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Privilege, Power, and Difference

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PRIVILEGE, POWER, AND DIFFERENCE

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and talk about them. In particular, it's easier to see the problems in relation to us, and to see ourselves in relation to them.

If we think the world is just made up of individuals, then a white woman who's told she's "involved" in racism is going to think you're telling her she's a racist person who harbors ill will toward people of color. She's using an individualistic model of the world that limits her to interpreting words like *racist* as personal characteristics, personality flaws. Individualism divides the world up into different kinds of people—good people and bad, racists and nonracists, "good guys" and sexist pigs. It encourages us to think of racism, sexism, and heterosexism as diseases that infect people and make them sick. And so we look for a "cure" that will turn diseased, flawed individuals into healthy, "good" ones, or at least isolate them so that they can't infect others. And if we can't cure them, then we can at least try to control their behavior.

But what about everyone else? How do we see *them* in relation to the trouble around difference? What about the vast majority of whites, for example, who tell survey interviewers that they aren't racist and don't hate or even dislike people of color? Or what about the majority of men who say they favor an Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution? From an individualistic perspective, if you aren't consciously or openly prejudiced or hurtful, then you aren't part of the problem. You might show disapproval of "bad" people and even try to help out the people who are hurt by them. Beyond that, however, the trouble doesn't have anything to do with you so far as you can see. If your feelings and thoughts and outward behavior are good, then *you* are good, and that's all that matters.

Unfortunately, that isn't all that matters. There's more, because patterns of oppression and privilege are rooted in systems that we all participate in and make happen. Those patterns are built into paths of least resistance that people feel drawn to follow every day, regardless of whether they think

about where they lead or the consequences they produce. When male professors take more seriously students who look like themselves, for example, they don't have to be self-consciously sexist in order to help perpetuate patterns of gender privilege. They don't have to be bad people in order to play a "game" that produces oppressive consequences. It's the same as when people play Monopoly—it always ends with someone winning and everyone else losing, *because that's how the game is set up to work as a system.* The only way to change the outcome is to change how we see and play the game and, eventually, the *system itself* and its paths of least resistance. If we have a vision of what we want social life to look like, we have to create paths that lead in that direction.

Of course there are people in the world who have hatred in their hearts—such as neo-Nazi skinheads who make a sport of harassing and killing blacks or homosexuals—and it's important not to minimize the damage they do. Paradoxically, however, even though they cause a lot of trouble, they aren't the key to understanding privilege or to doing something about it. They are participating in something larger than themselves that, among other things, steers them toward certain targets for their rage. It's no accident that their hatred is rarely directed at privileged groups, but instead those who are culturally devalued and excluded. Hate-crime perpetrators may have personality disorders that bend them toward victimizing *someone,* but their choice of whom to victimize isn't part of a mental illness. That's something they have to learn, and culture is everyone's most powerful teacher. In choosing their targets, they follow paths of least resistance built into a society that everyone participates in, that everyone makes happen, regardless of how they feel or what they intend.

So if I notice that someone plays Monopoly in a ruthless way, it's a mistake to explain that simply in terms of their personality. I also have to ask how a system like Monopoly rewards

ruthless behavior more than other games we might play. I have
to ask how it creates conditions that make such behavior appear
to be the path of least resistance, normal and unremarkable.
And since I'm playing the game, too, I'm one of the people who
make it happen as a system, and its paths must affect me, too.

My first reaction might be to deny that I follow that path.
I'm not a ruthless person or anything close to it. But this misses
the key difference between systems and the people who parti-
cipate in them: We don't have to be ruthless *people* in order to
support or follow paths of least resistance that lead to behavior
with ruthless *consequences*. After all, we're all trying to win,
because that's the point of the game. However gentle and kind I
am as I take your money when you land on my Boardwalk with
its four houses, take it I will and gladly, too. "Thank you," I say in
my most sincerely unruthless tone, or even "Sorry," as I drive
you out of the game by taking your last dollar and your mort-
gaged properties. Me, ruthless? Not at all. I'm just playing the
game the way it's supposed to be played. And even if I don't try
hard to win, the mere fact that I play the game supports its exis-
tence and makes it possible, especially if I remain silent about
the consequences it produces. Just my going along makes the
game appear normal and acceptable, which reinforces the paths
of least resistance for everyone else.

