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## **preface**

Confronting privilege can be extremely uncomfortable—a productive and healthy discomfort, to be sure, but discomfort just the same. And once the process of confrontation has begun, it's difficult to resist what a colleague once called "premature self-congratulation," the often earnest, if insufferable, proclamations of the newly converted. "Thanks so much for bringing this privilege thing to our attention," we might be tempted to say. "We'll take it from here."

The ability to live with that discomfort and without that preachy self-congratulatory tone is the hallmark of the works we have collected here. It is a struggle, both politically and stylistically, and we hope that these essays will prove to be as unsettling and as discomfiting as they have been for the editors.

After all, we found our way to these essays, and to editing this book together, because we were so unsettled and challenged by the process of confronting our own unearned privilege. The essays in this volume proved both provocative and helpful, not only as we first began to think our way through these issues, but also as we continue the process of confronting privilege today.

### **A Note to Students**

If you are reading this book, odds are your instructors are already themselves engaged in this process. Don't be afraid to talk about it, and to disagree. The way we've organized the book is sort of like peeling back the layers of an onion—the first articles describe the initial shock of realizing that in some way you, too, have experienced both privilege and the absence

of privilege. Perhaps you are a working-class student on a scholarship at a private college or university where the students are so wealthy that they often drive nicer cars than the professors. But perhaps you are also white, or straight, or male. But then again, you might be Muslim or Jewish and experience feelings of exclusion around Christmastime. Or an older student, or disabled.

Subsequent sections complicate matters by looking at the ways these different statuses—sexuality, ability, race, class, gender, religion, and the like—each modify and shape the others. Such complication changes the “or” in the preceding paragraph to an “and,” or a “but also”: What if you are black *and* female? What if you are white *but also* Jewish? As you’ll see, these statuses sometimes reinforce one another—as in straight white Protestant male—and sometimes collide with and undercut one another.

Some years ago, the great sociologist Erving Goffman described the ways these statuses all might coalesce into the “perfect” American male—the one who really has all the privilege:

In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports. . . . Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself—during moments at least—as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior.\*

This dynamic is critical. Goffman is saying that every single man, at some point in life, will “fail to qualify” and will feel, at least at moments, “unworthy, incomplete, and inferior.” It is those feelings of inadequacy and inferiority that, we think, often motivate us to resist facing the kinds of privilege we *do* have, because we are so painfully aware of the places and arenas in which we don’t measure up. Privilege is far less visible to us than its absence; when we are discriminated against, it is much more painfully obvious than when we belong to the groups that benefit from that discrimination.

One of the editors of this book has a friend—“Jane”—who is a black lesbian. Jane says that when she hangs out with a bunch of her black friends, all she can think about is being a lesbian who doesn’t fit in. (That is, because virtually all the black people at her school seem to be straight.) But when

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\*Erving Goffman, *Stigma* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 128.

Jane hangs out with her lesbian friends, all she can think about is how she's black and doesn't fit in (because all the lesbians at her school are white). We see where we *don't* fit in far better than where we *do*.

One more thing. Sometimes confronting privilege can be painful, but it can also be really funny. When you have a spare 2:40, check out this video of the comedian Louis CK describing his moment of realization of the privilege he gets for being a white man in America (warning: NSFW—or school!): [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqbw4nHrHc0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqbw4nHrHc0).

## Feeling Conscious, Not Guilty

Realizing that you do have privileges—no matter who you are—does not mean feeling miserable and guilty for the rest of your life. Just conscious, of both the advantages and the disadvantages that every one of us has because of the statuses we occupy, some by birth and some by choice. Conscious that there simply *are* no level playing fields anywhere—and that every single arena, whether class or race or gender or sexuality or religion or anything else, is not just a source of identity but also a site of social inequality that is arbitrary and unfair. Knowing how it feels to experience that inequality in one arena should inspire you to help level the playing field in all arenas.

But feeling conscious is an ongoing process, not a state of being. Consider this: following all the recent controversies about rape—from politicians making pronouncements about “real rape” or the role of God’s will in pregnancies resulting from rape to gang rapes as far away as India and as close to home as Ohio—a guy who truly considers himself an ally to feminist women felt . . . weary. “I will not think about rape for the entire weekend,” vowed “Jack” in a Facebook update.

