

Privilege Exercise (race focus)

This exercise has been designed to bring a group to certain conclusions regarding the concept of privilege and disadvantage. Because of the prevalence of racism and sexism in the US, and for the sake of obtaining clear results this exercise focuses on those two forms of prejudice. Many people attribute a person's economic standing to their character. "Poor people are lazy and stupid". Rich people get rich because they are smart and work hard". This belief in the quality of people in the U.S. discounts or ignores the fact that some people have many advantages and opportunities which they take for granted.

Because of this system of privilege, it is not possible to operate on a "level playing field". It is quite common to believe that everyone has started on a level playing field. They believe, like the Horatio Alger books taught us, that it is our individual abilities which earn us wealth and "success".

"Success," however, depends on many variables, including the development of self-esteem, our educational opportunities and attainment, and the support structures this society offers.

Before we begin please make a mental note of where you are and where the rest of the class is currently positioned. I will be making a series of statements and offering directions. Please close your eyes now and keep them closed for the duration of the exercise.

SPACE REQUIREMENTS: A room or space large enough to accommodate the participants in a single row.

PARTICIPANT REQUIREMENTS: This exercise works best with between 20 and 50 participants. Some ethnic diversity enhances the outcome but is not required. This exercise is best for adolescents and adults. If this is done with an entirely White audience, the group may be divided into two parts. One group will represent themselves. The other group will be asked to imagine they are a Black, Native American, or Latino child being raised in an impoverished family and area. Participants should be advised prior to these questions to remember their feelings during the exercise. Did they feel ashamed that they were part of a group that took a step forward or backward? Did they want to be a part of the group moving forward or backward?

1. Few White people in the history of the U.S. have ever been convicted and executed for killing a person of color. All White persons take a step forward.
2. The high school dropout rate for Latinos, Native Americans and African Americans is over 55%. Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans take one step back.
3. If when you walk into a store, the workers suspect you are going to steal something because of the color of your skin, take one step back.
4. If you can avoid those communities or places you consider dangerous, take one step forward.
5. If you or your ancestors have ever learned that because of your race, skin color, gender, or ethnicity, that you are ugly or inferior, take one step back.

6. African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asians, and women have been denied the right to vote in the U.S. White males take one step forward.
7. If you or your family has ever received welfare, Medicaid, or food stamps, take one step back.
8. If you have ever been called bad names because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or skin color, take one step back.
9. If you or any member of your family has been treated for depression, alcoholism or drug abuse, take one step back.
10. If you live now, or have ever lived in a home where drugs are sold on the street or near your home, take one step back.
11. If prior to your 18th birthday, you took a vacation outside the United States (or your native country), other than Mexico, take one step forward.
12. If, as a child, your parents keep, or kept, over 40 books in your home, take one step forward.
13. If you were raised in a home where a daily newspaper was delivered, take a step forward.
14. If you watch most programs on television and see members of your race or ethnicity, take one step forward.
15. African Americans, Native Americans, Chinese, and Mexicans were slaves in the United States. All those whose ancestors were not members of these groups, take a step forward.
16. All those who commonly see people of your race, gender, or ethnicity playing roles on television or in movies that you consider degrading or shameful take one step back.
17. All those who have a parent that never completed high school, take one step back.
18. All those who have a parent that completed college, take one step forward.
19. All those who were raised sharing their bedroom with another person take one step back.
20. If you are living with both of your biological parents, take one step forward.
21. All those who were raised in a rented apartment or house, take one step back.
22. All those who were raised in a community where the vast majority of the police, politicians, and government workers were NOT of your gender, racial or ethnic group, take one step back.
23. If you were taught *in-depth* about the history and culture of your ethnic ancestors in elementary and secondary school, take one step forward.
24. If your parents spoke English as a first language, take one step forward.

25. All those who have immediate family members who are, or have been in jail or prison for more than one week, take one step back.
26. All those who went (or go) to a school where the majority of teachers are of your race or ethnicity, take one step forward.
27. All those whose ancestors lost a war with the U.S. and whose land was made a part of the U.S. take one step back.
28. Native Americans have the highest rate of infant and mother mortality in the U.S. All Native Americans take one step back.
29. Life expectancy for African Americans in the U.S. declined to 69.2 years in 1988. Life expectancy for Whites in the same year was 75.6 years. African Americans take a step back (National Center for Health Statistics).
30. All those who have never been told that you were hated by others because of your race or ethnicity, take a step forward.
31. All those who ever felt they were denied a job or promotion because of your race or ethnicity, take a step back.
32. All those who were taken to art galleries or museums by their parents or guardians (not including school field trips), take one step forward.
33. All those who have been stopped or questioned by the police or other persons about your presence in a particular neighborhood, take one step back.
34. All those with immediate family members who are doctors, lawyers, or "professionals," take a step forward.
35. If you were discouraged from pursuing activities, careers or schools of your choice by teachers or guidance counselors, take one step back.
36. If your parents are able to or will provide significant financial support for your college costs, take one step forward.
37. If your ancestors were lynched, take one step back.
38. If you will never have to wonder if you were hired to meet a racial affirmative action goal, take one step forward.
39. If you commonly see people of your race in positions of leadership in business and government, take one step forward.
40. If you were ever told you must dress or act in a proper way because it reflected on your whole racial or ethnic group, take one step back.

41. If you were ever told to speak better English, take one step back.

Take a look around, notice the difference in alignment. Notice what groups of people are in the front and what groups of people are in the back. This visual represents the playing field that we were put on at birth. In no way is it level. The primary lesson to be learned from this exercise is that we are not operating on a level playing field. In the United States we are taught individual responsibility and blame for our lives. We are taught that if you work hard and persevere, you too can be rich. This is not always the case. Advantages given to us by our parents or other ancestors often give us privileges and benefits not accessible to everyone.

Think about your answers to the following questions:

1. Do these differences that discriminate against us have genetic components?
2. If not, why do we discriminate against each other?
3. If we gain the technology to enhance genetic traits will that increase discrimination?

We will discuss these questions later in the class period.