

# The Trouble We're In: Privilege, Power, and Difference

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The trouble around 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. It wasn't caused by something we did or didn't do. But now it's all ours, it's up to us to decide how we're going to deal with it before we collectively pass it along to the generations that will follow ours.

Talking about power and privilege isn't easy, which is why people rarely do. The reason for this omission seems to be a great fear of anything that might make whites or males or heterosexuals 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 people from looking at what's going on and makes it impossible to do anything about the reality that lies deeper down, so that they can move toward the kind of world that would be better for everyone.

## Difference Is Not the Problem

Ignoring privilege keeps us in a state of unreality, by promoting the illusion the 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 to 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 the 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 like we learn to tie our shoes, talk, and 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.

## Mapping Difference: Who Are We?

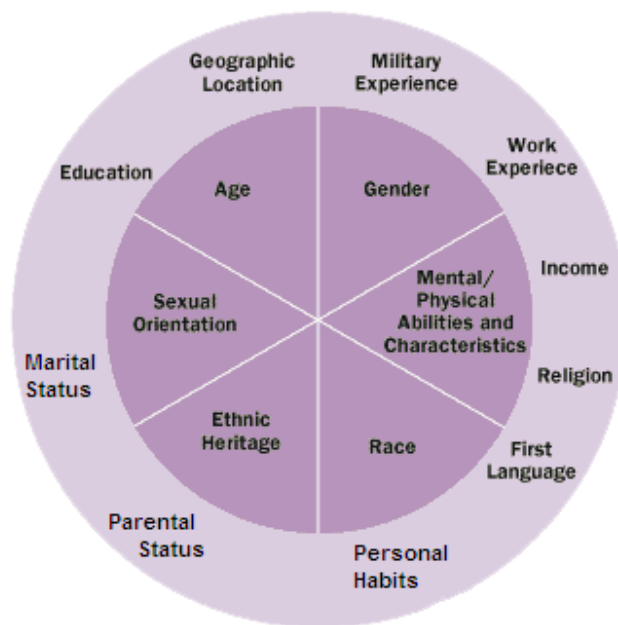
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<sup>1</sup> “White, Male and Worried,” *Business Week*, January 31, 1994, pp.55

Issues of difference cover a large territory. A useful way to put it in perspective is with the “diversity wheel” developed by Marilyn Loden and Judy Rosener.<sup>2</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 status, whether we’re parents, 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-four years old, heterosexual, and physically able (so far). In the outer ring, I’m married, a father, 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 Zen 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? Worse?

<sup>2</sup> Based on The Diversity Wheel. From Workforce America by M. Loden and J. Rosener, McGraw-Hill, 1991.

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? Would you feel less included among friends? 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 Latino/a to Anglo, or from physically able to using a wheelchair? Again, focus on the social consequences, on how people 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 as individuals are in the privacy of our hearts and souls, they matter a great deal in our society because they locate us in relation to other people and the world in ways that 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 almost impossible to change. 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 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.

People's perceptions are difficult to control, however, for they tend to assume they can identify characteristics such as race and gender simply by looking at someone. We routinely form quick impressions of race, gender, age, or sexual orientation. 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 they 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've figured it out. Our culture allows for only two genders (compared to other cultures that recognize several), and anyone who doesn't fit clearly 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 to "fit" the culturally defined categories of female and male. Most of our ways of thinking about sexuality are also based on social construction. Whether homosexual 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 very hard to change, are the object of quick and firm impressions, and 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>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The sections that follow are organized around types of behavior that are discussed in terms of racism by Joe R. Feagin and Melvin P. Sykes, *Living with Racism: The Black Middle-class Experience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) pp 21-22. I apply them more broadly.

## The Social Construction of Difference

The gay African American novelist James Baldwin once wrote an essay in which he 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>4</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 those differences as significant and meaningful, they are socially irrelevant and therefore 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 as 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, 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 privileges that go 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 of systems of privilege and oppression, and it is these systems that created them.<sup>5</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 non-white “race,” as were Italians, Jews, 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 the 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.

