

Safe Space Participant Guide

Assessing Your Personal Beliefs

People aren't born prejudiced, so where does it come from? From the moment we are born, we are inundated with messages, spoken and unspoken, about different types of people. Often we learn stereotypes and prejudices without even realizing it. Some of these messages may

have been about ourselves and what we are "supposed to" or not "supposed to" be.

All of us, LGBT and non-LGBT, have learned messages about LGBT people. What were the earliest messages you received about LGBT people and where did they come from? Were they positive, negative or neutral? Understanding the messages we receive can help us identify our own beliefs and biases that we can then challenge, helping to make us stronger allies. Use the "Check Yourself" Exercise below to explore your own biases.

Check Yourself: Understanding Your Own Beliefs

Anti-LGBT bias is all around us. Yet we tend to overlook the subtle biases — the anti-LGBT jokes, the exclusion of LGBT related-themes in curricula, even anti-LGBT name-calling. Subtle or not, bias has the power to hurt and isolate people. Your work as an ally includes recognizing and challenging your own anti-LGBT bias. Answer each question honestly, and consider how these will affect your work as an ally to LGBT students.

1. If someone were to come out to you as LGBT, what would your first thought be?
2. How would you feel if your child came out to you as LGBT? How would you feel if your mother, father or sibling came out to you as LGBT?
3. Would you go to a physician whom you thought was LGBT if they were of a different gender than you? What if they were the same gender as you?
4. Have you ever been to an LGBT social event, march or worship service? Why or why not?
5. Can you think of three historical figures who were lesbian, gay or bisexual?
6. Can you think of three historical figures who were transgender?
7. Have you ever laughed at or made a joke at the expense of LGBT people?
8. Have you ever stood up for an LGBT person being harassed? Why or why not?
9. If you do not identify as LGBT, how would you feel if people thought you were LGBT?

Recognizing your own biases is an important first step in becoming an ally. Based on your responses to these questions, do you think you have internalized some of the anti-LGBT messages pervasive in our world? How might your beliefs influence your actions as an educator of LGBT students? The more aware we are of our own biases and their impact on our behavior, the easier it is to ensure that our personal beliefs don't undermine our efforts to support LGBT students.

Talking the Talk

One simple yet important way to be an ally is to use LGBT-related terminology accurately and respectfully. The best way to ensure that you are using the proper terminology when referring to an individual is to find out the terminology they themselves prefer.

Language has a huge impact on the way we see others and ourselves, and yet, language is constantly changing. That is why it is important to familiarize yourself and keep up-to-date with LGBT-related terms and concepts. Begin by completing the “Terminology Match-Up” on the next page.

“One of the greatest challenges we face on a daily basis is not what the students do to one another. In fact, sadly, it is what is said by some of my colleagues about the students.”

— Alternative High School Educator, Ohio

Terminology Match-Up

How much LGBT-related terminology do you already know? On the left is a set of LGBT-related terms, on the right are definitions of these terms. To test your knowledge, select the matching definition for each term. Then check the *Glossary of LGBT-Related Terms* at the end of this *Safe Space Kit* for more terms and definitions.

ASK YOURSELF

- ▼ Which terms were you most familiar with? Which were you unfamiliar with?
- ▼ What terms are you most comfortable using? Are there any terms you are uncomfortable using? Why?

ANSWER KEY: 1=B, 2=F, 3=J, 4=E, 5=D, 6=I, 7=K, 8=M, 9=G, 10=A, 11=C, 12=H, 13=L

Core Vocabulary - Participant Sheet

Ally - (noun) a (typically straight- or cis-identified) person who supports, and respects for members of the LGBTQ community. While the word doesn't necessitate action, we consider people to be active allies who take action upon this support and respect, this also indicates to others that you are an ally.

Asexual - (adj) having a lack of (or low level of) sexual attraction to others and/or a lack of interest or desire for sex or sexual partners. Asexuality exists on a spectrum from people who experience no sexual attraction or have any desire for sex to those who experience low levels and only after significant amounts of time, many of these different places on the spectrum have their own identity labels. Another term used within the asexual community is "ace," meaning someone who is asexual.

Biological Sex - (noun) a medical term used to refer to the chromosomal, hormonal and anatomical characteristics that are used to classify an individual as female or male or intersex. Often referred to as simply "sex," "physical sex," "anatomical sex," or specifically as "sex assigned [or designated] at birth."

