits the literature on social work legitimizing power discussed below.

For instance, Webb (2000) identified the first source of social work power as social work knowledge bases, skills, methods and training, or what Smith (2008) and Foucault (Chambon, Irving, & Epstein, 1999) called *expert power*. The second source is the law, which is the legal and statutory powers of the state pertaining to the social work profession, like the ability to remove children at risk of abuse. The third source is the respect and deference ascribed to those in authority or those who are educated to speak and use language well. The fourth source is the recognition of ‘professional’ status, as a result of statutory accreditation. Additionally, Webb (2008) postulated that social work knowledge and legal powers are to be found within the worker and can be used unilaterally. However, the analysis of participants’ responses revealed a contradiction to this last point. Though it may appear that social workers can use their power unilaterally, the reality for most participants in the study was that the social workers use power relationally as they negotiate their role with different clients and within the context of their practice. Moreover, social workers’ power can be confined, constrained, or overruled by supervisors and management of an agency. This study revealed that social workers are mostly – if not always – in a position of relative power.
Participants’ description of their externally directed power is also best reflected in the discussion of power developed in the political sciences and sociology literature (Bierstedt, 1950; Reisch & Jani, 2012; Roscigno, 2011). For instance, study participants’ explanation of externally directed power coincides with the different bases of power in society—viz: expert, legitimate, referent, coercive, and reward power—postulated by French and Raven (1959) and explored by Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson and Hardiman (2009). As explained, expert power refers to special knowledge, expertise or professional competence, which some postmodern scholars had negatively deconstructed as aiding surveillance and governmentality (Foucault, 1997; Margolin, 1997; Orlie, 1997). Legitimate power refers to the perception that someone has the legitimate right to prescribe behaviour for someone else based on job position or assigned authority. This is related to legal-rational authority (Weber, 1964), which is power that is legitimized in institutions and bureaucracies, or what Lukes (1974, 2005) referred to as hegemonic power.

The third type of power relevant to the experience of study participants is referent power, which consists of the ability to establish connection or rapport with others. It is the power of persuasion arising, for instance, from social workers’ training and interpersonal skills (Hasenfeld, 1987). Coercive power mediates punishments or negative consequences for behaviour, with domination being the extreme form of power imbalance (Roscigno, 2011). Lastly, reward power mediates positive reinforcement or consequences for behaviour. These last two bases of power are associated with dominance or “power over” that many critical writers approximated as the definition of power (Dominelli, 1997; Ferber, 2003; Mullaly, 2010). Findings from this study, however, revealed that all these bases of power are different but practically inseparable, with one having the possibility of merging with another within the
dynamics of privilege, yet they are not all about domination. For instance, referent power relates to expert power, which is legitimized in the social workers’ position. Also, expert power could release both coercive and reward power, in which case a social worker can disapprove of, or reward clients for certain behaviours. Participants in this study have used various forms of power to accomplish therapeutic purposes without necessarily distinguishing in practice when and where expert power becomes reward or coercive power. They regarded power simply as the use of their position of authority to generate help or provide services for clients.

**Personal power.** Participants also identified internally directed power as a constituent part of privilege. They explained it as the power of agency, which includes self-determination, self-control, self-confidence, and the ability to rise above one’s circumstances. Some participants called this personal power. This personal power aligns with what Butler (1993, 1997) and Foucault (1994, 1997) described as the power of resistance or the possibility of revolt by clients. This study found that clients are not mere automations or powerless individuals, but indeed, that the power of the social worker cannot undermine clients’ capacity for intelligent thought and resistance.

Findings also revealed that power could be real or imagined; it could be positive or negative, and that it could be neutral or dormant until it is acted upon, all depending on different contexts and clients’ circumstances. Power as neutral or dormant equates to what Kumsa (2007) called “a potential waiting to happen” (p. 3). Goffman (1959) also treated power as a potential, comprising of resources such as access, information, ideology, labels, sanctions, and knowledge, the use of which depends on the intentionality of the power holder. Goffman suggested that one’s power in a situation is a function of both the situation and individual factors, as findings in this study also support.
**Power to, power over, and power with.** These three types of power identified by scholars in political science are relevant to the externally directed power discussed by study participants (Fazioli, Briar-Lawson & Hardiman, 2009; Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Pansardi, 2012; Srivastava & Anderson, 2009; Tew, 2006). For instance, *power to* is used as a synonym of empowerment, while *power over* is used to represent force or domination (Pansardi, 2012; Srivastava & Anderson, 2009). Pansardi (2012) argued that these are not competing concepts, but they denote the same category of social facts. As explained, “an exercise of *power over* always presupposes some kind of *power to* on the part of the agent” (Pansardi, 2012, p. 75). This means that without having the *power to* (also referred to as capacity for action) you cannot have power over someone else (Pansardi, 2012). Srivastava and Anderson (2009) also claimed that *power over* could be used “in the service of, and ultimately to protect vulnerable others, such as children or older people” (p. 39); and that is a notion that all study participants agreed upon.

Tew (2006) regarded *power with* as having power together with the client, a kind of co-operative power, which is similar to what Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson, and Hardiman (2009) called shared and balanced power, and what Lukes (1974, 2005) referred to as non-decision-making power. Findings of this study revealed that shared and balanced power (*power with*) are closest to what most participants in this study – especially those who do not work in child welfare or other mandated services – experienced in their daily practice. It appeared that most participants in child welfare and other mandated agencies mainly use ‘power over’ because of their agency mandates and positions of authority. The implication of this is that *power over* or dominance is not the only form of power connected to privilege. Equating power with dominance gravely ignores the potential for shared or collaborative power as demonstrated in this study. Moreover, even where power as dominance was prevalent, social workers still
utilized other forms of power. For instance, while recognizing the power (as dominance) of her child welfare agency, a study participant was more intent on engaging in anti-oppressive practice so that she could collaborate with her clients to the best extent possible while not compromising the mandate of her agency.

This study found that the variability of power depends on the kinds of clients, the type of agency or organization, the position or role of the social worker, and the resources available to meet clients’ needs. Findings from this study confirm the notion by Simon and Oakes (2006) that most power relations involve a mix of conflictual power and consensual power, contestations and debates. As such, power is always negotiated –consciously or unconsciously- between social workers and their clients. Findings also confirm the position by Tew (2006) that power operates in complex and contradictory ways, and that people may be involved in more than one mode of power relations at the same time, with interpersonal relationships offering opportunities for co-operative power “while simultaneously retaining aspects of oppressive inequality in how it is structured” (p. 40). This makes power relations in social work practice as unstable, ambiguous, and multidimensional as privilege.

**Epistemic Privilege**

Participants in this study opposed the notion put forth by Vodde (2001 and Pewewerdy (2007) that social workers imbibe the dominant ideologies in the society and thereby turn their knowledge into domination. Alluding to Foucault (1994), Vodde (2001) had argued that societal power is mobilized and legitimized for those who are privileged, and this legitimization results in the granting of the status of truth and correctness to their words, expertise, or knowledge. This ability to legitimate by power and authority, according to Kruks (2005), is called epistemic privilege, understood as the power to define knowledge and truth. Pewewerdy (2007) lamented
that epistemic privilege may enable social workers to co-opt the knowledge of clients to maintain their authority as therapists. However, this is a pessimistic view of knowledge utilization, which is not consistent with this study’s findings. Study participants employed their knowledge and skills to help clients in various circumstances. Furthermore, where they were unable to help alone, some participants recruited the expertise and skills of other social workers across agencies or organizations to help specific clients. It is not clear to me why a social worker would want to turn their knowledge into domination, especially having devoted and expended years of education in order to be helpful to clients. Views like these may do more damage to the professional training of social workers, whereby students may be afraid of their potential power and privilege instead of learning how to harness and utilize this power and privilege in the service of their clients.

**The Use of Self**

Scholars have gone to great lengths to discuss the use of self in social work practice. For instance, Arnd-Caddigan and Pozzuto (2008) wrote about the relational and contextual use of self, while Mandell (2007) and Weismann (2000) wrote about the conscious use of self. Yan and Wong (1999) wrote about the dialogic self. However, findings from this study revealed that the self is not differentiated in practice. Participants demonstrated that the self that is conscious cannot be separated from the self that is relational and dialogic. Howbeit, the use of self is always contextual as social workers practice in different agencies and communities. This supports the notion by Weinberg (2007) that the self is not fragmented in practice as it is in theory, but holistic as it is shaped by external socioeconomic and political dynamics in society (Gibelman, 1999).
Findings also confirm the notion that the self is made up of multiple identities (Arnd-Caddigan & Pozzuto, 2008). For participants in this study, some of these identities may be salient or dormant but are always evolving at different points in time, depending on the interaction and interconnection with others in specific contexts (Collins, 1990). One participant, a Latino male social worker, for instance, illustrated how his privilege became variable in different contexts - at home, at work, and in the community. He argued that while he experienced more privilege in the community and with most of his clients, his privilege at a particular workplace diminished with his colleagues and supervisors because of the intersections of his social identities (as male, heterosexual, and a visible minority). This confirms what many scholars have said about social work being always informed by all the diverse social identities of social workers (Gray & Fook, 2004; Jones, 2009; Walter, Taylor, & Habibus, 2011). It also accentuates the notion put forward by Yan (2002) that social workers have multiple and differential identities, and they have intermixed and multifaceted sets of values, cultures, and life experiences. These multiple identities, he proposed, propel various tensions with the cultures of the dominant society, their employing agencies, and clients. Though the Latino male social worker had privilege both as male and heterosexual, it appeared that his visible minority racial status was prevalent for him at work, rendering the other privileges secondary. In a larger sense, therefore, what is not yet clear is how to weigh each of one’s demographic characteristics in order to determine how each identity on its own, or in combination with others, or in interactions with each other, establish different types of privilege or create an integrated or alternative experience or understanding of privilege or oppression. However, congruent with Tatum (1997), it could be deduced from this study that multiple identities, in different combinations, shape individual human experiences of privilege. As such the experience and effects of privilege
would be different for each individual. The implication of this is that privilege cannot be regarded as absolute, but it is always relative, and its meaning would always be perceived through multiple dimensions and intersections (Abrams & Curran, 2004; Bedolla, 2007; Collins, 1986, 2010; Rosenblum & Tavis, 2009).

**The self and intersubjectivities.** Another nuance regarding the issue of privilege relates to the degree of connections or commonality of views between the social worker and client. Munhall and Chenail (2008) identified three levels of intersubjectivity. The first level of understanding they called *personal universes* where there are distinct subjective views of reality by at least two people in interaction, and their subjectivities may not intersect. The second level is *intersubjectivity* where there is more openness and more exchange, and the views of the two people in interaction intersect. The last level is a *shared perceptual field* “where subjectivities intersect” (p. 21). Stories by study participants indicated that they encountered different kinds of clients in different contexts and many of their interactions with clients could fit into these three levels identified above.

For instance, the two Black female participants in this study and their White male clients were in their own *personal universes* when their interactions were not successful because of their divergent views of reality. Most participants, however, had open and cooperative exchanges with their clients, making *intersubjectivity* a prominent level for social work interactions and interventions. The ideal level may be the *shared perceptual field* where subjectivities intersect, but – as revealed in this study – there is no guarantee that subjectivities can intersect at all times. However, it seemed that some participants experienced a shared perceptual field that further enhanced their privilege. This occurred when clients had positive expectations regarding the expertise of their social worker, shared a similar view of reality with the social worker, and fully
co-operated with the counselling process. It appeared that most White female social workers had this experience except for when they interacted with some White male clients who were disrespectful towards them. Besides, the East Asian female social worker exemplified this best when she beamed about having successful practice with young White female clients and visible minority clients who shared her cultural, religious, and immigrant background. It is, therefore, safe to assume that the more social characteristics a social worker has in common with the client, the closer their perceptual field may be.

