

Working With(in) Our Intersecting Race/Sex/Gender Identities

Miriam Yeung & Eric Pliner

LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

CONTENT OBJECTIVES

- To amplify the definition of both oppression and privilege with common examples.
- To increase awareness and sensitivity to the realities of oppression and privilege.
- To illustrate our own and others' mixed experience of oppression and privilege.
- To demonstrate graphically that the "playing field" is not yet level.

PROCESS OBJECTIVES

- To provide physical movement and a lasting visual image.
- To challenge and reduce feelings of guilt, blame and denial regarding the experience of oppressions and/or privilege.
- To cultivate stronger bonds among participants.

TIME REQUIRED

- Forming the line and giving instructions: 5 minutes
- The exercise: 6-12 minutes depending on number of statements. Include a few minutes for bringing chairs back in the space.
- Process: 20-30 minutes
- Total time: Plan an hour

MATERIALS NEEDED AND OTHER LOGISTICS

- The exercise works in any large open space. You can use a wide hallway, the foyer to an auditorium, a gym, or an outdoor space if time and weather allow. There needs to be an unobstructed wall, sidewalk or other "wall" for the "race." (Of course, if there are obstructions, they can be added to the metaphor during the processing!)
- Participants need to have their hands free.
- This is a good exercise first thing in the morning or after a break, when you have had time to clear the chairs, etc. from the space.
- Before the exercise consider any movement/support needs of all participants. People will be standing or using wheelchairs for 6-12 minutes.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Make sure everyone is there for the instructions. People joining after the exercise has begun is confusing and reduces the impact of the exercise.
2. Ask the group to line up side by side in one line across the room. Have them face you and the flat wall or sidewalk behind you. There should be about equal space in front as behind them.
3. Instruct folks to offer respect to one another by remaining silent during the exercise. (You will have to repeat this often.)

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4. Tell the group you are going to read a series of statements about life experiences. After each one you will instruct them to move either backward or forward depending on their experience.
5. Since “stepping” is something only people who walk do, try saying “move one space forward,” rather than “take one step forward.” This phrasing is less ableist and more affirming to people who use wheelchairs.
6. At this point you should illustrate the size of the step/move participants should take each time. Determine this by the size of the room and the number of statements you’re going to read. You don’t want half the room nose-to-the-wall after only a few statements.
7. If a statement is not heard clearly, anyone can ask for a “repeat.”
8. Ask the group to hold the hands of the people next to them, and to keep holding hands as long as they can. If someone in the group uses a wheelchair or walker, be sure the people on either side of her/him figure out how to keep physical contact. You may tell folks here that at some point they may have to let go. Later in the exercise, you may have to remind folks to let go rather than risk falling down.
9. Read the statements. Use the statements on the following pages you have selected for this group and design (race and class, gender and race, etc.) or write your own.
10. When you finish all statements, pause. Ask the group to remain where they are. Drop hands and look around. Ask them to note where they are, where their friends are.
11. Tell the group, “On my count of three, race to the wall.” (wall, line, sidewalk, whatever is behind you)
12. You may begin to count immediately, leaving no time to really think about what you asked. Or you may wait a few seconds before you start the count and note how some people prepare for the “race.”

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LEVEL PLAYING FIELD QUESTIONS

The following statements all relate to race and class. You can develop statements based on gender, sexual orientation, presence or absence of disability, spirituality, et al., to meet the needs of your design.

- 1.If your parents spoke English as a first language, move one space forward.
- 2.If, as a child, you had a room of your own with a door, move one space forward.
- 3.If you were raised in a community where the vast majority of police, politicians and government workers were *not* of your racial group, move one space back.
- 4.If you were denied a job or promotion because of your race, move one space back.
- 5.If you can get your hair cut in most any hair salon, move forward.
- 6.If you're racial or ethnic group has ever been considered by scientists as "inferior," move one space back.
- 7.If your home, as a child, had more than 10 children's books and 30 adult books, move forward.
- 8.If you were discouraged from pursuing activities, careers or schools of your choice by teachers or guidance counselors, move back.
- 9.If one or both of your parents completed college, move forward.
10. If you have spent one year or more without health insurance, move back.
11. If you have *never* been harassed or disrespected by police because of your race, move forward.
12. If one or both of your parents never completed high school, move back.
13. If you can easily find hair care products, skin care products and band-aids to suit your skin color and hair, move forward.
14. If you ate government "surplus" food as a child, move back.
15. If you read thoroughly about the history of your race in K-12 school books, move forward.
16. If neither you nor your parents had to spend any amount of time on public assistance, move forward.
17. If you, as a child, were ever told your were dirty, shouldn't touch someone's food, or drink from the same glass, because of your skin color, move back.
18. If you have ever been told that your religion or spiritual belief was strange, primitive, heathen, or just plain wrong, move back.
19. If you can easily find a birthday, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day or sympathy card picturing people of your skin color, move forward.

