

2

ABOUT PRIVILEGED GROUPS

In any educational context, it is helpful to know your audience, to understand with whom you're working. Being a member of a privileged group affects one's worldview, assumptions, and behavior. In this chapter, I'll explore what it means to be part of a privileged group and the significance of this for our educational efforts. Specifically, I'll discuss some common characteristics of dominant groups and dominant group members, multiple identities and the experience of privilege, and the resistance to acknowledging one's privilege.

Characteristics of Privileged Groups

There are several key attributes of privileged groups. In the first part of the discussion, I will focus on what characterizes a dominant group. I will then consider the implications of these qualities for members of privileged groups. While I will focus on what is generally true for dominant groups, it is important to keep in mind that there are also significant variations among forms of oppression and among individuals.

Normalcy

The dominant cultural and societal norms are based on the characteristics of the privileged group (Wildman, 1996). The dominant group becomes the point of reference against which other groups are judged. It becomes "normal". This standard of normalcy is also used to define what is good and right. These cultural norms become institutionalized and establish policy and practice. Catherine MacKinnon (1989) illustrates how this is true about males.

Men's physiology defines most sports, their health needs largely define insurance coverage, their socially designed biographies define workplace expectations and successful career patterns, their perspectives and concerns define quality in scholarship, their experiences and obsessions define merit, their military service defines citizenship, their presence defines family, their inability to get along with each other—their wars and rulerships—defines history, their image defines god, and their genitals define sex. (p. 224)

White, Christian, middle-class, heterosexual norms pervade our culture. Schools are one place where this is evident. The communication patterns and cultural styles used in most educational settings are more typical of White, upper-middle-class families. There is an emphasis on individualistic learning, competition, and quiet and controlled classrooms, as opposed to collectivist values, oral traditions, and more active behavior, which are more common in other cultural groups (Delpit, 1995; Greenfield & Cocking, 1996; Viadro, 1996). The structure and content of standardized tests have been based on White, middle-class males, giving rise to concerns about gender and racial bias (Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2009; Santelices & Wilson, 2010). The conformity, or lack thereof, to these norms has significant impact on educational success and achievement. For example, one study (Morris, 2007) found that teachers tend to view the behavior of Black girls as not "ladylike" and discourage behaviors and characteristics that lead to their class involvement and academic achievement.

This is also true in the workplace. Consider the style of speech and dress required for success in the business world. "Proper English", suits or other "professional attire", and a refined interpersonal style are the accepted standards. A study of the experiences of women, Jews, Blacks, Asians, Latinos, and gay men and lesbians in positions of corporate leadership found that while the faces may be more diverse, the behaviors and values remain the same (Domhoff & Zweigenhaft, 1998a). To be successful, these groups must conform to the norms and expectations of the dominant group. "Hedging against traditional stereotypes, Jewish and Black executives must be properly reserved, Asian executives properly assertive, gay executives traditionally masculine, and lesbian executives traditionally feminine" (Domhoff & Zweigenhaft, 1998b, p. 44). People cannot be "too Jewish", "too Black", or "too gay".

The image of a "good family" (still) consists of a mother who is home raising children and a father who is earning the money. When I recently bought a house, I got a strong dose of these cultural norms. I made many calls about hiring someone to do work in the house, saying only that I recently bought it and my full name (first and last). With a few exceptions, people referred to me as Mrs Goodman, assumed that I had a "handy husband" and that I would be home during the day. The possibility that I might be single or a lesbian was not part of most people's thinking.

Other cultural norms are also widespread. I became painfully aware that I was not part of the norm when I attended a huge educational conference in a major hotel in San Francisco during the week of Passover and there was not a matzoh in sight. (Matzoh is unleavened cracker-like bread eaten by Jews during Passover as a substitute for leavened bread which is not allowed.) Look in most mainstream card stores and notice how often you see a person with a disability, a person of color or a gay couple on the front, unless the card is targeted for that particular population. Whiteness as the norm in skin tone was revealed in reports about the color of a gown worn by First Lady Michelle Obama which described it as “nude” or “flesh-tone” (later, revised to “champagne”) (Critchell, 2010). It is particularly ironic since Mrs Obama is African American and the dress hardly matched her skin tone, clearly evident in all the pictures.

We often become aware of the norms when we are exposed to the reverse or an exception. Try switching to all female pronouns when reading something using the generic “he”. When I visited Atlanta, I was struck the first time I saw brown mannequins throughout a department store, despite having lived around New York City and other urban areas of the Northeast. Guided fantasies which reverse the norms, such as ones where homosexuality is the most common and accepted form of sexual orientation also illustrate what we take for granted as standard and appropriate.

Moreover, we tend to indicate the identity of individuals only when they are not what we consider the norm, otherwise their social identity is assumed and unnamed. People are likely to refer to the “woman doctor”, “Arab store-owner”, “Latino businessman”, “lesbian teacher” or “disabled lawyer”, even when their social identity is not significant to the story. Yet how often would someone use the terms “male”, “White”, “able-bodied,” or “heterosexual” to refer to individuals in similar positions? Sometimes, only through exposure to difference can we begin to see what we have become accustomed to and take to be “normal”.

