# Practice Guide

Power, privilege and use of self in child protection practice

The purpose of this practice guide is to assist practitioners to understand basic concepts and practice considerations in relation to privilege, oppression, and power. It encourages practitioners to understand their own experiences of privilege and oppression, to make purposeful use of self, and provides guidance on interpersonal skills when engaging and working with individuals, groups, and communities who are experiencing various forms of oppression.

## Privilege and oppression

Privilege and oppression come in many different forms, and operates on personal, interpersonal, cultural and institutional levels. While individual practitioners experience varying layers of privilege and oppression, the role of an authorised officer or practitioner working in a statutory organisation is an identity of privilege. Recognising the privilege of working in a statutory context with predominately involuntary clients experiencing significant disadvantage, is essential to work fairly and effectively with children, families and communities.

In recent years, discussions in society about privilege, power imbalance, inclusion, diversity, justice, race, and equality have become more prevalent. Honest conversations about these topics between staff and a willingness for practitioners to look within themselves to identify and leverage their privilege can pave the way for:

* meaningful action towards combating racism, sexism, classism and other forms of oppression that continue to be barriers to good child protection practice
* staff to develop an understanding of their personal biases that may impact on their decision making and casework with families who are different to themselves
* addressing the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in the child protection system.

### Privilege

Privilege gives advantages and benefits to members of dominant groups at the expense of others who are oppressed. When someone holds privilege, they are systematically advantaged by society because of certain attributes they possess associated with that identity which offers them more opportunity and safeguarding through life. Examples of groups that have privilege in Australian society include people who are white, living without disability, heterosexual, male, Christian, middle or upper class, middle-aged and who speak English. Privilege is characteristically invisible to people who have it and is far easier to forget or ignore than any oppressed identities we have. This is because when someone experiences oppression or disadvantage, it feels bad, unfair, harmful and/or upsetting.

### Oppression

When someone has an identity that is oppressed, they are systematically disadvantaged because of certain attributes associated with that identity. The more oppressed identities a person has, the fewer 'life chances' they have because of those intersecting layers of oppression. For example, growing up poor in an impoverished neighbourhood is difficult for a white male, however for a black woman, it is even more difficult due to the intersecting identities of being poor, a person of colour, and a woman. Some examples of how oppression impacts people today include:

* A man who is Aboriginal is more likely to be arrested than a man who is non-Indigenous.
* A person with disability is likely to have fewer job opportunities than a person without disability.
* A person who is transgender will likely experience higher rates of mental health concerns than a cisgender person.

The combination of prejudice and institutional power creates systems that discriminate against people experiencing oppression. Racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and classism enable privileged groups to exert control over oppressed groups by limiting their rights, freedom, movement and access to basic resources such as healthcare, education and housing. This can be at a systemic level (such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people having a shorter life span than non-Indigenous Australians) and at an individual level (a building with no ramp so people who use a wheelchair cannot gain entry).

The following table provides examples of privileged and oppressed groups. This table can be used as a tool to identify the privilege we hold and can help to recognise the differences between ourselves and others (keeping in mind that not all privileged and oppressed identities are ‘visible’).

### A working conceptualisation of historically and currently included/privileged (non-target) and excluded/oppressed (target) groups in Australia\*

| Type of oppression | Variable | Privileged/Included Groups (Non-Target) | Oppressed/Excluded Groups (Target) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Racism | Race / colour / ethnicity | People who are white. | People who are black / brown / of colour.  People who are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, South Sea Islander, Pacific Islander, African, Asian, Greek, Italian, Lebanese. |
| Classism | Socioeconomic status | People who are middle and upper class. | People who are poor and working class. |
| Elitism | Education level | People who are formally educated. | People who are informally educated. |
| Elitism | Place in hierarchy | People who hold managerial or executive positions.  People employed on a full-time basis. | People who are informally educated, unemployed, and/or who do clerical work.  People employed on a casual basis. |
| Sexism | Gender | Men. | Women / Non-binary / Gender fluid. |
| Genderism | Gender identity and gender expression | People who are cisgender.  People whose appearance and behaviours are congruent with the gender binary system. | People who are transgender, gender non-conforming, gender fluid, gender queer and/or androgynous. |
| Heterosexism | Sexual orientation | People who are heterosexual. | People who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, queer, or a sexual orientation other than heterosexual. |
| Religious oppression | Religion | People who are Christian. | People who are other religions and spiritualities  People who are atheist, agnostic, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, spiritual, Wiccan, Pagan. |
| Ageism | Age | Young adults and adults. | Children / The elderly. |
| Ableism | Disability | People who don’t have a disability.  People who are free from any conditions or impairments that make it difficult for them to do certain activities or interact with the world around them. | People with a physical, psychiatric, intellectual, neurological, sensory, emotional and/or learning disability. |
| Xenophobia | Immigrant status | People who are born in Australia. | People who are immigrants, refugees / New Australians. |
| Linguistic oppression | Language | People who speak English as a first language. | People who speak English as a second language.  People who are deaf / use sign language. |

