

Johnson, A. G. (2006). Privilege, power, and difference, 2nd Ed. Boston: McGraw Hill.



## CHAPTER 2

### Privilege, Oppression, and Difference

The trouble that surrounds difference is really about privilege and power—the existence of privilege and the lopsided distribution of power that keeps it going. The trouble is rooted in a legacy we all inherited, and while we're here, it belongs to us. It isn't our fault, but now that it's ours, it's up to us to decide how we're going to deal with it before we pass it along to generations to come.

Talking openly about power and privilege isn't easy, which is why people rarely do. The reason for this seems to be a fear of anything that might make dominant groups uncomfortable or "pit groups against each other,"<sup>1</sup> even though groups are *already* pitted against one another by the structures of privilege that organize society as a whole. The fear keeps us from looking at what's going on and makes it impossible to do anything about the reality that lies deeper down.

#### DIFFERENCE IS NOT THE PROBLEM

Ignoring privilege keeps us in a state of unreality by promoting the illusion that difference by itself is the problem. In some ways, of course, it can be a problem when people try to work together across cultural divides that set groups up to think and do things their own

way. But human beings have been overcoming such divides for thousands of years as a matter of routine. The real illusion connected to difference is the popular assumption that people are naturally afraid of what they don't know or understand. This supposedly makes it inevitable that you'll fear and distrust people who aren't like you and, in spite of your good intentions, you'll find it all but impossible to get along with them.

For all its popularity, the idea that everyone is naturally frightened by difference is a cultural myth that, more than anything, justifies keeping outsiders on the outside and treating them badly if they happen to get in. The mere fact that something is new or strange isn't enough to make us afraid of it. When Europeans first came to North America, for example, they weren't terribly afraid of the people they encountered, and the typical Native American response was to welcome these astonishingly "different" people with open arms (much to their later regret). Scientists, psychotherapists, inventors, novelists (and their fans), explorers, philosophers, spiritualists, anthropologists, and the just plain curious are all drawn toward the mystery of what they don't know. Even children—probably the most vulnerable form that people come in—seem to *love* the unknown, which is why parents are always worrying about what their toddler has gotten into *now*.

There is nothing inherently frightening about what we don't know. If we feel afraid, ~~it isn't what we don't know that frightens us, it's what we think we do know.~~ The problem is our ideas about what we don't know—what might happen next or what's lurking behind that unopened door or in the mind of the "strange"-looking guy sitting across from us on the nearly empty train. And how we think about such things isn't something we're born with. We learn to do it as we learn to tie our shoes, talk, and do just about everything else. ~~If we take difference and diversity as reasons for fear and occasions for trouble, it's because we've learned to think about them in ways that make for fear and trouble.~~ Marshall Mitchell, who teaches disability studies at Washington State University, tells of children who "approach me in my wheelchair with no hesitation or fear; but each year that they get older they become more fearful. Why? Because they are then afraid of what they've been taught and think they know."<sup>2</sup>

How we learn difference

## MAPPING DIFFERENCE: WHO ARE WE?

Issues of difference cover a large territory. A useful way to put it in perspective is with the “diversity wheel” (Figure 1) developed by Marilyn Loden and Judy Rosener.<sup>3</sup> In the hub of the wheel are six social characteristics: age, race, ethnicity, gender, physical ability and qualities (left/right-handedness, height, and so on), and sexual orientation. Around the outer ring are several others, including religion, marital and parental status, and social-class indicators such as education, occupation, and income.

Anyone can describe themselves by going around the wheel. Starting in the hub, I’m male, English-Norwegian (as far as I know), white (also as far as I know), fifty-nine years old, heterosexual, and nondisabled (so far). In the outer ring, I’m married, a father and grandfather, and a middle-class professional with a Ph.D. I’ve lived in New England for most of my life, but I’ve also lived in other countries. I have a vaguely Christian background, but if I had to identify my spiritual life with a particular tradition, I’d lean more toward Buddhism than anything else. I served a brief stint in the Army reserves.

It would be useful if you stopped reading for a moment and do what I just did. Go around the diversity wheel and get a sense of yourself in terms of it.

As you reflect on the results of this exercise, it might occur to you (as it did to me) that ~~the wheel doesn’t say much about the unique individual you know yourself to be, your personal history, the content of your character, what you dream and feel.~~ It does, however, say a lot ~~about the social reality that shapes everyone’s life in powerful ways.~~

Imagine, for example, that you woke up tomorrow morning and found that your race was different from what it was when you went to bed (the plot of a 1970 movie called *Watermelon Man*). Or imagine that your gender or sexual orientation had changed (as happened to the central character in Virginia Woolf’s novel *Orlando*). How would that affect how people perceive you and treat you? How would it affect how you see yourself? How would it change the material circumstances of your life, such as where you live or how much money you have? In what ways would the change make life better? In what ways worse?

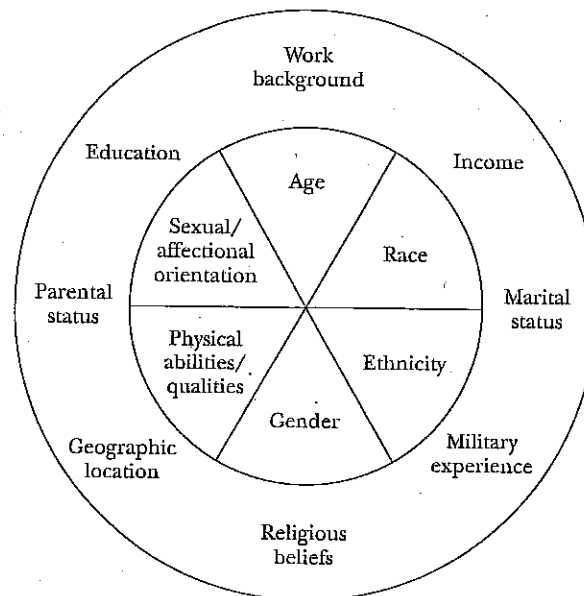


FIGURE 1. The Diversity Wheel. From *Workforce America* by M. Loden and J. Rosener, McGraw-Hill, 1991. Reproduced with permission from the McGraw-Hill Companies.

