

Talking About Race and Privilege Lesson Plan for Middle and High School Students

To accommodate the diversity of school and teacher schedules, this lesson can be presented over multiple class periods or sessions. Teachers and others who will be facilitating this lesson are encouraged to make meaningful connections to other topics being covered in their classes or school curricula (i.e., literature that discusses discrimination or civics/history lessons) as well as relevant current events both in their local communities and throughout the United States.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Define the concept of privilege.
- Identify and express examples of privilege in their lives or the world in which they live.

Large Group Lecture

Directions: Instructors may use the lecture notes below to guide a presentation to students about the basic concept of privilege. The information below will also guide the activities that are included in the lesson plan. The warm-up activity, "[Privilege Walking Lesson Plan](#)," might be helpful to introduce the topic. A link is included at the end of the lesson plan.

It is important for teachers and facilitators to be aware of the myriad emotions students could express as a result of this lesson. For example, some may become overtly emotional, defensive, angry, or even happy. To best manage these responses, we recommend that those who will be delivering these lessons have already established positive rapport with their students. Especially if the lesson will take place after a crisis incident related to privilege, the instructor may want to enlist the support of a co-instructor or cofacilitator. Instructors and facilitators are encouraged to monitor students' emotional states throughout the lesson.

Very importantly, instructors and facilitators should help students to understand that everyone has the potential of experiencing privilege. For example, if a classroom has a majority African American population, the class might focus on what it means to experience privilege if they are Christian or speak English. Instructors, therefore, should be aware of their students' backgrounds and adjust the lesson accordingly.

What Is Privilege?

Suggestions: Depending on students' cognitive abilities and developmental levels, teachers can provide the definition and/or have students define what privilege means to them as young people.

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary (2016) defines *privilege* as the following:

- : a right or immunity granted as a peculiar benefit, advantage, or favor
- : special enjoyment of a good or exemption from an evil or burden
- : a special opportunity to do something that makes you proud
- : the advantage that wealthy and powerful people have over other people in a society

NASP (2016) states that privilege is based on two concepts:

1. *Privilege Includes Unearned Advantages That Are Highly Valued but Restricted to Certain Groups.* Unearned advantages are those that someone receives by identifying or being born into a specific group. It is important to note that the groups who have received these advantages have not earned them due to their own hard work but rather their affiliation (e.g., being born into a wealthy family provides privileges that others do not have, such as accessing education as well as mental health and medical services; White Americans are more likely to walk into a mall without the suspicion of stealing). Equally important to note is the reality that while some benefit from unearned advantages, others are victims of unearned disadvantage. Unearned entitlements are things of value that all people should have; however, they are often restricted to certain groups because of the values of the majority culture that influence political and social decisions. The example below illustrates this concept.

Example: John (a boy) is perceived to understand science better than Jane (a girl). Although John and Jane are both in the same science class and have the same grades on their assignments and exams, because he's a boy, John's perceived superior understanding of science can become advantageous if he (rather than Jane) is encouraged to join science clubs. Over time, John's participation in various science clubs may lead to receiving better grades in science and improve his chances of being accepted into more rigorous and competitive classes and programs in the future.

Privilege oppresses certain groups. As explained by Wildman and Davis (1995),

Members of the privileged group gain many benefits by their affiliation with the dominant side of the power system. Privileged advantage in societal relationships benefits the holder of privilege, who may receive deference, special knowledge, or a higher comfort level to guide societal interaction. Privilege is not visible to its holder; it is merely there, a part of the world, a way of life, simply the way things are. Others have a lack, an absence, a deficiency.

Note: To continue the conversation in a way that is likely more personally meaningful, instructors could have students list the privileges that boys and girls experience. Using a T-chart, students could list both the advantages and disadvantages of being a boy or girl and share their responses with the larger group.