An example of how notions of normalcy get internalized is illustrated in a conversation I had with my daughter when she was eight. She was describing how a friend of hers who is bi-racial—Chinese and White, was being teased because of the shape of her eyes. In the course of this conversation, Halle said, “But my eyes are just. . . .” She paused to search for the right word. She finished her sentence by hesitantly saying “normal.” I used this teachable moment to offer her other language to describe her eyes (oval) and to discuss how what is “normal” depends on the context (in China, her friend’s eyes would be considered “normal”) and that things can be different without having to be considered “normal” or not.

When a group is part of the norm, they also get seen and see themselves as “objective” and “neutral”. Other groups have biases and agendas. This was evident in the confirmation hearing of Judge Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court. There was much discussion (and concern) about how her being a woman and Latina would shape her decisions, but virtually no discussion about how being male and White influences the decisions of the other Justices.

Superiority

This sense of normalcy also leads to a sense of superiority. Not only is it normal, it’s better. Differences get converted into “better or worse” with the attributes of the dominant group the winners. For example, not only is “standard English” more socially accepted, it is considered “better” than other cultural dialects. Not only are heterosexual nuclear families considered more “common” than gay or lesbian families, they are considered the “best” family structure. White (European) culture, as expressed in music, art, dance, and literature is considered more sophisticated than and superior to the cultures of other racial/ethnic groups (which may be considered interesting but “primitive”).

The conversion of differences into notions of superiority/inferiority, is seen in a study to assess children’s attitudes, beliefs, and social preferences about children with different skin tones. (<http://cnn.com>, May 2010). Children in early childhood and middle school were asked various questions to see which skin tones (ranging from light to dark) they associated with positive and negative traits (e.g. smart, dumb, nice, mean, etc). The children, as a whole, revealed a “White bias”, associating lighter skin with positive attributes and darker skin with negative attributes, though White children expressed a far greater bias.

Even the same traits may be named and valued differently depending on whether they are associated with a privileged or an oppressed group. Christians are “thrifty” while Jews are “cheap”; heterosexual men are “studs” while gay men are “promiscuous”; men are “leaders” while women are “bitches”; Whites are “shrewd” while Asians are “sneaky”. Privileged groups uphold their own attributes as preferable while distorting and disparaging the qualities of others.

Superiority is not always conveyed in blatant and intentional ways. It is the expectation (often unconscious) that people of color should assimilate to White norms in order to be acceptable and accepted. A similar process occurs when women are expected to adopt “male” styles of leadership and communication in order to be viewed as competent and effective in the workplace (though, they can’t be too “masculine” either). Trying to get people from disadvantaged groups to be “more like us” is usually a sign of supremacy at work, carrying the implicit message that “our way” is better.

This sense of superiority extends from the characteristics and culture of the dominant group to the individuals themselves. Oppression is commonly defined, in part, as the belief in the inherent superiority of one group over another. This influences how people are viewed and treated. People in professional positions are considered worthier of respect than people in working-class jobs. There is usually more public outcry when a White woman is raped or a White child is killed than when this occurs to a woman or child of color. People with developmental disabilities have been seen as appropriate guinea pigs for dangerous medical experiments. Even at the level of the Supreme Court, Judge Ruth Bader Ginsberg related an experience familiar to many women when she discussed how in conferences

with the other Supreme Court judges, her points were often ignored until they were made by one of the male judges (Lewis, 2009).

People from disadvantaged groups are generally labeled as substandard or aberrant. They are assumed to be less capable due to innate defects or deficiencies (Miller, 1976). For example, women are too emotional, Blacks are less intelligent, gays are morally deviant, and people with disabilities are defective. Not only are people from subordinated groups somehow inferior, but by logical extension, people from dominant groups are superior. This reasoning allows privileged groups to rationalize the systematic unfair treatment of people from oppressed groups and to feel entitled to power and privilege.

Cultural and Institutional Power and Domination

Oppression involves unequal social power—access and control of resources, goods, and rewards/punishments that enhance one's capacity to get what one needs and influence others. This allows for domination, the ability for one social group to systematically subjugate, control, manipulate, and use other people for its own ends. Social power and domination is created and maintained through interpersonal, institutional, and cultural forces. The privileged group creates systems and structures that reflect its values, embodies its characteristics, and advances its interests. A structural perspective on inequality recognizes the role of public policies and institutional practices, not simply individual attitudes, in developing and perpetuating societal inequality. People are increasingly using the term "White supremacy", not to refer to racial extremists, but to describe how notions of White superiority are embedded in our institutions and ideology. Unequal power systems are sustained by shaping people's worldviews, controlling resources, and constraining opportunities.

Since social oppression has both ideological and structural dimensions, it can take many forms. At times, it is blatant and coercive and the advantages to the privileged group are clear, such as with Jim Crow laws or forced (uninformed) sterilization. Often, however, it is more subtle and insidious, with less obvious benefits to the privileged group, such as media images that portray women as sex objects, or economic policies that maintain some unemployment to ensure a pool of cheap, surplus labor.

Privileged groups define the mainstream culture—behavior patterns, symbols, institutions, values, and other human-made components of society (Banks, 1991). They determine what is acceptable and unacceptable, what is valued and ignored. Other groups are relegated as "subcultures". For example, the dominant cultural norms are reflected in our standards of beauty. The image of a beautiful woman is someone who is young, extremely thin, tall, light-skinned, with Anglo features, and finely textured hair, and often blond and blue-eyed. According to mainstream time norms, people should be ruled by the clock. People are expected to be prompt and to end meetings according to pre-arranged times. Other cultural groups are more

relaxed about time, and begin and complete activities when they feel ready to do so. Often, this is seen as lazy and undisciplined.

