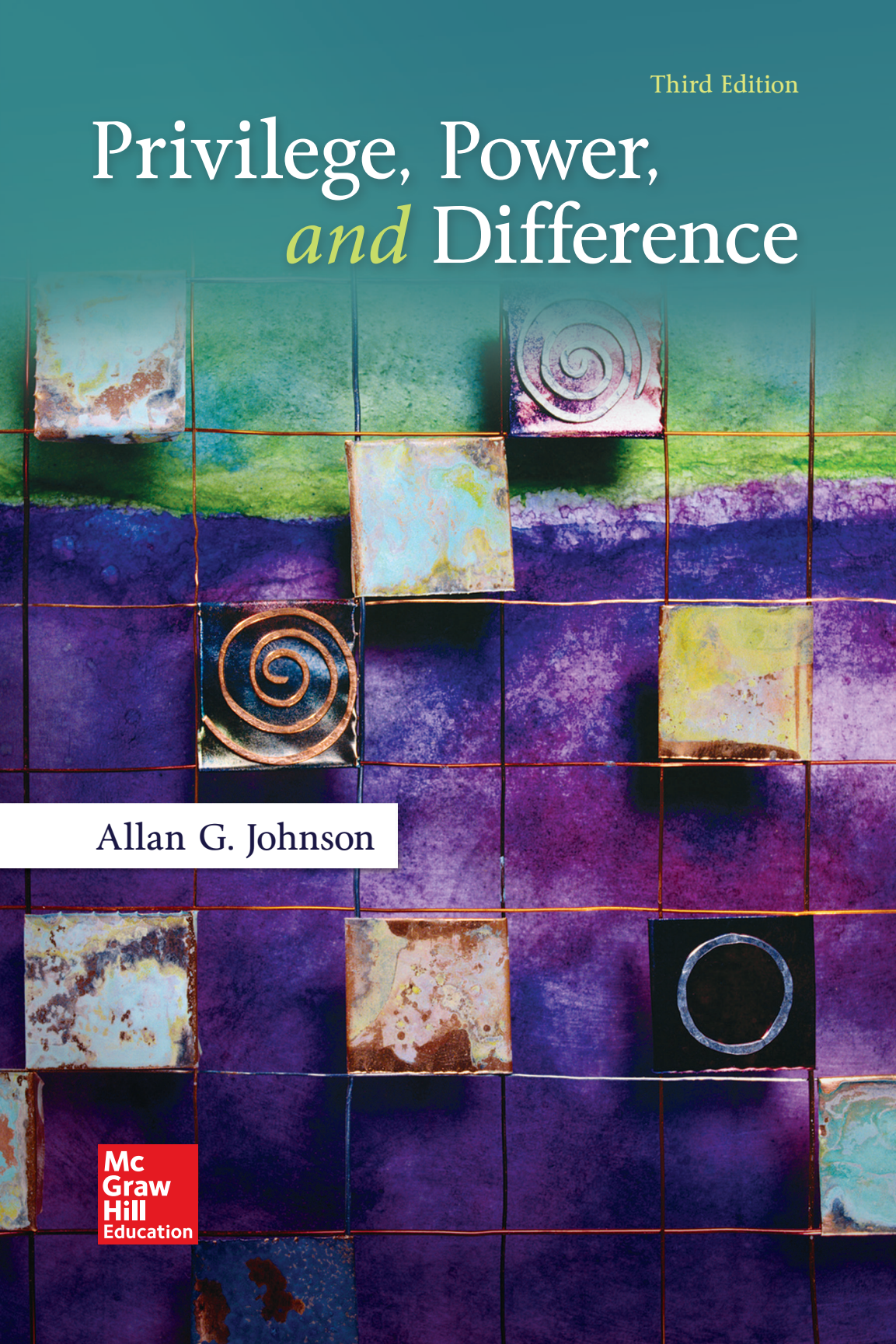
Third Edition

Privilege, Power, *and* Difference



Allan G. Johnson

Mc Graw Hill Education

Privilege, Power, and Difference

Third Edition

Allan G. Johnson, Ph.D.

