

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/his/their/zir 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 equity and 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. However, the idea is to offer and discuss 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 concept of privilege and ways that our privileges overlap.

Privilege Beads Exercise* Spring, 2018

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

MATERIALS

Privilege lists (optional: laminated)

Small beads of assorted colors

Small bowls or cups to hold beads

Small cups (3oz. disposable; one for each participant)

Cord or twine for stringing beads (optional)

SUGGESTED SETUP (revise as needed based on # of participants and the venue)

1. Create 7 “bead stations” around the room, spacing them so that multiple participants can stand at each station.

2. Place one or two bowls of multicolored beads at each station.

3. Post 2-3 copies of each “privilege list” at each station so that several participants can read them. *(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. Suggested talking points:

We’re going to explore our privilege as related to various social identities. Privilege refers to ways that individuals or groups can enjoy advantages based on their real or perceived membership in identity categories (e.g., gender, race, sexuality, nationality, religion, etc.).

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

We believe it is critical for everyone to reflect on privilege in this way in order to use our individual and collective privilege(s) for equity and social justice.

Focus only on your experience.

Please do not talk during this phase of the exercise.

(Note from BJ Allen: To create a reverent environment, play soft music in the background. I prefer Native American flute music.)

5. Provide each participant with a cup (into which they will place their beads).

6. Point out stations around the room and provide instructions:

- Each station includes a list of 7 statements related to a specific social identity.
- Each statement describes one possible example of privilege related to that category’s system of oppression and privilege, that is to say, the likelihood that an individual is might experience advantage or disadvantage.
- 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 other categories that could be included, or you might contest some of the items. Please do not over-analyze the statements: our goal is to begin reflection and discussion. If you can quickly answer “basically yes,” take the bead. If your answer is “basically no,” do not take a bead.

Also note that 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.

- Please visit each station, and read every item on each list. As you read a list, **for every item on the list to which you can answer, "Yes," take one bead.** If your answer to an item on a list is "No," do not take a bead. As you read each item, know that while some persons in the room may be taking a bead, 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 From BJ Allen: do a demonstration with one full list as if you were a participant (I recommend doing a list for which you will say "YES" to most (if not all, beads).]

Ask if anyone has questions.

7. Once you have given instructions, invite participants to circulate among the stations

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 their beads (e.g., bracelet, necklace, headband, anklet). 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 *as long as* they engage in the discussion as well.

DISCUSSION SUGGESTIONS

Invite participants to reflect on what it was like to focus on privilege and advantage, rather than on oppression or disadvantage 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 privilege as an 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? 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 collection of beads?

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 set of beads? 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 mean for us as individual leaders? In collaboration at our workplaces/campuses/communities?

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

If you have to cut off conversation on any particular question, and at the end of your allotted time, emphasize that this activity is meant to BEGIN larger conversations of What? So What? and Now What? Consider concluding by asking participants to make a commitment to act upon what they have experienced. Ask for a couple of volunteers to state their commitment. Consider stating something that you will do. Suggestions include:

Continue to learn about privilege and power.

Hold yourself accountable (in a loving way).

Create spaces for dialogue.

Request or provide training/professional development.

Educate others within your sphere of influence.

Strive for equitable structural change.

Speak up for persons who might be disadvantaged.

Share (with interested others) your experiences re: privilege and disadvantage.

Privilege Checklists

Please revise these if you would like to tailor them to your event.

Sexuality Privilege

1. I have formalized or could formalize my love relationship legally through marriage.
2. I can move about in public without fear of being harassed or physically attacked because of my sexual identity.
3. I do not have to fear negative consequences if my coworkers find out about my sexual identity.
4. If I want to, I can easily find a religious community that welcomes persons of my sexual identity.
5. No one questions the “normality” of my sexuality.
6. People don't ask me why I “chose” my sexual identity.
7. I easily can find sex education literature about my sexual identity.

Ability Privilege

1. I can assume that I will easily have physical access to any building.
2. I have never been taunted, teased, or ostracized due to a disability.
3. I can do well in a challenging situation without being told I am an inspiration because of my ability status.
4. I can go shopping alone and expect to find appropriate accommodations to make the experience hassle-free.
5. I do not have to request accommodations due to my ability status.
6. If I am not hired for a job, I do not question if it was due to my physical or mental ability.
7. Other people do not think that my mental ability is limited because of my physical ability.

Gender/Sex Privilege

1. If I have children and a successful career, few people will ask me how I balance work and home.
2. I do not have to think about the message my wardrobe sends about my sexual availability.
3. I never worry about being recognized as the sex/gender with which I identify.
4. A decision to hire me will never be based on assumptions about whether or not I might plan to have a family soon.
5. I am less likely to be sexually harassed at work than persons of other gender identities.
6. 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.
7. Major religions in the world are led mainly by people of my sex.

Race Privilege

1. Mainstream media routinely depict people of my race in a wide range of roles.
2. Children in my racial group do not need to be educated about systemic racism for their daily physical safety.
3. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
4. I can take a job without people thinking I was hired only because of my race.
5. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
6. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
7. I can go shopping without concern that store employees will monitor me because of my race.

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 that mainstream media will 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. I do not need to worry about negative consequences 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 fairly certain that I will not have to skip meals because I cannot afford to eat.
3. I have a savings account with at least a month's expenses in case of emergency.
4. In case of a medical emergency, I won't have to decide against visiting a doctor or a hospital due to economic reasons.
5. I don't **HAVE TO** rely on public transportation; I can afford my own vehicle.
6. My neighborhood is relatively free of obvious drug use, prostitution, and violent crime.
7. Most experts appearing in mass media seem to be from my social class.

Nationality/Citizenship Privilege (U.S.)

1. If I apply for a job, my legal right to work in this country probably will not be questioned.
2. I will never be denied housing in the U.S. due to my citizenship.
3. I can go into any bank and set up a checking account without fear of discrimination.
4. I can be reasonably sure that if I need legal or medical assistance, my citizenship status will not matter.
5. I do not fear that my employer will threaten me with deportation.
6. If I wanted to, I could travel freely to almost any country and be admitted back into the U.S.
7. If I were a victim of a crime, I wouldn't think twice about seeking police assistance due to my citizenship status.