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What Difference Does a Difference Make?

Societal Privilege, Disadvantage, and Discord in Human Relationships

The chapters in this volume are concerned essentially with differences between people and groups that Western culture deem salient and descriptions of those differences. These descriptions help us to organize the information that we have about these groups and our understanding of them, just as descriptive information helps us to organize what we know about the world, in general. However, Bruce Blaine (2000) argues that while such categorization helps to simplify things, it often leads to seeing individuals as members of groups they belong to rather than as individuals. This oversimplification is often a less accurate description of a given individual and can be most problematic in the delivery of human services, particularly but not exclusive to mental health services.

Diversity is a socially constructed concept that indicates the mere presence of differences. However, when we discuss diversity in this volume, we are concerned with a great deal more than just the presence of differences. Any serious discussion of differences leads to a range of other questions. Human beings differ from one another along a range of dimensions and in innumerable ways. The groups that the authors discuss are clearly different from one another on many dimensions just as they are similar on other dimensions. When placed on a spectrum, some of those differences are highly visible at one extreme, while others are completely invisible at the other extreme. However, aside from describing the groups, what makes these differences important? It is clear that some differences are deemed extremely salient while other kinds of differences, even though highly visible, are deemed so inconsequential that

we hardly notice them and do not devote much, if any, time or attention to their presence or description. The question we are left to grapple with if we are to understand the tension that often occurs when we directly experience or anticipate differences between ourselves and others, is what difference does difference really make and why. Why are some characteristics, beliefs, or behaviors of people given so much importance while others are not. Simply stated, why do differences matter, to whom do they matter, and who decides which differences make a difference?

The authors in this volume specifically explore the human dimensions of race/ethnicity, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, and disability. In Western culture these dimensions are deemed of great importance, and they are often the focus of, as well as the explanation for, discord between individuals and groups. Is it the difference per se that explains that discord or is it something that the differences are socially endowed with that creates social tension? I contend that it is the latter. Race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, socioeconomic class, religious and spiritual orientations have little meaning in and of themselves. It is the social context in which these dimensions are perceived, experienced, understood, and defined that makes them salient. Their salience is determined by how much of a difference these differences actually make in peoples lives, at a given time, and what they mean. Differences in and of themselves do not have meaning outside of a social context and social context helps to define those distinctions thus giving them meaning. What does it mean to share group membership? What does it mean when individuals do not share that membership? We are charged with making sense of these questions as well as appreciating the complexity of these issues in the training of human services professionals.

Allan Johnson (2001) argues that fear of the unknown is usually given as the reason that people fear and distrust those who are not like them, therefore, despite our good intentions this fear is *natural*. However, Johnson argues to the contrary that our fears are not based on what we do not know, rather, they are based on what we *think* we *do* know. When we directly encounter someone from a different ethnic group, someone who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual, someone from a different religion, or a person with a disability for the first time, it is really not the first encounter. It is the culmination of a series of previous symbolic encounters that takes place every single time a piece of information is formally or informally communicated about those group members or when they are conspicuously omitted as if they were invisible. These symbolic encounters occur when we watch movies, television, or overhear conversations of adults as children. Such encounters are perhaps most insidious when they are not accompanied by words or conversations. When adults have a visceral negative reaction to the mention or presence of some group or its

member, a child may experience a level of discomfort that casts a pall over the interaction and that comes to be associated with members of that group. These negative associations may linger into adulthood when the presence of the different group members elicits discomfort for reasons that you would be hard pressed to explain other than as a "feeling." They occur when we read newspapers, watch, or hear the news and its contents reveal who and what is considered important, productive, trustworthy and in danger, as well as who and what is considered disposable, unproductive, dangerous, and to be feared. Our information may come directly from peers, as well as loved and trusted figures who tell us what they *know* about members of different groups, based on information that they may have garnered only secondhand at best. Such encounters include our passing and informal observations of people who are different, particularly if we only encounter them when they are in roles that are subservient to ours, when we are dominant and they are subordinate as well as its corollary. What do we think explains someone else's position in the social hierarchy relative to our own and what does that tell us about ourselves? This collection of impressions serves as the body of what we *think* we *know* about people who we may have never really encountered directly before. The information communicated about them and the impressions formed of them are shaped by many complex sociopolitical and economic variables that may have little to do with the reality of who "those" people really are. Descriptions of "them" are not necessarily designed to accurately describe "them" and inform us, rather they may be designed and used to serve other purposes in a larger system of dominant and subordinate relationships. Distortions of groups often represent the way that it has become convenient or comfortable to see or perceive them. All these things constitute what we *think* we know about people who are different long before we ever actually have direct relationships with them.

