Privilege, Power, and Difference

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Introduction

I wrote this little book for one reason. We all know that a great deal of trouble surrounds issues of difference in this society, trouble relating to gender and race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, social class. A huge store of knowledge, from scientific research to passionate memoirs, documents this trouble and leaves no doubt that it causes enormous amounts of injustice and unnecessary suffering.

For all that we know, however, we still don't seem to have an understanding of the trouble we're in that allows us to do something about it. We are, both individually and collectively, stuck in a kind of paralysis that perpetuates the trouble and its human consequences.

All of us are part of the problem. There is no way to avoid that as long as we live in the world. But we could also make ourselves part of the solution if only we knew how. This book provides a way of thinking about the trouble that has the potential to help us become part of the solution by getting us unstuck. It provides a framework that is conceptual and theoretical on the one hand and grounded in the experience of everyday life on the other. Thus it allows us to see not only where the trouble comes from, but how we as individuals are connected to it, which is the only thing that gives us the potential to make a difference.

When most people read the phrase "how we as individuals are connected to it," they think they're about to be told they've done something wrong, that blame and guilt aren't far behind, especially if they are white or male or heterosexual or of a privileged class. This defensive reaction has done more than perhaps anything else to keep us stuck in our current paralysis by preventing each of us from taking the steps required to become part of the solution.

As a white, male, heterosexual, middle-class professional, I know about such feelings from my own life. But as a sociologist, I also know that it's possible to understand the world and myself in relation to it in ways that get past the defensive feelings and give us all a common ground from which to work for change. My purpose in this book is to articulate that understanding in ways that are clear and compelling and, above all, useful. The sociological framework the book offers is conceptual and theoretical. It is about how we think. But always the purpose is to change how we think so that we can change how we act, and by changing how we participate in the world, become part of the complex dynamic through which the world itself will change.

Because my primary goal is to change how people think about issues of difference and privilege, I've been less concerned with describing all the forms that difference can take and the problems associated with them. In choosing, I've been drawn to forms of difference that are the most pervasive, that affect the greatest number of people, and that produce the most harm. Also, like any author, I tend to stick to what I know best. As a result, I focus almost entirely on gender, race, social class, and, in a less extensive way, sexual orientation.

Because the nature of class is unique, I don't analyze it in the same way that I look at other forms of difference. Class differences have huge effects on people's lives, but class is fundamentally different from gender, race, and sexual orientation. The most important difference is that while we all have the potential to change our class position, the other forms of difference are almost impossible to change. Unlike class, differences of gender, race, and sexual orientation are associated with the body itself. From the moment of birth, for example, the assignment of people to categories of female or male is based almost entirely on their physical attributes and appearance.

But class still figures prominently in the book, because class differences and the capitalist economic system that produces them play a key role in how the trouble around difference works and how each of us experiences it. The historical roots of modern racism, for example, are primarily economic, and while racism is a problem that involves all white people, how it plays out in white people's lives varies depending on their social class. In some ways, for example, the social advantage of being white will tend to be more significant for lower- and working-class whites than it will for whites in the middle and upper classes. A lack of class privilege can make it more important to draw upon white privilege as a form of compensation. Without taking such patterns into account, it's difficult to know just what something like "race privilege" means.

To some degree, this book cannot help having a white, straight, male, middle-class point of view, because that's what my background is. But that combination of social characteristics does not simply limit me, for each also provides a bridge from my own experience to some portion of almost every reader's life. I cannot know from my own experience, for example, what it's like to be a woman or a person of color or a homosexual in this society. But I can bring my experience as a white person to the struggle of white people—including white women and lower-class white men—to deal with the subject of racism, just as I can bring my experience as a man to men's work—including gay men and men of color—around the subject of sexism and male privilege. In the same way, I can bring my experience as a straight person to the challenge faced by heterosexuals—of

whatever gender or race or class—who want to come to terms with heterosexism and homophobia.

What I don't know from my own experience I have to supplement by studying the experience and research and writings of others, which I've been working at since I received my Ph.D. in sociology almost thirty years ago. During that time, I've designed and taught courses on class and capitalism, the sociology of gender, feminist theory, and, with a female African American colleague, race in the United States. I've written a book on gender inequality (*The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*). I've been active in the movement against violence against women and have done diversity training in corporations and universities.

