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## RESEÑA

# Allan G. Johnson. *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition / *Privilegio, Poder y Diferencia*, 2<sup>a</sup> Edición. 2005. New York: McGraw-Hill

Reviewed by Juliet Delate Iler

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### **Reseña:**

Here we are reviewing a hallmark of the American social work scene, a work that –despite its brevity– can be found in university classrooms throughout the U.S., including in the prestigious University of Michigan School of Social Work where it is required reading for first year undergraduate students.

With this book –first published in 2005 and now in its second edition– Allan G. Johnson affords us an invaluable tool for providing an introduction to such fundamental social work concepts as privilege and power. Moreover, given its length of just 169 pages spread over 10 chapters, it is concise and cogent enough for consumption by a general public with interest in the matter.

The author skillfully opens the book by easing the audience into core social work issues with a range of real-life examples and historical explanations to answer questions such as what privilege is, where it comes from, why it is a problem, and what can be done about it.

The first chapter begins with the infamous case of Rodney King, the African-American man who was brutally beaten by Los Angeles police officers during a routine traffic stop. After the trial, which found the officers not guilty despite a video recording of the incident, riots ensued throughout the city. To quell the uprising, King made a public statement in which he raised a simple question: Why can't we all just get along? With this question, Johnson introduces the problem at hand, making clear that, up to now, society as a whole has not been able to get along, and that with this book, he seeks to analyze why that is.

The book begins slowly, introducing key concepts and building on them to reach a dynamic understanding of systems of privilege. The second chapter focuses on the

need for open dialogue around the issues associated with these systems. Currently, avoiding terms like 'racism' or 'sexism' has been the norm given their emotional charge; however, the author insists that we have to use words of this caliber in order to have a serious conversation about privilege and the problems surrounding it.

The third chapter begins to outline of the problems. The author makes use of Peggy McIntosh's definition of privilege: when one group has something of value that is denied to another group simply because of the groups they belong to and not because of anything they have done or failed to do. According to McIntosh, there are two main types of privilege –unearned entitlements and conferred dominance– the result of both being the suffering of non-privileged groups.

The chapter proceeds with examples of when and how privilege occurs in the American context. The author focuses his attention on three kinds of privilege –sexism, racism, and heterosexism– illustrating how members of privileged groups come to expect a certain level of respect, inclusion, or acceptance that members of non-privileged groups cannot hope to enjoy, or how members of non-privileged groups must conform to the criteria of the privileged groups to be accepted or have access to certain exclusive benefits. The author then proceeds to develop the complexity of privilege with the introduction of the paradox that exists in such systems: one may receive the benefits of privilege while being unaware of said benefits. Beneficiaries of privilege may even conclude that they are the ones oppressed by the system. With this nuance, we begin to understand the complexity and difficulty associated with privilege.

In chapter four, Johnson takes the reader on a brief trip back to the origins of the present system of privilege, analyzing the capitalistic model and its evolution. The author guides the reader through the intricacies of its annals to recognize how such a system evolved based on inequality, where workers sell their work to those who control the means of production; how the masses have come to compete with each other for scarce resources; and how racist and sexist ideas have been introduced to justify poor or inexistent salaries.

With these concepts in place, Johnson brings us back to the complex concept of privilege and its paradox. Here, the author makes use of Esther Disch's concept, the matrix of privilege, which encompasses all types of privilege –such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc.– to depict how each exists only in relation to others. To put in context, it's not as if a person gets two privilege points for being a man but loses one for being homosexual, thus ending up with one point's worth of privilege in life. Quite the contrary, privilege is not a static phenomenon but instead highly dynamic, ever-changing in relation to the situation and to others. The paradox of privilege occurs for that very reason: members of privileged groups may not perceive their own privilege if they compare themselves to those who –in a given situation– are more privileged than them instead of those who are less.

In chapter five, we learn that privilege exists in every corner and in the daily life of every member of society; the reality of disproportionate opportunity concerns everyone. Privilege is present in a sexist joke, in a comment about the PDA of a homosexual couple, or in stating that black people are happier living all together in the same neighborhood. It is also present in our silence in face of such comments. As such, we are all part of the problem and, thus, must all be part of the solution.

Even though by accepting the mere benefits privilege affords us, we become a part of the oppressive system and the suffering it causes, systems of privilege also make use of four main positive actions as well, including avoidance, exclusion, rejection, and devaluing. And yet, when a member of a non-privileged group tries to call attention to such unfair behavior, he or she is invariably criticized and attacked for “unprofessional behavior,” for being “too sensitive,” “a whiner,” “a bitch.”

