



Privileged Logics: An NSF Conference Interrogating Equity's Place in Conceptions of Scientific Quality

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Abstract: A National Science Foundation-sponsored conference (Award Number 2316197) held in 2024 interrogated the disjuncture between the equity promises of higher education and the experienced payoffs with focused attention on research training in the STEM fields. There was a keynote address and three plenary workshop sessions on use of metrics to assess quality, on learning communities, and on research ethics training. This article summarizes the perspective developed among participants, which suggested that scientific quality is tacitly associated with important scientific values and practice whereas equity goals are not. The concept of privilege combined with the decentering practices discussed in the conference can denaturalize those assumptions and open spaces for change. In the absence of such work, privilege creates barriers for underrepresented groups and prevents them from fully participating in and contributing to STEM research.

Keywords: *Equity, Privilege, Research Training and Practice*

To characterize the link between higher education and achievement as a millenarian promise is to highlight both that it is frustratingly unrealized and that it posits a world we do not yet inhabit—a world within which reward is allocated solely by talent and effort. It is nevertheless a precious promise—engrained perhaps more deeply than is deserved by our history. A refusal to give up that promise lies at the heart of individual and family sacrifice and commitment and demands a similar commitment from all of us who have to varying degrees found, earned, or been handed reward.

Group access and achievement in particular have been slow to equalize, and there is a growing recognition that the institutions, practices and persons that make up higher education are not firmly or efficiently organized to accelerate that pace. A recent characterization by Laurie Leshin (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2022) stated the case more forcefully when she said that higher education has been “a highly effective engine of inequality” (p. 1).

A National Science Foundation-sponsored conference (Award Number 2316197) held in 2024 in cooperation with the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics interrogated the disjuncture between the promise of higher education and the experienced payoffs with focused attention on research training in the STEM fields. *Privileged Logics: Interrogating Foundations and Practices in Research Ethics* was motivated by a recognition that, despite commitment, effort, and a variety of equity-enhancing practices (Blatch-Jones et al., 2024), progress in group-level measures of equity in research have been disappointing (Vo et al., 2024). The goals of the conference were to gather a diverse group from the STEM and responsible conduct in research (RCR) education communities to raise awareness about these issues, generate useful concepts for understanding them, and identify broadly applicable recommendations for addressing them that build on learning communities and other promising practices that already exist in research ethics.

From the perspective developed among participants, an uncritical conflation of traditional practice and quality is a significant part of this story. In short, scientific quality is tacitly associated with current values and practice whereas equity goals are

not. The concept of privilege combined with the decentering practices discussed in the conference can denaturalize those assumptions and open spaces for change. Privilege is a complex and often invisible system of power that advantages some groups and disadvantages others. In STEM research, privilege can manifest in many ways, such as through biases in peer review, inequitable access to mentoring, and narrow criteria for funding, tenure, and promotion. Such factors can create barriers for underrepresented groups and prevent them from fully participating in and contributing to STEM research.

What follows is a brief review of the framing of the privilege issue that was used to set the agenda for the one-day conference, a summary of the keynote address, and descriptions of the three workshops, which focused on the use of metrics to assess quality, on learning communities, and on research ethics training.

Framing

It is a truism that there is a non-random distribution of resources and rewards in almost all social systems, that in relatively large and complex systems those distributions operate through interdependent institutions, frameworks of comprehension and what Charles Taylor (1994) called a “built-in value slope” (p. 558), and that these components are in turn reinforcing and resistant to change. Why and how this resistance operates is roughly the subject matter of a critical analysis and, to the extent that they recognize the importance of unquestioned frames and values, such analyses can have a relativist tone (c.f., Bernstein, 1992, 2010; Habermas, 1990b; Lauden, 2012; Rorty, 1989). We believe a focus on the frames and values supporting research training and practice in academic settings is not only necessary but that—to the extent that such elements remain unexamined and unassailed—they can become distorted, outdated, or incomplete, and subsequently infect and circumvent efforts to produce change at all other levels. Unlike the broad relativist, and ultimately dead-end, critiques of traditional science, we argue that defensible foundations, defensible on both merit and equity grounds, can be established and built upon.

