

Privilege as Paradox

—Allan G. Johnson

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.

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. Try being queer for a week."¹ 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 privileges. 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.²

Societies and organizations promote privilege in complicated ways. 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 on a higher level than our own. So pointing out to some-

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one 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, be-
cause 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 privi-
leged *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 homosex-
uals: 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 superi-
ority. 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," in-
cluding 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 un-
aware 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 in-
ternalized her subordinate status that she doesn't see it as a problem
(thinking, perhaps, that women are ignored because they aren't intelli-
gent 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. . . .

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.³

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

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Costs from relations between social categories are defined 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.

NOTES

1. Charlotte Bunch, "Not for Lesbians Only," *Quest* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1975).
2. Harry Brod, "Work Clothes and Leisure Suits: The Class Basis and Bias of the Men's Movement," in Michael Kimmel and Michael A. Messner (eds.), *Men's Lives* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), p. 280. Italics in original.
3. For a classic discussion of the meaning of oppression, see Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1983), pp. 1-16.