How Systems of Privilege Work

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

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

DOMINANCE

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

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

Just because a system is male-dominated doesn't mean that most men are powerful. As most men will tell you, they aren't, most often due to class or race. Male dominance does mean, however, that every man can identify with power as a value that his culture associates with manhood, which makes it easier for any man to assume and use power in relation to others. It also encourages a sense of entitlement in men to use women to meet
their personal needs, whether it's getting coffee for everyone or
taking the minutes of a meeting. Since women are culturally
disidentified with power, it's harder for them to exercise it in
any situation. When women do find ways to be powerful in rela-
tion to men, it's usually in spite of the male-dominated character
of patriarchal systems as a whole.

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

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

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

"Yes," she said.

"Do you have a doctorate?"

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

What these images do is place a value on male power and control that is used every day as a standard for evaluating men in almost every aspect of their lives. Men who live up to it are routinely rewarded with approval, while men who seem insufficiently decisive and manly are always vulnerable to ridicule and scorn, primarily from other men. And so if I feel drawn to control a conversation or to always have an answer, it isn’t simply because I’m a controlling person, no more than greedy behavior happens in a Monopoly game just because people are greedy.

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

Patterns of dominance and the paths of least resistance that sustain them show up in every system of privilege. White dominance, for example, is reflected in an unequal racial balance of power in society and its institutions. The same is true of heterosexuality, although so many lesbians and gay men are still in the closet that it’s hard to be sure about the sexual orientation of people in power. There is no ambiguity or lack of clarity in the mainstream culture, however. It’s rare to see a film or television show in which the most powerful character is identified as gay, lesbian, working class, or African American, Latino/a, or Asian, or if they are, to have them still be alive when the closing credits begin to roll. Working-class characters are rarely the focus in films and on television, and when they do appear they are routinely portrayed as criminals or as stupid, ignorant, crude, bigoted, shallow, and immoral. The closest that racial minorities get to powerful roles is as sidekicks to powerful whites in “buddy” movies, and exceptions like The Color Purple and The
Hurricane are few and far between and must struggle for whatever recognition they get. And in a heterosexist culture, a powerful gay man is a contradiction in terms, and powerful lesbians are often dismissed as not being real women at all.

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

IDENTIFIED WITH PRIVILEGE

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

On most college campuses, for example, black students feel pressured to talk, dress, and act like middle-class whites in order to fit in and be accepted, what some have called being "Afro-Saxon." In similar ways, most workplaces define appropriate appearance and ways of speaking in terms that are culturally associated with being white, from clothing and hairstyles to diction and slang. Racial and ethnic minorities experience being marked as outsiders, to the extent that many navigate the social world by consciously changing how they talk from one situation to another. In shopping for an apartment over the telephone, for example, many African Americans know they have to "talk white" in order to be accepted (which may come to nothing once they show up in person and discover that the apartment has "just" been rented).

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

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

White identification means that whether arrested for a crime or winning a Nobel prize, whites are rarely if ever identified as white, because that is assumed. Racial tags are common, however, for everyone else, from “black physician” and “African American writer” to “Asian actor.” If a small group of white citizens marched on Washington to protest a policy that had nothing to do with race, news reports wouldn’t mention their race and certainly wouldn’t try to figure out why the group was all-white. They would simply be described as protesters or citizens
or members of a group that takes a position on that policy. If a group of Mexican Americans did the same thing, they would surely be identified as such and be asked why there weren’t any whites among them. And this isn’t because Mexican Americans stand out as a numerical minority, since the same pattern would hold for women, who would “stand out” and be tagged as women even though they outnumber men in the population.

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

In short, men are the cultural standard for humanity; women are just women. So when a woman is celebrated at the office and everyone joins in a round of “For She’s a Jolly Good Fellow,” no one laughs at or objects to the oxymoron, because in a male-identified society, it’s an honor to be considered “one of the guys,” to be associated with men and the standards by which men are measured. Nor are many people disturbed by the fact that there are no words that culturally associate women with a valued quality of human relation in the way that fellow and fellowship do for men. If someone suggested changing the words of America the Beautiful to “and crown thy good with sisterhood,”

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**Box 8.1**

*The Word “Brotherhood” as an Instance of Male-Identified Language*

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

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

| Fellow | A man or boy. |

| Fellowship | 1. The condition or relation of being a fellow; the fellowship of humankind.  
| 2. Friendly relationship. |
however, imagine the reception that idea would get and you have some idea of the power of male identification.

