- Christian missionary work which endeavors to bring Christianity to "Third World" and Indigenous peoples and simultaneously brings White supremacy

Let's take one of the examples above to map out how White supremacy plays out: the partitioning of territories in accordance to Colonial/White Western powers' interests.

World War I brought an end to what was then known as the Ottoman Empire. The allies divided the territories of the Ottoman Empire primarily into the British and French mandates (contracts to govern). The British mandate included "Mesopotamia"—what is known today as Iraq and Palestine, and the French mandate included what is known today as Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. The relevance of this history of British and French rule is that the dynamics of the partitioning and creation of these territories set in motion a whole series of political struggles, debates, and tensions that continue today. And of course British and French interests were not simply to be a stabilizing force; they included political, economic, and ideological investments in how these territories were divided and governed.

Now consider a very simplified historical overview of how these divisions played out in the example of Iraq. Almost overnight, the people of Iraq were governed by a foreign power who had no real knowledge or understanding of their culture, history, or ethnic relations. Britain imposed a monarchy and rule by class elites that did not take the various ethnic and cultural dynamics of the territory into consideration. Many of the ethnic groups within Iraq (such as the Shiites and the Kurds) rose up in resistance and attempted to gain their independence. But Britain, which was dependent on oil from Iraq, suppressed these attempts and the monarchic power structure lasted for much of the 20th century, until it was overthrown by the national army in 1958. In many ways, the Baath party (which Saddam Hussein eventually took over) was tied to this struggle for independence from colonial rule.

One of the ways in which White supremacy circulates is by obscuring, negating, rewriting, or reducing to folklore the histories of colonized peoples (who are almost always people of Color). When there is a gap in historical knowledge and perspective, that gap is filled by the dominant discourse (story) of how things came to be, or why a certain region or people are violent and seemingly endlessly at war. White supremacy circulates in how we explain these conditions, for example, that some cultures are uncivilized (in contrast to the White West) or lack a civilized religion (in contrast to the Christianity of the White West) or are genetically predisposed to violence (in contrast to White people of the West). All of these explanations hide White complicity in establishing the conditions of violence we see outside the West. They rationalize the need for "civilized" people to take control, bring order, and properly use and distribute the resources of the territory, while simultaneously reinforcing White culture as superior.

**Common White Misconceptions about Racism**

We have worked to address many of the common misconceptions about racism throughout the last two chapters. However, given their tenacity, we end by revisiting many of the most common arguments we hear. Regardless of intentions, these arguments (some seemingly innocent and others seemingly progressive) serve dominant interests and ultimately function to protect rather than to challenge racism. In this way they can be conceptualized as ideologies of White supremacy.

"Why can't we all just be human? Isn't it this focus on race that divides us?" In Chapter 7 we discussed the discourse of individualism and how it functions to obscure the reality of racism and White privilege. While individualism asks, "Why can't we all just be different?" the "just human" discourse asks, "Why can't we all just be the same (after all, everyone's blood is red under the skin)?" Remember that a key dimension of White socialization is a sense of oneself as existing outside of race. Of course on the biological level we are all humans, but when applied to the social level, insisting that we just see each other as human has similar effects as individualism. Once again the significance of race and the advantages of being White are denied. Further, this discourse assumes that Whites and people of Color have the same reality, the same experiences in the same context, and that the same doors are open. Whites invoke these seemingly contradictory discourses—we are either all unique or we are all the same—interchangeably. Both discourses deny White privilege and the significance of race. Further, on the cultural level, being an individual or being a human outside of a racial group is a social position only afforded to White people. Someday, if and when racism is overcome, this discourse will make sense, but to pretend that day has already arrived is a form of willful ignorance that works to deny the reality of racism.
As for the claim that focusing on race divides us, evidence shows that we are already divided by race on every measure of demographics and outcomes. We would argue that it is the refusal to take an honest account of the power of race as a social construct that keeps us divided.

"I have a friend who is a person of Color, which shows that I'm not racist." First, keep in mind that we are not defining racism as something that only some people are, but as a system that impacts everyone. All Whites who swim in the cultural water of Canada and the United States are socialized into psychological, institutional, and economic investments in upholding the racial system that privileges them. This socialization is not something we had a choice about nor is it something we can avoid. At the same time, this does not mean that we can't challenge our socialization and work to overcome it, although this takes a lifetime of commitment. Having people of Color in your life is of profound importance but does not in and of itself end White supremacy in the wider culture that shapes you, them, and your relationship.

Friendships alone are not enough to overcome all of our socialization; Whites still experience White privilege and maintain institutional control. Having a friend of Color does not, in and of itself, mean that you are educated about the complexities of racism, that you have worked to address your internalized dominance, or that you consistently treat your friend with cross-racial sensitivity and awareness. In addition, how much knowledge you have about the history of your friend's racial group and your receptivity to hearing about their personal experiences of racism will also impact how deep your relationship is.

"I went to school with a lot of people of Color. In fact, I was the minority at my school." What seems like a racially diverse environment for Whites does not always appear diverse for people of Color. But if you are White and went to school with a lot of people of Color, you probably grew up in an urban environment, and possibly urban poor. Even so, most schools with a racially diverse student population are still segregated within the school, mirroring the racial segregation of wider society. In addition, as you progress through life, upward mobility will often move you away from these schools, neighborhoods, and friends. We often find that White people who had a lot of childhood friends of Color rarely keep them because our schools, workplaces, and other environments channel us in separate directions. This illustrates the power of White solidarity to trump early cross-racial friendships.

