

Social GRRRAACCEEESSS and Safeguarding

Clarification of terms

This paper introduces readers to the concept of the Social GRRRAACCEEESSS. This is a crucial concept used in modern safeguarding practice.

The term is “A mnemonic that separates out different aspects of identity into separate categories.” (Butler, 2017, p. 17)

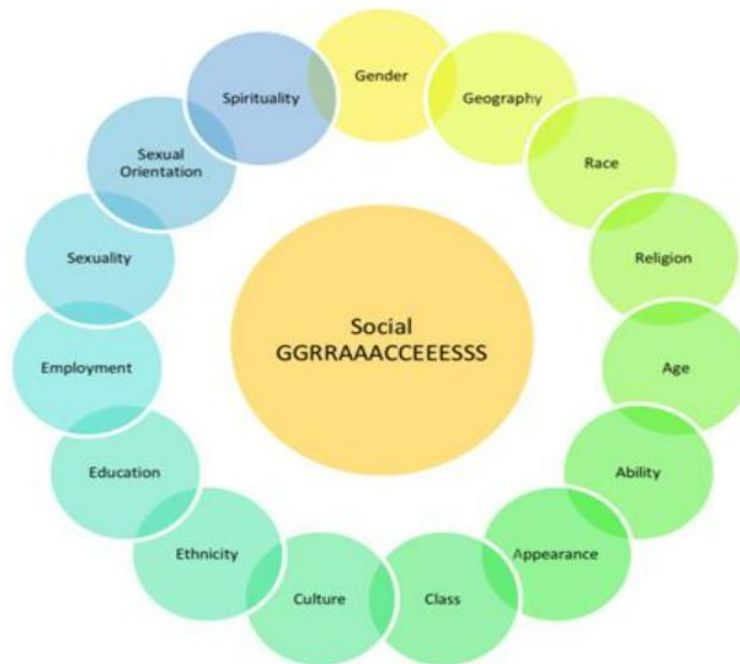
Discourse surrounding this mnemonic is situated within systemic practice*, with professional foundations including social work, counselling and psychotherapy. Therefore, such terminology and discourse sits externally from the Christian term “Grace” and its theological meaning, the unconditional and unearned love of God.

1. Introduction

The mnemonic GRRRAACCEEESSS proposes that, as individuals, we are a sum of parts, a sum of certain visible and invisible characteristics which in given contexts afford us power and privilege. Social GRRRAACCEEESSS (SGs) allow us to examine the elements of identity that might impact our lives and behaviours, asking us to be aware of how our identity influences our thinking. Providing a framework for thinking about identity, which is complex and interwoven.

When first being developed, the original mnemonic was arranged as “disgraces” to highlight the fact that such inequalities were disgraceful. Overtime the “dis” has been dropped with the addition of the word Social to ensure aspects are not merely seen on an individual level, but socially and contextually. The development of the Social GRRRAACCEEESSS as a framework derived from the work of John Burnham and Alison Roper-Hall**. To ensure practitioners recognised the challenges of working with social difference, enabling individuals to be alert to their own preconceptions.

2. What are the Social GRRRAACCEEESSS?



The mnemonic represents aspects of social difference. This list is not exhaustive. However, it is a starting point to allow us to consider in what way these influence how we view the world.

The representation of the SGs within the diagram is particularly important in drawing attention to the nature of the interlinking circles. This suggests fluidity, movement and complexity. To simply list the individual aspects may result in us not paying attention to the interactions between the differing aspects.

Reflection:

Which Social GRRRAACCEESSS are you drawn to most and why?

If someone was to describe you through the application of the SGs, what do you think this description would be?

3. How do the Social GRRRAACCEESSS inform safeguarding responses?

When responding within a safeguarding context it is important that we are aware of how, we are perceived by others and equally, how we perceive individuals. Survivors across differing contexts all to often reference the fact that they feel they are seen not as individuals but, as a part of a homogenous group. The SGs ensure we pay attention to both visible and invisible characteristics that shape our experiences of the world. *“There is more to me than meets the eye”* is central when thinking about the SGs as, we are required to look beyond visible and voiced characteristics, to those that are unvoiced and invisible.

