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2.1 The other side of social exclusion: interrogating the role of the privileged in reproducing inequality

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Introduction

As the chapters in this book demonstrate, social exclusion is a key concept used to understand various forms of inequality in contemporary capitalist societies. I argue in this chapter that while the concept of social exclusion has been important in illustrating the structural dimensions of unequal social relations and examining the costs of those relations for excluded groups, it has done little to address those of us who benefit most from existing social divisions and inequalities. Nor do most of the writings on social exclusion examine how these inequalities are reproduced by and through the daily practices and life-style pursuits of privileged groups.

In this chapter I will interrogate the concept of privilege as the other side of social exclusion and will argue that the lack of critical interrogation of the position of the privileged side of social divisions allows the privileged to reinforce their dominance. I aim to make privilege more visible and consider the extent to which those who are privileged can overcome their own self interest in the maintenance of dominance to enable them to challenge it.

Interrogating social exclusion and inclusion

Social exclusion has become a major concept in social policy research. Although it is often used to denote those marginalised by non-participation in the labour market, Lister (2000: 36) says that social exclusion ‘is a multi-dimensional concept … embracing a variety of ways in which people may be denied full participation in society’. It is clear, though, that the concept of social exclusion can be employed in very different ways depending on whether the primary objective is social cohesion or social justice (Lister 2000).

The opposite of social exclusion is seen to be ‘social inclusion’ which is defined as ‘the attempt to re-integrate or increase the participation of marginalised groups within mainstream goals’ (Barry 1998: 1). Sheppard (2006: 5) maintains that social exclusion and inclusion are ‘two sides of the same coin’. Is social inclusion a solution to the issue of marginalisation or does it distract us from the need for fundamental social change?
Some writers distinguish between different interpretations of social exclusion. One version involves greater integration of excluded people into the dominant society (Sheppard 2006), while the other version focuses on the dominant group who are the sources of exclusion (Byrne 2005). However, what are the consequences of replacing discussions of equality with the concept of social inclusion? Edwards et al. (2001: 425) suggest that the notion of inclusion positions the excluded as deficient or deviant who need to conform to the prevailing norms. I am doubtful that the language of social inclusion can provide a basis for social change. As Anthias (2000: 839) has noted, ‘subordination and economic exploitation can coexist under inclusion and in fact they constitute dis-empowering forms of inclusion’. Jones and Smythe (1999) suggest that the language of inclusion can actually perpetuate social exclusion.

Even in the more radical versions of social exclusion, the focus is almost always on the excluded. Somerville (2000) focuses on the opportunities and capacity of the excluded to resist the forces of exclusion. Byrne (1999) also emphasises the potential of the excluded to be organised through coalitions and social movements that are promoting social solidarity. More recently, however, Byrne (2005) has questioned whether social exclusion can be eliminated by interventions directed solely at the excluded.

Anthias (2000) identifies the tendency to identify persons as ‘the excluded’, and who are said to constitute varying degrees of exclusion from the normative ideals of the majority. In this regard, there is the danger that those seen as socially excluded may be portrayed as ‘either passive victims or willing agents in their own denigration’ (Anthias 2000: 838). The focus is thus on the process of producing ‘a disqualified identity’. She maintains that the focus on the excluded ‘focuses too much attention at the bottom of the scale and does not allow for looking at forms of inequality and hierarchy more generally’ (Anthias 2000: 838). This shifts attention off the dominant group and reinforces the tendency of sociology to study ‘downwards’.

Numerous writers have drawn attention to this focus on studying downwards. Bessant and Watts (1999: 309) for example, ask: ‘Why don’t we research the wealthy?’ Jamrozik and Nocella (1998) similarly note that academics study ‘the others’ rather than studying ‘ourselves’. They observe that ‘There is multitude of studies of “deviance” of the poor, the disadvantaged, but relatively few systematically conducted studies of the affluent and of the powerful’ (Jamrozik and Nocella 1998: 217).