Some Whites experience being a minority when they travel to another country. These experiences are important because they can provide some understanding of what people of Color experience here in Canada and the United States. However, being a minority in these contexts is not the same, because for most Whites, this is a temporary situation. While you can experience prejudice and can be discriminated against as a White person in the minority—and that is of course hurtful—it is not racism. First, to be in the minority as a White person is usually a situation Whites have chosen to be in and can easily escape. Second, in the larger society we are still affirmed as more valuable than people of Color and receive White privilege.

In the context of another country, keep in mind that most of the countries in which a White person would be a minority have a history of being colonized by White people and of being forced to defer to Whites. Further, our movies and media have been exported globally, and Whiteness has worldwide currency. For example, blepharoplasty, a surgical technique to make the eyes appear more "Caucasian," is the most popular cosmetic surgery in Asia and the third most frequently requested procedure among Asian Americans (Motaparthi, 2010); light skin is advertised in countries such as India as the most beautiful, and skin-lightening cream is a huge industry around the world (Li, Min, Belk, Kimura, & Bahl, 2008). While Whites might feel like "outsiders" when traveling in non-White countries, they are still elevated in myriad ways.

"People of Color are too sensitive. They play the race card." "Playing the race card" is a common accusation Whites make when people of Color bring up racism. To accuse a person of Color of playing the race card is to assert that the person's claim of racism is false. This is insulting to people of Color because it suggests that they are dishonest and that they lie about racism. This expression also reveals the lack of knowledge Whites have about racism and our arrogance that we could understand it better than people of Color.

Because of the factors we have discussed, there is much about racism that most Whites simply don't understand. Yet in our racial arrogance, we don't hesitate to debate the knowledge of people who have lived or studied these issues for many years. We feel free to dismiss these informed perspectives rather than to acknowledge that they are unfamiliar to us, reflect further on them, or seek more knowledge. Because of our social, economic, and political power within a White supremacist culture, Whites are in the position to legitimize people of Color's assertions of racism. Yet we are the least likely to see, understand, or be invested in validating those assertions, and the least likely to be honest about their consequences.

Because most Whites construct racism as specific acts that individuals either do or don't do, we think we can simply look at a specific incident and decide if "it" happened. But racism is infused in every part of society and in our perspectives. It is reinforced every day in countless and often subliminal ways. Our inability to think with complexity about racism, as well as our investment in it, makes Whites the least qualified to assess its manifestations. Our investment in denying racism
also ensures that we will most often determine that “it” did not happen. The very concept of a “race card” at all, in a society so deeply divided by race, is a cogent example of White denial. Ironically, it’s not much of a card to play since raising racism rarely gets people of Color anywhere with Whites. Very few Whites believe that structural racism is real or have the humility to engage with people of Color about it in an open and thoughtful way.

“This is just political correctness.” Charges of political correctness often surface when Whites are being challenged to acknowledge racism. Like other terms that originate as a challenge to unequal power, the concept of political correctness has been co-opted by dominant interests. Political correctness originated as a term to describe language, ideas, policies, and behavior that seek to minimize social and institutional oppression. Now, it has come to mean cultural sensitivity that has been brought to absurd levels. As soon as the term political correctness surfaces, discussion ends, for no one wants to be accused of being “PC.” Take for example the word “feminism,” which is simply the idea that women should have equal status and opportunity, but has now become a derogatory term with insulting variations such as “femi-nazi.” Consider how conservative pundits have managed to take the idea of equality for women and equate it with Nazism, and how such absurd perversions of the term have been so normalized that many young women today don’t want to be associated with feminism. We might reflect on whose interests it serves to position political correctness as something to be avoided.

“People of Color are just as racist as we are. In fact, now there is reverse racism and White people can’t get into college or get good jobs.” If you define racism as racial prejudice, then yes, anyone across any race can have just as much racial prejudice as anyone else. But racism is not merely racial prejudice. Racism is racial prejudice backed by institutional power. Only Whites have the power to infuse and enforce their prejudices throughout the culture and transform it into racism. If you understand what racism is, then you understand that there is no such thing as reverse racism. The term reverse racism implies that power relations move back and forth, one day benefiting one group and the next day the other. But as we can see from the founding of Canada and the United States to the present time, White power and privilege remain deeply rooted and intact.

For example, while the current U.S. president is biracial and this is very significant, consider that 236 years after the first Congress was formed, of 100 Senators there is one Latino, one Japanese American, one Native Hawaiian, and one African American. Of the 541 members of the 111th Congress, there are 40 African Americans, 27 Latinos, 6 Asian Americans, and 1 Native American. Of the 9 members of the Supreme Court, only 2 are not White (Manning, 2010). Focusing our attention on isolated exceptions allows us to deny the significance of the rules themselves and who they serve. The vast majority of CEOs, Fortune 500 executives, managers, professors, doctors, lawyers, scientists, and other prestigious positions of leadership and decision making are Whites. While Whites are the majority of people in the United States and in Canada, their overrepresentation in leadership does not match their numbers in society.

