

### **Instructional Activity: The “Privilege Race”**

**Objective:** Students concretely see and feel how societal *privilege* and *oppression* structure people’s access to resources like healthcare, education, employment, and nutrition.

**Timing:** I conduct this activity after introducing my students to the concepts of privilege and oppression, through readings such as Marilyn Frye’s *Oppression* and Peggy MacIntosh’s *White Privilege*. This lesson usually falls within the first two weeks of each semester.

**Step 1:** On a blank notecard, each student creates and writes down an identity comprised of five categories:

1. Race
2. Class
3. Gender
4. Sexual orientation
5. Ability status

*Examples: White middle-class woman who is straight and disabled  
Asian lower-class man who is bisexual and able-bodied*

**Step 2:** Students fold up their notecards and anonymously place them in a hat. The cards are shuffled, then each student randomly selects one.

**Step 3:** Instruct students to form a row in the middle of the classroom. Then, instruct them to step forward or back based on a series of conditions. For example:

*If your card says “white,” step forward; if not, step back  
If your card says “man,” step forward; if it says “woman,” step back  
If your card says “heterosexual” or “straight,” step forward; if not, step back*

**Step 4:** Once you move through all the categories, some students will be much closer to the front of the room than others. At the front, place signs with words like “College,” “Health Insurance,” “Clean water,” etc. Then announce that the students will be racing to grab these prizes.

**Step 5:** Begin the race. As soon as the students in front reach the prizes, ask the class to freeze in place and sit down.

**Discussion:** From this position, pose questions that connect the race to real-world social inequality. For example:

1. Was this a fair race? Why or why not?
2. Did anyone feel like they never stood a chance? How come?
3. How could this race symbolize real life?
4. What factors give some people easier access to resources like healthcare or education?

### **Rationale**

I designed this version of the “Privilege Race” to illustrate the two most crucial concepts of Women’s Studies: privilege and oppression. Most American students grow up learning that our society is a meritocracy, in which everyone can freely rise or fall through hard work. My very first job as a feminist instructor is to shatter this myth: I need to demonstrate to students in a visceral, concrete way how our society stacks the odds for and against certain groups based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and

disability. Specifically, students need to see how both *individual* and *systemic* discrimination shape people's access to resources like healthcare, education, employment, nutrition, and physical safety. Only then can students pursue the course's goal of critically analyzing and dismantling mechanisms of oppression. I therefore conduct this activity just after introducing the concepts of privilege and oppression, within the first two weeks of each semester.

I have repeatedly found the Privilege Race not just useful, but *crucial* for opening students' eyes to the reality that discrimination still exists. As an instructor, it is very difficult to challenge the myth of meritocracy: This myth is one of America's most dominant national narratives, and a basic assumption on which many students have built their worldview. When students initially read theoretical explanations of privilege and oppression, or listen to my first lecture on this topic, their skepticism is obvious. Through their facial expressions, class comments, and Carmen posts, many students tell me that they find these concepts either "bogus" (unrealistic), too abstract to comprehend, or simply difficult to accept.

However, students also repeatedly tell me that the Privilege Race transforms their understanding of societal privilege and oppression; that it instantly helps them see these concepts as real, concrete social forces with tangible effects on everyday life. When students move with their bodies across the classroom, and then race for prizes like "education" and "healthcare," they can physically *see* how life chances are unevenly distributed. Students in the front can *see* their physical advantage over those behind. Likewise, students who find themselves in the back of the pack can viscerally *feel* the disappointment and resentment as they realize they do not have a chance. Further, because students draw their cards from a hat, they can see how life chances are dealt randomly and unfairly in real life: Someone who by luck is born white, male, and rich will most likely have better access to all resources than someone born black, female, and poor. As students discuss the final questions, they clearly and insightfully link this race to real-world racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and able-ism.

Students consistently inform me that the Privilege Race is one of our most high-impact and worthwhile class activities. In emails, SEIs, written course evaluations, and informal conversations, students share how this activity shifts their worldview and opens them to new types of critical analysis. For example, at the end of fall 2014, one student emailed me spontaneously about a BuzzFeed article on critical pedagogy lessons. In the email, she wrote, "I think the 'privilege race' should be featured on BuzzFeed like this one was." Likewise, another student wrote on his midterm exam that the Privilege Race was "by far one of the most interesting things we've done in class so far." I also *see* an immediate difference in the way that students discuss matters of privilege and oppression, and even in their facial expressions when I broach topics such as affirmative action, the gender wage gap, and legal discrimination against LGBTQ people.

In conclusion, the "Privilege Race" activity is a crucial and successful tool for the beginning of all my courses. It helps students grasp the reality of privilege and oppression in a concrete, bodily way, and many recall it as a turning point in their critical awakening that lets them meaningfully engage with the rest of the course.