What makes socially constructed reality so powerful is that we rarely, if ever, experience it as that. We think the way our culture defines race or gender or sexual orientation 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 whom you like to sleep with—that thing acquires a

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<sup>4</sup> James Baldwin, “On Being ‘White’... and Other Lies” *Essence*, 1984. Reprinted in David R. Roediger (ed.), *Black on White: Black Writers on What it Means to Be White*, pp. 177—80 (New York: Schocken Books, 1999)

<sup>5</sup> For more on the social construction of whiteness, see Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, vol. 1: *Racial Oppression and Social Control* (New York: Verso, 1994); vol. 2: *The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (New York, Verso, 1997); Charles Gallagher, “White Racial Formation: Into the Twenty-First Century,” in Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (eds.) *Critical White Studies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), pp. 6-11; Reginald Horsman, “Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism,” in Delgado and Stefancic, pp. 139—44; and Kathleen Neal Cleaver, “The Antidemocratic Power of Whiteness,” in Delgado and Stefancic, pp 157—63.

significance it would not otherwise 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. But when the stakes are privilege and power, dominant groups are quite willing to ignore 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 “race privilege” or “gender 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. But for now, 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 anything they’ve done or failed to do.<sup>6</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, for example, then I’m benefitting from white privilege. That a heterosexual black woman can feel free to talk about her life in ways that reveal the fact she’s married to a man is a form of 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 speech, for example, it doesn’t occur to me that they’d probably be more critical and less positive if I were Latino or a woman 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 that I *didn’t* do a good job of course, 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 way except for the gender, race, and sexual orientation categories they belong to. In this sense, my privileged status *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>7</sup> In the same way, being female, or of color, or homosexual *doesn’t* determine people’s outcomes, but they are turned into *liabilities* that make it less likely that their talent, ability and aspirations will be recognized and rewarded.

The ease of not being aware of privilege is an aspect of privilege itself, what some call “the luxury of obliviousness” (or what philosophers call “epistemic privilege”). Awareness requires effort and commitment. Being able to command the attention of lower-class individuals without having to give it 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 white control jobs, schools, the police, and most other resources and sources of power. Race privilege gives whites little reason to pay a lot of attention to African Americans or to how white privilege affects

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<sup>6</sup> For her now classic statement of the concept of privilege, see Peggy MacIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies” widely reprinted.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peggy\\_McIntosh](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peggy_McIntosh)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

them. In other words, “To be white in America means not having to think about it.”<sup>8</sup> We could say the same thing about maleness or heterosexuality 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 MacIntosh, privilege comes in two types. The first is based on what she calls “unearned entitlements,” which are things that all people *should* have, such as feeling safe in public places 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 having to lose out. If the workplace changes so that everyone was valued for what they could contribute, for example, that privilege would disappear without the dominant groups 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 advantages give 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 or 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 US 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 outnumbers white males by a large margin.

The other form of privilege—what MacIntosh 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 woman 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 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

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Terry, “The Negative Impact of White Values,” in Benjamin P. Bowser and Raymond Hunt (eds.), *Impacts of Racism on White Americans* (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1981), p. 120

provided by the cultural assumption of white racial dominance that can override any class advantage a person of color might have.<sup>9</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

In one way or another, privilege shows up in the daily details of people's lives in almost every social setting. Consider the following examples of race privilege.<sup>10</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.

- 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 90 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 people of color are, and because of residential segregation, whites have 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.
- 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 dismissed.
- Whites can generally 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 are out in public, they won't be challenged and asked to explain what they're doing, nor will they be attacked by hate groups simple because of their race.

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<sup>9</sup> Ellis Cose, *The Rage of a Privileged Class: Why Do Prosperous Blacks Still Have the Blues?*, Harper Perennial, 1995

<sup>10</sup> Much of what follows is drawn from Joseph Barndt, *Dismantling Racism: The Continuing Challenge to White America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991); Cose, *The Rage of a Privileged Class*; Feagin and Sikes, *Living With Racism*; Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1996); McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege"; and David T. Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993)

