

“I don’t believe I have any special privilege:” A Two-Part Exercise to Reduce Student Resistance to the Concept of White Privilege

Abstract

The concept of white (and male) privilege is challenging for students to understand, and often leads to incredulity and resistance. Students often see white privilege as an outdated theory that disputes their beliefs in an equality meritocracy. This paper presents a two-part exercise to help students understand white privilege in a non-threatening way, thus reducing the resistance to the concept, allowing for more thorough understanding. This exercise is useful for diversity, organizational behavior, and/or human resource management courses.

Keywords: White privilege, Diversity, Inclusion

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Introduction

McIntosh (1989) describes white privilege as unearned privileges bestowed by society simply because one is white. Furthermore, the beneficiaries of these privileges are largely unaware of the advantages they receive. Those teaching classes that include multicultural issues are urged to include discussions of white privilege (Niehuis, 2005; Stewart, Latu, Branscombe, Phillips, & Denney, 2012). However, students are often resistant to the concept of white privilege (Tonino, 2015), and reject it as a valid phenomenon.

Rationale for the Exercise

Many students (particularly white students) are unaware of white privilege and its consequences, specifically the systemic advantages granted to whites and the disadvantages experienced by other races (McIntosh, 2015). In fact, most whites in general are heedless of the concept of “whiteness” and believe in the myth of pure meritocracy (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; McIntosh, 2015). Therefore, it is important for courses delivering diversity, inclusion, or multicultural content to include concepts of white privilege, for without it, white students are denied the opportunity to acknowledge and reflect on the institutionalized privileges afforded them (Abrams & Gibson, 2007).

However, white students are often resistant to the idea of white privilege. As Torino (2015) describes, this resistance may be the result of “cognitive defense mechanisms such as denial, rationalization, and/or minimization” (p. 297). This opposition to learning about white privilege is three-fold. First, many white students have never thought about or reflected on what

it means to be white in society (McIntosh, 2015; Sue, 2010). Second, it is less threatening to learn about racism because racism may be about *others'* issues about race, and students can distance themselves (i.e., "I'm not racist") (Abrams & Gibson, 2007). Third, students may see white privilege as discrimination against whites (Gillespie, Ashbaufgh, & Defiore, 2002).

In our own experiences with teaching white privilege, we found students to be actively (sometimes) resistant to the concept of white privilege. Before we started using the two-part exercise described below, we taught white privilege by having students read Peggy McIntosh's (1989) seminal article *White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack*, then discussing the "privileges" included in the article in class. Many white students were opposed to the idea of white privilege; some were openly defiant, refusing to believe that white privilege exists. We must note here that our experiences with McIntosh's article are counter to the experiences of some other educators (see, for example, Boatright-Horowitz, Frazier, Harps-Logan & Crockett, 2013). After three years of this method of teaching white privilege, we knew there had to be a better way for us and our students; a way to minimize resistance and make the conception of white privilege less threatening to students.

We reflected on the reasons students dismissed white privilege as a real phenomenon. In addition to the reasons presented in the literature (above), the comments we heard from students indicated that they believed that racism was "over," and that our society is an absolute meritocracy. These students truly believed that if someone of a non-white race worked as hard as the white student had, that person could achieve the same goals as easily. Underpinning these beliefs was faith in a pure and equal meritocracy. We realized how threatening it might be for white students to have that faith shaken. That is, to confront the reality that in addition to hard work, they, as white students, may have also have had institutionalized privileges that students of

other races may not have had; that achievements may not be due solely to their own efforts and talents (Ambrosio, 2014). This was the moment that we realized we needed to introduce the concept of privilege *first* in a way that did not threaten student's beliefs, and only then we could fully discuss white privilege.

Overview of the Exercise

This two-part exercise is a precursor to a class on white privilege in a *Diversity and Leadership* course. We use this exercise in the class meeting *before* the white privilege discussion to introduce the concept of privilege in a way that is less threatening to students, making them less defensive in the next class meeting. In our course, this two-part exercise occurs in about the fifth week of classes (of a 15-week semester), so we have established some rapport and trust with students. Subsequently, by this point in our course, students feel comfortable expressing their ideas and opinions.

The first part of the exercise involves students cutting out a paper figure using their left hand, leading to a discussion of right-handed privilege (details below). The second part of the exercise entails showing a video of folk singer John Gorka singing his song *Ignorance and Privilege*, and a subsequent discussion of his song (details below).