How the SGs impact our safeguarding responses:

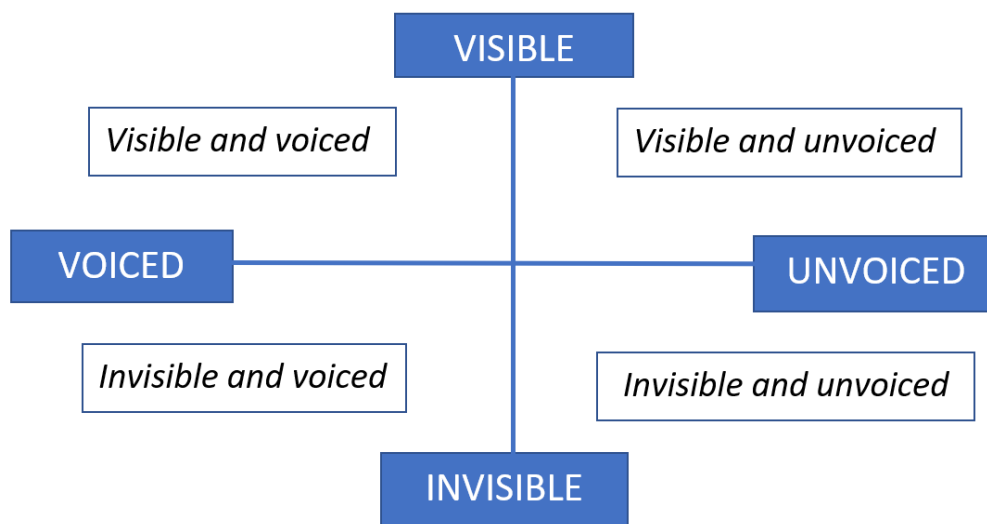
- They require us to explore our own privilege.
- They require us to acknowledge the perceptions held by those external to the Church and explore how this impacts on power, privilege and individual responses.
- They require us to reflect on our own and others’ visible, voiced, invisible and unvoiced SGs, and how these may impact the assumptions we and others form, and the responses / decisions we make (or fail to make).

4. Visible, voiced, invisible and unvoiced?

Let’s think about a kaleidoscope. Images move back and forward, getting larger and smaller, and blurring into each other. The same can be said for the SGs: a “collide-scope” of aspects of self (and others) that expand, contract, and collide, temporarily move forward, or fade away within differing contexts.

Characteristics of self can be visible and invisible, voiced, and unvoiced. Visible qualities may be afforded due to visual clues, such as gender, race, culture, appearance, ability.

The aspects of SGs may vary in the way they are visible or invisible (whether it is visually present and obvious) and voiced or unvoiced (whether it can be named or discussed) and they may move between quadrants, as shown in Figure 2.



“There is more to me than meets the eye”: the “invisible or unvoiced” SGs.

Example-

*A white, middle-class professional male will be afforded privilege due to class, gender and professional role. This male will be perceived by society as holding privilege. However, invisible SGs may remain unvoiced such as sexuality, which in given circumstances will result in oppression. In given situations sexual orientation, homosexuality in this case, may be an **invisible-voiced** SG. However in other social circumstances, due to under-representation and oppression, this may be **invisible-unvoiced***

The nature of SGs means there is a state of flux, the collide-scope of characteristics moving to the fore and blurring into one another. In differing contexts, certain aspects of identity will either take a position of being voiced, or unvoiced, visible or invisible. SGs are dynamic and shifting with contexts, sometimes colliding together and always in relationships with each other (Burnham, 2013).

Example-

*A female Afghan refugee, settled within a predominantly white, middle-class, rural village, with conversational English will be underrepresented. She might feel oppressed due to culture, gender, geography ability and religion. All of which will be **visible** or **voiced** within social situations. However, the **invisible-unvoiced** SG of education, being that of a medical degree in this case, would - if voiced - afford privilege.*

Engaging in conversation surrounding the unvoiced and invisible SGs, allows discussion around who, we are and how we are influenced beyond the presumed visible aspects.

5. Intersectionality

Intersectionality is the belief that the multiple parts, or sections, of our identity (race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender etc) can never be understood in isolation. Identity will always be made up of the overlap, or intersections, of these different aspects of identity, which are bound within contexts of power that give them meaning.