Although there are many dimensions of inequity and complex interdependencies, this conference used gender and race as a starting point. It is, therefore, essential that we remind ourselves that intersectional life worlds cannot be understood and addressed solely in those terms. To recognize how the assumptions and structures of difference play out must be a constant struggle against parochialism in all its forms and combinations. As pointed out in the orienting examples for the conference and even more in the shared stories and experiences of participants, STEM training and practice can and does reproduce privilege along dimensions other than gender and race, including sexual orientation, age, disability status, and neurodiversity. Two particularly important categories in our current climate are immigrant and socioeconomic status. Immigrant status now presents increasingly *de jure* barriers to inclusion as legal protections wane. And socioeconomic status has always been a powerful tool in sustaining privilege particularly in capitalist economies and cultures. It both sets the conditions of advantage and of allowable justifications for and against hierarchy. Indeed, conference participants were attentive to economic barriers to participation in amelioration initiatives for addressing privilege, such as learning communities, and in research itself. For example, they recommended flexible appointment scheduling for research participants and appropriate financial or in-kind compensation (e.g., release time) for learning community participants. Each of these axes—race, gender, immigration status, socioeconomic status, etc.—must be available to scrutiny in the processes we recommend.

As a starting point for the conference though, the intersections we highlighted were gender and race. Relevant criteria that sustain privilege in a social system are, therefore, those that 1) produce racial and gender inequities while 2) appearing natural or objective, at least to those who benefit. They are, therefore, not questioned or examined, and, if they are, can (appear to) be defended as merit-based and as race- or gender-neutral. As we will explore below, that defense is normative as well as instrumental. The conference work focused on examples of the policies and practices of privilege in the reward systems that govern research training and

practices. So long as merit and reward are understood in terms of the metrics underlying these reward systems, creation of more equitable practices will remain difficult. *Simply, this mistaken identification of standards of privilege with standards of merit in some objective or natural sense is central to the inability to meaningfully dismantle inequities.*

It is indeed fundamental to start with the realization that awareness of inequality and a commitment to abolishing it are insufficient. The maintenance of privilege is protected from scrutiny in ways that must be disentangled and denaturalized in order to be effectively ameliorated.

Metrics are a key term in this work because of how they function in the reward systems of research ecosystems and, perhaps more important, how they define quality in those systems. Quality determinations do not only influence individual rewards such as promotions, but they influence what gets studied, how it gets studied, and who benefits from those studies. Metrics are simply ways of measuring, but, as we have seen, they carry with them implicit acceptance of their justification for use. A common term that encompasses this value dimension is “standards.” The metrics or standards of privilege are, therefore, those that, in the U.S. research establishment at least, sustain white male advantage. Similarly, there is a conservative bias in that those in power get to define quality (what “counts”), as well as when and how and who gets to be involved in those normative conversations.

Examples of Biased Metrics

A key starting point for this work is to target privilege in the metrics that underlie the reward systems in the research ecosystem governing training in and the practice of research. For example, as described below (p. 13), and more fully elsewhere (Borden, Hartmann and Stapleton 2024), conference participants identified the following as having affected career outcomes for individuals due to privilege: demand for novelty and transformation over replication and incremental gains, statistical significance as a measure for worthwhile research, and preference for certain methodologies because of their consequences for productivity. So long as

merit and reward are understood in terms of these metrics, creation of more equitable practice will remain difficult.

It is not that any particular metric is or is not defensible, according to conference participants, but that explicit conversations among relevant parties are needed to make those decisions. That dialogue should furthermore be ongoing and determinedly inclusive. Participants wanted to open spaces supporting this more expansive dialogue to encourage a broader set of metrics less likely to reify a privileged instantiation of the core values of science.

