

Privilege Beads 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 their 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. The idea is to offer and discuss 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.

Options for implementing the exercise are: one facilitator, or a main facilitator plus facilitators for small group discussions.

Privilege Beads Exercise November 2022

Brenda J. Allen, Professor Emerita

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 privilege lists, # of participants and the venue) Recommended room setup - round tables to accommodate 5-7 people at each

1. Create “bead stations” (one for each privilege list) around the room, spacing them so that multiple participants can stand at each station. If space is limited, display lists side by side on one or two long rectangular tables.
2. Place one or two bowls of multicolored beads at each station or in front of each list at long tables.
3. Post 2-3 copies of each “privilege list” at each station so that several participants can read them. For long tables that are wide enough, place a copy of each list on both sides of the table. *(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. Lead facilitator: 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.).
Please note that this exercise is not meant to make anyone feel guilty or ashamed of their privilege or lack of privilege related to any identity or experience. Rather, the exercise seeks to highlight the fact that everyone has **some** privilege, even as some people have more than others. By illuminating our own various privileges, we can recognize ways that we can use our privileges personally and collectively to work for social justice. We believe that this is a critically important reflection on how we come into such work.
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 privilege and oppression, that is to say, the likelihood that an individual might experience advantage or disadvantage because of that identity.
 - 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: do a demonstration with one or two full lists as if you were a participant. I recommend doing a list for which you will say "YES" and one to which you will say "NO" to most (if not all, beads).]

Ask if anyone has questions.

Ask them to please not talk during this phase of the exercise.

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

Additional instructions

Optional: To create a reverent environment, play soft music in the background.

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 string them.

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

DISCUSSION SUGGESTIONS

One facilitator leads the discussion with the whole group, or assign a facilitator to each table to lead small group discussions (see below for instructions for table facilitators).

Discussion Comments and Prompts (revise as needed depending on time and whether or not there's a single facilitator)

Sole facilitator or Main facilitator:

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.

Invite participants to pause and 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.

- How did it feel to do this exercise (actual emotion words!)?
- For which list(s) did you have the most privilege? How do you feel about that?
- For which list(s) did you have the least privilege (if any?). How do you feel about that?

Inform participants that they do not have to refer to their specific responses in terms of social identity categories unless they would like to share.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS (whole group – led by facilitator, or small groups with facilitators):

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, overlapping 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?

Optional: What identities (systems of privilege) were not represented here today? If we had them, how would that affect your collection of beads?

What does the collective privilege present here mean for us as individuals? In collaboration at our workplaces/campuses/communities? [If the participants are from a single context, ask them: What does the collective privilege present here mean for us as (employees, colleagues, students, etc.)? How can we use our privilege to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion?

Conclude Exercise

Sole facilitator or Main facilitator:

OPTIONAL: We asked you to turn your beads into something tangible that you could wear or display. What would it mean for you to wear or show 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?

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.

Table Facilitator's Guide

The goal of the discussion is to allow participants to process the experience. Your role is to direct the discussion by providing prompts and striving to allow each person opportunities to contribute. Please do not share your responses to any of the questions or prompts. To optimize understanding, feel free to paraphrase or to ask clarifying questions.

Introduce yourself. Ask participants to introduce themselves: name and any other relevant info. Refer to **DISCUSSION PROMPTS** above to lead the discussion. At the end of the allotted time, thank them for participating.

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 sexual identity.
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 at work or school 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 I have a physical disability.

Cisgender Privilege

1. I'm never concerned about being recognized as the gender with which I identify.
2. My gender is always listed as an option on forms.
3. I do not worry about being denied services because my gender presentation doesn't seem to align with information on my ID.
4. I'm confident I'll be able to use a public bathroom without fear of verbal abuse, physical intimidation, or being arrested due to my gender identity.
5. Strangers call me by the name I provide, and don't ask what my "real name" [birth name] is based on my gender.
6. My gender validity is not based on how well I "pass" as non-transgender (i.e., look and sound like I'm a member of my gender identity group).
7. I do not have to worry that my gender expression will make people around me uncomfortable.

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.

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 status.
3. I can go into any bank and set up a checking account without fear of discrimination due to my nationality.
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.