Leading from the Follow Position: An Application to Supervision

Tammerie Day

Saturday night in a dim dance hall—candles glow on tables and twinkle lights are strewn across mirrored walls. Thumping bass notes and guitar chords telegraph the next song, and a prospective partner steps up. At my nod to a dance, she asks, "Lead or follow?"

"Yes!" I say, and we laugh at the roles and gender constraints we are not bound by. She takes the lead, and I am happy to follow since I know I may well be in the lead on the very next song at the Blue Moon dance, a community of women that gathered monthly for over a decade in Dallas, Texas. The Blue Moon was a safe and thrilling harbor for this late bloomer, a place where I found parts of myself I had lost long ago and grew into more of myself than I had ever been.

After my first few months at the dance, I started hearing some gentle teasing about "back-leading." I wasn't intentionally trying to steer, but apparently my instincts and sense of rhythm had other ideas. One night, a dance partner turned the tables on me: "No, you lead!" Ignoring my protests of not knowing how, she pulled me around to the lead position and backed into the follow position. One part waiting and one part gentle tug from her

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got me moving, but developing the skills, initiative, and confidence to lead took a little longer. I was stiff, ballroomy, with a frown of concentration as I tried to lead just right. But over time, with practice, I grew to love the role—creating a frame for my partner, steering us through the throng, supporting her fullest, freest expression of her dancing self. As a dancing pair, we would incarnate something together in the moment: an interpretation and signification of our selves and the song, never seen before and never to be seen again. And, with the ability to dance lead or follow, I never had to sit out a song!

Learning to lead made me a more graceful and grateful follower, a more well-rounded dancer. Eventually, this gift became one I could pass along, helping other dancers learn through my own gentle leading from the follow position. Alongside my journey of learning to be my gay self, my partners on the dance floor were reminding me and teaching me about power, responsibility, boundaries, space, initiative, leading, playfulness—how to be more fully human.

Of course, these same considerations also matter in ministry and in formation for ministry. In this issue of *Reflective Practice*, centered on paradigms of leadership in various cultural, religious, and organizational contexts, I would like to share ways to introduce learners to thinking about leading and following that are informed by understandings of identity and power. Similar to the way a dance instructor breaks down a flow into its disparate steps, the process I share below helps learners explore worldviews and social location characteristics and how these shape our identities, spiritual care contexts, and practices. These principles and the practices they enable are fundamental for ethical care, along with leadership and followership—and creative leading from the follow position.

Beginning with worldview

Each of us has a unique *worldview* that is shaped by our particular experiences of embodiment and enculturation. I came to be curious about worldviews in the context of learning to think more critically about being white and about how white people come to transform their thinking about racial identity and working for racial justice. Liz Stanley, a feminist sociologist from the United Kingdom, offers a useful model for thinking about worldviews as encompassing a person or people group's *ontology* (or way of

being), *perspective* (or way of seeing), and *epistemology* (or way of knowing).[1] I find it useful to add *praxis* (understood here as a way of working) since one's doing is critical to transformational work in the world. In the context of clinical pastoral education, pastoral caregiving is the praxis for which we explore the construction and impact of worldviews. One's praxis also could be congregational ministry or contextual education, community work or social justice activism.

Our unique *ontologies*—social location characteristics, temperament, birth order, etc.—shape who we are (and contribute to who we become) and what we can *see*, *know*, and *do*. As we grow up and into the world, enculturation shapes our unfolding and how we experience reality. We develop a sense of what is normative for us and may consciously or unconsciously *privilege* that normativity, with a corresponding disparagement of the identities, ways, and cultures of peoples of other social locations. In this way, our preference for what is normative for us can cause our reality to be shaped by false premises that put blinders on *what we can see*, which affects *what we can know or do*.

This raises a question. If *who we are* shapes what we can see and learn, isn't this a critical concern to grapple with as educators? Accordingly, I work with students to *open their perceptual apertures* as they engage in the study and practice of spiritual care. The section that follows explores the approach I use with our CPE interns and residents to deepen the self-awareness and broaden the perceptions with which they engage learning about and practicing spiritual care. I have also used this approach in congregational, university, and seminary settings with learners of varying social locations and intentions.

