

**Gender and Race, Work and Public Policy**  
**Mindy Fried, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Spring 2005**

**Course Description:**

While the majority of women work for pay, they also remain the primary caregivers for their young children and their elderly parents. Women continue to earn, on average, less than men, and occupational segregation persists, in which women predominate in select professions or in lower status positions within their professions. For women of color, these dynamics are exacerbated by the intersection of racial and gender bias. This course will provide students with an analytic framework to understand the roles that gender and race play in defining the work worlds of women and men in our society, including ways in which gender intersects with race and class. It will also look at specific workplace-related policies through a gender/race lens, including welfare policy, comparable worth, affirmative action, parental leave policy, child care policy and working time policies. We will investigate ways in which these policies address gender and racial inequities, and think critically about mechanisms for change.

We will use texts, articles, films, an audio tape and theater.

**Course Requirements:**

Students are expected to complete the weekly readings prior to class, to attend all classes and to participate in discussion. The course grades are based on class participation (10%), response papers/presentations (20%), a 10-page research/policy paper that involves library or field research (40%), and a final paper/presentation in which students explore strategies for change (30%). (See pages 6-8 of the syllabus for further detail regarding course requirements.)

**Required Readings:**

Albelda, Randy and Chris Tilly. 1997. *Glass Ceilings and Bottomless Pits: Women's Work, Women's Poverty*. Boston: South End Press.

Fried, Mindy. 1998. *Taking Time: Parental Leave Policy and Corporate Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Neely, Barbara. 1993. *Blanche on the Lam*. New York: Penguin Books.

**In addition, the majority of assigned articles are online at the following class website:**  
<http://stellar.mit.edu/S/course/11/sp05/11.237/>

The remaining articles are on reserve in the Rotch Library. Please note that articles on reserve in Roche Library have an asterisk next to them. (See the Reading Packet list at the end of the syllabus for a complete list of articles.)

**PART I: WORK IN AMERICA: SETTING THE CONTEXT**

**Week 1: February 7**

**A. Introduction: Economic and political context**

Film: *Rosie the Riveter*

**Week 2: February 14**

**B. Historical Background: How did we get here?**

Reading: Amott and Matthei, "Whatever Your Fight, Don't Be Ladylike" (ch. 5)  
Amott and Matthei, "We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible" (ch. 6)

### **C. Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Race**

Reading: Collins, "Toward a New Vision: Race, Class and Gender"  
Connell, R.W. (1987) "Sex Role Theory" in Gender and Power  
West, Candace and Don Zimmerman, "Doing Gender" in Lorber and Farrell, eds.,  
The Social Construction of Gender.

Play reading: "Gut Girls" by Sarah Daniel

**Note: Students "play the roles" of the characters – women slaughterhouse workers in 19<sup>th</sup> century England – reading two acts of this play aloud, and then using gender theories in a discussion of the characters and their interactions. (See one-page gender theory hand-out at end of syllabus.)**

## **PART II. GENDER, WORK AND FAMILY**

**Week 3: February 22 (on Tuesday, because of Monday holiday)**  
**Gender strategies to balance work and family**

Reading: \* Hochschild, *The Second Shift*, excerpt  
Chira, "Drum Beat"

Audio: "The Connection: The War Over Working Mothers"

**Week 4: February 28**  
**The Squeeze at the Bottom: Poor women and families in the U.S.**

Reading: Albelda, Randy and Chris Tilly, *Glass Ceilings and Bottomless Pits: Women's Work, Women's poverty* (chapters 1-5)  
Neely, Blanche on the Lam  
Murray, Charles, "White Popular Wisdom," in Losing Ground

## **PART III: GENDER, WORK AND FAMILY POLICY**

**Week 5: March 7**  
**Structural inequities in the labor force**

Reading: England, Paula, "Sex Gap in Pay," in Dunn, Dana, Workplace/Women's Place.  
Higgenbotham, Elizabeth, "Black Professional Women: Job Ceilings and Employment Sectors" in Dunn.

\* Reskin, Barbara. (1990) *Job Queues, Gender Queues*, Part I, chaps 5 (Pharmacy), 7 (Bank Management), 8 (Systems Analysts), and 12 (Bartending).