Why is this so? Ferber (2003: 319) maintains quite simply that we ‘have tended to ignore the issue of privilege because it implicates those in power’. This lack of a critical interrogation of privilege and internalised dominance allows dominant groups to reinforce their dominance. If we focus exclusively upon oppression and social exclusion, we reinforce the invisibility of privilege. The powerful and the privileged become invisible because they are subsumed under the ‘normal and ordinary’ (Byrne 2005: 57). Understanding the construction of privilege is necessary for a complete understanding of social exclusion.
Bailey (1998: 109) describes privilege as ‘systematically conferred advantages individuals enjoy by virtue of their membership in dominant groups with access to resources and institutional power that are beyond the common advantages of marginalised citizens’. Sidanius and Pratto (1999) identify the main benefits that accrue from privilege: ‘possession of a disproportionately large share of positive social value or all those material and symbolic things for which people strive. Examples of positive social value are such things as political authority and power, good and plentiful food, splendid homes, the best available health care, wealth and high social status’ (Sidanius and Pratto 1999: 31–32). Individuals come to possess these benefits ‘by virtue of his or her prescribed membership in a particular socially constructed group such as race, religion, clan, tribe, ethnic group or social class’ (Sidanius and Pratto 1999: 32). An individual’s privilege is thus more a product of their membership of privileged groups than it is of their individual capabilities.

To critically explore the concept of privilege, we need to identify the key characteristics. There are four main issues that I will discuss here: the invisibility of privilege by those who have it; the power of the privileged group to determine the social norm; the naturalisation of privilege and the sense of entitlement that accompanies privilege.

The invisibility of privilege

Most privilege is not recognised as such, by those who have it. In fact, ‘one of the functions of privilege is to structure the world so that mechanisms of privileges are invisible – in the sense that they are unexamined – to those who benefit from them’ (Bailey 1998: 112). Johnson (2001) observes how members of privileged groups either do not understand what others mean when they refer to them as privileged or they tend to get angry and defensive. Because privilege does not necessarily bring happiness and fulfilment, this will sometimes be used to deny the existence of privilege. These responses represent significant obstacles to the struggle for equality.

Members of privileged groups occupy what Rosenblum and Travis (1996) call an ‘unmarked status’. By this they mean that people in unmarked categories do ‘not require any special comment. Thus, the unmarked category tells us what a society takes for granted’ (Rosenblum and Travis 1996: 142). One of the consequences of this is that members of privileged groups are unlikely to be aware of how others may not have access to the benefits that they receive and thus they are unlikely to be able to acknowledge the experiences of those who are marginalised. Many privileged individuals may thus oppress people without being aware of it. When people are unable to recognise their privilege because they are so focused on their oppression, they are unable to see their role in keeping others subordinated.

While members of dominant groups may intentionally oppress others, not all members of dominant groups behave in oppressive ways. However, the reproduction of oppression does not demand the intent of individuals. Ferree
et al. (1999) discusses how, for example, white people gain privileges through ‘the subordination ... of people of color, even if he or she is not personally exploiting or taking advantage of any person of color’ (Ferree et al. 1999: 11).

The normativity of privilege

Privileged groups have become the model for ‘normative human relations’ and this explains in part why they do not want to know about the experiences of the excluded (Baker Miller 1995: 61). The privileged group comes to represent the hegemonic norm whereby ‘white, thin male young heterosexual Christian and financially secure people come to embody what it means to be normal’ (Perry 2001: 192). Perry (2001) observes that through the positioning of self and other, various dualisms are established in which forms of difference are devalued because they are seen as inferior, weak or subordinate in relation to the normal which is presented as superior, strong and dominant. The normativity of privilege means that this becomes the basis for measuring success and failure. Those who are not privileged are potentially regarded as aberrant and deviant. The establishment of this normative standard reproduces the negative valuation of difference. Because the privileged are regarded as ‘normal’, they are less likely to be studied or researched because the norm does not have to be ‘marked’. Gender then, for example, becomes a code word for women and race becomes synonymous with people of colour.

The naturalisation of privilege

The social divisions between the privileged and the oppressed are further reproduced through their attributed naturalness. Rather than seeing difference as being socially constructed, gender, race, sexuality and class are regarded as flowing from nature. Beliefs about social hierarchy as being natural provides a rationale for social dominance and absolves dominant groups from responsibility to address social inequalities (Gould 2000).

It is the belief in the ‘God-given’ or biological basis of dominance that reproduces social inequality. Members of privileged groups either believe that they have inherited the characteristics that give them advantages or they set out to consciously cover up the socially constructed basis of their dominance (Wonders 2000). When we understand the way in which difference is socially constructed, we are more able to develop strategies for challenging inequality.

Part of the process of interrogating dominant identities is to question their appearance of naturalness. As Tillner reports (1997: 3): ‘It means to lay open
their contingency, their dependency on power relations and to particularise them’. He proposes an important strategy of endeavouring to represent non-dominant identities as ‘normal’ and representing dominant identities as ‘particular’ as a way of subverting the tendency for dominant groups to always represent themselves as ‘the universal’.

