

Privilege Exercise* Based on an exercise by: Gerakina Arlene Sgoutas and colleagues,
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Purpose: to explore ways that we enjoy privileges based on being members of social identity groups in the United States. Please note that this exercise is not meant to make anyone feel guilty or ashamed of her or his privilege or lack of privilege related to any social identity categories. Rather, the exercise seeks to highlight the fact that everyone has **SOME** privilege, even as some people have more privilege than others. By illuminating our various privileges as individuals, we can recognize ways that we can use our privileges individually and collectively to work for social justice. Also note that each list is not meant to be exhaustive or comprehensive. You may think of other items that might be on a list, and that's fine. However, the idea is to offer some possible points of privilege that arise from being a member of certain social identity groups in the United States, and to invite us to reflect on the concepts of privilege and intersectionality (ways that our privileges overlap). Also, each list is meant to focus on your current status in life, which may mean that you haven't always enjoyed the privileges that you can identify today, or that you may have less privilege in a category than you once did.

Privilege Beads Exercise*

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Adapted/revised from instructions written by Dr. Thomas E. Walker, University of Denver, for Colorado Leadership for Equity, Advocacy and Discovering Social Justice

SETUP

1. Create 7 “bead stations” around the perimeter of the room, spacing them out so that multiple participants can stand around each station.
2. Place one bowl of multicolored beads at each station.
3. Post 2-3 copies of each “privilege list” above each station so that it can easily be read by several participants standing around each bowl.

(The goal of all of the above is to make it possible to move all your participants through all stations quickly and easily. Adjust as needed to your room’s layout.)

4. Explain the purpose of the exercise. For example:

We’re going to explore our privilege (one-up status) around various identities.

This is not meant to make anyone feel guilty or ashamed around having or not having particular privileges, but rather to explore how we ALL have SOME privilege, and therefore how to engage that aspect of our part in our societies.

We believe it critical for everyone to “sit in” this understanding in order to work and lead individually and collectively for social justice.

Please do not talk during this phase of the exercise. Focus only on your experience.

5. Note from BJ Allen: To create a reverent environment, play soft music in the background. I usually play native flute music.

PARTICIPANT STEPS

6. Provide each participant with a cup (into which they’ll collect their beads).
7. Point out stations around the room, explaining that:
 - Each station includes a list of 8 statements.
 - Each statement describes one possible example of privilege around that station’s system of oppression/privilege (one up-one down).
 - When instructed, please visit each station.

Please read each list carefully. As you read a list, **for every item on the list to which you can answer, “Yes,” take one bead.** As you read each item, know that while some persons in the room may be taking a bead, while others may not be. Do this for each list. When you are finished with every list, you will have a set of beads that represent your composite of privileges.

- Note that neither the stations nor the statements are meant to be exhaustive or comprehensive; these are meant to be a sampling, and a starting point for discussion given our limited time together today.
 - You might think of others that could be included or take issue with some present. Don't over-analyze the statements: our goal is to begin reflection and discussion, not nitpick definitions. If you can quickly answer "basically yes," take the bead. If your answer is "basically no," do not take a bead.
8. Once all these instructions have been given, invite participants to circulate among all 7 stations, taking one bead for each statement that basically applies to them.

Additional instructions

As participants finish collecting beads, provide them with a length of string/cord, and invite them to make some kind of jewelry/accessory for themselves with it (bracelet, anklet, necklace, broach, headband). However, let them know that this is optional, and that they do not have to use all of their beads if they decide to make an accessory.

They can continue crafting once discussion begins *so long as* they engage in the discussion as well.

DISCUSSION SUGGESTIONS

Invite participants to reflect on what it was like to focus on privilege, rather than on our oppression as we often do in diversity activities. Was it a new experience? Comfortable? Enlightening? How did it feel (actual emotion words!)?

Why is it important for us to be aware of this aspect of our identities/experience? Why don't we (have to) attend to it on a regular basis?

What does it mean for us to have multiple, intersecting identities—where we experience some privileges (around some identities) AND some oppression (around others)? What insight can this give us in connecting with others? Being patient/generous with them and ourselves? With holding ourselves and others responsible for our actions? Being allies or advocates?

What identities (systems of privilege) were not represented here today? If we had them how would that affect your "bling"?

We asked you to turn your beads into something wearable. What would it mean for you to wear this noticeably for the rest of the day? What messages could others take from your "bling"? How noticeable, to us and others, are our privileges on a daily basis? Can we and how do we hide (deny, justify, ignore) our privilege on a daily basis?

What does the collective privilege present here (all our "bling") mean for us as individual leaders? In collaboration at our own campuses? Across campuses/communities?