2. When Control or Power Has Been Given to One Group (Group A), This Group May Earn Privileges That Have Not Been Afforded to Other Groups (Group B and Group C). In other words, Group A can use their privileges to gain and exert even more power and influence over Groups B and C and thus enjoy privileges that are not accessible to others. The example below illustrates this concept:

A classroom teacher gives Group A the power to choose where they will sit during lunch. Due to the large number of students seated in the cafeteria during lunch, those who are seated closer to the exit doors are able to enjoy extra time at recess. Although Group A has not earned its right to sit near the exit doors (e.g., they did not complete a special task), because the teacher gave these students the power to choose their seats in the cafeteria, presumably because he/she liked them more than other students, Group A consequently controls the amount of time all students spend during recess.

Privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of group membership and not based on what a person or group has done or failed to do (Johnson, 2006). For those who routinely benefit from privilege, the challenge is to not quickly deny its existence. It is important to recognize that privilege is a part of the reality that helps some while it impedes others' experiences. For example, although being female or a person of color does not necessarily directly determine an outcome, these characteristics can easily and quickly make these individuals less likely to be hired, recognized, or rewarded in a variety of situations.

History of the Concept of Privilege

The concept of privilege can be seen in literature since W. E. B. Dubois wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903. In this book, he speaks of African Americans living in a world where they are not seen as just American, but as a "Negro" and an American. It further speaks to the concept that people of color are treated differently and that Caucasian Americans have an advantage over others due to the color of their skin. He wrote:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Peggy McIntosh is an American professor who revitalized the concept of privilege in her 1988 essay "White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies." As a White woman, she discusses the following:

In writing this paper I have also realized that white identity and status (as well as class identity and status) give me considerable power to choose whether to broach this subject and its trouble. I can pretty well decide whether to disappear and avoid and not listen and escape the dislike I may engender in other people through this essay, or interrupt, answer, interpret, preach, correct, criticize, and control to some extent what goes on in reaction to it.

Being white, I am given considerable power to escape many kinds of danger or penalty as well as to choose which risks I want to take.

Privilege Around Us

NASP (2016) illustrates that privilege is problematic (a) when it skews our personal interactions and judgments and (b) when it contributes to or blinds us to systemic barriers for those who do not possess a certain privilege, thereby creating or perpetuating inequity. In American culture, certain groups have the privilege of operating within settings—through no effort on their part—that are more conducive for their success, while others—through no fault of their own—find themselves in settings that make success more difficult (Miranda, Boland, & Hemmeler, 2009). Again, this concept refers to any advantage that is unearned, exclusive, and socially conferred. For example, with White privilege, White people are generally assumed to be law abiding until they show that they are not. On the other hand, people of color, in particular African Americans and Latinos, are routinely assumed to be criminals or potential criminals until they show that they are not (Johnson, 2006).

During this lesson, we will discuss the definitions that have already been provided. Throughout this discussion, keep in mind that many types of privilege exist. In other words, people can be privileged based on their racial/ethnic group membership, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability status. Because we cannot adequately address all types in this lesson, we will focus on the concept of racial privilege. We also realize that this can be a difficult concept to understand and the conversations that follow might be uncomfortable for you and/or your peers.

Note: Teachers may need to develop a safe place for students to feel comfortable with each other. Concerns of confidentiality may need to be discussed (i.e., Vegas rules: what is discussed during this lesson/class should stay in the classroom). If rapport has not already been established with their students, teachers may want to complete a trust building activity before beginning the lesson. Throughout the lesson and activities, keep in mind that it is possible for you to understand that different groups experience discrimination but not recognize the manner in which you experience your own privilege. To truly understand how you encounter privilege in your own life, it is necessary to take a close look at your personal experiences and reactions to those of others.

