



Some Notes for Facilitators on Presenting My White Privilege Papers

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1. My work is not about blame, shame, guilt, or whether one is a “nice person.” It’s about observing, realizing, thinking systemically and personally. It is about seeing privilege, the “up-side” of oppression and discrimination. It is unearned advantage, which can also be described as exemption from discrimination.
2. Please do not generalize from my papers. They are about my experience, not about the experiences of all white people in all times and places and circumstances. Read the paragraph in each paper before the list begins.
3. Keep “the lists” in their autobiographical contexts. This is a matter of scholarly integrity. But it will actually increase your effectiveness to be able to say, “This is from just one white woman coming to see she’s white in her time and place and workspace. . . .”
4. Draw on the participants’ own personal experiences, not their opinions. Opinions invite argumentation. Experience invites listening without resisting. Opinions tend to elicit defensiveness; shared experiences tend to elicit open curiosity. When participants move from experiential testimony to opinion, bring them back. The usual academic habits work against deep new learning of this kind.
5. When exploring privilege, it is useful to use “Serial Testimony,” a disciplined mode in which each participant gets to respond in turn, uninterrupted, for, say, one minute, timed. I call this “the autocratic administration of time in the service of democratic distribution of time.”
6. Without rigorous use of a watch or timer, Serial Testimony can be as undemocratic as any other discussion form.
7. Understand that every participant has an intricate “politics of location” (Adrienne Rich) within the systems of social power. For example, all people in a workshop or class will have experience of both advantage and disadvantage.
8. Recognize that all people are both located in systems and also uniquely individual.
9. Co-presentations and panels of people speaking about their experiences one after another can be very effective. I do not usually arrange for “dialogues,” since I feel they are often a veiled form of debating and fighting, rather than listening and learning.
10. My lists of unearned privileges are not “check lists” or questionnaires.
11. The lists are not confessional readings.
12. Please mention the specificity of “my sample.” I compared my circumstances only with what I knew of the circumstances of my African-American female colleagues in the same building and line of work. This sample is very specific with regard to race, sex, region, location, workplace, vocation and nation.
13. Be very wary of entrapment in definitions of privilege and power. They lack nuances and flexibility.
14. Invite people to make their own autobiographical lists of privilege, for example, about:

Sexual Orientation	Gender	Language
Class	Employment	Nation of origin
Region	Physical ability	Parents relation to education
Religion	Handedness	

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15. Beware of gym-exercises which position people in only one aspect of their identities, asking them to step forward or backward from a baseline at a given prompt.
16. Avoid self righteousness and preaching to family and friends about privilege. Informal, untimed testimony can work in these settings to invite learning and decrease argumentation.
17. Explain the word “systemic.” Help participants or students to understand (or begin to understand) what it is to see society systemically, rather than only in terms of individuals making individual choices.
18. Explain why U.S. people, especially White people, have trouble seeing systemically. Explain the myth of meritocracy: that the unit of society is the individual and that whatever one ends up with must be whatever that individual wanted, worked for, earned, and deserved. This myth suppresses knowledge of systemic oppression and especially its “up-side” – systemic privilege.
19. Work to strengthen two intellectual muscles: a) the ability to see in terms of systems as well as in terms of individuals; b) the ability to see how systemic discrimination is matched by systemic privilege.
20. Think about the privilege work in schools and universities as making one smarter, not necessarily better. Academic institutions do not claim that making us better is their primary goal.

When I present, or co-present with a person of color, on Privilege Systems, whether or not I am the first to speak, I usually:

- tell how I came to see men’s privilege and their obliviousness to it, which made me see laterally to my own race privilege and my obliviousness to it;
- read some examples from my white privilege list, and sometimes read some of my heterosexual privilege list, Christian privilege list, and lists of privilege relative to Asian Americans, Indigenous people, Latino/as, etc.;
- analyze some of the different misreadings of my paper by white people and people of color;
- raise the question of how I can use unearned advantage to weaken systems of unearned advantage, and why I would want to.

The co-presenter and I take equal time to testify about how we came to see privilege systems in and around us. After this, we use Serial Testimony. We form either circles of five to eight people or pairs of two people to respond in turn, uninterrupted for one minute each, to the following prompts:

Round one: What is one way you’ve had unearned disadvantage in your life?

Round two: What is one way you’ve had unearned advantage in your life?

Round three: What is it like for you to sit here and talk about and hear about these experiences of unearned advantage and disadvantage?

Round three is like a debrief in itself. Any further debrief should be on *new* learnings from the exercise.

Unfacilitated discussion of the exercise can quickly lead away from experience to generalization and opinions people came into the session with.

Some people “get” the idea of systemic privilege and ask “But what can I do?” My answer is, you can use unearned advantage to weaken systems of unearned advantage. I see white privilege as a bank account that I did not ask for, but that I can choose to spend. People with privilege have far more power than we have been taught to realize under the myth of meritocracy. Participants can brainstorm about how to use unearned assets to share power; these may include time, money, leisure, connections, spaces, travel, and may connect with changes in other behaviors as well, such as paying attention, making associations, intervening, speaking up, asserting and deferring, being alert, taking initiative, doing ally work, and recognizing and acting against both the external and internalized forms of oppression and privilege.