In answering these questions, try to go beyond the obvious consequences to see the ones that are perhaps more subtle. If you’re heterosexual now, for example, and wake up gay or lesbian, your sexual feelings about women and men would be different. But what about how people perceive you and treat you in ways unrelated to sex? Would people treat you differently at school or work? Would friends treat you differently? Parents and siblings? In similar ways, what changes would you experience in switching from female to male or from male to female, from white to African American, from Asian or Latina/o to Anglo, or from nondisabled to using a wheelchair or a white cane? Again, focus on the social consequences, on how people would perceive you and treat you if such a thing happened to you. What opportunities would open or close? What rewards would or wouldn’t come your way?

For most people, shifting only a few parts of the diversity wheel would be enough to change their lives dramatically. Even though the characteristics in the wheel may not tell us who we are as individuals in the privacy of our hearts and souls, they matter a great deal because

they locate us in relation to other people and society in ways that can have huge consequences.

The trouble around diversity, then, isn't just that people differ from one another. The trouble is produced by a world organized in ways that encourage people to *use* difference to include or exclude, reward or punish, credit or discredit, elevate or oppress, value or devalue, leave alone or harass.

This is especially true of the characteristics in the center of the wheel, which have the added quality of being difficult if not impossible to change (except acquiring a disability, which can happen to anyone at any time). It's true that sex-change surgery is available and that it's possible for some people to "pass" for a race or sexual orientation that is other than what they know themselves to be. But this is quite different from being married one day and divorced the next, or getting a new job that suddenly elevates your class position. Unlike the outer portion of the wheel, the inner portion consists of characteristics that, one way or another, we must learn to live with regardless of how we choose to reveal ourselves to others.

Perceptions are difficult to control, however, because people tend to assume that they can identify characteristics such as race and gender simply by looking at someone. We routinely form quick impressions of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, or disability status. Sometimes these impressions are based on blanket assumptions—that everyone, for example, is heterosexual until proven otherwise. Or if they *look* "white," they *are* white. People usually form such impressions without thinking and rely on them in order to see the world as an organized and predictable place from one moment to the next.

We may not realize how routinely we form such impressions until we run into someone who doesn't fit neatly into one of our categories, especially gender or sexual orientation. Pass someone on the street whom you can't identify as clearly male or female, for example, and it can jolt your attention and nag you until you think you've figured it out.

Our culture allows for only two genders (compared with some cultures that recognize several), and anyone who doesn't clearly fit one or the other is instantly perceived as an outsider. This is why babies born with a mixture of sex characteristics are routinely altered

surgically in order to "fit" the culturally defined categories of female and male. In contrast, among the Native American Navaho, a person born with physical characteristics that weren't clearly male or female was placed in a third category—called *nadle*—which was considered just as legitimate as *female* and *male*. In some Native American plains tribes, people were allowed to choose their gender regardless of their physical characteristics, as when men might respond to a spiritual vision by taking on the dress of women.<sup>4</sup>

Most of our ways of thinking about sexuality are also based on social construction. Whether gay or lesbian behavior is regarded as normal or deviant, for example, depends on the cultural context, as does the larger question of whether sexual orientation is perceived as defining the kind of human being you are and the way you live your life.

So the characteristics at the center of the wheel are usually very hard to change, are the object of quick and firm impressions that can profoundly affect our lives. Clearly, diversity isn't just about the "variety" that the word suggests. Diversity *could* just be about that, but only in some other world.<sup>5</sup>

## THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DIFFERENCE

The late African American novelist James Baldwin once offered the provocative idea that there is no such thing as whiteness or, for that matter, blackness or, more generally, race. "No one is white before he/she came to America," he wrote. "It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country."<sup>6</sup>

What did Baldwin mean? In the simplest sense, he was pointing to a basic aspect of social reality: most of what we experience as "real" is a cultural creation. In other words, it's made up, even though we don't experience it that way.

Take race, for example. ~~Baldwin isn't denying the reality that skin pigmentation varies from one person to another. What he is saying is that unless you live in a culture that recognizes such differences as significant, they are socially irrelevant and therefore, in a way, do not exist.~~ A "black woman" in Africa, therefore, who has not experienced white racism, does not *think* of herself as black or experience herself

as black, nor do the people around her. African, yes, a woman, yes. But not a *black* woman.

When she comes to the United States, however, where privilege is organized according to race, suddenly she becomes black because people assign her to a social category that bears that name, and they treat her differently as a result. In similar ways, as Baldwin argues, a Norwegian farmer has no reason to think of himself as white so long as he's in Norway. But when he comes to the United States, one of the first things he discovers is the significance of being considered white and the privilege that goes along with it. And so he is eager to adopt "white" as part of his identity and to make sure that others acknowledge it.

So Baldwin is telling us that race and all its categories have no significance outside systems of privilege and oppression in which they were created in the first place.<sup>7</sup> This is what sociologists call the "social construction" of reality.

One way to see the constructed nature of reality is to notice how the definitions of different "races" change historically, by including groups at one time that were excluded in another. The Irish, for example, were long considered by the dominant white Anglo-Saxon Protestants of England and the United States to be members of a nonwhite "race," as were Italians, Jews, Greeks, and people from a number of Eastern European countries. As such, immigrants from these groups to England and the United States were excluded and subjugated and exploited in much the same way that blacks were. This was especially true of the Irish in Ireland in relation to the British, who for centuries treated them as an inferior race. Note, however, that their skin color was indistinguishable from that of those considered to be "white." If anything, the skin of most people of Irish descent is "fairer" than that of others of European heritage. But their actual complexion didn't matter, because the dominant racial group has the cultural authority to define the boundaries around "white" as it chooses.

The same is true with the definition of what is considered "normal." While it may come as a surprise to many who think of themselves as nondisabled, disability and nondisability are socially constructed. This doesn't mean that the difference between having or not having full use of your legs is somehow "made up" without any objective reality. It does mean, however, that how people notice and label and think

about such differences and how they treat other people as a result depend entirely on ideas contained in a system's culture.

