

# WITH AND WITHOUT

## Interlocking Oppression and the Dynamics of Privilege



**Time:** 45 minutes

**Materials:** “The Effects of Privilege: Statements” and “Selected List of Heterosexual Privileges” and/or “Selected List of Privileges Enjoyed by Those Who Are Gender-Conforming or Cisgender” (for facilitators only); scissors; basket or other container; chart paper and markers; paper, pens, or pencils

**Audience:** Students from high school through college, Adults

**Note:** This activity can be used to explore either the unearned privileges associated with being heterosexual or unearned privileges associated with being cisgender or non-trans. It can also be used to explore both issues if you have time. It is important to decide how you want to use the exercise so participants get the most out of it.

1. Prior to conducting this activity, photocopy “The Effects of Privilege: Statements,” and cut the copy into strips with one statement on each strip. Place the strips of paper in a basket, bag, or large envelope.
2. Begin by sharing the following. (If the group you are working with has some experience examining issues of privilege, skip to number three.)

“People identify themselves in many ways – by gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, ability, ethnicity, etc. Most people are advantaged by certain aspects of their identity and disadvantaged by others. For example, a male with a physical disability may find himself at a disadvantage because of his disability; he may be forced to use the back entrance with a ramp to get into a building and he may not be able to easily access many modes of public transportation. In this case, a person who does not have a physical disability would have advantages or privileges that he does not have.

“The same male, however, may be advantaged by his gender due to the fact that his annual income is likely to be 30% higher than a female in a position comparable to his. Because he is a male, he has an advantage. Because he has a physical disability, he has a disadvantage.”

3. Write the term “privilege” on a sheet of chart paper. Ask for participants to share their thoughts about the meaning of the phrase, using the shared example as well as others. Write these ideas on chart paper under the term.
4. Share the following definition of privilege, adapted from “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”(1988) by Peggy McIntosh. **Note:** You may want to write this definition on chart paper prior to conducting the activity.

“Privilege can be defined ‘an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks,’ that a person can ‘count on cashing in each day,’ but about which the person is ‘meant to remain oblivious.’”

5. Let participants know that they will now be hearing some statements that describe some of the unearned privileges people enjoy. Give the basket containing the statements to any participant. Ask the person to take a strip of paper from the basket and read aloud the statement that is written on it. After doing so, have the person pass the basket to the next person. Go around the circle, repeating this process, until all of the statements have been read aloud.

6. Lead a brief discussion, using the following questions:
  - What stood out for you as you heard the statements being read aloud?
  - What are some examples of how you have been personally affected by one of the privileges that was read aloud? Did you take these for granted, and assume that these privileges are available to everyone?
  - In what ways do you think the existence of these privileges affects people or society in general?
7. Ask participants to raise their hands if they believe they personally enjoy privileges based on an aspect of their identity. Elicit a few examples of these privileges from participants who raised their hands.
8. Explain that participants will now work in small groups to further explore some of the unearned privileges or advantages in society associated with sexual orientation or gender identity and expression. To assist groups, suggest specific topics to consider, e.g., health care, workplace, law, social norms, and language use.
9. Divide the group into five small groups. Distribute a sheet of chart paper and a marker to each group. Instruct groups to select a recorder and to brainstorm as many unearned privileges as they can think of that are associated with sexual orientation or gender identity expression. Allow about 15 minutes for this process. Circulate around to room to assist small groups with their brainstorming exercise. Refer to the “Selected List of Heterosexual Privileges” and/or “Selected List of Privileges Enjoyed By Those Who Are Gender-Conforming or Cisgender” handout for examples.
10. Reconvene the group and ask the recorder of the first group to select and present five different privileges associated with sexual orientation or gender identity that they identified (preferably from a variety of different topics). Ask groups to share five other privileges that were not mentioned in the previous group presentations. After all the groups presented their five privileges, ask groups to offer any additional privileges that were not mentioned in the previous group(s). If necessary, share other relevant privileges with the group, using the “Selected List of Heterosexual Privileges” or the “Selected List of Non-Trans Privileges.” Post the groups’ sheets of chart paper on the walls around the room.

Lead a discussion, using some or all of the questions that follow.

- Why do you think people accept privilege?
- What are some of the structures in our society that support these systems of privilege?
- How is privilege maintained?
- How can privilege be dismantled? What are some of the advantages of doing so?
- Do you think that lesbian, gay, and bisexual people deserve the same rights as heterosexuals? Do you think that transgender or gender nonconforming people deserve the same rights and protections as cisgender or gender conforming people? What do you think about the claim that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people are asking for “special” rights?
- As an individual with advantages because of certain aspects of your identity, what can you do to be a better ally for those who do not have those advantages? How can these strategies be applied to support gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in your community?
- How can people with disadvantages because of certain aspects of their identity gain advantages?
- What are strategies to achieve equal rights and privilege in society? How can you apply these strategies to support the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community in your school or organization?