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PRIVILEGE, POWER, AND DIFFERENCE, THIRD EDITION

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For Jane Tuohy

About the Author

Allan G. Johnson is a nationally recognized sociologist, nonfiction author, novelist, and public speaker best known for his work on issues of privilege and oppression, especially in relation to gender and race. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy, 3e* (2014), *The Forest and the Trees: Sociology as Life, Practice, and Promise, 3e* (2014), and a memoir, *Not From Here* (2015). His work has been translated into several languages and is excerpted in numerous anthologies. Visit his website at www.agjohnson.com and follow his blog at agjohnson.wordpress.com.

Also by Allan G. Johnson

Nonfiction

Not from Here: A Memoir
The Gender Knot
The Forest and the Trees
The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology

Fiction

The First Thing and the Last
Nothing Left to Lose

Introduction

I didn't make this world. It was given to me this way!

Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*[1]

It isn't news that a great deal of trouble surrounds issues of privilege, power, and difference, trouble based on gender and race, sexual orientation and identity, disability, social class. Or that it causes a great deal of injustice, anger, conflict, and suffering. We seem unable, however, to do anything about it as it continues from one generation to the next. We are, as individuals, as a society, stuck in a kind of paralysis that perpetuates the trouble and what it does to people's lives.

We are, each of us, part of the problem, because, in one way or another, and for all our differences, we have in common the fact of our participation in a society we did not create. We can also make ourselves a part of the solution, but only if we know how. That there are choices to be made is true for everyone, no matter how we are located in the world, and the effectiveness of those choices can be no better than our understanding of how it works. What we bring to that is shaped by our position and experience of the world—as male or female, for example, of color or white, working or middle class. But no matter who we are and what we know because of it, we still need tools for making sense of reality in ways that connect us with the experience and lives of others. Because it is only then that we can come together across lines of difference to make something better than the legacy that was passed to us.

I wrote this book to help us get unstuck, by sharing a way of thinking about privilege and oppression that provides a framework that is conceptual and theoretical on the one hand and grounded in research and the experience of everyday life on the other. In this way it allows us to see not only where the trouble comes from but also how we are connected to it, which is the only thing that gives us the potential to make a difference.

When people hear "how we are connected to it," they often react as if they're about to be accused of doing something wrong. It's especially common among men and whites, but it also happens with women and people of color who anticipate being blamed for their own oppression. Either way, it is a kind of defensive reaction that does more than perhaps anything else to keep us stuck.

As a white, male, heterosexual, nondisabled, cisgender, upper-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 defensiveness and denial to put us on a common ground from which we can work for change. My purpose here is to articulate that understanding in ways that are clear and compelling and, above all, useful.

Because my main goal is to change how people think about issues of privilege, I have been less concerned with describing all the forms that privilege can take and the problems associated with them. In choosing, I've been drawn to what affects the greatest number of people and produces the most harm, and, like any author, I tend to stick to what I know best. As a result, I focus almost entirely on gender, race, social class, disability status, and sexual orientation.

In the second edition, I added issues of disability, and I think it's important to say something about how that came about. Why was it not included before? The main reason is that I, as a person without disabilities, was unable to see the reality of disability status as a form of privilege. After the first edition was published, I heard from several readers—most notably Marshall Mitchell, a professor of disability studies at Washington State University—who urged me to reconsider. What followed was many months during which I had to educate myself and listen to those who knew more about this than I did. I had to come to terms with what I didn't know about privilege and what I *thought* I knew, which is to say, I had to do for myself what I wrote this book to help others do.

Simple ignorance, however, is not the whole story, for the difficulties that people without disabilities face in seeing their privilege and the oppression of people socially identified as disabled is rooted in the place of disability in human life. Unlike gender, race, and sexual orientation, disability status can change during a person's lifetime. In fact, almost everyone will experience some form of disability during their lives, unless they die first.

People with disabilities, then, are a constant reminder of the reality of the human experience—how vulnerable we are and how much there is in life that we cannot control.

For many nondisabled people, this can be a frightening thing to contemplate. Treating people with disabilities as if they were invisible, designing buildings as if everyone was nondisabled, seeing people with disabilities as inferior or abnormal, even less than human—all these oppressive practices enable nondisabled people to deny a basic feature of the human condition.