Hanson, S. and Pratt, G. (1995). "Employer Practices, Local Labor Markets and Occupational Segregation" in Hanson and Pratt, Gender, Work and Space (ch. 6)

Films: "The Occupation: A Film About the Harvard Living Wage Sit-In"

**Week 6: March 14**  
**Government Policy**

Reading: Nelson, B. (1990) "The Origins of the Two-Channel Welfare State: Workmen's Compensation and Mother's Aid" in L. Gordon, ed., Women, State and Welfare (ch. 5).  
Grossman, et al, "Family Policy in Massachusetts: A Call to Action" in Journal of Progressive Human Services, vol. 2, no.1, 1991.  
Misra, Joya, "Mothers or Workers? The Value of Women's Labor: Women and the Emergence of Family Allowance Policy" in Gender and Society, vol. 12, no. 4, 8/98.  
Albelda and Tilly, Glass Ceilings and Bottomless Pits: Women's Work  
Women's Poverty (chs 6 and 7)

***Paper Prospectus due.***

**March 21: Spring Vacation**

## ***PART IV: IN THE WORKPLACE AND THE LABOR MARKET***

**Week 7: March 28**

**Macro to Micro: Intersection of Race and Gender in the Workplace**

Reading: Burnham, Margaret, "The Supreme Court Appointment Process and the Politics of Race and Sex"

Film: Strange Justice

**Week 8: April 4**

**Contested Solutions: Comparable Worth and Affirmative Action**

**9a. Comparable Worth**

Reading: Amott and Matthei, "Comparable Worth, Incomparable Pay"  
Blum, "Possibilities and Limits of Comparable Worth"  
Blum, "Tough Politics: The Comparable Worth Movement"

Simulated role play: Public hearing on comparable worth, with city officials hearing testimony from group of advocates for comparable worth legislation.

***Research/Policy Paper due.***

**Week 9: April 11**

**9.b. Affirmative Action**

Reading: Farley, "What is Affirmative Action?"  
Yates, "Civil Wrongs," excerpt  
Berry, "Affirmative Action: Why we need it, why it is under attack"  
Reskin. (1998). The realities of affirmative action in employment. ASA

**April 14 (Thursday night panel)**

**Panel presentation: Addressing Race and Gender Issues in Nonprofit organizations**

Speaker: Susan Fleishman, Executive Director of Cambridge Community Television

## **PART V: DOMESTIC AND EUROPEAN WORK/FAMILY POLICIES: THE RESPONSIBILITY OF GOVERNMENT, PRIVATE SECTOR OR INDIVIDUALS?**

**Week 10: April 25**

**Child Care Policy:**

**Field Trip to State House with Marta Rosa, early care and education specialist**

**Note: Students meet with state legislators to talk about child care policy**

Readings: Casper, L.M., "Who's Minding Our Preschoolers?" Current Population Report, Series P 70-62. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/childcare.html>  
Hofferth, S. and Wissoker, D. "Price, Quality and Income in Child Care Choice." Journal of Human Resources, 27(1), 70-111.  
Joffe, C. (1983). "Why the United States Has No Child Care Policy" in Diamond, ed., Families, Politics and Public Policy.

**Week 11: May 2**

**Leave policies and policies that address overwork**

Reading: Fried, Mindy, Taking Time: Parental Leave Policy and Corporate Culture

Jacobs, Jerry and Kathleen Gerson, "Do Americans Feel Overworked?: Comparing Ideal and Actual Working Time" in Work and Family: Research Informing Policy, (eds.) Toby Parcel and Daniel Cornfield, 1999.

Golden, Lonnie, "Flexible Schedules: Who Gets Them and What are Workers Giving Up to Get Them?"

## **PART VI:**

**Week 12: May 9**

**Work in the 21st Century: Pressure Points for Change**

*Final paper presentations in debate format*

## **COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**

- ***Attendance and Participation***

The success of this course is dependent on ongoing, active student participation. I will usually lecture at the beginning of each class to provide a framework for understanding the topic and the readings, but the class will revolve around student interaction, and not lectures.

Because of the centrality of active class participation, you are expected to attend every class period. Your absence would be missed by all, since your presence is critical for the lively exchange of ideas. Attendance is taken into consideration in figuring your Class Participation grade. (Participation accounts for 10% of your grade. Excessive absences—missing more than two classes—will negatively affect your overall grade.)

