

Privilege Beads Exercise
Utilized in AFAM 397/SOCY 398: Unpacking Whiteness

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Submitted by:

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INSTRUCTOR NOTES

The aim of this exercise is to assist students' awareness of white privilege in relation to the other privileges experienced based on being members of certain social identity groups in the United States. Beyond demonstrating the complexity and intersections of privilege and highlighting the fact that everyone has some form of privilege, this exercise forces students to walk in another's shoes momentarily and think about how privilege may or may not operate outside their own lived experiences. This exercise is most effective if students already have a clear understanding of their own privileges generally.

EXERCISE PREPARATION

1. Create "Privilege Lists" (see below) of statements of privileges that come with holding a given status for each social status and identity (i.e., race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, citizenship, religion). Leave the status label off the list for the exercise.
2. Write as many vignettes as you have students to capture various degrees of privilege that are covered by the various privilege lists. These may be adjusted depending on the makeup of the classroom and the focus of the class. For example, in my "Unpack Whiteness" class composed primarily of students of Color, many vignettes were from a white perspective to help them better understand white privilege relative to other forms.
3. Example vignettes:

Jessica is a 26-year-old white woman from Philly. She and her fiancé, Steven, enjoy bicycling along the river near their house on the weekend, as well as going to church together. They both work for IBM, Jessica as an engineer and her fiancé as a janitor. They want to get married in Jessica's hometown Catholic church. When they went in for marriage counseling the pastor refused to marry them citing that he did not feel like

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they were financially ready to get married and that Jessica would likely end up having to cover a majority of the household bills which he did not agree with.

Tyler is a 35-year-old white man living in Miami. He married his high school sweetheart in their hometown Baptist church and has two children with his wife of 10 years. He went into the military after playing 3 years of major league baseball and his wife is a pilot. He is currently in rehabilitation with veterans' affairs after losing an arm to an improvised explosive device. He applied to be his son's little league coach but was turned down for the position. The man who got the coaching job works out of town, so he often cancels practice. Tyler does not understand why he was not offered the job.

Claire is a 20-year-old college sophomore. She came to the United States from Italy when she was ten. She likes to workout with her girlfriend and enjoys playing football, which she learned to play when she was a kid from her three brothers. She was the first girl to play on her high school football team and her junior college football team. Her new university welcomes her to tryout, and she makes the team. But the rest of the guys refuse to train with her and after the fifth game of the season with no playing time she considers quitting even though she really loves the game.

Linda just turned 40 and for the past few years she has been transitioning from male to female, although she has not had gender reassignment surgery because she can't afford it. She just moved from Connecticut to Texas after renouncing the Catholic church who said they did not support her transition. She recently got a new job as a day care manager. She is fully living as woman and did not disclose that she had recently transitioned. A coworker accidentally walked in on her going to the bathroom and reported her to higher management. Linda was immediately terminated for lying on her application about her "true" sex.

4. All vignettes may not capture every identity. However, students may be instructed to fill in missing identity components and make assumptions about the missing statuses. Again, vignettes should be crafted with the class dynamics and the overall purpose of the exercise in mind.

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EXERCISE SETUP

1. Create “bead stations” for every identity status 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 a “privilege list” above each station so that it can easily be read by several students standing around each bowl. The goal is to make it possible to move all your students 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 the concept of privilege around various identities from other people’s perspectives. This is not meant to make anyone feel guilty or ashamed around having or not having particular privileges one’s self. Furthermore, it is not meant to capture all identities or the privileges and challenges that come with those identities. Instead, it is meant to demonstrate the complexities of identities, status, and privilege and how having certain privileges, particularly white privilege, may hinder an individual from recognizing their privileges in society or the struggles of more marginalized groups.

5. Students will randomly draw a vignette. Instruct them to carefully read the scenario and imagine what it would be like to be this individual. This is when students can be instructed to imagine any missing components of their person’s identity.
6. Provide each student with a pipe cleaner, sting, or cup to collect their beads. (I prefer a pipe cleaner because they are easy to manipulate and clearly demonstrate the quantity of beads.)
7. Point out the 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 (status/identity).
 - 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. 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.

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- 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 students to circulate among all 7 stations, taking one bead for each statement that basically applies to them as the person described in their vignette.

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DISCUSSION SUGGESTIONS

Invite students to reflect on what it was like to focus on privilege, rather than on oppression as we often do in diversity activities. Was it a new experience? Comfortable? Enlightening? How did it feel?

What was it like stepping into another's lived experience? Was it hard to imagine? How did their imagined life compare to your own?

Why is it important for us to be aware of this aspect of 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?

How does this exercise inform our understanding of others' perceptions and behaviors?

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

Turn your pipe cleaner beads into a bracelet. 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 about others? Their behaviors? Our interactions with them?

Remember this exercise is a starting point to discuss the depth and significance of (white) privilege in history, social structure, institutions, identities, and everyday interactions with others. This is meant to start a larger conversation of "so what?" and "what now?"

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EXAMPLE PRIVILEGE LISTS

(Note: It is suggested the label of the identities be left off for the actual exercise)

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.