Accepting that condition is especially difficult for nondisabled people in the United States, where the cultural ideal of being autonomous, independent, young, strong, and needing no one's help is deeply rooted. As any student of social life knows, however, this is based on an illusion, because from the time we are born to the moment we die, we all depend on other human beings for our very existence. But being an illusion does not lessen the power of such ideas, and I had to come to terms with how they affected my writing of this book.

You might be wondering why I use the word "nondisabled" to refer to people without disabilities. Wouldn't "abled" be simpler and more direct? It would, but it would also cover up the reason for including disability issues in a book on privilege.

Consider this: if I have use of my eyes and you cannot see, it is reasonable to say that I have an ability and you have an inability. Or, put differently, when it comes to using eyes to see, I am abled and you are disabled. I might point out that my condition gives me certain advantages, and I'd be right, although you might counter that your condition gives you access to experiences, insights, and sensitivities that I would be less likely to have. You might even assert that your way of seeing is just different from mine and that you don't consider yourself disabled at all. Still, if we're looking at the specific ability to use the eyes to see, I think most people would agree that "abled" and "disabled" are reasonable ways to describe this particular objective difference between us.

The problem—and this is where privilege comes in—is that not being able to use your eyes to see brings with it disadvantages that go beyond sight itself, whereas having the use of your eyes brings with it unearned advantages that go beyond the fact of being able to see. This happens, for example, when the inability to see leads to being labeled a "blind person" or a "disabled person" who is perceived and judged to be nothing more than

that—a helpless, damaged, inferior human being who deserves to be treated accordingly. But not being able to see does not mean that you are unintelligent or helpless or inferior or unable to hold a decent job or make your own decisions. It just means you cannot see. Even so, you might be discriminated against, giving others—people who can see and therefore are not perceived as "disabled"—an advantage they did not earn.

So, "nondisability privilege" refers to the privilege of *not* being burdened with the stigma and subordinate status that go along with being identified as disabled in this culture. Admittedly, it is an awkward way to put it, but as is so often the case, systems of privilege do not provide a language that makes it easy to name the reality of what is going on.[2]

You may also have noticed that I don't include social class as an example of privilege, power, and difference. I made this choice not from a belief that class is unimportant, but because the nature and dynamics of class are beyond the scope of what I'm trying to do. My focus is on how differences that would otherwise have little if any inherent connection to social inequality are nonetheless seized on and turned into a basis for privilege and oppression.

Race is perhaps the most obvious example of this. Biologists have long agreed that what are identified as racial differences—skin color being the most prominent—do not define actual biological groups but instead are socially defined categories.[3] More important is that for most of human history, such "differences" have been regarded as socially insignificant. When Europeans began to exploit indigenous peoples for territorial conquest and economic gain, however, they developed the idea of race as a way to justify their behavior on the grounds of supposed racial superiority. In other words, by itself, something like skin color has no importance in social life but was turned into something significant in order to create, justify, and enforce privilege.[4]

Social class, of course, has huge effects on people's lives, but this is not an example of this phenomenon. On the contrary, social class differences are inherently about privilege. It is also true, however, that class plays an important role in the forms of privilege that are the focus of this book, which is why I devote an entire chapter to the capitalist system that produces social class today. Although racism is a problem that involves all white people, for example, how it plays out in their lives is affected by class. For upper-class whites, white privilege may take the form of being able to hire women of color to do domestic service work they would rather not do themselves (such

as maids and nannies) or, on a larger scale, to benefit from investments in industries that make use of people of color as a source of cheap labor. In contrast, in the working class, white privilege is more likely to take the form of preferential treatment in hiring and promotion in skilled trades and other upper-level blue-collar occupations, or access to unions or mortgages and loans, or being less vulnerable to the excessive use of force by police.