We will begin by discussing the concept of racial privilege. Sue (2003) discusses the concept of *White privilege* and defines it as follows:

The unearned advantages and benefits that accrue to White folks by virtue of a system normed on the experiences, values, and perceptions of their group. White privilege automatically confers dominance to one group, while subordinating groups of color in a descending relational hierarchy; it owes its existence to White supremacy; it is premised on the mistaken notion of individual meritocracy and deservedness (hard work, family values, and the like) rather than favoritism; it is deeply embedded in the structural, systematic, and cultural workings of U.S. society; and it operates within an invisible veil of unspoken and protected secrecy. (p. 137)

When thinking of the concept of White privilege, below are some advantages and disadvantages of being a recipient of White privilege.

Advantages

When you attend school, your race will be portrayed positively in the curriculum. Individuals who share your racial background will be presented as examples of those who have contributed to American history. For example, you and your friends will be taught about the United States's presence in Europe during World War II to stop the Jewish Holocaust without a discussion of its Japanese internment camps. Another example might be the discussion of famous inventors in the United States, such as Thomas Edison and Henry Ford, who are predominantly White and male.

Disadvantages

The contributions of racial/ethnic minorities are limited, ignored, or portrayed negatively and/or in a stereotypic fashion. Examples include the portrayal of Native Americans as unsophisticated and in need of European (White) influence to better themselves; African American and Hispanic American history only being discussed during their designated months rather than throughout the year; Nat Turner's slave "rebellion" (it's presented as a rebellion to the slave owners instead of slaves fighting for their freedom); and viewing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech as his most significant contribution. (In fact, Dr. King spent a significant amount of time working to have the Voting Rights Act of 1965 passed by Congress as well as ending segregation and poverty.)

Understanding How Privilege Impacts Opportunities to Learn

There are many other types of privilege that exist in our society. Another example of privilege involves having an "understanding of the Haves and Have-Nots" (Miranda, Boland, Hemmeler, 2009). For example, Student A comes from a family in which the parent/guardian works from 8:00 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. and makes a large enough income so that the student can attend a private preschool. The family's income also allows the student to travel in a car to museums or other academically rich activities over the weekend. The parent is home at night and can review homework and read to the child before bed. On the other hand, Student B comes from a family in which the parent/guardian works two jobs from 1:00 p.m. until 1:00 a.m. A grandparent stays at the home to assist with child care because the parent cannot afford preschool and could not get onto the waiting list for Head Start. Although the grandparent makes sure that all of the student's basic needs are met, the family cannot afford books to read at home and does not have a car to go to the public library. The family relies on public transportation, and the bus runs on a limited schedule during weekends. Both students enter kindergarten. Student A easily learned the topics that are being taught (i.e., letters, numbers, basic letter sounds) because they were already exposed to these concepts in preschool. Student B, however, struggles because this is the first time the student has been exposed to these concepts. The teacher assumes that Student A is highly intelligent because the student understands many of the topics that are taught in class. The teacher assumes that Student B will continue to struggle in school because the student is not learning at the same pace as the other students in the classroom. From this illustration, socioeconomic status (SES) is another example of how privilege affects the opportunities people have in our society.

Supplemental Questions

- Having heard this example, what demographics come to mind?
 - Are the families rich? Are they poor?
 - What is the ethnicity of Student A? What is the ethnicity of Student B?

- What is the educational level (highest degree completed by the parents) of Student A? What about Student B?
- What languages do the families speak?

Large Group Reflection

Directions: The instructor can have students call out their responses in a large group. A scribe can be selected to take notes on what students share. If students don't immediately begin to participate, the instructor may want to introduce a few "yes/no" questions and have students raise their hands to respond. Students can also write their answers on an index card, place the index card in a bowl, and the teacher can randomly pull the responses to preserve students' anonymity.

