

Privilege: The Neglected Obstacle in Attaining Equity in the Ad Industry

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When you are accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression.

—Unknown, n.d.

The quest to address inequities in the advertising industry has in large part been hyper-focused on taking corrective and affirmative actions that diversify the field beyond its white male majority. While such a focus has resulted in laudable diversity gains, equality remains firmly out of reach. How is this so? Well, inequity inherently has two sides – those receiving less than their fair share and those who are receiving more. As such, efforts to obtain equity demand a two-pronged plan of action, wherein both oppression and privilege are acknowledged and tended to. Focusing solely on the oppression aspect of the equation has the unintended effect of normalizing positions of privilege, which, as the opening quote so succinctly states, results in a warped understanding of equality as a state of (reverse) discrimination. The acknowledgement of privilege as the unavoidable companion of oppression is by no means a new development. More than eighty years ago Du Bois (1935, p. 700) highlighted the unearned “public and psychological wage” low-income white men received, which, unlike their black colleagues, enabled them to be “admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools.” However, rather than heed these words and expressly confront how discriminatory industry practices have served to create and maintain privileged positionalities, equity efforts (in and outside of the industry) have primarily concentrated on alleviating oppressive conditions. The purpose of this essay is to emphasize the importance of addressing privilege in the struggle to remedy inequities in the advertising industry. More specifically, I attempt to provide actionable suggestions for advertising educators that may assist with bringing equity to the ad industry.

Privilege and Inequity in Advertising: Overview

Limits of Current Equity Efforts

Advertising industry. The fundamental component of advertising equity efforts has centered on diversification – most notably providing more opportunities to white women and applicants of color. This approach is grounded in sound reasoning and an abundance of statistics that demonstrate that white women and people of color are woefully underrepresented in the industry, particularly in management positions and the oft glamorized creative wing of the trade. In 1978, the New York City Commission on Human Rights found that people of color (Black and Latinx) made up only 5% of the individuals employed by agencies located in New York City (40 of the 50 largest agencies had offices in New York City at the time). In contrast, Black and Latinx communities were 25% of the local area labor force. The Commission’s report astutely highlighted that the underrepresentation present in the ad industry “was not simply the result of neutral forces, but emanated directly from discriminatory practices” (as cited in Bendick & Egan, 2009, p. iii). Thirty years later a report commissioned by the Madison Avenue Project uncovered that severe levels of underrepresentation remained in place (Bendick & Egan, 2009). Their 2009 study determined that about 16% of large advertising firms employed no black managers or professionals, a rate 60% higher than in the overall labor market, and that Blacks were only 62% as likely as their white counterparts to work in the creative division of agencies. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) reported that in the United States Black and Latinx individuals comprised approximately 16% of those employed by ad agencies, PR firms and com-

panies offering related services. Combined, these communities represented approximately 30% of the US population at the time.

According to their own internal documents, in 2015 the rate of racial minorities that held a managerial position stood at 19% and 18% at Interpublic and Omnicom, respectively (Tadena, 2016). Interpublic also reported that women held 30% of the management positions within its creative departments. In 2014, WPP reported that women made up 31% of its executive leadership (Tadena, 2016). In contrast, during the same time frame women made up just over 50% of the overall workforce. With respect to coveted creative director positions, the percentage of women in these roles increased from about 3% in 2008 to 11% in 2016 (Hanan, 2016). These figures suggest that while the industry has experienced modest progress in alleviating the underrepresentation of historically marginalized populations, serious disparities still exist. The report sponsored by the Madison Avenue Project noted that at the current rate of progress, Black numbers among advertising managers and professionals would not reach equitable levels until 2079. Clearly, current modes of action are not enough!

Advertising education. The inequities found in the industry are buttressed by similar injustices present in advertising education. Instructors and students majoring in advertising (and related disciplines) remain overwhelmingly white. In 1988 approximately 87% of mass communication undergraduates were white. In 2010 that number had declined to 70% (Vlad, Becker, Kazragis, Toledo & Desnoes, 2011). The same can also be said of advertising scholarship. In an analysis of advertising and other communication-related articles published between 2000 and 2013, research investigating the experiences of students of color and the pedagogical approaches of professors of color were notably lacking from the canon (Hendrix & Wilson, 2014). As a result, the pipeline of applicants looking to enter the industry is not only disproportionately white, but also woefully underexposed to nonwhite industry-pertinent scholarship, experiences and perspectives.