In similar ways, the effect of race on people of color is also shaped by social class differences. Blacks and Latinos, for example, who have achieved wealth or power—such as Barack Obama, Sonia Sotomayor, or Ben Carson—are more protected from many overt and extreme forms of racism. In similar ways, the children of elite black families who attend Ivy League colleges may be spared the most extreme expressions of racist violence and discrimination, while experiencing more subtle microaggressions.[5]

Without taking such patterns into account, it is difficult to know just what something like "white privilege" means across the complexity of people's lives.

To some degree, this book cannot help having a point of view that is shaped by my social location as a white, heterosexual, cisgender, nondisabled, upper-middle-class male. But that combination of social characteristics does not simply limit what I bring to this, for each provides a bridge to some portion of almost every reader's life. I cannot know from my own experience, for example, what it's like to be female or of color or LGBT in this society. But I can bring my experience as a white person to the struggle of white people—including white women and working-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 perspective and experience to the challenges faced by people who are heterosexual or nondisabled, regardless of their gender or race or class.

What I cannot know from my own experience I have tried to supplement by studying the experience and research and writings of others. This has led me, over the course of my career, to design and teach courses on class and capitalism, the sociology of gender, feminist theory, and, with a female African American colleague, race in the United States. I have written on male privilege and gender inequality (*The Gender Knot*), I've been active in the movement against men's violence against women, and I've given hundreds of presentations on gender and race across the United States.

In these and other ways, I've spent most of my life as a sociologist and a writer and a human being trying to understand the world we live in, how it's organized and how it works, shaping our lives in so many different ways. None of this means that what I've written is the last word on anything. If, however, I have succeeded in what I set out to do here—and only you will know if I have done that for you—then I believe this book has something to offer anyone who wants to deal with these difficult issues and help change the world for the better.

If, however, you come to this with the expectation of not liking what you're about to read, I suggest you go next to the Epilogue before turning to Chapter 1.

CHAPTER 1

We're in Trouble

In 1991, a black motorist named Rodney King suffered a brutal beating by police officers in Los Angeles. When his assailants were acquitted and riots broke out in the city, King uttered a simple yet exasperated plea that echoed across the long history and deep divide of racism in the United States. "Can we all get along?"

Fast forward more than twenty-five years to mass protests against police shootings of unarmed black people,[1] and King's question still resonates with our racial dilemma—what W. E. B. Du Bois called, more than a century ago, "the problem of the color line."[2] It is a question that has haunted us ever since the Civil War ended slavery, and, like any serious question, it deserves a serious response.

In the 21st century, in spite of Barack Obama's two terms as president, the evidence is clear that however much we might wish it otherwise, the answer to Rodney King's question is still no.[3] Whether it is a matter of can't or won't, the truth is that we simply do not get along. In addition to police violence, people of color are disproportionately singled out for arrest, prosecution, and punishment for types of crimes that they are no more likely than whites to commit. Among illegal drug users, for example, whites outnumber blacks by more than five to one, and yet blacks make up sixty percent of those imprisoned for that offense.[4] Segregation in housing and schools is still

pervasive and, in many parts of the country, increasing.[5] The average net wealth of white families is twenty times that of blacks, with the 2008 financial collapse being far more devastating for people of color than it was for whites.[6] At every level of education, whites are half as likely as blacks and Latinos to be unemployed or to have incomes below the poverty line. The average annual income for whites who work year round and full time is forty-four percent greater than it is for comparable African Americans. It is sixty percent greater than for Latinos. The white income advantage exists at all levels of educational attainment and only increases at higher levels.[7]

The damage caused by everyday racism is everywhere, and is especially galling to middle-class blacks who have believed what whites have told them that if they go to school and work hard and make something of themselves, race will no longer be an issue. But they soon discover, and learn anew every day, that nothing protects them from their vulnerability to white racism.[8]

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

With that in mind, the most important thing I can say to reassure those readers who are wondering whether to continue reading is that things are not what they seem. The defensive, irritable, and even angry feelings that people in dominant groups often experience when they come across such language are usually based on misperceptions that this book will try to clarify and set straight, including, in Chapter 2, the widely misunderstood concept of privilege.

It is also important to keep in mind that the reality of privilege and oppression is complicated, and it will take much of this book to outline an approach that many have found useful—especially men and whites trying to understand not only how it all works, but what it has to do with them. It is an approach that isn't widely known in our society and, so, as with any

unfamiliar way of thinking, it helps to be patient and to give the benefit of the doubt until you've followed it to the end.