Those things that we *think* we know about the unknown or about people who are different are learned ideas. We are not simply born in fear of the unknown or the different, we are carefully taught to be afraid. Differences facilitate what Rachel Siegel (1995) and Paul Wachtel (1996) describe as the processes of distortion and projection. It is easier to distance ourselves from people or groups who are different from us than those who are similar. We can view the different group as "other" or "not me" and, of course, view the "other" as capable of all that we do not want to see in ourselves. All human beings share a common pool of potential feelings and behaviors. Despite this, when we use differences to deem people who are different some kind of "other" and not like us, unwanted feelings and behaviors of our own may be easily projected onto "them," experienced as if they represent some kind of flaw in the "other" group or individual and have nothing to do with ourselves. Siegel views fear as a necessary component in this process and observes:

> Fear is the glue that maintains existing biases. . . . When people are categorized as *we* or *they*, fear becomes part of the process of projecting onto those whom we see as unlike ourselves all of the attributes that we would like to deny in ourselves. *We* are the good self. *They* are the bad self. All players must be maintained in that position and must deny that this is going on. Socially unacceptable traits can thus remain invisible to the self while we stereotype those whom *we* call *they* or *other* and imbue *them* with negative traits. (1995, p. 297; emphasis added)

Blaine (2000) observes that we explain the behaviors of other people very differently than we do our own behavior. He uses Allport's concept of ultimate attribution error, described by Thomas Pettigrew (1979), to explain this phenomena. We tend to explain our own behavior as a function of situational or environmental factors, while we explain the behavior of those who differ from us, more harshly and as a function of their personality or internal traits. This suggests that people who are not like us are seen as less likely to change. Their behavior is ultimately attributed to some kind of basic flaw in the person's character rather than some aspect of their circumstances. Furthermore, if their failing is their own fault, they do not deserve our help, and they may even be undeserving of the opportunities that they are denied. We may even rationalize the harm they endure as deserved. Moreover, we need not question why some people have many opportunities and others do not, the explanation is self-evident.

A clear example of this phenomenon may be observed when it is applied to analyses of socioeconomic class. John Hartigan (1997) and Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray (1997), in their work on poor white Americans, observe that Americans, love to hate the poor. They observe that being labeled "poor" hardly elicits sympathy, rather it elicits hostility and disgust and can often leave poor people feeling ashamed of themselves. Being poor is often associated with negative personality and character traits such as having inadequate values, being inept, lazy, or simply stupid. Poor people are also viewed as if they refuse to work (rather than that they are often unable to find work or living wages), live in female-headed households, live in inner-city ghettos, are primarily people of color, and are undeservedly on welfare. Even if it were not for these direct negative characterizations, our feelings about the poor are reflected in our language in the definitions of values and descriptions of behaviors that are associated with different class status and even the word "class" itself. The Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines "class" as high social rank, elegance, high quality, a rating based on grade or quality. Karen Wyche (1996) tells us that when we say that someone has "no class" we really do not mean that they do not belong to a socioeconomic strata. But what do we mean? We are usually suggesting that people with "no class" have lower- or working-class values;

that they are behaving like poor or working-class people, with the clear inference that such behavior is deficient in some way. The demeaning implication is clear that to have lower-class values or behavior is the same as having no "class" at all. Consistent with Webster's definition, being lower class is to possess low quality or low social rank or lack them altogether. Our feelings about class distinctions are also reflected in our language. People who have "middle-class values" are viewed as hard working, valuing an education, saving their money, capable of delaying gratification, and always trying to improve their lot in life. By defining middle-class values in this manner, the implication is that people who are middle class acquired that status because they have the correct values and good moral character. This fails to address in any significant way the critical role of social systems in the maintenance of class differences. Such differences are often a function of differential access to opportunities, such as education, at one time, trade union membership, as well as many jobs or careers that were completely closed to out LGB (lesbian/gay/bisexual) people, physically challenged individuals, people of color, women, older workers, and so on. Simply put, differential opportunity and social injustice often block access to middle-class status as access is not always merit based. The person, in this case, the poor person is blamed for their circumstances with the assumption that they did not do enough to better their circumstances. Blaming the poor for their plight serves to further obscure the reality of an invisible system of class oppression in this society. Poverty, like other differences in status, is explained as a function of personal deficits, while situational and systemic barriers go unexplored and remain invisible.