**Diverse Experiences of Privilege**

Findings from this study revealed that there is no single, unified experience of privilege by participants. Rather, participants had multiple, dynamic, and contradictory experiences of privilege because of their social identities and professional status. This section discusses the experience of privilege that relates to specific social identities in the light of existing literature.

**Social identity-related experiences.** All participants experienced privilege in various parts of their social identities. The specific social identities to be discussed are class, male, cisgender, age, disability, indigenous and religious.

**Class privilege.** It has generally been assumed that many social workers benefit from middle class income and respected professional status (Greene, 2010; Kondrat, 2002, Lopez, 2010). However, many participants in this study refuted this assumption. This study found that many participants did not have middle class upbringing. Rather, many were born into lower or working-class families and struggled to get an education while working multiple jobs. Furthermore, securing a social work employment did not necessarily place participants in the middle-class category, even with their master’s degree. A few of the participants had time-limited, and temporary contract positions in various organizations. Therefore, the experience of
class privilege for many participants was more in line with Hobgood (2000) who found that most professionals and managers only wear the middle-class camouflage when it comes to social class identity, yet they really belong to the upper echelon of the working class. This is because they have only their labor and productive abilities as their means of income. For those who have middle class identity, since they control no means of production, Hobgood asserts that their class identity is tenuous if they lose their paychecks or their income producing abilities. From my cursory observation of the society, it seems that some social workers do not have full time employments anymore. Instead, they have multiple, and sometimes simultaneous, contract positions that are also sometimes supplemented by private practice. Their privilege based on class identity can only be tenuous because of the uncertainty and anxiety they might experience in their employment situations.

**Male privilege.** Findings suggest that while being male may be a point of differentiation and advantage for all male participants the benefits accrued differently to all of them on the basis of their intersecting identities. Four White and three visible minority males participated in this study. They all discussed their better employment opportunities when compared to female social workers. In agreement with literature, male participants proposed that they played unique roles in their agencies by being assigned harder, more aggressive, and more complex cases (Giesler, 2006; Warde, 2009). This reportedly boosted not only their self-confidence, but also their worth to their agencies. They also stated that clients were likely to respect them more than their female colleagues.

However, adrocentrism, which is male privilege (Bem, 1993; Black & Stone, 2005) was confirmed by the four White male participants in the study, but not as much by the three visible minority males. The White males recognized their advantages within their organizations from
being hired to being promoted and even having preferential treatments by some clients, colleagues, and organizations. This study revealed that White males are more likely to receive promotion and advancement at work than their visible minority counterparts. In addition, visible minority males may also experience diminished privilege when compared to their White female colleagues. This finding confirms the notion put forward by Woods (2010) that “black men and other men of colour participate in the sex/gender system without receiving the same material and nonmaterial rewards White men do” (p. 36). A Black male participant declared that male privilege is a hoax in social work practice. This calls to question the idea about gender equity in social work as it relates to promotion. It seems to me that the idea of equity for White able-bodied females in social work administration may not have transferred to access for people of colour. This may mean that what social workers say they believe or value may be different from what they practice. It may also imply that conscious or unconscious discrimination may result in deprivation of supervisory and administrative positions for visible minority applicants.

Similarly, the Latino male participant highlighted racism and sexism against him in a social work agency. He characterized his interactions with colleagues and supervisors as “walking on egg shells” because he had a “target on his back.” This sentiment had resonance with some male attendees at some conferences and academic settings where I presented on the subtheme of male privilege from this study. Some shared experiences of being silenced, discredited, or demonized because they were men, and how they could not possibly understand or speak on certain issues because of their gender. Some reported that they deliberately suppressed their feelings and opinions so that they would not be interpreted incorrectly as being oppressive. The consensus is that male privilege is complicated in social work practice, especially for visible minority males.
**Cisgender privilege.** All study participants had cisgender privilege, meaning that they identified and aligned with the sex and gender they were assigned at birth (Walls & Costello, 2011). This study is unable to discuss the experience of privilege by non-heterosexual social workers. However, two sexual minorities who did a transferability check on the themes did not report any disagreement with any of the findings. Neither did they specifically highlight any issue regarding their sexuality in relation to their privilege or lack thereof.

**Age privilege.** This study illuminates the paradox of age in social work practice. The North American society usually assigns worth and privilege to youth, and negative stereotypes and stigma to older adults (Black & Stone, 2005; Hick, 2010). In contrast to this characterization, study participants highlighted the expectations and preference of most clients that their social workers should be or look older. Some younger looking participants narrated stories of challenges and discrimination by their clients. The assumption seemed to be that older social workers would have more life and practice experiences than younger ones. This may not be accurate, but psychologically satisfying for many clients. However, a participant reported that the exception is that adolescents and younger clients preferred younger social workers with the assumption that they would understand current social issues and challenges more than older ones.

**Disability.** It is assumed that the North American society privileges able-bodiedness and those who are disabled are sometimes rendered invisible or ignored by society (Black & Stone, 2005). Notwithstanding, a participant in this study who is physically challenged saw disability more from the social model as something created by a disabiling environment, which turns impairments and handicaps into disabilities.
(Higgins, 1992; Leslie, Leslie & Murphy, 2003; Oliver, 1990; Rosenblum & Travis, 2009). The participant held that she was neither constrained nor privileged by her physical disability. Rather, she made the choice to maximize her own potentials and provide social work services to her clients. This participant demonstrated that a person with a disability is not always helpless or dependent; rather, that person is part of human diversity. Her disability, she maintained, was irrelevant to her sense of privilege. This supports the idea put forth by Watson (2002) that disability is in the eye of the beholder. It could also be argued that other categories of her identities – as a White female with a middle-class status, interacted and intersected with her disability to provide better outcomes for her in society.

*Indigenous privilege.* Like the participant with physical disability, the Indigenous male participant did not see himself as less privileged because of what he referred to as his “Native status.” Contrary to the literature, he stated that his Native identity gave him the privilege to discuss certain issues like immigration and multiculturalism. It may be the case that this participant had not internalized the oppression expected of his Indigenous status (Angell & Dunlop, 2001; Hick, 2010; Turner & Turner, 2009) or engaged in deception or self-deception that is necessary for his own psychological subjugation in society (Mullaly, 2010; Sider, 1987).

*Religious privilege.* The privilege of religion seemed to have no implication for study participants. Though majority of them identified as Christians, many of them said they were nominal, in terms of not actively observing any religious ordinance. Two participants had no religious affiliation, one identified as a spiritist, and one professed to be an atheist. Whereas Christianity has been touted in the literature as the dominant
religion in North America because many laws and conventions are based on it (Black & Stone, 2005), the two notions by Todd (2010, 2011) that Christianity is at the intersection of oppression and privilege, and that the project of White supremacy is intertwined with Christianity, are not shared by one of the study participants who identified as an atheist. This participant did not see himself as oppressed, or not privileged, because of religion, but believed more in the secularity of the Canadian society. No study participant highlighted religion as a mark of privilege or oppression.

There are many ways in which this finding could be interpreted. Maybe all participants, irrespective of their religious affiliations were oblivious to their religious privilege. Maybe religion does not play a vital role in privilege as it used to be for the distribution of resources in society (Porter, 1965). Maybe religion is so entrenched in the system that its effects are no longer observable. Maybe other identities such as class and race have overshadowed the salience of religion in Canadian society. Or maybe atheism, or a lack of religious affiliation, is not a contradiction to religion as an organizing principle of society. Nonetheless, with increasing religious diversity of the country (Statistics Canada, 2011) and several Muslims joining the profession of social work – as I observed from my teaching practice – one would expect that the role of religion in social work practice will be revisited.

Having outlined the above, it is worth noting that many participants did not distinguish between personal and professional privilege. This may be because participants were interviewed as social workers. It may also be that the identity of a social worker has become inherent in their lived experience.
Work-related experiences. As a result of their position as social workers, all participants experienced privilege as a gateway to resources for their clients. This study also revealed that social workers often tap into their personal and social networks when needed, to improve the circumstances of their clients. However, some participants demonstrated that the ability to provide access has the corollary of restricting access; and that decision was mostly within the purview of individual social workers. This supports the idea put forward by Rossiter (2000) that social workers embody the “micropolitics” of power in their daily lives through what they forget, permit, obey, and how power works through their bodies as they “foster regimes of truth” (p. 159).

Wendt and Seymour (2010), using the Foucauldian framework, went a step further to propose that social workers should critique their practice as potentially dangerous. However, what these authors did not explore is the tendency of some social workers to feel disempowered, helpless, or powerless within the structures that have endowed them with power and privilege. As discovered in this study, the dialectic of power and powerlessness is that while social workers may have power to perform their duties, they may also experience powerlessness within the context and structure of their agency/employment. Many participants in this study indicated instances where they were rendered powerless in their positions of authority. However, the feeling of powerlessness experienced by many social workers did not contradict the power inherent in their position. As some participants indicated, their powerlessness was sometimes connected to their inability to predict client outcomes, and the lack of support by their agencies especially when they experienced adverse circumstances with their clients.
Findings from this study also revealed that, though social workers have what Curry-Stevens (2010) called positional privilege, their positions produced different effects depending on their clients and the context of their practice. For instance, social workers in mandated agencies experienced more power than social workers in voluntary agencies where clients were not compelled to receive services. Privilege and power can, therefore, be entrenched or accentuated by agency mandates and procedures. Furthermore, social workers often personified the power of their agencies or organizations to greater or lesser extent, as a participant declared,

The authority that CAS (Children’s Aid Society) has, my work place has, is huge…

CAS is just to me an abstract entity… So, if CAS or child protection services have authority, in my mind, I have that authority.

Clients’ stories. There is no discussion of privilege in existing literature that describes the experience of hearing stories or feeling honoured to hear those stories by social workers. In this study, by hearing clients’ stories, social workers provided outlets for clients to vent, process emotions, lessen distress, and mobilize strengths. Sometimes these workers sat in silent discomfort as witnesses to clients’ unfolding circumstances when words failed. Some felt trusted by clients and regarded their presence in the lives of clients as an honour. The idea of privilege as presence is, therefore, an expansion of social work literature.

Furthermore, this study found that the experience of privilege by social workers could sometimes cause desensitization to their clients. For instance, social workers from less privileged backgrounds who struggled to earn privilege by education, may assume that the same opportunity exists for everyone in society. This fallacy exemplifies what
Mullaly (2010) called the *myth of equal opportunity*, which is the idea that everyone in society has equal access to resources and opportunities in society. However, even if this were true, what these social workers may not recognize is that socialization or learned behaviour may influence how people identify or capitalize on opportunities. They may also downplay the role of a person’s motivation, drive, or will, as well as environmental factors like family and social support regarding translating opportunities to privilege.

**Work-related barriers.** Findings revealed that some social workers experienced barriers from clients based on their own social identities and this tremendously affected their experience of privilege. The notion of barriers from clients has not been adequately explored in social work literature. Analysis of participants’ responses revealed that social workers felt discriminated against by the prejudice of their clients based on age or appearance (“You’re too young, what do you know?”), on the basis of family status (“Are you married?” “Do you have children?”), and on the bases of professional and personal experiences (“How long have you been doing this?” “Do you know what you’re doing?” Or “Have you ever overcome drug or alcohol addictions?”). These stereotypes, beliefs, and negative prejudgments -exhibited through attitudes and behaviours of disrespect- appeared to be common place, and sometimes contributed to the exclusion of some social workers from working or practicing with all the clients initially allocated to them.