Programs such as Affirmative Action in the United States and Employment Equity in Canada are often cited as examples of reverse racism or special privileges that people of Color have over Whites. These programs were developed in order to redress the reality and pervasiveness of White discrimination against people of Color. Still, common sense understanding of these programs is very limited; for example, no employer is required to hire an unqualified person of Color, but they are required to be able to articulate why they didn’t hire a qualified person of Color.

Federal protections are important because although many Whites claim they would “hire the best person for the job,” they do not understand that because of the constant messages that people of Color are inferior, who we perceive as the best person for the job will likely be someone White. According to Pager (2007), White men with a criminal record are slightly more likely to be called back for a job interview than Black men with no criminal record, even when they are equally qualified. In addition to unconscious preference for White applicants, another way racism manifests in the workplace is through the concept of “fit.” This is the tendency to prefer people whose cultural style matches the workplace culture. Unfortunately, the culture of the workplace, unless owned by people of Color, will likely be White. This plays out in industries such as fashion, wherein there is a very specific and limited ideal of female beauty (such as narrow noses and slim hips), and in schooling when teacher candidates are evaluated based on whether the staff will be able to relate to them.

Although women were not originally included in Affirmative Action, White women have numerically been the program’s greatest beneficiaries. While Affirmative Action and other programs have made an impact on increasing the numbers of underrepresented groups in employment, these programs have not come close to reaching their goals. Still, states such as California and Washington have ended Affirmative Action, and the Supreme Court ruled that giving points based on race could not be used in college admissions.

When thinking about programs such as Affirmative Action, it’s important to remember the dynamics of race. Because Whites are seen as “just people” rather than as White people, when they are hired it is assumed to be because they are qualified. When people of Color are hired (regardless of whether an employment equity program had anything to do with their hire), Whites often assume that they were hired due to a special program. This assumption reveals that Whites see
people of Color as inherently unqualified; we have difficulty imagining they could have gotten the job on their qualifications alone. Further, this assumption reveals the sense of entitlement Whites have to all desirable positions ("they got my place in law school" or "they got my job"). This also suggests that we are not quite as colorblind as we often claim.

"Racism is a thing of the past. Besides, I didn't own slaves; I wasn't around when Indians were put in residential schools." Many White people are woefully uninformed when it comes to the continuing presence of racism. Seeing ourselves as individuals, with no connection to our nation's pasts, erases history and hides the way in which wealth and social capital have accumulated over generations and benefits us as a group today. Canada and the United States were founded on the exploits of slavery as well as genocide, and racism did not end when slavery or the residential school systems ended (Zinn, 1980/2010). Legal and institutional exclusion of people of Color, in addition to illegal acts ranging from lynching to racial profiling, continue today. Racist acts of terrorism such as the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982 and James Byrd in 1998 still occur.

People of Color were denied Federal Housing Act (FHA) loans as recently as the 1950s. These loans allowed a generation of Whites to attain middle-class status through home ownership. Home ownership is critical in the United States because it is the means by which the "average" person builds and passes down wealth, providing the starting point for the next generation. People of Color were systematically denied this opportunity and today the average White family has eight times the wealth of the average Black or Latino family (Federal Reserve Board, 2007). Excluding people of Color from the mechanisms of society which allow wealth building continues today through illegal but common practices such as higher mortgage rates, more difficulty getting loans, real estate agents steering them away from "good" neighborhoods, discrimination in hiring, and unequal school funding.

Racial group membership is consistently traced to inequitable outcomes on every indicator of quality of life and these outcomes are well documented and predictable (Hughes & Thomas, 1998; Williams, 1999). Limiting our analysis to the micro or individual level prevents a macro or "big picture" understanding. At the micro level ("I didn't own slaves"), we cannot assess and address the macro dimensions of society that help hold racism in place, such as practices, policies, norms, rules, laws, traditions, and regulations. For example, in the United States people of Color have been formally—and now informally—prevented from participating in government wealth-building programs that benefit White Americans.

Consider, for example, the ways in which schools are funded through the property tax base of the community in which they are situated. Given the fact that youth of Color disproportionately live in poor communities and their families rent rather than own, youth of Color are penalized through this policy, which ensures that poor communities will have inferior schools. In turn, this practice ensures that middle- and upper-class students, who are more likely to be White, will get a superior education and have less competition in the future workplace—an example of institutional racism and White privilege (Kozol, 1991).

In light of all the possible creative options for funding schools to ensure that every child has equal access to quality education, the current acceptance of the status quo is an example of institutional racism. Other examples of institutional racism that serve to reinforce the ways in which schools reproduce inequality include: mandatory culturally biased testing; "ability" tracking; a primarily White teaching force with the power to determine which students belong in which tracks; cultural definitions of intelligence, what constitutes it, and how it is measured; and standards of what constitutes good behavior as determined by White teachers and administration. Rather than serving as the great equalizer, schools function in actual practice to reproduce racial inequality. Insisting that we could not have benefited from racism because we personally didn't own slaves is extremely superficial and hides the reality of White advantage at every level of our past and present society.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What are the key differences between celebrating diversity and antiracist education? Discuss each of these differences and provide examples for each.
2. What is Whiteness? The authors claim that Whiteness is organized globally. How?
3. What do the authors mean when they use the term White supremacy? How does White supremacy manifest in institutions?