- ***Response Papers/Presentations***

For two class days you will serve, along with one or two other students, as a "responder." You will prepare a brief (one- to two-page, typewritten, double-spaced) analysis of a central issue or argument in that day's reading and how it relates to a gendered analysis of work (and policy, where relevant). In addition, you will prepare two questions for class discussion, based on that

reading. While the instructor will assume the major responsibility for facilitating the class discussions, you will present your written analysis and your questions, and they will be used as part of the basis for class discussion. (Each paper/presentation accounts for 10% of your grade, or 20% total.)

- ***One-page reaction papers***

On the weeks that you are not the official “responder/presenter,” you will bring a one-page “reaction paper” to class, which should be your thoughtful reaction to the week’s readings. Please bring two copies, one for the instructor and the other for the “responders” of the week. The purpose of these reaction papers is to help you process what you have read, as well as facilitate the conversation. I will read your reaction papers and return them the following week. I will also ask the “responders” of the week to read their classmates’ reaction papers and offer responses. These reaction papers will *not* be graded.

- ***10-page research/policy paper***

This paper can be fun to write! You can work on this paper alone or in pairs; it’s your choice. Choose from the following options (or suggest your own idea, which we can discuss):

1. Select a workplace policy or benefit that potentially supports employees to balance their work and family responsibilities/needs. Critically review the research in this area. What have you learned from the findings of these studies? What are the strengths and limitations of these studies (e.g., their methods)? Where are the gaps in information about the policy/benefit? If you were to design a study, what else would you want to know about the policy/benefit? Possible examples of workplace policies/benefits are: employer-sponsored child care, union-initiated work-family policies/programs, flexible work arrangements (e.g., flextime, telecommuting, job sharing, part-time work), and parental leave policy.
2. Examine workplace policies in another country that offer a contrast to the U.S. Critically review the research done on these issues, using a gender lens in your analysis. Compare and contrast with policies and practices in the United States. Identify some of the reasons why the two countries’ policies are similar/different. Possible countries to explore include: Sweden, Germany, France, and the U.K.
3. Research a piece of work-related legislation that is pending or has already passed. Describe the legislation, analyze it from a gender perspective. Describe the forces in favor and opposed to it, articulate their positions, and provide any insight regarding how their ideologies inform their stance on the legislation. Does the legislation go far enough? Does it go too far? Share your opinion about it. Finally, provide an analysis regarding the implications of this legislation.

Examples of legislation you might select include: welfare legislation (e.g., Transition Assistance for Needy Families), parental leave legislation (e.g., Family and Medical Leave Act, Baby UI), child care legislation (e.g., ABC), etc.

4. Select a controversial work-related issue (e.g., welfare reform, child care, parental leave, occupational health and safety). Identify 4 individuals you will interview who have strong opinions about this issue, including strategies for change. Make sure that your interviewees reflect a range of perspectives and social locations (e.g., legislators, advocates, consumers, government official). Design questions you will use to interview them; conduct the interviews (between 30-60 minutes per individual); analyze the findings (organize the findings by themes); and write a paper that pulls

the material together. Your final paper will synthesize their views, as well as include your perspective on the issue, and what you have learned overall from this process. Some questions you might explore may include the following: What are their positions and in what venues do they express these opinions (e.g., legislature, media)? What rationale do they give for their opinions/beliefs? What activities have they taken to create change (e.g., legislative, public education)?

A paper prospectus is due on due **March 12<sup>th</sup>**. This prospectus should describe what you plan to write about and a general outline of your paper. The prospectus will not be graded! It is simply an opportunity for you to get feedback from the instructor about your ideas. I will give you written commentary, offering you suggestions about how to proceed. You are welcome to make an appointment with me to discuss this paper as well.

The final paper is due **April 2<sup>nd</sup>**. (This paper accounts for 40% of your grade.)

- ***Final Paper (10-12 pages) and Presentation: Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Pressure Points for Change***

What is the most powerful strategy (or strategies) for improving the lives of women and men both in and outside of the workplace? Should the government provide universal policies that create a floor of opportunity for all? Should the market (e.g., the private sector) be responsible for these policies? What should the role of workers be, either as individuals or via organized labor?