Some social workers also felt discriminated against based on gender. Though social work is a gendered profession with an overwhelming number of female professionals (Hick, 2010; Hicks, 2001; Turner & Turner, 2009; Weinberg, 2012), this study found that male clients were routinely prejudiced against, and disrespected, female social workers. This finding confirms the argument by Lucas and Baxter (2012) that
members of disadvantaged status groups, like women and other minorities have decreased influence and face challenges in acquiring power; and if they are in positions of power, they are often seen as illegitimate occupants and their power is questioned.

Furthermore, this study found that female social workers only sometimes reported such incidence to their agency. On occasions, according to participants, agency practices have included transferring such clients to male social workers, when available, or asking male social workers to sit-in while service is being provided by the female social worker. I submit that incidents like this disempower the female social worker while inadvertently providing special status for the male social worker.

Findings of the study also revealed another source of barrier as the position of the social worker. Many participants reported that clients would routinely get upset that the social worker had access and credibility to help them to navigate for resources when they could not help themselves. Often, clients would lash out against their social workers or engage in other kinds of micro-aggression, even though they would still expect to be helped. This study revealed that micro-aggression – consisting of subtle insults, slights, putdowns, or invalidating remarks (Sue, 2010) - were not only directed at racialized social workers as Badwall (2014) indicated, but also to White female social workers. Only one out of the four White male participants reported any micro-aggression from clients (based on perceived socioeconomic status).

Some scholars may be right that social workers are oppressive to their clients (Lipsky, 1980; Lubove, 1965; Margolin, 1997; Mullaly, 2010), but what is not fully fathomed is the aggression that might emanate from clients towards social workers. The
most endemic barrier identified in this study relates to the marginalized identities of social workers, especially regarding race, as discussed below.

Though the literature acknowledged the existence of marginalized identities in society, it has not purposely examined these identities in social workers, or the effects of these identities on social work practice (Burnes & Ross, 2010; Underliner, 2000). One of the reasons could be the assumption that all social workers are White (Curry-Stevens, 2010), or that most professions are fashioned and conditioned in the habitus of Whiteness (Bourdieu, 1999). However, not all social workers are racially or culturally White, as the diversity of study participants revealed. This study also illustrates that the racial identity of social workers influences how they are received and treated by their clients.

This finding is confirmed by Slay and Smith (2011) who examined the construction of professional identity and the role of stigma in the development of professional identity for individuals from stigmatized cultural groups. They perceived professional identity as “one’s professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences” (p. 85), and maintained that one’s professional role confers prestige, autonomy, and a degree of privilege on the holder. However, they submitted that a fractured identity of “otherness” compromises how much prestige, autonomy, and privilege a minority professional would hold. Race, they concluded, influences the career experiences of minorities. This conclusion agrees with some findings of my study, which at once exemplifies the effect of race on visible minority or racialized social workers, while also providing representation for racialized social workers whose experiences have not been adequately documented in the literature of
privilege. It is clear from this study that professional privilege does not prevent discrimination against racialized social workers by some of their White clients.

**Racism in Social Work Practice**

Six racialized social workers participated in this study, divided equally into male and female gender. Findings revealed that the burden of racism in social work practice was borne by Black participants, even when compared with other racialized social workers of Asian and Latin American descent. While Shibutani and Kwan (1965) wrote about the possibility of race being a “visible stigma” by which others are “confronted by an insuperable obstacle” (p. 50), Badwall (2014) wrote about the dilemmas that emerge when racialized social workers perform an identity that is “historically never meant for them” (p. 2). These dilemmas include scenarios where White clients refuse to work with racialized social workers; where racist ideas are spoken or projected during appointments; and where workers have “close encounters with physical violence and death threats” (p. 2). Only Black participants in my study reported these kinds of incidence with the additional burden of physical violence directed towards Black female social workers. One Black female participant reported that she was mortally afraid of meeting some of the White male clients in the community.

Further complicating these kinds of scenarios for study participants was the organizational or agency complicity in reported racist behaviours. Badwall (2014) wrote about “unsupportive responses” from co-workers and managers who would remind workers to stay “client-focused, empathic, and critically reflexive about their professional powers” (p. 2). Her thesis was that “where racism is named, the imperatives to be empathic and client-centred take priority over addressing racism” (p. 2). This was
confirmed by study participants’ experiences, as their colleagues and supervisors either questioned their capability and ability to work with all clients, or ignored the incidence altogether. Under the guise of client-centredness and protecting the security of all workers, these Black social workers in my study were replaced by White social workers who resumed working with these White male clients. Furthermore, not only did these Black female social workers feel unsupported by their agencies, they also felt powerless in their positions. The idea of professional power or privilege in these instances was lost to them.

In addition, there was no reported instance in which any of these White male clients were reprimanded by the agencies in question. To paraphrase Badwall (2014), therefore, one could submit, that the professional privilege and power of Black female social workers are more likely to be lost in racist encounters with White male clients, especially when these social workers work in predominantly White-normed institutions (like many child welfare agencies where these incidents happened to the two Black female participants in the study). According to Feagin (2014), White-normed institutions are agencies or organizations where “White individuals are mostly in command at and near the top,” making rules, establishing structures, functions, and values of these organizations (p. 214). In this study, the need for the safety of workers notwithstanding, not confronting clients’ racism, and replacing racialized workers to satisfy the clients, may have been perceived by the agency as being client-centred, but it inadvertently reduced the social workers’ privilege and accentuated their powerlessness. It also exerted systemic exclusion on them. Ironically, these social workers had to continue discharging their duties without any resolution to their mistreatment by clients. This is consistent
with the assertion by Badwall (2014) that racialized social workers have to negotiate White dominance even as they experience racism in their everyday practice. It also relates to the notion of *double consciousness* proffered by Dubois (1903/1989), whereby Black people perceive themselves through the eyes of White people while also being conscious to be authentic to themselves. From my own experience, this double consciousness is requisite for their survival in various social work agencies or organizations.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the Black female participants did not question, interrupt or “challenge these sites of racism” as Badwall (2014, p. 2) suggested. Rather, they recoiled at the treatment of their agencies, occasionally questioned their own competence, and hoped that their next encounters with such clients would not be as problematic. Other non-Black but racialized participants (Asian and Latino) did not report discrimination from their clients based on race. Nevertheless, it was within his own agency that the Latino male participant experienced racism and sexism with colleagues and managers. He reported that his privilege diminished within that agency and his complaints regarding negative treatments were ignored.

At any rate, Badwall (2014) may have been right to suggest that social work education does not prepare visible minority social workers for what they might encounter in the field. This may be because social work educators themselves are mostly White and have no lived experience of racial discrimination, or that they are unable to understand that racial discrimination could occur in social work practice.
Privilege versus Oppression: A Modification of Ferber’s Matrix

Based on some of the findings of this study, this section suggests a modification to Ferber’s (2010) matrix as a means of understanding oppression and privilege from an intersectional perspective. Ferber’s matrix has eight key features. The first feature is that privilege and oppression are interlocked as two sides of the same coin, and should, therefore, be examined together since one cannot exist without the other. Though this assumption had resonance with some participants, there was an alternative, nuanced position by others that privilege can be a factor in oppression without necessarily creating oppression. Some participants asserted that not all privilege is connected to oppression. They cited education, or access to education, as an example of a privilege that does not lead to oppression, but which rather enabled them to become social workers to be of service to the oppressed. This finding confirms and exemplifies what Blum (2008) referred to as non-injustice related privilege. Participants accepted that privilege and oppression could be a continuum instead of being conjoined opposites. Moreover, this study found that many social workers pursued egalitarianism in their practice. They strove consciously to promote clients’ autonomy and to resolve clients’ challenging situations, while also recognizing that they could not always control client outcomes.

The second feature of Ferber’s matrix (Ferber, 2010) is that forms of privilege and oppression interact and intersect, thereby exposing diversity within homogeneous groups. This seems accurate as far as participants in this study were concerned. All the participants identified various social identities and illustrated that identities are usually multiple and fluid. Findings of this study confirmed the heterogeneity within groups and the fluidity of all groups and categories, such as race, gender, sex, or age. This is also in
line with Singer (2001) who suggested that we must sidestep dichotomies like privileged and oppressed and focus on understanding the society “where social categories overlap, interact, and change over time” (p. 13).

The third feature of the matrix is that social classifications are historically and culturally variable because they are social constructions that support “specific configuration of power” and perpetuate inequality (Ferber, 2010, p. 252). This feature correctly indicates that social identity and values attached to them are culturally and historically determined. Study participants proposed that some identities might shift or morph into each other, such as race and ethnicity, or sex and gender whereby they become indistinguishable and we may not know where one ends and another starts. This also depends on the sociopolitical and economic circumstance of the society, including technological advancements.

The fourth feature of the matrix is inclusivity, which means that everyone experiences privilege and marginalization because of their social identities (Ferber, 2010). Findings from this study revealed that while this point is accurate for many participants, the four male participants who were White, heterosexual, able-bodied, and middle class, did not express experiencing any oppression at any level. Instead, they experienced what Tisdell (1995) referred to as *interlocking structural privilege*, which connotes an advantage in society based on a combination of people’s valued social identities (p. 46). Only one White male participant felt oppressed based on socioeconomic status (because he had a working-class background) in comparison to one of his clients who spotlighted their socio-economic difference. However, all White female and all visible minority participants reported experiencing different forms of
oppression in addition to their privilege. This study indicates that the experience of privilege and marginalization by all individuals and groups are not equal, confirming the notion by Kimmel (2000) that all forms of inequality and privilege are not the same.

The fifth feature of the matrix asserts that inequality is institutional, not characteristic of individuals (Ferber, 2010). Though the stated intention of this feature was not to blame individuals for structural problems, evidence from this study suggests that inequality can have both structural and individual characteristics. This buttresses Kumsa’s statement that “structures and persons are not outside each other but embedded and embodied in each other” (Kumsa, 2007, p. 22). Participants in this study expressed that they embodied the profession of social work and the power/authority inherent in their various agencies. Consequently, social workers, by embodying their professional status, become part of power and inequality structure, and their specific practices may singly and collectively alter, reduce, or transform inequality within institutions.

The sixth feature of the matrix enjoins social workers to recognize that inequality is harmful to all, even those who are privileged (Ferber, 2010). This statement is not contradicted by my study. It is also because of societal inequality that the profession of social work exists to ameliorate clients’ challenges and advocate for necessary resources. As a researcher, I suppose that inequality may discourage the maximization of individual’s potential in the society, thereby diminishing the whole society as a consequence.

The seventh feature of the matrix encourages ongoing self-examination because everyone in society is implicated in the dynamics of privilege and oppression (Ferber,
This feature compliments the findings of this study regarding reflection, and also uncovers the challenges social workers face in their bid to reflect on privilege and power.

The eighth feature of the matrix suggests that social workers must proactively focus on social change. It also suggests that social workers should take ownership of, and examine, their privilege in order to become allies with others and activists for social justice (Ferber, 2010). Participants in my study had the opportunity to examine their privilege, and some reported being allies with their clients, but there was no indication of activism from any of these participants, irrespective of their theoretical or practice orientation. This study found that social workers in direct practice concentrated more on clients’ immediate needs than the process of social stratification or the project of societal transformation.

Finally, upon deeper reflection on the lived experience of study participants in relation to the matrix, what becomes clearer is that most participants and their clients experienced what Sheared (1994) referred to as polyrhythmic realities. This is the idea that most people experience a mixture of privileged and oppressed statuses, having some attributes that are valued in society and others that are not. This study confirms that social workers and their clients engage in polyrhythmic realities in different contexts, and this makes privilege and oppression very relational and dynamic in social work practice, and in all human interactions. This is also consistent with the social constructionist view of reality (Jones, 2010; Lopez, 2010).