We provided three examples of biased metrics to conference participants to establish a shared understanding. The first is from medicine. If one finds empirically that African-American and Black men have higher creatinine levels, one concludes that this finding is a statistical normality, and race-specific norms can be developed (and were). Those norms result in higher estimates of glomerular filtration rate for Black than white men at the same level of serum creatinine. But if those higher norms are due to factors such as nutrition, diet, sleep, health-care access, and environmental stress, the higher values are likely not “normal” as a health standard and should be treated as aggressively as they, or even lower values, are for white men. Note that these represent at least a race, gender, socioeconomic intersectionality as alluded to above. Health-care providers essentialized race differences for higher creatinine, sometimes through relatively ad hoc explanations. In this case, they used the supposedly greater muscle mass of African-American men as their answer. This explanation resulted in the undertreatment of Black men and contributed to poorer health outcomes for them (Hsu et al., 2021; NIH, 2021; Williams et al., 2021).

Similarly, if young African-American men and boys are more likely to be arrested and convicted, use of classificatory risk scales that use such data will disproportionately classify these persons as high risk. This assessment will generally lead to higher rates of supervision, including incarceration, which would tend to exacerbate the potential for subsequent arrest and conviction (DeVall et al., 2025). This “validates” the risk instrument but assumes that the original scale of risk meant

the same thing for white and Black youth. If, in certain environments police supervision is already higher, and if certain behaviors that are criminal from a white middle-class normative perspective garner less community approbation, arrest and conviction will be biased measures of deviance. Put another way, *deviation from white middle-class norms is more meaningful in white middle-class environments than in the life-worlds of others*. Applying that standard as if it meant the same thing everywhere is a mistake. Note that it is a different mistake than the kidney function test discussed above. There, the race-normed approach to measurement was problematic, whereas here the *lack* of race norming is a problem. Both are instances of improper attention to the environment or context that produces the outcome being measured, which, again, is only reasonably analyzed with attention to at least age and socioeconomic distinctions, as well as to those attached to gender and race. And in both cases, the problem is only clear when the appropriate target standard is identified—health in the first example, normative deviance in the second. Apparently, race-adjusted and race-neutral measures obscured, rather than assisted, in measuring health and deviance.

Both examples—and the ones we are more interested in, pertaining to success in college, graduate school, and in the professoriate—require that we interrogate the standards we use to justify position and reward. Too often, those standards will not survive the two criteria listed above. Those standards both produce and justify advantage and disadvantage, and, so, meaningful change requires the interrogation we hope to foster.

There is no shortage of recognition that some current standards support white privilege and male privilege in the academy. There is also fairly widespread recognition that awareness training is necessary but not sufficient to change these embedded beliefs and practices (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). These are broad and non-specific critiques—true but insufficient to support change. The actual deconstruction (delegitimization, denaturalizing) of the specific rules by which we reward performance in graduate school and the professoriate is needed and must be accompanied by considerations of alternatives.

Of the three areas of inquiry highlighted for the workshops at the conference—research ethics training, learning communities, and standards and metrics of quality assessment—the third is, in many ways, the source problem, whereas the first two are promising paths toward amelioration. Even in research ethics training and learning communities, however, the forms and attitudes that develop might run afoul of unexamined privilege (Marshall et al., 2022; Wilbur & Scott, 2013; Wyatt et al., 2021). It would indeed be shocking if such practices were somehow immune to these dangers.

Standards of Quality

The metrics of quality discussed in this section come from discussions at the conference. While Kuhn's (1970) most fundamental contribution is his part in demythologizing scientific knowledge and practice in favor of a historicized and contingent view, one of his great insights was that academic fields are largely defined by the standards of quality shared by members. These standards have both formal and informal dimensions. Formally, standards such as those pertaining to accreditation, admission, hiring, and promotion and tenure tend to be explicit—written down, widely known—and defensible relative to what are somewhat imprecisely called Mertonian norms of science (Anderson et al., 2010; Merton 1942). Those norms are themselves widely known and believed to be operative. They are principles such as objectivity, openness to critique, a stubborn adherence to merit as the only criterion, and so on. But informally, Kuhn (1970) suggested that science is a different animal, something that historians of science have affirmed (Datson & Galison, 2007; Shapin & Schaffer, 2011) and case studies of contemporary scientific practice (c.f., Latour & Woolgar, 1986) have elaborated.