This is how most systems work and how most people partici-
pate in them. It's also how systems of privilege work. Good peo-
ple with good intentions make systems happen that produce all
kinds of injustice and suffering for people in culturally devalued
and excluded groups. Most of the time, people don't even know
the paths are there in the first place, and this is why it's impor-
tant to raise awareness that everyone is always following them in
one way or another. If you weren't following a path of least resis-
tance, you'd certainly know it, because you'd be on an alter-
native path with greater resistance that would make itself felt.

In other words, if you're not going along with the system, it won't be long before people notice and let you know it. All you have to do is show up for work wearing "inappropriate" clothes to see how quickly resistance can form around alternative paths.

The trouble around difference is so pervasive, so long-standing, so huge in its consequences for so many millions of people that it can't be written off as the misguided doings of a small minority of people with personality problems. The people who get labeled as bigots, misogynists, or homophobes are all following racist, sexist, heterosexist paths of least resistance that are built into the entire society.

In a way, "bad people" are like ruthless Monopoly players who are doing just what the game calls for even if their "style" is a bit extreme. Such extremists may be the ones who grab the headlines, but they don't have enough power to create and sustain trouble of this magnitude. The trouble appears in the daily workings of every workplace, every school and university, every government agency, every community. It involves every major kind of social system, and since systems don't exist without the involvement of people, there's no way to escape being involved in the trouble that comes out of them. If we participate in systems the trouble comes out of, and if those systems exist only through our participation, then this is enough to involve us in the trouble itself.

Reminders of this reality are everywhere. I see it, for example, every time I look at the label in a piece of clothing. I just went upstairs to my closet and noted where each of my shirts was made. Although each carries a U.S. brand name, only three were made here; the rest were made in the Philippines, Thailand, Mexico, Taiwan, Macao, Singapore, or Hong Kong. And although each cost me twenty to forty dollars, it's a good bet that the people who actually made them—primarily women— were paid pennies for their labor performed under terrible

conditions that can sometimes be so extreme as to resemble slavery.

The only reason people exploit workers in such horrible ways is to make money in a capitalist system. To judge from the contents of my closet, that clearly includes *my* money. By itself, that fact doesn't make me a bad person, because I certainly don't intend that people suffer for the sake of my wardrobe. But it does mean that I'm involved in their suffering because I participate in a system that produces that suffering. As someone who helps make the system happen, however, I can also be a part of the solution.

But isn't the difference I could make a tiny one? The question makes me think of the devastating floods of 1993 along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. The news was full of powerful images of people from all walks of life working feverishly side by side to build dikes to hold back the raging waters that threatened their communities. Together, they filled and placed thousands of sandbags. When the waters receded, much had been lost, but a great deal had been saved as well. I wonder how it felt to be one of those people. I imagine they were proud of their effort and experienced a satisfying sense of solidarity with the people they'd worked with. The sandbags each individual personally contributed were the tiniest fraction of the total, but each felt part of the group effort and was proud to identify with the consequences it produced. They didn't have to make a big or even measurable difference to feel involved.

It works that way with the good things that come out of people pulling together in all the systems that make up social life. It also works that way with the bad things, with each sandbag adding to the problem instead of the solution. To perpetuate privilege and oppression, we don't even have to do anything consciously to support it. Just our silence is crucial for ensuring its future, for the simple fact is that no system of social oppression can continue to exist without most people choosing to

remain silent about it. If most whites spoke out about racism; if most men talked about sexism; if most heterosexuals came out of their closet of silence and stood openly against heterosexism, it would be a critical first step toward revolutionary change. But the vast majority of "good" people are silent on these issues, and it's easy for others to read their silence as support.

As long as we participate in social systems, we don't get to choose whether to be involved in the consequences they produce. We're involved simply through the fact that we're here. As such, we can only choose *how* to be involved, whether to be just part of the problem or also to be part of the solution. That's where our power lies, and also our responsibility.