In another example, an openly gay man or lesbian who is the target of a physical assault or other bias crime may be seen as having brought such treatment on themselves by allowing their sexual orientation to be known, for example, flaunting behavior. Their difference is seen as the problem rather than the response to their difference. The victim is blamed rather than the victimizer. This kind of thinking facilitates the avoidance of any analysis of the role of social justice or injustice in someone's dilemma or in their treatment. The meaning of the characteristic that distinguishes the person or makes them *different* from the observer, that is, their poverty, sexual orientation, ethnicity/skin color, religion, and so on is defined by a distortion of what it really is and what it really means as if it were the problem. The person's difference is then used to explain their ill treatment or place in the social hierarchy. In this analysis, an individual or group's failings can be attributed to their personal defect. The role of the social system, and the identities of the players who benefit from that system, can thus be avoided.

Blaine (2000) and Johnson (2001) both argue that a cultural mythology has been developed to explain the way many aspects of the human differences discussed in this volume are responded to. In that mythology, fears or appre-

hensions about differences are deemed *natural*. Since this fear is deemed *natural*, the avoidance of that which is different leads us to inevitably distance ourselves from and fear individuals and groups who are not like us. It is deemed only *natural* that we do this. Johnson (2001) suggests that this myth is designed to keep those who we consider outsiders on the outside of opportunities for social advancement and power and to rationalize mistreating them, if they happen to make it to the inside and actually acquire some of those opportunities. Some groups are deemed presumptuous and are even mistreated for simply advocating that they have equal access to social opportunities. Examples include African Americans and women who had to fight to secure the right to vote; lesbians and gay men who demand the right to work in any occupation, marry, and adopt children; people with disabilities who demand to have equal access to public facilities, as well as educational and occupational opportunities; and members of religious groups that demand the freedom to practice their religions without being discriminated against.

Johnson (2001) observes that historically people have not *naturally* avoided the unknown. To the contrary, many people find mystery in difference and experience the unknown as something compelling that draws them to it as a function of their human curiosity. Children display a natural curiosity about the unknown that reveals a *natural* ignorance about realistic dangers. They must be taught to discriminate between what and who is dangerous and what and who is not. For example, if you observe children in department stores or other public places, they more often than not readily approach each other unless they are discouraged by adults. When they do this and they are discouraged, it sends them an insidious message about difference. The message may be that something is wrong with them, that something is wrong with the other child, or that something is wrong about approaching anyone who is different. However, as long as the prevailing cultural myth about naturally fearing difference is accepted, we can avoid examining the role of social injustice in both creating and maintaining discrepancies in social power, as well as our own personal stake and role in them. Discrepancies in social power may be understood as representations of social privilege and social disadvantage. It is the need to deny the existence and meaning of those power differentials that is often a key ingredient in the discord observed between many individuals and groups who differ along the dimensions discussed in this volume.

While most human services professionals agree in principle that exploring and understanding the role of culture, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, race, class, age, and other variables is important in a range of arenas, in practice, people often report that they experience great discomfort when confronted with the need to discuss these issues and even greater discomfort when the discussion leads to an examination of the social inequities that are associated with membership in certain groups, essentially, examining social injustice. It is

important to consider the discomfort often present when addressing these differences and its origins.

Materializing the Role of Social Privilege and Disadvantage in Negative Responses to Human Differences

What do we mean when we refer to social privilege? The Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines privilege as a special advantage, immunity benefit granted to or enjoyed by an individual, class, or caste, that people come to feel they have a right to hold. What is noteworthy is that while the benefit or privilege is given regardless of merit, once people have it, they experience it as something they have a right to have and that perhaps others who are not like them do not have an equal right to. Social privilege is usually something that facilitates the optimal development of an individual, increases access to societal opportunities, or simply makes life easier but is not acquired by virtue of merit or personal effort. It is gained simply by being a member of the group that is privileged. It is important to understand the nature of privilege as something that is not merit-based to fully grasp the reluctance of many people to acknowledge that they may have it. The dimensions discussed in this volume represent human dimensions that may be a locus of privilege or a locus of disadvantage, depending on the group you belong to and the current context.

