

Understanding Race and Privilege

Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

*James Baldwin
Poet, Novelist, Essayist*

Across the nation, children of all backgrounds are experiencing a time in which discussions about race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and culture are at the forefront of their everyday lives. Many avoid these discussions because they fear that conversations about race, bias, and racism lead to feelings of anger, guilt, discomfort, sadness, and at times disrespect. The current state of our Union, however, no longer allows for these tough conversations to be ignored. While uncomfortable for some, school psychologists are in a position to lead or at least participate in these conversations. By using their knowledge and expertise of systems-level change, school psychologists can facilitate the dialogue to bring about positive, productive outcomes.

This document is part of a series of resources developed by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) in response to recent acts of racial violence and the increasingly uncivil discourse occurring across our country. It is important for school psychologists and other educators to understand the historical and contemporary conditions that have resulted in many of these violent acts, as well as others' reactions (including violence) to these events. NASP seeks to help schools and families engage in constructive dialogue about privilege, prejudice, power, and the ways that all of us can work together to shift the conversation from hate and violence towards understanding and respect to ultimately bring about positive change and unity to our communities.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In today's American society, each of us has an identity that shapes how we see ourselves and others. Not only do our social norms and cultural underpinnings influence our experiences, they also set the course for how we view the world. Differences in identity—and related struggles for place and power—are woven throughout our history and social and political culture. In fact, while diversity is a hallmark and strength of our nation, the path toward common ground, mutual respect, and equity has been rocky for nearly every religious, racial, and ethnic group that has become part of the American fabric along the way. The same is true for groups identified by specific experiences and characteristics, such as gender, sexual orientation, and

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disability. In many respects, though, the disconnect in identity and experience between White Americans and those of nonmajority backgrounds is deeply intertwined in our most difficult challenges, such as poverty, disenfranchisement, isolation, inequity, and violence, and it isn't fully possible to address these issues without also addressing this reality.

THE ROLE OF PRIVILEGE

For many members of the majority culture (i.e., those who identify as White) in the United States, being made aware of one's classification as linked to privilege is likely not a common or welcomed experience.

Indeed, many people have never been asked or required to reflect on their own privileged status, and in regards to racial identity, doing so might feel uncomfortable or even discordant with the common narrative regarding social and political changes over the years. For example, White Americans may attach the concepts of progress toward equality or being "color blind" as mitigating privilege. As a result, many White Americans either may not be aware of or may avoid considering how simply being White confers special status or experiences,

potentially to the detriment of others. While many Americans may not view themselves as privileged because of their economic or social status, the advantage of being in the majority racial group is real, even if often hidden.

Recognizing that you have privilege does not require feeling guilty for your privilege. Rather it is an essential step toward understanding how that privilege might shape your views or negatively affect others, even unintentionally, and what steps we can take to break down barriers created.

Consider simple life activities such as shopping in a store without the fear of being followed or buying or renting a home in an area that you can afford without consideration of your race. This fundamental disconnect might both motivate and exacerbate the racial/cultural divide in the United States due to a lack of awareness of how privilege contributes to the realities of racism. Peggy McIntosh (1990), in her essay "[White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#)", wrote, "I realized that I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but also had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, White privilege, which puts me at an advantage." Importantly, although privilege is often associated only with wealth and/or economic status, it applies far more broadly. Privilege can be assigned to populations within a group, such as athletes, individuals perceived as attractive, individuals who attain higher levels of education, or membership in certain religious groups. Loosely defined, privilege includes the following aspects.

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.

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.

"If privilege means I have access to something that has been or is being denied to others because of a difference in one or more of our socially constructed group memberships, I must recognize that privilege does not necessarily determine a positive outcome, but it becomes an asset to make what I want more likely to happen for me". (Tomes, 2013)

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).

THE EFFECT OF PRIVILEGE IN SCHOOLS

In schools, privilege-based bias plays out in many ways but perhaps most acutely in discipline. Macintosh (2014) refers to the disproportionate disciplinary outcomes in schools and the importance of evaluating implicit bias in the context of vulnerable decision points that are highly susceptible to individuals' unconscious bias. Unconscious bias at its core speaks to lack of awareness of—or literally not thinking about—internal biases when engaging in disciplinary practice. Such unconscious bias is likely the result of individuals' past experiences, including lack of exposure to certain students (i.e., ethnic minorities). When adults who are working with young people make fast decisions, the data suggest an increase in the likelihood of disproportionate disciplinary practices that unfortunately continue to perpetuate the stigma of perceived criminal behavior from African American and Latino students.

As practitioners continue to develop and grow in their own self-awareness, the potential to change the current outcomes seen in disciplinary practices is promising. Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2009) suggest that culturally competent educational leaders should engage in the following:

- Assess one's own culture
- Value diversity
- Manage the dynamics of difference
- Adapt to diversity
- Institutionalize cultural knowledge

These practices allow culturally competent educational leaders to recognize their own cultural values, norms, and expectations, while allowing them to collaborate with students, staff, and families from other cultures. These interactions support the management of conflicts that may arise as a result of cultural differences. Adapting to diversity suggests embedding equitable practices in classroom management, instructional practices, and social-emotional learning. Finally, institutionalizing cultural knowledge speaks to informing school policies that are equitable and supportive of *all* students.