Biphobia - (noun) a range of negative attitudes (e.g., fear, anger, intolerance, resentment, erasure, or discomfort) that one may have/express towards bisexual individuals. Biphobia can come from and be seen within the queer community as well as straight society. **Biphobic** - (adj) a word used to describe an individual who harbors some elements of this range of negative attitudes towards bisexual people

Bisexual - (adj) a person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to male/men and females/women. Other individuals may use this to indicate an attraction to individuals who identify outside of the gender binary as well and may use bisexual as a way to indicate an interest in more than one gender or sex (i.e. men and genderqueer people). This attraction does not have to be equally split or indicate a level of interest that is the same across the genders or sexes an individual may be attracted to.

Cisgender - (adj; pronounced "siss-jendur") a person whose gender identity and biological sex assigned at birth align (e.g., man and male-assigned). A simple way to think about it is if a person is not trans*, they are cisgender.

Coming Out - (1) the process by which one accepts and/or comes to identify one's own sexuality or gender identity (to "come out" to oneself). (2) The process by which one shares one's sexuality or gender identity with others (to "come out" to friends, etc.).

Gay - (adj) (1) a term used to describe individuals who are primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex and/or gender. More commonly used when referring to males/men-identified ppl who are attracted to males/men-identified ppl, but can be applied to females/women-identified ppl as well. (2) An umbrella term used to refer to the queer community as a whole, or as an individual identity label for anyone who does not identify as heterosexual.

Gender Expression - (noun) the external display of one's gender, through a combination of dress, demeanor, social behavior, and other factors, generally measured on scales of masculinity and femininity. Also referred to as "gender presentation."

Gender Identity - (noun) the internal perception of an one's gender, and how they label themselves, based on how much they align or don't align with what they understand their options for gender to be. Common identity labels include man, woman, genderqueer, trans, and more.

Genderqueer - (adj) a gender identity label often used by people who do not identify with the binary of man/woman; or as an umbrella term for many gender non-conforming or non-binary identities (e.g., agender, bigender, genderfluid). Genderqueer people may think of themselves as one or more of the following, and they may define these terms differently:

- may combine aspects man and woman and other identities (bigender, pangender);
- not having a gender or identifying with a gender (genderless, agender);
- moving between genders (genderfluid);
- third gender or other-gendered; includes those who do not place a name to their gender having an overlap of, or blurred lines between, gender identity and sexual and romantic orientation.

Heteronormativity - (noun) the assumption, in individuals or in institutions, that everyone is heterosexual, and that heterosexuality is superior to all other sexualities. Leads to invisibility and stigmatizing of other sexualities. Often included in this concept is a level of gender normativity and gender roles, the assumption that individuals *should* identify as men and women, and be masculine men and feminine women, and finally that men and women are a complimentary pair.

Homophobia - (noun) an umbrella term for a range of negative attitudes (e.g., fear, anger, intolerance, resentment, erasure, or discomfort) that one may have towards members of LGBTQ community. The term can also connote a fear, disgust, or dislike of being perceived as LGBTQ.

The term is extended to bisexual and transgender people as well; however, the terms biphobia and transphobia are used to emphasize the specific biases against individuals of bisexual and transgender communities.

Homosexual - (adj) a [medical] term used to describe a person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex/gender. This term is considered stigmatizing due to its history as a category of mental illness, and is discouraged for common use (use gay or lesbian instead).

Intersex - (adj) someone whose combination of chromosomes, gonads, hormones, internal sex organs, and genitals differs from the two expected patterns of male or female. In the medical care of infants the initialism DSD ("Differing/Disorders of Sex Development"). Formerly known as **hermaphrodite** (or hermaphroditic), but these terms are now considered outdated and derogatory.

Lesbian - (noun/adj) a term used to describe females/women-identified people attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to other females/women -identified people.

LGBTQ / GSM / DSG / + - (adj) initialisms used as shorthand or umbrella terms for all folks who have a non-normative (or queer) gender or sexuality, there are many different initialisms people prefer. **LGBTQ** is Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Queer and/or Questioning (sometimes people at a + at the end in an effort to be more inclusive); **GSM** is Gender and Sexual Minorities; **DSG** is Diverse Genders and Sexualities.