**Extension Activities**

1. Discuss some of the common misconceptions about racism. How would you counter these misconceptions from an antiracist perspective? In pairs or small groups, practice articulating your counter arguments.
2. Watch the film Of Civil Wrongs and Rights: The Fred Korematsu Story (Fournier et al., 2000) (http://korematsuinstitute.org/). (See Figure 8.1 for information on Korematsu.) Next, conduct further research into Japanese internment in WWII, or conduct research on another minoritized racial group who has challenged legalized racism. Write an essay using these cases to illustrate how racism and White supremacy work.
CHAPTER 9

“Yeah, But...” Common Rebuttals

“So, I have to watch everything I say?”

Based on our experiences teaching critical social justice in a variety of forums, we predict that readers will raise some common questions, objections, and critiques. This chapter addresses the most commonly raised issues and objections. Drawing on all that has been discussed in previous chapters, we briefly but explicitly speak again to these concerns.

The primary goal of this book is to explain key concepts in critical social justice education in ways that deepen our readers’ understanding. Deepening understanding is not dependent on agreement; the back-and-forth arguing inherent to winning or losing debates is not useful here. We expect that some ideas will be new and difficult to understand. But struggling to understand and struggling to rebut are very different choices. Raising questions because you are working through an idea is important, and we encourage you to seek out critical social justice education well beyond this book. However, rebuttals that function to block out, cut off, and negate explanations are counter to the goals of education, be it critical social justice or any other kind. We ask our readers to reflect on whether the goals of their questions are greater clarity or greater protection of their existing worldview. Once a level of fluency has been gained, one is of course free to reject the arguments, but will be able to do so from a more informed and nuanced position.

As we have explained, our socialization is the foundation of our identity. Thus to consider that we have been socialized to participate in systems of oppression that we don’t condone is to challenge our very sense of who we are. But this socialization is not something we could choose or avoid, and doesn’t make us bad people. It does, however, make us responsible for reeducating ourselves and working to change oppressive systems. This is unquestionably very challenging but can also be personally rewarding as we gain insight, expand our perspectives, deepen our cross-group relationships, align what we believe and say with what we do, and increase our personal and political integrity.

Based on our experience teaching critical social justice to a wide range of people in a variety of forums, we can predict that certain rebuttals will be made. While we have discussed many of these issues in detail elsewhere, given their tenacity, we want to revisit the most common ones. In the examples below, when we refer to “students” we are referring primarily to our students in university and college classrooms. However, the objections, as well as our responses to them, should be familiar to people outside of these contexts and easily transferable.

Claiming That Schools Are Politically Neutral

- “Politics has no place in schools,”
- “It’s not a school’s place to teach values.”

Many teachers believe that schools are apolitical spaces and that the knowledge taught in them is neutral. However, schools have a very long history of political struggle. Specific debates such as whether creationism and/or evolution should be taught; legal cases such as Brown v. Board of Education that ended legal segregation in schools; and residential schools for Aboriginal children are all examples that demonstrate the political and value-based nature of schooling. There is no neutral space and schools are not now, nor have they ever been, politically neutral.

If we believe in a just and democratic society (as the U.S. Constitution implies and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states), then we must recognize that politics have a central place in school. Citizens must be prepared to foster a healthy democracy, and preparing students for democratic citizenship is a key responsibility of public schools. To do so, schools have to educate students about the nation’s social history; provide a multitude of perspectives; foster critical thinking and perspective taking; enhance students’ stamina for engaging with challenging ideas; and improve students’ ability to engage with research, raise critical questions, evaluate alternative explanations, tolerate ambiguity, and foster collaboration. Without these skills, young people are ill equipped to advance a socially just, democratic nation state.

All change for a more just society has come from great struggle. Enslaved Africans were not freed because White people overall thought it would be good to free them. Emancipation required decades of struggle, sacrifice, and activism (in many cases involving physical violence and a death toll in the hundreds of thousands). Residential schools weren’t closed, Chinese workers weren’t granted citizenship, and domestic violence against women wasn’t made illegal because the dominant group thought it was a good idea; the dominant group was forced to change due to pressures that took decades to build.

We can take a basic level of acceptance for granted today because of the hard work and the activism of people before us: feminist, gay and lesbian, civil rights,
Indigenous, disability, and other activists. The capacity to recognize the need for and engage in social justice activism is part of what it means to participate in a healthy democracy, and public schools play a fundamental role in fostering this.

**Dismissing Social Justice Scholarship as Merely the Radical and Personal Opinions of Individual “Left Wing” Professors**

- “Your opinions are so strong.”
- “These ideas are radical.”
- “This is all so one-sided. I wish you would include texts from ‘the other side’ of the conversation.”

The “radical scholars” objection reduces scholarship in critical social justice education to personal values and political correctness. But “radical” must have a referent; what knowledge is it radical in contrast to? When we object that this perspective is radical, we are also saying that mainstream or dominant perspectives are not radical; in other words, they are perceived to be neutral and objective.

When the scholarship that professors are drawing upon is reduced to subjective and biased personal opinions, that scholarship is transformed from a highly complex and informed body of knowledge into the personal opinions of a single professor. The effect of this is that all opinions become equally valid and therefore the scholarship, now reduced to opinion, can simply be dismissed. This strategy effectively positions critical classrooms as places of ideology, opinion, and subjectivity, while simultaneously positioning other kinds of classrooms—those in which allegedly neutral or “transparent” frameworks are taught—as objective spaces of real and preferred knowledge.

