

Box 4.4 (continued)

an all-white jury trying a black man accused of the sexual assault of a white woman.

As a professor of social work who teaches courses on minority issues, I am familiar with racial matters in the United States. I understand the significance of race as a social force, what racism is, how it is manifested as an institutional force, and how it differs from prejudice. In response to questions from the prosecutor and especially from the defense attorney, I tried to explain what these issues and concepts mean and how they could factor into the jury's decision.

The judge didn't seem to be paying much attention to my answers. Even though I insisted that I could be fair and impartial in making a decision based on the facts that would be presented, the prosecution clearly did not want me on the jury and issued a peremptory challenge. The judge excused me.

I walked out of that courtroom in a state of shock and disbelief and anger. How was it possible on September 6, 2001, in a courtroom in the United States, that a black man charged with sexual assault on a white woman would have to face a jury of 12 white people? For decades, allegations of rape of white women were used to justify lynching black men throughout this country, including here in the North.

It was a clear instance of institutional racism. I'm sure that most of the people in that courtroom believe that they are not prejudiced, but institutional racism and discrimination can occur without people being prejudiced. They can occur without people intending for them to occur or even being conscious that they are occurring. When racist

consequences are part of institutional laws, customs, or practices, the institution is racist. It does not matter whether the individuals who carry out those practices have racist intentions.

How could the judge allow this to happen in her courtroom? She did not say a single word that showed concern about whether the defendant could receive a fair and impartial hearing. How could the prosecution not raise a concern? Don't they care whether justice was served? Why didn't others speak up, including some of the other members of the jury panel?

The defendant might have been guilty. I don't know, and I'll never know. But he could not receive a fair and impartial hearing in that courtroom. Even if he were acquitted, there would always be a cloud over the verdict. If he were convicted, many people would believe that the jury was influenced by racial beliefs about black men and sex. The defendant would not be tried by a jury of his peers—a jury that would reflect this community.

What worries me most is whether this kind of thing occurs often. Hardly anyone in the courtroom seemed to care, which suggests that the situation is not unusual. I would like to think that American society has changed. But I see no difference between what happened in that courtroom in September and the Jim Crow segregation I saw as a child in the 1950s and 1960s. I grew up in the North, where racism was perhaps more subtle than in the South, but I grew up in a racist society. What I saw in that courtroom tells me that not much has changed.

Another way to look at privilege is that it helps maintain oppression. People who are members of dominant groups gain from the existence of oppression. Dominant group members benefit from having advantages over other groups; thus, they have less of an incentive to dismantle oppressive systems. Because members of the dominant society have been the ones in power, their views, beliefs, and concerns have shaped the development of the institutions that exist in American society. They developed the health care, mental health, and education systems with the needs of their dominant society as the driving force. For example, treatments offered in the mainstream U.S. health care system have generally been ones that are preferred by people of European descent. People from other cultures find it hard to access treatments they would prefer in mainstream health centers. Modes of healing that are not sanctioned by the mainstream are also rarely covered by insurance. If we don't honestly discuss and address privilege, it will be difficult to dismantle oppression.

Explanations of Social Injustice

The mere fact that we are a diverse society does not explain the existence of prejudice, discrimination, oppression, and other types of social injustice. A number of theories strive to explain why these conditions exist.

Biological Determinism

Since the settlement of North America by Europeans, innate biological characteristics have been used to explain and justify the mistreatment of various groups of people. The argument was made that slavery was acceptable because Africans were inherently less capable, less intelligent, and less human than white people. Indigenous Peoples were seen as savages who deserved to be forced off their land, robbed of their culture, and killed. Women have been kept out of jobs and paid less money on the basis of the belief that they are biologically inferior to men. Supporters of the belief that social and economic status is biologically determined stress that individuals and groups do well economically and socially because of innate biological characteristics.

Although the belief in biological determinism is no longer widespread, it has not completely disappeared. In 1994, a bestseller entitled *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (Hernstein & Murray, 1994) reignited the debate about the biological inferiority of certain groups. The authors asserted that economic inequality is due to the genetic inferiority of some groups, which dooms them to failure. Blaming all inequality on genetics, the book dismissed generations of social and environmental inequalities between groups, such as inadequate nutrition, prenatal care, health care, and access to education.

The research on which *The Bell Curve* was based has been widely criticized. A number of authors identified the flaws in the research and demonstrated that economic and social success depend more on social circumstances than on innate intelligence (Fischer et al., 1996; Gould, 1994; Knapp, Kronick, Marks, & Vosburgh, 1996). The belief that success is predetermined by innate intelligence is incompatible with the social work values that people are shaped by their environment and are capable of change.



EP 7b

The Socialization Process

A common explanation for prejudice and discrimination is that people learn through observation. When children see their parents, teachers, friends, and the media treat people differently, they begin to see biased attitudes and behaviors as normal. For example, when a child's parents socialize only with other members of their own racial group, the child accepts this as the norm. Similarly, when children see stereotypical representations of members of various groups on television and in the movies, they begin to accept these stereotypes as reality. This process of learning through observation and repetition is referred to as socialization.