**Social Justice versus Social Control: Duality or Continuum?**

According to several social work Codes of Ethics (CASW, 2005; AASW, 2003; IFSW, 2005) the main goal of social work is the pursuit of social justice; but some
scholars have argued that social workers only use their position to exert control on their clients (Floersch, 1999; Foucault, 1980; Handler, 1973; Lipsky, 1980; Lubove, 1965; Margolin, 1997; Polsky, 1991). Margolin (1997), for instance, argued that social workers are only capable of one motive, that of social control. This also mimics Foucault’s (1980) idea that social workers have only the task of dominance and surveillance of the poor. This study, however, found that most social workers did not preclude social justice from social control. Indeed, study participants discussed social control as being geared towards the protection of the vulnerable and betterment of the collective. For instance, participants working in child welfare were quick to explain that the removal of an abused child from a family, which may disrupt a family’s configuration and appear as social control, is a form of social justice for the child who is now provided an opportunity to thrive elsewhere. Also, contrary to Margolin’s (1997) view that social workers have only the motive of social control, this finding is congruent with Wakefield’s (1998) explanation that human beings may have more than one motive for any specific action, and that the motivation or desire to help may take precedent over social control. This finding also indicates that social control is not necessarily negative, as it may prevent a breakdown of social order and allow for the continued existence of society.

Additionally, participants were also in sync with Wakefield (1998) who admitted that social control is negative when used to only enforce conformity to social norms, protect privilege, or exploit people. This is why Rossiter (2000) cautioned that social workers must maintain vigilance in their practice. This vigilance necessitates critical reflection. Many participants commented that this research project provided for them an opportunity for critical reflection regarding power and privilege in their practice.
The Emotionality of Privilege

Corbin and Strauss (2008) argued that one could not separate emotions from action because they are “part of the same flow of events, one leading into the other” (p. 7). Saldana (2013) added that “emotional states are very complex, and single experiences can include multiple or conflicting emotions” (p. 108). As a validation of these statements, this study found that participants experienced a range of emotions regarding their privilege, not just negative emotions as identified in most of the literature (Choudhuri, 2011; Logue, 2005; Mindrup, Spray, & Lamberghini-West, 2011; Pinteris & Poteat, 2009; Watt, 2007).

Moreover, Henze, Lucas and Scott (1998) wrote about the silences and denials surrounding privilege, which make open dialogue difficult, but the same difficulty did not arise in this study as participants spoke freely and uninhibited. In fact, a couple of participants – both White females – commented after their interviews that they assumed that the study was going to be negative, but were pleasantly surprised it was not.

Participants discussed a variety of emotions, including negative ones. However, the emotions expressed were more relational to specific client interactions than the social structure of society. Consistent with the literature, some of the negative emotions identified include anger, shame, regret, helplessness, and frustration. These were linked to several factors, such as the stereotyping of all social workers as child welfare workers, the vulnerability of workers regarding their marginal social identities, discrimination by clients, or being unable to meet clients’ needs or expectations. In expansion of the literature, however, some participants experienced negative emotions when they did not feel adequately supported by their agencies, and some reported certain tensions and
jealousies with, and among, colleagues on the basis of job titles, positions, and responsibilities.

A contribution of this study is the discussion of positive emotions, which have not been adequately addressed in literature. Study findings revealed that the topic of privilege did not always lead to negative emotions. Some participants reveled in their privilege and were not bashful to highlight their advantages in terms of social identities and professional status. Feeling good about oneself, feeling powerful, happy, blessed, phenomenal, and grateful, were some of the positive emotions identified. Some of these emotions were attributed to the social workers’ position of authority, their ability to create meaningful change for their clients, and their ability to connect clients to resources, to community, and to new social networks. Findings revealed that most social workers experienced positive emotions when they deemed their interactions with their clients successful. Social workers in non-mandated agencies reported more satisfaction and fulfillment than those in mandated agencies, perhaps because their clients voluntarily participated and invested themselves in the therapeutic process to have successful outcomes.

Some of these positive emotions may be consistent with Wernick (2009) whose study’s participants leveraged their wealth for social justice ventures, but that study did not directly examine the emotions of the participants. However, findings from my study accentuate those of Iezzi (2009) whose participants – eight White counselling psychology doctoral students, interns and psychologists – felt good about their racial privilege and reported that it positively impacted their work with minority clients and even increased their confidence.
Another contribution of this study to literature is the subtheme of ambivalent or mixed emotions, where participants’ feelings were simultaneously positive and negative. A few participants expressed their gratitude for being able to help clients while also expressing frustration that such help is needed. Some participants expressed that they had hope mixed with anger, and joy mixed with shame. A participant related this to the “fragile edge of privilege” whereby the client could confide in and confront the social worker at the same time, a situation that prompted the social worker to “walk a fine line” when interacting with the client.

In summary, the theme of assorted emotions reveals that emotions regarding privilege are never linear, consistent, or straightforward, but are multiple and contradictory. It also suggests that social workers will experience a myriad of emotions regarding their privilege depending on the type of clients they have, the social identity of the social worker, and the type of agency or context of social work practice.

Lastly, the point could be made that there is nothing special about social workers’ emotions as all emotions are general human traits. It could be argued that regardless of privilege, most people will experience similar emotions through their line of work. Nevertheless, what makes these findings important is that only negative emotions have been mostly identified and highlighted in the literature of privilege (Briscoe, 2011; Cullen, 2008; Ewashen, 2003; Manuppelli, 2000; Mindrup, Spray & Lamberghini-West, 2011; Pinteritis, Poteat and Spanierman, 2009; Watt, 2007), and this study acknowledges and discusses other kinds of emotions as illustrated by the lived experience of direct practice social workers.
Reflection

Critical reflection has been suggested by many scholars as a means of addressing or deconstructing privilege (Mullaly, 2010; Noble & Sullivan, 2009; Vodde, 2010; Yip, 2006). When defined as a continuous internal dialogue that should critique the oppressive discourses embedded in one’s consciousness (Mullaly, 2002) or a “ceaseless process of refraction” which forces people to acknowledge where they are “complicit in the perpetuation of oppression” (Jones, 2010, p. 123), social workers are possibly intimidated about the energy this exercise might consume. It is, therefore, not surprising that this study revealed that critical reflection is not a priority for participants.

This study found that social workers in direct practice were not invested in critical reflection about oppressive discourses in their consciousness when interacting with clients, and neither were they involved in delineating their complicity in the dynamics of oppression (Curry-Stevens, 2010; Jones, 2010). Rather, they were trying to actively listen to clients’ stories in order to forge plans of care that would be appropriate in resolving clients’ challenges. Critical reflection often happened in times of crisis, or when participants encountered difficult client situations.

This study revealed that critical reflection was not a priority for participants because they were too busy with the daily demands of their jobs. There was also the fear of repercussion from management if participants were to start asking sensitive questions about agency mandates and practices based on critical reflection. This reinforced to some participants that reflection was neither encouraged nor promoted, thereby becoming a risky venture in some agencies. Furthermore, reflection was not a priority for some because there was no infrastructure or process for reflection at several agencies.
Nevertheless, consistent with the literature, participants understood their “structured position of power” (Huron, 2005, p. 348), but there was no indication that they challenged the status-quo at work or in the wider society. Rather, they worked within and around the system in a way that benefited their clients.

In connection to the above, what is surprising to me is the notion of fear of reflection, especially as identified by Michael, a 42-year-old White male social worker within the hospital setting. He identified the fear of repercussions from management as the core reason for not reflecting on his work and privilege. Was he only intent on keeping his job or professional status, or could there be alternative reasons for this fear? Why could someone with “interlocking structural privilege” (Tisdell, 1995, p. 46) in terms of race, gender, and class be afraid and unable to exercise his privilege fully to challenge the status-quo when needed? Could there be others like him who are similarly challenged? Unfortunately, I was unable to pursue this line of questioning during the interview. This outlier was revealed to me by a member of my committee after data analysis. Further studies may be needed to examine the implication of the fear of repercussion.

Furthermore, this study revealed that reflection does not need to be a solitary exercise, or uniform for all social workers, or even organized in any formal way. Participants reflected individually and in group settings as circumstances dictated. Additionally, many participants found reflection with colleagues, which they regarded as peer supervision, more valuable than self-reflection and clinical supervision. This was because they could easily and freely share thoughts and opinions, and provide or receive feedback and constructive criticism without feeling evaluated, judged, or documented.
This study also found that, for the participants, the definition of colleagues included friends and family members in allied human and social service fields.

Moreover, this study found that social work students on field placement provided opportunities for reflection for supervisors and practitioners irrespective of their busy schedules. Students in placement or internship could ask questions about agency mandates, processes, and practices, including worker-client relationships; and supervisors were reportedly more inclined to provide rationale for agency operations. Reflection on privilege often happened in such instances.

**Phenomenological Reflection.** Van Manen (1997) regarded phenomenology as the reflection on everyday life, yet went a step further to declare that “phenomenological reflection is not introspective but retrospective” (p. 10). Like Husserl (1970), he argued that one only reflects on what has happened as opposed to what one is living through in the present moment. His declaration that true introspection was not possible is not supported by participants in this study. Not only did these participants reflect retrospectively, they also reflected introspectively as they negotiated their interactions with clients in real time. They regarded the power of introspection as the awareness of present moment interaction, where one could affect immediate change in the tenor or direction of dialogue with clients.

Arising from the above, I propose that introspection is not only possible in social work practice, but also practical and desirable, as social workers usually observe, and reflectively calibrate their responses to clients. Social workers acutely recognize the need to document client interactions as a standard of practice; as such, they have to pay attention at all times.
I am also inclined to argue that if reflection cannot be introspective, the ability to recognize the process and effects of one’s interaction with others would be limited, if not problematic. Retrospection cannot reverse present moment actions, it can only contain a promise to do better in the future – to listen more attentively to clients, and to suspend negative judgements, or eliminate pre-judgements. Retrospection will always be relevant as an evaluation of the service provided, but social workers also need introspection.

Furthermore, from the analysis of participants’ data, it is safe to argue that participants in this study not only reflected retrospectively and introspectively, but also proactively, as they anticipated and planned for future interactions with specific clients. It appeared that many visible minority participants in this study tended, much more, to reflect proactively about their interactions with clients.

**Dismantling Privilege**

There was a sense of inevitability in the way in which most study participants perceived privilege in society. This, perhaps, sprang from pragmatism regarding the current organization of society. Participants argued that to dismantle privilege would require a total overhaul – destruction and restructuring – of the society, a task, which to most of them, is not feasible. A number of participants were adamant that social workers alone cannot “level the world” or “erase privilege” unless everybody in society agreed. The likelihood of this sort of agreement, according to them, is close to nil. This perspective, in a way, validates the notion that social workers are complicit in the social arrangement of society, therefore, they may do nothing to change it (Baines, 2002; Dominelli, 2001; Leonard, 1997). This is also in line with the *myth of fatalism*, or the myth that change is not possible (Mullaly, 2010), in which case one would not try to do
the improbable as there is no guarantee of success. However, an alternative argument could be made regarding this. It may not be so much the complicity of the social worker, or the fatalism in their belief system, but the helplessness, and perhaps a lack of confident capacity they might feel regarding the daunting task of transforming society. As such, when participants were not enthusiastic about dismantling privilege, they were only acknowledging “the real world” in which they live as a complex set of sociopolitical, cultural and economic arrangements that does not yield to easy transformation or reformation.