None of this means I'm in a position to say the last word on anything or that this book will reflect everyone's experience of difference and privilege. If, however, I've succeeded in what I set out to do here—and only you will know if I have—then I believe the result will be a book that has something to offer almost everyone who wants to deal with these difficult issues and help change the world for the better.

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CHAPTER 1

Rodney King's Question

In 1991, a black motorist named Rodney King suffered a brutal beating at the hands of police officers in Los Angeles. When his assailants were acquitted—in spite of evidence that included a videotape of the incident—and riots broke out in Los Angeles, King uttered the exasperated plea that would become famous as it echoed across the long history and deep divide of racism in the United States. "Can't we all just get along?"

His words formed a simple yet eloquent summary of the current state of our racial dilemma, what the black leader and scholar W. E. B. Du Bois called a century ago "the problem of the color line." But in King's few words, he said more than that. Past his exasperation lies a real and serious question, one that has haunted us ever since the Civil War brought down the institution of slavery. Like any serious question, it sits and waits for what it deserves, which is a serious answer.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, it is clear that however much people might wish it otherwise, the answer is still no.

Whether it's a matter of can't or won't, the truth is that we simply don't get along. Segregation in housing and schools is stubborn and pervasive, and the average wealth of white families is almost ten times that of blacks. The steady corrosion that everyday racism causes to the fabric of social life is everywhere. It especially galls middle-class blacks who believed what whites told them, that if they did everything right—if they went to school and worked hard and made something of themselves—race would no longer be an issue. But they soon discovered, and they learn anew every day, that nothing seems to protect them from their vulnerability to white racism.

As I write this, I'm aware that some readers—whites in particular, and especially those who don't have the luxury of class privilege—may already feel put off by my use of words like *racism, white,* and, even worse, *white racism.* One way to avoid such reactious is to follow the advice I was once given to not use the words at all. As the rest of this book will try to make clear, however, if we dispense with the words we make it impossible to talk about what's really going on and what it has to do with us. And if we can't do that, then we can't see what the problems are or how we might make ourselves part of the solution to them, which is, after all, the only worthwhile point of writing or reading a book such as this one.

With that in mind, perhaps the most important thing I can say to reassure readers who are wondering whether to continue is that things are not what they seem. The defensive and irritable feelings that whites often experience when they come across such language are based on some fundamental misperceptions of the world which this book will try to clarify and set straight. If I succeed at that, then the meaning and emotional weight of concepts like "privilege" and "white racism" will soften and shift.

Problems of perception and defensiveness apply not only to the language of race, but to an entire set of social differences

that have become the basis for a great deal of trouble in the world. Although Du Bois was correct that color would be a defining issue in the twentieth century, the problem of "getting along" doesn't stop there. It is also an issue across differences of gender, sexual orientation, and numerous lesser divides. Men's violence and harassment aimed at women is epidemic in the United States, for example, and show no sign of letting up anytime soon. The glass ceiling that lets women see the executive suite but keeps them from being promoted to it is as thick as ever, and the gender gap in income is narrowing only at a glacial pace and persists even among top executives in Fortune 500 companies. Men dominate virtually every major organization and institution, from corporations to government to organized sport and religion, and for all the hype about the "new father," men rarely feel as responsible for domestic work and child care as their female partners do. Harassment and discrimination directed at gay men and lesbians are commonplace, and although physical violence and murder are more rare, they are an ever-present reminder of the dangers of being identified as anything other than heterosexual.

Clearly, we aren't getting along with one another, and we need to ask why not.

For many, the answer is some variation on "human nature." People can't help fearing the unfamiliar—including people of other races, goes one popular argument. Or women and men are so dissimilar it's as though they they come from separate planets, and it's some kind of cross-cultural (if not cross-species) miracle that we get along as well as we do. Or there is only one natural sexual orientation (heterosexual), and all the rest are therefore unacceptable and bound to cause conflict wherever they become obvious. Or those who are more capable will get more than everyone else—they always have and they always will. Someone, after all, has to be on top.