Advantaged groups also establish the dominant ideology—a pervasive set of ideas and ways of looking at reality. The dominant ideology forms individual consciousness and both justifies and conceals domination (Kreisberg, 1992, p. 15). The concept of "hegemony" (Gramsci & Forgas, 2000) describes the ways in which the privileged group imposes their conception of reality in a manner accepted as common sense, as "normal" and as universal. As Jean Baker Miller (1976) explains,

"A dominant group has the greatest influence in determining a culture's overall outlook—its philosophy, morality, social theory and even its science. The dominant group, thus, legitimizes the unequal relationship and incorporates it into society's guiding concepts" (p. 8). This dominant ideology, which I discuss in more depth in Chapter 4, is embedded in institutional structures and practices that shape our consciousness and experiences. What we learn (and don't learn) in school, what we see (and don't see) in the media, how we are expected to act at work, how our economy is structured, who are held up as role models, and what research gets funded and validated, reflects and reinforces the dominant ideology. This informs our sense of what is important, true, and real about ourselves, others, and the world. This power to define reality is labeled "true power" by Derald Sue (2010a). He explains, "When a clash of realities occur, mainstream groups have the tools—education, mass media, peer social groups and institutions to define and impose realities upon other groups" (p. 46).

When privileged groups have greater institutional power, it allows them to establish policies and procedures that can provide, deny or limit opportunities and access to resources and social power. In 2007, the top 1% of the population owned almost 35% of the privately held wealth in the US; the top 20% controlled approximately 85% of the wealth in this country (Wolff, 2010); in 2010, only about 3% of CEOs of the Fortune 500 companies were women (Catalyst, 2010); and women and people of color are still grossly underrepresented in Congress. They exercise control over access to health care, housing, education, employment, political representation, fair judicial treatment, and legal rights.

Privileged groups also define acceptable roles for people in subordinated groups. These roles usually involve providing services that people from advantaged groups do not want to do or do not highly value. This social manipulation impedes human dignity and self-determination. Conversely, people from privileged groups can provide benefits to others from their own social group—by sharing information, providing jobs, creating laws and policies, contributing money, making appointments to boards and committees, and facilitating social and political connections.

The control of the dominant belief system and major institutions results in psychological domination as well. People from both privileged and marginalized groups often begin to accept the messages from the dominant culture of dominant group superiority and subordinated group inferiority. When this is absorbed by people from the privileged group, it is sometimes called "internalized superiority/supremacy."

Sometimes it is conscious, but often "it is the unconscious, internalized values and attitudes that maintain domination, even when people do not support or display overt discrimination or prejudice" (hooks, 1989, p. 13). For people from oppressed groups, "internalized oppression" or "internalized inferiority" undermines their self-esteem, sense of empowerment, and intragroup solidarity. It encourages unhealthy, dysfunctional behavior. In addition, people from oppressed groups are encouraged to develop personal and psychological characteristics that are pleasing to the privileged group—being submissive, dependent, docile (Miller, 1976). As long as people believe that they are inferior or deserve their situation, consider their treatment fair or for their own benefit, or are constrained in their self-development, they will not effectively challenge the current system.

Since the dominant ideology is embedded in our institutional practices and individual consciousness, for oppression to continue, we just need to act "normally", to go along with the status quo. It does not require malice or bad intentions to perpetuate systems of domination. We have been conditioned to see our social systems as normal and natural, even if some societal inequities are recognized.

Since only privileged groups have institutional power and the ability to systematically enforce their views, only they may be "oppressive" (e.g. racist, sexist, ableist, etc). Certainly, people from *all* social groups (advantaged and disadvantaged) have prejudices and may act in discriminatory ways. Women may stereotype men, gays may deride heterosexuals, and Latinos may favor other Latinos for jobs. However, I, like many others, make the distinction between oppression and other terms such as prejudice, bigotry or bias. None of the oppressed groups has the societal power to systematically disadvantage the corresponding privileged group. Consequently, from this line of thinking, there is no "reverse racism" even though people of color can act in hurtful, unfair ways toward White people. The shorthand definition "prejudice + social power = oppression" is useful to capture this distinction.

Privilege

Oppression involves both systematic disadvantage *and* advantage. This "system of advantage" (Wellman, 1977) bestows on people from privileged groups greater access to power, resources, and opportunities that are denied to others and usually gained at their expense. Most discussions of social injustice focus on the subjugation of oppressed groups—the ways in which they are discriminated against, marginalized, exploited, manipulated, demeaned, and physically and emotionally attacked. Less attention is given to the other part of the dynamic—the privileging of the dominant group.

Social oppression creates privilege systems—benefits or unearned advantages systematically afforded people from dominant groups simply because of their social group membership. "... What makes something a privilege is the unequal way in which it is distributed and the effect it has on elevating some people over others"

(Johnson, 2005, p. 175). It includes what we are able to take for granted or not have to think about simply because we are part of an advantaged group; people from disadvantaged groups cannot make the same assumptions. Peggy McIntosh (1988) describes White privilege as "an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks" (p. 71). Privileges can be both material and psychological; they can include concrete benefits as well as psychological freedoms; often these are interrelated. McIntosh lists numerous privileges for Whites that reflect these two interconnected dimensions. She writes,

I can go home from most meetings of the organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, feared or hated; I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them; I can go into a supermarket and find the food I grew up with, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can deal with my hair; I can be pretty sure that, if I ask to talk to 'the person in charge' I will be facing a person of my race; I can be pretty sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race; I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race; I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race; I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, or be late to meetings without having people attribute these behaviors to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race; I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do. (pp. 5-9)

(Using her work as a template, there are now lists of privileges for many other groups.)