Almost instantly some of Jack’s female friends pointed out, gently but firmly, that they do not have that luxury, that they can’t “opt out” of thinking about rape. His response was eloquent; he was so grateful to his friends both for pointing out what he hadn’t seen (privilege makes you blind to some things and enables you to see others) and for doing so in such a way that he could react openly, without being defensive.

Here was a moment, in miniature, of the sort of experiences you will have reading this book. Your task is to be as gentle and as firm when explaining your experiences as Jack’s friends were, and to be as open as Jack was to accepting the possibility of a different point of view. To facilitate this process, at the end of each section we have provided issues for discussion

and activities for you to engage in. Instead of “busy work” questions to make sure you’re really reading, these are designed specifically to help you engage in the very difficult work of self-examination. Our goal with this volume is not to simply provide you with the latest and most important scholarship on the subject of privilege. Learning about privilege entails examining your own life and experience as well. After all, each one of us has been deeply shaped by the systems and processes examined in these chapters. Understanding privilege is one step in the process of working to dismantle systems of inequality.

There’s an old saying, attributed to Native Americans, that you can’t really understand another’s experience until you’ve walked a mile in their moccasins. (Some college campuses help men do just that by “Walking a Mile in Her Shoes”—an organized activity in which men don high heels and attempt to walk across their own campuses.) Truth is, you can’t walk a mile in *everyone’s* moccasins; you have to trust people when they tell you about their experiences. But only if you really do trust them will they be able, in turn, to really listen to your explanation of what it’s like to live inside *your* skin.

## Acknowledgments

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The process of producing a book like this is as much form as it is content, as much practical concerns as it is political engagement, as much technical as theoretical. And we have been ably assisted by Rosemary Kelbel, Abby’s departmental program assistant, who helped tremendously with the logistics of the book’s assembly.

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We live in a nation where—despite all ideological assertions about meritocracy and about how individuals are free to rise as high as they can based solely on their individual achievements—race, class, and gender are the best predictors of what we social scientists call “life chances”: your level of wealth, occupation, health, even marital happiness. Ours is a nation where characteristics of your birth are the best predictors of where you will end up at your death. On the other hand, we actually do want to live in a nation in which those ideals of individual achievement are actually realized, where talent, motivation, ambition, and hard work actually do pay off, where race, class, sexuality, and gender predict very little about your economic and social life.

Every single day, we are inspired by all the people who have done so much work already to reveal the workings of oppression; all the scholars, writers, and activists who have struggled to make the unseen visible, teaching the privileged about privilege; those who had virtually no choice but to examine race, class, gender, and sexuality as they confront daily the effects of inequality based on those experiences.

# **introduction**

## toward a sociology of the superordinate

Michael S. Kimmel

### **This Breeze at My Back**

To run or walk into a strong headwind is to understand the power of nature. You set your jaw in a squared grimace, your eyes are slits against the wind, and you breathe with a fierce determination. And still you make so little progress.

To walk or run with that same wind at your back is to float, to sail effortlessly, expending virtually no energy. You do not feel the wind; it feels you. You do not feel how it pushes you along; you feel only the effortlessness of your movements. You feel like you could go on forever. Only when you turn around and face that wind do you realize its strength.

Being white, or male, or heterosexual in this culture is like running with the wind at your back. It feels like just plain running, and we rarely if ever get a chance to see how we are sustained, supported, and even propelled by that wind.

This book tries to make the wind visible.

In recent years, the study of discrimination based on gender, race, class, and sexuality has mushroomed, creating a large literature and increasing courses addressing these issues. Of course, the overwhelming majority of

the research has explored the experiences of the victims of racism, sexism, homophobia, and class inequality. These are the “victims,” the “others” who have begun to make these issues visible to contemporary scholars and laypeople alike. This is, of course, politically as it should be: the marginalized always understand first the mechanisms of their marginalization; it remains for them to convince the center that the processes of marginalization are in fact both real and remediable.