Critical theory challenges the claim that any knowledge is neutral or objective, outside of humanly constructed meanings and interests. Yet ironically, only forms of knowledge that do not claim to be objective, and instead acknowledge their perspectives and interests (as critical theory does), are perceived as biased and open to debate; it is usually only when someone names their perspective that they are seen as having one. Accusations that professors have a liberal bias (“radical” or “Marxist” or “socialist” or “left wing”) typically emerge in courses that attempt to challenge (or at least unsettle) the idea of neutral knowledge.

**Citing Exceptions to the Rule**

- “Barack Obama is president so racism has ended in the United States”
- “I have a friend who’s Latina and she’s the CEO of the company.”
- “My professor is openly gay and he still got tenure.”

There are two types of exceptions that people commonly raise. One type is citing examples of public figures from minoritized groups who have “made it.” The second type is giving personal or anecdotal examples. In both cases—one that we all know and one that only you know—the goal is to prove that anyone can make it if they try and that there are no structural barriers. We are not arguing that the system is inflexible and cannot allow for a single exception, or that people don’t have agency to challenge oppressive systems. Of course there are exceptions to every rule, but the exceptions also prove the rule. Why are these examples so notable that we know them by name?

Take the commonly cited public example of the presidency of Barack Obama. This is indeed a highly symbolic milestone in U.S. history and worthy of celebration. However, racism is very complex and can’t be reduced to whether an individual person of Color succeeds. The system can accommodate some exceptions, but these exceptions don’t actually change the system overall. In many ways Obama’s presidency has surfaced a great deal of racism while allowing dominant society to deny it. Obama’s presidency, for example, has done nothing to affect increasing racial segregation. This segregation is more powerful because it occurs at the “ground level”—how we actually live our lives.

The personal example (“There was one Asian guy at my school and no one ever had a problem with him”) is problematic, in that we are only hearing the dominant member’s necessarily limited perception. The personal example is almost impossible to engage with and thus works to cut off, rather than expand, exploration. The public example is at least familiar and we have had the opportunity to hear a range of perceptions on it. Either way, while there are always exceptions, the patterns of oppression are consistent and well documented.

**Arguing That Oppression Is Just “Human Nature”**

- “Injustice exists in every society it’s just human nature.”
- “Somebody has to be on top.”

Because it’s virtually impossible to separate nature from nurture (culture), claims that specific human dynamics are natural are very difficult to substantiate. There is no line at which we can say that some pattern of human relations occurs before or beyond the forces of socialization. Even patterns we observe in infants can only be interpreted through our cultural lenses. Because it is so difficult to separate nature from nurture, the more useful question for our purposes is, whom does it serve to say that oppressing others is natural? In other words, who is more likely to say that oppressing is human nature: those on the top doing the oppressing, or those on the bottom being oppressed? This argument always serves to support the dominant group and not the minoritized group.
The human nature argument also demonstrates how oppression changes and adapts over time. While it would no longer be acceptable in mainstream society to justify some oppressions as natural (for example, racial), it is still acceptable to justify other oppressions this way (such as gender). A more constructive and ethical use of a human nature argument is to notice that throughout history, humans have strived to overcome oppression and make society more just.

Appealing to a Universalized Humanity

- “Why can’t we all just be humans?”
- “We all bleed red.”
- “It’s focusing on difference that divides us.”

Biologically we are all humans, of course. But socially we are members of hierarchically organized groups. Where we are in dominant groups, we are taught to see our perspectives as neutral, objective, and representative of a universal reality; our group is the standard for what it means to be normal or “just human.” Thus dominant group members have the privilege of seeing themselves as outside of any group, and thus able to represent all of human experience. However, when we are in a minoritized group, our group is almost always named. Continually limited to our group identification, we are perceived as capable of speaking only for that particular group; whereas a “guy” can speak for all guys, a “gay guy” is seen as speaking only for other gay men.

Further, because dominant group members are taught to see themselves as normal, we assume that people in the minoritized group share our reality. This assumption imposes our reality on them, prevents us from learning more about their perspectives, and invalidates the oppression they experience. Insisting that “we are all just human” in response to evidence of oppression is a way to deny that oppression exists at all and to end any further discussion.

As for insisting that addressing difference is what divides us, dominant and minoritized groups are already divided from one another by virtually every measure, both physically and in life outcomes. In a society in which group difference clearly matters, we suggest that not addressing our differences and pretending that they have no significance serves to hold them in place.

Insisting on Immunity from Socialization

- “I was taught to treat everybody the same.”
- “My parents raised me to believe that it didn’t matter that I was a girl, I could be anything I wanted.”
- “That’s not my experience.”

In addressing the claim that one has been immune to the forces of socialization, we offer the following reminders:

- Our families are not the sole forces of our socialization.
- Our families are themselves not free from socialization.
- We consistently receive many contradictory messages from a multitude of sources.
- It is impossible not to be affected by these mixed messages.
- We cannot simply decide that these messages have no effect; it takes conscious and ongoing effort to challenge them.
- Our experiences occur within a socially stratified society and must be contextualized as such.