This exercise was designed for courses that deal with issues of diversity, inclusion, or white privilege specifically. The exercise is well-suited to diversity, organizational behavior, and/or human resource management courses. Furthermore, the exercise can be used in either undergraduate or graduate courses.

The learning objectives for this exercise are:

1. For students to understand and experience the concept of privilege (generally) in a non-threatening way.
2. For student to gain a holistic view of the concept of privilege.
3. To decrease students' resistance to the concept of white privilege.
4. For students to ultimately fully understand the concept and realities of white privilege in society.

Target Audience

This exercise was created for an undergraduate upper-division management elective course entitled Diversity and Leadership. However, this exercise can be used in any course where diversity and inclusion concepts are taught, including graduate-level courses.

Time Required

This two-part exercise is best suited to a 75-minute class period, but can be adapted to a 50-minute class period. The exercise can also be part of a longer class period (i.e., a three-hour class); it works well for the second half of such a class, where other content (not white privilege content) might be covered in the first half of the class.

Number of Participants

This exercise can work with as few as five or six students, or as many as 25.

Materials Needed

A copy of the “paper doll” (Appendix A) and a pair of scissors are needed for each student. Additionally, a copy of the lyrics to *Ignorance and Privilege* (Appendix B) should be copied for distribution to each student.

Pre-Exercise Preparation Needed by Students

No particular pre-preparation is needed by students. In fact, this two-part exercise works best if students have no preparation for it. We found that our students enjoyed having a class without a prior reading assignment. We told students that they didn’t need to do anything for this particular class and that we would be doing a fun and sometimes funny exercise with the class.

Pre-Exercise Preparation Needed by Instructor

In advance of conducting the exercise with students, the instructor should:

1. Copy the “paper doll” (Appendix A) for each student in the class.
2. Obtain a pair of scissors for each student in the class. The first year we conducted this exercise, we begged and borrowed scissors from colleagues (and of course returned them later). After the first time running the exercise, we knew we would use it year after year, and it was much more efficient to buy enough pairs of scissors. Scissors can be obtained rather inexpensively at warehouse stores (e.g., BJ’s, Costco), dollar stores, or discount stores like Target.
3. Copy the lyrics of *Ignorance and Privilege* by John Gorka (Appendix B) for each student.

4. A close reading of Peggy McIntosh's (1989) article *White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack*. This will help guide the classroom discussion for this two-part exercise.

Instructions for Classroom Execution of the Exercise

With little introduction, distribute the copies of the paper doll and scissors to students. Prior to distributing the copies of the paper doll, we told students, "We'll be doing something a little bit different in class today. It may seem like a silly exercise, but just go with it. It's nothing hurtful or embarrassing. Just try your best and have fun with it." Because we have established some trust with students at this point in the semester (approximately week five), students are more than willing to "just go with it."

Instruct students to cut out the paper doll using their left hand. It is important not to direct students to use their non-dominant hand. Many left-handers have learned to cut right-handed, but for those who cut left-handed, allowing them to use their dominant hand gives them an advantage (unearned privilege) in this exercise, and can be a topic for discussion later. In our experience, in this part of the exercise students are laughing and noisy, talking with each other as they struggle to cut with their left hand. We usually allow 12-15 minutes for this activity. This part of the exercise could also be timed, which would add more challenge and pressure for students.

After students have completed cutting out the paper doll, have all students hold up their paper dolls. Instruct students to look around the room at how well or poorly other students have done. Allow a bit of time for students to talk to each other and comment on the paper dolls around the room. Students are often surprised by well-cut out paper dolls.

To begin the discussion, ask the right-handed students how it felt to cut out the paper doll with their left hand. Student responses may vary, but generally students talk about how uncomfortable it felt and how poorly they did. Next, ask the left-handed students how they the exercise went for them. Many of the left-handed students will comment about discomfort (even if these students usually cut left-handed, they are using right-handed scissors). Have just the right-handed student hold up their paper dolls, then have the left-handed students do the same. Ask students to comment about any quality differences in the paper dolls (often the left-handed ones are slightly better, even with right-handed scissors). Next, ask the right-handed students if the activity took more time and if they had to concentrate more than if they had used their right hand.