Research can be a rough, piecemeal, political, networked, defensive, resource-dependent, and resource-driven game. The façade of disinterested pursuit of truth—or nowadays, of useful and innovative work (c.f., Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2012)—is, or at least can be, a protective ideology that many participants still usefully believe. And if established scientists believe that merit

and objective critique got them where they are, the concept of privilege is foreign and perhaps incoherent. Indeed, that core aspect of self-image may make science particularly recalcitrant to the work we wish to undertake, significantly disadvantaging many students and early career faculty. Other aspects of the university—undergraduate admissions and pedagogy, for example—can perhaps be adjusted. However, working science—instantiated in graduate programs and academic, private and government research centers—is the (supposed) model of merit and equality.

Our problem is to identify the rules of the game that are not questioned and indeed cannot be questioned if that self-image is to be retained—and to convince actors and institutions that change is needed. And remember, furthermore, that the systems here (at the lab, university, and national levels) are competitive and, therefore, conservative to admissions of malpractice at both the levels of individual and institution—and perhaps at national and other levels as well (suggesting that metrics of national reward and international rankings should also be examined; Curry et al., 2022; Jong et al., 2021).

Components of privilege's structure in academic research and mechanisms through which that privilege operates are illustrated in our third pre-conference example, that of standardized tests—both those that purport to measure general intellectual ability and those that measure preparation targeted to the relevant field or tasks. These are thought to be part of an objective, quantified meritocracy but fail the first criterion—they produce inequality of outcomes. They are suspect on the second criterion as well, but even if they were good predictors of success, they would still warrant scrutiny and change if alternatives could be developed which would operate more equitably. The appropriate standard of measurement for the GRE, for example, should be prediction of graduate school success, but importantly, that would be success in a well-structured graduate program, rather than in one itself marred by privilege. Like each of the other two examples, the literature here is large and far from uniform in its methods and results. Nevertheless, a recent article by Feldon et. al. (2024) on the GRE discussed at the conference is a good summary of empirical scrutiny of the justification for this metric. This meta-analysis showed that the

predictive validity of the GRE on graduate school GPA is modest to vanishing. About 62% of included studies showed no predictive value, and those that did tended to show a diminishing effect over time. Furthermore, while GRE scores overall predicted 4% of GPA variance, the magnitude of negative effects where lower GRE scores predicted more positive student outcomes was only 0.16% for white students but 7.3% for samples “comprised entirely of people of color” (p. 120).

As alluded to earlier in respect to the foundational nature of standards, the examples discussed so far illustrate that the underlying mechanisms of the standards upholding privilege are probably similarly operative across other domains of policy and practice—even supposedly ameliorative ones. So, for example, these mechanisms support ostensibly color-blind assessment standards, importantly including those generated by machine learning (ML) protocols (c.f., Gandara et al., 2024), that in fact disadvantage non-whites and non-males, but they are also at work in teaching, mentoring, and other efforts to engage and welcome students and faculty and perhaps even in the form and expectations of learning communities and other critical apparatuses.

It is easy to become enamored of a theoretical concept like privilege. It is a truism that the person trained in hammers can only imagine pounding things (by implication, into submission). Similarly, the sociologist sees all problems rooted in the conceptual and often co-constituted methodological tools of their craft and same for the psychologist and so on. Even the “meta” disciplines, such as evaluation, and the consciously pluralistic (or hard to pin down) ones, such as Science Studies, fall prey to the limits of their horizons as Gadamer (2013) might put it. Gadamer’s “horizons” trope is particularly important to the work of our conference because it points not just to current limits—“the narrowness of horizon”—but to the “possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth” (p. 213).