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20. If you have ever lost a job, a promotion because you had to take considerable time off work to care for a sick child or parent, move back.
21. If, as a child, you were *never* told you must dress or act in a proper way, because it reflected on your whole race, move forward.
22. If you have *ever* been asked if you were the secretary, maid, housekeeper, janitor or some other subordinate job, when you were the boss or homeowner, move back.
23. If you needed braces as a child but you did not get them, move back.
24. If your religious holidays are regularly recognized by (this organization's) calendar, move forward.
25. If you have ever been stopped or questioned by police or other people about your presence in a particular neighborhood, move back.
26. If you *never* had to wonder if you were hired to meet an affirmative action goal, move forward.
27. If your fitness as a parent has *never* been questioned because of your income, education, work or welfare status, move forward.
28. If your relatives of any generation were forced to leave ancestral lands, move back.
29. If you had a relative of any generation who was lynched, move back.
30. If you have *never* had to hand a grocery store cashier food stamps for your food, move forward.
31. If you have seen the owner of a purse (or other valuable) close it, move it or clutch it tighter when you appeared, move back.
32. If you have *never* been followed by the security guard in a store, move forward.
33. If, when you were growing up, you were regularly told you couldn't have all the milk or food you wanted because there was not enough, move back.
34. If you have ever owned a car, move forward.
35. If you or any relative was ever forced to live in an internment or relocation camp, move back.
36. All those whose ancestors lost a war with the U.S. and whose land was made part of the U.S., move back.
37. If you or members of your family have ever lived downwind from a nuclear test site, move back.
38. All those who themselves or whose parents could not legally vote for any period of their lives, move back.
39. If you went to a private elementary or secondary school, move forward.
40. If you were taken to art galleries or museums by your parent(s), move forward.
41. If you or a relative has ever been imprisoned, move back.

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42. If you were rewarded as a child in school for being assertive and speaking your mind, move forward.
43. If you have an immediate family member who is a doctor, lawyer, professor or other “professional,” move forward.
44. If you regularly cash checks without showing additional identification, move forward.
45. If your classroom opportunities or grades were reduced because of your race, move back.
46. If you or a relative of any generation were sterilized against your will, move back.
47. If you or family members have ever lived in housing built on hazardous waste sites, move back.
48. If, as a child, you vacationed outside the U.S., move forward.
49. If you commonly see people of your race in positions of leadership in business, the courts and government, move forward.
50. If you own a personal computer, move forward.
51. If most medical models for disease are based on your racial group, move forward.
52. If your bags have *never* been searched in a store or airport, move forward.

joan olsson 1995 – adapted from “Horatio Alger” exercise which was adapted by Ellen Bettman from an activity developed by Martin Cano, Valerie Tulier and Ruth Katz of “A World of Difference.”

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PROCESS

Alter the order of these questions based on time available and which “take home messages” you want to emphasize.

1. **How did it feel to be in your position at the end?** (before the race to the wall) Help people talk about their feelings of guilt, anger, apathy, confusion, frustration.
2. **How did it feel to have to let go of your friends hands?** There will often be very touching comments here.
3. **What did you notice about your reactions as the exercise progressed?** There is often a lot of laughing, playful jostling at the beginning. Things get serious fast. Help people pay attention to the change in feelings.
4. **What did you think and feel when you looked around at the end?** (before the race to the wall) **Was there anything that surprised you about people’s positions? Including your own?** Often folks will be surprised that a friend is so far away from them, when they thought they had much in common. Others will be surprised at the opposite: folks they never thought had similar experiences to them remained nearby.
5. **How many “cheated” or adjusted their step size?** (e.g., took larger steps backward or forward) **or did not move when they could have? Why? What feelings or thoughts prompted you to do that?** Some folks will start feeling guilty after they move forward several times. They may start to shorten their forward steps and take large steps when a statement moves them back. Folks who are moving backward often, may also adjust their moves. Have people talk about what was going on for them as they altered their moves.
6. **What was your first reaction to my instruction: “Race to the wall?”** Some folks near the front will remark: “There was no need for me to run, I was so close.” Others may say, “I ran hard anyway.” Those near the back may say either “I ran as fast as I could, because I was determined to get there,” or “What was the point? No matter how hard I ran, I wasn’t going to win.”
7. **What does this exercise show us?** At some point someone will always question the validity or necessity or values represented by the wall: “Just because you or society says that’s the wall we should race to, doesn’t mean I have to. I can establish my own values or goals.” While, of course, people do have some control of their “goals,” it is crucial to point out that regardless of how individuals may value or define “success” or “achievement,” the society has some pretty concrete criteria (education, money, power, etc.) Usually the person who challenges the validity of the whole wall notion, is someone with quite a bit of privilege.

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TAKE HOME MESSAGES

- None of the exercise statements was about any individual's choice or decision. Each was dependent on parents, other people or social circumstance. While recognizing the feelings of guilt and blame that can arise, reinforce this "no choices" point.
- None of the statements, nor any person's position at the end of the exercise, has anything to do with how hard people worked, how smart they are, how well-intended or determined they were.
- Many of the statements relate the multi-generational impact of oppression and privilege. While there is no denying that substantial social change has occurred, it is still true that at least some of the effects of oppression from one generation do impact subsequent generations.
- The statements in the exercise (and the life experiences they represent) have a cumulative effect. People of color do not have just one opportunity denied; women do not experience just one incident of harassment, etc.
- In the exercise, no matter how fast or hard folks near the back run, they will not beat the front folks to the wall. Relate to perceptions and reality in the comments: "women have to work twice as hard as men" or "people of color have to be twice as qualified as whites," etc.
- What emotional responses might logically be evoked by these common, repeated and expected (by adulthood) experiences? (by both the target and privileges groups?)

You can begin here to talk about internalized oppression and internalized privilege. The feelings, particularly of young people (in target groups) of "Why bother? I can't get there." or "I can't do that."

The assumptions by people in privilege groups of "I accomplished that simply on my own merit and determination."

- The "playing field" is NOT level. Race, class, gender, etc. (depending on which issues are addressed in the statements of the exercise) continue to have significant influence on people's access to the opportunities of this society.
- There remains a need for programs like affirmative action.