Problems of perception and defensiveness apply not only to race but to a broad and interconnected set of social differences that have become the basis for a great deal of trouble in the world. Although Du Bois was correct that race would be a defining issue in the 20th century, the problem of "getting along" does not stop there. It is also an issue across differences of gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status,* and numerous other divides.

Since 1990, for example, and Hillary Clinton's nearly successful candidacy for the presidency notwithstanding, there has been little progress in the struggle for gender equity. The average man working full time earns almost thirty percent more than the average woman. In spite of being a majority among college graduates, most employed women are still confined to a narrow range of lower status, lower paid occupations, and those women who have made inroads into previously male-dominated professions, such as medicine and law, are more likely than men to be in lower ranked, lower paid positions. At the same time, men entering occupations such as nursing and elementary school teaching are more highly paid than comparable women and are more likely to advance to supervisory positions. In universities, science professors, both male and female, widely regard female students as less competent than comparable males and are less likely to offer women jobs, or to pay those they do hire salaries equal to those of men. In politics, women make up less than nineteen percent of the U.S. Congress and hold less than a quarter of all seats in state legislature and statewide office, in spite of being a majority of the population. In families, women do twice as much housework and child care as men, even when also employed outside the home.[9]

There is also a global epidemic of men's violence, including war, terrorism, and mass murder, as well as sex trafficking, rape, and battery directed primarily at girls and women.[10] Official responses and public conversations show little understanding of the underlying causes or what to do, including the fact that the overwhelming majority of violence is perpetrated by men. Worldwide, thirty percent of women report having been sexually or physically assaulted by a partner, and women are more at risk of being a victim of

* Throughout this book, I use the word "status" to indicate a position or characteristic that connects people to one another through social relationships, such as student, female, parent, or white.

rape and domestic violence than of cancer, car accidents, war, and malaria *combined*.[11] In the United States, one out of every five female college students is sexually assaulted during their college careers, and sexual assault is so pervasive in the military that the greatest threat to women comes not from the hazards of military service but from sexual assault by male service members.[12] In addition, harassment, discrimination, and violence directed at LGBT* people are still commonplace, in spite of signs of growing social acceptance, as with the legalization of same-sex marriage. It is still legal in most states, for example, to discriminate against LGBT people in employment, housing, and public accommodations.

In addition to issues of gender, race, and sexual orientation, the estimated fifty-four million people with disabilities in the United States are vulnerable to abuse both within and outside their homes. They are routinely stereotyped as damaged, helpless, and inferior human beings who lack intelligence and are therefore denied the opportunity to develop their abilities fully. The physical environment—from appropriate signage to entrances to buildings, buses, and airplanes—is typically designed in ways that make it difficult if not impossible for them to have what they need and to get from one place to another. Because of such conditions, they are far less likely than others to finish high school or college and are far more likely to be unemployed; and, when they do find work, to be paid less than the minimum wage. The result is a pervasive pattern of exploitation, deprivation, poverty, mistreatment, and isolation that denies access to the employment, housing, transportation, information, and basic services needed to fully participate in social life.[13]

Clearly, across many dimensions of difference, we are not getting along with one another, and we need to ask why.

For many, the answer is some variation on "human nature." People cannot help fearing the unfamiliar, for example, or women and men are so different that it's as though they come from different planets, and it's a miracle that we get along at all. Or there is only one natural sexual orientation (heterosexual)

* LGBT is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Some activists expand it to include "queer" (LGBTQ), a general term that refers to those who, in various ways, reject, test, or otherwise transgress the boundaries of what is culturally regarded as normal in relation to gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation and expression. Some regard it as an umbrella term for the other four components of LGBT. "Queer" is also routinely used as an insult directed at LGBT people. A cisgender person is one who was assigned a sex at birth that culturally matches their self-identified gender, such as someone identified as female at birth who self identifies as a woman.

and gender identity (woman or man) that must culturally match the sex we are assigned at birth (making us cisgender), and all the rest are unacceptable and bound to cause conflict wherever they show up. Or those who are more capable will get more than everyone else—they always have and always will. Someone, after all, has to be on top.