Male privilege is evident in an exercise I do with groups of university men and women.¹ I ask them to describe what they do on a daily basis to ensure their safety. The men have a hard time coming up with a list. On the other hand, the women quickly cite numerous efforts: locking doors, walking with buddies, getting rides, avoiding certain areas, checking their cars, staying inside during late hours. Men have the privilege of being able to move about with less thought, worry, and constraint. (For men facing other forms of oppression—racism, classism, heterosexism, ableism—the privilege of safety may be significantly limited).

People with class privilege have access to the best medical care; to leisure and vacations; to good housing, food, and clothing; and to governmental financial advantages (e.g. tax breaks, write-offs for mortgages). They feel entitled to be treated respectfully, to be taken seriously, and to have opportunities to use their talents. They can choose work that may be meaningful, though not well-compensated, knowing they have a safety net—other marketable skills, opportunities for

education, or financial resources. They can use connections to get jobs or to be admitted to college. It's interesting to note that when opportunities are gained due to connections, there is not the outcry about merit. On the other hand, affirmative action is constantly attacked (cf. Larew, 2010).

Able-bodied people do not have to think about access to buildings—for education, cultural events, employment, socializing; about travel—around one's own town, vacation areas, conference sites; or about needing assistance to do basic daily tasks. They do not fear that people will assume them to be less intelligent or less productive solely because of a (possibly irrelevant) disability. My privilege as a hearing person became starkly apparent at a conference I attended. One of the participants in a session I was facilitating was a woman who was deaf. The conference provided interpreters during the workshop. At one of the social events, she motioned me over to say hello to a colleague who was also deaf, but there was no interpreter. We were unable to communicate effectively since I didn't know sign language. Not only did I feel frustrated and disappointed that I was missing out on getting to know some interesting people, I realized how much I enjoyed and gained from being able to socialize and network with so many people at the conference while they sat by themselves, unable to interact with the rest of the participants.

People with Christian privilege do not have to take personal days to observe their religious holidays or worry whether institutional dining halls and cafeterias will have foods that meet their religious dietary needs. They can travel around the country and find churches they can attend and hear music on the radio or programs on TV that reflect their religion. Prayers at public occasions will usually be based on Christianity (even if they're intended to be non-denominational) and their holy day (Sunday) is taken into account when scheduling work, school, or public events (Blumenfeld, Joshi, & Fairchild, 2008; Schlosser, 2003; Seifert, 2007).

Heterosexuals can freely display public affection, talk openly about their partner, have their relationship publicly acknowledged and celebrated, and be protected from discrimination. They don't need to worry if it's all right to bring their partner to events (and then, if they can dance together); if they'll lose their job if they're "out"; if they'll be accepted by their neighbors, or if their partner will be considered "family" under hospital guidelines and thus be able to visit or make medical decisions.

I became aware of another aspect of heterosexual privilege when I worked on a committee against homophobia on a university campus. When I was hired to do human relations education, it was clear that few people on campus were willing to publicly deal with issues of heterosexism, despite the often stated need and some very active (though essentially closeted) gay and lesbian faculty and staff. I quickly formed a committee (open to everyone) to address gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues on campus (transgender issues weren't in people's consciousness then). There was a lot of interest and a strong representation of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. While

we worked very collaboratively, I was the "chair" and "contact person"—regularly sending out notices of our meetings and events, being called by the student newspaper to report on our activities. On a campus that felt unsafe to most gays, I realized that as a heterosexual, I had more freedom to be public about working against homophobia than my lesbian and gay colleagues. I had the safety of not being "found out", despite assumptions that I was a lesbian. It felt like a privilege to be visible around this issue. (This is not to deny the fact that people from privileged groups do face risks when being allies.)

Promoting identification with superiority and privilege helps to prevent people from an advantaged group from allying with people from one of their disadvantaged groups. White poor and working class men have often used (and have been encouraged to use) their "whiteness" to feel privileged while rejecting an alliance with men of color in a similar class position (Roediger, 1991). They rely on racism and their sense of White privilege to create separation, instead of forging a common struggle against classism and economic exploitation.

Moreover, oppression is maintained not just by taking actions *against* disadvantaged groups but by increasing privileges *for* advantaged groups. "Inequality gets reproduced through advantages to Whites as much or more so than it does through discrimination against minorities" (DiTomaso, 2003). We need to examine both parts of the dynamic. For example, even when White women and people of color (and others from subordinated groups) are not actively denied jobs, unless they are included in the informal social network, mentored, encouraged to take on new responsibilities, and provided opportunities for professional development, the net effect will be that they will not advance at the same rate as White men. White men are being privileged even though White women and people of color may not be facing overt discrimination.

There is a growing recognition of how the history and cumulative effect of interlocking benefits for the dominant group affect current inequities, particularly related to race (California Newsreel, 2003; Katznelson, 2006; Lipsitz, 1998; Lui, Robles, Leonard-Wright, Brewer, & Adamson, 2006). There has been a legacy of institutional (including government) policies, as well as more informal practices, that have unfairly privileged people from dominant groups. "Histories of unearned advantages, unequal distribution of resources, the effects of housing segregation, access to job connections—these are the factors that reproduce the unequal outcomes that we see" (DiTomaso, 2003).

