



White Privilege

| *Is there such a thing as white privilege? If so, what can we do about it?*

Goal for the Session

Participants will define “white privilege,” unmask the manifestations of white privilege in our everyday life, and discuss the impact of white privilege on people of color.

Preparing for the Session

- This study is part of the Racism Study Pack. Your group may use this study alone, although we suggest you use it along with the other studies in the pack. Suggestions for using this study in various groups of people are found in “Additional Teaching Tips” at the end of this Leader’s Guide.
- The following is the suggested order of the study pack, although you may study in any order your group chooses.
 - Why Is It So Difficult to Talk about Racism?
 - Racism 101
 - The Bible and Racism
 - A History of Racism in the United States
 - White Privilege
 - Is Affirmative Action Still Needed?
 - Do Segregated Churches Imply Racism?
- Pray for yourself and the participants.

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Prayer
- Defining white culture

ENGAGING

- Discovering white privilege
- Redefining racism

RESPONDING

- Steps to balance the playing field

CLOSING

- Prayer

- Read through the Leader’s Guide to ensure that you have all the necessary materials and definitions from previous sessions.
- Prepare the necessary newsprint headings and columns.

Teaching Tip

Recognize that white privilege may be difficult for some participants, regardless of race, due to its invisibility as the standard or norm. Be patient in facilitating the

questions, and expect to explain the same question multiple times.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Prayer

You may prayer the following prayer or one of your own choosing.

Grant, O God, that your light and truth be our guides amid our disagreements, privileges, and oppressions. Let your grace and forgiveness be the lens with which we look toward one another and ourselves. We lift up these prayers to you and in the name of Christ. **Amen.**

2. Defining White Culture

On a sheet of newsprint, draw three columns and label them African American, Latinos/Latinas, and White. Beginning with the African American column, invite participants to describe characteristics of each culture, discussing the white culture as the last one. Initially, many white participants may have difficulty identifying or describing any characteristics. Culture, race, and ethnicity are often perceived as something that people of color possess. White participants may respond that they don't have a culture; they're just white, or American. Thus, the inability to define or describe white culture points to the invisible standard that white culture has in the United States and shows how whites have privilege over people of color.

Exploring (30 minutes)

3. Discovering White Privilege

The following exercise, which is described in the Participant Handout, is accomplished with the most impact among a diverse group of participants. This is an abbreviated format, but the results are the same. At the end, the white participants will be far ahead of the people of color. Have all the participants stand side by side at an arm's distance and hold hands. Read the following statements.

- If your parents spoke English as a first language, take one step forward.
- If you were raised in a community where the vast majority of police, politicians, and government workers were *not* of your race, take one step back.

- If you have ever wondered if you were chosen to serve on a church committee or governing board because of your race, take one step back.
- If you can easily find hair-care products, skin-care products, and Band-Aids to suit your skin color and hair, move one space forward.
- If you can go an entire day without interacting with a person of another color, take a step forward.
- If you learned or were told that you are ugly or inferior because of your race, take one step back.
- If persons of your race were ever denied a right to vote, take a step back.
- If you went to school and the majority of your teachers were of your race, take one step forward.
- If you were ever told to dress or act in a different way because it reflects on your race, take one step back.
- If you were ever identified by your race or ethnicity, take a step back.

Have everyone look around and see who is where. Point out that none of these statements are about an individual's achievement or choices, but about family and social circumstance. It is not a level playing field. These are generational realities based upon history and privilege that impact us today.

Ask the following questions:

- How did it feel to let go of each other's hands and move forward or back?
- Did you feel guilty if you were constantly taking a step forward?
- How do you feel about where you stand relative to everyone else?

If your congregation is all white, in lieu of moving forward and back, discuss the statements by asking how each circumstance contributes to white privilege and its invisible standard.

4. Redefining Racism

If your group has studied other topics in the Racism Study Pack, redirect the participants to the newsprint sheet from the previous sessions with the working

definition of race and racism. If participants have been keeping a working definition on their own, invite them to continue to do so now. Using their Participant Handout, invite participants to edit the definition of racism. You may choose to use some of the guiding questions below.

- According to the author, why is the term “personal prejudice” not interchangeable with racism? How does it contribute to maintaining white privilege?
- What definition is the author proposing? How does this change our working definition?
- According to Beverly Tatum, why should racism be defined as a system rather than racial prejudice?