CHAPTER 8

How Systems of Privilege Work

Like everything else in social life, privilege, power, and oppression exist only through social systems and how individuals participate in them. People make systems and their consequences happen; systems include paths of least resistance that shape who people are and how they participate. To see how all of that works, we need to look at how systems are put together. If we look at the game of Monopoly as a system, for example, we can describe it without ever talking about the personalities of the people who might play it. We can do the same thing with a university, a corporation, a family, a society, or a world economic system like global capitalism.

Systems organized around privilege have three key characteristics. They are *dominated* by privileged groups, *identified* with privileged groups, and *centered* on privileged groups. All three characteristics support the idea that members of privileged groups are superior to those below them and, therefore, deserve their privilege. A patriarchy, for example, is male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered.[1] Race privilege happens

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through systems that are white-dominated, white-identified, and white-centered, and heterosexism works through systems that are dominated, identified with, and centered on heterosexuality and heterosexuals.

DOMINANCE

When we say that a system is dominated by a privileged group, it means that positions of power tend to be occupied by members of that group. Power also tends to be identified with such people in ways that make it seem normal and natural for them to have it. In a patriarchy, for example, power is culturally gendered in that it is associated primarily with men. To the people living in such a society, power looks "natural" on a man, but unusual and even problematic on a woman, marking her as an exception that calls for special scrutiny and some kind of explanation. When Margaret Thatcher was prime minister of Great Britain, for example, she was often referred to as "the Iron Lady." This drew attention to both her strength as a leader and the need to mark it as an exception. There would be no such need to mark a strong male prime minister (as an "Iron Man," for example), because his power would be assumed.

This kind of thinking supports a structure that allocates most power to men. In almost every organization, the farther down you look in the power structure, the more numerous women are; the higher up you go, the fewer women you'll find. That's what a male-dominated system looks like.

Just because a system is male-dominated doesn't mean that most men are powerful. As most men will tell you, they aren't, most often due to class or race. Male dominance does mean, however, that every man can *identify* with power as a value that his culture associates with manhood, which makes it easier for any man to assume and use power in relation to others. It also encourages a sense of entitlement in men to use women to meet

their personal needs, whether it's getting coffee for everyone or taking the minutes of a meeting. Since women are culturally *dis*identified with power, it's harder for them to exercise it in any situation. When women do find ways to be powerful in relation to men, it's usually *in spite of* the male-dominated character of patriarchal systems as a whole.

For women to have power in relation to men also makes women vulnerable, because power in their hands lacks the cultural legitimacy of men's power. As such, it easily arouses suspicion. Female professors, for example, tell many stories of having their authority, expertise, and professional commitment routinely challenged not only by colleagues, but by students, men in particular.[2] As a man, I enjoy the benefit of the doubt with students, who usually assume I know what I'm talking about. When a woman walks into the same classroom, however, male students may challenge her credibility and authority from the start. They'll argue or question every point and feel free to interrupt her. They may go so far as to mutter "Bitch" to a pal in the next seat or comment on her physical appearance, or turn away, roll their eyes, go to sleep, hold side conversations.

"I'm still routinely asked if I've ever taught the course before," says one seasoned female professor. "They look utterly shocked when I say I've taught most of my courses 15–18 years— sometimes longer than they've been alive."[3]

Similar things can happen with peers. After teaching her first class, a new professor saw a male faculty member poke his head into her classroom after the students left. "Are you a faculty member here?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Do you have a doctorate?"

"Yes."

"Well, at least you're educated," he said, and walked away.[4]

Powerful women are also open to being called bitches or lesbians as a way to discredit and negate their power by attacking

them personally. When women gather together, even just for lunch, men may suspect them of "being up to something"—planning some subversive use of power that needs to be monitored and contained. Men's anxiety over this usually comes out as humor ("So, what little plot are you gals hatching?") but the gender dynamic underlying male dominance and women's potential to subvert it is clearly there. In the home—the one place where women manage to carve out some power for themselves—their power is routinely seen as problematic in ways that men's power in relation to women is not. The abundance of insulting terms for men who are dominated by women, for example, and the absence of such insults for comparable women show clearly how our culture sanctions male dominance.