Stephanie Wildman (1996), Peggy McIntosh (1988), and Allan Johnson (2001) analyze white skin privilege as one form of social advantage, and each discusses the ways that they and other White Americans benefit from having white skin in a racist society. In its essence having white skin privilege makes life easier. In her examination of race privilege, Stephanie Wildman (1996) defines key elements of privilege as the systemic conferral of benefit and advantage. She argues that the characteristics of people who are members of privileged groups come to define societal norms and not surprisingly to the benefit of the people who establish the norms. Members of other groups are measured against the characteristics that are held by the privileged, usually the most dominant members of a society, and found to be wanting in some way. The privileged characteristic is legitimized as the norm and those who stand outside of it are considered deviant, deficient, or defective. These are important concepts in mental health. Overall, "they" are seen as deserving of their lot in life.

There is a connection between the need to establish clear boundaries between ethnic, class, sexual, and other groups in our society and the existence of privilege and social disadvantage. The need for socially constructed boundaries between heterosexuals and lesbians and gay men, men and women, lower and upper socioeconomic classes, people of color and White Americans and other groups is not to provide accurate descriptive information about them.

These boundaries are in place to maintain and justify the system of social privilege and disadvantage associated with those characteristics. The ultimate goal is to make sure that the privileged maintain their privileged access and that others do not have similar access.

Achievements by members of privileged groups are usually attributed to individual efforts and rewards for those efforts are seen as having been earned and deserved. Judith Jordan (1997) observes that a myth of "earned power" and "meritocracy" was developed by the members of the dominant culture to justify their right to discriminate against and limit social opportunities for people who were different. When these myths are accepted, people are viewed as getting whatever they deserve. People who are in positions of power are seen as deserving of privilege. People who are powerless, disadvantaged, vulnerable, and who are exploited are presumed to be getting what they deserve as well, which includes blame, punishment, and contempt for their condition. Members of socially disadvantaged groups would not simply go along with this arrangement, unless they were convinced that the social system distributed opportunities fairly. When they accept the myth of meritocracy, they may even blame themselves. This form of self-blame is expressed in ***internalized*** racism, sexism, abilism, classism, heterosexism, and so on. The person of color who *believes* that White people are superior has internalized racism. Believing the negative stereotypes about some aspect of your identity is a form of internalized oppression. Hence, the systemic determinants of social privilege and disadvantage are usually invisible and if materialized are denied by those who are in power and who benefit from them. Needless to say, members of both socially privileged and socially disadvantaged groups will have feelings about their relative status that will affect the way they feel about encounters with one another.

Social disadvantage stands on the opposite end of the conceptual continuum of privilege. Marilyn Frye (1996) observes that it is important to make a distinction between societal disadvantage and human misery. In her analysis of social oppression she observes that people can suffer, experience pain, and be miserable without being socially disadvantaged. Conversely, privileged status does not always protect one from the experience of human suffering or failure. However, to be socially disadvantaged is to have your life "confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction" (Frye, 1996, p. 165).

Nancy Boyd-Franklin (1993) writes that in the course of her work training clinical psychologists and family therapists, she finds that it is usually acceptable and sometimes even welcome to discuss cultural differences between various societal groups. There is general agreement that many people will differ

from the human services professional and that it is incumbent on that professional to know something about the values, beliefs, and behaviors that characterize people who are different from us. These discussions about cultural specifics often evoke interest and most people agree that a working knowledge of those differences is crucial to doing culturally sensitive work with clients from culturally diverse groups. However, when the discussion shifts to explore the systemic realities of belonging to certain groups, racism, as opposed to race; heterosexism, as opposed to lesbian or gay sexual orientation; classism, as opposed to class status; abilism, ageism, and so on, the mood changes. Members of the audience, who had been previously receptive, polite, and accepting become defensive, angry, attacking, and sometimes absorbed in their own guilt. This response can serve as a metaphor for what people who are members of socially disadvantaged groups report as a part of their experience, when they attempt to talk about the ways they face societal discrimination or to express their anger and pain about it. Their comments evoke reactions that are often hostile. Blaine (2000) observes that color blindness, the belief that everyone has experienced some form of oppression, making everyone the same, and other forms of denial of differences are designed to avoid confronting the reality of social injustice. Johnson (2001) argues that privilege is not only a problem for those who do not have it but is also for those who have it because of its relational nature. When someone is unfairly disadvantaged by social systems and fails to get something they deserve, someone else is unfairly privileged and gains something they do not deserve.

