

Privilege Through the Looking-Glass

Patricia Leavy (Ed.)



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Privilege Through the Looking-Glass

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Privilege Through the Looking-Glass

Edited by

Patricia Leavy



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PRAISE FOR
PRIVILEGE THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS

“*Privilege Through the Looking-Glass* offers a varied and profound examination of how privilege functions as the underside of power. This is a powerful and important book about inequality, identity, agency, and the challenge of addressing difference as part of a democratic ethos in a time of growing authoritarianism all over the world. Every educator should read this book.”

– **Henry A. Giroux, Ph.D., Professor of English and Cultural Studies, McMaster University, and author of *America at War with Itself***

“Patricia Leavy has brought together a group interdisciplinary scholars who have taken up the formidable challenge of analyzing how their own lived experiences are understood and measured by manufactured norms produced historically by systems of mediation (institutional, cultural, social, economic) and intelligibility that are often invisible and that position them differentially (politically) in a structured series of dependent hierarchies that privilege whiteness over non-whiteness, capital over labor, maleness over femaleness, etc. While it is often a privilege to live in the world of theory, we need to remember that when we scratch a theory, we discover biographies, we find histories and we find pain. *Privilege Through the Looking-Glass* is a courageous volume that blends theory, personal experiences, and reflections on contemporary debates over identity. This is a book that is more about the politics of identity than identity politics. It is a powerful testament to the urgency of understanding privilege and deserves to be read widely.”

– **Peter McLaren, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor in Critical Studies, Chapman University, and author of *Paulo Freire, Che Guevara and the Pedagogy of Revolution*, and *Pedagogy of Insurrection***

“Never was a book that critically interrogates privilege so urgently needed. From microaggressions to macroaggressions, Patricia Leavy’s latest book stays true to her commitment to linking the personal and political in public research, and these multiple passionate contributors demand that readers wake up, take action, and do the same in our own work and everyday lives.”

– **Anne M Harris, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Principal Research Fellow, RMIT University**

“Privilege Through the Looking-Glass unmasks the casual ‘isms’ that suppress the best aspects of our humanity, by assembling a powerful and honest collection of parables. Poignant and unflinching, the contributors eschew the cloak of objectivism to give the hard truth about privilege as a social ill, and the collective responsibility of the conscious community to confront all forms of oppression. Stimulating to the highbrow, yet palatable to the lay, this book has lessons for anyone with the spirit to explore better ways to be themselves and relate to others.”

– **Ivory A. Toldson, Ph.D., Professor, Counseling Psychology Program, Howard University, and Editor-in-Chief for *The Journal of Negro Education***

“Privilege Through the Looking-Glass offers readers a reflective and reflexive response to the confounding and corrosive issues that inform, and sometimes govern, people’s everyday lives and identities. In highly accessible and unique ways, this book shines a light on the complexities of cultural life, and in ways that will entice and challenge readers, compelling them to re-think their ways of being with others, and themselves.”

– **Keith Berry, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Communication, University of South Florida and the National Communication Association Anti-Bullying Task Force Co-Chair**

*“Marshalling the power of storytelling, *Privilege Through the Looking-Glass* offers a collection of essays wherein experienced scholars confront, challenge, and explicitly discuss everyday forms of racial, sexual, gendered, and ablest privilege embedded in contemporary social life. In so doing, Leavy and the contributors offer an admirable introduction to the many ways the personal is political, and invisible privileges operating at varied levels of society can be made visible and subject to correction. Well-crafted through combinations of scholarly expertise and personal experience, *Privilege Through the Looking-Glass* may be an ideal text for sensitizing students to the myriad of social forces operating within, around, and beyond their own everyday experiences and assumptions.”*

– **J.E. Sumerau, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Sociology, University of Tampa, and author of *Cigarettes & Wine***

“To be included in Patricia Leavy’s world is inspiring but to have the opportunity to read her work on privilege, power, oppression and the expectations or freedoms from persons of diverse backgrounds and statuses, well that’s just exhilarating. As a social policy instructor and clinical social worker, I always find opportunities to use Leavy’s work with my students, whose testimonies include their own exhilaration in exploring privilege and power and perhaps even discovering their own unexposed privilege.”

– **Renita M. Davis, LCSW, PIP, Social Work, Troy University**

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For more information, visit the author's website
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*To Shalen Lowell,
social justice warrior, treasured friend,
and endless source of support*

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PATRICIA LEAVY

1. INTRODUCTION TO *PRIVILEGE THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS*

The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us.