As popular and powerful as such arguments are, the only way to hold on to them is to ignore most of what history, psychology, anthropology, sociology, biology, and, if people look closely, their own experience reveal about human beings and how they live. We are not prisoners to some natural order that pits us hopelessly and endlessly against one another. We are prisoners to *something*, but it's closer to our own making than we realize. And we, therefore, are far from helpless to change it and ourselves.

CHAPTER 2

We're In Trouble

Every morning before breakfast I walk with our dogs, Sophie and Elsie, in acres of woods behind our house in the northwest hills of Connecticut. It's a quiet and peaceful place. I can feel the seasons come and go. Winter lies long and deep beneath one snowfall layered on another. Come spring, fiddlehead ferns uncoil from the forest floor and then summer exhausts itself before sliding into the cool, crisp clarity of autumn.

I like the walks mostly for the solitude. I can reflect on my life and the world and see things in perspective and more clearly. And I like to watch the dogs crash through the woods as they chase each other in games of tag, sniff out fresh deer scat or the trail of an animal that passed through the night before. They go out far and then come back to make sure I'm still there.

It's hard not to notice that everything seems pretty simple to them—or at least from what I can see. They never stray far from what I imagine to be their essence, the core of what it means to be a dog in relation to everything around them, living and otherwise. And that's all they seem to need or care about.

It's also hard not to wonder about my own species, which, by comparison, is deeply troubled most of the time. I suspect we don't have to be, because even though I'm trained as a sociologist to see the complexity of things, it seems to me that we're also fairly simple. Deep in our bones, for example, we are social beings. There's no escaping it. We can't survive on our own when we're young, and it doesn't get a whole lot easier later on. We need to feel that we belong to something bigger than ourselves, whether it's a family or a team or a society. We look to other people to tell us that we measure up, that we matter, that we're okay. We have a huge capacity to be creative and generous and loving. We spin stories, make art and music, help children turn into adults, save one another in countless ways, and ease our loved ones into death when the time comes. We have large brains and opposable thumbs and are incredibly clever in how we use them. I'm not sure if we're the only species with a sense of humor—I think I've seen dogs laugh—but we've certainly made the most of it. And we're astonishingly adaptable. We can figure out how to live just about anywhere under almost any conditions you could imagine. We can take in the strange and unfamiliar and learn to understand and embrace it, whether it's a new language or an odd food or the mysteries of death and dying or the person sitting next to us on the crosstown bus who doesn't look like anyone we've seen before.

For all our potential, you'd think we could manage to get along with one another. By that I don't mean love one another in some profoundly idealistic way. We don't need to love one another—or even *like* one another—to work together or just share space in the world. I also don't mean something as minimal as mere tolerance or refraining from overt violence. I mean that you'd think we could treat one another with decency and respect and appreciate if not support the best we have in us. It's what I imagine Rodney King meant by "get along."

It doesn't seem unreasonable to imagine a school or a workplace, for example, where all kinds of people feel comfortable showing up, secure in the knowledge that they have a place they don't have to defend every time they turn around, where they're encouraged to do their best, and valued for it. We all like to feel that way: accepted, valued, supported, appreciated, respected, belonging. So you'd think we'd go after it like dogs on the scent of something good to eat. We'd go after it, that is, unless something powerful kept us from it.

Apparently, something powerful does keep us from it, to judge from all the trouble there is around issues of difference—especially in relation to race, gender, sexual orientation, and class. Something powerful keeps us far from anything like a world where people feel comfortable showing up and feel good about themselves and one another. The truth of this powerful force is everywhere, but we don't know how to talk about it, and so we act as though it's always somewhere other than here and now in the room with us.

A few years ago I was sitting across a restaurant table from an African American woman. We were talking about a course on race and gender that we wanted to teach together. And while we talked about what we wanted our students to think about and learn, I felt how hard it was for me to talk about race and gender in that moment—about how the legacy of racism and sexism shapes our lives in such different ways, how my whiteness and maleness are sources of privilege (another of those words that can get people going) that elevates me not above some abstract groups, but above her, my friend.