Engaging worldview

In a didactic entitled "Social Location and Power in Ministry," I offer and explain the worldview model described briefly above as a way to explore how social situatedness shapes our worldviews. I draw the model on a whiteboard and give an overview of the model's components. We begin with *ontology*, exploring givens, choices, values, and stances through Socratic questioning and dialogue. What is the nature of being? What are human beings for? Is there a divine being, and how are we in relationship to it? How are we shaped by social location categories such as race, gender, class,

sexual orientation, and so on? What choices do we make about our social locations, and where do we stand in our relations with others and with the divine? In asking these questions, I shift between the lead and follow position; I offer the framework for exploration and the leading questions. The learners fill in the picture with their responses, weaving their stories into the learning.

As we engage choices and stances, we begin naturally to engage the question of *perspective*, the particular outlook or vantage point(s) from which we view the world. Perspectives are uniquely personal and yet very much shaped by our ontology, particularly our social locatedness. *Where we see from* and *who we see with* shapes what we can see and what we make of what we can see. Here, perspective is shaping the connection between ontology and epistemology.

Exploring *epistemology* brings up equally fundamental questions. What is knowledge? What is it to know? What does it mean to be a knower? What is the purpose of our seeking to know or of what is being sought as knowledge? (I note that knowing and seeking to know are always purposeful, though this is not always acknowledged.) Who do we regard as adequate knowers? What are sources of knowledge? I list each of the students' responses on the whiteboard.

We quickly fill the board with what we know about knowers and sources of knowledge, ranging from texts and traditions to grandparents and gurus, leaders and experts, priests and prophets, shamans and schools, intuition and information, data and wisdom. As we look at what we have created, I ask the students for the common denominator of all the knowers and sources, and they are able to identify *experience* as the source of all knowing, whether captured in Scripture or a grandmother's wisdom or one's own gut instinct. We discuss qualities of experiential knowing, the authority we give to more direct experience, and the heightened value of knowing we intentionally produce when experience is *critically reflected upon*. I ask students to hold that thought as we turn to the last segment of the worldview model.

Adding *praxis* to the worldview model takes into account what happens when being, seeing, and knowing turn into *doing*; human beings or human communities create material effects in our own and others' embodied lives by the work we do and practices we engage in. Through praxis, our ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and commitments take shape in intentional, purposeful work, practice, or behavior, including spiritual care.

I point out to the students that each aspect of our worldviews is shaped by the others; i.e., how we *see* is shaped by our fundamental experience of *being*, of relational living in the world. The ways we *know* things are shaped also by our ontology and perspective. All of these have an effect on what we *do*, how we behave, and how we work in the world. Our experiences in turn have an effect on the ongoing development of our ontologies, perspectives, and epistemologies. All of these are shaped, in turn, by our locatedness in societal contexts—what sociologists call *social location*. Bringing these contexts to consciousness gives learners powerful tools for understanding how they experience their worlds, how the systems of the world empower or disempower them and their care receivers, and *how we can begin to make more conscious choices* about our being, seeing, knowing, and doing. Learners get practice with use of these tools as we take a deeper dive into ontology and epistemology.

Engaging social location: how being shapes knowing and doing

Exploring ontology as a way of being *located*, socially and geographically, helps us understand ourselves better. When we are aware of our own location and of ourselves as persons who learn, know, and do from that location, we can seek to understand *others'* locatedness and how it shapes *their* experiences. We continue our work with an in-class exercise in which I write a series of social location categories across a whiteboard. I put up the first few and ask the students for other relevant categories. We typically come up with a list that looks something like the top row of Table 1.