Moreover, people from dominant group receive privileges regardless of their individual attitudes. They neither have to be aware of the advantages nor want them to receive them.

In the same way that men benefit from a patriarchal system by the way resources are distributed, even if they don't have antipathy toward women, white people are given the spoils of a racist system even if they're not personally racist. (Powell, 2003)

22 Promoting Diversity and Social Justice

McIntosh also makes distinctions among privileges. She suggests that some are advantages that everyone is entitled to and should be a right; these need to be extended to all. Examples include having your neighbors be decent to you, not having your race work against you in employment, or not being followed or harassed in stores. Other privileges confer dominance and reinforce our present hierarchies, such as being able to ignore less powerful people, to manipulate our legal system to avoid punishment, to withhold information or resources, or to advance your interests to the detriment of others. These need to be rejected and eliminated. Therefore, as we examine privilege systems, we need to consider how privileges are constructed, how they are used to further systemic and structural inequality, and how to ensure that everyone has access to the privileges that should be human rights.

Individuals from Privileged Groups

Individuals are affected by being part of a privileged group and the dominant culture. Their experiences and perspectives are shaped by their social position. The effects of being dominant group members are reflected in people's attitudes, thinking, and behavior. I'll discuss several of the most common traits. Again, these vary according to the individual and their other social identities.

Lack of Consciousness

People from privileged groups tend to have little awareness of their own dominant identity, of the privileges it affords them, of the oppression suffered by the corresponding disadvantaged group, and of how they perpetuate it. In the first place, people from privileged groups generally do not think about their dominant group identity.

I conduct a couple of activities that highlight this point. At the beginning of a class or workshop, I'll ask people to introduce themselves by choosing words to describe who they are. People of color will virtually always refer to their racial/cultural identity, while someone who is White rarely will (Wildman, 1996 and Tatum, 1997 report similar findings).

In another activity, I list common social categories: race, sex, religion, sexual identity, ability/disability, class, age, and ethnicity, and ask people to choose the two or three that are most important to who they are, to their sense of identity. I later ask them to choose the three that feel least important. Again, most people include in their three most important identities subordinated ones (though depending on the group, people are less likely to reveal their sexual orientation if they are gay, lesbian, or bisexual). The three least important are dominant identities. The one consistent exception is sex; both females and males often include it in their top three. This is not surprising since sex is such a salient and referenced social category.

When these results are pointed out to people in the class, I ask them why they think this occurs and why they chose the identities they did. People who choose a subordinated identity as most important talk about feeling very aware of that identity—it makes them feel different, others make them aware of it, it has created obstacles to overcome, or it is where they get mistreated. On the other hand, they recognize that their dominant identity is something to which they generally do not need to pay attention.

Even though we are most exposed to information about privileged groups, people from these groups tend to have the least self-awareness about that aspect of their identity and its social significance. This absence of consciousness about their social identity, seems to, in part, reflect unequal power relationships. Miller (1976) maintains that people from dominant groups are deprived of feedback about their behavior from people from subordinated groups (since it's unsafe to tell), and therefore don't learn about their impact on others. Nor do mainstream institutions (media, schools) provide this kind of perspective. (I also think that most people from privileged groups are not interested in or are afraid of knowing anyway, a point discussed later.) Nonetheless, people from advantaged groups are allowed, in fact encouraged, to remain unaware. In contrast, people from disadvantaged groups become highly attuned to and knowledgeable about the dominant group since their survival depends on it.

This lack of awareness relates to being the norm, and therefore not needing to think about one's social identity. It's like being a fish in water—when you're surrounded by water as part of your natural environment, it's hard to be aware of it. And, this water has been filtered through the dominant ideology. People from privileged groups are surrounded by their culture and therefore don't notice it. This allows them to see themselves as individuals, not as part of a group that has social power and privilege. While members of other social groups may be lumped together, obliterating individual and intragroup differences, people from privileged groups tend to see themselves as unique individuals who succeed or fail based on their own merit.

Moreover, this "fish in water" phenomenon contributes to the lack of awareness people from dominant groups have about their privileges. Because the norm or reality is perceived as including these benefits, the privileges are not visible to the dominant group (Wildman, 1996). As I stated earlier, since privileges are things we usually take for granted and assume to exist, they therefore tend to be invisible. Frequently, we do not realize that something is a privilege until we compare it with the experience of the disadvantaged group. Several examples illustrate this occurrence.

One Sunday morning I was in New York City saying goodbye to my then boyfriend. As we stood on the curb next to my car kissing, I heard some people down the block behind me clapping. We stopped, and as I slowly turned around, I saw four men sitting on the back of a truck laughing and applauding. I felt mortified. As I was recounting this episode to a lesbian friend of mine, it suddenly occurred to me

how this was about heterosexual privilege. I could blithely and obliviously kiss on the street, and then be applauded for my action. I doubt that my gay or lesbian friends would so unconsciously kiss their lover in public, or that they would likely get such a positive reaction. I had the luxury of just worrying about being embarrassed.