Other popular options include the initialism GLBT and the acronym QUILTBAG (Queer [or Questioning] Undecided Intersex Lesbian Trans* Bisexual Asexual [or Allied] and Gay [or Genderqueer]).

Pansexual - (adj) a person who experiences sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction for members of all gender identities/expressions

Passing - (verb) (1) a term for trans* people being accepted as, or able to “pass for,” a member of their self-identified gender/sex identity (regardless of birth sex) without being identified as trans*. (2) An LGB/queer individual who is believed to be or perceived as straight.

Queer - (adj) used as an umbrella term to describe individuals who don't identify as straight. Also used to describe people who have non-normative gender identity or as a political affiliation. Due to its historical use as a derogatory term, it is not embraced or used by all members of the LGBTQ community. The term queer can often be use interchangeably with LGBTQ.

Questioning - (verb & adjective) an individual who or when someone is unsure about or is exploring their own sexual orientation or gender identity.

Romantic Attraction - (noun) an affinity for someone that evokes the want to engage in relational intimate behavior (e.g., flirting, dating, marriage), experienced in varying degrees (from little-to-non, to intense). Often conflated with **sexual attraction** or **emotional/spiritual attraction**.

Sexual Attraction - (noun) an affinity for someone that evokes the want to engage in physical intimate behavior (e.g., kissing, touching, intercourse), experienced in varying degrees (from little-to-non, to intense). Often conflated with **romantic attraction** or **emotional/spiritual attraction**.

Sexual Orientation - (noun) the type of **sexual, romantic, emotional/spiritual attraction** one feels for others, often labeled based on the gender relationship between the person and the people they are attracted to (often mistakenly referred to as sexual preference)

Straight - (adj) a person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to people who are not their same sex/gender. A more colloquial term for the word **heterosexual**.

Trans*/Transgender - (adj) (1) An umbrella term covering a range of identities that transgress socially defined gender norms. Trans with an * is often used to indicate that you are referring to the larger group nature of the term. (2) A person who lives as a member of a gender other than that expected based on anatomical sex.

Transphobia - (noun) the fear of, discrimination against, or hatred of trans* people, the trans* community, or gender ambiguity. Transphobia can be seen within the queer community, as well as in general society. Transphobia is often manifested in violent and deadly means. While the exact numbers and percentages aren't incredibly solid on this, it's safe to say that trans* people are far more likely than their cisgender peers (including LGB people) to be the victims of violent crimes and murder.

1. **Sexual Orientation**
2. **Lesbian**
3. **Gender Identity**
4. **Gender Expression**
5. **Transgender**
6. **Gay**
7. **Gender Non-Conforming**
8. **Androgynous**
9. **Bisexual**
10. **Transphobia**
11. **Homophobia**
12. **Heterosexism**
13. **Queer**

A The irrational fear or aversion to transgender people of those who are perceived to break or blur societal norms regarding gender identity or gender expression.

B The inner feelings of who we are attracted or oriented to sexually and emotionally.

C Refers to an irrational fear of or aversion to homosexuality or lesbian, gay or bisexual people.

D An identity of a person whose gender identity is not aligned with their sex assigned at birth and/or whose gender expression is non-conforming.

E An individual's physical characteristics, behaviors and presentation that are linked, traditionally, to either masculinity or femininity, such as: appearance, dress, mannerisms, speech patterns and social interactions.

F A sexual orientation and/or identity of a person who is female-identified and who is sexually and emotionally attracted to some other females.

G A sexual orientation and/or identity of a person who is sexually and emotionally attracted to some males and some females.

H Applies to attitudes, bias and discrimination in favor of heterosexual sexuality and relationships. It includes the presumption that everyone is heterosexual or that male/female attractions and relationships are the norm and therefore superior. It is the belief that everyone is or should be straight.

I A sexual orientation and/or identity of a person who is sexually and emotionally attracted to some members of the same sex.

J How we identify ourselves in terms of our gender.

K An identity of a person who has gender characteristics and/or behaviors that do not conform to traditional or societal gender expectations.

L An umbrella term used to describe a sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression that does not conform to heteronormative society.

M Having the characteristics or nature of both maleness and femaleness; neither specifically feminine nor masculine.