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

This means that a man can make it as a lawyer or a manager while at the same time living up to the cultural standards that define a “real man.” A woman, however, is caught in a bind. If she patterns herself on ideals that are culturally defined as feminine, she’s likely to be seen as not having what it takes to get ahead in a male-identified world. But if she pursues a more “masculine” path toward success, she opens herself to being judged as not feminine enough—uncaring, cold, a bitch. Students hold their female college professors, for example, to a much higher standard of caring and emotional availability than they do male teachers. But if a woman professional comes across as too warm and caring, her credibility, competence, and authority are invariably undermined and challenged. In this way, “serious” work is structured to fit most men’s lives far more easily and with far less conflict than it fits most women’s lives. So profession and career are words that on the surface don’t appear to be gendered one way or the other, but in fact they are implicitly male-identified.

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

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

**PRIVILEGE AT THE CENTER**

Because systems are identified with privileged groups, the path of least resistance is to focus attention on them—who they are, what they do and say, and how they do it. Look at the front page of any newspaper, and you’ll find that the vast majority of people pictured, quoted, and discussed are men who also happen
to be white and middle or upper class. If women, Latinos, or African Americans are there, it's usually because of something that's been done to them (murdered, for example) or something they've done wrong (rioted, murdered, stole, cheated, and so on). There are exceptions, of course—a Madeleine Albright as Secretary of State or a Clarence Thomas as an associate justice of the Supreme Court or black athletes—one of the few areas where they are allowed to excel. As exceptions, however, they prove the rule.

To judge from television and film, most of what happens of significance in the world happens to straight white men. To see what I mean, try an experiment: Make a list of the ten most important movies ever made, movies that reflect something powerful and enduring about the human experience, about courage and personal transformation, the journey of the soul, the testing of character, finding out who we really are and what life is all about. Once you have your list, identify the key character in each, the one whose courage, transformation, journey, testing, and revelations are the point of the story. And then note that person's gender and race. Chances are that at least nine out of ten will be white, Anglo, heterosexual males, even though they are less than 20 percent of the U.S. population.

Consider, for example, the list of films that have been awarded the Oscar for best picture over the last thirty years (see Box 8.2). Of these films, judged better than all the rest in each year, none set in the United States places people of color at the center of the story without their having to share it with white characters of equal importance (Driving Miss Daisy and In the Heat of the Night). The one film that focuses on Native Americans (Dances with Wolves) is told from a white man's point of view with Native Americans clearly identified as the other. Only two focus on non-European cultures (The Last Emperor and Gandhi). Although Out of Africa is set in Africa, the story focuses exclusively on whites and, without any critical comment, their exploitation of the African continent. This same list of films also contains only three that are female-centered (Out of Africa, Terms of Endearment, and The Sound of Music), and none with any major characters who are gay or lesbian.

When a film does focus on someone who is other than white or male or heterosexual, it gets little attention unless, like The Color Purple (1985), it has a powerful white heterosexual male such as Steven Spielberg behind it. Anything less than that—no matter how good it is—has little chance of drawing much attention, much less winning an Academy Award. Even The Color Purple, which was nominated for eleven Academy Awards, didn’t win a single one.

The handful of films that do focus on women or blacks or lesbians or gay men are likely to be tagged (and devalued) as
“women’s films” or “black films” or “gay films” or “lesbian films,” even though all the rest are never called “men’s films” or “white films” or “heterosexual films.” In a society identified with males, whites, and heterosexuals, such films are supposedly about everyone, or at least everyone who counts.

Because systems of privilege center on dominant groups, those who aren’t included have reason to feel invisible, because in an important social sense, they are. Black, Latino/a, and female students routinely report that instructors don’t call on them in class, don’t listen to what they say, or don’t let them finish without interruption. Research shows that men receive the overwhelming majority of attention in classrooms at every level of education, a pattern that repeats itself in the workplace and everywhere else that women and men meet. I’ve been in meetings of thirty people in which the two or three men present talked almost the entire time with no sign from anyone that anything was wrong.

This happens in part because in a world that centers attention on men and what they do and say, the path of least resistance for men is to claim attention by calling out answers without being recognized or by interrupting female students. It also happens because the path of least resistance for women is to give way in the face of privilege, to allow men to take up whatever time and space they want and not challenge their right to do so. So when male students jump in with a response—even to the extent of thinking up answers as they go along—teachers and female students let them get away with it.