That patriarchy is male-dominated also doesn't mean that most men have domineering personalities that make them need or want to control others. In other words, I'm not using the term *male dominance* to describe men. Rather, it describes a patriarchal system that both men and women participate in. It also describes gendered patterns of unequal power and paths of least resistance for both men and women that support those patterns.

For men, those paths of least resistance include presenting the appearance of being in control of themselves, others, and events. I'm aware of this path, for example, in how I feel drawn to respond to questions whether I know the answer or not, to interrupt in conversations, to avoid admitting that I'm wrong about anything, and to take up room in public spaces. One day some years ago, my life partner Nora Jamieson and I were having a conversation about something that began when she raised a question. I responded almost without hesitation, until she interrupted me to ask, "Do you actually know that or are you just saying it?" I was startled to realize that I was just saying it. The response appeared in my head and that seemed reason enough to say it. But I wasn't saying it as though it was just a

thought that happened to be wandering through my mind. I spoke with an unhesitating flow that suggested I knew what I was talking about, that I was an expert in the subject she'd raised.

But I didn't know that what I was saying was true, at least no more true than what anyone else might say, provided, of course, that I gave them the chance. This included Nora, who had been sitting there listening to me in silence. Until that moment, she followed a corresponding path of least resistance for women: silent attentiveness, hesitation, self-doubt, humility, deference, supporting what men say and do, and taking up as little space as possible. When she stepped off that path, she shook an entire structure by revealing its existence and how both of us were participating in it. She also raised the possibility of alternative paths—of men learning about silence and listening, doubt and uncertainty, supporting others and sharing space.

Why call such patterns of control and deference "paths of least resistance"? Why not just say that I and many other men have a problem we might call a "controlling personality" or that women just tend to be "unassertive"? The answer is that we all swim in a dominant culture that is full of images of men seeking control, taking up time and space, competing with other men, and living with a sense of entitlement in relation to women. And each of those is matched by images of women letting men do all of that, if not encouraging them to or insisting on it. The images permeate popular culture—from film and television to advertising and literature—and shape the news, from the front page to the sports section.

What these images do is place a value on male power and control that is used every day as a standard for evaluating men in almost every aspect of their lives. Men who live up to it are routinely rewarded with approval, while men who seem insufficiently decisive and manly are always vulnerable to ridicule and scorn, primarily from other men. And so if I feel drawn to con-

trol a conversation or to always have an answer, it isn't simply because I'm a controlling *person,* no more than greedy behavior happens in a Monopoly game just because people are greedy.

This is what Deborah Tannen misses in her popular books on gender and talk.[5] She describes many gender differences in styles of talking that tend to give men control over conversations. But when she tries to explain why this is so, she almost completely ignores how those differences promote male privilege at women's expense. Instead she argues that women and men talk differently because as children they played in same-sex groups and learned distinctively male or female ways of speaking from their peers. What she doesn't tell us is how those peers happened to acquire their gendered styles of talking. The answer is that they learned them from adults in families, the mass media, and in school. In other words, they learned them by participating in a society where conversation is a major arena in which gender privilege is played out.

Patterns of dominance and the paths of least resistance that sustain them show up in every system of privilege. White dominance, for example, is reflected in an unequal racial balance of power in society and its institutions. The same is true of heterosexuality, although so many lesbians and gay men are still in the closet that it's hard to be sure about the sexual orientation of people in power. There is no ambiguity or lack of clarity in the mainstream culture, however. It's rare to see a film or television show in which the most powerful character is identified as gay, lesbian, working class, or African American, Latino/a, or Asian, or if they are, to have them still be alive when the closing credits begin to roll. Working-class characters are rarely the focus in films and on television, and when they do appear they are routinely portrayed as criminals or as stupid, ignorant, crude, bigoted, shallow, and immoral.[6] The closest that racial minorities get to powerful roles is as sidekicks to powerful whites in "buddy" movies, and exceptions like *The Color Purple* and *The*

Hurricane are few and far between and must struggle for whatever recognition they get. And in a heterosexist culture, a powerful gay man is a contradiction in terms, and powerful lesbians are often dismissed as not being real women at all.