Next, I acknowledge that there are variables within each category. We explore some of these, such as varieties of ethnicities within racial constructions, the gender binary and gender-variant experiences, and varieties of economic and cultural class designations. Once we have explored the implications of socially located embodiment for shaping experience and knowing, I explain to the students that another effect of embodied life in society is the allocation of *degrees of societal power* or *disempowerment* based on these variables, and I tell them that they already know a lot about this. To explore this point, I ask the students for a snap judgment on each category. Who has power in our society for each category? Answers come fairly quickly, indicative of ingrained stereotypes and assumptions, which we acknowledge as part of what we are attempting to surface (see second row of Table 1).

Table 1. Chart of Social Location Categories

Race	Gender	Class	Sexual Orientation	Age
White	Female	High/Rich	Heterosexual	40S–50S
↑	↑	↓	↑	↓
Racism	Sexism	Classism	Heterosexism	Ageism

Usually a student will point out, usefully, that the reality of experience is more complex than what we are whiteboarding; if not, I note that the status associated with many of these categories is more fluid (not really monolithic, binary, or permanent) than we are indicating but that we tend to use them anyway, a point useful to recognize. I also acknowledge that the number of people who hold power in *all* these categories is small and yet *quite real* and that they are *overrepresented in positions of power and privilege* in the United States.[2]

I propose to the students that they are likely using these categories day in and day out, making estimates and guesses about people they meet, which either brings stereotypes and prejudices into play or, perhaps more benignly, assessments of relative power and/or connection. We explore the role of implicit bias in our snap judgments about power.

Next, I invite the students to "plot" me against the categories, drawing up and down arrows to indicate empowerment or disempowerment (third row of Table 1). Their snap judgment is usually accurate except for sexual orientation; I pass for straight, but I am not.

As we plot my identities on the categories, we are able to explore some of the nuances of social location as we discuss the reality that I am—as most people are—empowered by some aspects of my social location and disempowered by others. I propose to the students that they also know a lot about these disempowerments and related phobias, and I invite them to name them. For most of the categories, this is fairly easy; some we struggle to

Ability	Religion	Geography	Education
Able	Christian	Us, Urban	Educated
↑	↑	↑	↑
Ableism	Intolerance Islamophobia Anti-Anti-Semitism Semitismxenophobia	Nationalism Ethnocentrism	Intellectualism

name (typically, the oppressions having to do with religion, geographic location, and education levels). See fourth row of Table 1.

We proceed to explore responses to these oppressions and movements to resist them, as well as allied movements to join in systemic and societal transformation, for instance, anti-racist work and Black Lives Matter as movements for racial justice. I then ask the students, based on what they have learned about experience as a source of knowledge, who is in the best position to hold epistemological privilege regarding the experience of oppression or intolerance? The students note, rightfully so, that the *experiencers* of the oppression or intolerance hold epistemological privilege. I also ask who, in their experience, tends to be in charge of efforts to study or address these oppressions or intolerances? The students acknowledge that it tends to be persons holding societal privilege. This brings us to a key point, which is that in many cases there is *an inverse relationship between societal privilege and epistemological privilege*.[3]

In working with CPE students, I ensure we attend to the column of reflections under the category of ability. Who, I ask, has the epistemological privilege about the experience of disease, injury, or trauma? About the experience of being hospitalized or having a family member in the hospital? The patient, comes the reply. The family. And yet, who is in charge of many of the decisions about care for the person? Physicians, nurses, therapists come the responses. And it is not that this is altogether wrong, we acknowledge. Clinicians have a hard-earned, informed perspective and clinical wisdom.

And yet, this exercise lifts up the disempowerment many experience when they become patients and are no longer regarded as competent or as adequate knowers on their own behalf. And if a patient is societally disempowered *outside* the hospital, this is magnified *inside* the hospital. Learners are able to explore chaplains' many roles and stances. Sometimes we must take a leadership role, such as to insist that a clinical team hear a patient's wishes or attend to an ethical dilemma. Sometimes we follow the lead of the patient or family. And sometimes, as I have just demonstrated with the students, we help care receivers to discover and make use of knowledge they already have but perhaps have not critically reflected upon or clearly articulated to themselves or their families. These learners have now had a clear experience of leading from the follow position and are able to themselves use the approach.