When presented with evidence of systematic discrimination, majority students are often indifferent, and sometimes even defensive and resistant. “What does this have to do with me?” they ask. The more defensive of them immediately mention several facts that, they believe, will absolve them of inclusion into the *superordinate* category. “My family never owned slaves,” “I have a gay friend,” and “I never raped anyone” are fairly typical responses. Virtually none seems able to discuss white people as a group. Some will assert that white people differ dramatically from one another, that ethnicity and religion are more important than race. Others maintain that white people, as a group, are not at all privileged. And virtually all agree that racism is a problem of individual attitudes, prejudiced people, and not a social problem.

What’s more, we seem to be even *more* eager to let ourselves off the collective hook, to refuse to examine these issues from the point of view of the superordinate, than we were even a decade ago. We triumphantly declare America a “postracial” society because we now have an African-American president, and it’s not uncommon to hear people “opt out” of understanding racism because they voted for Barack Obama (as if racism were a personal lifestyle option). Indeed, it seems that this self-congratulatory moment has also permitted the return of a more virulent public expression of racism than we’ve witnessed in decades.

Equally true, try finding a female student who calls herself a feminist. My female students often tell me that feminism was really important back in the day, when, for example, their baby-boomer professor was in college, because things were so unequal then. “But now I can do anything I want; I have completely free choice,” the women declare. Gender inequality is a thing of the past; feminism is no longer necessary. “Thank you very much,” they seem to be saying to the generations of women who came before them. “We won.” (These same students often return to campus a few years later and confess how naive they were, not having entered the labor market or

experienced wage discrimination, glass ceilings for promotion, or well-intentioned husbands who can't seem to remember how to wash a dish.)

Such statements are as revealing as they are irrelevant. They tell us far more about the way we tend to individualize and personalize processes that are social and structural. They also tell us that majority students resist discussing inequality because it will require that they feel guilty for crimes someone else committed, as well as to recognize the ways they have benefited from those actions.

Even those students who are willing to engage with these questions tend to personalize and individualize them. They may grudgingly grant the systematic nature of inequality, but to them, racism, sexism, and heterosexism are bad attitudes held by bad people. They are eager to help those bad people see the error of their ways and change their attitudes to good attitudes. This usually will come about through better education.

Those of us who are white, heterosexual, middle class, and/or male need to go further; we need to see how we are stakeholders in understanding structural inequality, how the dynamics that create inequality for some also benefit others. Privilege needs to be made visible.

For the past couple of decades, a spate of exciting new research in a variety of disciplines, including sociology, literature, and cultural studies, has been examining what previously passed as invisible, neutral, and universal. We now can begin to see how the experience of “privilege” also shapes the lives of men, white people, and heterosexuals. Such inquiries, long overdue, are enabling us to more fully understand the social dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and how they operate in all our lives.

## Making Privilege Visible

To be white, or straight, or male, or middle class is to be simultaneously ubiquitous and invisible. You’re everywhere you look, you’re the standard against which everyone else is measured. You’re like water, like air. People will tell you they went to see a “woman doctor,” or they will say they went to see “the doctor.” People will tell you they have a “gay colleague” or they’ll tell you about a “colleague.” A white person will be happy to tell you about a “black friend,” but when that same person simply mentions a “friend,” everyone will assume the person is white. Any college course that doesn’t have the word “woman” or “gay” or “minority” in the title is, de facto, a

course about men, heterosexuals, and white people. But we call those courses “literature,” “history,” or “political science.”

This invisibility is political. I first confronted this invisibility in the early 1980s, when I participated in a small discussion group on feminism. In one meeting, a white woman and a black woman were discussing whether all women were, by definition, “sisters,” because they all had essentially the same experiences and because all women faced a common oppression by men. The white woman asserted that the fact that they were both women bonded them, in spite of racial differences. The black woman disagreed.

“When you wake up in the morning and look in the mirror, what do you see?” she asked.

“I see a woman,” replied the white woman.