It is not clear to what extent prior theoretical viewpoints influenced the attitudes of participants on privilege. However, participants’ responses were consistent with literature when they highlighted the inequality that is endemic to Western societies (Hick, 2010; Mullaly, 2007; Terry, 2005; Turner & Turner, 2009; Weber, 1986). They argued that the pyramid will always technically exist though one could buffer its effect for those at the bottom. Some also argued that dismantling privilege will only shift the arrangements within, but not obliterate the structure itself. Most participants interviewed were admittedly not at the top of the pyramid. Some observed that social work is not at the top of the pyramid of helping professions either, when compared to nursing and psychology. They affirmed that it may indeed take many years to dismantle the current power structure because it took years to build and reinforce it. They also expressed that establishing authority as social workers does not conflict with promoting the self-determination of clients, even within the structure of power. They demonstrated that most social workers utilize collaborative and empowering approaches with their clients.
Some participants wondered how one could dismantle what is ascribed and connected to social identities, such as race, ethnicity, and gender, underscoring the implausibility of such a task. This viewpoint is in line with the paradox explained by Kruks (2005) who pronounced that privilege would still be present even when renounced. It also resonates with Kimmel (2010) who argued that one could no more renounce privilege than to stop breathing because “privilege is in the air we breathe” (p. 9). Some participants even went further to argue that to the extent that privilege is fluid, multidimensional, and contextual, it would be difficult to dismantle what keeps changing. Even when identities do not change, the meanings and values attached to them may change. A large number of participants agreed with the suggestion advanced by Kruks (2005) that it may be preferable to acknowledge and effectively deploy one’s privilege in the service of others instead of investing time to disclose and renounce it.

Also, consistent with the literature, participants agreed that social workers should challenge and confront privilege by being aware of their power and responsibility to fight against all forms of injustice in society (Mullaly, 2010; Mullaly & West, 2018). From participants’ experiences, using privilege to the benefit of others included exposing clients to opportunities that would enable them to actualize their potentials, breaking the dichotomy of ‘us versus them’ between social workers and clients, recognizing the diversities between and within these groups, and becoming allies with people and groups that are marginalized. All these are in line with the literature on ally-ship (Bishop, 2002; Casey, 2010; Edwards, 2006). They are also compatible with Vodde (2001) and Jones (2010) who respectively said social workers should form partnership with, and learn from, oppressed groups.
Finally, this study also complements the four themes identified in the empirical literature of privilege, which are: identity development, education, awareness, and emotionality (Archer, 2011; Baines, 2000, 2002; Henze, Lucas, & Scott, 1998; Jones, 2009; McCann, 2012; Ray & Rosow, 2012; Watt, 2007). First, in terms of identity development, for instance, asking questions about how social workers in direct practice experienced their privilege struck at the root of personal and professional identities, and it confirms the notion that identities are linked to status in society and status could be used to sustain or challenge privilege (Archer, 2011; Giesler, 2006). Participants in this study discussed their social identities, some of which led to the acquisition of professional identity within the socioeconomic and political context of society. This study also confirms Pratto and Steward’s (2012) notion that members of subordinate groups are more aware of their marginalized social identities than members of dominant groups are of their invisible privilege. Even within professional contexts, participants with marginalized identities freely discussed the impact of these identities on their practice.

Second, regarding the theme of education, many participants enjoined social work to provide more education on privilege in order to enable students going into the field to be more comfortable and intentional about the use of their privilege. Third, this study also builds on the literature on awareness of privilege as it relates to the participants’ level of education (Loya, 2007), years of social work practice experience (Mitchell, 2009), self-awareness regarding all categories of social identities (Johnson, 2010; Mindrup, Spray, & Lamberghini-West, 2011) and critical reflection (Middleton, Anderson, & Banning, 2009). Findings from this study demonstrated that social workers’ lived experiences are not easily divisible into different compartments, but are holistic and
fluid depending on contexts. Lastly, beyond the literature of privilege that is noted for the exploration of negative emotions, this study revealed a range of emotions including those that are positive and ambivalent, thereby contributing to the expansion of the literature.
Chapter 6

Conclusions & Implications

The purpose of this study was to understand how social workers in direct practice experience their privilege. The rationale was that a more sophisticated understanding of privilege is essential for social workers in order to maintain the standard of competence in professional practice (CASW, 2005; Marsiglia & Kulis, 2009).

The decision to use social constructionism as the framework for the study was founded on the need to understand the meanings that participants assigned to their experiences as they interacted with clients in different contexts of practice. Likewise, the use of hermeneutic phenomenology as methodology was to produce an interpretative descriptive text that recognizes and acknowledges the complexity of particular experiences for each individual participant. The rationale for using hermeneutic phenomenology is that it accepts multiple ways of knowing, and it allows the researcher to understand the multiplicity and nuances in participants’ views. This framework and methodology enabled the researcher to answer the research question regarding how social workers in direct practice experience their privilege, in a detailed manner.

Research Process

I used an open-ended, semi-structured interview method to collect data from twenty social workers in direct practice in South Western Ontario, Canada. These interviews were transcribed verbatim and a random sample of five (audio and transcripts) were verified by a dissertation committee member. Then, I developed codes to classify important information according to the research question, after which I read and re-read the data to observe what emerged. I coded the data in an iterative way – comparing, contrasting, and refining them; and did peer-review of the codes and categories to ensure trustworthiness. Using Nvivo-11 software
enabled me to easily retrieve, re-code, and re-file data as needed. Following Braun and Clarke (2005), I also did the thematic analysis of data according to the research question.

Six themes emerged from this study to answer the research question. They were: a) moving target, b) the embeddedness of power, c) variegated experiences, d) assorted emotions, e) reflection is not a priority, and f) the pyramid will always exist. These themes were validated by study participants in the process of member-checking, as well as by different groups of practicing social workers, social work scholars, and graduate students of social work. This study has made some contributions to social work practice, including education and research.

**Conceptual and Theoretical Contributions**

Using social constructionism, this study provided a more comprehensive understanding of privilege, as that which is complex, relational, multidimensional, and contextual. This study has generated new knowledge about privilege as a moving target by proposing that privilege is not only connected to social identities, which are unearned, but also to earned professional status, and to personal agency, irrespective of, or in addition to, social identities and professional status.

Furthermore, this study refuted the conventional understanding of power as dominance by highlighting how participants described the different uses of power in their practice. By making power explicit in the definition and operation of privilege, this study questioned the notion that all social workers have power over their clients. It also challenged the dichotomies in the social work discourse, specifically regarding concepts like privilege and oppression, social justice and social control, and professional expertise and client self-determination. All these highlighted how seamlessly practitioners move through various modes of being in their professional interactions.
What is to be commended is how participants were open to the researcher about their experiences of privilege. They identified hearing clients’ stories and being a presence in clients’ lives as points of privilege. Participants were also forthcoming and candid about their positive, negative, and ambivalent emotions, rooted within the complexities, ambiguities, tensions, and multidimensionality of their privilege. The identification of positive and ambivalent emotions also expanded the literature of privilege in social work practice.

This study also enriched the understanding of privilege by creating a space for multiple ways of knowing. It included the voices and experiences of some participants with minority statuses who are marginalized in society and social work literature. It contributes further to the literature that challenges the stability of privilege in relations to specific social identities, and promoted the idea of the self which is fluid, intersectional, and relational as social workers interact with their clients, agencies, and society (Black & Stone, 2005; Harris, 2009; Philips, 2010).

This study found that social workers experience privilege in multiple ways and in different contexts, as they work with diverse clients. It also demonstrated that social workers use their non-professional (personal and social) networks as a means of helping their clients. Additionally, it further highlighted that social workers can experience barriers, microaggressions, and oppression regarding their roles from clients. As such, this study illustrated that social work encounters were not a unilateral process whereby social workers were the objective knowers acting upon, and oppressing, clients. Rather, social workers were also subjective participants in the therapeutic process where they affected, and were also affected by, their diverse client systems – be they individuals, couples, families, groups, and communities.
Empirical Contributions

This is a Canadian study that examined the experience of privilege by direct practice social workers in various fields of practice. The diverse demographics of social workers make this study very valuable to the profession. The study provided descriptive data on privilege by using hermeneutic phenomenology to focus on the essence of each participant’s lived experience. Through the process of horizontalization, which is “laying out all the data for examination and treating the data as having equal weight” or value (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96), it produced phenomenological narratives (known as individual textural description) for each participant before engaging in composite textural description or across-case cluster analysis for all participants. This inquiry illuminated how different social workers embodied privilege and the intricacy of privilege in their lived experiences. For example, contrary to conventional knowledge, for instance, an Indigenous social worker regarded his “Native status” as a privilege instead of being the basis for his oppression, just in the same way that a White female social worker regarded her race as an initial disadvantage while working in an Indigenous community. Likewise, beyond the idea of tokenism, some visible minority social workers highlighted their privileged status in terms of job hiring, especially for agencies and organizations seeking to diversify their work force, while a White female social worker lamented her male partner’s inability to secure employment because of his White race. True to the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, instances like these challenge, or cause us to reconsider the complexity, interpretative, and fluid nature of privilege in everyday life, and promotes knowledge development about the variances of privilege.

A great strength of this study is the thoroughness of the member-checking process, which confirmed the thematic findings and provided further examples from the lived experience of
participants. Another strength is its transferability or relevance to other social workers in different contexts. These illustrated the notion by Van Manen (1997) that “one’s own experiences are the possible experiences of others and also that the experiences of others are the possible experiences of oneself” (p.58), and that a “good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience –is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience” (p. 27).

Lastly, this study also provided a sampler for the promotion of praxis, which is the social workers’ engagement in an unending cycle of reflection, action, and reflection (Richardson, 2000) on the phenomenon of privilege. The interview process itself demonstrated social workers’ reflection-in-action as well as promoted reflection regarding power and privilege by social workers.

Limitations of the Study

This study has a number of limitations. First, to the extent that researchers are drawn to particular interests, which, in turn, requires particular methodologies, there could be no absolute objectivity or neutrality regarding qualitative studies (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2001). The process of this inquiry was influenced by my lived experience and graduate education, therefore, necessarily subjective. However, I stated my assumptions, reflected on my social location, and authenticated themes through member checking. Nevertheless, the findings are, in essence, technically provisional.

Second, the notion that phenomenology is a methodology without codified procedures or methods (Gadamer, 1975) is both perplexing and liberating. I regarded phenomenology as a methodology that is infused with paradoxes. Paradoxically, for instance, the strengths of hermeneutic phenomenology seem to also be its weaknesses. For instance, while it asks for
researchers to find essences or the natural significance of an experience, it proposes that essences cannot be seen in absolute terms (Van Manen, 1997, p. 39). The implication is that whatever we regard as essences are not to be reified as if they are natural, immutable, or categorical. As such, there appears to be no fixed properties of the phenomenon of privilege. What the study has unearthed, therefore, becomes only contingent on time, history, and context.

Third, this study was unable to overcome one of the challenges of utilizing intersectionality as an analytical tool, which is its complexity (Mehrotra, 2010). Though my data acknowledged the importance of multiple, simultaneous identities, participants were not able to identify the full extent of the intersections and what that meant regarding the experience of privilege. For many participants, one identity (particularly race and gender) still weighed heavier than others. It is yet to be discovered if the intersection of various identities in different contexts produce different experiences for individuals than those described here.

Fourth, the traditional limitation of qualitative studies is that generalization is impossible (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The recruitment of participants both by purposive sampling and snowball sampling also necessarily excluded others who may have shared their own experiences but had no opportunity to participate. The findings of this study are not intended to represent the experiences of all social workers.

Fifth, as with all research where participants are asked about their experiences and feelings, the social desirability bias may be present (Patton, 2002). Social desirability bias is when participants say what would be more acceptable because of social conventions, rather than what they know to be true for them. There was no way to assess the degree to which social desirability influenced participants’ narratives in this study.
Sixth, I represented participants’ area of practice by their current jobs, but many participants have worked in different agencies and fields of practice, and they drew responses from diverse experiences, irrespective of their current social work practice. The implication is that – apart from participants who were new social workers and have only worked in one agency – there may be no set of answers that only specifically referred to an experience in a single social work context. Social workers’ changing roles indicated the expansiveness of their experiences, some of which may not even have been captured.