I am usually unaware of my privilege as an able-bodied person until I am with a person who has a disability. For several days of a conference I was attending, I wandered about the large hotels looking for the sessions, joined friends for meals, and explored the city. I then met a colleague who used a wheelchair. She generally limited herself to the sessions that were being held in one hotel since navigating it was difficult enough. Trying to get out of the hotel, cross the streets, and move about other hotels was too time-consuming and exhausting. Finding an accessible place to have dinner became another issue. After spending most of the day together, we arrived back at our hotel and found that the elevator in the lobby that stopped at our floor was closed for the evening. Since the suggested alternative was up an escalator (which was impossible to do in a wheelchair), we ended up taking the freight elevator. Technically, the hotel and the conference were wheelchair accessible. However, it made me realize how much I take my mobility, and what it affords me, for granted.

In these previous examples, the privilege is clear if we try to become conscious of it. In other cases, the privilege is more hidden. In an effort to explore sex discrimination, the television show *Prime Time* matched a White man and a White woman on all variables except sex (e.g. overall appearance, education). (*The Fairer Sex*, 1993). They went out separately to look for jobs, buy a car, etc. Both applied for a job as a territory manager for a landscape business that was advertised in the newspaper. Even though based on their resumes she was better qualified for the job, when the man was interviewed he took an aptitude test and was told about managerial possibilities; when the woman was interviewed, she took a typing test and was asked about her secretarial skills.

They conducted a similar experiment with a White man and a Black man to examine racism (*True Colors*, 1992). In one situation, they both responded to an ad for an apartment to rent. The Black man was told that the apartment was rented, while the White man, who went in later, was told that the apartment was still available. In both of these situations, not only did the White man receive better treatment and more opportunities than the woman or Black man, but those options and advancements were gained at their expense. The White man had these chances because others were denied the same opportunity. If there weren't hidden cameras, the White man never would have known that the woman or Black man were not treated as he was. He was just being treated nicely. Unfortunately, this kind of treatment becomes a privilege, an unearned advantage.

While these segments are becoming dated, personal stories and more recent research indicate that these same dynamics continue to exist (cf. Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004; U.S. Housing Scholars and Research and Advocacy

Organizations, 2008). Dominant group members may be unaware that they are the recipients of privileged treatment and that it is at the expense of others. They therefore believe that their achievements are based on their own merit, not on systematic advantage. (See Hawkesworth, 1993, Chapter 2, for a review of the research that documents how sexist bias privileges men at women's expense.) They are less likely to realize how "business as usual" could still cause injustice.

Lastly, because the privileges are sometimes hidden and the discrimination subtle, people from privileged groups don't realize the pervasiveness of oppression. They assume their experiences and treatment are "normal". This assumption, coupled with little knowledge of the injustices that people from disadvantaged groups face, allows them to remain unconscious. People from advantaged groups are taught to notice neither inequalities nor privileges. They are "privileged to remain innocent" (Lazarre, 1996).

This lack of consciousness allows for the unintentional perpetuation of injustice. People do not realize that what they are doing is biased or discriminatory. Gaertner and Dovidio (1986) coined the term *aversive racism* to refer to when White people espouse egalitarian values but unconsciously hold negative feelings and beliefs about people of color. This leads them to engage in racist acts without being aware of it and to deny that racism is affecting their behavior (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2005). More broadly, the unconscious and unintentional expressions of bias and prejudice toward socially devalued groups are often called microaggressions (Sue, 2010a, 2010b). There are innumerable examples of these, yet one situation captures this well. A photo in a local newspaper featured a White boy and an African American boy, with the White boy in the foreground. The title was announcing the winner of the "geography bee". The caption began with the name of the White boy and the fact that he finished in second place. It then explained that the other boy was the winner, and gave his name. Even when the African American deserved the spotlight, from looking at the photo (and the order of the information in the caption), it appeared that the White boy was the winner. A positive image of an African American male was diminished; yet newspapers have no difficulty highlighting African American males when they are involved in illegal activity. While some people may intentionally promote racist or other oppressive images, I doubt whether the photographer of the picture or the editor of the newspaper intended to convey such a distorted and implicitly racist message. Yet, they colluded with institutional racism. Since people do not have to act in overtly discriminatory ways, but just behave "normally" or "unconsciously" to perpetuate oppression, it is easy to remain unaware of the impact of their own actions or of their institution's practices.

Denial and Avoidance of Oppression

There is a fine line between recognizing that some privileges may be less obvious and therefore easy to overlook, and choosing not to see or look for them. Similarly,

there is a difference between lacking an awareness of the extent of social injustice and deciding not to acknowledge it. People from privileged groups have the options to deny the existence of oppression and to avoid dealing with it. Lazarre (1996) refers to this as "willful innocence." (See Kivel, 2002 for a discussion of the tactics people from privileged group use to retain their benefits and avoid their responsibility.)

For the reasons cited earlier, people from privileged groups tend to be less conscious of oppression and more likely to deny that it exists. In their reality, they are generally unhampered by their social identity and ignorant of the mistreatment of others. Along with a sense of superiority, it becomes easy to proclaim that if it is not an issue from their perspective, then it's not an issue. Since their life can proceed rather well under the current circumstances, they do not need to bother to explore or listen to the complaints of others. They can ignore claims of discrimination and label those who raise issues as oversensitive or troublemakers. Denying that there is oppression also allows the system of domination to remain in place and to be justified.

This is exacerbated by the fact that people from advantaged and disadvantaged groups tend to define oppression differently. In the case of racism, Whites are more likely to see racism as "individual acts of meanness" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 5), individual acts of prejudice and discrimination, or as extreme actions that are the exception rather than the norm. Blacks are more likely to see it as daily indignities and as a system of institutionalized practices and policies that work to their disadvantage (Duke, 1992; Shipler, 1997). Therefore, if people only recognize injustice when it is blatantly expressed by individuals, they will never understand the depth and breadth of social oppression.