The ego ideal is defined as the collection of ideal characteristics that we would like to see in ourselves. The reality of who we are always falls short of our ideal because by definition the ideal is perfection and therefore unattainable. It is our ideal self, the way we would like to be and sometimes the way we actually experience ourselves. When we are confronted with the ways that we fall short of that ideal, we experience shame. Few people want to acknowledge getting something that they did not deserve or even worse, profiting at someone else's expense, whether deliberate or not. It is not viewed as a positive reflection on ourselves when it occurs, rather it is deemed shameful and makes us uncomfortable about ourselves. To avoid experiencing shame and discomfort, we must deny that we may profit at someone else's expense. This denial becomes difficult if we hold a social privilege and we encounter people who are disadvantaged around that characteristic. The encounter itself can elicit discomfort, even if differences and/or their meaning are never overtly discussed. This often forms the core of the *discord* or discomfort that is experienced between two people or groups that are different. It is not just their difference that is the problem although superficially it is easier to attribute the discord to what is most obviously visible and different about them. It is really the discrepancy in social power as well as the denial of the systemic privilege that both individuals and groups

know exists on some level and that elicits discomfort in both. If members of socially disadvantaged groups voice their feelings about this situation or even assert that privilege exists, they may elicit not only discomfort but also anger from privileged group members for many of the reasons previously discussed. For this reason, many members of socially disadvantaged groups will deny any awareness of the role of societal oppression, even if asked directly, out of a realistic fear that the person or group with greater social power will become uncomfortable and use that power against their vulnerable counterparts in various ways. This pretense needed to maintain "harmony" further silences members of socially disadvantaged groups and makes discussions about this issue even more unlikely. The failure to explore the reality of social privilege and social disadvantage maintains the illusion that differences between people per se are the problem rather than what those differences mean in a society that is racist, sexist, heterosexist, ageist, ableist, and so on.

Paula Rothenberg (1988) suggests that identifying institutions and systems that perpetuate the privilege of one group and the subordination of another elicits considerable anger and resistance from members of privileged groups. She attributes their anger and resistance to the need to avoid acknowledging the implications of having privilege, whether intended or not. Among those implications is the challenge to many deeply held beliefs about the inherent fairness of the American dream and the belief in the American value of diversity. When the reality of privilege materializes, it also challenges individuals' personal beliefs about how they became successful and perhaps even more fundamentally, who they really are. This can be particularly troubling to people who need to believe that their *ego ideal* is the reality. Hence, many Americans are invested in believing that sexual orientation, race, gender, and so on represent real and not socially constructed differences, and that those differences justify unequal treatment and limited access to the opportunities that others who are privileged have benefited from. It is unlikely that these issues can be confronted in a client without scrutinizing and challenging one's own sense of self as a health service provider. This task can be a painful and difficult but necessary undertaking.

Clare Holzman (1995) suggests that when people are confronted with the power and privilege differentials between themselves and others, guilt can be an immediate and powerful reaction, and one that they would like to avoid as quickly as possible. She argues that its most unproductive form is one that is misdirected or produces immobilizing shame. By contrast, guilt can be productive when it motivates a person to understand and change their behavior and attitudes. She warns us, however, that when guilt is used to elicit sympathy or ward off anticipated attack, people who belong to socially disadvantaged groups often feel that they are expected to forgive, soothe, or assuage the privileged person's discomfort. When these feelings of discomfort are used

to shift the focus away from examining the social locus of disadvantage to taking care of the privileged person's guilt or shame, a healthy transformation cannot occur. Furthermore, this places an unfair, additional imposition on already burdened socially disadvantaged group members. When privileged group members engage in this behavior, it may exemplify an exercise of their privilege as well as a subtle way of silencing the disadvantaged person or persons. Members of privileged groups who experience such emotions often project them onto disadvantaged group members rather than experience the often painful discrepancy between ways they would like to see themselves, their *ego ideal*, and who they really are.

Most people do not want to be considered racist, heterosexist, classist, or sexist, but they spend more of their time seeking to avoid those *labels*, rather than exploring their behavior and the ways that they benefit from or have participated in systems of interrelated privilege and oppression, intended or not. It is unlikely that in a society that is racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist and discriminates systemically on other levels that one can have privileged characteristics and not have benefited from them. But what does that mean? In a heterosexist society, a heterosexual person has the social rights that are accorded heterosexual persons and denied to LGB persons. In this example, they do not have to actively do anything to acquire the benefits of heterosexuality. Similarly, in a racist society, individuals who have white skin derive the benefits of white skin privileges simply because they possess that characteristic. What is derived is based on the presence of privileged characteristics, not effort, ability, or merit. The rationales for doing this are built into the rules and institutions of our society. The inability of an individual to point to, remember, or name the specific events or times when they benefited from a privileged characteristic does not determine the degree to which they have benefited in some ways. Hierarchies of privilege and disadvantage exist within privileged and disadvantaged groups just as they exist between them.