Human beings, for example, come in a variety of heights, and many of those considered "normal" are unable to reach high places such as kitchen shelves without the assistance of physical aids—chairs and step-stools. In spite of their inability to do this simple task without special aids, they are not defined as disabled. Nor are the roughly 100 million people in the United States who cannot see properly without the aid of eyeglasses. Why? Because the dominant group—like all dominant groups—has the power to define what is considered normal. In contrast, people who use wheelchairs, for example, to get from one place to another—to "reach" places they cannot otherwise go—do not have the social power to define their condition as within the boundaries of normality, that is, as little more than a manifestation of the simple fact that in the normal course of life, people come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes and physical and mental conditions.

Disability and nondisability are also constructed through the language used to describe people. When someone who cannot see is labeled a "blind person," for example, it creates the impression that not being able to see sums up the entire person. In other words, blind becomes what they *are*. The same thing happens when people are described as "brain damaged" or "crippled" or "retarded" or "deaf"—the person becomes the disability and nothing more. ~~Reducing people to a single dimension of who they are separates and excludes them, marks them as "other," as different from "normal" (white, heterosexual, male, nondisabled) people and therefore as inferior.~~ The effect is compounded by portraying people with disabilities as helpless victims who are "confined" or "stricken" or "suffering from" some "affliction" and then lumping them into an undifferentiated class—the blind, the crippled, the retarded, the deaf, the disabled.

Of course, using a wheelchair or being unable to see or hear affects people's lives, and pointing out that disability and nondisability are socially constructed is not intended to imply otherwise. But there is a world of difference between using a wheelchair and being treated as a normal human being (who happens to use a wheelchair to get around) and using a wheelchair and being treated as invisible, inferior, unintelligent, asexual, frightening, passive, dependent, and

nothing more than your disability. And that difference is not a matter of the disability itself but of how it is constructed in society and how we then make use of that construction in our minds to shape how we think about ourselves and other people and how we treat them as a result.

What makes socially constructed reality so powerful is that we rarely if ever experience it as that. We think the way our culture defines something like race or gender is simply the way things are in some objective sense. We think there really is such a thing as “race” and that the words we use simply name an objective reality that is “out there.” The truth is, however, that once human beings give something a name—whether it be skin color or disability—that thing acquires a significance it otherwise would not have. More important, the name quickly takes on a life of its own as we forget the social process that created it and start treating it as “real” in and of itself.

This process is what allows us to believe that something like “race” actually points to a set of clear and unambiguous categories into which people fall, ignoring the fact that the definition of various races changes all the time and is riddled with inconsistencies and overlapping boundaries. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, U.S. law identified those having *any* African ancestry as black, a standard known as the “one-drop rule,” which defined “white” as a state of absolute purity in relation to “black.” Native American status, in contrast, required at *least* one-eighth Native American ancestry in order to qualify. Why the different standards? Adrian Piper argues that it was mostly a matter of economics. Native Americans could claim financial benefits from the federal government, making it to whites’ advantage to make it hard for anyone to be considered Native American. Designating someone as black, however, took *away* power and *denied* the right to make claims against whites, including white families of origin. In both cases, racial classification has had little to do with objective characteristics and everything to do with preserving white power and wealth.<sup>8</sup>

This fact has also been true of the use of race to tag various ethnic groups. When the Chinese were imported as cheap laborers during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the California Supreme Court declared them not white. Mexicans, however, many of whom owned large amounts of land in California and did business with whites, were considered white.

Today, as Paul Kivel points out, Mexicans are no longer considered white and the Chinese are “conditionally white at times.”<sup>9</sup>

When the stakes are privilege and power, dominant groups are quite willing to ignore such inconsistencies so long as the result is a continuation of their privilege.

## WHAT IS PRIVILEGE?

No matter what privileged group you belong to, if you want to understand the problem of privilege and difference, the first stumbling block is usually the idea of privilege itself. When people hear that they belong to a privileged group or benefit from something like “white privilege” or “male privilege,” they don’t get it, or they feel angry and defensive about what they do get. *Privilege* has become one of those loaded words we need to reclaim so that we can use it to name and illuminate the truth. Denying that privilege exists is a serious barrier to change, so serious that it is the subject of a whole chapter (Chapter 7). But it’s important to get a sense of what the word means before we go any further.

As Peggy McIntosh describes it, ~~privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they’ve done or failed to do.~~<sup>10</sup> If people take me more seriously when I give a speech than they would someone of color saying the same things in the same way, then I’m benefiting from white privilege. That a heterosexual black woman can feel free to talk about her life in ways that reveal the fact that she’s married to a man is a form of heterosexual privilege because lesbians and gay men cannot casually reveal their sexual orientation without putting themselves at risk.

Notice that in all these examples, it’s relatively easy for people to be unaware of how privilege affects them. When people come up to me after I give a presentation, for example, it doesn’t occur to me that they’d probably be more critical and less positive if I were Latino or female or gay. I don’t *feel* privileged in that moment. I just feel that I did a good job, and I enjoy the rewards that are supposed to go with it.

The existence of privilege doesn’t mean I *didn’t* do a good job or that I don’t deserve credit for it. What it does mean is that I’m *also*

getting something that other people are denied, people who are like me in every respect except for the social categories they belong to. In this sense, my access to privilege doesn't determine my outcomes, but it is definitely an *asset* that makes it more likely that whatever talent, ability, and aspirations I have will result in something good for me.<sup>11</sup> In the same way, being female or of color doesn't determine people's outcomes, but these characteristics are turned into *liabilities* that make it less likely that people's talent, ability, and aspirations will be recognized and rewarded.