Admitting that there is oppression and that one participates in it opens up the possibility of personal discomfort. As Allan Johnson (2005) explains, people from privileged groups feel they should be exempt from such an experience.

Dominant groups typically show the least tolerance for allowing themselves to feel guilt and shame. Privilege, after all, should exempt one from having to feel such things. They experience reminders of their potential for feeling guilt as an affront that infringes on their sense of entitlement to a life unplagued by concern for how their privilege affects other people. The right to deny that privilege exists is an integral part of privilege itself. So men can be quick to complain about "being made to feel guilty" without actually *feeling* guilty. (p. 62, italics in the original)

This privilege is sometimes referred to as "the right to comfort". This was expressed very directly at a training I conducted with a group of university students. The first several activities highlighted the groups' diversity and clearly made the point that we need to value our differences and create equality for all groups. After participating in an exercise that physically demonstrated White privilege and institutional racism, a White male said that he didn't like the activity because it made him feel

uncomfortable and bad about being White. He understood that the point of the activity was to demonstrate inequities and knew that the purpose was not to make White people feel guilty. Nevertheless, he still insisted that his discomfort made him not want to engage, and therefore the activity was counterproductive. He felt entitled to the privilege of not having to be uncomfortable, and therefore had the privilege of choosing not to confront issues of racism.

People from privileged groups can also choose to remain silent when they are aware of injustice. The impact on people from disadvantaged groups is usually more profound and immediate, and thus more likely to elicit a greater need to respond. Since people from privileged groups are usually less directly affected, they can decide not to take action. In fact, there is incentive not to do so. First, people from advantaged groups who point out inequities and challenge the status quo often put themselves at risk. They may face retaliation at work or school, ostracism, harassment, or violence. Second, it disrupts a system that largely works to their benefit. People from privileged groups tend to have more to lose, at least in the short run, if they make waves. (However, in Chapter 5, I'll discuss the extensive costs of oppression to people from dominant groups as well.)

Sense of Superiority and Entitlement

Being part of the norm, a member of the dominant group, and the beneficiary of (invisible) privileges often leads to a sense of superiority and entitlement or internalized superiority/supremacy. Even though this sense of identity is false and unearned, people from dominant groups come to expect certain treatment and opportunities. They feel they *deserve* the privileges they have come to assume will be theirs. This attitude is beyond a healthy sense of self-respect or pride in one's cultural group; it can be arrogance and snobbery. They not only expect their needs to get met, but often believe that their needs should supersede others' needs.

People with class privilege (money or status) expect their phone calls to be returned promptly and their work to receive priority. I notice that students who are upper middle class, especially males, feel more entitled to my time and attention as a professor. They expect individual attention and accommodations to meet their needs. In general, men expect their wants and desires to take precedence over a woman's. Sometimes, people have a clear sense of entitlement and consciously believe that they deserve special treatment. Many times, people who are acting entitled rarely see their behavior in this light. They are just doing what they think anyone would or should do.

This sense of superiority often becomes evident when people from an advantaged group encounter someone from a disadvantaged group in a position of expertise or authority over them. Men may balk at having a woman boss or Whites may be uncomfortable with a person of color as the doctor or consultant. People from privileged groups are often suspect of the ability, knowledge, or right to such status of people from oppressed groups. This may reflect more than just stereotypes and

bias. This arrangement calls into question the implicit superiority of people from the dominant group and what they assume is the appropriate social order. Some of the personal and political attacks on President Obama could be viewed in this way.

Multiple Identities and Experiences of Privilege

In my description of common characteristics of people from privileged groups, I have narrowly focused on a single aspect of one's identity. However, that is only one strand of a whole tapestry. Individuals' other social identities color their experience of that dominant identity, and more broadly, affect one's overall experience of both privilege and oppression. Not everyone benefits equally; privileges are mediated by one's other social positions. Other social statuses affect the degree to which an individual experiences the advantages of privilege.

Privileges gained through a dominant identity may be mitigated or reduced because of a subordinated identity. Class privilege certainly provides many advantages, yet it may be limited by racism, sexism or heterosexism. Even middle and upper class Black men get stopped by police and suspected for criminal activity; in fact, being in a "nice neighborhood" or driving an expensive car will often bring on this suspicion. Women in high-level positions still do not command the same respect or influence as men in similar positions. Openly gay men do not have the same access to corporate or political power (or membership in the "Old Boys Network") as heterosexual men. (As described earlier in this chapter, people from various oppressed groups rarely have the same access to high-level institutional power, and when they do, it is at a cost.)

Nor does privilege in one area prevent subordination in another. Wealthy women are still subject to sexual violence even though they have greater opportunities to protect their safety. Being able-bodied, heterosexual, and White does not exempt a working class person from class oppression. A White man in his 30s who has the benefits of race, sex, and age may still face employment discrimination because he has a disability. In extreme cases, other dominant identities or privileges are irrelevant. No aspect of privilege could protect the Japanese from internment, Native Americans from removal, or Jews from extermination.

On the other hand, the experience of oppression in one aspect generally does not eradicate the experience of privilege in another. Some feminists feel that because they are all women and experience sexism their experiences are similar. White women, able-bodied women or heterosexual women may ignore the way they have privileges in other parts of their lives. Some Jews may be subject to anti-Semitism, yet still have white-skin privilege. Men of color confront racism, yet still benefit from sexism and patriarchy.