One of the difficulties inherent in acknowledging privilege is that it often triggers the feeling that you have done something wrong, followed by a self-defense. All people have more than one identity. Some of their identities may be privileged while others may be disadvantaged. Most, however, are more comfortable expressing the ways they are disadvantaged than the ways they are privileged. We are all, however, responsible for acknowledging the presence of social privilege in our own lives, and the ways we benefit from it. It is impossible to grapple with the complexity of difference if we do not acknowledge the social context of privilege and disadvantage that salient human differences are embedded in. We are not personally responsible for the existence of these systems of privilege and disadvantage, but we move within them all the time in some role or roles. Institutional privilege is conferred by interlocking social systems as a reward for the possession of characteristics valued by those who are dominant. It

is indeed good fortune to be born heterosexual in a heterosexist society; white in a racist society; financially well off in a classist society; male in a sexist and patriarchal society; young in an ageist society; and able bodied in an ableist society. Possession of those desired characteristics does not make one a better person, despite the fact that superior value is attributed to them as a rationale for the discrepancy in social power attendant to them, however, possessing those characteristics makes life easier. Membership in those categories is a function of the luck of the draw. People do not control their ethnicity, the presence of a disability, their sex, sexual orientation, age, or the economic status of their parents; they are simply born into those statuses. For that reason, the presence of benefits accrued as a function of these characteristics are privileges.

Frye (1996) observed that the presence of a privilege does not eradicate the struggles an individual encounters when those struggles are defined outside the realm of their locus of privilege. When individuals have multiple identities, some of those identities or characteristics may place them in privileged groups, while simultaneously, others will place them in disparaged groups. Some forms of privilege may mitigate or positively moderate some forms of disadvantage, while other privileges may not mitigate them at all. Similarly, membership in some disadvantaged groups can compound the negative effects of simultaneous membership in another disadvantaged group or groups. For example, a poor woman with a disability, lesbians and gay men of color, poor older men and women, and so on.

We often assume that just being a member of a disadvantaged group or experiencing protracted hardship from social disadvantage makes that person more tolerant or accepting of members of other disadvantaged groups than people who are privileged. This wishful thinking is perhaps more myth than substance. A person's membership in a disadvantaged group does not mean that they are incapable of behaving in oppressive ways to members of some other group if they hold a social privilege that the other group is denied. For example, African Americans and other people of color have a long history of patterned social disadvantage that is based on their race/ethnicity/skin color. Despite this, many people of color do not view the struggles of other disadvantaged groups for social justice as similar to or as deserving as their own. How can we explain this response to a group's difference, by people who have been mistreated on the basis of their own difference from the majority?

In this specific example, the relative visibility of race/ethnicity among African Americans as well as other people of color and the invisibility of lesbian/gay sexual orientation play a significant role in the belief that nontraditional sexual orientation is chosen. It is as if the sexual orientation of lesbians and gay men, including those who are also people of color, are not relevant, because of their invisibility, until they make their "difference" known. People who have these beliefs assert that, unlike for example, African Americans, Asians, and other ethnic "minority" group members, lesbians and gay men have a choice about

remaining invisible. If they choose to be visible, they bring problems on themselves. People of color on the other hand are deemed readily identifiable and without "choice." This line of reasoning clearly suggests that lesbians and gay men who choose to be "out" are inviting negative treatment and that perhaps they even deserve it. Among some people of color, any behavior that is routinely acceptable among heterosexual men and women is often regarded as something distasteful among lesbians and gay men (just as it is in the dominant culture), for example, displays of affection in public. The core belief is that nontraditional sexual orientation represents a difference that is a flaw, unlike racial identity, and is something that can and should be concealed. The message is that people who choose not to do so are simply asking for trouble and deserve whatever they get. It is assumed that the problem rests in being known and that there is no cost in remaining silent. This position is a stark representation of heterosexual privilege and homophobia because it is a contradiction to what we know about how African Americans, for example, feel about group members who choose to pass for white. Such behavior is viewed as the ultimate betrayal, not only against yourself but also against your people, your ancestor's struggle, and your African heritage; something that only a person completely lacking personal pride or integrity would do.