The sense of entitlement associated with privilege

Another aspect of privilege is the sense of entitlement that members of privileged groups feel about their status. As Rosenblum and Travis (1996: 141) state: ‘The sense of entitlement that one has a right to be respected, acknowledged, protected and rewarded – is so much taken for granted by those of us in non-stigmatised statuses, that they are often shocked and angered when it is denied them’. Lyn (1992), in reflecting upon her own situation as a white woman, describes how she had come to believe that she deserved whatever benefits and status she had attained because she had struggled for them. She did not recognise how her class and race facilitated that struggle.

Many writers have connected men’s sense of male entitlement to violence against women. As Connell (2000: 3) puts it: ‘From a long history of gender relations, many men have a sense of entitlement to respect, deference, and service from women. If women fail to give it, some men will see this as bad conduct which ought to be punished’. She also notes that some men will regard women’s challenge to male entitlement as a threat to their masculinity.

We thus need to understand more clearly how privileged group members’ sense of entitlement is subjectively experienced and socially constructed. Hatty (2000: 58) has noted, for example, that ‘men may employ particular rhetorical devices to reinforce the contours of their version of reality of their entitlement to use violence’. Adams et al. (1995) identify the ways in which men use language to reinforce their assumptions about male dominance. Men construct what Adams et al. (1995) call a ‘discourse of natural entitlement’ which enables them to believe that they are designed to dominate women. These discourses legitimate men’s use of violence against women.

Towards an intersectional theory of privilege

While different forms of exclusion are distinct, they are also interrelated and mutually reinforcing. This approach means that people who are excluded may also participate in the exclusion of others. It is necessary then for people who are excluded to not only struggle against their own exclusion but also to confront their own privilege and internalised dominance. I recognise, however, that the onus to change should be greater for those who have access to multiple levels of privilege. In advocating a greater level of responsibility by members of dominant groups for the maintenance of privilege, I also acknowledge that an understanding of privilege necessitates a structural analysis that identifies the systemic nature of privilege.
What an intersectional analysis makes clear is that ‘all groups possess varying degrees of penalty and privilege in one historically created system’ (Collins 1991: 225). While people find it relatively easy to identify their experience of oppression and exclusion, they often find it harder to recognise how their thoughts and actions uphold the subordination of others. Some people may struggle against their oppression but at the same time maintain their access to various dimensions of privilege. When people are able to define themselves in terms of one or more forms of oppression, they may not feel the need to acknowledge themselves as benefiting from another form or forms of oppression (Wildman and Davis 2000). Given that most people can be seen to exhibit both some degree of penalty and privilege, it is equally important for individuals to see themselves as belonging to dominant groups as well as to excluded groups.

As those groups who are both excluded and privileged start to examine their privilege, we need to be careful that these groups are not asked to take more than their share of the responsibility for the reproduction of privilege. Razack (1998) observes, for example, that white women’s writing is judged more harshly than white men’s writing. However, following Razack (1998), I think that groups who are oppressed or excluded on one dimension need to acknowledge their complicity with other relations of domination and subordination. We all need to locate ourselves in the social relations of domination and oppression. If everyone were simply privileged or just subordinated then the analysis of systems of privilege would be easier.

The internalisation of dominance and privilege

A concept that has been used to understand some of the ways in which privileged people sustain their dominant position is ‘internalised domination’. Pheterson (1986: 147) defines internalised domination as ‘the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within a dominant group of prejudices against others’. The concept of internalised domination may explain in part ‘why significant numbers of people from the dominant group seem to hold oppressive thoughts and exert oppressive behaviour but do not consider themselves to be oppressive’ (Mullaly 2002: 145).

Tillner (1997: 2) usefully takes this notion of internalised domination a little further by defining dominance ‘as a form of identity practice that constructs a difference which legitimises dominance and grants the agent of dominance the illusion of a superior identity’. In this process, the identities of others are invalidated. Thus, because dominance is socially constructed and psychically internalised, to challenge it, we will need to explore different models of identity and construct subjectivities that are not based on domination and subordination.

It is not possible for members of dominant groups to escape completely the internalisation of dominance (Johnson 2001). Negative ideas and images are deeply embedded in the culture and it is unlikely that men, whites and heterosexuals will not be affected by sexism, racism and homophobia. As noted
earlier, prejudice is not necessarily always consciously enacted by members of dominant groups.