“That’s precisely the problem,” responded the black woman. “I see a *black* woman. To me, race is visible every day, because race is how I am *not* privileged in our culture. Race is invisible to you, because it’s how you are privileged. It’s why there will always be differences in our experience.”

As I witnessed this exchange, I was startled, and groaned—more audibly, perhaps, than I had intended. Someone asked me, the only man in the room, what my response had meant.

“Well,” I said, “when I look in the mirror, I see a human being. I’m universally generalizable. As a middle-class white man, I have no class, no race, and no gender. I’m the generic person!”

Sometimes I like to think that it was on that day that I *became* a middle-class white man. Sure, I had been all those before, but they had not meant much to me. Since then I’ve begun to understand that race, class, and gender don’t refer only to other people, who were marginalized by race, class, or gender privilege. Those terms also described me. I enjoyed the privilege of invisibility. The very processes that confer privilege to one group and not another group are often invisible to those upon whom that privilege is conferred. What makes us marginal or powerless are the processes we see, partly because others keep reminding us of them. Invisibility is a privilege in a double sense—describing both the power relations that are kept in place by the very dynamics of invisibility, and in the sense of privilege as luxury. It is a luxury that only white people have in our society not to think about race every minute of their lives. It is a luxury that only men have in our society to pretend that gender does not matter.

That discussion took place several decades ago, but I was reminded of it recently when I went to give a guest lecture for a female colleague at my

university. We teach the same course on alternate semesters, so she always gives a guest lecture for me, and I do one for her. As I walked into the auditorium, one student looked up at me and said, "Oh, finally, an objective opinion!"

All that semester, whenever my female colleague opened her mouth, what this student saw was "a woman." Biased. But when I walked in, I was, in this student's eyes, *unbiased*, an objective opinion. Disembodied western rationality—standing right in front of the class! This notion that middle-class white men are "objective" and everyone else is "biased" is the way that inequalities are reproduced.

Let me give you another example of how power is so often invisible to those who have it. You all have e-mail addresses, and you write e-mail messages to people all over the world. You've probably noticed that there is one big difference between e-mail addresses in the United States and e-mail addresses of people in other countries: their addresses have "country codes" at the end of the address. So, for example, if you were writing to someone in South Africa, you'd put "za" at the end, or "jp" for Japan, or "uk" for England (United Kingdom), or "de" for Germany (Deutschland). Even if you write to someone at a university in another country, you have to use the country code, so, for example, it would be "ac.uk" for an academic institution in Britain, or "edu.au" for an educational institution in Australia. But when you write to people in the United States, the e-mail address ends with "edu" for an educational institution, "org" for an organization, "gov" for a federal government office, or "com" or "net" for commercial Internet providers. Why is it that the United States doesn't have a country code?

It is because when you are the dominant power in the world, everyone else needs to be named. When you are "in power," you needn't draw attention to yourself as a specific entity, but rather you can pretend to be the generic, the universal, the generalizable. From the point of view of the United States, all other countries are "other" and thus need to be named, marked, noted. Once again, privilege is invisible.

There are consequences to this invisibility: privilege, as well as gender, remains invisible. And it is hard to generate a politics of inclusion from invisibility. The invisibility of privilege means that many men, like many white people, become defensive and angry when confronted with the statistical realities or the human consequences of racism or sexism. Since our privilege is invisible, we may become defensive. Hey, we may even feel like victims ourselves.

In *The Envy of the World*, *Newsweek* writer Ellis Cose underscores this issue when he counsels other black people in this way:

Given such psychologically complex phenomena as racial guilt and racial pain, you are not likely to find much empathy or understanding when you bring racial complaints to whites. The best you can generally hope for is an awkward silence accompanied by the suspicion that you are crying wolf.  
(excerpted in *Newsweek*, January 28, 2002, p. 52)

I was reminded of this sort of reaction from the privileged when I appeared on a television talk show opposite three “angry white males”—three men who felt that they had been the victims of workplace discrimination. The show’s title, no doubt to entice a large potential audience, was “A Black Woman Took My Job.” In my comments to these angry men, I invited them to consider what the word “my” meant in that title, that they felt that the jobs were originally “theirs,” that they were entitled to them, and that when some “other” person—black, female—got the job, that person was really taking “their” job. But by what right is that his job? By convention, by a historical legacy of such profound levels of discrimination that we have needed decades of affirmative action to even begin to make slightly more level a playing field that has tilted so decidedly in one direction.