That said, the importance of outreach programs such as the American Association of Advertising Agencies' Multicultural Advertising Internship Program (MAIP), the American Advertising Federation's Most Promising Multicultural Student Program (MPMS), the Marcus Graham Project and the International Radio and Television Society's (IRTS) Summer Fellowship Program cannot be over-

stated. Each does critical work in easing the inequities faced by historically marginalized populations by providing resources, training, mentorship and industry access. However, if equality is ever to be attained, similar programs must be developed and cultivated that engage with those who receive unearned advantages because of the structure and culture of the industry. The findings of a recent qualitative study of internship-based affirmative action programs at three large advertising agencies suggest that potential gains offered by these programs are ultimately nullified by the systemic presence of white privilege (Boulton, 2015). These findings support the creation of additional programs that can work to disrupt the normalization of privilege by educating current ad professionals on the myriad ways the industry's structure and culture has privileged young able-bodied white males at the expense of others.

Culture of Racial and Gender Stereotypes in Advertising

After conducting their study in 2009, the researchers responsible for the Madison Avenue Project report (Bendick & Egan, 2009) concluded that the workplace culture of general market advertising agencies needed to be fundamentally transformed. The industry has long held on to a culture fraught with racial and gender stereotypes (e.g., women are not effective leaders; people of color cannot succeed in general market advertising) and an everyday attitude wherein personal relationships and social comfort often take precedence over skill and job performance (Bush, 2011; Gregory, 2009). Compounding these issues is a broader societal culture in the US, wherein historical context and structural issues are largely obscured. Lawrence, Sutton, Kubisch, Susi and Fulbright-Anderson (2004) note that three interconnected specious beliefs permeate dominant American culture:

1. Equal Opportunity: The belief that race and other aspects of a person's identity no longer serve as barriers to progress with respect to employment, education and wealth accumulation.

2. Meritocracy: The belief that resources and opportunities are earned via hard work and skill, and that external considerations like social capital serve an inconsequential role.

3. Personal Responsibility/Individualism: The belief that individual choice and behaviors determine life outcomes; people are masters of their fate irrespective of their social position.

Several scholars (Alexander, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Miller & Lapham, 2012; Lui,

Robles, Leondar-Wright, Brewer, Adamson & United for a Fair Reason, 2006) have identified how these beliefs do not match the everyday lived experience of individuals. Gains made by civil rights movements have resulted in more opportunities and increased protection under the law for historically marginalized populations. However, key indicators connected to employment, education and wealth accumulation reveal that we are far from delivering equal opportunity to all (Adamczyk, 2016; Ireland, 2016; Long, 2016). Furthermore, in reality, people are situated within broader collectives, including families, geographic and symbolic communities, as well as chosen and assigned social groups. As such, individual outcomes are intricately associated with the level of resources and status available to these collectives. That is not to say that the choices made by individuals have no bearing on life outcomes. But by overemphasizing the effects of human agency, the obstacles and limitations placed on marginalized communities by structural and systemic forces are erroneously attributed to their personal judgment and practices. So too are the advantages and benefits provided to the dominant group mistakenly understood as natural or rightfully earned. Therefore, not only does the culture of advertising need to change, we, too, must transform the broader culture's perfunctory acceptance of specious beliefs.

Proposed Efforts on Attaining Equity

At this point you may be murmuring to yourself, "Ok, smarty pants, that sounds well and good, but what practical steps can I take to help bring about such a paradigm shift?!" Well, I'm glad you asked. Here are a few concrete actions educators can take to bring equity work in the industry into alignment¹:

Contextualize the Field

Advertising students from both privileged and oppressed backgrounds are rarely exposed to the broader current and historical context from which the present-day advertising industry operates. While some may abstractly recognize links to racism, classism and patriarchy, most are oblivious to the breadth and depth of these systems of privilege and oppression in society at large. Situating the discriminatory practices found in the advertising industry within the inequities of broader social structures can enable students to identify privileged and oppressed positionalities as systemic and ideological, not merely con-

sequences of isolated occurrences and/or individual behavior. Some reading material that could be useful in this regard includes:

1. *Dimensions of Racism in Advertising: From Slavery to the Twenty-First Century* (2015) by E. L. Wonkeryor (Ed.)