Intersectionality has often been in focus when aspects of the SGs intersect and lead to multiple marginalisation's. Intersectionality is noted when SGs are closely interwoven and hard to separate, such as religion, race and culture. This highlights the important understanding that social differences are not unitary or mutually exclusive entities but interwoven to shape either privilege or oppression. Exploring intersectionality requires us to consider the power and oppression which aligns with aspects of identity as they intersect and the subsequent impact.

Example-

A physically disabled white man will be rewarded the privileges of patriarchy and whiteness, while discriminated against for being a wheelchair user. His age, sexuality, and class will bring additional axes of privilege and oppression into the mix. These intersections result in a unique lived-experience that can only be understood by holding these identities together.

Reflection:

What are your invisible SGs and are there times these become voiced?

Do you feel there are any SGs missing?

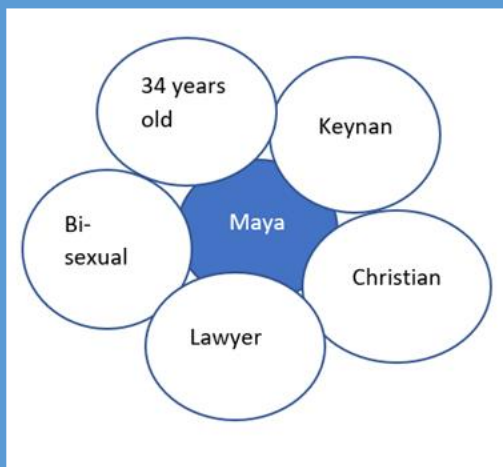
6. What does this all mean?

SGs are socially constructed. Within differing contexts certain aspects of identity will afford you power or privilege, whereas within other contexts they may lead to oppression. SGs hold stories of pride and shame, power and privilege, conferring positions of power.

SGs as a concept will not eliminate power or privilege; developing awareness and seeking to unpick differentials in power allows us to develop awareness of social difference and the power/ privilege afforded.

Example

I was first introduced to the SGs through a “line of privilege exercise”, utilised to explore how aspects of identity afforded power and privilege. I recall feeling uncomfortable as either I or a colleague stepped forward, but this exercise brought to the forefront the overriding focus of the SGs in allowing the identification of power differentials.



This is a daisy model, with self, placed in the centre and the SGs that the individual aligns with most depicted as “petals”

Age- Education- sexual orientation- Religion- Culture

These SGs will influence how Maya is perceived and how Maya perceives others. Maya moved to London to undertake her degree. Maya was fortunate in Kenya due to her father's politic standing. When returning to Kenya Maya is afforded privilege due to her education, professional role and class. However, her sexuality is unvoiced, due to the oppression she perceives she would encounter. By contrast, in London Maya's sexual orientation is voiced, she is afforded privilege and power due to her role within the LGBTQ community using her professional role to address inequality.

The way we think about the world is tied up with the position and power we have within this, and this will be fluid and change within different contexts and differing groups we might be involved within.



Time to think:

What are the SGs that afford privilege or oppression to each family?

7. Presumption, Bias and Preconceived Perceptions

SGs and our lived experiences will influence our own outlook and relationships both professionally and socially. SGs allow us to explore how we make sense of communication, relationships and experiences, and how this impacts on our relational processes, understanding and decision making.

Taking into consideration interactional patterns and lived experiences which inform our biases, perceptions and presumptions.

The word "bias" tends to align with negative connotations. However, such negative connotations are only aligned when we are not aware of our own biases and how they influence our behaviours and relationships. SGs allow us to challenge and reflect on self and rather than removing bias requires us to accept how this is formulated.

Example-


“When you look at me who do you see?”

“I see all the previous social workers who have let me down, who have not supported me and want to take my children away”.

The above question, “when you look at me who do you see?” will be guided by the respondent’s presumptions and perceptions. There will be instances when we are “seen” by an overriding aspect of our identity, such as employment, culture or gender. This can lead us to be homogenously grouped, “tarred with the same brush” due to previous lived experiences.

What does this mean? We need to be aware not only of **how we are viewed** due to SGs and the related power, but also **how we might view others**, requiring reflection in relation to preconceived perceptions, bias and presumptions.

The nature of preconceptions can lead to alignment with individuals due to similarities within visible and voiced SGs.



Time to think:

When entering a professional or social situation who are we drawn to?

When entering a room within unknown individuals who are you drawn to?

