**Should Men Open Doors for Women? Really?**

by Allan Johnson (2014)

I was amazed to hear on NPR the other day a serious discussion of whether it’s okay for men to open doors for women. Amazed because I remember this conversation from roughly thirty years ago when feminists were working out the basics of how patriarchy and male privilege work. And now here we are again.

Here’s something I wrote about that conversation in my book, Privilege, Power, and Difference, as part of a look at how seemingly innocuous social rituals, including what we think of as being ‘polite,’ can do harm by perpetuating privilege and oppression.

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***It Doesn’t Count if You Don’t Mean It***

In a culture that promotes an individual-guilt model to explain just about everything that goes wrong, it’s easy to confuse intentions with consequences. If something bad happens, there must be someone with bad intentions who made it happen. A corollary is that if our intentions are good, they can’t result in something bad, as if conscious intent is all that connects us to the consequences of what we do.

Some years ago there was a heated online discussion that began when a woman pointed out that she didn’t like it when men rushed ahead to open a door for her to pass through without having to open it herself.

“I remember,” she wrote, “when I first realized how stupid I felt sitting in a car while a man scurried around to open the door for me.” She objected to this “door-opening ceremony” because “it seemed to do more for men than it did for women.” She explained that it puts men in a position of control and independence (men can open doors for themselves) and leaves her waiting helplessly for men to do what she can do for herself. Like all rituals, opening doors is symbolic. It sends the message that men are active, capable, and independent, whereas women are passive, incapable, and dependent—yet another way to keep men in control.

The men roared back in a defensive chorus. “We’re not trying to dominate anyone,” wrote one. “We’re just being polite.”

“But,” another woman objected, “there is more going on than the men admit.” She pointed out that if this ritual were performed only out of politeness, women would also feel obliged to open doors for men, since being polite is something that runs both ways. Politeness, of course, can sometimes go in just one direction, as when subordinates defer to superiors.

“Well, maybe that’s what door opening is,” a man shot back. “Men are like servants waiting on women.”

“But,” came the reply, “if that were so, why is it so hard to get men to help us when we really need it? Why are we always stuck with the scut work at home and at work?”

It went on like this for quite a while, women objecting to consequences they didn’t like and men defending against conscious intentions they didn’t feel they had.

Where the conversation finally wound up was the insight that consequences matter whether or not they are matched by conscious intent. When men defend opening doors for women as being nothing more than polite, they assume it cannot mean something they don’t know about, do not intend.

But meaning and intention are not the same, because meaning comes from culture. Men can think they’re just being nice, but that doesn’t mean rushing around the car to open the door will not have social consequences beyond what they’re aware of. In a patriarchal society, there is a good chance that the forms people follow—including being what’s socially defined as polite—are also patriarchal. In short, both sides of the argument can be right: men may not consciously intend to put women down, and what men do often does put them down.

The luxury of obliviousness makes a lack of conscious intent a path of least resistance that is, by its very nature, easy to follow without knowing it. The sense of entitlement and superiority that underlies male privilege is so entrenched that men don’t have to know what they’re doing and can always say they didn’t mean it because, in a sense, that’s the truth. They weren’t thinking, they weren’t mindful, they weren’t aware—all the things that go into ‘meaning it.’ But this is precisely the problem with privilege and the damage that it does, what the women in that conversation were trying to get men to see. And still are.