Hopefully at this point our readers understand that they cannot be immune from the larger forces of socialization and that they couldn’t avoid having been socialized into groups that are positioned hierarchically in relation to each other.

Ignoring Intersectionality

- “I am oppressed as a lesbian, so I might be White but I have no privilege.”
- “I think the true oppression is classism. If we address class, all the other oppressions will disappear.”

People who raise this kind of objection have usually spent a lot of time thinking about their minoritized group status. This is understandable; the currents we swim against are often clear to us and it is much more difficult to identify the currents we swim with. Yet identifying all of the currents we swim in is a powerful next step in our growth.

Someone who is of Asian heritage, while experiencing racism, may simultaneously have several other forms of privilege if, for example, that person is heterosexual, able-bodied, and male. Of course racism will affect how he experiences these privileges; for example, racist stereotypes about Asian men often undercut how they experience male privilege. But while the dominant White culture may diminish Asian male masculinity, he will still experience male privilege in relation to Asian women, and he will still have the right to marry the woman of his choice.

The dynamics of intersectionality are deeply significant and it is impossible to develop critical social justice literacy without an ability to grapple with their complexities. For example, in addition to other intersections of oppression, classism and racism affect the gay community; racism and heterosexism affect people with disabilities; heterosexism and sexism affect people who are poor or working class; heterosexism and classism affect people of Color. Rather than rejecting the
possibility that we can have any privilege if we experience oppression somewhere in our lives, the more constructive approach is to work to unravel these intersections to see how we may be upholding someone else's oppression.

**Refusing to Recognize Structural and Institutional Power**

- "Women are just as sexist as men."
- "I'm the only male in my group so I am oppressed."
- "People of Color are racist too."

Given the deeply embedded patterns that develop from our group identities, simply being the only dominant member in a given setting will not be a reversal of oppression. Dominant group members bring their patterns of privilege with them. For example, men in relation to women (and White men in particular) are socialized overall to take up more physical and social space than others. Men will tend to talk first, last, and most often; set the tone and the agenda of meetings; have a disproportionate effect on decisions; and be perceived as (and presume themselves to be) leaders in almost every context (internalized dominance) (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

Conversely, minoritized group members also have conditioned patterns (internalized oppression) that predispose them to defer to the dominant member. Women overall will talk less when men are present and defer to men's presumed leadership (or risk being perceived as overbearing if they do not). These patterns and relations do not reverse or change based on the ratio of dominant to minoritized members present. Without intentionality and skills of alliance, the group members will enact the inequitable relationship. The new member will be suddenly "oppressed" or have a "minority" experience because he is the only man in a workgroup. Of greater importance, then, are the skills and perspectives the dominant group member brings.

STOP: Remember that this book is an introduction to complex ideas. While men are socialized into norms of masculinity and women into norms of femininity, we acknowledge that gender identities are not so clear-cut. For instance, many women have interests, characteristics, and mannerisms that would be labeled "masculine," and many men have those that would be labeled "feminine." The next level of analysis would be to explore how masculinity and femininity are socially constructed through norms and expectations that shape what it means to "act like a man" or "act like a woman."

Another common objection is that of numbers. Statements such as "We don't have much racial diversity here because we don't have very many people of Color in our area" or conversely, "We are doing well because we have a lot of people of Color in our department" are often heard in responses to questions of racial diversity in the workplace. There are a few important dynamics to notice about these statements:

- They reflect the dominant perspective; for example, a workplace that seems racially diverse to White people may not seem diverse to people of Color.
- They assume that all that is needed to interrupt inequality is the presence of the minoritized group.
- Both of these statements defend and rationalize the situation in question and thereby limit, rather than expand, further action.

As for the claim that people of Color are just as racist as White people, this is to confuse discrimination with racism. We are all just as prejudiced as the next person, and we all discriminate. But when we use the "ism" words, we are describing a dynamic of historical, institutional, cultural, and ideological oppression. Without the language to describe structural oppression, we continue to hide and deny its existence. Using the terms interchangeably obscures the reality that discrimination across race is not the same in its effects, because only the discrimination of White people is backed by historical, institutional, cultural, ideological, and social power and thus has far-reaching and collective impact on the lives of people of Color. A more interesting and fruitful line of inquiry might be why so many people are so invested in insisting that the minoritized group is "just as" prejudiced or oppressive as the dominant group. What does this insistence rationalize or excuse? What is served by the refusal to acknowledge institutional power?

**Rejecting the Politics of Language**

- "What do they want us to call them now?"
- "You mean I have to watch everything I say?"

Language is a form of knowledge construction; the language we use to name a social group shapes the way we think about that group. To think critically about language is to think critically about power and ideology. Take the example of homelessness. Just 20 or so years ago, the term homeless was not common. The terms we used at that time for people we would now term homeless included bums, derelicts, tramps, transients, hobos, and winos. These are clearly negative terms that
conjure negative images and are all typically associated with men. Over time, advocates came to realize that many women and children were also homeless, and that women and children had different issues and needs because of their gender and age. In other words, the kinds of challenges that a single man living on the street might have are different from those that a single woman living on the street might have, and different still from those of a single woman living with children.

Advocates realized that they had to change the public perception of this population in order to increase the resources available to them; few people were interested in helping "bums" and "winos" (notice how some people are perceived as worthy of resources and others are not). There was a deliberate political effort to introduce the term homeless in order to change the public perceptions of this diverse population. When the language changed, so did the perception; this change enabled greater access to resources, illustrating the political power of language.