(Audre Lorde, 1984, p. 123)

This book seeks to make visible that which is often invisible. It seeks to sensitize us to things we have been taught not to see. Privilege, power, oppression, and domination operate in complex and insidious ways, impacting groups and individuals. And yet, these forces that affect our lives so deeply seem to at once operate in plain sight and lurk in the shadows, making them difficult to discern. There is an expression in sociology that says, “I don’t know who discovered water, but I doubt it was a fish”. In other words, environments are nearly impossible to perceive when we are immersed in them. This book attempts to expose our environments.

Privilege Through the Looking-Glass is a collection of essays that explore status characteristics in daily life. The essays seek to illustrate that the personal is public. None of us lives in a vacuum. We live in social, historical contexts that shape our experiences. Status characteristics, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, education, and ableness have a profound impact on the experiences of groups within society as well as individuals’ personal biographies. Through societal institutions (e.g., education, government) as well as the symbolic realm (e.g., images and narratives that circulate via the media), we develop ideas about different groups based on these shared characteristics. This is the essence of socialization, the lifelong process by which we learn the norms and values of our culture as well as how to enact our multiple roles (e.g., student, friend, worker, patriot) in culturally appropriate ways. Through the socialization process we develop taken-for-granted, common sense ideas about the social world and our place within it. These ideas include assumptions and biases that are used to justify social injustice and inequality.

WHAT IS PRIVILEGE?

Privilege refers to the unearned benefits we receive based on our status characteristics. In her groundbreaking essay, Peggy McIntosh (1989) explored White privilege and male privilege. She observed an “invisible knapsack” of unearned benefits or privileges that Whites carry around with them. A few examples of White privilege include speaking to people in positions of power in education or business and knowing you are likely speaking to a person of your own race, going shopping without being followed or harassed, readily finding books and toys for your children that represent characters who look like them, and being pulled over by the police without worrying your race will work against or endanger you. The greatest privilege of all is not recognizing how you benefit from privilege. The inability to see these unearned benefits is a privilege. People who benefit from unearned privileges are generally oblivious to them, as they have been socialized to be. Privilege and power are invisible to those who have it (Kimmel, 2014; McIntosh, 1989). Drawing on McIntosh, Michael Kimmel writes, “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” (2014, p. 3). For example, when we talk about race, we think of people of color, not White people, as if they do not embody race. Or consider how we identify males with Mr., which carries no meaning with regard to age or marital status, in contrast with Miss, Ms., and Mrs. for females, which identifies females in relation to their relationship status (Tannen, 2009).

It’s difficult to sensitize people to their own privilege in part because of the nature of oppression. Marilyn Frye (2007) explains that oppression is a macroscopic phenomenon and cannot be understood when applying only a microscopic perspective, as we are prone to do in daily life. Frye uses a bird cage analogy to explain how oppression operates. If you focus your eyes on only one wire of a bird cage, you will wonder why the bird doesn’t fly freely. One wire alone does not inhibit the bird. You must step back in order to see the *network* of connected wires, which together are as confining as a solid dungeon (Frye, 2007, p. 86). Frye writes this about women’s oppression, “...when you look macroscopically you can see it—a network of forces and barriers which are systematically related and which conspire to the immobilization, reduction, and molding of women and the lives we live” (2007, p. 86).

Oppressions are also structurally arranged to operate in concert with each other. For example, sexism and homophobia work together, with each used as a weapon for the other (Pharr, 2007). For instance, consider the use of the word “lesbian” as an insult (a weapon) (Pharr, 2007).

In order to understand how privilege and power operate in complex ways, this book adopts an intersectional approach.

WHAT IS INTERSECTIONALITY?

When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other.

(Patricia Hill Collins & Sirma Bilge, 2016, p. 2)

Intersectionality developed in the context of Black feminist activism and thought. During the social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Black feminists expounded many principles of intersectionality in both political contexts and groundbreaking texts, although the term was not yet used (Collins & Bilge, 2016). A major development occurred in 1973 with the formation of the Combahee River Collective (CRC), a collective of Black feminists. Their work has been vital to the elaboration of what became known as intersectionality theory. In their famous 1977 statement, they wrote:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. (Combahee River Collective, 1977)

Influenced by this work, Black and Chicana feminists published numerous landmark texts in the 1980s (see the suggested resources at the end of this chapter for examples). Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989, 1991) is credited with coining the term intersectionality to examine how status characteristics *intersect* or overlap.

Identities are not one dimensional or unitary. One simultaneously inhabits a body that carries race, gender, and class (as well as sexual orientation and ableness). I am not simply a woman. I am a White, middle-upper class,