Bourdieu’s work is useful in explaining how various forms of inequality are reproduced and internalised. He formulated the term ‘habitus’ to explain how ‘a system of stable dispositions’ lead people to see the world from a particular perspective (Bourdieu 1977a). Unlike Marxist and radical humanist views, however, which outline how people’s ideas and consciousness are shaped by dominant ideologies, Bourdieu emphasises how dominant ideologies are incorporated into the body. He argues that dispositions are ‘beyond the grip of conscious control and therefore not amenable to transformations or corrections’ (Bourdieu 2001: 95). Bourdieu regards a person’s habitus as ‘a direct product of the person’s structural situation; it is the psychological embodiment of the objective conditions in which one lives’ (Hurst 2001: 198).

The concepts of internalised domination and habitus help us to understand the seeming paradox that Minow (1990) identifies in relation to those who publicly criticise social inequality, while at the same time engaging in practices that perpetuate these inequalities. While she emphasises the task of examining and reformulating our assumptions about the social world, she acknowledges that this requires more than individuals learning to think differently, because of the ways in which the individual’s thinking is shaped by institutional and cultural forces. Thus, while it is important for individuals to acknowledge the privileges they have and to speak out against them, it is impossible to simply relinquish privilege as an act of will.

Given the complexity of the issues facing members of privileged groups, how are they to respond when they are challenged about their privilege? How do egalitarian individuals live their lives in ways that are congruent with their values and beliefs? It is easy to feel despair when one is constantly challenged by subordinate groups. Are there any ways of resolving these dilemmas?

**Privilege and positionality**

Those in dominant groups will be more likely than those in subordinate groups to argue that existing inequalities are legitimate or natural. Sidanius and Pratto (1999: 61) formulate the notion of ‘social dominance orientation’ to explain ‘the value that people place on non-egalitarianism and hierarchically-structured relations among people and social groups’. They argue that people develop an ‘orientation towards social dominance’ by virtue of the power and status of their primary group. This social dominance orientation is largely a product of one’s membership within dominant groups, although they seem to allow that some members of dominant groups may identify with subordinates.

Most members of privileged groups appear to actively defend privileged positions. In this context, government interventions aimed at addressing inequality and mobilisation by socially excluded groups (important as they both are) seem unlikely to fundamentally change the social relations of dominance and subordination (Crowfoot and Chesler 2003). What likelihood is
there then that members of privileged groups might form alliances with excluded groups? What would encourage them to do so?

Just as oppressed groups have a range of strategies available to them to respond to their oppression, Dominelli (2002) identifies three strategies that dominant groups can utilise to respond to concerns or questions about their privilege: demarcationalist, incorporationist and egalitarian. Demarcationalists view the world through a hierarchical lens and endeavour to hold on to and increase their power and resources to maintain their privileged position. Incorporationalists may support incremental changes but they also want to retain existing social divisions. Egalitarians reject the social order that grants them privileges because they recognise the injustice associated with their position.

Harding (1995) believes that it is possible for members of dominant groups to develop the capacity to see themselves from the perspective of those in subordinated groups. Because subjectivity is generated through social processes, she argues that dominant subjectivities can also be changed by these processes. Dominant groups do not necessarily form a homogeneous network of shared interests, making it possible for members of dominant groups to ‘resist the usual assumptions and orientations of those groups’ (Sawhney 1995: 284). This is consistent with my experience of constructing a profeminist men’s standpoint in researching the experiences of men (Pease 2000).

Bailey’s (2000) argument that members of dominant groups can develop what she calls ‘traitorous identities’, adds support to this position. She differentiates between those who are unaware of their privilege and those who are critically cognisant of their privilege. Traitors are thus those who refuse to reproduce their privilege and who challenge the worldviews that dominant groups are expected to adhere to. These dominant group members are able to identify with the experiences of oppressed groups. It is from this basis that white people will challenge racism and that men will challenge patriarchy. So while it is difficult for members of privileged groups to critically appraise their own position, it is not impossible.

The process of developing a traitorous identity involves learning to see the world through the experiences of the oppressed (Bailey 2000). This may not be fully possible but members of dominant groups can make a choice about accepting or rejecting their part in the establishment. Members of privileged groups have a responsibility to deconstruct their own discourse. As Johnson (2001: 166) says, it is more important for ‘members of privileged groups to work with others on issues of privilege rather than trying to help members of subordinate groups’.

**Privilege as structured action: doing dominance**

It is through the processes of accomplishing gender, race and class, etcetera, that social dominance is reproduced. Rather than seeing concepts like race, gender and class as reified categories, we should be more interested in the
processes of gendering, racialising and classing. In this project, I draw upon the work of Fenstermaker and West (2002a) who set out to analyse how race, gender and class constitute ‘ongoing methodical and situated accomplishments’ (2002a: 75). They analyse how people conduct themselves in specific situations to understand ‘how the most fundamental divisions of our society are legitimated and maintained’ (Fenstermaker and West 2002a: 78).