Lastly, I had to interrogate what direct practice was during the project. Though the request for study participants was made for direct practice social workers, I quickly realized that there was role undulation between direct and indirect practice. For instance, a few participants straddled both practice roles by engaging in service coordination and policy making at the organizational level, in addition to doing client assessments and therapy at the individual level. Such participants were not denied an opportunity to participate in the study, as they argued that a substantial proportion of their practice was face-to-face interaction with clients. It appeared that practicing social workers may not have rigid lines of demarcation between direct and indirect practice.

**Implications for Social Work**

This study has implications for the social work profession in the areas of education, practice, and research. This study is rooted in the ethics and values of social work as it examines the multidimensional privilege that social workers and clients embody. It supports the core values and principles outlined by the Canadian Association of Social Workers’ (CASW, 2005) Code of Ethics by recognizing the dignity and worth of each person (both clients and social workers) and the importance of human relationships in therapeutic encounters. The moral
imperative that arises is that privilege could be used towards individual and communal good, as well as collective social justice goals.

**Education**

Social work students are routinely prepared to understand, recognize, and assess for oppression as it affects their clients within the society (Dominelli, 2002; Harlow & Hearn, 1996; Leslie, Leslie, & Murphy, 2003; Mullaly, 2002; Phillips, 2002; Rossiter, 2001). Without neglecting this, we must also recognize that teaching students about privilege (including theirs and their clients’) is an important part of multicultural education (Anderson & Middleton, 2011; Mindrup, Spray, & Lamberghini-West, 2011; Mitchell, 2009). As students are trained to become professional helpers in a diverse and complex society, they must have a thorough understanding of themselves—in all of their own differences, diversities, and multiplicities, and the impact of their identities, intersectionalities, and subjectivities on their clients, and agencies or organizations.

Findings from this study suggest that it may be important to include more content on privilege in the social work curriculum. This is directly relevant to contemporary social work practice. The Canadian Association for Social Work Education’s (CASWE, 2014) *Standards for Accreditation*, for example, states that understanding issues of diversity is a core competence required of all social workers. One of the core learning objectives for students is that they must “recognize diversity and difference as a crucial and valuable part of living in a society” (CASWE, 2014, p. 11). Findings from this study can inform this guideline. For example, privilege should not only be taught from the critical perspective but also from the social constructionist perspective. Students need to understand privilege as a relative phenomenon that one could have more or less of depending on circumstances or context. They should also know
that the intersections of identities and contexts make privilege a dynamic concept. It is therefore imperative that social work students and practitioners understand the variances and multidimensionality of privilege as a moving target so that they can pay close attention not only to their own social identities in practice but also their contexts of practice, their own sense of agency, autonomy, independence, and self-reliance, as well as their clients’ multiple identities and presenting problems.

Furthermore, students should learn how to maintain integrity regarding issues of power, recognizing that the power based on position and context of practice may change. They should know that, like privilege, power relations in social work practice are unstable, ambiguous and multidimensional. They should also understand the different forms and uses of power and the relativity of power in different agencies and contexts of practice. As this study indicates, students should recognize that the dialectics of power and powerlessness may recur throughout social work practice. This happens when the agency or organizational structure that endows them with power simultaneously makes them feel powerless in their position. Students should not strive so much to create a binary of power and powerlessness but to pragmatically embrace this dialectic as they continue to provide services to their clients and pursue social justice in the society.

Lastly, findings from this study seem to suggest that the shaping of professional identity has been largely based on what students learn in school in addition to their accreditation after school, but not by the interaction with clients. Client interaction is another layer that attention should be paid to during their education. Social work students should be taught not only to be aware of their social identities and professional status, but also about the fluidity of privilege for
each person, including clients, in various contexts. Learning about privilege may reduce one’s primordial fear of difference and the prejudgment of others.

Practice

As society gets more diverse, especially with increasing immigration to Canada (Statistics, 2011), social workers will be at the forefront of providing services to clients. They, therefore, need to have a proficient grasp of the issues of identities and the privilege attached to them. Learning about, recognizing, and building on clients’ privilege, would add to the strengths-based perspective in social work (Saleebey, 2002). Likewise, as social workers increasingly practice in a multicultural context, learning about the multidimensionality and complexity of privilege will become part of their cultural competency (Heydt & Sherman, 2005; Yan & Wong, 2005).

Furthermore, the social demographics of social workers are becoming increasingly more diverse and the need exists more than ever for social workers to recognize that privilege and vulnerabilities will simultaneously play out in therapeutic encounters. Social workers must recognize that clients could discriminate against them on the bases of age or appearance, race, family status, personal/professional experience and gender. They must, therefore, learn specific strategies regarding dealing with micro-aggressions (Sue, 2010). Moreover, to the extent that it is highly unlikely that social workers can separate their own social identities from their practice, findings from this study suggest that male social workers should not assume that they will have gender privilege or that Christian social workers will have religious privilege. Neither should the social worker with a disability or Indigenous social worker assume that they will lack privilege based on those statuses. Other aspects of identity can moderate, diminish or accentuate privilege.
Social work practitioners must also recognize that power is not absolute or solely held by the professional. Though there is power/authority inherent in their positions depending on their practice context, this power may not be uniformly experienced by all workers. This power could also be used positively or negatively, or unused. Social workers must understand and consciously utilize power in the service of their clients.

Furthermore, social work agencies and organizations should provide space for open dialogue regarding power and privilege and mitigate the possibility of oppression of social workers. Agencies should educate clients when clients have engaged in racist or sexist behaviors and not be too swift to grant a client’s request for a different social worker when such request seem to stem from the client’s prejudices. Agency management must recognize that systematic exclusion has occurred when racialized social workers are removed to pave the way for White social workers to take over a case. Agencies should have zero tolerance for all forms of discrimination or hatred. There is need to name and address racist and sexist encounters when they occur in practice, and to provide a safe space and respectful environment for social workers with marginalized identities to practice as effectively as they can.

Social work agencies need transformative leaders in this increasingly multicultural Canadian society, so social work administrators should cultivate members of marginalized groups into leadership roles. Though it cannot be guaranteed that persons from marginalized groups in leadership roles would be more progressive or that this move will lead to immediate social change, it may lead to a shift in attitude and consciousness for clients and workers. Relevant training programs should be implemented to ensure that these members are able to contribute their own knowledge and experience to enhance social work practice. Lastly, social workers need to ensure that differences and privileges attached to them are not hindrances to
meaningful conversations, but to engage authentically and relate with clients not as disparate identities but as full partners in the therapeutic process.

**Reflection.** It is concerning that participants in this study did not see critical reflection as a priority even though they recognized the importance of reflection for good practice. Findings from this study align with the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (2014) curriculum guidelines which states that social workers need to be “grounded in reflective practice” (p. 2). It is recommended that critical reflection should not be regarded as an intimidating exercise. It does not have to be about oppressive discourses (Jones, 2010; Mullaly, 2010) or reaction to negative client interactions as identified by many study participants. Rather, reflection should be considered as a constituent part of practice. It does not need to be a solitary exercise but it could be done in groups. Reflection should also be understood not only as retrospection (Van Manen, 2007) but introspection. Social workers can also reflect proactively to prepare for client encounters and plan intervention strategies accordingly.

In addition, social work agencies should provide infrastructure or process for reflection. Though findings suggest that direct practice social workers often have busy schedules, with extensive waiting lists, agencies should highlight the significance of reflection by allowing social workers to schedule time for reflection in their daily routine. Social workers should be encouraged to devote specific times and days for reflection exercises and social work agencies should ensure that supervisors are available for debriefing.

Furthermore, agency management should create a non-judgemental atmosphere where staff can freely discuss challenges and difficulties with social identities as they affect practice. They should also promote peer supervision where workers can provide constructive criticism and encouragement to one another. In addition, they should encourage all workers, not only social
work students on placement, to ask questions about agency mandates and practices and be open to answering questions. Agency management should also be open to suggestions from staff about how to improve organizational practices and processes as it relates to reflection. Lastly, as indicated by some participants, agencies should encourage and promote reflection in such a way that workers will not fear negative reprisals or repercussions from management.

*Dismantling privilege.* Participants in this study seemed to assume that to dismantle privilege implies a total restructuring of society. This may be because society and social structures may have been understood as objective entities outside of the self. However, there is an alternative perspective that “structures and persons are not outside each other but embedded and embodied in each other” (Kumsa, 2007, p. 22). This means that no structure can survive without those who make it function. It follows, therefore, that by engaging in action to understand or change the self, the social worker can affect the way social structures or society function. Findings from this study suggest that social workers can confront and challenge privilege by, first, being aware of its relationship to power. Social workers can also provide clients with opportunities that they may not otherwise have. Findings from this study also suggest that the issue is not to renounce privilege (Kimmel, 2010), but to understand it in all its fluidity, multidimensionality and contextuality. To dismantle privilege may imply understanding the meanings and values that are attached to it, then deploying it in the service of others (Kruks, 2005).

**Research**

Privilege is still an underexplored area of scholarship which is relevant to several disciplines – including social work, education, sociology, psychology, nursing, and medicine. This research, therefore, expands the knowledge base of social work as it studied direct practice
social workers, some of whose voices have been absent in the literature. Social work research should continue to explore this area to gain more knowledge and enhance social work practice. For instance, findings from this study revealed that barriers sometimes come from clients. More studies are needed to explore the ways in which clients may discriminate against their social workers and strategies for addressing this issue. Future investigations can also be directed towards understanding the clients’ perspective of social workers’ privilege, as well as the privilege of clients when they engage in social work services.

Also, based on preliminary findings about the awareness of privilege, further research is suggested regarding the spectrum of privilege ranging from denial and obliviousness to acceptance and gratitude. This could signify a theoretical model regarding the awareness of privilege. Additionally, further studies are recommended on reflection in the context of organizational practice. Many social work classes engage students on critical reflection on many issues, hence the subtheme of “too much reflection” in this study. However, this study also identified a specific barrier to reflection in practice as the fear of repercussion from management. Further studies need to explore this fear, who experiences it, when and how, as well as its effect on practitioners and its implication for professional practice in various organizations.

Lastly, participants in this study were not able to explicitly communicate how their identities intersected and how those intersections created their experience of privilege. Instead, they tended to rank order their multiple, simultaneously existing identities and how they experienced their reality. Future research might explore how, and in what ways, participants rank their key identities – be it race, gender, or class – and how they see these as trumping all the other privileges in the context of their professional experiences, rendering other privileges less
important or insignificant. This proposed study should also examine if participants with similar identities have the same kinds of experiences.