Aside from the psychological cost of passing, trying to be invisible, and hiding that is associated with being closeted, the cultural and psychological literature document the negative psychological effects of passing as a long–term mechanism for managing discrimination. Intense levels of stress accompany the constant threat and fear of being discovered. There is also a price to be paid in the form of physical and psychic energy that a person is forced to expend if they live a fraudulent life and if they are forced to conceal and compartmentalize important aspects of their lives and selves, particularly from people who they are closest to. There is also an ongoing level of vigilance and a concomitant lack of spontaneity that has a negative impact on the authenticity required in healthy interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, when a climate of terror gives rise to the kind of silence that is required for people to become and remain invisible, the act of silencing itself represents another form of social oppression. Finally, sexual orientation is not routinely visible in the way that race/ethnicity is readily apparent among most African Americans. However, the assumption that race is always equally visible among African Americans or that they are always identifiable is not valid either. This assumption ignores the presence of African Americans, throughout our history, who chose to pass for white. Most group members feel it is important to claim one's African ancestry with pride. However, the same principle is not applied to sexual orientation and constitutes an example of privilege within a disadvantaged group. In this case, heterosexual African Americans who are heterosexist exercise a kind of heterosexual dominance or privilege by defining being "out" racially

and ethnically as healthy and imperative, while being "out" as a lesbian or gay man as a problem. Thus, the difference in sexual orientation, being gay/lesbian, is defined as the problem. Among African Americans, and other ethnoracial groups, when a person is unfairly treated because of their ethnic group membership, racism is clearly defined as the problem, not the person who is harmed. In fact, when a person is discriminated against, based on their ethnicity, and they feel that they deserved maltreatment, we consider it an expression of their *internalized racism* and consider it a problem. However, when a lesbian or gay man is mistreated because of their group membership, it is the victim who is defined as the problem. This kind of behavior is an example of within-group heterosexual privilege, in that the very behavior that is defined as laudable in a dominant or privileged group, in this example heterosexual men and women of color, is deemed a defect in their lesbian and gay counterparts, the disadvantaged group. Heterosexism is not defined as the problem; the person who identifies or makes their "difference" visible is considered the problem. While African Americans and other people of color may be righteously seen as socially disadvantaged groups, these examples inform us that all people of color are not equally disadvantaged within their groups, nor are they immune to behaving in oppressive ways just because they are members of a disadvantaged group. Although I have used ethnoracial groups and sexual orientation in this example, there are many other permutations and combinations that may be observed. We cannot understand the tension that surrounds exploring human differences if we need to deny the existence of a system of privileges and disadvantages that those differences are always embedded in. We must also appreciate how those systems operate between as well as within groups.

Thus far, this discussion has focused on the meaning of human differences and the relationship between the meaning of differences, the existence of power and privilege hierarchies, and the need to avoid acknowledging the presence of those hierarchies by deeming differences themselves as problematic. I have discussed privilege and disadvantage within the same categories of characteristics (race: white American vs. Americans of color, etc.) to simplify this analysis. In reality it is far more complicated as many different identities are engaged in every individual simultaneously. Clearly, no individual or group has just one identity. The collective dimensions that this volume's authors explore all exist in every individual. Every person has an ethnic or cultural identification, is a member of a socioeconomic class, a gender, a sexual orientation, an age cohort, and so on. All those dimensions develop in some kind of dynamic interaction with one another across the life span. Hence, the Japanese-American who is a lesbian, from a lower class background, with a visible mobility disability may experience herself as very different from her Japanese-American counterpart who is heterosexual, able bodied, and upper class. The gay African-American male may experience himself and his African Americanness very differently from his heterosexual coun-

terpart. While they both share an ethnic identity that is different from other ethnic identities, they may not view ethnicity as the most salient aspect of their identity. Other identities in this example will "color" the experience of ethnicity. Similarly, the first Japanese-American woman may feel that she has more in common with another woman with a disability, or another woman who is poor, than another Japanese-American woman with whom she shares no other identities that are important to her. The identity that is most salient to some individuals may be the one that requires the greatest expenditure of time and effort to overcome the social barriers associated with it.