Messerschmidt (1997: 4) similarly, in discussing crime as ‘structured action’, emphasises how ‘the social construction of gender, race and class involves a situated, social and interactional accomplishment’. Gender, race and class are thus a series of activities that we do in specific situations that are influenced by structural constraints. Because they involve accomplishments enacted by human agents, it is possible to resist the reproduction of social structures. Talking specifically about men, for example, Messerschmidt (1993) argues that masculinity is something that has to be accomplished in specific social contexts. It is ‘what men do under specific constraints and varying degrees of power’ (Messerschmidt 1993: 81).

When we act in the world, we are not just operating within structural constraints. Rather, we are also determining the nature of those structures through our actions and interactions. The structures which oppress us then are not only contextual. They are also constituted through our actions. This means that we can challenge those arrangements by engaging in ‘inappropriate’ racial or gender behaviour.

Various commentators have argued that this approach neglects the structural dimensions of inequality. Maldonado (2002: 85) for example, says that there is insufficient acknowledgement of ‘the constraints imposed by the macro-level forces in the social environment’. O’Brien and Howard (1998: xiv) also argue that this approach ‘obscures institutional and structural power relations’. Weber (2002: 89) says that Fenstermaker and West obscure ‘the mechanisms of power in the production and maintenance of racism, class and sexism’ because therein ‘exclusive attention to face to face interaction, macro social structural processes such as institutional arrangements are rendered invisible’. In Weber’s view, the structural dimensions of social inequalities cannot be transformed by ‘the attitudes and actions of a few actors in everyday interactions’ (2002: 90).

Certainly, we must acknowledge the importance of locating class, gender and race relations in the context of institutional structures. We must also accept that ‘gender, and race, class and compulsory heterosexuality extend deep into the unconscious and outward into social structure and material interests’ (Thorne 2002: 85). However, how useful is it to establish a duality of micro and macro forces? Why must structure and action be represented as an either/or opposition? Because I am interested in opposition, resistance and change, social action that challenges the processes of ‘differentiating persons according to sex categories, race categories and/or class categories … undermines the legitimacy of existing institutional arrangements’ (Fenstermaker and West 2002b: 99).
O’Brien (1998: 25) captures the complexity well when she says that ‘we are socially constituted subjects who navigate webs of opportunities and obstacles not necessarily of our own choosing’. Furthermore, I agree wholeheartedly with Collins et al. (2002: 81) who argue that the concept of interlocking oppressions must involve a recognition of both ‘macro-level connections’ at the level of social structures and ‘micro-level processes’ which describes how individuals experience their positions within the hierarchies of domination and oppression. In challenging the dichotomisation of micro and macro forces, we must view the relationship between social structure and social action as ‘dynamic and reciprocal’ (Messerschmidt 1997: 14). While social structure is reproduced by the widespread and continual actions of individuals, it also ‘produces subjects’. Individuals do not simply produce gender, race and class in a vacuum. Rather, they are reproduced and constrained by institutional settings such as families, workplaces and the state.

We must move beyond this conflict between ‘social constructionist’ and ‘structuralist’ approaches. We must interrogate privilege at interactional, cultural and structural levels at the same time that we explore the intersections of privilege with social exclusion.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that to gain a broader understanding of the processes that produce social exclusion, we need to focus on the individuals and groups who benefit from those processes and activities. We must all recognise how we are enmeshed in the social relations of dominance and subordination that we criticise and that we too are likely to have internalised dominance in varying degrees (Brewer 1997).

Although I teach courses about and write articles and books on dominant forms of masculinity and privilege, I still benefit from gender, race, class and sexual privilege. In what ways does the academic discourse exclude the voices of marginalised people? Is it enough for us to be simply critical of our positioning, while doing nothing to change the material conditions that produce it? Obviously not, but if we own our positionality, we at least challenge the view that the white middle-class male perspective represents some form of transcendent truth. To challenge this ethos, more white middle-class men will need to read and reflect upon the writings by those who are marginalised and excluded. We need to feel distressed by these experiences and come to disapprove of our unearned advantages which are conferred upon us simply because of our membership of privileged groups. Such distress may be the starting point for more of us to challenge the systems that benefit us unfairly.

**Notes**

1 An earlier, shorter version of the discussion of the characteristics of privilege was published as part of the following article: Pease, B. (2006) ‘Encouraging critical reflections on privilege in Social Work’, *Practice Reflections*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 15–25.