The traditional names that dominant groups use for minoritized groups have their roots in oppressive history and were not chosen by the minoritized group (such as "Colored People" "Oriental" or "Retarded," which are all terms that should be avoided). Further, it really isn't that difficult to keep up with changes in language. Many of us manage to keep up with popular language of the day, whether it was slang like "groovy" and "cool" in the past or "OMG" and "LOL" today. Notice that it is easy for us to keep up with language when we are invested in the social context. To choose not to be aware of changes in language regarding minoritized groups indicates that we may be living in a great deal of segregation from them. It is also an indication of a lack of interest that is not accidental. On the other hand, to be aware of changes in language yet still insist that we have the right to say anything we want is willful irresponsibility. Of course we all have the right to say whatever we want, but there are consequences for what we say.

In a pluralistic society that claims to uphold the ideals of equality, speech must be chosen in ways that are cognizant of the context. We wouldn't speak to our boss the way we might to our friends. These are choices of context-appropriate speech, and we all conform to these speech considerations on a daily basis. Rather than feeling resentful (an indicator that our internalized dominance is being challenged), we might consider our ability to adapt to changes in language as an indicator that we are growing in our critical social justice literacy.

**Invalidating Claims of Oppression as Over-Sensitivity**

- "People just need to lighten up."
- "Why don't you people just get over it?"
- "I didn't mean it that way; can't you take a joke?"

This objection is a variation on the "political correctness" objection, which implies that whenever minoritized groups and their allies speak to oppression they are just being oversensitive and taking things too seriously. There are several problematic dynamics in this dismissal. First, the arrogance of someone in the dominant group feeling qualified to determine the legitimacy of a minoritized group member's reaction to oppression. Remember that for many of us in the dominant group, our socialization is invisible, and so we often assume that others will share our frames of reference and see a situation the same way that we do. If we are committed to critical social justice, then we recognize that the burden of understanding should rest with the dominant group.

Another problematic dynamic is that dominant group members often do not understand the collective weight of oppression. What is "just a comment" for us is often one of many daily micro-aggressions for the minoritized group. That someone from the minoritized group would be willing to let us know how oppression impacts them takes a lot of courage, given how freely dominant groups tend to trivialize this information. Dismissing the feedback as oversensitivity conveys that we are not open to or interested in understanding the impact of our behavior on others. A more constructive use of this feedback is to use it as an entry point to consider what understanding we are lacking.

Focusing on intentions is another way we often dismiss the impact of our behavior. Common dominant group reasoning is that as long as we didn't intend to perpetuate oppression, then our actions don't count as oppressive and we don't need to take responsibility for them. We then tend to spend a great deal of energy explaining to the minoritized group why our behavior is not oppressive at all. This invalidates minoritized experiences while enabling us to deny responsibility for the impact of our behavior in both the immediate interaction and the broader, historical context.

Finally, this dismissal allows dominant group members to project the problem outward onto minoritized groups and their allies while simultaneously minimizing it—the problem now belongs to the minoritized group and they themselves create it by taking life too seriously. According to this reasoning, it isn't really an issue at all; the minoritized group itself could easily solve oppression by simply getting over it and moving on. From a critical social justice perspective, this is the equivalent of the dominant group telling the minoritized group to accept their oppression.

The life and activism of Nora Bernard (Figure 9.1) illustrate the impact of oppression and minoritized groups' struggles for justice.
Nora Bernard was a Canadian Mi'kmaw activist, member of the Millbrook First Nation, and survivor of the residential school in Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia.

She testified before a House of Commons Committee in 2005 saying, “Sexual and physical abuse was not the only abuse that the survivors experienced in these institutions. Abuses included such things as being incarcerated through no fault of their own; the introduction of child labor; the withholding of proper food, clothing, and proper education; the loss of language and culture; and no proper medical attention.”

She initiated and won the largest class action lawsuit in Canadian history, on behalf of over 80,000 survivors of the Canadian residential school system. After 12 years of tireless activism on the part of Bernard and others, the federal government settled the suit, conservatively estimated at between 3 and 5 billion dollars. She received her compensation check for $14,000 in 2007.

Nora Bernard was posthumously awarded the Order of Nova Scotia in 2008.

Source: http://www.danielnpaul.com/scan_image/NoraBernard.jpg

Reasoning That If Choice Is Involved It Can’t Be Oppression

- “It’s not oppression if people choose to participate.”
- “Women in those videos could just say no; they’re getting paid and choose to enact those scenes.”

The discourse of “choice” is pervasive in dominant society. Much like individualism, “choice” claims that we are each free to participate in any opportunities made available to us. In the example of music videos, this argument claims that the women in the videos are adults, they are getting paid, and they could choose not to participate if they had a problem with the videos. Further, we can just choose not to watch the video if we have a problem with it.

While choice is important in all social exchanges, the choice discourse shifts the focus away from a big-picture understanding of injustice and toward an individual explanation. Were we instead to account for the structural forces shaping what choices are available to us, we might ask questions such as: What other opportunities to earn a living wage in the music industry do young women have? What opportunities do young women have to participate in this industry without furthering the same sexist plots? In other words, if they choose to say no, could they still work? The discourse of choice diverts our attention away from structural oppression by placing responsibility wholly in the hands of (in this example) individual young women. And when there are rewards for conformity (such as conform and earn a salary, or don’t conform and don’t earn a salary), how much choice is really on the table? Further, only a very limited pool of traditionally attractive women have the choice to star in these videos at all.