Ask the class if they can imagine being left-handed in a right-handed world. Ask the students what types of activities might take more time or that they would need to think about more. The left-handers in class will be really helpful at this point, but right-handers contribute, too (in our experience). Activities that come up include writing in notebooks, using right-handed desks attached to chairs, swiping credit and debit cards, opening doors, eating next to a right-hander, and shifting manual transmissions. This entire debrief discussion usually takes 10-15 minutes, depending on the size of the class.

If time allows, show the Youtube video *What It's Like to be Left-Handed in a Right-Handed World* (BuzzFeedVideo, 1:32 minutes, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1swN72r5Fk>). This is a light-hearted look at some of the challenges left-handers face, and may spark some new ideas about those challenges.

Finally, introduce the concept of right-handed privilege. Specifically that the world is designed for right-handers (they are majority), and left-handers are expected to adapt. Remind students that it took right-handers longer to cut with their left-hand, and took more of their concentration. Challenge students to consider if their lives would be any different if they had to think before doing the most mundane tasks. Ask students what advantages right-handers automatically have in a world designed for right-handers. Ask students if they were aware of their (the right-handers) privilege before this activity. In our experience, all of the right-handed students answered that they were not aware. Explain that this lack of awareness defines an “invisible privilege/advantages;” one(s) to which we are oblivious. By having this conversation, you are having a discussion that will be useful in the future class meeting on white privilege; this is part of the set-up to that class.

Variation on paper doll cutting: If the class is large, students could be paired, with one student serving as the observer while the other student cuts the paper doll left-handed. Should you use this option, the observers should share their observations first, before the “cutters” do.

For the second part of the exercise, distribute the lyrics to *Ignorance and Privilege* (Appendix B). Show the Youtube video of John Gorka singing his song (*Folk Alley Sessions - John Gorka, "Ignorance and Privilege,"* 4:12 minutes, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXaECZEiXdQ>). It is important that the students have the lyrics to follow along with the video.

Once the video finishes, ask students what privileges Gorka sings about. Students most often mention:

- “lack of pigment in my skin”

- Catholicism (in a Christian country)
- Gorka went to college, while his father was a blue-collar laborer
- His family moved from the city to the country
- “Never went through a war”
- “Never Depression poor.”

For each of these, we ask students to explain what they think he means by the statement, which leads to a robust classroom discussion. Next draw students’ attention to the chorus of the song:

“If the wind is at your back
And you never turn around
You may never know the wind is there
You may never hear the sound”

Ask students what they think Gorka means by this chorus. In our experience, students have some suggestions, but often miss the point of “invisible privilege/advantages” (the wind at his back, helping him forward, and he not even knowing it). Ask students to make comparisons to right-handed “invisible privilege/advantages.”

Students are then assigned Peggy McIntosh’s (1989) article *White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack* as reading for the next class meeting. This two-part exercise, for us, is the set-up for the next class meeting.

Student Reaction to the Exercise

We had hoped that discussing privilege in a fun and non-threatening way would lessen the students’ resistance to the concept of white privilege (the subsequent class meeting). We were in no way prepared for the impact this two-part exercise had. In several years of using this exercise, across approximately 100 students, only one student vocalized any resistance to the