On a final note, though this study has not dismantled the concept of privilege, by better identifying social workers’ experiences of privilege as fluid, context-dependent, multiple and shifting, it has potentially opened the way to future dialogue among social workers about their differences in ways that are less defensive or threatening, more honest, open, and respectful. It is my hope that this will ultimately help social workers towards greater changes at individual, interpersonal, policy, organizational, cultural and social systems level.
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CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: The Praxis of Privilege: How Social Workers Experience their Privilege

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Akin Taiwo, MSW, RSW, PhD candidate from the School of Social Work at the University of Windsor. Information gathered from this study will be used as part of his PhD dissertation.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact Dr. Brent Angell, the Faculty Supervisor, through his email at angell@uwindsor.ca or by telephone at 519-253-3000 ext. 3064.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to explore social workers’ experience of their privilege. Privilege is the earned and unearned advantages that social workers have as a result of their social identities, professional education, socialization, certification and accreditation; and social workers use their privilege when working with clients. This researcher will like to know specifically how you experience your privilege as a social worker. Your participation will add to the multiplicity of meanings and experiences of privilege and will expand our understanding of the phenomenon of privilege in social work practice.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:
- Contact the researcher, Akin Taiwo, through his email ataiwo@uwindsor.ca or telephone: xxx-xxx xxxx.
- Consent to participate in the research and consent to be audio-taped
- Complete a demographic form
- Complete an interview that may take up to 2 hours (This interview could be completed at your home, office, university, or any mutually agreed upon place with the researcher)
- You will be contacted once during the data analysis phase by the researcher, primarily by email, to provide feedback to the initial themes and findings of the study.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The study does not have any major risks. The interview questions will be no more difficult than the topics that occur in day-to-day interactions as a professional. For instance, interview questions include:
What is your understanding of privilege and power?
What gives you a sense of privilege in your life?
Describe your experience of privilege (when it has been positive and negative)
How do you reflect on privilege in your practice?

If a particular question makes you feel uncomfortable, you can choose not to answer the question and still continue to be in the study or withdraw at any time without consequences.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

There may be no direct benefit to you. But you may benefit indirectly from the satisfaction that you have contributed in a meaningful way to social work education and research. In addition, this study will give you an opportunity to be self-reflective regarding your practice experience as prescribed by the Social Work Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (2008). On a larger scale, the study will contribute to scholarly literature that may help social workers to be more intentional about their privilege and practice.

COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

You will receive a $20 Tim Horton’s gift card at the completion of the interview as a “Thank You” for sharing your time and experience. Participants who withdraw shall still receive the $20 Tim Horton’s gift card in appreciation for their attempt.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. However, as a social worker, the researcher is mandated by law to report abuse or child mistreatment or intent to cause harm to self or others. Your name will not be used during the interview. Your responses to the interview questions will not be connected to your identity in any way. The interview shall be audio-taped and interview tapes shall be destroyed after transcription is completed and verified. Transcription files will have no identifying information and shall be indefinitely stored by the researcher and used for research purposes. The dissertation committee shall also have access to the anonymized data.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw up to the point that we complete the interview. After that time, you cannot withdraw your data when analysis starts as I will not be able to link you to your data. You may refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. You may also choose to stop the interview and withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. The researcher may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so. The researcher will also be alert to signs of discomfort, (e.g. fidgeting) and ask if you want to stop the interview. Participants who withdraw will still receive the $20 Tim Horton’s gift card in appreciation for their attempt.
FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS

The summary of the research shall be available on the Research Ethics Board (REB) website by December 31, 2015.

Web address: www.uwindsor.ca/REB
Date when results are available: December 31, 2015.

SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

These data may be used in subsequent studies, in scholarly and literary publications and in presentations.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact: Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3P4; Telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3948; e-mail: ethics@uwindsor.ca
SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the information provided for the study, The Praxis of Privilege: How Social Workers Experience their Privilege as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

____________________________________
Name of Participant

______________________________
Signature of Participant

____________________________________
Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

____________________________________
Signature of Investigator

____________________________________
Date
LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

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- What gives you a sense of privilege in your life?
- Describe your experience of privilege (when it has been positive and negative)
- How do you reflect on privilege in your practice?
If a particular question makes you feel uncomfortable, you can choose not to answer the question and still continue to be in the study or withdraw at any time without consequences.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

There may be no direct benefit to you. But you may benefit indirectly from the satisfaction that you have contributed in a meaningful way to social work education and research. In addition, this study will give you an opportunity to be self-reflective regarding your practice experience as prescribed by the Social Work Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (2008). On a larger scale, the study will contribute to scholarly literature that may help social workers to be more intentional about their privilege and practice.

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SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

____________________________________  __________________
Signature of Investigator                  Date
Appendix C

Letter of Recruitment through OASW

Dear colleague,

My name is Akin Taiwo, a doctoral student in social work at the School of Social Work, University of Windsor. I am asking you to participate in my PhD research study on the phenomenon of privilege. This study has received the University of Windsor’s Research Ethics Board (REB) clearance.

I am interested in understanding the experiences of twenty social workers in direct practice in multiple settings drawn from Southwestern Ontario, which includes Windsor-Essex, Chatham-Kent, and Sarnia-Lambton. Direct practice is face-to-face interaction with clients—such as individuals, families, and groups, in publicly funded agencies, institutions or organizations, or in private practice. This includes social workers in settings such as hospitals or corrections and probation facilities, child welfare agencies, mental health, gerontology, family and community services, and so on. Excluded are social workers in indirect practice, such as those in administration and those who formulate and evaluate policies and programs or those who work in research groups and who do not provide direct services to clients. Interested participants would only do one interview that may take up to two hours.

Many scholars believe that social workers have power and privilege because of their education, knowledge, skills, expertise, and their professional status, which is backed by law. Some define privilege as a means through which social workers account for their advantages in social work relationships. As such, it is mostly assumed that all social workers experience power and privilege the same way; and it has been recommended that social workers should challenge, confront and dismantle their privilege. Yet, social workers could also feel powerless or trapped in certain situations in their lives and practice situations. How do they experience privilege in such situations?

The purpose of this study is, therefore, to arrive at a multiplicity of views based on the lived experiences of social workers, which, in turn, is based on their different social identities (like age, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class etc.), years of experience, practice approach, and context of practice. My research question is: How do social workers in direct practice experience privilege? The information, which I hope to gather, will enable the profession of social work to have a more holistic view of privilege, and it would expand the knowledge base and literature on power and privilege in social work practice.

Should you be interested in participating in this study, please read the attached Letter of Information for Consent to Participate in Research, and contact me within two weeks, (ending.............) at ataiwo@uwindsor.ca or xxx-xxx xxxx to set up a meeting. You can also, please, forward this email to refer me to your social work colleagues who you think might be interested in participating in this study. All participants shall receive a $20 Tim Hortons’s gift card at the end of the interview as appreciation for sharing their time and experience with me.

Thank you very much. I’m looking forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Akin Taiwo, MSW, RSW, PhD candidate
School of Social Work, University of Windsor.
Appendix D

Letter of Recruitment through Field Supervisors

Dear colleague,

My name is Akin Taiwo, a Ph.D student in social work at the School of Social Work, University of Windsor; and I am doing my dissertation research on the phenomenon of privilege. This study has received the University of Windsor’s Research Ethics Board (REB) clearance. I am hoping that you can help me forward or circulate this information to the social workers in your organization.

I am interested in understanding the experiences of twenty social workers in direct practice in multiple settings drawn from Southwestern Ontario, which includes Windsor-Essex, Chatham-Kent, and Sarnia-Lambton. Direct practice is face-to-face interaction with clients – such as individuals, families, and groups, in publicly funded agencies, institutions or organizations, or in private practice. This includes social workers in settings such as hospitals or corrections and probation facilities, child welfare agencies, mental health, gerontology, family and community services, and so on. Excluded are social workers in indirect practice, such as those in administration and those who formulate and evaluate policies and programs or those who work in research groups and who do not provide direct services to clients. Interested participants would only do one interview that may take up to two hours.

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Should you be interested in participating in this study, please read the attached Letter of Information for Consent to Participate in Research, and contact me within two weeks, (ending…………..) at ataiwo@uwindsor.ca or xxx-xxx xxxx to set up a meeting. You can also, please, forward this email to refer me to your social work colleagues who you think might be interested in participating in this study. Interested participants should contact me directly. No one at the School of Social Work would know whether or not you participated in the study. All participants shall receive a $20 Tim Horton’s gift card at the end of the interview as appreciation for sharing their time and experience with me.

Thank you very much. I’m looking forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Akin Taiwo, MSW, RSW, PhD candidate
School of Social Work, University of Windsor.
Title of the Project: The Praxis of Privilege: How Social Workers Experience their Privilege

I consent to the audio-taping of this interview.
I understand these are voluntary procedures and that I am free to withdraw at any time by requesting that the taping be stopped. I also understand that my name will not be revealed to anyone and that taping will be kept confidential. Tapes are filed by number only and store in a locked cabinet.
The destruction of the audio tapes will be completed after transcription and verification.
I understand that confidentiality will be respected and that the audio tape will be for professional use only.

_____________________________________
Date
Appendix F

Demographic Questionnaire

Please check or fill in all that applies. Thank you.

1. All levels of education (Please check all your degrees)
   ___ Bachelor’s degree (BSW)
   ___ Master’s degree (MSW)
   ___ PhD
   ___ Others (Please specify, including what discipline) __________________________

2. What is the total number of years of your post-accreditation practice experience?
   ______

3. What is your gender? (Please check one)
   ___ Male
   ___ Female ______
   ___ Others (specify) ________________________

4. What is your sexual orientation? (Please check one)
   ___ Heterosexual
   ___ Homosexual (gay & lesbian)
   ___ Bisexual
   ___ Others (specify) ________________________

5. What is your present age?
   ___ Years

6. What is your current relationship status? (Please check one)
   ___ Never legally married
   ___ Legally married (and not separated)
   ___ Separated, but still legally married
   ___ Divorced
   ___ Widowed
   ___ Others (specify) __________________________

7. What is your race or ethnic group? (Please check all that applies)
   ___ Aboriginal/First Nation/Status Indian - Specify___________
   ___ Arab
___ Black
___ Chinese
___ Filipino
___ Japanese
___ Korean
___ Latin American
___ South Asian (e.g. East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan etc) ____________
___ Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Malaysian, Laotian, etc.) Specify___
___ West Asian (e.g., Iranian, Afghan, etc.) Specify: ______________________
___ White
___ Others (Please specify) __________________________

8. What is your religious affiliation or spiritual orientation? (Please check all that applies)

___ Agnostic
___ Atheist
___ Buddhist
___ Christian (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Non-denominational) Please
      specify____________________
___ Confucianism
___ Existentialist
___ First Nations/Indigenous
___ Goddess/Feminist spirituality
___ Greek Orthodox
___ Hindu
___ Jewish (Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Non-affiliated) Please specify _________
___ Muslim
___ Pagan/Wiccan
___ Shamanism
___ Sikh
___ Spiritism
___ Traditional African religion/spirituality
___ Unitarian Universalist
___ Others (Specify) ____________________

___ No religious affiliation

9. In what type of work environment or setting have you practiced social work? (Please check all that apply, specify particular areas with years of practice in each)

___ Child Welfare/Foster care __________________ (years)
10. What do you consider your theoretical orientation for practicing social work? (Please check all that applies)
   ___ Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
   ___ Critical (Feminist, Anti-Oppressive Practice etc)
   ___ Eclectic/Multifaceted
   ___ Humanistic
   ___ Narrative
   ___ Psychodynamic
   ___ Others (Specify) ___________________

11. Other information you would like to share about yourself:

Thank you for your time and effort in completing this. It is greatly appreciated.
Appendix G

Interview Questions
Thank you for granting me this interview. I’m glad that we could meet today. As you know, the purpose of my dissertation is to get some clarity about the nature of privilege and power and how social workers experience that in practice. But before we get to the definitions, could you please tell me:

(Re: Context of practice)
1. What kinds of professional services you provide and how do you provide/deliver these services?

(Re: Conceptualization)
2. What’s your understanding of privilege?
   • Potential probing question: How do you define and describe it?
3. What’s your understanding of power?
   • Potential probing question: How do you define and describe it?
4. What do you think is the relationship between privilege and power?
   • Potential probing question: Are they different or are they connected?