It may be worthy of reflection to consider in which contexts we see women’s choices about how to use their bodies as free, and in which contexts we see those choices as up for debate. For example, in the context of music or porn video, many argue that a woman has the right to use her body in any way that she chooses. In this context, the politics surrounding her choice (such as limited economic opportunities for women) are stripped away. But in the context of other kinds of choices, such as reproductive choice, it is often argued that a woman should not have choice. What is considered her individual choice over her body in one context is considered open for public debate in another. This indicates that there are more institutional interests surrounding how women use their bodies than mere individual free choice would imply. Still, regardless of the choices of the individual women that star in them, the industry markets these videos to all of us, and we are all affected by their virtually unavoidable circulation throughout the culture.

Positioning Social Justice Education as Something “Extra”

- “We have to prepare students for the test; that’s just the way it is.”
- “Dealing with social justice in the classroom (or workplace) takes time away from the real work we have to do.”

We often hear this rationale for inaction in school contexts wherein teachers explain that they wish they had time to “deal with” social justice but they have to deal with the curriculum first, and there just isn’t time in the day to do everything. Because dominant institutions in society are positioned as being neutral, challenging social injustice within them seems to be an extra task in addition to our actual tasks.

Yet, as we have argued, the way we act in the world is based on how we perceive the world. Our worldviews are not neutral; they are shaped by particular ideas about how the world is or ought to be. For example, if you believe that we are all unique human beings, that our group memberships are irrelevant, and that the best remedy for injustice is to attempt to see everyone as an individual, then that perspective will be visible in everything you teach and how you teach it.

If, on the other hand, you believe that our group memberships are important, that different groups have different levels of access to resources, that this
inequitable access is shaped by institutional forces, and that we have agency to positively influence those institutions for the betterment of everyone, then that too will be evident in everything you teach.

Although it does take ongoing study and practice before a social justice framework will fundamentally shape your work, to decide not to take on this commitment does not mean you are being neutral. Indeed, to decide not to take on this commitment is to actively support and reproduce the inequitable status quo. When we have developed a critical social justice consciousness, it is evident in all that we do and no longer seen as “outside our job description.”

**Using Guilt to Excuse Inaction**

- “I feel so bad and I don’t know what to do.”
- “This is all just a guilt trip.”

When we begin to realize that contrary to what we have always believed, categories of difference (such as gender, race, class, and ability), rather than merit alone, do matter and significantly shape our perspectives, experiences, opportunities, and outcomes, we can feel overwhelmed. These feelings are part of the process of understanding oppression and injustice, and it’s normal to feel frustrated when answers don’t come easily. But it’s important that these feelings be only temporary and don’t become an excuse to avoid action, because when we are in the dominant group, guilt that results in paralysis is rooted in privilege. In other words, paralysis due to guilt ultimately protects our positions and holds oppression in place. Consider the collective impact of wealthy people who benefit from classism claiming, “I feel so overwhelmed by my wealth, I don’t know what to do,” or of men who benefit from sexism claiming, “I feel so overwhelmed by men’s domination of every social institution, I don’t know what to do,” or of White people who benefit from racism claiming, “I feel so overwhelmed by my unearned privileges, I don’t know what to do.”

Another way that paralysis manifests is by waiting for instructions before acting. Our students often lament that they are being told about all of the problems but not given any solutions. Yet the desire to jump to the “end” or to the answers can be a way to avoid the hard work of self-reflection and reeducation that is required of us.

This lament can also work as a way to rationalize inaction: “If you can’t tell me what to do, then I don’t have to do anything.” But the solutions are not simple formulas that can be applied by anyone in any situation; they are dependent upon the specific context and social position of the person undertaking them. Knowing the privileges and limitations afforded by your group positions is the most powerful first step in evaluating how you might act. Further, it is also important that we don’t focus solely on an individualistic approach; critical social justice action is already underway and we need to take the initiative to find out what is happening in our community (schools, workplaces, non-profit organizations) and get involved.

In the concluding chapter we offer some concrete suggestions for what one can do, but we encourage our readers to remember that the best antidote to guilt is action.

**Discussion Questions**

1. How would the authors respond to the rebuttal, “So, I have to watch everything I say?”
2. Which of the rebuttals have you felt yourself (or perhaps still feel)? Which is the most challenging for you and why? If you could speak back to yourself with the voice of the authors, how would you counter the rebuttal?
3. Pick two rebuttals and discuss the contexts in which you have heard them (or variations of them). Using the concepts explained in this book, how might you respond to this rebuttal were it to be raised again in your presence? What challenges might there be in responding in a public context (such as a meeting at school or in the workplace), and how will you meet these challenges?

**Extension Activities**

1. a. The following are common suggestions people make for achieving an equitable climate:
   - Respect people
   - Treat everyone equally
   - Don’t take things personally
   - Don’t judge anyone
   - Don’t see color

   In small groups, see if you can come to consensus on describing what each of these would look like in action. Be sure that your description includes indicators that would allow anyone to know it when they saw it in action.