If the preceding orientation helped to establish a ground and a vocabulary for the conference, it was left to the keynote presenter, Dr. Sarina Saturn, to make these concepts real and to put them in a larger context and understanding of inequities.

The real work followed in the workshops and agenda-setting sessions that constituted the remainder of the conference.

Privileged Logics NSF Conference Descriptive Summary

The conference consisted of a keynote presentation, three workshop sessions, a working lunch focused on discussion of barriers to change, and a concluding session prompting participants to identify one action drawing on the day's conversations that they could try at their own institutions or organizations.

The three co-investigators wrote a descriptive summary of the day's events, and this report is an effort to combine those into a single synthetic account. Two main principles were operative: 1) description rather than interpretation was emphasized and 2) apart from the organizers and presenters, names and other obviously identifying characteristics were avoided.

General Observations

All three observers noted that the diversity of participants and of their home institutions was a great benefit. So too was the willingness to share—to contribute and to listen to the contributions of others. In part because many of these contributions were practical and forward-looking, we believe participants walked away with something positive. Engagement was high throughout the day, and participants expressed interest in being part of the continuing conversation.

Keynote

Dr. Sarina Saturn, a neurologist and advocate, provided the keynote address with themes that included neuroscience; diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) terminology; holistic mindfulness; contemplative resilience, self-regulation and stress; a multi-faceted and grounded attention to well-being; allyship based at least in part on compassion; and, of course, privilege. Dr. Saturn's presentation also focused on mentorship, particularly reciprocal mentorship, and the difference between cultural competence and cultural humility.

The following notes provide more detail from the presentation:

Dr. Saturn noted the difficulty of DEIJ work and the need for self-care. In particular, she developed insights from trauma-informed care and repeatedly stressed the role of well-being in equity—as through attention to protection from harm, creating connection to community, work-life harmony, “mattering” at work and opportunity for growth. These are both concerns and values—things to be honored and worked toward. These aspects of a more holistic valuing were drawn on significantly in later discussions on metrics and learning communities.

Dr. Saturn contrasted cultural competence with cultural humility. The former assumes there is an endpoint to your knowledge and can foster stereotyping based on essentialist assumptions about cultures. The latter focuses on self-reflection, personal critique, sensitivity to historical realities, and compassionate listening. It, therefore, encourages movement from the ability to engage across cultures to dynamic lifelong learning about cultures.

Similarly, Dr. Saturn’s presentation of reverse and reciprocal mentorship highlighted the need for attention to non-hierarchical and humble relationships (Murray et al., 2022). She advised to seek interinstitutional mentors if there are no good mentors available at your institution. And to seek out mentees; don’t wait until they come to you. Otherwise, you’ll get all the “alphas” who already have opportunity advantages.

Across the keynote, there was a consistent theme—doing better by doing things differently—that resonated with many. But this thematic unity was grounded in the particular discussions already mentioned and by a consistent presentation of experiences and of more formal resources, such as articles and websites.

Finally, Dr. Saturn noted that higher education began as a privileged institution, and much of that legacy remains. There is a pervasiveness of privilege, and dismantling it is difficult. It is helpful to think about privilege vs. oppression. Again, she noted orienting articles (Fuentes, 2023) and highlighted that both individualized and institutional work are needed. In time and substance, therefore, the keynote provided a welcoming start to our work together.

Highlights of Workshop Session on Use of Metrics

Much of this activity and discussion was already drawn on in the orienting framing above. There was broad agreement that metrics currently used are unfair and reproduce privilege. Reasons include adherence to a competitive scientific culture, perceptions that these metrics are objective, their usefulness in appealing to outsiders for engagement and recruitment, and inertia and/or mistaken notions of rigor from those who have been at the institution for a long time and do not want to change the way things are done.