When men don’t jump in, teachers gravitate toward them anyway, standing closer to them in the room, looking to them for the most interesting or productive answers, challenging and coaching them more, all the while assuming that women don’t have what it takes to say something worth hearing. None of this has to be done consciously in order to center attention on dominant groups at the expense of everyone else. It simply flows along down a well-traveled path of least resistance that makes invisibility a key part of the devaluing that lies at the heart of privilege and oppression.

Often the only way that marginalized groups can get attention is to make an issue of how social life is centered on dominant groups. So women form their own support groups at work; they attend women’s colleges, where they don’t have to overcome the cultural weight of male-centeredness; blacks form their own dorms or clubs on college campuses and sit at their own tables in the dining hall; schools create special programs that focus on women or African Americans or various ethnic groups; women participate in a “Take Our Daughters to Work” day; lesbians and gay men organize pride marches to draw attention to the simple fact that they exist (“We are everywhere”).

Drawing attention away from dominant groups often provokes a defensive response that reaffirms the very privilege the trouble is about. In systems of privilege, the focus is on dominant groups all the time as a matter of course, so much that it’s never recognized as something special. Thus the slightest deviation can be perceived as a profound loss of privilege. Some fascinating research on gender in the classroom, for example, shows that as long as men overwhelmingly dominate the conversation, the participation of women and men is perceived as roughly equal. But if women’s talk rises to as little as a quarter or a third of the total interaction, men perceive that the women have taken over. Such perceived shifts can result in howls of protest over the unfairness of giving subordinate groups “special” attention—“Why not a “Take Our Sons to Work Day”?” “Why do gays and lesbians have to call attention to themselves?” “When do we get to have a White History Month?”

As so often happens, subordinate groups are in a double bind. If they don’t call attention to themselves, the defaults built
into systems of privilege make them invisible and devalued. If they do call attention to themselves, if they dare to put themselves at the center, they risk being accused of being pushy or seeking special treatment. This is why women, gay men, lesbians, and racial or ethnic minorities are often referred to as “special-interest groups” that are always working from a biased agenda, while men, heterosexuals, and whites are not.

THE ISMS
Most of the time, words like 

*racism*, *sexism*, and *heterosexism* are used to describe how people feel and behave. Racism, for example, is seen as something that exists only inside people as a flawed part of their personalities. It’s an attitude, a collection of stereotypes, a bad intention, a desire or need to discriminate or do harm, a form of hatred. From that perspective, doing something about racism means changing how individuals feel, think, and behave (since behavior is connected to how we think and feel).

But racism is also built in to the systems that people live and work in. It’s embedded in a capitalist system organized around competition over scarce resources, and organized to be white-dominated, white-identified, and white-centered. This manifests itself everywhere we turn. Given this reality, it doesn’t make sense to ignore everything but individual personality and behavior, as if we live in a social vacuum. For this reason, sociologist David Wellman argues for a broader definition of racism that includes but goes beyond the personal. Racism is the patterns of privilege and oppression themselves and anything—intentional or not—that helps to create or perpetuate those patterns. If we extend this to other forms of privilege, then sexism and heterosexism are also more than personal expressions of hostility or prejudice, but include everything that people do or don’t do that promotes male privilege and heterosexual privilege.¹⁵

To see what Wellman means, consider not what people do or say, but what they don’t. Consider, for example, the power of silence to promote privilege and oppression. Human beings are highly dependent on one another for standards of what—and who—is okay and who isn’t. Although there will always be individuals who don’t care what other people think, the vast majority will avoid doing something they believe people around them would criticize. But if the people in their community and society are silent, then the perpetrators are free to interpret that as support for what they do.

From the late 1800s through the mid-1940s, for example, white Southerners lynched more than five thousand African Americans. The actual violence was done by a relatively small number of individuals, but they acted from the assumption that most people in their communities and states either approved of their actions or wouldn’t do anything to stop them even if they disapproved. Many lynchings were advertised in advance in local newspapers, for example, and pictures taken of the atrocities were often sold as postcards.

Since the lynchers couldn’t possibly know everyone in their community or state personally, the only way they could assume they’d get away with it was to see themselves as living in a particular kind of society—white-dominated, white-identified, and white-centered—that placed such a low value on black people’s lives that torturing and killing them was unlikely to be made an issue, much less treated as a crime. The real power lay not with the lynchers as individuals, but with society and the great collective silence in the face of the racist horror the individuals perpetrated, a silence that spoke as loudly as the violence itself, regardless of how people felt about it as individuals.