Just as we have a cultural myth about differences being inherently problematic, we have a similar myth about similarities being inherently harmonious. People often presume that if they share some salient group membership or identity with someone that they will be more like one another than not. We also assume that people who share some major aspect of identity or *difference* with us will understand us better and will be more accepting of us than someone who is different along that dimension. There is often the assumption that there is one master identity, usually the one that is most visible or the one that is most disparaged by society, that subsumes all other identities in ways that are often more mythical or fantasied than realistic. The reality is that most people have multiple identities that shift in a kaleidoscopic way, depending on the point in time, social and geographical contexts, and the person's personal history. Members of the same group are not homogeneous. Wildman (1996) and Rothenberg (1988) observe that each of us is embedded in a matrix of categories and contexts, where in some contexts we are privileged with respect to some identities and in others we may be disadvantaged, each interacting with the other. One form of privilege can moderate a form of oppression, simultaneously, just as membership in an oppressed group may negatively moderate a locus of privilege in an individual. No person fits into only one static category, rather, each of us exists at the nexus of many groups or categories. All members of a socially disadvantaged group are not disadvantaged equally. All members of a privileged group are not privileged equally.

The very idea of race, sexual orientation, gender, or any similar characteristic exists only because we give them meaning that changes with time, place, and circumstances. Social hierarchical positioning, whether based on race, sexual orientation, class, gender, or other variables, is maintained in part through an unwritten rule that it cannot be discussed; hence, difference per se is deemed the problem.

Recommendations for Human Services Professionals

In human services contexts, professionals involved in training as well as counseling must assess their own feelings, fears, and fantasies about similarities and dif-

ferences before engaging in such work. For example, it is important to consider the role of difference, social privilege, and social disadvantage in your own life and its meaning. It is important to know what you are predisposed to do when you encounter people who are different and people who are similar. How does difference/similarity make you feel? What assumptions do you make when someone is like you, for example, ethnicity. Do you gloss over or need to deny differences? Are they anxiety provoking? What did it mean to be different/similar to others as a child? We often presume that difference is a bad thing. For some people, however, for example, individuals from large families, being different may have represented the only way they could get any kind of personal attention from overwhelmed adults because the difference made them stand out in the family "crowd." For others, being different may have resulted in having family members distance themselves from you or threaten to do so. Other individuals may have been forced to remove themselves from the company of a loved one who was different and who the family disapproved of. Was it more important to stand out or fit in and if so, around what characteristics was this the case? What do you use to fill in the blanks when you encounter an unknown? How did you come to *know* what you think you *know* about others?

Consider, of course, that you have many identities. Determine where you are located on the spectrum of social privilege and social disadvantage for each of those identities, as well as the person or persons you will be working with. Consider those identities separately and think about how they come together. For example, when you were first aware of them, where did you get the information you have about what it meant to be identified with that group, how old you were, how did it make you feel about yourself, and did this change over time. When you encounter another person, what is the normative power relationship in society represented by your identities? How might this be recapitulated in your professional relationship with this person? How might it be helpful, as well as not helpful? Is there a discrepancy between your personal subjective identity and your social status? How do you explain and manage the discrepancy internally as well as publically. How do you feel when you are more as well as less socially privileged than the person or persons you are working with? How do you manage those feelings?

Summary

The tendency to universalize human experience should be carefully scrutinized. While it is usually engaged to decrease interpersonal tension, the result is that it generally increases marginalization among members of socially disadvantaged groups. The need to see people as just alike, to deny or fear their differences is used to avoid the difficult tensions that can disrupt the false sense of social

harmony and security between different groups as well as within the same group. This is often anxiety provoking. Most people grow up believing in the values of fairness and in the explicit assumption of fairness in our social institutions. When people are confronted with the ways in which their optimal development is or has been enhanced by factors that are not based on a simple function of ability, hard work, or fairness, but rather on things they did not earn, they may need to avoid acknowledging that reality. To acknowledge this reality may appear synonymous with minimizing your personal ability and effort, indeed, your personal integrity. Such denial, however, creates major obstacles in implementing diversity and in some settings, even in discussing it. Failing to acknowledge and understand the broad and divergent role of societal privilege and social disadvantage in people's lives ultimately undermines those initiatives whose goal is to celebrate the richness of human differences.

In considering the complicated nexus of cultural differences and similarities in any individual, we are compelled to ask questions that go beyond our understanding of these variables as mere differences or similarities and speak more directly to their meaning. This chapter has discussed the tendency to avoid examining the meaning of differences, such as race, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, social class, sexual orientation, and other variables, and the attribution at least in part to the discomfort associated with examining the differentials in power and privilege that accompany these human distinctions and give them significance in people's lives.

In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde writes:

> Somewhere on the edge of consciousness there is what I call a mythical norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows "that is not me." In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside in this society. Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing. (1984, p. 116)

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