Examples of metrics that have affected outcomes for individuals due to privilege included: the demand for novelty and transformation (although there can also be an anti-innovation bias denying merit to delivery modes such as podcasts as well as to core expanding substantive areas and a focus on community impact) over replication and incremental gains; statistical significance as a measure for worthwhile research; tenure as a status attached to financial stability; grades as measures of learning and achievement; differential treatment based on your field or major; the demand for grants and differential value attached to different kinds of grants (e.g., federal), and different methodologies (e.g., community-based research takes more time, and this is not accounted for when counting publications).

We also talked about “memorable messages” e.g., “Don’t focus too much on teaching,” which undergird the existing hierarchies of advantage.

Strategies for mitigating negative outcomes of metrics because of privilege included: flexible appointment scheduling for research participants; appropriate financial compensation for research participants; workshops for informal peer review of methodology that assigns value before publication; expansion of promotion and tenure criteria (e.g., categories for community engagement and DEIJ work); recognition of integration of teaching/service/research; recognizing planning, engagement and other types of grants as worthwhile deliverables; equity audits.

Among the unquestioned assumptions that maintain privilege are the superior “rigor” of quantitative versus qualitative designs—science is even thought to be “by its

nature” quantitative—hence we set our review standards similarly. Also, as mentioned above, there is a conservative bias in that those in power define what “counts” as well as when and who participates in those normative conversations. Questions fostering inclusion and change would push toward more holistic and expansive metrics; ex., success of students/faculty/staff whom we have mentored; contributions to the institution and community (can we elevate service more?).

A two-tiered system (research vs. teaching faculty) perpetuates the hierarchy even while ostensibly recognizing contributions that are not traditional. These hierarchies of merit and reward, including status and financial rewards, are present in hiring, promotion, funding agencies, publishers (e.g., journal rankings) and most of the peer review systems surrounding those arenas.

Highlights of the Workshop Session on Learning Communities

Several participants were not sure what a learning community was or had not taken part in one, so early discussion focused on differences/similarities among learning communities vs. less focused groups vs. facilitations vs. student/professional organizations, while recognizing that these boundaries can be blurred.

Learning communities can be built around both institutional and interinstitutional goals and target populations. Within institutions, current voices can be supplemented by purposive expansions through cohort hires and other strategies to foster inclusive, and usually, interdisciplinary conversations. In addition to multiple disciplines, multiple institutional roles are often usefully present in the learning communities that effect institutional change. The dialogue across, rather than among, supposed interests also encourages plain speaking and a focus on “facts” of the situation.

Strategies for avoiding the reproduction of inequities in learning communities included: intentionally bring in a variety of experiences and views; make sure there is a seat for everyone, open dialogue, identify and address barriers to participation (e.g., provide financial or in-kind compensation like time off work or course release time).

Possibilities for impacting change included: creating new policies and recommendations, creating low-commitment opportunities for participation, hosting public events, and encouraging both top-down and bottom-up participation. Participants said they thought avoiding inequity and impacting change kind of blended together in our discussion.

For allyship, one strategy was to attract hesitant participants (who might be precisely who needs to be involved in these discussions) by targeting role models, mentors, and distinguished professionals who can demonstrate that this work is valuable and needed.

To leverage power, learning communities can ally with students and collect data from them as well as all employee categories at the institution (do not leave anyone out). Be strategic about process; e.g., provide a narrower vision at first to focus the group, then expand the vision as the group learns more. The nature of the community may change from more homogenous membership for affinity to a more heterogeneous membership for bridging. Use scaffolding: start at one level of the institution, then move up to the next level, and so on.

Learning communities are a broad and flexible category—they do not have to be formally convened to be effective. Their subject matter can be varied and can evolve over time. They can be about learning new things (ex.: teaching online, teaching graduate courses; discovering new research methodologies, etc.) or about building community (creating a sense of belonging; providing support, etc.). While some had used learning communities to address systemic issues, others had not envisioned this strategy as broadly.