This is also true of people with disabilities. Nondisabled people often assume that people with disabilities lack intelligence and are little more than needy, helpless victims who can't take care of themselves and whose achievements and situation in life depend solely on their physical or mental condition and not on how they are treated or the physical or attitudinal obstacles that are placed in their way.<sup>12</sup>

The ease of not being aware of privilege is an aspect of privilege itself, what some call "the luxury of obliviousness" (or, in philosophy, "epistemic privilege"). Awareness requires effort and commitment. Being able to command the attention of lower-status individuals without having to give it in return is a key aspect of privilege. African Americans, for example, have to pay close attention to whites and white culture and get to know them well enough to avoid displeasing them, since whites control jobs, schools, government, the police, and most other resources and sources of power. White privilege gives whites little reason to pay attention to African Americans or to how white privilege affects them. In other words, as James Baldwin put it, "To be white in America means not having to think about it."<sup>13</sup> We could say the same thing about maleness or any other basis for privilege. So strong is the sense of entitlement behind this luxury that males, whites, and others can feel put upon in the face of even the mildest invitation to pay attention to issues of privilege. "We shouldn't *have* to look at this stuff," they seem to say. "It isn't *fair*."

## TWO TYPES OF PRIVILEGE

According to McIntosh, privilege comes in two types. The first is based on what she calls "unearned entitlements," which are things of value that all people *should* have, such as feeling safe in public

spaces or working in a place where they feel they belong and are valued for what they can contribute. When an unearned entitlement is restricted to certain groups, however, it becomes a form of privilege she calls "unearned advantage."

In some cases, it's possible to do away with unearned advantages without anyone losing out. If the workplace changed so that *everyone* was valued for what they could contribute, for example, that privilege would disappear without the dominant group having to give up their own sense that *they* are valued for their contributions. The unearned entitlement would then be available to all and, as such, would no longer be a form of unearned advantage.

In many other cases, however, unearned advantage gives dominant groups a competitive edge they are reluctant to even acknowledge, much less give up. This is particularly true of lower-, working-, and lower-middle-class whites and males who know all too well the price they pay for a lack of class privilege and how hard it is to improve their lives and hang on to what they've managed to achieve. Their lack of class privilege, however, can blind them to the fact that the cultural valuing of whiteness and maleness over color and femaleness gives them an edge in most situations that involve evaluations of credibility or competence. To give up that advantage would double or even triple the amount of competition. This would especially affect white males, who are a shrinking numerical minority of the U.S. population. A loss of race and gender privilege would level the playing field to admit white women and people of color, a combined group that outnumber white males by a large margin.

The second form of privilege—what McIntosh calls "conferred dominance"—goes a step further by giving one group power over another. The common pattern of men controlling conversations with women, for example, is grounded in a cultural assumption that men are supposed to dominate women. An adolescent boy who appears too willing to defer to his mother risks being called a "mama's boy," in the same way that a husband who appears in any way subordinate to his wife is often labeled "henpecked" (or worse). The counterpart for girls carries no such stigma. "Daddy's girl" isn't considered an insult in this culture, and the language contains *no* specific insulting terms for a wife who is under the control of her husband.

Conferred dominance also manifests itself in race privilege. In his book *The Rage of a Privileged Class*, for example, the African American journalist Ellis Cose tells the story of an African American lawyer, a partner in a large firm, who goes to the office early one Saturday morning to catch up on some work and is confronted near the elevator by a recently hired young white attorney.

"Can I help you?" the white man says pointedly.

The partner shakes his head and tries to pass, but the white man steps in his way and repeats what is now a challenge to the man's very presence in the building: "Can I *help* you?" Only then does the partner reveal his identity to the young man, who then steps aside to let him pass. The young white man had no reason to assume the right to control the older man standing before him, except the reason provided by the cultural assumption of white racial dominance that can override any class advantage a person of color might have.<sup>14</sup>

The milder forms of unearned advantage usually change first because they are the easiest for privileged groups to give up. Over the last several decades, for example, national surveys show a steady decline in the percentage of whites in the United States who express overtly racist attitudes toward people of color. This trend is reflected in diversity training programs that usually focus on appreciating or at least tolerating differences—in other words, extending unearned entitlements to everyone instead of the dominant group alone.

It's much harder, however, to do something about power and the unequal distribution of resources and rewards. This is why issues of conferred dominance and the stronger forms of unearned advantage get much less attention, and why, when they are raised, they often provoke hostile defensiveness, especially from those who struggle with a lack of class privilege. Perhaps more than any other factor, this reluctance to come to terms with more serious and entrenched forms of privilege is why most diversity programs produce limited and short-lived results.

#### *What Privilege Looks Like in Everyday Life*

As Peggy McIntosh showed in her groundbreaking work,<sup>15</sup> privilege shows up in the daily details of people's lives in almost every social

setting. Consider the following examples of race privilege.<sup>16</sup> This is a long list because the details of people's lives are many and varied. Resist the temptation to go through it quickly. Take your time and try to identify situations in which each might occur. As you read these lists, you may find yourself wondering why you should believe that any of this material is true, especially if you're white or male or heterosexual or nondisabled. Since I'm all those things, let me tell you why I believe it.

Some of the items are based on scientifically gathered data, such as income statistics or studies of everything from access to health care to bias in the criminal justice system to how much people pay for cars. Other items are based on the enormous weight of evidence compiled over many years in the stories that people tell about their experience living in this society. Added to this is the logic of understanding what is most likely to happen in a world organized as this one is. This doesn't qualify as scientific proof, but many things we know to be true are not scientifically provable in the strictest sense. For example, I cannot prove scientifically that being a slave on a plantation was a terrible experience. But I can show lots of evidence that supports this claim—stories of slaves and former slaves, diaries of slave holders, photographs of slaves who were horribly scarred from being whipped, newspaper stories from slavery times, and so on. I can also imagine what it would be like to live under such conditions. Putting all this evidence together, it's safe to conclude that it must have been terrible, even though, strictly speaking, I can't prove it.

What follows, then, is not simply a matter of personal opinion. It is supported by a great deal of evidence of various kinds gathered over many years. If you want to see for yourself, go to the "Resources" section at the end of the book.

- Whites are less likely than blacks to be arrested; once arrested, they are less likely to be convicted and, once convicted, less likely to go to prison, regardless of the crime or circumstances. Whites, for example, constitute 85 percent of those who use illegal drugs, but less than half of those in prison on drug-use charges are white.