When a Student Comes Out to You...

When a student comes out to you and tells you they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) your initial response is important. The student has likely spent time in advance thinking about whether or not to tell you, and when and how to tell you. Here are some tips to help you support them.

▼ **Offer support but don't assume a student needs any help.** The student may be completely comfortable with their sexual orientation or gender identity and may not need help dealing with it or be in need of any support. It may be that the student just wanted to tell someone, or just simply to tell you so you might know them better. Offer and be available to support your students as they come out to others.

▼ **Be a role model of acceptance.** Always model good behavior by using inclusive language and setting an accepting environment by not making assumptions about people's sexual orientation or gender identity. Addressing other's (adults and students) biased language and addressing stereotypes and myths about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people also position you as a positive role model. By demonstrating that you are respectful of LGBT people and intolerant of homophobia and transphobia, LGBT students are more likely to see you as a supportive educator.

▼ **Appreciate the student's courage.** There is often a risk in telling someone something personal, especially sharing for the first time one's sexual orientation or gender identity, when it is generally not considered the norm. Consider someone's coming out a gift and thank them for giving that gift to you. Sharing this personal information with you means that the student respects and trusts you.

▼ **Listen, listen, listen.** One of the best ways to support a student is to hear them out and let the student know you are there to listen. Coming out is a long process, and chances are you'll be approached again to discuss this process, the challenges and the joys of being out at school.

▼ **Assure and respect confidentiality.** The student told you and may or may not be ready to tell others. Let the student know that the conversation is confidential and that you won't share the information with anyone else, unless they ask for your help. If they want others to know, doing it in their own way with their own timing is important. Respect their privacy.

▼ **Ask questions that demonstrate understanding, acceptance and compassion.** Some suggestions are:

- Have you been able to tell anyone else?
- Has this been a secret you have had to keep from others or have you told other people?
- Do you feel safe in school? Supported by the adults in your life?
- Do you need any help of any kind? Resources or someone to listen?
- Have I ever offended you unknowingly?

...and Tells You They Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender

▼ **Remember that the student has not changed.** They are still the same person you knew before the disclosure; you just have more information about them, which might improve your relationship. Let the student know that you feel the same way about them as you always have and that they are still the same person. If you are shocked, try not to let the surprise lead you to view or treat the student any differently.

▼ **Challenge traditional norms.** You may need to consider your own beliefs about sexual orientation, gender identity and gender roles. Do not expect people to conform to societal norms about gender or sexual orientation.

▼ **Be prepared to give a referral.** If there are questions you can't answer, or if the student does need some emotional support, be prepared to refer them to a sympathetic counselor, a hotline, your school's GSA or an LGBT youth group or community center.

SOME ADDITIONAL THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN A STUDENT COMES OUT TO YOU AS TRANSGENDER:

▼ **Validate the person's gender identity and expression.** It is important to use the pronoun and name appropriate to the gender presented or that the person requests — this is showing respect. In other words, if someone identifies as female, then refer to the person as she; if they identify as male, refer to the person as he. Or use gender neutral language. Never use the word "it" when referring to a person, to do so is insulting and disrespectful.

▼ **Remember that gender identity is separate from sexual orientation.**

Knowing someone is transgender does not provide you with any information about their sexual orientation.

WHAT NOT TO SAY WHEN SOMEONE COMES OUT TO YOU:

▼ **"I knew it!"** This makes the disclosure about you and not the student, and you might have been making an assumption based on stereotypes.

▼ **"Are you sure?" "You're just confused." "It's just a phase — it will pass."** This suggests that the student doesn't know who they are.

▼ **"You just haven't found a good woman yet" said to a male or "a good man yet" said to a female.** This assumes that everyone is straight or should be.

▼ **"Shhh, don't tell anyone."** This implies that there is something wrong and that being LGBT must be kept hidden. If you have real reason to believe that disclosing this information will cause the student harm, then make it clear that is your concern. Say, "Thanks for telling me. We should talk about how tolerant our school and community is. You may want to consider how this may affect your decision about who to come out to."

▼ **"You can't be gay — you've had relationships with people of the opposite sex."** This refers only to behavior, while sexual orientation is about inner feelings.

