

IMPLEMENTATION EXERCISE

WHITE PRIVILEGE: THE COLOR-LINE EXERCISE

I developed the following exercise after reading Du Bois's (1903/1996) *The Souls of Black Folk* and then participating in SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) training with Peggy McIntosh in 2002. As a part of our training, we read McIntosh's (1989) article "White Privilege," which is autobiographical; in it, she compared her circumstances only to those of a small group of African American women in her building and in her line of work. She did not claim that her examples of privilege applied to all White people in all times and places relative to all people of color. Many people, including me, have found, however, that McIntosh's observations of her life have some bearing on our own experiences. The point of this exercise is to think about racial privilege as a corollary of racial discrimination and to see whether and how any of the points in McIntosh's list apply to you.

Time required: 60 minutes

Materials required: For each participant, Courageous Conversation Journal and a copy of the exercise in Table 10.1

Review the Four Agreements and the first five Conditions of Courageous Conversation.

Prepare the group by introducing the Sixth Condition:

Examine the presence and role of Whiteness and its impact on the conversation and the problem being addressed.

1. Invite participants to make personal sense of Whiteness. Offer them an explanation of White as a color. If the color-line exercise is to be effective, you must be working with a racially diverse group.
2. Have each participant complete the color-line exercise in Table 10.1, which is adapted from the work of Peggy McIntosh (1989) and uses the scale it provides. Reiterate to the group that they must answer all questions and may enter only a 5, 3, or 0; that is, they may not enter 1, 2, or 4 in response to any question.
3. Have participants total their scores and then line up in an arc, with the persons who had the lowest scores to the right and those with the highest scores to the left.
4. With the group arranged in this arc, pose the probing questions in the box that follows. With each question, have appropriate members take a

step forward into the center of the arc. Once the group has noted the response, have those who stepped forward return to their original places.

PROBING QUESTIONS

- Would all women step forward?
What you see is how race impacts women.
- Would all women with an advanced degree step forward?
What you see is how race impacts women with higher-level education.
- Would men with an advanced degree step forward to join the women with advanced degrees?
What you see is how race impacts people with advanced degrees.
- Would all White people step forward?
What you see is White privilege and the color line.

5. Now read to the group the following excerpt from *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903 by W. E. B. Du Bois, a Black man who had a PhD from Harvard:

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea. . . . Curious it was, too, how this deeper question [of the color line] ever forced itself to the surface despite effort and disclaimer. (Du Bois, 1903/1996, pp. 15–16)

Then ask the group, “Where is our color line between the lighter and darker races?”

6. Following the series of probing questions and the reading, allow the entire group some time to process the exercise together in the arc.
7. Finally, have the participants return to their tables, where they will continue conversations in smaller multiracial groups. Recognize that the patterns revealed by the probing questions above may be upsetting and even shocking to some participants.
8. You may wish to have each educator complete the exercise in Table 10.1 with a friend of a different race and report on this at your next meeting.

Recognize that some White participants may not know anyone of a different race whom they consider a friend. These educators might reflect on why their friendships include only people of the same race.

Table 10.1 White Privilege: The Color-Line Exercise

Respond to each question using one of the following scores:

5 if the statement is mostly true for you

3 if the statement is sometimes true for you

0 if the statement is seldom true for you

Because of my race or color . . .	My response	Friend's response
If I wish, I can arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.		
If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area that I can afford and in which I would want to live.		
I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.		
I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.		
I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the newspaper and see people of my race widely represented.		
When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.		
I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.		
I can go into supermarkets and find the staple foods that fit with my cultural traditions; I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented; I can go into any hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.		
Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.		
I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.		
I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.		
I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.		

Because of my race or color . . .	My response	Friend's response
I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.		
I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.		
I can remain oblivious to the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling, in my culture, any penalty for such oblivion.		
I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.		
I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race.		
If a traffic cop pulls me over, or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.		
I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, and children's magazines featuring the people of my race.		
I can go home from most meetings of the organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, feared, or hated.		
I can take a job with an Affirmative Action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.		
I can choose public accommodations without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.		
I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.		
If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.		
I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.		
TOTAL SCORE		