- ▣ Although many superstar professional athletes are black, in general black players are held to higher standards than whites. It is easier for a “good but not great” white player to make a professional team than it is for a similar black.
- ▣ Whites are more likely than comparable blacks to have loan applications approved and less likely to be given poor information or the runaround during the application process.
- ▣ Whites are charged lower prices for new and used cars than are people of color, and residential segregation gives whites access to higher-quality goods of all kinds at cheaper prices.
- ▣ Whites can choose whether to be conscious of their racial identity or to ignore it and regard themselves as simply human beings without a race.
- ▣ Whites are more likely to control conversations and be allowed to get away with it and to have their ideas and contributions taken seriously, including those that were suggested previously by a person of color and ignored or dismissed.
- ▣ Whites can usually assume that national heroes, success models, and other figures held up for general admiration will be of their race.
- ▣ Whites can generally assume that when they go out in public, they won’t be challenged and asked to explain what they’re doing, nor will they be attacked by hate groups simply because of their race.
- ▣ Whites can assume that when they go shopping, they’ll be treated as serious customers not as potential shoplifters or people without the money to make a purchase. When they try to cash a check or use a credit card, they can assume they won’t be hassled for additional identification and will be given the benefit of the doubt.
- ▣ White representation in government and the ruling circles of corporations, universities, and other organizations is disproportionately high.
- ▣ Most whites are not segregated into communities that isolate them from the best job opportunities, schools, and community services.

- ▣ Whites have greater access to quality education and health care.
- ▣ Whites are more likely to be given early opportunities to show what they can do at work, to be identified as potential candidates for promotion, to be mentored, to be given a second chance when they fail, and to be allowed to treat failure as a learning experience rather than as an indication of who they are and the shortcomings of their race.
- ▣ Whites can assume that race won’t be used to predict whether they’ll fit in at work or whether teammates will feel comfortable working with them.
- ▣ Whites can succeed without other people being surprised.
- ▣ Whites don’t have to deal with an endless and exhausting stream of attention to their race. They can simply take their race for granted as unremarkable to the extent of experiencing themselves as not even having a race. Unlike some of my African American students, for example, I don’t have people coming up to me and treating me as if I were some exotic “other,” gushing about how “cool” or different I am, wanting to know where I’m “from,” and reaching out to touch my hair.
- ▣ Whites don’t find themselves slotted into occupations identified with their race, as blacks are often slotted into support positions or Asians into technical jobs.
- ▣ Whites aren’t confused with other whites, as if all whites look alike. They’re noticed for their individuality, and they take offense whenever they’re put in a category (such as “white”) rather than perceived and treated as individuals.
- ▣ Whites can reasonably expect that if they work hard and “play by the rules,” they’ll get what they deserve, and they feel justified in complaining if they don’t. It is something other racial groups cannot realistically expect.

In the following list for male privilege, note how some items repeat from the list on race but other items do not.

- ▣ In most professions and upper-level occupations, men are held to a lower standard than women. It is easier for a “good but not great” male lawyer to make partner than it is for a comparable woman.

- Men are charged lower prices for new and used cars.
- If men do poorly at something or make a mistake or commit a crime, they can generally assume that people won't attribute the failure to their gender. The kids who shoot teachers and schoolmates are almost always boys, but rarely is the fact that all this violence is being done by males raised as an important issue.
- Men can usually assume that national heroes, success models, and other figures held up for general admiration will be men.
- Men can generally assume that when they go out in public, they won't be sexually harassed or assaulted just because they're male, and if they are victimized, they won't be asked to explain what they were doing there.
- Male representation in government and the ruling circles of corporations and other organizations is disproportionately high.
- Men are more likely to be given early opportunities to show what they can do at work, to be identified as potential candidates for promotion, to be mentored, to be given a second chance when they fail, and to be allowed to treat failure as a learning experience rather than as an indication of who they are and the shortcomings of their gender.
- Men are more likely than women are to control conversations and be allowed to get away with it and to have their ideas and contributions taken seriously, even those that were suggested previously by a woman and dismissed or ignored.
- Most men can assume that their gender won't be used to determine whether they'll fit in at work or whether teammates will feel comfortable working with them.
- Men can succeed without other people being surprised.
- Men don't have to deal with an endless and exhausting stream of attention drawn to their gender (for example, to how sexually attractive they are).
- Men don't find themselves slotted into a narrow range of occupations identified with their gender as women are slotted into community relations, human resources, social work, elementary

school teaching, librarianship, nursing, and clerical, and secretarial positions.

- Men can reasonably expect that if they work hard and "play by the rules," they'll get what they deserve and feel justified in complaining if they don't.
- The standards used to evaluate men as *men* are consistent with the standards used to evaluate them in other roles such as occupations. Standards used to evaluate women as women are often different from those used to evaluate them in other roles. For example, a man can be both a "real man" and a successful and aggressive lawyer, while an aggressive woman lawyer may succeed as a lawyer but be judged as not measuring up as a woman.

In the following list regarding sexual orientation, note again items in common with the other two lists and items peculiar to this form of privilege.

- Heterosexuals are free to reveal and live their intimate relationships openly—by referring to their partners by name, recounting experiences, going out in public together, displaying pictures on their desks at work—without being accused of "flaunting" their sexuality or risking discrimination.
- Heterosexuals can marry as a way to commit to long-term relationships that are socially recognized, supported, and legitimated. This fact confers basic rights such as spousal health benefits, the ability to adopt children, inheritance, joint filing of income tax returns, and the power to make decisions for a spouse who is incapacitated in a medical emergency.
- Heterosexuals can rest assured that whether they're hired, promoted, or fired from a job will have nothing to do with their sexual orientation, an aspect of themselves they cannot change.
- Heterosexuals can move about in public without fear of being harassed or physically attacked because of their sexual orientation.
- Heterosexuals don't run the risk of being reduced to a single aspect of their lives, as if being heterosexual summed up the kind of person they are. Instead, they can be viewed

and treated as complex human beings who happen to be heterosexual.