For the final paper, you will select one or more strategies for creating gender equity in the workplace (e.g., government policies, private sector initiatives, labor as initiator of change, individuals as initiators of change). You can either work alone or in pairs. Write a 10-12 page paper, arguing why this strategy (strategies) are necessary, drawing upon material covered throughout the semester (use examples). (It does not necessarily have to reflect your opinion, but you must provide a convincing argument).

On the final day of class, we will have a debate in which the various perspectives will be presented. (This paper and presentation accounts for 30% of your grade.)

## **I LOOK FORWARD TO WORKING WITH YOU THIS SEMESTER!**

### **Reading Packet Gender, Work and Public Policy**

Please note: Articles to be placed in the Roche Library on reserve have an asterisk next to them (\*). All others will be online via e-reserves.

1. Anderson, Margaret (1993). "Women and Work," in Thinking about Women, p. 101-109 in Anderson, Margaret (1993). Thinking About Women: Sociological Perspectives on Sex and Gender, Third Edition. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
2. Amott and Matthei, "Whatever Your Fight, Don't Be Ladylike" (ch. 5) in Amott, Theresa and Julie Mathaei (1996). Race, Gender and Work: A Multicultural

- Economic History of Women in the United States, revised edition. Boston, MA: South End Press.
3. Amott and Matthei, "We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible" (ch. 6) in Amott, Theresa and Julie Mathaei (1996). Race, Gender and Work: A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the United States, revised edition. Boston, MA: South End Press.
  4. Lorber, "Night to His Day: The Social Construction of Gender" in Lorber, Judith (1994) Paradoxes of Gender. New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press.
  5. \* Anderson, Margaret, "Social Construction of Gender," in Thinking about Women (chapter 2) in Anderson, Margaret (1993). Thinking About Women: Sociological Perspectives on Sex and Gender, Third Edition. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
  6. Collins, Patricia Hill, "Toward a New Vision: Race, Class and Gender" in Rosenblum, Karen and T. Travis, editors (1996). The Meaning of Difference. McGraw Hill.
  7. Davies, Margery, "Women's Place is at the Typewriter" in *Radical America* 8, no. 4, July-August, 1974, 1-28.
  8. Connell, R.W., "Sex Role Theory" in Connell, R.W. (1987). Gender and Power. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
  9. West, Candace and Don Zimmerman, "Doing Gender." *Gender and Society* (1), 125-151 (1987).
  10. \* Hochschild, The Second Shift, chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 in Hochschild, Arlie (1989). The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home. New York: Viking Penguin, Inc. {NOTE: can limit to chapters 4 and/or 6 on-line}
  11. Chira, Susan, "Drum Beat" in Chira, Susan (1998). A Mothers Place: Talking the Debate About Working Mothers Beyond Guilt and Blame. HarperCollins Publishers.
  12. Murray, Charles, "White Popular Wisdom" in Murray, Charles in Murray, Charles (1984) Losing Ground. New York: Basic Books, Inc.
  13. Nelson, B., "The Origins of the Two-Channel Welfare State: Workmen's Compensation and Mother's Aid" in Gordon, Linda, editor (1990). Women, the State and Welfare. Madison: Wisconsin University Press.
  14. Sapiro, Virginia, "The Gender Basis of American Social Policy" in Gordon, Linda, Editor (1990). Women, the State and Welfare. Madison: Wisconsin University Press.
  15. Grossman, et al, "Family Policy in Massachusetts: A Call to Action" in *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, vol. 2(1) 1991, Hayworth Press, Inc.