Our task is to begin to make visible the privilege that accompanies and conceals that invisibility.

## The Invisible Knapsack

One way to understand how privilege works—and how it is kept invisible—is to look at the way we think about inequality. We always think about inequality from the perspective of the one who is hurt by the inequality, not the one who is helped. Take, for example, wage inequality based on gender. We’re used to hearing that women make about 78 cents for every dollar made by a man. In that statistic women’s wages are calculated as a function of men’s wages; men’s wages are the standard (the \$1) against which women’s wages are calculated. In this way, the discrimination against women is visible—doing the same job, they earn less, just because they are women.

But what if we changed the statistics? What if we expressed men’s wages as a function of women’s wages? What if we said that for every dollar earned by a woman, men make \$1.28? Then it wouldn’t be the discrimination that

was visible—it would be the privilege. Just for being a male, a male worker received an additional 28 cents. This is what sociologist R. W. Connell calls the “masculinity dividend”—the unearned benefits that accrue to men, just for being men.

One could easily apply this model to race, class, and sexuality. And several of the authors in this volume probe their own experiences as a way to enable others to see what had earlier been invisible. Perhaps no one has done that more successfully than Peggy McIntosh, in her celebrated essay on what she calls the “invisible knapsack.” The invisible knapsack contains all the little benefits that come to us simply because we are white, or straight, or middle class, or male. We have to open up that knapsack, dump its contents out, and take a look at all the very different ways that these ascribed characteristics (those we were born with) have become so obscured that we have come to believe that the events of our lives are the results of achieved characteristics.

Making gender, race, class, and sexuality visible—both as the foundations of individual identity and as the social dynamics of inequality—means that we pay some attention to the differences among them as well. Often students argue that gender is different from race, because, as one of my students put it, “you have to live every day with a person of the opposite sex, but you don’t have to live so intimately with people of another race.” Leaving aside the potential racism or heterosexism of such a statement—one might, after all, live intimately with someone of a different race, or one might not live with someone of the opposite sex—this student does point to an important issue: *just as all forms of inequality are not the same, all forms of privilege are not the same.*

For example, two of the dimensions we discuss in this book—race and gender—appear, at least on the surface, to be based on characteristics present at birth: one’s sex or race. That means that they are always visible to an observer. (Well, at least nearly always. There are, of course, people who change their biological sex, or who dress differently from established norms, and those who try to pass as members of another race, and even those, like the late Michael Jackson, who seem to be using draconian surgical techniques to be taken for the other.) Thus the privileges based on gender or race may feel even more invisible because those privileged by race and gender did nothing to earn their privilege.

Privilege based on physical ability is difficult to navigate because the world was made largely by physically able people *for* physically able people.

The idea that sidewalks and curbs were not “neutral” would have been a foreign concept indeed to people as recently as the 1970s, when a group in California, at the Center for Independent Living, began the first campaign for ramps. Equal access to public buildings has to, in fact, provide *equal* access to everyone. Equality doesn’t mean we all can use the same stairs (e.g., that there is no longer a separate entrance for “white” and for “colored” or for “boys” and “girls”). Equality means we all may have to use *different* means to arrive at the *same* place.

The other dimensions—sexuality, religion, class—however, are not immediately visible to the public. One can more easily pass as a member of a privileged group. But sexual minorities also may feel that their identity is not a social construction but the fulfillment of an inner essence—that is, it is more like race and gender than it is like class. While race and biological sex may seem to be evidently inborn, biologically based, and/or “God-given,” sexuality also feels like that to both heterosexuals and homosexuals.