- Whites can assume that when they go out shopping, they'll be treated as serious customers, not as potential shoplifters or people without 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 white 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 like blacks are slotted into support positions or Asians into engineering, for example.
- 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 characterized as members of a category (such as "white") rather than being 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 **gender privilege**, note how some items repeat from the list on race, but that 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 that 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 of 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, 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 to control conversations and to 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 with them.
- Men can succeed without others being surprised.
- Men don't have to deal with an endless and exhausting stream of attention drawn to their gender (for example how sexually attractive they are).
- Men don't find themselves slotted into a narrow range of occupations identified with their gender like women are slotted into community relations, human resources, social work, elementary school teaching, librarianship, nursing, clerical and secretarial.
- Men 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.
- 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 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 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 that 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 can marry their companion of choice, and automatically receive all of the legal rights and privileges that accompany marriage, for example, filing joint taxes, community property rights, medical decision-making rights, survivorship rights, etc.
- 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 choose among a wide variety of family lifestyles including complete reproduction rights and adoption, and the laws and society will support their decisions as personal rights.
- Heterosexuals can live in the comfort of knowing that other people's assumptions about their sexual orientation are correct.

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>11</sup> This means that if you come from several ethnic groups, the one that lowers your status is the one that lowers your status is the one that 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 having any black ancestry is still enough to be classified as entirely black in many people's eyes (in accordance with the "one drop rule" that has been a striking feature of race relations in the United States for several centuries). 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>12</sup>

If you're male or heterosexual or white 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

Individuals are the ones who experience privilege or the lack of it, but individuals aren't what is actually privileged. Instead privilege is defined in relationship to a group or social category. In other words, race privilege is more about white people than it is about white *people*. I'm not race privileged because of who I am as a person. Whiteness is privileged in this society, and I have access to that privilege only when people identify me as belonging to this category "white." I do or don't receive race 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 white or male or heterosexual to receive the privilege attached to these categories. 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

<sup>11</sup> Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism*, pp 112

<sup>12</sup> See Ruth Frankenberg, *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993)

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 becoming a man, but by successfully presenting herself as one. That's all it takes.

In similar ways, you can lose privilege if people think you don't belong to a particular category. My sexual orientation is heterosexual, for example, which entitles me to heterosexual privilege, but only if people identify me as heterosexual. If I were to immediately 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, a heterosexual person. 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>13</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 organizations 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 gender 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>14</sup>

Societies and organizations promote privilege in complicated ways, which we'll look at in later chapters. For now, it's important to 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 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 or 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 or higher than our own. So pointing out to someone in the United States who lives in poverty that they're better off than impoverished people in India doesn't make them feel much 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 *them*.

Since being white is valued in this society, whites will tend to compare themselves with other whites, not with people of color. In the same way, men will tend to compare themselves with other men and not with women. What this means, however, is that whites will 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 hierarchy that exists among men between heterosexuals and homosexuals: Heterosexual men are more likely to consider

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<sup>13</sup> Charlotte Bunch, "Not for Lesbians Only": *Quest* 11 no 2 (Fall 1975)

<sup>14</sup> Harry Brod, "Work Clothes and Leisure Suits: The Class Basis and Bias of the Men's Movement" in Michael Kimmel and Michael A. Messner (eds.), *Men's Lives* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), p280. Italics in original.

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 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,” including 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 that social position of females and males as social categories with one subjective experience of belonging to one of those categories. They aren’t the same. For various reasons—including social-class privilege or submission to a religion or an unusual family experience or simply being young—she may have avoided a direct confrontation with 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 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 feel privileged.

This is a common reaction that is related to the difference between individuals on that one hand and social categories on the other. Knowing that someone belongs to one or more of the privileged categories, “white,” or “heterosexual,” or “male,” doesn’t necessarily tell us what life is 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 they 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 them, 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 that 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 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 that they can continue to be counted among “real men” who are worthy of being set apart from—and above—women. It should

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. The concept of oppression points to social forces that tend to “press” upon 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>15</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 that has the power to oppress them.

As we saw earlier, people in privileged categories can certainly feel bad in ways that resemble oppression. 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 belonging to a privileged category 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 out-weighted 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 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 people of color or queer or in a lower social class, but not because they are male. In the same way, whites can experience oppression as women, homosexuals, or members of lower classes, 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 be the recipient of privilege. Only people can do this by belonging to privileged categories in relation to other categories that aren’t.

Finally, it’s important to point out that belonging to 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 whites as a social category oppress people of color as a social category, for example, is a social fact. That doesn’t, however, tell us how a particular white person thinks or feels about particular people of color or behaves towards 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.

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<sup>15</sup> For a classic discussion of the meaning of oppression, see Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1983) pp.1–16

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