The simple truth is that when I go shopping, I'll probably get waited on faster and better than she will. I'll benefit from the cultural assumption that I'm a serious customer who doesn't need to be followed around to keep me from stealing something. The clerk won't ask me for three kinds of ID before

accepting my check or accepting my credit card. But all these indignities that my whiteness protects me from are part of her everyday existence. And it doesn't matter how she dresses or behaves or that she's an executive in a large corporation. Her being black and the realtors' and bankers' and clerks' being white in a racist society is all it takes.

She also can't go for a walk alone at night without thinking about her safety a lot more than I would—without planning what to do in case a man approaches her with something other than good will. She has to worry about what a man might think if she smiles in a friendly way and says hello as they pass on the sidewalk, or what he'll think if she doesn't. She has to decide where to park her car for the greatest safety, to remember to have her keys out and ready as she approaches it, and to check the back seat before she gets in. In other words, she has to draw a tight boundary around her life in ways that never occur to me, and her being female is the only reason why.

As these thoughts filled my mind, I struggled with how to sit across from her and talk and eat our lunch while all of this is going on all the time. I wanted to say, "Can we talk about this and *us*?" But I didn't, because it felt risky, the kind of thing you both know but keep at bay by not actually *saying* it, like a married couple where one's been unfaithful and both know it but collude in silence to keep the thing going. They realize that if either speaks the truth they both already know, they won't be able to go on as if this gulf and hurt between them weren't there.

It's not that I've *done* something or thought bad thoughts or harbored ill will toward her because she's black and female. No, the problem is that in the world as it is, huge issues involving race and gender shape her life and mine in dramatically different ways. And it's not some random accident that befell her while I escaped. A tornado didn't blow through town and level her house while leaving mine alone. No, her misfortune is connected to my fortune; the reality of her having to deal with racism and sexism every day is connected to the reality that I *don't*. I didn't have to do anything wrong for this to be true and neither did she. But there it is just the same.

All of that sits in the middle of the table like the proverbial elephant that everyone pretends not to notice.

The "elephant" is a society and its people for whom a decent and productive social life that is true to the best of our essential humanity continues to be elusive. In its place is a powerful kind of trouble that is tenacious, profound, and seems only to get worse. I can't help wondering how much worse it will get.

The trouble we're in privileges some groups at the expense of others. It creates a yawning divide in levels of income, wealth, dignity, safety, health, and quality of life. It promotes fear, suspicion, discrimination, harassment, and violence. It sets people against one another. It builds walls topped with broken glass and barbed wire. It weaves the insidious and corroding effects of oppression into the daily lives of tens of millions of women, men, and children. It has the potential to ruin entire generations and, in the long run, to take just about everyone down with it.

It is a trouble that shows up everywhere and touches every life in one way or another. There is no escape, however thick the denial. It's in families and neighborhoods, in schools and churches, in government and the courts, and especially in colleges and the workplace, where many people have their first true experience with people unlike themselves and what this society makes of such differences.

The hard and simple truth is that the "we" that's in trouble is all of us—not just straight white middle- and upper-class males—and it will take all or at least most of us to get us out of it. It's relatively easy, for example, for white people to fall into the safe and comfortable rut of thinking that racism is a problem that belongs to people of color, or for men to see sexism as a women's issue, or for members of the middle and upper

classes to see poverty as people's own fault. But such thinking mistakes fantasy for reality. It pretends we can talk about "up" without "down" or that a "you" or a "them" can mean something without a "me" or an "us." There is no way that a problem of difference can involve just one group of people. The "problem" of race can't be just a problem of being black, Chinese, Sioux, or Mexican. It has to be more than that, because there is no way to separate the "problem" of being, say, black from the "problem" of *not* being white. And there is no way to separate the problem of not being white from *being* white. This means privilege is always a problem for people who don't have it and for people who do, because privilege is *always* in relation to others. Privilege is always at someone else's expense and always exacts a cost. Everything that's done to receive or maintain it—however passive and unconscious—results in suffering and deprivation for someone.