Responding (5 minutes)

5. Steps to Balance the Playing Field

This session shows that the playing field is definitely not level and tilts dramatically in one direction. Invite participants to recommend concrete steps that everyone can take to unveil white privilege.

Closing (5 minutes)

6. Prayer

Loving and merciful God, help us to see you in everyone.

Guide us in our journey to hear all voices and recognize our actions

that oppress your creation. O God, hear our prayer.
Amen.

Teaching Alternatives

- Order the Equality Index from the National Urban League at www.nul.org/thestateofblackamerica.html. Using this as a guide, discuss the variables that contribute to the continued inequality between white Americans and people of color.
- View the documentary *Race: The Power of an Illusion* and have a discussion concerning the series.
- Create a blog where participants can continue the dialogue. Encourage postings of observed white privilege in everyday life.

For More Information

Race: The Power of an Illusion (a three-part documentary on race), DVD, Video, directed by Christine Herbes-Sommers (PBS/California Newsreel, 2003), is one of the best introductions to the issue of race in science, history, and society. An online companion is available at http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm. Highly recommended!

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001).

Michael K. Brown et al., *White-Washing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

Melanie E. L. Bush, *Breaking the Code of Good Intentions: Everyday Forms of Whiteness* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

Richard Dyer, “The Matter of Whiteness” in *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, 3rd ed., ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: Worth Publishers, 2008).

Laurie M. Cassidy and Alex Mikulich, eds., *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007).

Gary R. Howard, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006).

Robert Jensen, *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism, and White Privilege*. (San Francisco: City Lights, 2005).

Allan G. Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 2nd ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2005).

Frances E. Kendall, *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships across Race* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Meizhu Lui et al., *The Color of Wealth: The Story behind the U.S. Racial Wealth Divide* (New York: New Press, 2006).

Karyn D. McKinney, *Being White: Stories of Race and Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Rondel Thompson and Sophia Parker, "The National Urban League Equality Index" in *The State of Black America 2007* (New York: National Urban League, 2007).

James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

David T. Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Tim Wise, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2007).

About the Writer

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Additional Teaching Tips for Various Types of Groups

Leading a session on racism is ideally accomplished with a diverse group of participants representing a variety of heritages. But unfortunately this is not always possible or realistic. Given these circumstances we have provided tips for facilitating these sessions in a fruitful manner.

General Guidelines

- Remind participants that these sessions are a starting point. The work to challenge racism is ongoing. Remind yourself that conversations dealing with racism are difficult and uncomfortable. This is normal.
- All voices need to be heard and respected. Be mindful that no one is targeted for their views. Encourage everyone to listen to each other and the writers of the sessions without being defensive.
- Be mindful that the conversation stays on topic with time to share experience, analysis, and hopes for the future.
- Identify your own struggles with race and racism in order to check any negative assumptions or stereotypes you may have.

All-White Congregations

- Be alert that the conversation stays on topic and does not downplay the effect of racism.
- An all-white conversation may provide a forum for an honest expression of views. Issues of white guilt and denial are normal if the discussion is fruitful. Address these issues and avoid the tendency to downplay or ignore them.
- Racism cannot be and is not an issue only for people of color. Encourage participants to take ownership.

Primarily White Group with a Few People of Color

- Be alert to statements or questions that ask the person of color to make a sweeping generalization for all people of color. For example: What do people of color need or want?
- Racism must be challenged together by people of color and white people. Watch for manifestations of white guilt in the form of denial.
- If possible, have two facilitators, one white and one person of color.
- This group makeup can be tricky because the power dynamic so closely mirrors what people of color experience in many aspects of their lives. Be mindful that the people of color in the room don't feel pressured to "educate" the white participants about race or racism. Also, make sure that the experiences of the people of color don't get sidetracked, downplayed, or explained away even if there is disagreement in the room.

Primarily People of Color with a Few White People

- The white participants may feel unable to express themselves openly, resulting in a lack of honesty. Be careful to keep the conversation from becoming accusatory.
- If possible, have two facilitators, one white and one person of color.

Group with All People of Color

- Facilitator must be a person of color for honest exchange.
- Not all people of color will agree about what the definitions or implications of racism are in society or in their lives, so don't assume opinions or feel the need to force consensus. Instead, call participants to a spirit of support amid different experiences, creative collaboration, and coalition building.