(Re: Experience of privilege)
5. What gives you a sense of privilege?
   a. As a person (Prompt: In terms of social identities/intersection of identities)
   b. As a professional (Prompt: In terms of qualifications, certification, and authority)
6. Can you please describe your experienced of/with privilege in your practice? (Give two or more examples)
   a. When it has been positive
   b. When it has been negative
   • Potential probing questions:
     o In what ways have you experienced privilege? (re: identities/intersectionalities)
     o In what context and with which clients do you experience power and privilege?
     o How does the interaction between you and your clients shape your experience of privilege?
     o How did you feel? What kinds of emotions/tensions, if any, came up for you?
     o When did they arise – during/after the interaction? What did you do about them?

(Re: Reflection)
7. In the context of your work, do you find opportunities to reflect on issues of power and privilege? (With colleagues, on your own, or in staff or agency meetings?)
   • Potential probing questions:
     o If there is no opportunity for reflection, why or why not?
     o If there is opportunity for reflection, what does the conversation sound like?
       (What is the current dialogue with colleagues about this topic?)
     o As part of the ongoing development that we do as social workers, how does your reflection on power and privilege enhance your practice, if at all?
     o Some scholars have suggested that we should confront, challenge, or dismantle privilege, what do you think about that? In what ways can we do that, if we should?
8. What would you like to add to my understanding of privilege that I have not asked?
Appendix H

Data Collection & Analysis Process

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Notes:
- Interviews conducted from February 9- March 27, 2015
- Transcription of Interviews from April 6 to May 17, 2015
- Verification of Interview transcripts from April 9 to June 15, 2015
- Memoing on Interview transcripts from July 15 to August 18, 2015
- Coding of transcripts from November 25, 2015 to February 1, 2016
- Within-case analysis from Feb 4 – April 10, 2016
- Review and editing of within-case analysis from April 18 – May 3, 2016
- Second level (hierarchical coding) from June 15 – August 8, 2016
- Across-case (thematic analysis) from June 20 to August 10, 2016
Appendix I

CONFIDENTIAL AGREEMENT FOR TRANSCRIPTIONS

As a transcriber of research interviews, I, ______________________________ agree to protect the confidentiality of this research and its participants. As such, I will not disclose any information about this research to anyone.

I also agree to destroy the audio files and copies of the transcripts that I may have after completion and submission of transcripts to the researcher. These include transcription and audio that may be on file in a computer hard drive, USB, disc, or any other digital or storage system.

Transcriber’s name:

Signature:

Date:

Researcher/Witness:
## Appendix J

### Initial Nodes/Codes

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<td>Colonial privilege</td>
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<td>Power as influence</td>
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<td>Dominance and control</td>
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<td>Empowerment</td>
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<td>Government role</td>
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<td>Age discrimination</td>
<td>Gateway for access</td>
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<td>Unscheduled visits</td>
<td>De-sensitization to clients</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal interest in family</td>
<td>Barriers from clients</td>
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246
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social network</th>
<th>Embodying the profession</th>
<th>De-sensitization to clients</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gender discrimination abuse and harassment</td>
<td>Indigenous versus Colonial privilege</td>
<td>Barriers from clients</td>
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<td>Benefits of privilege</td>
<td>Inter-subjectivities and interactions</td>
<td>Embodying the profession</td>
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<td>Complicated privilege</td>
<td>Male privilege</td>
<td>Combination of Identities</td>
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<td>Drawbacks of privilege</td>
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<td>Male privilege</td>
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<td>Visible minority identities</td>
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<td>Duty and responsibilities</td>
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<td>Access to information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interactions with self and others</td>
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<td>Discrimination by clients</td>
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<td>No support from agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fear of clients</td>
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<tr>
<td>Privilege as a Native</td>
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<tr>
<td>Privilege as a Male</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| Privilege as positive | Positive Emotions | Positive Emotions |
| Mixed emotions | Negative Emotions | Negative Emotions |
| Privilege as negative | Ambivalent Emotions | Ambivalent Emotions |
| Privilege becomes ego | | |
| Humor to cope | | |
| Deprecation, reducing value | | |
| Interdisciplinary teams | | |
| Guilty about privilege | | |

<p>| No reflection | No reflection | Reflection: Not a priority |
| No time for reflection | No time for reflection | How social workers reflected |
| Reflecting alone, Isolation | Fear of reflection | Benefits of reflection |
| Reflection with client | Too much reflection | |
| Reflection with colleagues | How social workers reflected | |
| Reflection with supervisors | Benefits of reflection | |
| Reflection with friends, Reflection with family | Reflection as review | |
| Fear of reflection | Reflection for indirect practice | |
| Benefits of reflection | Student supervision | |
| Reflection as review | Too much reflection | |
| Reflection for indirect practice | How much reflection | |
| Student supervision | Benefits of reflection | |
| Too much reflection | | |</p>
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<th>Acknowledge privilege</th>
<th>Confronting and challenging privilege</th>
<th>Confronting and challenging privilege</th>
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<td>Loving privilege</td>
<td>Dismantling privilege</td>
<td>Dismantling privilege</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness of privilege</td>
<td>Inevitability of privilege</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inevitable structure and pyramid of society</td>
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<tr>
<td>Challenging privilege</td>
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<td>Confronting privilege</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dismantling privilege</td>
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Appendix L

Final Categories and Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Identities</td>
<td>Moving Target</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professionalism as earned advantage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Privilege as agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Externally-directed power</td>
<td>The Embeddedness of Power</td>
</tr>
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<td>Internally-directed power</td>
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<td>Power as not always negative</td>
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<td>Privilege and power, similarities and distinctions</td>
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<td>Privilege, power, and oppression</td>
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<td>Gateway for access</td>
<td>Variegated Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The privilege of sharing stories</td>
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<td>De-sensitization to clients</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barriers from clients</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embodying the profession</td>
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<tr>
<td>Combination of Identities</td>
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<td>Male privilege</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive Emotions</td>
<td>Assorted Emotions</td>
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<td>Negative Emotions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ambivalent Emotions</td>
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<td>Reflection: Not a priority</td>
<td>Reflection Not a Priority</td>
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<td>How social workers reflected</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benefits of reflection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confronting and challenging privilege</td>
<td>The Pyramid Will Always Exist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dismantling privilege</td>
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Appendix M - Themes & Findings, Participant Comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>How Theme is understood by researcher</th>
<th>How Theme represents participant experience</th>
<th>How Theme does not represent participant experience</th>
<th>Other Comments about theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moving Target</td>
<td>Privilege is a moving target because it is a phenomenon that keeps unfolding depending on context. Essentially, there are various types of privilege, which manifests in various forms in the lives of individuals. For instance, privilege applies to social identities into which people are born, including family and country of origin, race, culture, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexual orientation, religion, ability, class or socio-economic status. This privilege is mainly unearned, subtle, uneven, dynamic, and mostly invisible for those who have it. Privilege also applies to professional status which is gained or attained by certain efforts and actions, like education, clinical training, accreditation, and practice or employment. This privilege is also linked to having access to confidential information from clients and having benefits and resources in society based on one’s status as a professional. This privilege could be lost if not maintained by perseverance, efficiency or ethical practice. There is also the privilege which is associated with one’s ability for self-determination, being able to assert oneself and make decisions in different circumstances, exercise one’s rights and freedoms without fear or pressure. This privilege, as a sense of agency, could also be linked to social identities and professionalism. These different components of identities and contexts make privilege a moving target. However, not everyone is privileged in every area of life, as privilege is also understood in comparison and contrasts between and among individuals and groups of people. Privilege fluctuates.</td>
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or shifts according to specific history, culture, and socio-economic situation of one’s society.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>How Theme is understood by researcher</th>
<th>How Theme represents participant experience</th>
<th>How Theme does not represent participant experience</th>
<th>Other Comments about theme</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Embeddedness of Power</td>
<td>Power and privilege are interconnected and inseparable. Indeed, there are different types of power enclosed in privilege; one being the power of position, which is externally directed (to influence, help, direct, or empower clients), and there is internally directed power based on one’s ability for self-determination. Power could also be positive or negative depending on its usage, or dormant until it is used. And, social workers, because of their position of privilege, exercise power in social work relationships, and that has impact on whether or not their clients feel oppressed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
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<tr>
<td>Variegated Experiences</td>
<td>Most social workers experience privilege with all their clients as a result of their position of power. This position makes them a ‘gateway’ for access to programs and services in the community; it also makes them a witness to clients’ stories of their lives and situations. At the same time, because of their privilege, some social workers experience de-sensitization to clients on one hand as well as barriers from clients on the other hand. Nevertheless, to the extent that they embody the profession of social work, social workers have multiple and contradictory experiences. Some of these relate to their ability to help, which could be appreciated or resented by clients, or the respect they enjoy in society, or the social networks they have access to. Some of these experiences also relate to the intersections of their social identities, especially in terms of race, gender, and age/appearance, and the interactions and effects of these identities on clients who also have diverse identities. Most social workers say their interactions with clients shape their experience of privilege and enable them to recognize their social location in society. Social workers also experience privilege differently based on how their clients themselves experience privilege in their interactions with and reactions to social workers. All White social workers, irrespective of gender say they have power over all their clients, but not so for all visible minority social workers, irrespective of gender.</td>
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<td>Theme</td>
<td>How Theme is understood by researcher</td>
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| Male Privilege     | Male privilege is complicated in social work practice, and depending on the context of practice, there appears to be both advantages and drawbacks that accrue to some male social workers.  
Female social workers can exhibit patriarchal values because of the way society is set up.  
Benefits of male privilege in social work practice include more employment opportunities, unique roles within the hiring organization, more positive client responses, and the possibility of promotion (though more for the White male than racialized male social workers).  
Drawbacks include the male’s reduced capacity to demonstrate emotions, the conflation of gender with sex, restricted practice with some female clients because of previous abusive experiences, and the inability of a few men to represent the diverse views of all men.  
Racialized male social workers could even experience a diminished privilege in their work setting than in the wider society. |                                             |                                                  |                                             |
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<th>How Theme does not represent participant experience</th>
<th>Other Comments about theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assorted Emotions</td>
<td>There are multifarious emotions attached to the experience of privilege, some of which are positive, negative, and ambivalent. Positive emotions include feeling good, having a sense of fulfilment and accomplishment, excitement, gladness, and pride, especially when social workers successfully ‘connect’ with their clients and have positive results. Negative emotions include fear, paranoia, anger, anxiety, shame, helplessness and embarrassment especially when clients have negative perception of, and interaction with social workers or when social workers do not feel supported by their workplace. Ambivalent emotions result when social workers have positive and negative emotions simultaneously, like being happy to help clients but frustrated that clients need certain kinds of help, or enjoying the trust while enduring the confrontation of clients in therapy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflection Not a Priority</td>
<td>Reflection is not a priority for most social workers unless or until they encounter difficult client situations. Many social workers do not reflect on privilege and power at all. Reasons range from not having enough time to being too busy with a long wait-list, fear of reflection (as it may unearth what management does not want to hear or what social workers do not want to deal with) and the impression that social workers may be reflecting too much already. However, when social workers reflect, some reflect alone, some with colleagues and supervisors, and sometimes with students on placement or internship. Reflection increases awareness, promotes empathy and humility, de-stresses the social worker, and enhances practice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Pyramid Will Always Exist</td>
<td>Privilege can be confronted and challenged in order to reduce or eliminate its negative effect, but privilege cannot be dismantled because it is entrenched in the infrastructure of society and it is attached to people’s social identities which are dynamic and mostly inescapable. What can be dismantled is the way we perceive and utilize privilege, as hierarchy is needed for the society to function properly and privilege is needed by social workers to practice effectively. Social workers should, therefore, acknowledge and embrace their privilege and professionalism instead of being defensive about it; they should use their privilege to remove barriers and provide opportunities instead of seeking its total dissolution, which is impractical.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other views to consider?</td>
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</tbody>
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Vita Auctoris

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