1. Should the United States be a color blind nation? Is it important to discuss concepts of privilege and prejudice? Note: The instructor should be prepared to discuss what *color blind* means perhaps by citing examples of people who state, "I don't see race."
 - a. **Suggested answers:** The U.S. should not be a color blind nation. People should recognize individuals' ethnicity and their own. Prejudice and privilege affect all of us in different ways. Having discussions about these concepts when they occur can help the world respond and work to end prejudice and privilege.
 - b. If students don't know what prejudice means, the instructor should be prepared to explain the concept to the class.
2. In the United States, there is a popular phrase "People need to pick themselves up by their bootstraps." How does the concept of privilege relate to this statement? Note: If you are working with a group of students who have not heard this phrase, replace it with the following: "Many Americans believe that people can be successful if they work hard and have a strong work ethic. How does the concept of privilege relate to this statement?"
 - a. **Suggested answers:** A common answer to this question is, "How can people pick themselves up by their bootstraps if they do not have boots?" This question infers that all people have been given the same materials in life to be successful.
 - b. The instructor can share articles on the effects of class and wealth in public education. This is an example from the Associated Press (AP) called "Divided America: In Recovery, Many Poor Schools Left Behind."
<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/37c22cdf81504e5386e8a029e5ba94c7/divided-america-recovery-many-poorschools-left-behind>
3. Some people think, "I have not discriminated against anyone before" or "Slavery and Jim Crow segregation happened a long time go." Why should we have a conversation about how privilege affects us?
 - a. **Suggested answers:** Everyone experiences receiving privilege or the negative outcomes of not receiving privilege. Privilege impacts everyone in today's society. Although slavery ended after the Civil War, this does not mean that individuals do not continue to experience its negative effects. Communities around the country are still segregated. Wealthy families tend to live in wealthy communities. Impoverished families typically live in poor communities. Understanding privilege will help society provide equitable supports to help everyone succeed. Prejudice and privilege still impact our society today. Conversations like this help everyone learn how to end it.

PRIVILEGE APTITUDE TEST

Adapted From the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel

<https://civilrights museum.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/YouthPrivilegeAptitudeTest.pdf>

Directions: Answer each of the following questions with YES or NO. If your answer is YES, give yourself 1 point. If your answer is NO, give yourself 0 points. After you have answered each of the questions, add up all of your points. Please complete this activity without any assistance from your teacher or friends. Also, because everyone is different, your friends will likely have different answers that don't apply to you. Very importantly, there are no right or wrong answers.

Notes for teachers: To accommodate the reading levels of some your students, you might consider reading each of the items aloud to the entire class. If students ask questions about the items, do your best to explain them without providing too many details. Encourage students to answer the items in the best way possible and that makes sense to them. If necessary, remind students that there are no right or wrong answers.

Item Number	Item	Yes	No	Points (0 or 1)
1	When I go to the store, people believe that I am trustworthy and I will not steal something. People in the store do not follow me around.			
2	As a boy I can play with dolls or as a girl I can play with trucks without anyone questioning my choice.			
3	I can walk after dark in public places without fear. I am not taught to fear walking alone after dark in most public spaces.			
4	When I am taught about American history or about contributions made, I am sure that I will see and hear stories about people who look like me.			
5	The majority of the staff at my school look like me.			
6	My school has plenty of books in the library, computers for students, and additional resources for students and teachers.			
7	I will not be teased because of my last name.			
8	I am encouraged to excel in every subject in school.			
9	When a question about my race is asked, I am not the only one singled out to answer or speak my opinion.			
10	When I watch television, there are a lot of people in positive roles that look like me.			
11	My intelligence is not questioned because of the way I speak.			
12	Using public bathrooms and going up and down the stairs in public spaces are easy for me.			
Total Points				

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Directions: After you have completed the survey, in a small group (3–5 students), discuss the questions below. After you have discussed each question, choose one person from your group to share what was talked about with the larger class.

1. How did you feel about this activity?
2. As you were reading and answering the questions, how did you feel?
3. Please describe your feelings to the others in your group.
4. As you were reading the questions, can you think of other questions that should have been asked?
5. If you were creating your own privilege survey, what additional questions would you include on the survey? What are your reasons for including these questions?
6. Would you remove or rephrase any of the questions above? If so, why?
7. How does your TOTAL SCORE compare to other students in your group?
8. Why do you think that the scores are different for people in your group?
9. As a group, choose to discuss specific questions from the survey.
10. Why did you choose to discuss these questions?
11. Compare the scores of each of your group members for each question.
12. Discuss the possible reasons for the different scores amongst your group members.