As popular as such arguments are, they depend on ignoring most of what history, psychology, anthropology, sociology, biology, and, if we look closely, our own experiences reveal about human beings and how we 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 is more of our own making than we realize.

The Trouble We're In

Every morning I walk with our dogs in acres of woods behind our house, a quiet and peaceful place where I can feel the seasons come and go. I like the solitude, a chance to reflect on my life and the world, and to see things in perspective and more clearly. And I like to watch the dogs chase each other in games of tag, sniff out the trail of an animal that passed by 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 the essential nature of what it means to be a dog in relation to everything around them. And that is all they seem to need or care about.

It's also hard not to wonder about my own species, which, by comparison, seems deeply troubled most of the time. I believe we do not have to be, because even though I'm trained as a sociologist to see the complexity of things, I think we are fairly simple.

Deep in our bones, for example, we are social beings. There is no escaping it. We cannot survive on our own when we're young, and it doesn't get that much easier later on. We need to feel that we belong to something bigger than ourselves, whether it's a community or a whole 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 music and art, help children turn into adults, save one another in countless ways, and ease our loved ones into death. We have large brains and opposable thumbs and are 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 known dogs to laugh—but we have made the most of it. And we are highly adaptable, able to live just about anywhere under almost any conditions. We can take in the strange and unfamiliar and learn to understand and embrace it, whether it's a new language or the person sitting next to us on the crosstown bus who doesn't look like anyone we've ever seen before.

For all of our potential, you would think we could get along with one another. By that I don't mean love one another in some idealistic way. We don't need to love, or even like, one another to work together or share space in the world. I also don't mean something as minimal as tolerance. I mean treating one another with decency and respect and appreciating, if not supporting, the best we have in us.

It doesn't seem unreasonable to imagine a community, for example, where parents don't have to coach their children on how to avoid being shot by police on the way home from school, or raped on a date. Or a workplace 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 would think we'd go after it like dogs on the trail of something good to eat. We would, 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 and how far we are from anything like a world where people feel comfortable showing up and good about themselves and one another. And yet, for all the trouble, we don't know how to talk about it, and so we act as though it's always somewhere other than where we are.

It reminds me of sitting in a restaurant with an African American woman, as we talk about a course on race and gender that we want to teach together. And while we talk about what we want our students to think about and learn, I'm feeling how hard it is 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 that elevate people like me not above some abstract groups, but above people like her, my friend.

The simple truth is that when I go shopping, for example, I will probably get waited on faster and better than she will. I will 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 credit card. But all these indignities, which 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 clerk being white in a racist society is all it takes.[14]

She also cannot go for a walk alone at night without thinking about her safety a lot more than I do—planning what to do in case a man approaches her with something other than goodwill. She has to consider what he might think if she smiles in a friendly way and says hello, or what he'll think if she does not. She has to decide where to park her car for safety, to remember to have her keys out as she approaches it, to check the back seat before she gets in. In other words, she has to limit her life in ways that almost never occur to me, and her being female is the reason why.[15]

As these thoughts fill my mind, I struggle with how to sit across from her and talk and eat our lunch while all of this is going on all the time. I want to say, "Can we talk about this and *us?*" But I don't, because it feels too risky, the kind of thing both of you know but keep from saying, like a couple where one has been unfaithful and both know it, but they collude in silence because they know that if either speaks the truth of what they both already know, they won't be able to go on as if this awful thing between them isn't there.

It's not that I have *done* something or thought bad thoughts about her because she is black and female. No, the problem is that in the world as it is, race and gender shape her life and mine in dramatically different ways. And it isn't 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 good fortune. The reality of her having to deal with racism and sexism every day is connected to the reality that I *do not.* I did not have to do anything 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 elephant that everyone pretends not to see.

The "elephant" is a society and its people—for whom a decent and productive social life that is true to the best of our human selves—continues to be elusive. In its place is a powerful kind of trouble that is tenacious, profound, and seems only to get worse.

