

## Privilege Blindness

**Harry:** The vast, vast majority of violence in our society is committed by men, but it's not named as male violence.

We had the horrendous shootings in Norway . . . and all the media coverage debates whether it's religious, whether it's racist, but the obvious fact that it's another man; that gender is implicated in this, continually, . . . continually, goes unremarked upon by the media. And it's not part of the conversation, and it has to be. You cannot solve a problem until you properly name it.

**Stephen:** historically we have minimal accounts of women engaged in the same kind of violence. There seems to be this relationship of masculinity with male violence.

**Harry:** There clearly are women who have been violent, and what's interesting is they get punished for it more. Because we so, at a deep level, accept that men are violent that we just sort of normalize it.

**Stephen:** It's part of the idea of male privilege or male entitlement is seems.

**Harry:** Yeah, it's very much connected to privilege. Male violence is very much connected to the culture of masculinity, to the social power of masculinity.

Violence arises - the kind of violence we're talking about - violence arises in defense of privilege. There's nothing **innate** about the male psychology or the male body, which leads men to be violent. It's when privilege and power that we take for granted is threatened that you get these violent responses.

**Stephen:** Michael and I talked about this idea of biology, because I think many people, especially in our culture, have this perception of testosterone, it's part of the natural male physiology because they have muscle power, more than women do, that they're the aggressor, the predator, that there's this biological connection to aggression and violence, but you're saying no.

**Harry:** Biological explanations are just too convenient. They let people off the hook.

Once we say it's biological, what goes with that is: "It's always been that way . . . it's always going to be that way . . . there's nothing to do about it . . . the conversation is over!"

If we look at this as socially caused, then what's learned can be unlearned. If we are convinced it's biological we don't attempt to change it, therefore, nothing changes, then we feel we're right, "It's was biological!"

But if we think it's social, and there's an extraordinary amount of evidence to back that up, then we look for ways to solve the problem, and lo-and-behold, we find them.

**Stephen: Nobody is born to hate; nobody is born violent. I mean, there's psychology that comes in and that's a different story, but socially, the social conditioning, I think, that you're talking about, this equation that it's not biology, it's social conditioning.**

**Harry:** Yeah, and the conditioning starts way earlier than we realize. There are studies where parents even are given tape recordings of their child crying and other children crying and they will respond the way parents do . . .

But when they are told the gender of the child, they'll respond: "Oh the boy is angry, we've got to appeal to his needs," They'll respond to the girl: "Oh, she must be frightened, she needs to be comforted." Even when they are given the incorrect information they will hear the cry differently depending on what they've been told the gender of the child is.

**Me: We're constantly hearing from those with antigay sentiments that gay people have a tendency to indoctrinate children, yet they don't see their own indoctrination of their own boys and girls.**

**Harry:** We're not aware of how deeply our conditioning to children, even as parents, as teachers, is responding to gender and our own role in creating gender conditioning.

So because our own role is **not visible** to us, we therefore, think "Oh, it was there naturally, it's biological;" it's just because we're not conscious of our own interventions.

**Stephen: What's the fear of putting men and masculinity under the microscope?**

**Harry:** Well, my colleague and friend Michael Kimmel says, "Real men don't study gender."

To have questions about gender, by our contemporary definitions of what it is to be a successful man, to have questions is already a sign of a failed masculinity. So masculinity: "I'm a man. I know what that means. What is there to talk about? I'm done!"

To engage in a conversation about masculinity is already a challenge to traditional masculinities.

So I teach a course on men and masculinities, and I think it's important to validate the courage of men who are willing to step through the door into a classroom about men and masculinities.

And one of the things they're struggling with is to step into that classroom is they're going to be tagged as gay. That's the people who have questions about masculinity because they inhabit the failed masculinity by contemporary definitions.

**Stephen: How would you define the traditional dominant masculinity ideology in America, and what are some of the characteristics people believe make that man?**

**Harry:** There's a wonderful description that dates back many decades from sociologist Erving Goffman where he says "the ideal man is straight, white, middle class, college educated, healthy, recent record in sports." There are all sorts of categories; I don't remember all of it.

But that's the dominant image against which everybody measures themselves.

And the interesting thing is that anybody, even people who from the outside appear to fit that, the relatively very, very few who do, are in some way going to feel that they don't measure up.

Everybody gets hit by that standard and made to feel inferior in some way, which makes people cling to that model all the more desperately, which is a trigger for the violence in defense of their privilege.

**Stephen: Your work - or a lot of your work - shifts the magnifying glass from subordinated groups onto those who are more dominant or superordinate.**

**Harry:** A lot of us have gotten more or less good at identifying oppression, but we're still not that skilled at identifying privilege. And those are two sides of the same coin.

The standard model many people have in talking about oppression is they picture that there's a level playing field and some of us are pressed down. That's the root of the word oppression.