Respond to Anti-LGBT Language and Behavior

Anti-LGBT behavior comes in all shapes and sizes: biased language, name-calling, harassment and even physical assault. GLSEN's *National School Climate Survey* consistently finds that many LGBT students regularly hear homophobic slurs, such as "faggot" or "dyke," at school, and most students have been verbally or physically harassed in school. Youth who regularly experience harassment can suffer from low self-esteem, high rates of absenteeism and low academic achievement. Educators can make a difference by intervening in anti-LGBT name-calling, bullying and harassment every time they witness it. Taking action when you see it occur can help create a safe space for all students. Intervening on the spot will also serve as a teachable moment to let other students know that anti-LGBT behavior will not be tolerated. One of the most effective things you can do as an ally is respond to anti-LGBT behavior.

HOW TO INTERVENE IN NAME-CALLING, BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

Follow these steps when you witness anti-LGBT name-calling, bullying or harassment.

1. Address Name-Calling, Bullying or Harassment Immediately.

Concentrate on stopping the behavior in that moment. Sometimes it's a simple response to hearing a derogatory term like, "That language is unacceptable in this classroom." Make sure that everyone can hear you. Never miss the opportunity to interrupt the behavior. Remember: no action is an action — if an incident is overlooked or not addressed it can imply acceptance and approval.

2. Name the Behavior.

Describe what you saw and label the behavior. "I heard you use the word faggot and that is derogatory and is considered name-calling. That language is unacceptable."

3. Use the Teachable Moment (or Create One).

Make sure to educate after stopping the behavior. Decide if you are going to educate in the moment or later, and if it will be publicly or privately. If you decide to educate later you will need to create the teachable moment. You can then take this opportunity to teach one class, the entire grade or the whole school about language and behaviors that are acceptable and those that are not.

4. Support the Targeted Student.

Support the student who has been the target of the name-calling, bullying or harassment. Do not make assumptions about what the student is experiencing. Ask the student what they need or want. You will have to decide whether to do this in the moment or later, and if it will be publicly or privately. Suggest that the student visit with a counselor only if the student requests extra support.

5. Hold Students Accountable.

Check school policy and impose appropriate consequences. Make sure disciplinary actions are evenly applied across all types of name-calling, bullying and harassment.

WHAT DO I SAY WHEN THEY SAY "THAT'S SO GAY?" RESPONDING TO UNINTENTIONAL ANTI-LGBT LANGUAGE

Almost all LGBT students regularly hear the word "gay" used in a negative way at school. Though many downplay the impact of expressions like, "That's so gay" because they have become such a common part of the vernacular and are often not intended to inflict harm, most LGBT students say that hearing "gay" or "queer" used in a negative manner causes them to feel

bothered or distressed. Especially because these expressions are so pervasive in our schools, it is critical that an ally treat this like all other types of anti-LGBT language and address it.

Not all students may understand why this language is offensive, so you may need to educate the students on why this is anti-LGBT language. For example, ask them why they would use “gay” to mean that something is bad or boring. Let them know that it is offensive and hurtful to LGBT people when they use “gay” to describe something as undesirable. When challenged on using this type of language, a common response from students and adults is that they did not mean “gay” to mean homosexual. They may say that it’s just an expression and they

don’t mean any harm by it. The chart below suggests some strategies for dealing with these types of comments, including the benefits and challenges for each strategies.

For free public service announcements, lesson plans, discussion guides and other resources that address anti-LGBT language, visit www.glsen.org.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES TO “THAT’S SO GAY”

(excerpted from GLSEN’s *ThinkB4YouSpeak Educator’s Guide*)

RESPONSES	BENEFITS	CHALLENGES
“What do you mean by that?”	Doesn’t dismiss it.	Students might not be forthcoming.
“How do you think a gay person might feel?”	Puts responsibility on the student to come up with the solution.	Student may not say anything.
“Do you say that as a compliment?”	Asking this rhetorical question in a non-accusatory tone may lighten things up enough for your students to shake their heads and admit, “No.”	Students may just laugh off your question, or reiterate that they’re “Just joking.”
“So the connotations are negative?” or “So maybe it’s not a good thing?”	Not accusatory. Could open up the floor for discussion.	There’s always the chance that students will still be reluctant to speak up.