Class, however, does not. In fact, class seems to feel exactly the opposite—as a status that one was not born with but that one has earned. Class is less visible than the other dimensions because while our objective position in an economic order depends on empirically measurable criteria (income, occupation, education), class as an everyday experience rests on other people’s evaluation of our presentation of self. It is far easier to pass as something we are not—both for people of modest means to affect the lifestyle of the rich and famous and for very wealthy people to affect the styles of the poor. While most of us would like to have everyone think we are wealthier than we actually are, it is often the case that the truly wealthy want everyone to think they are *less* wealthy than they are. We may dress “up” while they dress “down.”

Often we will associate ourselves with the trappings of the class to which we aspire as opposed to the class from which we actually come. Take, for example, fashion. I am reasonably certain that most of the readers of this essay have, at some point in their lives, gone bowling. And I am equally certain that very few readers, if any, have ever played polo. And yet I would bet that many of you would be very happy to shell out a lot of money for a garment that identified you as a polo player (for example, a Ralph Lauren “Polo” shirt with a little polo player on it) than for an equally well-made garment with a little bowler on it. In fact, you would be eager to pay a premium on that Polo shirt precisely because the brand has become associated with a class position to which you can only aspire.

Class can be concealed and class feels like something we have earned all by ourselves. Therefore, class privilege may be the one set of privileges we are least interested in examining because they feel like they are ours by right, not by birth. All the more reason to take a look at class.

Religious privilege can be equally invisible. Imagine that you are Buddhist or Muslim or Taoist, or Jewish or Hindu or any one of the thousands of religions in the world, and you live in a country in which people routinely proclaim, “America is a Christian nation!” Just how welcome would you feel? Just how much a part of the nation would you feel? Or imagine you are an atheist, as fully 20 percent of all Americans are, and you have to clench your teeth every single time you say the Pledge of Allegiance and mouth the words “under God” without actually saying them? Religious privilege is when you assume that everyone has a faith, and that everyone’s faith is the same generic Christianity as yours. It’s called “christonormativity”—the assumption that everyone else is also Christian. And when you wish someone a “Merry Christmas,” you might think you are being *inclusive* and genuinely warm and friendly toward them. But the other person may experience this as *exclusionary*, making him or her feel you are cold and unfeeling. If you don’t assume someone’s religion, or even that they *have* one, you can’t offend them.

## The Souls of White (and Straight and Middle-Class and Male) Folk

Taking a look at class is a difficult thing to do, and there is no question that it will make us feel uncomfortable. It’s unpleasant to acknowledge that all the good things that have happened to you are not simply the result of your hard work and talent and motivation but the result of something you had no power over. Sometimes it will make us feel guilty, other times defensive. Sometimes we just feel powerless. “What can I possibly do to change this massive system of inequality?”

In a culture such as ours, all problems are thought to be individual problems, based on bad attitudes, wrong choices, or our own frailties and addictions. When confronted with structural or social problems, we think the solutions are either aggregated individual solutions—*everyone* needs to change their attitudes—or that the solutions don’t exist. A single, lone individual has no chance, we think, to change the system. You can’t fight City Hall.

We feel powerless, impotent. We can become mired in guilt. Some people argue that guilt is a negative emotion and that we shouldn't have to feel guilty for the things that happened generations—even centuries—ago. Occasionally someone is moved by that guilt to attempt to renounce his or her privilege. Books counsel us to become “race traitors,” or to “refuse” to be a man.

And sometimes a posture of self-negation feels moral and self-righteous. Guilt isn’t always a “bad” emotion after all. How would you feel about a German student who says that he really didn’t want to feel guilty about genocide in World War II? “After all, I never personally sent a Jew to the gas chamber.” Or a white South African who proclaimed that she never actually benefited from apartheid, since she got her job and her wealth by virtue of her hard work and determination.

Guilt may be appropriate, even a necessary feeling—for a while. It does not freeze us in abjection, but can motivate us to transform the circumstances that made us feel guilty in the first place, to make connections between our experiences and others’ and to become and remain accountable to the struggles for equality and justice around the world. Guilt can politicize us. (Perhaps that’s one reason we often resist it?)

While noble in its intention, however, this posture of guilty self-negation cannot be our final destination as we come to understand how we are privileged by race, class, gender, and sexuality. Refusing to be men, white, or straight does neither the privileged nor the unprivileged much good. One can no more renounce privilege than one can stop breathing. It’s in the air we breathe.