SELF-REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Wildman & Davis (1995) explain that “the lives we lead affect what we are able to see and hear in the world around us.” As such, an important first step to understanding the concept of group-based privilege and how it can shape peoples’ perspectives, experiences, and interactions is to examine our own experience. We can be the beneficiary of privilege without recognizing or consciously perpetuating it. Learning to see one’s own privilege as well as that of groups and systems can create an important pathway to self-discovery. Some questions to consider are listed below.

1. When was the last time you had to think about your ethnicity, race, gender identity, ability level, religion, and/or sexual orientation? What provoked you to think about it or acknowledge it?
2. When watching TV or a movie, how likely are you to watch shows whose characters reflect your ethnicity, race, gender, ability level, religion, gender identity, and/or sexual orientation?
3. When using social media, how diverse is your feed? How diverse are your friends and followers? How diverse are those that you follow?
4. How do you respond when others make negative statements towards individuals of a different ethnicity, race, gender, ability level, religion, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity than yourself?
5. How often do you go to social settings where the majority of individuals are of a different ethnicity, race, gender, ability level, religion, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity than yourself?
6. How diverse is the community in which you live?
7. How do you feel when you are in a community that is different than your neighborhood?
8. How would you make your neighborhood more inclusive and sensitive?
9. If you recognized your privilege, what did you do with this realization?

SUGGESTIONS FOR TALKING TO OTHERS ABOUT PRIVILEGE

Engaging in thoughtful discussion with people of other backgrounds is essential to understanding privilege. Prior to the discussion, ask participants to read Peggy McIntosh's article, "[White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#)," or "[Waking Up White](#)" by Debby Irving.

- 1. Start by discussing how privilege looks in our society and which groups have privilege and which do not.**
 - a. The first discussion should be about privilege, in general, in America and the reasons some groups have privilege and others do not. This lays a foundation before personalizing the discussion and may help participants be less defensive.
 - b. Next, ask participants to discuss examples of how they are privileged and how they are not privileged. Listen to the ways in which a person legitimately does and does not have privilege and validate any frustrations that are expressed, especially before offering your opinion or perspective. The discussion about areas in which participants have not experienced privilege is where the most empathy may be found.
 - c. Be sure to listen twice as much as you speak.
- 2. Stress that privilege is relative to each individual's lived experience.**
 - a. The degree to which individuals experience privilege must be framed within the context of their own race, gender, ability level, religion, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity coupled with the communities in which they live, work, and play as well as the persons with whom they interact.
- 3. Recognize that having privilege does not require feeling guilty for your privilege.**
 - a. Because each of us likely has an element of privilege within our make-up (ethnicity, gender, ability level, religion, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity), individuals need not feel guilty for their privilege.
 - b. Rather, the focus should be to use our privileged positions to challenge the systems in which we live. Specifically, challenge yourself and others to refuse to live in a system of unchecked privilege. For example, challenging school staff members to walk the route their students take to school each day is a small but meaningful step toward helping them to identify and understand their privilege in relation to the students they serve.
- 4. Determine and offer ways to challenge systems of privilege and oppression in your own life.**
 - a. If someone mentions an oppressive pattern that relates to privilege (e.g., "Men always dominate conversations and talk over women because they are taught that their voices are more valuable."), consider how you will not participate in this pattern. For example, you might say less or be aware of how often you are speaking and begin to listen more while others are speaking.

CONCLUSION

Understanding and engaging in self-reflection and discussions about privilege is an essential step to addressing individual and systemic inequities in our society. We must be aware of and honest about our personal perspectives and how these may or may not contribute to biases that in turn may contribute, even unintentionally, to prejudice, inequity, isolation, poverty, and violence. Schools present an ideal context for helping to guide conversations and learning opportunities for students. (See NASP's lesson plan, "Talking to Middle and High School Students About Privilege" for additional specific guidance.)

RESOURCES

Related NASP Resources

“NASP Statement Regarding Recent Acts of Violence”: <http://www.nasponline.org/about-school-psychology/media-room/press-releases/nasp-statement-regarding-recent-acts-of-violence>

“Racism, prejudice, and discrimination,” NASP position statement: <http://www.nasponline.org/x26830.xml>

“Talking to Middle and High School Students About Privilege,” lesson plan:

<http://www.nasponline.org/resources/social-justice> <http://www.nasponline.org/social-justice>

Online

“10 children’s books that help White kids understand what children of color are up against,” *Romper* blog post: <https://www.romper.com/p/10-childrens-books-that-help-white-kids-understand-what-children-of-color-are-up-against-15238>

“Confronting White Privilege,” *Teaching Tolerance* article, <http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-42-fall-2012/feature/confronting-white-privilege>

“For White teachers in the times of #Blacklivesmatter,” *Practical Theory* blog post:

<http://practicaltheory.org/blog/2016/07/07/for-white-teachers-in-the-time-of-blacklivesmatter/>

“Resources for discussing police violence, race, and racism with children,” *Education Week* blog post:

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/2016/07/resources_for_discussing_police_violence_and_addressing_trauma_with_students.html?cmp=eml-contshr-shr

The Pathology of Privilege: Racism, White Denial & the Costs of Inequality, Media Education Foundation video:

<http://shop.mediaed.org/tim-wise-on-white-privilege-p137.aspx>

“White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack,” monograph by Peggy McIntosh:

<https://www.deanza.edu/faculty/lewisjulie/White%20Priviledge%20Unpacking%20the%20Invisible%20Knapsack.pdf>

Books

Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools, Second Edition by Glenn E. Singleton

Waking Up White by Debby Irving

“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” And Other Questions About Race, 5th Anniversary Revised Edition by Beverly Daniel Tatum

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