Large Group Activity

Directions: After students have completed the survey and reflected in their small groups, have the students discuss the following questions in a large group. Depending on the answers provided or the culture of the group, race can be interchanged with sexual orientation, gender, religion, disability status, or socioeconomic status (SES). For example, if your class is majority Hispanic and Christian, you could have a conversation about the privilege of being Christian in America.

1. Now that you have learned about privilege, think about how your race impacts your interactions with others in your school and neighborhood. Are there areas in which you are privileged? Are there areas in which you are not experiencing privilege?
2. What does “White privilege” mean to you? Say the following to the large group: “Based on your experiences, finish this statement: Being White lets you _____.” Note: Allow students to provide their opinions of the things that occur because of White privilege.
3. Restate some of the examples the students provided. Then say the following: “Can these things only be achieved because of being White? What can privileged persons do so that nonmajority individuals can also achieve these things?”
4. Say the following to the large group: “We have a lot to learn about each other’s (choose one: race, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, disability status, or SES). Share at least one positive thing or misconception about what your (choose one: race, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, disability status, or SES) means to you and that you want others to know.”
5. Summarize the large group activity.

Exit Card

1. List one thing that you learned today about privilege.
2. What are two things that you found out makes you privileged?
3. Starting today, how can you raise awareness about privilege with your friends and/or family?
4. How did the lesson impact you? What emotions did you experience/feel?

RECOMMENDED READINGS AND WEBSITES

There are a number of other resources, websites, and books one can use in the classroom or refer the students to research more about the topic of privilege. Below are a list of some of the most helpful and easily adapted activities and resources to use in the classroom.

Privilege Walk Lesson Plan – <https://peacelearner.org/2016/03/14/privilege-walk-lesson-plan/>

Provides a quick activity to have students start the conversation about privilege at school.

Human Education: Resources for teaching about white privilege – <http://humaneeducation.org/blog/2012/05/21/13-resources-for-teaching-about-white-privilege/>

Provides a list of different resources to address privilege that includes articles, books, commentaries, and actual lessons on how to teach privilege in the classroom. A great list of resources to give to students or use as the basis of your lesson on privilege.

Two Towns of Jasper – <http://www.pbs.org/pov/twotownsofjasper/lesson-plan-2/>

From a PBS documentary called *Two Towns of Jasper* that details the brutal killing of a Black man in 1998. This resource comes with a full lesson on how to discuss the details of this documentary and provides a link to a resource library of other documentaries, as well as resources to teach privilege in the classroom.

Teaching Race in the Age of Obama – http://www.whiteprivilegeconference.com/pdf/framework_for_teaching.pdf

Uses excerpts from the book *Teaching Race in the Age of Obama*, and explores racism, privilege, and color blind perspectives using a matrix of privilege and oppression that addresses the many areas of race relations in today's society. A great resource to be adapted into a lesson.

Teaching Tolerance – <http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-42-fall-2012/feature/confronting-white-privilege>

Provides a framework on confronting White privilege in the classroom. It addresses important aspects of diversity and privilege training and discussion, such as “bursting the bubble” and “disturbing the comfortable” in order to make lessons about privilege effective and powerful. The author also provides a toolkit to use during lessons in the classroom for grades 9–12.

Adams, M., Blumenfeld, W. J., Castañeda, C., Hackman, H. W., Peters, M. L., & Zúñiga, X. (2013). *Readings for diversity and social justice* (3rd edition). New York, NY: Routledge.

Provides readings about different areas of social justice that include not only privilege and racism but sexism, ageism, and heterosexism, among many others. It also provides lesson plan activities and a voices section that details the experiences of real people who lived the different social

injustices explored in the book. This book is great to use for high school students, and sections can be assigned for reading and discussion in the classroom.

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