We live in a society that attaches privilege to being white and male and heterosexual regardless of your social class. If I don't see how that makes me part of the problem of privilege, I won't see myself as part of the solution. And if people in privileged groups don't include themselves in the solution, the default is to leave it to blacks and women and Asians, Latinos, Native Americans, lesbians, gay men, and the lower and working classes to do it on their own. But these groups can't do it on their own, because they don't have the power to change entrenched systems of privilege by themselves. If they could do that, there wouldn't be a problem in the first place.

The simple truth is that the trouble we're in can't be solved unless people who are heterosexual or male or Anglo or white or economically comfortable feel obligated to make the problem of privilege *their* problem and to do something about it. For myself, it means I have to take the initiative to find out how privilege operates in the world, how it affects people, and what all that has to do with me. It means I have to think the unthinkable, speak the unspeakable, break the silence, acknowledge the elephant, and then take my share of responsibility for what comes next. It means I have to *do* something to create the possibility for my African American friend and me to have a conversation about race, gender, and us, rather than leave it to her to take all the risks and do all the work. The fact that it's so easy for me and other people in dominant groups not to do this is the single most powerful barrier to change. Understanding how to bring dominant groups into the conversation and the solution is the biggest challenge we face.

My work in this book is to help find a way to meet that challenge. It is to identify tools for understanding what's going on and what it's got to do with us without being swallowed up in a sea of guilt and blame or rushing into denial and angry self-defense. It is to open windows to new ways of thinking about difference and what's been made of it in this society. It is to remove barriers that stand between us and serious, long-term conversation *across* difference and effective action for change that can *make* a difference.

WE CAN'T TALK ABOUT IT IF WE CAN'T USE THE WORDS

As I suggested in the opening pages of Chapter 1, you can't deal with a problem if you don't name it; once you name it, you can think, talk, and write about it. You can make sense of it by seeing how it's connected to other things that explain it and point toward solutions. Usually the language needed for this comes from people working to solve the problem, especially people most damaged by it. Words like *privilege, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, heterosexism, classism, dominance, subordination, oppression,* and *patriarchy* are part of their everyday vocabulary.

When you name something, the word draws your attention to it, which makes you more likely to notice it as something

significant. That's why most people have an immediate negative reaction to words like *racism, sexism,* or *privilege.* They don't want to look at what the words point to. Whites don't want to look at racism, nor men at sexism, nor heterosexuals at heterosexism, especially if they have worked hard to improve their class position. People don't want to look because they don't want to know what it has to do with them and how doing something about it might change not only the world, but themselves.

So people ignore the trouble by trying to get rid of the language that names it. They discredit the words or twist their meaning or turn them into a phobia or make them invisible. That's what's happened with most of the words that name the trouble around difference. It's become almost impossible, for example, to say *sexism* or *male privilege* without most men becoming so uncomfortable and defensive that conversation is impossible. They act as though *sexism* names a personality flaw found among men, and just saying the word ("Can we talk about sexism today?") is heard as an accusation of a personal moral failure. The same is true of all the other "isms." Since few people like to see themselves as bad, the words are taboo in "polite" company, including many diversity training programs at corporations and universities. So instead of talking about the racism and sexism that plague people's lives, people talk about "diversity" and "tolerance" and "appreciating difference." Those are good things to talk about, but they're not the same as the isms and the trouble they're connected to.

More than once, I've been asked to talk about the consequences of social domination, subordination, and oppression without actually saying the words *dominant, subordinate,* or *oppression.* At such times, I feel like a doctor trying to help a patient without ever mentioning the body or naming what's wrong. We can't get anywhere that way—and we haven't been. Our collective house is burning down, and we're tiptoeing around afraid to say "Fire."

The bottom line is that a trouble we can't talk about is a trouble we can't do anything about. Words like *sexism* and *privilege* point to something difficult and painful in our history that continues in everyday life in our society. That means there is no way to talk about it without difficulty and without pain. It is possible, however, to talk about it in ways that make the struggle and the pain worth it. To do that, however, we have to reclaim these lost and discredited words so that we can use them to name and make sense of the truth of what's going on.