The author uses the sixth chapter to emphasize that the major problem concerning privilege is that members of privileged groups believe that it is not their problem, either because they are unaware of its existence, they don't want to be aware, they think it's a personal problem concerning others, or they may even want to maintain their status within the system. Overcoming these ideas is the single most important challenge to bring about change. Johnson, who works professionally as a corporate consultant on these matters, presents three arguments to combat this lack of awareness: the tin cup argument (do it because it's the right thing to do), the business case argument (it's good for business), and the personal interest argument (all of us will live better if we change). In the author's experience, the first two arguments wane over time and do not last, but it is the third argument which we should fall back on to effect real change.

Chapter seven proposes ways to approach this massive problem. Johnson believes that, in order to attempt to effectively solve the problem, we must understand how it works. To illustrate its workings, he uses the game Monopoly as an example: the game is structured such that it encourages players to drive the others into bankruptcy. Perhaps the players, individually, have no interest in harming their peers by bringing about their bankruptcy, but it is consequence of winning the game. With this example, the author introduces a key concept in understanding how the privilege system works: paths of least resistance. In Monopoly, the path of least resistance is that of driving your fellow players into bankruptcy. Choosing any other path would result in complaints from the others or, simply, in losing the game. It's the same in real life with systems of privilege: paths of least resistance and our willingness to follow them are what perpetuate the system.

Johnson encourages the reader to choose other paths –paths of greater resistance– which will, invariably, generate criticism and resistance from our peers or from society at large, but which, nonetheless, must be taken. The author suggests that one might begin simply by speaking out about privilege, thereby making injustice and

everyday manifestations of privilege more visible. We must also recognize that systems of privilege operate within each one of us and must begin by not blaming ourselves. We are social animals; we are born into the system; the system is within us, and thus change must begin within us. The problem may be greater that each one of us, but regardless we must act to solve it individually.

Chapter eight explains the three key dimensions of systems of privilege: they are dominated by, identified with, and centered on privileged groups. Johnson uses the privilege that comes from being born a man to give examples of each. In terms of domination, the author illustrates how power appears natural on a man while appearing unnatural or forced on a woman. Women occupy positions of power much less frequently than men, and when they do, they are subject to criticism which would not apply if they were men. As to the second dimension –identification with privileged groups– Johnson invokes men’s biological life cycles as an example. Men, and their life cycle, are the standard in the business world; if one desires to get ahead and attain a position of power, forget about getting pregnant or attending to family. Lastly, Johnson speaks of the spotlight placed on privileged groups to explain the third dimension of privilege. As a man and a professor, the author recognizes that at department meetings at the university, men speak for the large part of any meeting, meanwhile when a woman speaks, she is often interrupted or her words devalued. Another poignant example the author puts forward on this issue speaks to the number of films and television programs made with men or whites or the upper-class at their center versus the number of films with blacks or the lower-class or even simply women as protagonists.

With the ninth chapter, Johnson presents seven strategies frequently used to “get off the hook” or ameliorate any guilt felt by the members of privileged groups as a result of their privilege and the suffering it causes. These strategies include the following: denial; blaming the victim (if they worked harder, they wouldn’t be in this situation); calling it something else (the battle of the sexes); maintenance of the status quo (they prefer to live in their little neighborhoods or they just can’t afford to live here); the belief that it doesn’t count if you don’t mean it, or that I’m one of the good ones; or being sick and tired of hearing about it (not again! It’s always in the news!) According to the author, these strategies are mere panaceas of the problem, only serving to reinforce the position of privileged groups; they do nothing toward solving the problem. Ultimately, Johnson proposes that the only real way to “get off the hook” is to “get on the hook” and take responsibility for our part in the system.

Therefore, in the tenth and final chapter of the book, Johnson calls the reader to action, on the one hand, debunking two common myths regarding social change and, on the other, proposing action for change, beginning with oneself. The first myth affirms that “it’s always been this way and always will” and the author refutes this notion with the example of women’s suffrage in America; a century ago, women in the U.S. were not allowed to vote, but thanks to the effort and perseverance of

many, today every woman in America enjoys this right. Along these same lines, he attacks the myth of "no effect," that our actions do not bring about any perceivable change. To this, Johnson does concede that it is possible that no significant change will occur in our lifetime, but continues to maintain that, we must still act, as most major social change occurs across generations, not within them. It is likely that our efforts will bear fruit beyond our lifetimes.

The author concludes the text by imploring the reader to choose paths of greater resistance to change the privilege system by altering which paths receive resistance from society. He encourages us to do *something*, to stick our necks out; to observe and realize how the world works; to see privilege and its daily manifestations; to speak out; to ask questions even if we don't know the answer; to forge alternative paths thereby making those of least resistance visible and allowing others to question their logic. Above all, Johnson recommends that we embark on this journey slowly, little by little, trying to do something more day-by-day; it is a long process, and we must be constant.

Highly recommendable, this book is essential reading for any student starting out in the field of social work, but also for anyone merely curious about the topic. The author masterfully develops concepts such as privilege, capitalism, systems of inequality, power, and paths of least resistance in a way that allows for effortless understanding. A third edition of the book is set to be released in 2017 and will include an epilogue on changing worldviews.

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