Social location, power, and epistemic hospitality in spiritual care

At this point, the students and I are poised to ask and explore many questions. How do we engage the realities of differences in personal and social identities and power in the context of spiritual care? What practices help when our lived realities are different from those of our care receivers? What do we know about the emotional and spiritual impact of oppressive realities we don't share? What resources and strengths might be present that we miss? And how do we manage the impact of oppressive forces and/or lack of access to resources that affect *us*, the caregivers?[4]

I have learned through my use of these tools and my attempts to transmit them to students that this is a valuable way to begin, one that provides touchstones as the CPE unit unfolds. When students recognize and/or become dismayed about what they don't know, I remind them of the gift of not knowing: that you can inquire about another's experience, acknowledge the other as the expert on their own experience, and support their reflection about that experience in order to draw forth the wisdom of the experiencer. This approach respects and helps guard the epistemological privilege of the person having the experience even when we think we *do* know what's going on and what's needed. This is epistemic humility as a practice of effective followership.

Clinical pastoral education students are not the only ones who can benefit from these practices. Spiritual caregivers, contextual and field edu-

cators, and religious leaders of all stripes can consider these principles of epistemic humility and hospitality by grappling with issues of power, resources, and access:

- Identify and understand how your social location shapes you as a student of others' experiences, religious and otherwise, in terms of both helps and hindrances. Identify and prepare to deal productively with the ways your social location differs from the persons you are encountering, whether in pastoral care or interfaith settings or in interacting with a person who does not espouse a faith tradition.
- Give critical thought to your embedded epistemology—your enculturated ideas about what you regard as knowledge, what you think knowing entails, and who you regard as holding epistemic authority. Recognize that the person(s) you are encountering may hold epistemic authority for the task at hand; balance or even bracket your own experience with valuing the experiential knowing of persons from other traditions.
- Understand how even a student or young minister can carry institutional and societal power into a spiritual care or interfaith interaction, particularly if the social context of the religious tradition includes differences in race, class, and other characteristics that societally disempower the practitioners.
- In cultivating epistemic humility and hospitality, recall Otto Maduro's assertion that all knowing is "a fragmentary, partisan, conjectural, and provisional reconstruction of reality."[5] Other adjectives apply: knowing is *perspectival*, *purposeful*, and *partial* (in both senses: incomplete and preferential). Accordingly, the most fruitful knowing happens in community where multiple perspectives are brought to bear in pursuit of communally discerned purposes. As Patricia Hill Collins asserts in *Black Feminist Thought*, no one group has a clear angle of vision, and no one group has a universal theory or methodology that allows it to discover the absolute truth or that can serve as the universal norm for evaluating other groups' experiences. Rather, "Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge," aware that its knowledge is unfinished. "Each group thereby becomes better able to consider other groups' standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own standpoint or suppressing other groups' partial perspectives."[6] This perspective can be very powerful in spiritual care—perhaps even in health care as a whole and congregational ministry in particular.
- Epistemic humility entails openness to variant perspectives and experiences, which we can deliberately seek out. We can commit to tolerance, respect, and perhaps even an allied stance with the community with whom we are engaged in learning. We can read and respectfully teach the literature of various people groups. We can unmoor our usual allegiances by attending different religious services and events held by other social action

> groups. We can live into the kind of engaged learning that supports work for health, wholeness, love, and justice.

These principles were born in congregational ministry and honed in anti-racist and interfaith communities as well as in religious studies classrooms. I believe any minister or supervisor of ministry—particularly those of us who hold forms of social power—might find these principles useful for creating hospitality, welcome, understanding, respect, and even justice. Do we listen to the voices of people at and on our margins and privilege their experience and wisdom? Do we take our commitments seriously enough to invite persons from the margin into positions of power over us, our organizations, and our budgets? Do we practice ethical followership willingly and voluntarily? When, where, and how?