16. Acker, "Women, Families and Public Policy in Sweden" in Acker, Joan in Ferguson, Susan, Editor (1994). Shifting the Center: Understanding Contemporary Families. California: Mayfield Publishing Companies.
17. Misra, Joya, "Mothers or Workers: The Value of Women's Labor: Women and the Emergence of Family Allowance Policy" in *Gender and Society*, vol. 12, no. 4. August, 1998, 376-399.
18. Burnham, Margaret, "The Supreme Court Appointment Process and the Politics of Race and Sex" in Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992.
19. Bane and Ellwood (1994). "Understanding Welfare Dynamics" in Bane, Mary Jo and David Ellwood (1994). Welfare Realities: From Rhetoric to Reform. Boston: Harvard University Press.
20. Harris, Kathleen Mullan, "Life After Welfare, Women, Work and Repeat Dependency" in Harris, Kathleen Mullan Harris (1996). *American Sociological Review*, vol. 61 (June: 407-426).
21. \* Anderson, Margaret, "Women and Work," p. 109-128, 132-133 in Anderson, Margaret (1993). Thinking About Women: Sociological Perspectives on Sex and Gender, Third Edition. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
22. England, Paula, "Sex Gap in Pay" in Dunn, Dana, Editor (1997). Workplace/Women's Place: An Anthology. Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company.
23. Higgenbotham, Elizabeth, "Black Professional Women: Job Ceilings and Employment Sectors" in Dunn, Dana, Editor (1997). Workplace, Women's Place. Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing.
24. \* Reskin, Barbara and Patricia Roos (1991) Job Queues, Gender Queues. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. Chapters 5 (Pharmacy), 7 (Bank Management), 8 (Systems Analysts), and 12 (Bartending).
25. Tomaskovic-Devey, D., "Segregation, Inequality and Discrimination: Extent of Sex and Racial Discrimination" and "Do People Choose Segregated Jobs?" in Tomaskovic-Devey, D. (1993). Gender and Racial Inequality at Work: The Sources and Consequences of Job Segregation. Ithaca: ILR Press Sage House.
26. Hanson, Susan and Pratt, Geraldine, "Employer Practices, Local Labor Markets and Occupational Segregation" in Hanson, Susan and Geraldine Pratt (1995). Gender, Work and Space. New York: Routledge.
27. Amott and Mattei, "Comparable Worth, Incomparable Pay" in *Radical America* 18 (5): 21-28 (1984).
28. Blum, "Possibilities and Limits of Comparable Worth" in Dunn, Dana Editor (1997). Workplace, Women's Place. Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing.

29. Blum, "Tough Politics: The Comparable Worth Movement" in Blum, Linda (1991). Between Feminism and Labor: The Significance of the Comparable Worth Movement. California: The University of California Press.
30. Farley, "What is Affirmative Action?" in Farley, John (1987) The Future of Majority-Minority Relations in the United States. Oakland, CA: Institute for Contemporary Studies Press.
31. Yates, Steven, "Civil Wrongs," in Yates, Steven (1994) Civil Wrongs: What Went Wrong with Affirmative Action. NJ: Prentice Hall.
32. Berry, Mary Frances, "Affirmative Action: Why we need it, why it is under attack" in Curry, George and Cornel West (1996) The Affirmative Action Debate. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
33. Reskin (1998). "The realities of affirmative action in employment," "The Effects of Affirmative Action on Other Stakeholders," and "Conclusion and Policy Implications." Washington, D.C.: American Sociological Association.
34. Badgett, M.V. Lee (1995). "The Wage Effects of Sexual Orientation Discrimination" in *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, vol. 48, no.4 (July 1995).
35. Hofferth, Sandra and Douglas Wissoker "Price, Quality and Income in Child Care Choice" in *Journal of Human Resources*, 27 (1): 70-111 (1992).
36. Joffe, Carol (1983). "Why the United States Has No Child Care Policy" in Diamond, Irene (1983) Families, Politics and Public Policy: A Feminist Dialogue on Women and the State. New York: Longman.
37. Golden, Lonnie (2000). "Flexible Schedules: Who Gets Them and What are Workers Giving Up to Get Them?" Working Paper #00-04. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University.
38. Drago, Bob (2000). "Time for Their Own: The Individual and Workplace Sources of Teachers' Time with their Children in the U.S." Working Paper #00-05. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University.
39. Jerry Jacobs and Kathleen Gerson, "Do Americans Feel Overworked? Comparing Ideal and Actual Working Time," in Toby Parcel and Daniel Cornfield, Eds., Work & Family: Research Informing Policy, CA: Sage Publications, 2000.

## **Brief Definitions of Theories**

### **Biological Determinism**

The behavior of men and women is determined by their chromosomes, hormones, and their genitals and reproductive organs. There are significant sex/gender differences based on the "fact" that women and men are biologically different. These differences result in a number of critical

differences in the nature of how men and women behave and what they are able to achieve/accomplish.