2. *Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry* (2008) by J. Chambers

3. *Advertising Diversity: Ad Agencies and the Creation of Asian American Consumers* by S. Shankar (2015)

4. *Latinos Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (2001) and *Latino Spin: Public Image and the Whitewashing of Race* (2008) by A. Dávila

5. *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement* (2016) by A. Zeisler

6. *Consumer Equality: Race and the American Marketplace* (2016) by G. R. Henderson, A.-M. Hakstian and J. D. Williams

7. *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality* (Chapter 2) (2005) by D. A. McBride

Present Advertising as a Socializing Agent

Advertising educators often consider advertising to be part "science" and part "art." As a "science," it is understood to be a business endeavor wherein attempts to maximize ROI are carefully crafted through the segmentation of consumers, formulation of messages and designation of media placement. As an "art," advertising is positioned as an act of creativity, which requires imagination and keen attention to aesthetics. Advertising educators are adroit at teaching these two sides of the field. However, the role that advertising plays in the socialization process is generally neglected by educators. While some may highlight how advertisements aid in consumer socialization, few expand that abstraction to include more basic functions of human identity, such as sexuality and gender, social class and racial socialization. The benefits of illustrating how advertisements act as socializing agents are twofold. One, students realize the social power they will potentially wield as industry professionals and will feasibly be more thoughtful in the messaging they disseminate. And two, students may begin to self-reflect on the multitude of ways they have internalized privileging and oppressive beliefs and behaviors promoted by advertisers. The Media Education Foundation offers a plethora of finely produced documentaries that critically

¹ Resources listed with each action are by no means exhaustive, but rather are intended to serve as jump-off points

engage with the socializing aspects of advertising. Some notable titles include:

1. *Advertising & the End of the World* (1997) by S. Jhally
2. *Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse* (2017) by S. Jhally
3. *Killing Us Softly* series by J. Kilbourne
4. *The Illusionists* (2015) by E. Rossini

Prioritize Discussions of Privilege and Oppression

Offering courses specifically designed to address discriminatory practices in the advertising industry is a vital component of promoting equality. However, it is not sufficient. A productive multicultural advertising curriculum should explore issues of privilege and oppression across course offerings. Delegating such matters solely to multicultural courses or a designated teaching module that at most will span a few days, may have the unintended effect of marginalization. Courses that focus on issues of diversity in advertising bring matters that are generally overlooked in traditional courses to the forefront; however, in doing so, the two remain isolated from each other. Since instances of privilege and oppression occur in the context of traditional advertising practices, the two should be explored and critically examined in unison. Additionally, students who specifically register for a multicultural course most likely possess a high level of readiness and openness in regard to exploring social justice issues. In some respects, this may lead to a situation where the instructor is “preaching to the choir.” When all ad-related courses incorporate sustained discussions of how privilege and oppression operate within advertising, a wider net is cast, and many more students will benefit. Here are a few resources from beyond the confines of advertising literature that can assist with effectively engaging the privileging and oppressive dimensions of the ad industry and their relationship to broader social structures:

1. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970, 1st ed.) by P. Freire
2. *Privilege: A Reader* (2017, 4th ed.) by M. S. Kimmel and A. L. Ferber (Eds.)
3. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000) and *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994) by bell hooks
4. *Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in People* (2002) by A. Bishop

In Closing

Unquestionably, the work currently being done to address the inequities in the advertis-

ing industry should be commended. Growth in the numbers of historically underrepresented populations in the applicant pool of agency positions (especially those in management and creative) and support for the success of those already in the industry are important and urgently needed. However, addressing the oppressive manifestations of discriminatory practices is not enough. If equality is ever to be obtained, we, too, must address the ways in which privilege circulates in the industry systemically and within its cultural practices. Without such a balanced approach, privileged positionalities remain as taken-for-granted norms, which leads the privileged to mistake compensatory actions as discriminatory.

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