Social location and power in supervision

Not too surprisingly, I use these same principles in supervision. Even if a student shares my social location, I hold a position of situational power, for good reason and for good purpose. I love how Antony Williams speaks of this:

> "Super-vision" is a vision offered to trainees so that they may see, "second time around," the process in which they are involved; it does not mean the vision of the supervisor being imposed on the trainee.[7]

There can be no such thing as a "neutral" book on supervision. Both therapy and supervision plunge us into the world of values, ideas, and passions—the chaos of life. Where one is "coming from" does matter, and it shows up in every action that is taken, every word that is said to the trainee. Supervisors' interactions with their trainees come not only from an intellectual frame but also from their core constructs about the therapeutic enterprise, their understanding of supervision, and, indeed, their whole approach to life itself.

In the clinical educational setting, I do hold positional authority over students and certainly have exercised those responsibilities when students don't fulfill their responsibilities and commitments. More often, though, my "supervision" is more of a perspective than a position, one informed by my awareness of the student's worldview, social location, and learning goals and by my assessment of what role to engage at various points in the stu-

dent's learning. Here, too, Williams offers useful framing: supervisory roles can range across teacher, facilitator, consultant, and evaluator.[8]

One of our recent student interns (a white, straight, young evangelical male) struggled to grasp even the idea of respectful listening to me or his peers or others in the department. I alternated between teacher and evaluator roles with this young man, providing direct instruction and redirection. In dance terms, I needed to be a strong lead, providing explicit choreography and holding a firm frame. By mid-unit, we had discovered that his avoidance of empathic connection was related to his fear of being plunged through sadness back into clinical depression. Clear invitations to risk-taking and supportive supervision helped him to learn that he could engage empathically and move through pain as he cared for others and himself.

Working with a group of experienced residents, I am in a different context. Here, my roles are teacher and evaluator but also often facilitator and consultant. My dance of supervision is more dynamic. Sometimes I lead, such as when offering a didactic or a new approach in response to a case conference. Sometimes I follow, particularly when a student is exploring from a perspective shaped by a social location that differs significantly from my own. And sometimes I lead from the follow position. I may have a sense of where the student is headed or what might be helpful, and yet I know that guiding them toward *a discovery of their own* can result in more powerful and resonant learning. For instance, working with a Buddhist resident, I know I am not—and do not present myself as—an expert on her tradition. However, I can practice epistemic humility by inviting her to reflect on what in her tradition helps her with a given learning or caregiving challenge. Taking the time to educate myself on her tradition enables me to be more attuned to when and where her tradition might be more of a resource, to gently lead even as I follow.

This approach is particularly helpful for me as a white educator working with students of color. I acknowledge their knowing from lived experience I cannot share and the blinders imposed by my privilege. I offer my intention to work relationally and reflectively to deepen their clinical wisdom. I acknowledge the social power that augments the positional power of my role, and I name my goal, as I do with all my students, to use my power for their learning rather than wielding it over their work. I acknowledge, too, the complexity of holding my anti-racist identity (and its tendency toward followership with people of color) in tension with the purposefulness of my

positional authority in their learning process. I seek the mutual grace to recover from stumbles through honest accounting and authentic self-representation. I take consultation from anti-racist white peers and the people of color with whom I am in accountability relationships.

In a recent resident unit, these complexities came into play as I worked with a group that included two African American students (one straight male and one bisexual female) and three white students (one bisexual female, one straight male, and one gay male). The group had been working together six months and with me for about two months. I noticed some tension arising in the group over scheduling, which began to come to a head in a conflictive experience with racial undertones that the residents brought to interpersonal relations group (IPR). I supported the group's engagement during IPR, inviting each group member to join the fraught conversation, to recognize that the discussion was arising out of a tension in the life of the group as a whole, and to work against potential scapegoating through experience-sharing and responsibility-taking.

In individual consultation in subsequent individual supervisions, my role with each student was different. With the white female student accused of rude-bordering-on-racist behavior, I invited her reflection and then joined by sharing my own experiences of "getting called on my stuff" so that she was not isolated as "the identified white person" in this setting. We were able to acknowledge the shame we have experienced and reflect on ways to move through it. This helped lower her anxiety and made space for learning; when she asked for resources, I moved into a teacher/consultative role and offered frameworks for learning (including a reminder of the didactic on social location and power in ministry) as well as readings that I shared with the whole group. She named these as helpful interventions.