Successful outcomes of some learning communities were shared and included: creating resources for student success, leading to a discussion of how to treat the issue of sex/gender in a biology class, including updating lab manuals, changing the way a forensic scientist classified gender as “with or without a Y chromosome”; helping international students become more competitive for summer teaching assignments; and helping folks understand the need for professional

development around how to talk with and listen to underrepresented students struggling with recent hate crimes.

Highlights from the Workshop Session on Research Ethics

Examples of what is done now at participants' institutions regarding research ethics ranged from nothing and bare minimum CITI modules focused on compliance for those with federally funded grants, to monthly town halls and resources provided across campus and weekly face-to-face trainings to supplement CITI required for all researchers, whether or not they are federally funded (the most comprehensive program resulted from disciplinary action by a federal granting agency).

Examples of research ethics topics most directly related to privilege included sexual harassment and Indigenous student mentoring. But there was wide agreement that the orientation to understanding and addressing privilege was largely absent from most institutional training.

A narrow focus on research integrity ignores the social benefits of research and equity and generally leads to rather superficial topics and a focus on compliance. The emphasis on "sins" of commission versus omission is also rooted in a liability attitude.

Participants thought historical background and the case study method were valuable if done right, but they had also seen ineffective uses of such strategies. Other problems included pushback from privileged professors who think they don't need or have time for RCR training. Disregard for research impacts was linked to a "pure science" philosophy (though participants noted that caring about impacts and caring about pure science are not mutually exclusive).

Suggestions for improving RCR training included: be more transparent about the origins of research ethics training in harms to marginalized communities, emphasize cultural humility in instruction regarding historical background, and highlight how these problems are still relevant today.

For assessment, this group liked the idea of a pre-test using a qualitative approach to test changing language and attitudes about topics such as, “What is evidence?”

There was a desire to move beyond online-only experiences such as CITI to at least supplement those trainings with in-person learning community meetings. For example, you can’t move on to the next CITI module until/unless you attend an in-person learning community meeting to process/reflect on that module. These kinds of interventions also could take the form of internal conferences inside labs to discuss good lab practices. This group also thought it was important for researchers to attend “booster” meetings in person on an annual basis.

After the Conference Thoughts

An important lesson from our post-conference conversations and literature review is that the voluminous work on research integrity and on the responsible conduct of research (RCR) shares much, particularly on the harm side, with our focus on privilege. Already apparent in the framing section that preceded the conference and led this article, our stance is that RCR work can open doors to reforms that can and do ameliorate those harms. But “privileged logics” often serve as an unrecognized basis for both research integrity and the failure to achieve it. We, therefore, can and do substantially improve RCR without fundamentally questioning or changing the logics of research practice themselves.

Heuristically, we suggest that there are two possible levels of critique and critique-informed change. The first is a critique based on equity harms and the embrace of a culture of care. Progress along these lines is advanced and sophisticated. The second level is a critique of the cultural norms of science themselves. Those norms, often implicit or romanticized, can accept alternative norms such as kindness and equity as additions or checks on its excesses, but have not yet had to come to grips with alternatives as replacements. In the absence of such a core challenge to their legitimacy, alternatives may simply define another class of scientist or faculty person. Indeed, this has largely occurred for several

decades and not coincidentally mirrors the defensive tactics that Lakatos associated with the outer bands of theory defense (Lakatos, 1978; Musgrave & Pigden, 2023)¹.

There may, in fact, be two (or more) research cultures—one based on cooperation, inclusion, kindness, and work-life balance; and one based on “excellence” and “competition.” The problem is not that only one of these exists in most or many places. It is that there is an implicit hierarchy, and the excellence culture is on top. Our argument is that this hierarchy needs to be deconstructed and *shown to be flawed and indefensible*. “Excellence” does not in fact mean what that word implies; it is simply or at least partly the way with which the old guard is comfortable.