Moreover, one's other intersecting identities not only affect one's degree of privilege but also shape that privileged identity. For example, a Black man's experience and identity as a man is different than a White man's; a Jewish person's experience and identity as a White person is different than a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant's.

Though not absolute, our particular mix of identities does shape our experiences. Privilege can help alleviate experiences of oppression. The more dominant identities one has, the more one can draw on those privileges to deal with the discrimination and disempowerment faced in his/her subordinated roles. The more subordinated identities one has, the more likely the privilege one does have is eroded. However, this is not simply an additive game; our social identities are not a balance sheet where one can just compare the number of identities on the dominant side and the number on the subordinated side and know how much power, privilege, or freedom one has. Individuals and the dynamics of oppression are much more complicated than that. Some people argue that certain oppressions are worse than others or have greater impact. As noted in the previous chapter, Young (1990) points out there may be different "faces" or manifestations of oppression which are experienced to greater or lesser degrees by different oppressed groups. Oppressions may be linked but not comparable. As Audre Lorde (1983) asserts, "there is no hierarchy of oppressions".

Resistance to Seeing Oneself as Privileged

Many people have reactions to considering themselves privileged or dominant. Some people have difficulty thinking in those terms about themselves; others can do it, but just don't like the idea. There are several reasons for these types of responses.

First, being "privileged", "dominant", or an "oppressor" has negative connotations. Many people assume it means that individuals willfully discriminate against or mistreat others. It seems to refer to the "bad guys". Most people don't see themselves, or want to see themselves, in that light. They consider themselves nice people who try to treat people fairly.

Second, most people do not even realize that they are privileged or part of groups with greater social power. As I have described, most people from dominant groups don't think about that identity; they are simply "normal". They also do not realize the extent of systemic inequalities and the ways they are advantaged. It is hard to accept being privileged when you are unaware of your privileges or feel you have earned them.

Even if people from dominant groups are aware of their social status, they don't feel privileged or powerful. Most people are struggling to live their lives. They worry about their jobs, their families, and their health. They personally do not have access to great amounts of resources or make decisions that affect the nation. More people feel controlled rather than in control. Given the individualistic and competitive nature of our society, few people feel secure. The fact that most people think of themselves as individuals, rather than as members of a social group exacerbates the difficulty of seeing themselves as privileged. Since individuals themselves do not alone create and maintain dominant ideologies and oppressive structures, it is understandable that an individual would not feel that they have had much of a role

in societal oppression. Since they *personally* don't feel advantaged, it is difficult to acknowledge that they are part of a group that is. A White woman expresses this realization:

I never thought about it before, but there are many privileges to being White. In my personal life, I cannot say that I have ever felt that I had the advantage over a Black person, but I am aware that my race has the advantage. (Tatum, 1997, p. 102)

Alternatively, some people from dominant groups feel that they are the ones at a disadvantage. This is particularly true for Whites who feel that people of color are now the ones getting the benefits, especially in the job market. However, when conducting exercises where White people are asked if they would rather be a person of color, virtually no Whites indicate that they would like to switch.

Moreover, the sense of privilege is relative. First, Johnson (2005) contends that people tend to assess their relative standing in comparison to people like themselves (looking sideways) or to people more advantaged than themselves (looking up). Rarely do we judge ourselves in relation to people worse off than ourselves (downwards). Therefore, if our "peers" or those "above" us seem better off than we do, it is of little comfort or consequence that others are in worse positions. Therefore, people are usually quite aware of their relative deprivation but refuse to acknowledge their relative privilege.

Second, not all people in a particular advantaged group are similarly situated. Certainly the experience of class privilege of someone in the top 1% of wealth in this country is quite different from someone who is comfortably middle class. Third, other subordinated identities erode one's sense of privilege. Some people from a targeted group claim that their oppression undermines any privileges they may receive from their dominant identity. Rather, I would say that other social positions affect the *degree* to which someone is advantaged in one's dominant identity. An individual can recognize privileges due to one's dominant identities while also acknowledging how those identities are affected by one's other targeted identities. Privilege and oppression are not mutually exclusive, even if there is a dynamic between them.

As noted before, people tend to focus on their subordinated identities. For people who are part of a privileged group, their targeted identity(ies) will usually have greater significance than their dominant identity(ies). This makes it more difficult for them to identify as someone from a privileged group and to acknowledge that status. Most people will tend to see themselves as someone from a disadvantaged group, ignoring their privileges in other aspects of their lives. In the models of social identity development I will describe in the following chapter, there is a stage where people are very invested in their subordinated identity. At this point, it is particularly challenging for individuals to examine their privilege from a dominant identity.

Conclusion

This chapter broadly describes *privileged groups* and offers perspectives to appreciate how they might see themselves and the world. The dominant culture, both overtly and covertly, promotes the normalcy and superiority of the advantaged group, and their right to power and privilege. People from advantaged groups *therefore tend* to be less aware and less sensitive to oppression and feel entitled to privileges (which they don't see and believe are deserved). There is generally little opportunity, support or incentive for people from privileged groups to explore their identity and examine its social implications. Thus, this provides a social imperative and challenge for social justice educators. In the following chapter, I will discuss ways to approach facilitating an educational process toward awareness and change.

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