The result of such patterns of dominance is that if you're female, gay, African American, Latino/a, Asian, Native American, or in some other way on the outside of privilege, when you look upward in all kinds of power structures you don't see people like you. Your interests are not represented where power is wielded and rewards are distributed, and you get no encouragement to imagine yourself as one of those who enjoy power and rewards. Those who don't look like people in power will feel invisible and in fact *be* invisible, for they are routinely overlooked. And this is a major way that patterns of inequality and privilege repeat themselves over and over again.

IDENTIFIED WITH PRIVILEGE

"It's a man's world" is an expression that points in part to the male-dominated character of society which puts most power in the hands of men. In the same way, one could say "It's a white world" or "It's a straight world." But there's more than power at work here, for privileged groups are also usually taken as the standard of comparison that represents the best that society has to offer. This is what it means to say that a system is male-identified or white-identified.

On most college campuses, for example, black students feel pressured to talk, dress, and act like middle-class whites in order to fit in and be accepted, what some have called being "Afro-Saxon."[7] In similar ways, most workplaces define appropriate appearance and ways of speaking in terms that are culturally associated with being white, from clothing and hairstyles to diction and slang. Racial and ethnic minorities experience being marked as outsiders, to the extent that many navigate the social

world by consciously changing how they talk from one situation to another. In shopping for an apartment over the telephone, for example, many African Americans know they have to "talk white" in order to be accepted (which may come to nothing once they show up in person and discover that the apartment has "just" been rented).[8]

Because privileged groups are assumed to represent society as a whole, "American," for example, is culturally defined as white, in spite of the diversity of the population. You can see this in a statement like, "Americans must learn to be more tolerant of other races." I doubt that most people would see this as saying that we need Asians to be more tolerant of whites or blacks to be more tolerant of Native Americans. The "Americans" are assumed to be white, and the "other races" are assumed to be races *other* than white. *Other* is the key word in understanding how systems are identified with privileged groups. The privileged group is the assumed "we" in relation to "them." The "other" is the "you people" whom the "we" regard as problematic, unacceptable, unlikable, or beneath "our" standards.

In a white-identified system, white is the assumed race unless something other than white is marked—hence the common use of the term *nonwhite* to lump together a variety of races into a single category of "other" in relation to a white standard. To get a sense of the effect of this practice, imagine a society in which whites were referred to routinely as "noncoloreds."

White identification means that whether arrested for a crime or winning a Nobel prize, whites are rarely if ever identified *as* white, because that is assumed. Racial tags are common, however, for everyone else, from "black physician" and "African American writer" to "Asian actor." If a small group of white citizens marched on Washington to protest a policy that had nothing to do with race, news reports wouldn't mention their race and certainly wouldn't try to figure out why the group was all-white. They would simply be described as protesters or citizens

or members of a group that takes a position on that policy. If a group of Mexican Americans did the same thing, they would surely be identified as such and be asked why there weren't any whites among them. And this isn't because Mexican Americans stand out as a numerical minority, since the same pattern would hold for women, who would "stand out" and be tagged as women even though they outnumber men in the population.

Such patterns of identification are especially powerful in relation to gender. It is still common to use masculine pronouns to refer to people in general or to use *man* to name the entire species (as in "mankind" and "the family of man"). In a similar way, men and manhood are held up as standards of comparison. The idea of "brotherhood," for example, is clearly gendered, since women can't be brothers by any stretch of the imagination, yet it also carries powerful cultural meaning about *human* connection, as in the stirring line from "America the Beautiful," "And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea."[9] Brotherhood is defined as a "condition" or "quality" of human relationship (see Box 8.1) that embodies warmth and good feeling, especially across social differences. It is linked to the idea of *fellowship*—the general human capacity for companionship, common interest or feeling, friendliness, and communion—which is based on being a fellow, which is also clearly and unambiguously defined as male. By comparison, although African American women have made powerful use of the idea of sisterhood, in the dominant patriarchal culture it amounts to little more than the biological fact of being someone's sister, which is to say, being female and sharing the same set of parents. All of its other meanings are narrowly confined to groups of women—such as nuns and feminists—even when it refers to the quality of relationships.