Just as most Southerners (and Northerners) were silent about lynching, the vast majority of men are silent on the issue of sexual harassment and violence and do nothing more than privately disapprove of it or assure themselves that they’d never
engage in it themselves. In the same way, most whites do nothing that would raise consciousness about all the ways racism works in their communities or workplaces. They may readily acknowledge overt behavior that perpetuates the trouble around difference. “Yes,” they’ll say when asked about discrimination, “it’s a terrible thing.” And they mean it.

What they don’t see most of the time, however, is how silence and not looking and not asking are in effect just as racist or sexist or heterosexist because oppression depends on them in order to continue. White professors or managers who don’t go out of their way to ask about race trouble in classrooms or the workplace may be good people who’d never act from ill will toward racial minorities. But how good or bad they are as people is beside the point. Their motives and intentions are irrelevant to the future of racism as a pattern of inequality and the suffering it causes. What counts isn’t just what they do, but even more what they don’t do.¹⁶

When I think about this, I imagine a scene in which a gang of white men are beating a black man in broad daylight on a city street. I’m standing in a crowd of white people who are watching. We aren’t hurting anyone; we feel no ill will toward the man being beaten; we may be feeling sorry for him. We aren’t cheering the attackers on or showing any outward signs of approval. We’re just standing in silence, “minding our own business.” And then one of the men stops, looks up, and says, his eyes panning across our faces, “We appreciate your support. We couldn’t do it without you.”

This is how racism and other forms of privilege really work day in and day out, as a result of what might be called “passive oppression.” It depends on a social environment that makes it easy for so many to stand by and do nothing. Most white people in the United States are racist not because they act from feelings or thoughts of racial hostility or ill will, but simply “because they acquiesce in the large cultural order which continues the work of racism.”¹⁷ That’s all that’s required of most white people in order for racism to continue: that they not notice, that they do nothing, that they remain silent.

**THE ISMS AND US**

It is tempting for whites, for men, and for heterosexuals to suppose that they could be raised in a racist, sexist, and heterosexist society and participate in it day after day without being touched by it on a personal level. But it’s a dream that, for everyone else, is a nightmare of denial. There is no way for a member of a dominant group to escape that kind of immersion unscathed. Nobody is the exception who miraculously doesn’t internalize any of the negative ideas, attitudes, or images that pour in a steady stream from the surrounding culture and make the trouble around privilege happen as it does.

In other words, on some level, of course I’m racist, sexist, and heterosexist in the same way that I automatically dream in English and prefer certain foods. I wish it weren’t so, but it is. The assumption that some racism resides in every white person is a reasonable one in this society.¹⁸ I would assume that everyone I meet in the United States speaks English until they showed otherwise, not because of what I know about them, but because of what I know about the culture of this society. In the same way, I would assume that racism touches and shapes everyone in one way or another and leaves a mark that cannot be erased. To assume otherwise is to engage in wishful thinking and live in a world that doesn’t exist.

This doesn’t mean that white people are consciously racist or that men are intentionally sexist, or that heterosexuals are overtly heterosexist. But it does mean that there isn’t a single white person or man or heterosexual who doesn’t have these issues to deal with inside and in relation to the world around them. This is their legacy. It was handed to them when they were
children with no sense of what was wise and good to take into themselves and what was not. And so they accepted it, uncritically, unknowingly, even innocently, but accept it they did. It wasn't their fault. They have no reason to feel guilty about it, because they didn't do anything. But now it is there for them to deal with, just as it's there for women, people of color, lesbians, and gay men who also didn't do anything to deserve the oppression that so profoundly shapes their lives.

CHAPTER 9

Getting Off the Hook
Denial and Resistance

No one likes to see themselves as connected to someone else's misery, no matter how remote the link. Usually their first response is to find a way to get themselves off the hook, and as I'll show below, there are all kinds of ways to do that. As a result, they leave it to someone else to take care of the problem, which, of course, doesn't happen, and for pretty much the same reasons.

The fact is that we're all on the hook because there's no way to avoid being part of the problem. People of color, the lower and working classes, women gay and straight, and gay men are all on the hook every day. Whites, heterosexuals, and men are, too, but they're more likely not to know it because they have so many ways to act as though they aren't, and privilege allows them to get away with it. But, the more aware we are of all the ways there are to fool ourselves, the easier it is to become part of the solution.