*\* Adapted from VISIONS Inc by Amy Cipolla Stickles-Wynen and Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs (2022)*

### Moving through discomfort

Conversations about privilege, power and oppression can cause discomfort for practitioners who might be exploring their privilege for the first time or who struggle to see their privilege due to other hardships they have experienced. It is, however, extremely uncomfortable and difficult for people who experience oppression on a daily basis, particularly if they have multiple, intersecting oppressed identities, and have to manage their lived experience of marginalisation, discrimination and prejudice. It is a privilege to learn about racism as a white person rather than experiencing it as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person or person of colour. It is a privilege to learn about xenophobia as a person born in Australia rather than experiencing it as an immigrant or refugee. It is a privilege to learn about homophobia as a heterosexual person rather than experiencing it as a gay person, and so on.

People with privilege can feel a surge of defensiveness when they are ‘called in’ (having their harmful behaviour addressed privately) or ‘called out’ (having their harmful behaviour addressed publicly). Being called in or called out requires a person to:

* move beyond their own feelings
* tune into their empathy for others, and
* interrogate their own beliefs and biases.

While this can cause discomfort, moving through this feeling can have a positive outcome if practitioners use their experience as an opportunity for reflection and growth, and to align their values with their actions. Most often, discomfort is underpinned by fear (fear of the unknown, fear of being labelled as ‘oppressive’, fear of being associated with a harmful group) which is a key driver of prejudice and social fracture. Therefore, if a person feels resistant, defensive or uncomfortable, this can indicate a need for the person to create space for themselves to safely explore their feelings of stress, confusion or pain that come from their discomfort. While moving through discomfort, the end goal of the person who has been called in or out should always be on understanding how their harmful behaviour from a place of privilege has impacted on the affected person or group who is oppressed.

## Microaggressions

Microaggressions are defined as verbal, behavioural and environmental indignities that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial or other slights and insults toward historically marginalised groups or those who experience oppression. Microaggressions are subtle and often unintentional interactions in the form of a side comment, offensive statement or an insensitive question. Microaggressions reinforce the privilege of those in the target groups above and undermine a culture of inclusion. The difference between microaggressions and overt discrimination (also known as macroaggressions) is that people who say or do microaggressions might not even be aware of them. Microaggressions can seem small, but compound over time.

Microaggressions are so subtle, it can be difficult to know if you have said or experienced one since the words can look and sound complimentary. Microaggressions can seem safe, harmless or inoffensive, but in the context of racist assumptions and stereotypes, microaggressions are damaging to the person or community they are directed towards. Repeated microaggressions heard and felt by someone can result in a person experiencing a cumulative, negative impact on their wellbeing.

Microaggressions can become second nature to the person saying them as they are usually said with good intentions but impact on the recipient of the microaggression in multiple ways. Some examples of common microaggressions said to people with oppressed identities or from oppressed groups by a person with privilege are as follows:

| **Microaggression** | **Basic intention of the message** | **Interpretation (What the person experiencing oppression hears)** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| When I see you, I don’t see colour. | A white person may say this to a person of colour to indicate they want to treat them equally, or to suggest that there are more important characteristics they value over the person’s race. | * If you don’t see my colour, you don’t actually see me. * You’re not interested in understanding my culture which is a huge part of my identity. * You’re not willing to acknowledge or address the worries that affect people of my colour such as racism or systemic inequalities. * You think my experience as a black person is no different from the experience of people who are white. * You prefer not to see your colour, it makes ‘it’ easier for you. |
| We are one race- the human race. | A white person may make this statement to convey their belief that people of colour or historically marginalised groups deserve the same treatment as white people. |
| All lives matter. | A white person may say this:   * to indicate a desire for everyone to be treated equally * because they are uncomfortable with learning about how they benefit from institutional racism * to derail conversations about racism against Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) * to shut down conversation. | * You want to prioritise your own comfort rather than paying attention to the racism, violence and police brutality perpetuated against BIPOC. * You have no interest in equity and positive change for BIPOC. * You don’t care to understand how oppression has affected my ancestors and affects me today. |
| Everyone in society can succeed if they work hard enough. | Individual people are responsible for their own personal circumstances and being a hard worker is all you need to have a good life. | * You think I’m lazy or incapable for not being able to get a job. * You think I am personally responsible for my shortcomings and you ignore the systemic inequalities that impact on people who are oppressed. |
| You’re transgender? Wow, you don’t look like it at all! | A cisgender person may say this with intention to compliment the appearance of a transgender person. | * You think being transgender is undesirable. * You think the goal of a transgender person is to ‘pass’ as a cisgender person. * Do you think of or see me differently now that you know I am transgender? |
| You are so articulate; you speak so well! | A person who speaks English as their first language may say this as a compliment to a person who speaks English as a second language. | * You have stereotyped me based on my appearance / accent / immigrant status. * You didn’t think I would be articulate, and you didn’t expect me to be capable of intellectual conversation. * It isn’t your place to comment on how well I speak English. |
| It is your choice to be lesbian / gay / bisexual / transgender / asexual. You can be whoever you want to be. | Someone might say this to convey to a person with a diverse gender or sexuality that they don’t ‘have a problem’ with the person being LGBTIQ+. | * You don’t understand that my sexual orientation and gender identity is who I am, not something I ‘choose’ * I don’t need your permission to be who I am – why do you think you have the right to say something about my identity? |
| I don’t understand why gay people have to flaunt their lifestyle – being gay is fine but I hate it being in my face. | A heterosexual person may say this because:   * they are different to people from the LGBTIQ+ community and that difference makes the LGBTIQ+ community ‘stand out’ to them * they don’t want to acknowledge the existence of gay people. | * You can accept my existence but only if I fit into your box. * You want me to be more like you and less like myself and that makes it is easier for you. * You think I want attention or that I’m a trouble-maker because I am living authentically. * You think I shouldn't be allowed to display my affection towards my partner publicly like heterosexual people do. * You think events that celebrate and support my experiences are unnecessary. |
| If people don’t like it here, they should just go back to where they came from. | A person might use this phrase to degrade or threaten someone who they believe ‘isn’t Australian’. | * You don’t think I look or act Australian enough. * You don’t think I belong here and I’m not welcome. * I am fearful for my safety and wellbeing when people say this to me – does everyone around me think this way? |

## Intention and impact

People often attempt to deflect criticism about their oppressive language or actions by making the conversation about their good intentions. This is an action that centres the conversation about the person with privilege, rather than the person experiencing harm. When a person defends their intent instead of understanding the negative impact of what they have said or done, it can be difficult to move past and they are likely to engage in the same harmful behaviour due to their ‘good intentions’. However, a person’s intentions are irrelevant if their actions impact and further marginalise or oppress someone.

Take the following scenario for example:

*A white practitioner says to their colleague who identifies as Torres Strait Islander “You’re no different to the white people I work with”. The practitioner who identifies as Torres Strait Islander advises their white colleague that this statement is harmful and makes them feel like their cultural identity is being erased by the white person. The white practitioner tries to deflect and tell their colleague that it was only their intention to be inclusive and states “I’m not racist!”.*

To move past this defensiveness and to truly work towards doing no harm, the person who has caused an impact must learn how their actions and language have hurt the other person or marginalised group. If you or someone you know has found it difficult to recognise the impact of harmful behaviour or language, try and do the following:

* Reflect and empathise to the best of your ability. Ask yourself “What could be, or might have been, the impact of my actions or words?”
* Listening is vitally important as privilege can shield us from understanding the impact of our actions. Listen deeply to the person who has been impacted by what you have said or done, without your intentions interfering with the conversation. Don’t make the conversation about yourself, your good intentions, or how you aren’t a bad person.
* As difficult as it may be, do not defend yourself or your actions. Remain quiet and listen to what the person who has been impacted by your words or actions is saying to you. This gives a non-verbal indication of an engaged and active reflection on your part.
* Offer a genuine apology to the person impacted and acknowledge how your words or behaviours have impacted them. This can include thanking the impacted person for taking time to trust you enough to provide feedback.
* Remember ‘What you **did’** is not ‘What you **are’**. Many times, a person who says a racist or sexist microaggression isn’t trying to be racist or sexist. To move through defensiveness, separating yourself from your behaviour can be a useful tool.
* If you are still struggling to understand how what you said or did has a negative impact on an oppressed person or group, take time to research the oppressed identity and understand by talking to other people and using the internet. It is not the responsibility of the person who has been impacted to ‘convince’ you or spend time teaching you why what occurred was harmful.
* There may be other actions required of you to make amends and to acknowledge the hurt caused. While it is not the responsibility of the person impacted to state what these are, asking them if there is anything further you can do provides an opportunity for the impacted person to talk further and to advise whether other actions can alleviate the hurt they have experienced and help prevent it recurring in the future.

In response to the above scenario, instead of the white practitioner deflecting and defending their character, the below steps are a more ideal approach for the practitioner to take to acknowledge their impact:

1. “I am truly sorry for what I said before. I want to acknowledge that the impact of my words made you feel like I didn’t recognise or care about your culture”. (*Offering genuine apology and acknowledging the impact of the statement*).
2. “I appreciate you taking time to tell me this. I know it must have been difficult to give me that feedback and I’m so glad you value our relationship enough to tell me how my words hurt you”. (*Thanking the person for taking time and energy to provide feedback*).
3. “I have spent time reflecting on my behaviour and I am going to commit to doing better and educating myself on how words like these can be harmful”. (*Reflecting on own behaviour and making a commitment to do better*).
4. “Please tell me if there is anything I can do to make this better?”. (*Checking in with the person in case other reparations can be made*).

## Conclusion

Practitioners understanding and reflecting on their identities of privilege and oppression are critical to good child protection practice. Understanding microaggressions, remembering intent and impact, and making the effort to move through discomfort and change harmful behaviour goes some way toward addressing power imbalances. This practice guide can be used to form the basis of important reflective discussions in individual and group supervision that are essential for effective and respectful engagement and casework with marginalised individuals and communities.

## Appendix A: Individual reflection or group supervision exercise

The table ‘A working conceptualisation of historically and currently included/privileged   
(non-target) and excluded/oppressed (target) groups in Australia’ can be used as an activity for individual reflection or group supervision. Print the table and ask individuals to mark or make note of the areas of privilege and oppression that apply to them.

Note: This activity requires participants to maintain confidentiality when done in a group setting. Remember not all identities are ‘visible’ and there may be times when practitioners do not feel comfortable to reveal or discuss their oppressed identifies with others. Consider the emotional safety of people in the group, and allow people to complete the table anonymously or privately if preferred.

After reviewing the table, consider using the following questions as a basis for individual reflection or group discussion:

1. What were your thoughts on doing this exercise?
2. What do the results highlight for you?
3. When you think about the children, parents and families you work with, are you seeing differences between your privilege and theirs?
4. How do you know about the privileged and oppressed identities the children, parents and families you work with have? Is any of what you know rooted in assumptions?
5. Where are your blind spots? What is your individual commitment to learning more about the experiences of people who are oppressed in the areas where you have privilege?
6. What do you need to be mindful of when you are engaging and discussing important things such as culture, case plan goals, safety and support networks, and offering services that match with the children and families you work with?
7. How does privilege impact on a person’s access to services and their experiences with systems?

## References

Washington, E., Hall Birch, A. & Morgan Roberts, L. (2020). *When and how to respond to microaggressions.* Harvard Business Review: Analytical Services, <https://hbr.org/2020/07/when-and-how-to-respond-to-microaggressions>

## Version history

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