And it is embedded in the architecture that surrounds us. Renouncing privilege ultimately substitutes an individual solution for a structural and social problem. Inequality is structural and systematic, as well as individual and attitudinal. Eliminating inequalities involves more than changing everyone’s attitudes.

Trying to rid oneself of bad attitudes, renouncing one’s unearned privilege also, finally, brings us no further than the feelings of impotent despair that we often feel in the face of such overwhelming systemic problems. We feel lonely. We feel isolated from our friends, our families, or our classmates. It’s the loneliness of the long-distance runner against the wind.

The struggles against inequality are, however, collective struggles, enormous social movements that unite people across geography, race, religion, class, sexuality, and gender. Participating in these struggles to end inequality

brings one into a long history of those who have stood alongside the victims of oppression, those who have added their voices to the voices of those who had been earlier silenced. Examining our privilege may be uncomfortable at first, but it can also be energizing, motivating, and engaging.

## A Method of Analysis

In this book, we try to use an “intersectional approach” to explore the ways in which race, class, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, and religion intersect and interact. This theory was first developed by women of color who argued that the variables of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not be separated in understanding their experiences. This was a response to the traditional studies of race, which focused on race alone and usually ended up focused narrowly on men of color, and women’s studies, which often focused only on the experiences of white women. But some of these theorists asked different questions: Where does the black person stop and the woman begin? How can one analyze the totality of one’s experience without examining the ways in which all these categories coincide, collide, contradict?

Intersectionality has now become a buzzword in academia, though it still has virtually no currency outside of colleges and universities. It’s clear that the different statuses we occupy—by race, class, gender, sexuality, age, etc.—all shape and modify one another. Sometimes one of these becomes a master status through which all others are filtered and in which all others become sort of adjectives to its noun. At other times, they shift and sort and collide in ways that can give you a headache. It’s complex, and one always runs the risk of a slippery slope into an infinite regress, and by the time you’re done enumerating all the different statuses you occupy, you are the only one of that specific combination, and therefore immune to any and all generalizations. Individualism is not the corrective to a social analysis; it’s part of it.

What does seem clear, from surveys of young people, is that the places in which we are not privileged are the ones of which we are most aware. In a well-known study, students were asked to list five characteristics about themselves. Not “cool” or “pretty” or “awesome,” but five social characteristics. Virtually all the African-American students listed their race; virtually no white students did. (Asian students and Latinos were split about 50/50.) About 25 percent of the students listed “Christian” (they were largely evangelicals), but nearly 100 percent of the Jews and Muslims listed their faith. (Virtually no atheists listed that; it’s just not that important to them, I guess.)

None of the heterosexual students wrote “straight” but virtually all the LGBT students listed something to do with their sexuality. Many students listed their ethnicity—Irish, Italian, Dominican, Russian. Not one student who did not have a disability wrote anything about that; every single physically disabled student noted it. And no one wrote anything to do with class. No one at all.

It’s still the case that those parts of our lives in which we feel we stick out, by which we feel marginal, are the most visible to us. We are more aware of where we don’t fit in to the dominant groups than where we do. Yet both—our membership in dominant if invisible groups and our membership in visible yet marginalized groups—define us, providing the raw materials from which we fashion an identity. Subordinate and superordinate—these are the statuses that enable us to define who we are.

We need to understand both if we are to understand ourselves, as well as others. We need to see how these different statuses combine and collide, reinforce and contradict one another. This volume uses an intersectional analysis to explore the ways in which race, gender, class, religion, physical ability, and sexuality interact in the lives of those who are privileged by one or more of these identities. We bring together leading thinkers and writers on all of these dimensions, to examine both the parallels and the ruptures among these different but connected relationships. Written both personally and analytically, these essays can bring the reader inside the experiences, and enable us all to begin to theorize our own lives, as well as to explore the ways in which these systems intersect in people’s lives.

Ultimately we believe that examining those arenas in which we are privileged as well as those arenas in which we are not privileged will enable us to understand our society more fully, and engage us in the long historical process of change.