- ☐ Heterosexuals can usually assume that national heroes, success models, and other figures held up for general admiration will be assumed to be heterosexual.
- ☐ Most heterosexuals can assume that their sexual orientation won't be used to determine whether they'll fit in at work or whether teammates will feel comfortable working with them.
- ☐ Heterosexuals don't have to worry that their sexual orientation will be used as a weapon against them, to undermine their achievements or power.
- ☐ Heterosexuals can turn on the television or go to the movies and be assured of seeing characters, news reports, and stories that reflect the reality of their lives.
- ☐ Heterosexuals can live where they want without having to worry about neighbors who disapprove of their sexual orientation.
- ☐ Heterosexuals can live in the comfort of knowing that other people's assumptions about their sexual orientation are correct.

In the following list regarding disability status, note again items in common with the other lists and items peculiar to this form of privilege.

- ☐ Nondisabled people can choose whether to be conscious of their disability status or to ignore it and regard themselves simply as human beings.
- ☐ Nondisabled people can live secure in other people's assumption that they are sexual beings capable of an active sex life, including the potential to have children and be parents.
- ☐ Nondisabled people have greater access to education and health care. They are less likely to be singled out based on stereotypes that underestimate their abilities and be put in "special education" classes that don't allow them to develop their full potential.
- ☐ Nondisabled people can assume that they will fit in at work and in other settings without having to worry about being evaluated and judged according to preconceived notions and stereotypes about people with disabilities.

- ☐ Nondisabled people are more likely to be given early opportunities to show what they can do at work, to be identified as potential candidates for promotion, to be mentored, to be given a second chance when they fail, and to be allowed to treat failure as a learning experience rather than as an indication of who they are.
- ☐ Nondisabled people don't have to deal with an endless and exhausting stream of attention to their disability status. They can simply take their disability status for granted as unremarkable to the extent of experiencing themselves as not even having one.
- ☐ Nondisabled people can ask for help without having to worry that people will assume they need help with everything.
- ☐ Nondisabled people can succeed without people being surprised because of low expectations of their ability to contribute to society.
- ☐ Nondisabled people can expect to pay lower prices for cars because they are assumed to be mentally unimpaired and less likely to allow themselves to be misled and exploited.
- ☐ Nondisabled people can assume that if they work hard and play by the rules, they'll get what they deserve without having to overcome stereotypes about their ability status. They are less likely to be shuttled into dead-end, menial jobs, given inadequate job training, paid less than they are worth regardless of their ability, and separated from workers unlike themselves.
- ☐ Nondisabled people are more likely to control conversations and be allowed to get away with it and have their ideas and contributions taken seriously, including those that were suggested before by a person with disabilities and then dismissed or ignored.
- ☐ Nondisabled people can assume that national heroes, success models, and other figures held up for general admiration will share their disability status.
- ☐ Nondisabled people can go to polling places on election day knowing they will have access to voting machines that allow them to exercise their rights as citizens in privacy without the assistance of others.

- ▣ Nondisabled people can generally assume that when they go out in public, they won't be looked at as odd or out of place or not belonging. They can also assume that most buildings and other structures will not be designed in ways that limit their access.
- ▣ Nondisabled people can assume that when they need to travel from one place to another, they will have access to buses, trains, airplanes, and other means of transportation.
- ▣ Nondisabled people can count on being taken seriously and not treated as children.
- ▣ Nondisabled people are less likely to be segregated into living situations—such as nursing homes and special schools and sports programs—that isolate them from job opportunities, schools, community services, and the everyday workings of life in a society.
- ▣ Nondisabled people don't have to worry about their disability status being used against them when trying to fit in at work or whether teammates will feel comfortable working with them.

As data from the U.S. Census and other sources show, one of the most visible consequences of privilege is the uneven distribution of jobs, wealth, and income and all that goes with it, from decent housing and good schools to adequate health care. At every level of education, for example, whites are half as likely as are people of color to be unemployed or have incomes below the poverty line. The average white household has more than 14 times the net wealth of the average African American household, and the average annual income for whites who work year-round and full-time is 44 percent greater than it is for comparable African Americans. It is 60 percent greater than for Latinas and Latinos. The white income advantage exists at all levels of educational attainment.<sup>17</sup>

As to gender inequality, men who work year-round and full-time earn on average 50 percent more than do comparable women.<sup>18</sup>

Compared with people who have disabilities, nondisabled people are twice as likely to complete high school and college, more than twice as likely to be employed, and half as likely to live in poverty.<sup>19</sup>

Regardless of which group we're talking about, privilege generally allows people to assume a certain level of acceptance, inclusion, and

respect in the world, to operate within a relatively wide comfort zone. Privilege increases the odds of having things your own way, of being able to set the agenda in a social situation and determine the rules and standards and how they're applied. Privilege grants the cultural authority to make judgments about others and to have those judgments stick. It allows people to define reality and to have prevailing definitions of reality fit their experience. Privilege means being able to decide who gets taken seriously, who receives attention, who is accountable to whom and for what. And it grants a presumption of superiority and social permission to act on that presumption without having to worry about being challenged.

To have privilege is to be allowed to move through your life without being marked in ways that identify you as an outsider, as exceptional or "other" to be excluded, or to be included but always with conditions. As Paul Kivel points out, "In the United States, a person is considered a member of the lowest status group from which they have any heritage."<sup>20</sup> This means that if you come from several ethnic groups, the one that lowers your status is the one you're most likely to be tagged with, as in "She's part Jewish" or "He's part Vietnamese" but rarely "She's part white." In fact, as we saw earlier, having any black ancestry is still enough to be classified as *entirely* black in many people's eyes. ~~People are tagged with other labels that point to the lowest-status group they belong to, as in "woman doctor" or "black writer" but never "white lawyer" or "male senator." Any category that lowers our status relative to others can be used to mark us, to be privileged is to go through life with the relative ease of being unmarked.~~<sup>21</sup>

As I'm using the term *privilege* here, I distinguish it from good luck or being able to do things that one personally values but that aren't valued in the culture. Having good friends, for example, is both lucky and good, but it's not a form of privilege unless it is systematically allowed for some and denied to others based on membership in social categories. Nor is something such as feeling free to express emotion a form of privilege, even though many people consider it a good thing and something that's allowed for women and discouraged in men. The reason emotional expressiveness isn't a privilege is that although it may be good for health and well-being, patriarchal culture puts a low value on it compared with appearing to be tough and always being in control as

core aspects of patriarchal masculinity. Privilege is a feature of social systems, and something that isn't highly valued in the culture of a system can never qualify as a form of privilege. I may personally be glad that I feel free to have a good cry when I need to, but it's hard to think of a situation in which doing so would elevate my status. It's easy, however, to think of situations in which it would have just the opposite effect.