In short, men are the cultural standard for humanity; women are just women. So when a woman is celebrated at the office and everyone joins in a round of "For She's a Jolly Good

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Box 8.1
The Word "Brotherhood" as
an Instance of Male-Identified Language

Sisterhood

1. The state of being a sister.
2. A group of sisters, especially of nuns or of female members of a church.
3. An organization of women with a common interest.
4. Congenial relationship or companionship among women.
5. Community or network of women who participate in support of feminism.

Brotherhood

1. The condition or quality of being a brother.
2. The quality of being brotherly, **fellow**ship.
3. A fraternal or trade organization.
4. All those engaged in a particular trade or profession or sharing a common interest or quality.
5. The belief that all people should act with warmth and equality toward one another regardless of differences in race, creed, nationality, etc.

Fellow   A man or boy.

Fellowship

1. The condition or relation of being a fellow; the fellowship of humankind.
2. Friendly relationship.

Fellow," no one laughs at or objects to the oxymoron, because in a male-identified society, it's an honor to be considered "one of the guys," to be associated with men and the standards by which men are measured. Nor are many people disturbed by the fact that there are *no* words that culturally associate women with a valued quality of human relation in the way that *fellow* and *fellowship* do for men. If someone suggested changing the words of *America the Beautiful* to "and crown thy good with sisterhood,"

however, imagine the reception that idea would get and you have some idea of the power of male identification.

Male identification is woven into every aspect of social life. Most high-status occupations, for example, are organized around qualities that are culturally associated with masculinity, such as aggression, competitiveness, emotional detachment, and control. This is what it takes to succeed in law, medicine, science, academia, politics, sports, or business. No woman (or man) becomes a corporate manager, gets tenure at a university, or is elected to public office by showing their capacity for cooperation, sharing, emotional sensitivity, and nurturing.

This means that a man can make it as a lawyer or a manager while at the same time living up to the cultural standards that define a "real man." A woman, however, is caught in a bind. If she patterns herself on ideals that are culturally defined as feminine, she's likely to be seen as not having what it takes to get ahead in a male-identified world. But if she pursues a more "masculine" path toward success, she opens herself to being judged as not feminine enough—uncaring, cold, a bitch. Students hold their female college professors, for example, to a much higher standard of caring and emotional availability than they do male teachers. But if a woman professional comes across as *too* warm and caring, her credibility, competence, and authority are invariably undermined and challenged. In a male-identified system, she can't fit the model of a successful professional or manager and at the same time measure up as a "real woman." It is the kind of classic double bind that is one of the hallmarks of social oppression: She can be devalued no matter what she does.[10]

The world of work is also male-identified in the definition of a "career" and the timing of key stages in the route to success. In most organizations, for example, the idea of a career assumes an almost complete commitment to the work, which means that the only way to have both a career and a family is to have some-

one at home to take care of children and other domestic responsibilities. Despite all the talk about "the new fatherhood," this almost always means a wife and mother. Furthermore, in typical patterns of career timing, the key years for establishing yourself overlap with a woman's key years for starting a family. In this way, "serious" work is structured to fit most men's lives far more easily and with far less conflict than it fits most women's lives.[11] So *profession* and *career* are words that on the surface don't appear to be gendered one way or the other, but in fact they are implicitly male-identified.

Male identification shows up in more subtle ways as well, from popular culture to the comings and goings of everyday life. In Ken Burns's PBS documentary on baseball, for example, he tells us: "Baseball defines who we are." Apparently, he didn't give much thought to who is included in *we*. I doubt he meant that the essence of baseball defines who women are in some fundamental way or that it defines what most women experience as their society. But if the statement is likely to ring true for men, then, in a male-identified world, it's assumed that it rings true for everyone, and if it doesn't, so what?

In this way, male identification tends to make women invisible, just as white and heterosexual identification tend to make people of color, lesbians, and gay men invisible. The other day I made an airline reservation and the clerk gave me a confirmation code. "PWCEO," she said, and then, to make sure I'd gotten it right, added, "That's Peter, William, Charles, Edward, Oscar."

PRIVILEGE AT THE CENTER

Because systems are identified with privileged groups, the path of least resistance is to focus attention on them—who they are, what they do and say, and how they do it. Look at the front page of any newspaper, and you'll find that the vast majority of people pictured, quoted, and discussed are men who also happen