With the African American female who had named her white peer's problematic action, my role was to hear her experience, acknowledge the power and courage of her giving voice to her concern, invite reflection on previous experiences of voicelessness and powerlessness, and invite her to explore what it meant to take and use power ethically. This was a delicate dance. I knew some of the heat in the situation came from a storehouse of oppressive experiences and that it was difficult to identify the energy that belonged in the current experience and relationship. As a white person seeking to live into an anti-racist identity, I wanted no part of silencing her

in any way. And yet, in my consultative supervisory role, I knew there was learning available to her. We are continuing to find our way.

Space constraints preclude my exploring all the supervisory strategies in play with the other students, but it is clear that as this group has moved through weeks of exploring how social locatedness and power are shaping their interactions, they have moved through conflicts to deeper levels of intimacy as they face into dynamics of not only race but also gender and sexual orientation. Each of the students has experienced abusive behavior from someone in their past, as I have, and so we are exploring the differences between working out of our spiritual authority and being patterned by an internalized abuser. I have worked through my own fear of expressing strength, authority, and power, although it is an ongoing journey, and so I can see parts of their paths and how to move with them. My great joy is seeing my students make intentional and informed choices by assessing when to speak and when to listen, when to act and when to trust, and when to wait for another's leadership and when to lead.

Conclusion

This work grows out of my commitment to a *liberative epistemology*, one that rejects ways of knowing that objectify or dehumanize and embraces those that foster the ability of all persons to reach a fuller humanity and to be subjects of their own seeing, knowing, being, and doing, whether at personal, cultural, or systemic levels. Using these tools can help us all become more critically aware of the epistemological constraints that can accompany societal privilege and to work to overcome them. Increasing understanding about social location and power heightens awareness of societal and cultural impacts and increases compassion for self and others, raises cultural competence and awareness of power, and deepens the quality of care and potentially widens its scope. These epistemological commitments help me help my students to grow into more ethical, accountable working relationships in which our work and learning has the possibility of benefiting more people more justly. Finally, attending to these issues is key to living into the love and justice mandates of many spiritual and religious traditions.

In telling these stories, I feel in my body how much I miss the Blue Moon—the line dances where we were all in step, the slow dances of intimate connection, the improvisational embrace of two-steps and shuffles

and waltzes. And yet, I sense too that that energy is with me still, a warmth radiating from my heart and out through my body into the seeking and searching connections with my students and our care receivers. We are doing love in this dance of learning and caring and living more fully into the lives offered to us. And in this dance, there is no edge to my gratitude, no end to the unfolding.

NOTES

1 Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, *Breaking out Again: Feminist Ontology and Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

2 This is not simply anecdotal insight. In the course of doing research for my dissertation, I reviewed years of data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics corroborating this point.

3 In some settings, we might explore the impact of this inverse relationship on other forms of ministry. For instance, who has the deepest epistemological privilege about poverty? Poor people do, the learners reply. And yet, it is rare for actual poor people to be (and remain) in charge of efforts to address poverty.

4 When I have presented this content to professional chaplains and educators, we have sometimes also explored the extent to which these are the concerns of spiritual care. Who on the team attends to socially determined realities? What is the material impact of oppressions on access to resources, including health care and support after hospital discharge, emergency department utilization, readmission rates, management of chronic illnesses, and partnerships of faith communities with health care institutions?

5 Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 100. Isasi-Díaz references Otto Maduro, *Mapas Para La Fiesta: Reflexiones Latinoamericanas Sobre La Crisis Y El Conocimiento* (Cap. Federal, Rep. Argentina: Centro Nueva Tierra para la Promoción Social y Pastoral, 1992), 136–38.

6 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 270.

7 Antony Willliams, *Visual and Active Supervision: Roles, Focus, Technique* (New York: W. W. Norton), xiii.

8 Willliams, *Visual and Active Supervision*, 115.