If you're male or heterosexual or white or nondisabled and you find yourself shaking your head at the foregoing descriptions of privilege—"This isn't true for *me*"—it might be due to the complex and sometimes paradoxical way that privilege works in social life.

### PRIVILEGE AS PARADOX

One of the paradoxes of privilege is that although it is received by individuals, the granting of privilege has nothing to do with who those individuals are as people. Instead, individuals receive privilege only because they are perceived by others as belonging to privileged groups and social categories. In other words, male privilege is more about *male* people than it is about male *people*. I don't have privilege because of who I am as a person. Maleness is privileged in this society, and I have male privilege only when people identify me as belonging to the category "male." I do or don't receive privilege based on which category people put me in without their knowing a single other thing about me.

This means that you don't actually have to be male, for example, to receive the privilege attached to that category. All you have to do is convince people you belong to the appropriate category. The film *Shakespeare in Love*, for example, is set in Elizabethan England, where acting on the stage was a privilege reserved for men. The character Viola (the woman Shakespeare falls in love with) wants more than anything to act on the stage and finally realizes her dream, not by changing her sex and becoming a man but by successfully presenting herself as one. That's all it takes. In similar ways, gays and lesbians can have access to heterosexual privilege so long as they don't reveal their sexual orientation. And people with hidden disabilities such as epilepsy, many diseases, and learning disabilities can receive nondisabled privilege so long as they do not disclose their disability status.

You can also lose privilege if people think you *don't* belong to a particular category. My sexual orientation is heterosexual, which entitles me to heterosexual privilege, but only if people identify me as such. If I were to announce to everyone that I'm gay, I would immediately lose my access to heterosexual privilege (unless people refused to believe me), even though I would still be, in fact, heterosexual. As Charlotte Bunch put it, "If you don't have a sense of what privilege is, I suggest that you go home and announce to everybody that you know—a roommate, your family, the people you work with—that you're a queer. Try being queer for a week."<sup>22</sup> When it comes to privilege, then, it doesn't really matter who we really are. What matters is who other people *think* we are, which is to say, the social categories they put us in.

Several important consequences follow from this paradox of privilege. First, privilege is rooted in societies and groups as much as it's rooted in people's personalities and how they perceive and react to one another. This means that doing something about the problem of privilege takes more than changing individuals. As Harry Brod wrote about male privilege:

We need to be clear that there is no such thing as giving up one's privilege to be "outside" the system. One is always *in* the system. The only question is whether one is part of the system in a way which challenges or strengthens the status quo. Privilege is not something I *take* and which I therefore have the option of *not* taking. It is something that society *gives* me, and unless I change the institutions which give it to me, they will continue to give it, and I will continue to *have* it, however noble and egalitarian my intentions.<sup>23</sup>

Social systems and the people who make them happen promote privilege in complicated ways, which we'll look at in later chapters. For now, be aware that we don't have to be special or even feel special in order to have access to privilege, because privilege doesn't derive from who we are or what we've done. It is, as we've seen, a social arrangement that depends on which category we happen to be sorted into by other people and how they treat us as a result.

~~The paradoxical experience of being privileged without feeling privileged is a second consequence of the fact that privilege is more about social categories than who people are. It has to do primarily with the~~

people we use as standards of comparison—what sociologists call “reference groups.” We use reference groups to construct a sense of how good or bad, high or low we are in the scheme of things. To do this, we usually don’t look downward in the social hierarchy but to people we identify as being on the same level as or higher level than our own. So pointing out to someone who lives in poverty in the United States that they’re better off than are many people in India doesn’t make them feel better, because people in the United States don’t use Indians as a reference group. Instead, they will compare themselves with those who seem like them in key respects and see if they’re doing better or worse than *those people* are.

Since being white is valued in this society, whites tend to compare themselves with other whites, not with people of color. In the same way, men tend to compare themselves with other men and not with women. What this means, however, is that whites tend not to feel privileged *by their race* when they compare themselves with their reference group, because their reference group is also white. In the same way, men don’t feel privileged *by their gender* in comparison with other men, because gender doesn’t elevate them above other *men*. A partial exception to this is the hierarchy that exists among men between heterosexuals and gays, by which heterosexual men are more likely to consider themselves “real men” and therefore socially valued above gay men. But even here, the mere fact of being male isn’t experienced as a form of privilege, because gay men are also male.

An exception to these patterns can occur for those who are privileged by gender or race but find themselves ranked low in terms of social class. To protect themselves from feeling and being seen as on the bottom of the ladder, they may go out of their way to compare themselves to women or people of color by emphasizing their supposed gender or racial superiority. This can appear as an exaggerated sense of masculinity, for example, or as overt attempts to put women or people of color “in their place” by harassment, violence, or behavior that is openly contemptuous or demeaning.

A corollary to being privileged without knowing it is to be on the *other* side of privilege without necessarily feeling *that*. For example, I sometimes hear a woman say something like, “I’ve never been oppressed as a woman.” Often this is said to challenge the idea that

male privilege exists at all. But this confuses the social position of females and males as social categories with one woman’s subjective experience of belonging to one of those categories. They are not the same. For various reasons—including class privilege or an unusual family experience or simply being young—she may have avoided exposure to many of the consequences of being female in a society that privileges maleness. Or she may have managed to overcome them to a degree that she doesn’t feel hampered by them. Or she may be engaging in denial. Or she may be unaware of how she is discriminated against (unaware, perhaps, that being a woman is the reason her professors ignore her in class) or may have so internalized her subordinate status that she doesn’t see it as a problem (thinking, perhaps, that women are ignored because they aren’t intelligent enough to say anything worth listening to). Regardless of what her experience is based on, it is just that—her experience—and it doesn’t have to square with the larger social reality that everyone (including her) must deal with one way or another. It’s like living in a rainy climate and somehow avoiding being rained on yourself. It’s still a rainy place to be, and getting wet is something most people have to deal with.