Why are you drawn to these individuals?

Reflection:

Using the daisy model and the SGs which you are most drawn to, which of these affords you either privilege or oppression?

- Within your professional role.
- Within your social context.

Do you dare ask yourself...

- Have you ever been overlooked for a promotion because of your gender?
- Have you ever felt too intimidated to disclose your sexuality to colleagues?
- Has a disability ever prevented you from contributing to the workplace?
- Have you ever been rejected from a job application solely based on your surname?

8. How does this impact our responses in safeguarding?

Power and privilege are socially constructed. What is not socially constructed is a person's ability to cause harm to others, to pose a safeguarding risk, or be the victim/ survivor of abuse.

Our responses within given contexts are impacted by socially constructed power and privilege. Power and privilege will be granted all too often due to positions in society. This can impact on our assessment of, and decision-making about, safeguarding situations.

Within practice settings professionals are often required to reflect on the impact of SGs within their work, and how this impacts their interactions and responses.

Example-

Two families are in the process of being assessed due to concerns regarding parental alcohol misuse.

The first family is upper-middle class, residing in an affluent area. Both parents work within the legal profession and are financially able to send both children to a prestigious private school. The second family resides within a deprived area. Neither parent is employed, with both in receipt of Universal Credit and the children receiving free school meals.



Time to think:

What are the SGs that afford privilege or oppression to each family?

Within these practice contexts professional responses will differ due to power and privilege. Working with the first family is seen all too often as disempowering for professionals, finding their own power and privilege diminished due to that of the family, making challenge and direct discussion more difficult. Whereas those working with the second family, will hold power and privilege, meaning professional challenge surrounding behaviours and risk becomes more direct. For the two families the outcome of assessment may differ due to the imbalance of power within the relationship.

The example above highlights how SGs can impact our ability to challenge individuals in given circumstances. Power and privilege will empower and disempower individuals within given contexts. Understanding and reflecting on SGs (our own and those of others) allows us to explore how our responses are impacted. This requires us to develop a robust understanding of the complex interplay of our own and others' SGs, and to pay attention to the patterns that influence our decision making and responses.

Reflection:

Which SGs do you privilege in yourself and others?

Has there been a time when SGs have affected your confidence to challenge or hold another to account?

- What happened within this situation?
- What were your emotional responses?
- Did you overcome this, if so how?

Does power and privilege impact our ability to hold to account within the Church?

Can you think of a situation where your response to someone has been influenced by your perception of their lack of power and privilege, and which you now question?

9. Final reflections and summary

The cornerstone to systemic practice and principles (such as the SGs) requires individuals to reflect, take a position of curiosity and seek to explore the world from differing perspectives. Within the field of safeguarding, SGs afford us the opportunity to challenge oppression and privilege. Consciously reflecting on how and why we act and interact with others due to our identity and lived experiences helps us to make the best possible judgments in safeguarding situations, to get things right.

Within safeguarding we are reminded that:

- Fast unconscious thinking leads us to make assumptions; time is required to pause and reflect. Ensuring we are consciously aware of what might influence our assumptions is essential.
- The exploration of SGs allows us to reflect on what informs our attitudes, perceptions and biases. All of which will influence how we work with individuals.
- The nature of the human mind and societal perceptions can lead to homogenous views of groups of individuals, whether it be the clergy or survivors.
- Reflecting on the aspects of the SGs that afford privilege allows awareness when working with others, whilst considering how our visible SGs can lead to presumptions about invisible aspects.
- Exploring SGs requires us to check for assumptions and preconceived knowledge ensuring we work collaboratively with individuals defining their unique intersecting experiences of oppression and privilege, to gain greater understanding of lived experiences.

Further reading

- Burnham, J. (2012) Developments in social GRRRAACCEEESSS: Visible-invisible and voiced-unvoiced. In I-B. Krause (Ed.) *Culture and Reflexivity in Systemic Psychotherapy*. Mutual Perspectives. London: Karnac.

- Butler, C. (2017). Intersectionality and systemic therapy, *Context*, 151, pp. 16-18.
- Totsuka, Y. (2014). 'Which aspects of social GRRAAACCEEESSS grab you most? 'The social GRRAAACCEEESSS exercise for a supervision group to promote therapists' self-reflexivity. *Journal of family Therapy*, 36, pp86-106