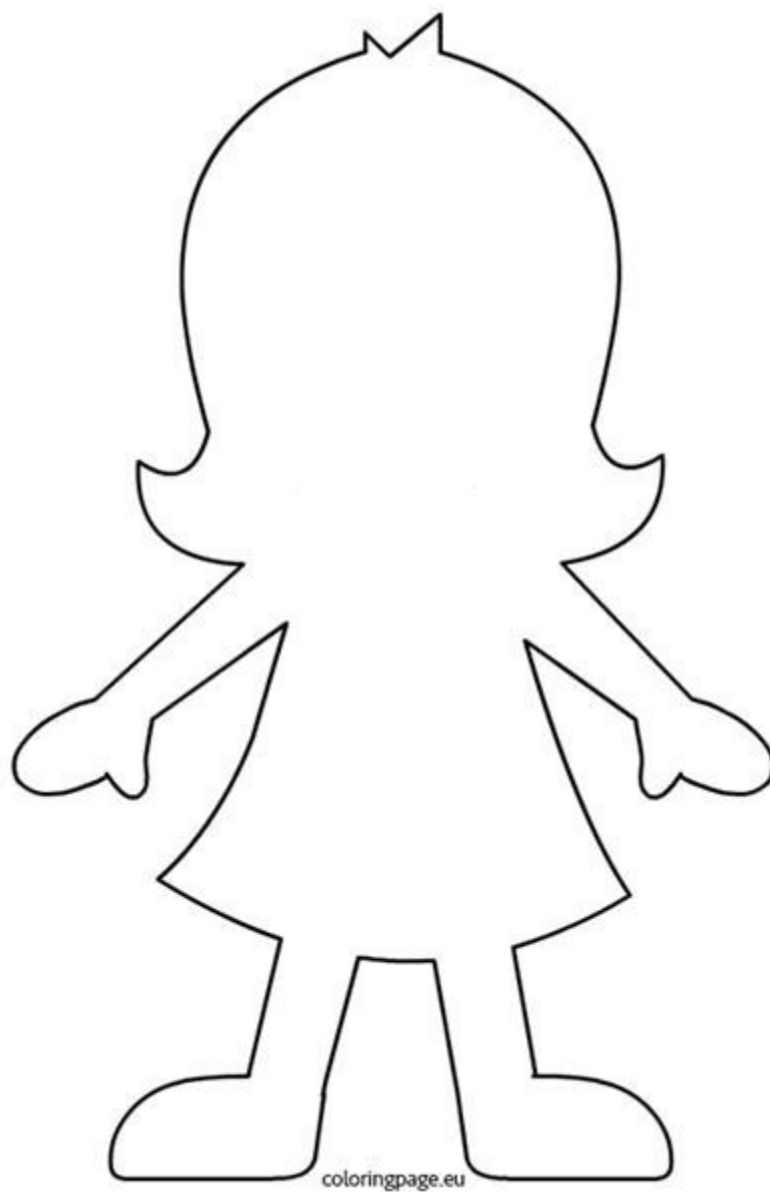
idea of white privilege. Additionally, throughout the class dedicated to white privilege students continually refer back to “right-handed privilege.” Part of the end-of-course evaluation asks students to comment on what should stay in the course, what should be eliminated, and what could be improved (open-ended questions). This two-part exercise is routinely (year after year) rated as the number two activity that should stay in the course (number one is a Ted talk), because of its impact on student understanding of white privilege.

How Exercise will be Demonstrated in a 30-Minute ELA Session

Activity	Time
Introduction & Brief White Privilege Discussion	5 mins
Instructions for the Paper Doll Exercise	3 mins
Conduct the Paper Doll Exercise (Session participants will cut out the paper doll using their left hand)	7 mins
Debrief the Paper Doll Exercise & Discussion of Right-Handed Privilege	10 mins
Distribute <i>Ignorance and Privilege</i> Lyrics & Brief Discussion of Their Use	5 mins
Total Time	30 mins

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Appendix A: Paper Doll

Appendix B: Words to *Ignorance and Privilege* by John Gorka**Ignorance and Privilege****(words and music by John Gorka, © Blues Palace Music, ASCAP)**

*A song about earned and unearned advantage from a bygone era – or, as William Faulker said,
“The past is not dead. In fact, it’s not even past.”*

I was born to ignorance, yes,
and lesser poverties
I was born to privilege that I did not see
Lack of pigment in my skin won a free
and easy in
I didn’t know it but my way was paved

I grew up a Catholic boy in a
Northeastern state
A place when asked “Where you from?”
Some people tend to hesitate, reply a little bit late
As if maybe you didn’t rate
I was born to ignorance and privilege

My Dad ran a printing press
A tag and label factory
I may have seen it as a child
Now a distant memory
Almost too faint to see
Dark red brick factory
I didn’t know it but my way was paved

We moved from a city street
Shortly after I arrived
To a house on a gravel road
Where I learned to be alive
Crawl, walk, run and ride
That’s where I learned to come alive
I didn’t know it but my way was paved

If the wind is at your back
And you never turn around
You may never know the wind is there
You may never hear the sound

Got to grow and go to school
Work at home and dream at night
Even be a college fool like I had any right
Never went through a war, never
Great Depression poor
I didn't know it but my way was paved

Nose to the grindstone
Shoulder to the wheel
Back against the wall
Maybe you know how it feels

If the wind is at your back
And you never turn around
You may never know the wind is there
You may never hear the sound

I was born to ignorance, yes, and
lessor poverties
I was born to privilege that I did not see
Lack of pigment in my skin won a free and easy in
I didn't know it but my way was paved
I was born to ignorance and privilege