### *The Paradox That Privilege Doesn’t Necessarily Make You Happy*

I often hear men deny the existence of male privilege by saying they don’t feel happy or fulfilled in their own lives. They reason that you can’t be both privileged and miserable, or, as one man put it, “Privilege means ‘having all the goodies,’” so if you don’t feel good, then you must not be privileged.

This is a common reaction that is related to the difference between individuals and social categories. Knowing that someone belongs to one or more of the privileged categories, “white,” or “heterosexual,” or “male,” or “nondisabled” doesn’t tell us what life is actually like for them. Belonging to a privileged category improves the odds in favor of certain kinds of advantages and preferential treatment, but it doesn’t guarantee anything for any given individual. Being born white, male, and upper-class, for example, is a powerful combination of privileged categories that would certainly put a person in

line for all kinds of valued things. But this person could still wind up losing it all in the stock market and living under a bridge in a cardboard box. Nonetheless, even though the privilege attached to race, gender, and social class didn't work out for this particular person, the privilege itself still exists as a fact of social life.

Another reason privilege and happiness often don't go together is that privilege can exact a cost from those who have it. To have privilege is to participate in a system that confers advantage and dominance at the expense of other people, and this situation can cause distress to those who benefit from it. White privilege, for example, comes at a huge cost to people of color, and on some level white people must struggle with this knowledge. That's where all the guilt comes from and the lengths to which white people will often go to avoid feeling and looking at it. In similar ways, male privilege exacts a cost as men compete with other men and strive to prove their manhood so they can be counted among "real men" who are worthy of being set apart from—and above—women. It should therefore come as no surprise that men often feel unhappy and that they associate their unhappiness with the fact of being men.

### OPPRESSION: THE FLIP SIDE OF PRIVILEGE

For every social category that is privileged, one or more other categories are oppressed in relation to it. As Marilyn Frye described it, the concept of oppression points to social forces that tend to "press" on people and hold them down, to hem them in and block their pursuit of a good life. Just as privilege tends to open doors of opportunity, oppression tends to slam them shut.<sup>24</sup>

Like privilege, oppression results from the social relationship between privileged and oppressed categories, which makes it possible for individuals to vary in their personal experience of being oppressed ("I've never been oppressed as a woman"). This also means, however, that in order to have the experience of being oppressed, it is necessary to belong to an oppressed category. In other words, men cannot be oppressed *as men*, just as whites cannot be oppressed as whites or heterosexuals as heterosexuals, because a

group can be oppressed only if there exists another group with the power to oppress them.

As we saw earlier, people in privileged categories can certainly feel bad in ways that can feel oppressive. Men, for example, can feel burdened by what they take to be their responsibility to provide for their families. Or they can feel limited and even damaged by the requirement that "real men" must avoid expressing feelings other than anger. But although access to privilege costs them something that may *feel* oppressive, to call it oppression distorts the nature of what is happening to them and why.

It ignores, for example, the fact that the cost of male privilege is far outweighed by the benefits, while the oppressive cost of being female is not outweighed by corresponding benefits. Misapplying the label of "oppression" also tempts us into the false argument that if men and women are *both* oppressed because of gender, then one oppression balances out the other and no privilege can be said to exist. So, when we try to label the pain that men feel because of gender (or that whites feel because of racism, and so on), whether we call it "oppression" or simply "pain" makes a huge difference in how we perceive the world and how it works.

The complexity of systems of privilege makes it possible, of course, for men to experience oppression if they also happen to be of color or gay or disabled or in a lower social class, but not simply because they are male. In the same way, whites can experience oppression for many reasons, but not because they're white.

Note also that because oppression results from relations between social categories, it is not possible to be oppressed by society itself. Living in a particular society can make people feel miserable, but we can't call that misery "oppression" unless it arises from being on the losing end in a system of privilege. That can't happen in relation to society as a whole, because a society isn't something that can have privilege. Only people can do this by belonging to privileged categories in relation to other categories that aren't.

Finally, being in a privileged category that has an oppressive relationship with another isn't the same as being an oppressive *person* who behaves in oppressive ways. That males as a social category oppress females as a social category, for example, is a social fact. That doesn't,

What are the costs of privilege?

however, tell us how a particular man thinks or feels about particular women or behaves toward them. This can be a subtle distinction to hang on to, but hang on to it we must if we're going to maintain a clear idea of what oppression is and how it works in defense of privilege.

Now that we're getting into the pervasiveness of the damage of privilege and oppression in people's lives, we may feel helpless and wonder, "What can anyone do about it?" If you find yourself feeling that way now or later on, turn to Chapter 9, which is devoted to that question.



### CHAPTER 3

## *Capitalism, Class, and the Matrix of Domination*

Whenever I teach about race, there always comes a point when students start saying things such as "We don't get it. If race is socially constructed and doesn't exist otherwise, and if human beings don't have to be afraid of one another, then where does racism come from? Why all the oppression and hostility and violence over something that's made up? And why would people make it up this way in the first place? It's stupid."

The answer takes us into the history of race, where we find two things that usually startle students as much as they did me when I first became aware of them. First, white racism hasn't been around very long—hardly more than several centuries and certainly not as long as peoples now considered "white" have been aware of other "races." Second, its appearance in Europe and the Americas occurred right along with the expansion of capitalism as an economic system. This is no coincidence, because capitalism played a major role in the development of white privilege and still plays a major role in its perpetuation.

This isn't surprising given the importance of economics in social life, which is, after all, how people organize themselves to provide what they need for their material existence—food, shelter, clothing, and the like—and to live what their culture defines as a "good life." Because