By nature, women are inherently more passive, nurturant, caring and emotional, all of which handicaps them in achieving responsible work-related positions (e.g., managerial positions or public office). They are meant to be mothers, in the domestic sphere, "in the home." In fact, they are much better at caregiving than men. They are victims of their "raging hormones," which on a monthly schedule, makes them less capable.

By nature, men are inherently more aggressive, more competitive, more capable, more rational, smarter...than women. Because of their hormonal make-up, they have a tendency to be more violent than women, and are more sexually promiscuous than women. Because they are more rational than women, they are more able to take on major responsibilities in their jobs. Because they are better workers than women, they should be paid more money. Men's place is in the world, in public affairs, etc.

### **Sex Role Theory**

Women and men fulfill a set of expectations in relation to existing social roles. These expectations determine their actions, behaviors. Being a woman or man means enacting a social role that defines one's sex (e.g., sex role). Women's and men's behaviors are different because they respond to different social expectations from the various individuals and social institutions they encounter.

The behavior of individuals is controlled by positive and negative sanctions which flow from social interaction. The social roles of "man" and woman" are viewed as complementary, rather than reflecting any power relationship between men and women. The "female role" and the "male role" are tacitly treated as equal. All women are put into the category of woman; all men are in the category of men.

What is normative (based on social expectations) is also considered what is standard, the way all people live. When people behave outside of "the norm," they are considered deviant. Sex roles can be changed, but this requires a change in the expectations of women and men. In the context of paid work, expectations of women and men are different, based on gendered social norms, and considered complementary in nature.

### **Social constructionist perspective**

There are gender imbalances in our everyday world that are reinforced and reproduced in our social institutions. Class and race intersects with gender as it influences the opportunity structures available to women and men, and the interactions between women and men.

Gender also systematically functions at broader levels, within social institutions (e.g., work), and within the structure of our economic system. The roles that women and men find themselves are NOT determined by their biological functions or physiological beings; rather, they are created within the social world. People actively "do gender" (West and Zimmerman); that is, they behave based on norms of what is appropriate for women/men, and in so doing, actually reinforce or reproduce notions of gender. This is reinforced by the world around them, via social and economic structures that reflect gendered norms.

### **Interlocking structures of oppression (Patricia Hill Collins)**

Race, class and gender are categories of analysis that are essential in helping us understand the structural bases of domination and subordination. "Additive analyses" of oppression rank individuals by their experience of dominance and subordination – assuming that oppression can be quantified and that some oppressions are worse than others. But this approach doesn't recognize that race, class and gender function as parallel and interlocking systems of domination and subordination. Gender/race/class oppression is maintained at three dimensions:

- Institutional oppression, in which systemic relationships of domination and subordination is structured within social institutions like schools and in the workplace. While these institutions may profess equal opportunities, race/class/gender biases affect opportunity structures (people have “varying degrees of penalty and privilege”).
- Symbolic dimension of oppression, in which stereotypes or controlling images are used to define diverse race, class and gender groups. Symbolic images of these groups interact to maintain systems of domination and subordination (e.g., black women viewed as mammy, the matriarch; white men viewed positively as aggressive in the workplace, while aggressiveness by black or Hispanic men, or by women in the workplace viewed negatively). It is critical to see how these symbolic images perpetuate stereotypes.
- Individual dimension of oppression – we all live within institutions that reproduce race/class/gender oppression and encounter images of all groups, but individual biographies vary tremendously. “Each of us carries around the cumulative effect of our lives within multiple structures of oppression”.

These three dimensions frame our opportunity structure, but we also have “agency”, or the ability to make choices and work towards change. We live in a world with varying levels of power and privilege. These differences frame our relationships. Differences in power constrain our ability to connect with one another, even when we think we’re engaged in dialogue across differences.

There may be a tendency to “rank” one’s privilege in relation to others (by class/race/gender), rather than feel compassion for others’ suffering. At the same time, those in privileged positions may not recognize the contribution of women, people of color or the poor, other than as spokespeople for their “interests” (e.g., gender, race).

People need to come together in coalitions around common causes, seeing how race/class/gender systems maintain the status quo. Essential in doing this is empathy for the experiences of others with experiences different from ourselves. The privileged are less motivated to do so, but it is essential for these individuals to have any empathy for others.