The trouble we are in is the privileging of 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, anger, harassment, and violence. It sets people against one another. It weaves the corrosive 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 is in families and neighborhoods, in schools and churches, in government and the courts, in colleges and the workplace, wherever people experience people unlike themselves and what this society makes of such differences.

The hard and simple truth is that the "we" who are in trouble includes everyone, us, and it will take most of us to get us out of it. It is 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. But such thinking assumes that 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 cannot be just a problem of being black, Asian, Arab, Sioux, or Latino. It has to be more than that, because there is no way to separate the "problem" of being, say, Native American from the "problem" of *not* being white. And there is no way to separate not being white from *being* white. This means privilege is always a problem both for those who do not have it and those 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 is done to receive or maintain it—however passive and unconscious—results in suffering and deprivation for someone else.

We live in a society that attaches privilege to a variety of characteristics regardless of social class. If I do not see how that makes me part of the problem of privilege, I also will not see myself as part of the solution. And if people in privileged groups do not include themselves in the solution, the default is to leave it to women and Asians, Latinos/as, blacks, Native Americans, LGBT people, people with disabilities, and the lower and working classes to do it on their own. Although these groups are not powerless to affect the conditions of their own lives, they do not have the power to singlehandedly

do away with entrenched systems of privilege. If they could do that, there wouldn't be a problem in the first place.

The trouble we are in cannot be solved unless people who have privilege feel obligated to make the problem of privilege *their* problem, and to do something about it. For me, it means I have to take the initiative to find out how privilege operates in the world, how it affects people, and what 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 woman 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 people in dominant groups not to do this is the single most powerful barrier to change. Understanding how to change that by bringing them into the conversation and the solution is the biggest challenge we face.

My work here is to help us meet that challenge by identifying tools for understanding what is going on and what it's got to do with us without being swallowed up in a sea of guilt and blame, of denial and angry self-defense. It is to share a way of thinking about difference and what has been made of it. It is to remove barriers that stand between us and serious, long-term work *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

Dealing with a problem begins with naming it, so that we can think and talk and write about it, so that we can make sense of it by seeing how it's connected to other things that explain it, and point toward solutions. The language we need usually comes from people working to solve the problem, typically those who suffer most because of it, and who rely on words like privilege, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, classism, ableism, dominance, subordination, oppression, and patriarchy.

Naming something draws attention to it, making us more likely to notice it as significant, which is why people often have a negative reaction to words like sexism or privilege. They don't want to look at what the words point to. Men don't want to look at sexism, nor whites at racism, especially if they've worked hard to improve their own 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 and their own lives.

One means of escape is to discredit the words or twist their meaning or turn them into a phobia or make them invisible. It has become almost impossible, for example, to say "men's violence" or "male privilege" without men being uncomfortable and defensive, as if saying the words is to accuse them of something. 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 training programs in corporations and universities. So, instead of talking about the sexism and racism that plague people's lives, the focus is on "diversity" and "tolerance" and "appreciating difference," all good things to talk about, but not at all the same as the isms and the trouble they're connected to.

More than once I have been asked to talk about the consequences of domination and oppression without saying "dominant," "subordinate," or "oppression." At such times, I feel like a doctor trying to help a patient without mentioning the body or naming what is wrong. We cannot get anywhere that way, with our collective house burning down while we tiptoe around, afraid to say "fire."

The bottom line is that a trouble we cannot talk about is a trouble we can't do anything about. Words like "privilege" and "oppression" point to difficult and painful parts of our history that continue to shape everyday life today. That means there is no way to talk about it without difficulty or the possibility of fear or pain. It is possible, however, to talk about it in ways that make the struggle 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 reality of how things really are.

Reclaiming words begins with seeing that they rarely mean what most people think they mean. "Patriarchy" is not code for "men," for example, just as "racist" is not another way to say "bad white people." Oppression and dominance name social realities that we can participate in without being oppressive or dominating people. And feminism is not an ideology organized around being lesbian or hating men. But you would never know it by listening to how these words are used in the media, popular culture, and over many a dinner table. You would never know such words could be part of a serious discussion of how to resolve a problem that belongs to us all.