As the conference concluded, participants were challenged to address an issue of privilege at their institution and propose a means to address it. Post-conference elaborations of the challenges of institutional implementation have highlighted that studies on change management in higher education emphasize a structured approach, starting with bringing constituents together who are most impacted, designing small, manageable steps, leveraging data for decision-making, measuring results and encouraging a culture that supports continuous improvement and innovation (Ezzeddine, et. al., 2023; Gahagan, 2025). Institutions looking to address, for example, quality metrics to achieve racial equity in promotion and tenure might review a recent article in *Academe* (Pittman, 2023) that points to recommendations for expanding promotion and tenure criteria to remove inequitable barriers facing faculty members of color and design place-specific solutions to remove those barriers. Additionally, another article published in the ADVANCE Journal, points to steps taken by one college to shift the culture of the tenure and promotion process and includes guiding questions to be considered in a revision (Rodriguez, et. al., 2024).

¹ Lakatos argued that theory is not accepted or rejected as a whole but that particular parts, typically those in which empirical testing is active, serve as a buffering mechanism for the core components. Core theoretical assumptions, therefore, remain protected from direct scrutiny and challenge and continue to provide a more or less unquestioned basis for modifications in the outer bands.

More generally, throughout this call to action there has been a tension between the need for locally derived understanding and values and a sense that we already know enough to “get on with the work” in important ways. There is merit to be sure in cataloguing and learning from the success stories of others, but there is also merit in developing basic information and generating methods that can be put in service to supporting the necessary local dialogues. This points to an obvious and important limitation of the work to date. We report on what we believe is a fundamental approach but recognize that it has so far been vetted in only a single conference. Moreover, elaboration and critique of the approach have been entirely descriptive. Next steps of broader comparative debate and of the evaluation of operational efforts toward institutional change must follow.

A first priority is to develop operation tools for assessing institutional climate and supporting measurement of change over time. Second, that development must be informed and critiqued by a wider representation of institutions, contexts, and roles than was present at the conference. Pilot projects and sessions at additional conferences, especially targeting non-U.S. and otherwise diverse research environments (e.g., HBCUs, technical universities) is crucial. Third, those pilot projects will have to transition from instrumentation development to credible inferences about institutional change over time. As one seeks to actually measure change in a complex institutional process such as tenure and promotion, it will be hard to tell if the privilege-based interventions are important to any measured change without well-defined operational goals and hypotheses that define well-specified paths to those goals.

And finally, as more hands join in the work, or better, as more voices contribute to the dialogue, the questions and the answers will change. This is as it should be. We invite you to be part of that conversation and change and join us and our conference participants through contributions to

<https://www.privilegedlogics.com/>.

Conclusion

It remains to be seen if the critique offered in terms of privilege will find a foothold—as discussed already, there are very strong interests in other directions. But a persistent effort is worthwhile. Finally, our focus on assessment of quality as the core scientific problem—and the key impediment to deconstructing privilege—suggests a complementary theoretical path. Dialogic or communicative reason as developed, for example by Habermas (1990a; 1998) around political and moral arenas, can be adapted to the scientific enterprise. Through dialogue, scientific communities, having deconstructed the supposed naturalism of prior standards, can honor alternative values and procedures.

The goals of the work may, therefore, be recast as a localized agenda:

1. To decenter standard metrics
2. To explore alternative values and practices
3. To develop a vocabulary and set of processes that support these efforts.

The result is local versions of scientific merit that are true to a dialogic model of adequacy that has always been central to science but is currently undernourished. It will remain the case that what counts for quality will be derived from the arguments that best survive the evidence-based scrutiny of the community of scientists. Reasons, as always, should win out. But a space for the development of arguments and reasons must be cleared through expansion of the dialogue—first in its object—to include the completeness and priorities and distortions among the previously entrenched norms and practices—and second in its participants—to include all who cannot be justifiably excluded. The two expansions are co-dependent and synergistic. New voices and new metrics will be co-produced.

Science writ large is best understood and evaluated in retrospect. But science as local research values and practices can be actively contested, even in the face of pressures from the larger ecosystem. Piloted in the Privileged Logics conference and

its offshoots, that local conversation can infiltrate and provide a counterweight to the larger system.

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