Our bead selection today was based on *our current experience* –here (in USA, at college, etc.) and now (today), not in where we, our families or others of our identity group have been or are. Some identities and privileges can and do change over time, for "better" or "worse"; but we are discussing the present, not past or potential.

We can't do "oppression algebra" where our oppressions and privileges across multiple identities cancel out to some 'net' oppression or privilege score! It's both/and.

Especially if you have to cut off conversation on any particular question, and/or at the end of our hour, emphasize that this activity is meant to BEGIN the larger conversations of So What and Now What.

Privilege Surveys Note: Please edit these to fit the context in which you are using the exercise (e.g., according to participants' characteristics, or based on points you'd like to stress).

Sexuality Privilege

1. I have formalized or could formalize my love relationship legally through marriage and receive the benefits that accompany marriage.
2. I can move about in public without fear of being harassed or physically attacked because of my sexuality.
3. I do not have to fear that if my family or friends find out about my sexual orientation there will be economic, emotional, physical or psychological consequences.
4. If I want to, I can easily find a religious community that will not exclude me for my sexuality.
5. No one questions the “normality” of my sexuality or believes my sexuality was “caused” by psychological trauma, sin, or abuse.
6. People don't ask why I “chose” my sexual orientation.
7. I can go for months without me or anyone else referring explicitly to my sexuality.
8. I easily can find sex education literature for couples with my sexual orientation.

Ability Privilege

1. I can assume that I will easily have physical access to any building.
2. I have never been taunted, teased, or socially ostracized due to a disability.
3. I can do well in challenging situation without being told what an inspiration I must be to other people of my ability status.
4. I can go shopping alone and expect to find appropriate accommodations to make the experience hassle-free.
5. I can hear what's going on around me without using an assistive device.
6. I can easily see the letters on this page.
7. I am reasonably certain that others do not think that my intelligence is lacking, just because of my physical status.
8. If I am fired, not given a raise, or not hired, I do not question if it had anything to do with my physical or mental ability.

Gender/Sex Privilege

1. If I have children and a successful career, few people will ask me how I balance my professional and private lives.
2. My elected representatives are mostly people of my sex. The more prestigious and powerful the elected position, the more this is true.
3. When I ask to see “the person in charge,” odds are I will face a person of my sex. The higher-up in the organization the person is, the surer I can be.
4. I do not have to think about the message my wardrobe sends about my sexual availability.
5. In general, I am not under much pressure to be thin or to worry about how people will respond to me if I’m overweight.
6. I will never be/was never expected to change my name upon marriage or questioned if I don’t change my name.
7. Most individuals portrayed as sexual objects in the media are not the same sex as I am.
8. Major religions in the world are led mainly by people of my sex.

Race Privilege

1. I can look at the mainstream media and find people of my race represented fairly and in a wide range of roles.
2. Schools in my community teach about my race and heritage and present it in positive ways throughout the year.
3. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or closely watched by store employees because of my race.
4. I can take a job with an employer who believes in Affirmative Action without people thinking I got my job only because of my race.
5. When I use credit cards or checks for a face-to-face transaction, I don't have to wonder whether someone will challenge my financial reliability because of my race.
6. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
7. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
8. I can consider many options -- social, political, or professional -- without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do.

Religious Privilege

1. I can assume that I will not have to work or go to school on my religious holidays.
2. I can be sure to hear music on the radio and watch specials on television that celebrate the holidays of my religion.
3. My religious views are reflected by the majority of government officials and political candidates.
4. Food that honors my religious practices can be easily found in any restaurant or grocery store.
5. Places to worship or practice my religion are numerous in my community.
6. Most people do not consider my religious practices to be “weird.”
7. Implicit or explicit references to religion where I work or go to school conform to my religious beliefs.
8. I do not need to worry about the ramifications of disclosing my religious identity to others.

Class Privilege

1. I can be sure that my social class will be an advantage when I seek medical or legal help.
2. I am reasonably sure that I or my family will not have to skip meals because we cannot afford to eat.
3. I have a savings account with at least a month's rent and bills set aside in case of emergency.
4. I have taken a vacation outside of the country within the past three years.
5. I have never been homeless or evicted from my place of living.
6. I have health insurance.
7. I don't have to rely on public transportation to travel to work or school; I can afford my own vehicle.
8. The neighborhood I live in is relatively free of obvious drug use, prostitution, and violent crime.

Nationality Privilege (U.S.)

1. When I apply for jobs, my legal right to work in this country probably will not be questioned.
2. People generally assume that I can communicate proficiently in English.
3. I have never been told not to speak in my native language during everyday interactions.
4. People do not assume I am poor because of my nationality.
5. The history of my country is an integrated part of the basic U.S. education curriculum.
6. People from my country are visible and positively represented in politics, business, and the media.
7. If I wanted to, I could travel freely to almost any country.
8. People where I live rarely ask me what country I'm from.