Reclaiming the words begins with seeing that they rarely mean what most people think they mean. *Racist* isn't another word for "bad white people," just as *patriarchy* isn't a bit of nasty code for "men." *Oppression* and *dominance* name social realities that we can participate in without being oppressive or dominating *people.* And *feminism* isn't an ideology organized around being lesbian or hating men. But you'd never know it by listening to how these words are used in the mass media, popular culture, and over the dinner table. You'd never know such words could be part of a calm and responsible discussion of how to resolve a problem that belongs to all of us.

I use these difficult words freely in this book because I'm writing about the problems they name. Readers who happen to be white or male or heterosexual or economically comfortable or members of some other privileged category will have an easier time of it if they try to tolerate the discomfort such words evoke. I don't use them as accusations. (If I did, I'd have a hard time looking in the mirror each morning.) I don't intend that anyone take them personally. As a white, male, middle-class heterosexual, I know that in some ways these words are about me. There's no way to avoid playing some role in the troubles they name, and that's something I need to look at. But in equally important ways, the words are *not* about me because they name something much larger than me, something I didn't invent or create, but that was passed on to me as a legacy when I was born

into this society. If I'm going to be part of the solution to that difficult legacy, it's important to step back from my defensive sensitivity to such language and look at the reality it points to. Then I can understand what it names and what it has to do with me and, most important, what I can do about it.

CHAPTER 3

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

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 that it's 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,"[1] 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 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 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?

Issues of difference cover a large territory. A useful way to put it in perspective is with the "diversity wheel" (Figure 3.1) developed by Marilyn Loden and Judy Rosener.[2] 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.

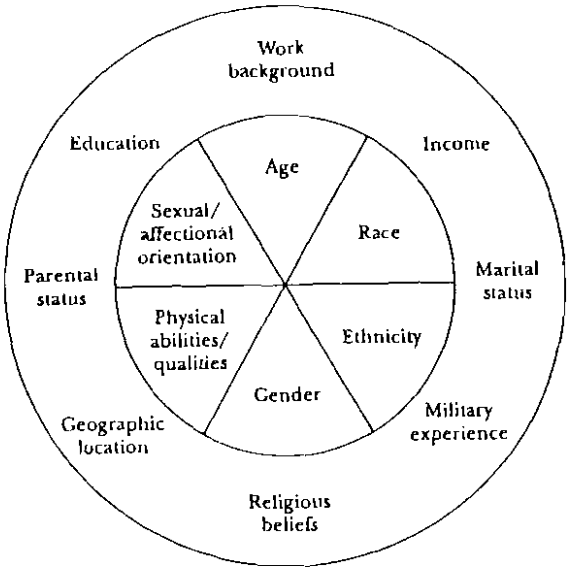

FIGURE 3.1 The Diversity Wheel. From *Workforce America* by M. Loden and J. Rosener, McGraw-Hill, 1991. Reproduced with permission from the McGraw-Hill Companies.

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?

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 Latina/o to Anglo, or from physically able to using a wheelchair? 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 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 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.

People's perceptions are difficult to control, however, for they 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, 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 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. 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.[3]

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DIFFERENCE

The 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."[4]

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.[5] 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, 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.

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 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. But 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 "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, so serious that it is the subject of a whole chapter (Chapter 8). 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 because of anything they've done or failed to do.[6] 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 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 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 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 respect 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.[7] 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-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, 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 them. In other words, "To be white in America means not having to think about it."[8] 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 McIntosh, 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 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's having to lose out. If the workplace changed 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 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 outnumbers white males by a large margin.

The other 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.[9]

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.[10] 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 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's 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 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 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 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 others' 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 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 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 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.

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."[11] 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, 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.[12]

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 relation 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 the 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 those 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 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 that 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 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. Trying being queer for a week."[13] 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.[14]

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 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 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 won'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 homosexuals: 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," 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 the social position of females and males as social categories with

one woman's subjective experience of belonging to one of those categories. They aren't the same. For various reasons—including social-class privilege 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 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 on the 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 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 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.[15]

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 can 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 although 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 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 people of color or gay 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 social 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 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.