

Book Review

Kimmel, M. S. & Ferber, A. L. (Eds.). (2017). *Privilege: A reader*. 4th edition. Boulder, CO: Westfield Press.

Reviewed by Stephen M. Marson, Ph.D., ACSW, Senior Editor, *The Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*

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Privilege: A Reader is currently in its fourth edition. Earlier editions include 2013, 2009, and 2003. The primary audience for this collection of articles is college students, who would be assigned to read this book as a supplement to a variety of courses in sociology, social work, African American studies, feminist studies, Native American studies, and perhaps psychology. Looking at reviews on amazon.com, a reader will notice extremely high praise from student readers. Most students called *Privilege* “life changing.” Paradoxically, a student who composed a contemptuous review on amazon.com demonstrated that the book had a profound impact on his thinking. Clearly, he did *not* appreciate the primary thesis in this volume, but the various chapters propelled him to *think*. I am sure that the Kimmel and Ferber giggled when they read this negative review.

I suspect that I am showing my age, but I found the book borderline trite. Huh? Yes, for someone who has been teaching and writing on this subject for 40 years, I found nothing new in it. The book referred to research that was completed when I was enrolled in a college course titled “Sociology of Women.” It was cutting-edge research in 1972, but I know that my mouth dropped open when I realized that the authors were presenting the material as something new and earthshaking. For example, in Collins’s chapter titled “Toward a New Vision,” she reports the results of perceptual research on the differential characteristics of “masculine” and “feminine.” She fails to cite the research, but I vividly recall reading this research in 1972. Years

later as a professor, I referred to the same research in lectures. When the students realized that I was citing 1972 research, they rolled their eyes and I got the impression that they thought I was too old to teach. Although it is clear that the findings continue to be earthshaking, I wonder how today’s students would react if they realized how ancient some of these cited studies are? If Collins had reported on the lack of change in our overall perception of male/female characteristics, the chapter would have been more profound.

The question “What to do about white privilege?” remains unanswered in this volume. This does not suggest that no efforts are made. Several authors pointed out that we should make lists. Raising our consciousness about white privilege certainly is the first step. Within Kimmel and Coston’s chapter titled “Seeing Privilege Where It Isn’t,” they introduce a conceptual framework offered by Goffman in the early 1960s. For me, there is nothing new; but for college students, Goffman’s work can open their eyes to a totally new view of the world.

Within my experience and world view, the best avenue to understanding privilege is the concept of institutional racism/sexism. It is addressed in the book, but the presentation is highly superficial. Why? Institutional racism/sexism is a highly abstract concept that requires intensive analytic analysis, which is *not* entertaining. Clearly this book is entertaining and captures the attention and imagination of college students who read it.

To understand highly abstract concepts, it is critical to begin with an example of my own. Here is one: While teaching about institutional racism in a course titled "Introduction to Social Work," a student said that she dearly loved her aging mother and took her to the *best* geriatric specialist she could find. They experienced a long drive to the Duke University Medical Center. When the physician walked into the room, my student recounted that she was both shocked and upset. She said, "I drove all this way to see a good doctor." The student was expecting a white male physician in his 40s, but she got a female African American physician in her early 30s! The *great* irony for this example includes the fact that the student telling this story was African American. In her heart, this African American social work major believed that only white males in their 40s can be the best physicians. *This is institutional racism! AND IS THE BASIS FOR "WHITE PRIVILEGE"!*

There are some academic problems with this volume. The citations are inconsistent. In some chapters APA is used; in other chapters it is not. Most annoying was Pease's chapter titled "Globalizing Privilege." Although APA is used here, the editors failed to include a reference page. When I wanted

to check his sources, none of them are printed as they should be. Clearly, the book needs better copy editing. In Gastfriend's chapter titled "Reflections on Privilege," specific data are presented, but no references are offered. For me, this is exasperating. For most college students, these problems would go unnoticed.

I did not like this book and would have never adopted it for any of my courses. HOWEVER, it is abundantly clear that students absolutely LOVE reading it. In reading student reactions on amazon.com, it is clear that EVEN for the one student who claims to hate the book, it propelled his critical thinking skills. Generating excitement among students makes this book a worthy reading requirement, which outweighs my reluctance to adopt it.