So if we took off the weight from the people who are being weighed down, then they'd be back on the level playing field. But that's an incorrect picture. It's only half of the story.

And I'd say a better picture is the Scales of Justice.

You know, Lady Justice holding those balanced scales and she's blindfolded, not because she doesn't see, but to indicate that she's impartial, huh?

And on the scales of justice, if one side is going down because of oppression, necessarily, the other side is being lifted up because of privilege. And that's the part that we've not been trained to see.

To talk about racism is to talk about white privilege; to talk about sexism against women is to talk about male privilege. To talk about heterosexism, homophobia, is to talk about straight privilege. And we need to always have that in mind, and we just haven't trained ourselves to see it.

## **Music Break**

**Harry:** There's a fancy term in philosophy - epistemology; it's the theory of knowledge.

And there's a theory that talks about "standpoint epistemology," that the standpoint from which you see things influences, if not determines, the knowledge you have and what you count as knowledge.

So, oppressed people - people at the margins - will see the social structure more accurately than those who are at the top; those who are reaping the benefits.

Those who are getting the benefit from any social or social hierarchy have a vested interest in not seeing how the system works because if you see that, you get your own privilege thrown in your face.

Part of inhabiting privilege is learning to have these blinders on where we don't see the world around us . . . and we're not self-conscious about our own enactment, our own performance of gender identity, or racial identity, or sexual orientation identity, or whatever it is.

Part of every oppression is not just a power imbalance, but a knowledge imbalance.

Employees will be very clear of the personal likes and dislikes of the boss because you need to know "Is it OK if I dress a certain way, or come in a few minutes late, or talk a certain way?"

The employer knows very little about the personal likes and preferences of the employees. Because it doesn't matter! Your decisions matter.

So those who are at the top don't see the whole system. Those who are at the bottom understand how it operates.

Those who are excluded, marginalized, oppressed, will see the enactment of gender, or race, or sexual orientation, or class roles, where those who are at the top will just not see it; it's not visible to them.

**Stephen: This supports my argument that gay people growing up in a straight household know both worlds. They know heterosexual world, they know gay world.**

**Gay people know straight people better than straight people know themselves. Black people know white people better than white people know themselves because of what you just said. Comment a bit further on those associations.**

**Harry:** Yeah, I can tell you . . . as a Jew, I know about Jewish culture and Christian culture and I'm aware of how Christian privilege works, of how Christians assume that everyone else is Christian and the world just needs to be oriented around those viewpoints.

It's very powerful. It's also very subtle. So in all sorts of ways, people who get to impose their vision as the norm, when we're talking about heterosexism, that's what we're talking about, the view that that "normal" is heterosexist and everybody should conform to that. And that works its way simply into the way we conduct ourselves in the world.

**Stephen: What's your view on this idea of heterosexism not being a part of the everyday language in facing hate crimes against the gay community?**

**Harry:** When we talk about heterosexism, people often think we are talking about heterosexuality . . . and that's a mistake.

We're not talking about sexual orientation, we're talking about sexual orientation privilege . . . that heterosexuality is seen as the norm, and we don't see the straight privileges we have.

Some of us are aware of gay bashing, where people get - gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer sexual orientations - get beaten to a pulp, to the point of death.

But as a straight person my privilege of being able to be affectionate with my partner in public without worrying I'm going to be assaulted like that; that's straight privilege, and we claim it unthinkingly.

When we say someone is exercising heterosexual privilege, or white privilege, or male privilege, we're not accusing them of having any bad feelings about anybody else, of seeking power.

Privilege is not something I take. Privilege is something the society gives me, and I will continue to have it, if I'm a member of the dominant group, whether I want it or not, no matter how egalitarian or noble my intentions.

My obligation is to be aware of that privilege and to try to counter it as best I can.

Because society continues to give me privilege because of my group membership, it's not up to my individual renunciation. I will continue to have it.

To give up my privilege, whether my sexual orientation, or race or gender, or whatever, to give it up on an individual basis is not possible. But to join with others to overthrow the social structures that give me that privilege, I think that's very possible and absolutely necessary.

**Stephen: Do you think that the visible presence of the LGBT community - the more-and-more visible presence of the LGBT community - forces straight people to become aware, more aware, or to start to have an idea of their own gender performance; especially for men as it relates to men, because there's this barrier?**

**Harry:** The presence and the activism and the visibility of the LGBTQ community is an enormous gift to straight people. It has the potential to liberate us from our narcissism.

Privilege brings with it narcissistic vision. We think we're seeing the world; we're actually just seeing our own reflection. And the way to liberate Narcissus from his narcissistic delusion is to make waves, to trouble the water and disrupt the illusion.

And that's the service that all liberation movements offer to those in dominant groups. They make waves. They disrupt our narcissistic delusions where we're just viewing ourselves and think we're seeing the world.

The liberation movements of oppressed people offer people in dominant groups the opportunity to actually see the world as it really is.