Support Student Clubs

For many LGBT students, student clubs that address LGBT student issues (commonly called Gay-Straight Alliances or GSAs) offer critical support. These clubs are student-led, usually at the high school or middle school level, and work to address anti-LGBT name-calling, bullying and harassment in their schools and promote respect for all students. The existence of these clubs can make schools feel safer and more welcoming for LGBT students. GLSEN's *National School Climate Survey* has found that compared to LGBT students without a GSA, students in schools with a GSA or similar student club:

- ▼ Reported hearing fewer homophobic remarks.
- ▼ Experienced less harassment and assault because of their sexual orientation and gender expression.
- ▼ Were more likely to report incidents of harassment and assault.
- ▼ Were less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation or gender expression.
- ▼ Were less likely to miss school because of safety concerns.
- ▼ Reported a greater sense of belonging to their school community.

Only half (50.3%) of students reported having a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) or similar student club at their school.

— 2013 *National School Climate Survey*

GSAs, like all student clubs, must have a faculty advisor. Serving as the advisor for your school's GSA is one important way that you can be an ally to LGBT students. Not only does being an advisor allow you to help the efforts of your GSA, it makes you more visible as an ally to all members of your school community, making it easier for LGBT students to identify supportive school staff.

As an ally, you may also need to advocate for the rights of students to establish a GSA in their school. Although some opponents of GSAs have attempted to restrict the existence of or access to these clubs, the federal Equal Access Act of 1984 requires public schools to allow GSAs to exist alongside other non-curricular student clubs.

Dos and Don'ts of Being an Ally to LGBT Students

DO...

▼ **Listen.** One of the simplest yet most important ways to be an ally is to listen. Like all students, LGBT students need to feel comfortable expressing themselves. If a student comes to talk to you about being harassed, feeling excluded or just about their life in general, keep in mind that you may be the only person they feel safe speaking to. Be there to listen.

▼ **Respect confidentiality.** Effective allies will respect their students' confidentiality and privacy. Someone who is coming out may not want everyone to know. Assume that the person only told you and just wants you to know, unless they indicate otherwise. Informing others can create an unsafe environment for the student.

▼ **Be conscious of your biases.** Effective allies acknowledge how homophobia, transphobia and heterosexism may affect their efforts to be an ally to LGBT people. They continuously work to recognize and challenge their own biases.

▼ **Seek out knowledge.** Effective allies periodically brush up on LGBT-related language and current issues facing the LGBT community.

▼ **Be a resource.** An effective ally will also know when and how to refer students to outside help. The last section of this guide includes a list of LGBT-related resources and referral sources for LGBT youth.

DON'T...

▼ **Think you have all the answers.** Do not feel you must always have the answers. If you are faced with a problem you don't know how to solve, let the student know you will look into the subject to try and find an answer. Sometimes the best thing for you to do is to refer the student to an outside source that may be able to help them. The last section of this guide includes a list of LGBT-related resources and referral sources for LGBT youth.

▼ **Make unrealistic promises.** Be careful not to promise something you may not be able to deliver. This can damage the relationship you have with the student as an ally.

▼ **Make assumptions.** It is important to avoid making assumptions and perpetuating stereotypes. These can be extremely offensive and may turn a student away from you. It is also important to avoid assuming you know what the student needs. Be sure to listen to your student and ask how you can support them.

ASK YOURSELF



- ▼ Which of these strategies are you most likely to use in your school?
- ▼ Are there other strategies that you have used when intervening in anti-LGBT language, harassment and bullying in your school?

Make Your Action Plan

Now that you have learned how to be an effective ally to LGBT students, it's time you make your plan of action. By making realistic goals and documenting them, you will be more likely to make the change you seek. Use the questions provided to specify your next steps.

What can I do to support LGBT students?

What can I do to educate students and school staff?

What can I do to advocate for changes within the school?

What further resources, information, or help do I need?

White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack

by Peggy McIntosh

“I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group”

DAILY EFFECTS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE

I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions that I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographic location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can tell, my African American coworkers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place and time of work cannot count on most of these conditions.

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
7. When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
10. I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.
11. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another person’s voice in a group in which s/he is the only member of his/her race.
12. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser’s shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
13. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
14. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
15. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.
16. I can be pretty sure that my children’s teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others’ attitudes toward their race.
17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.
18. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.
19. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
20. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
21. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

Peggy McIntosh is associate director of the Wellesley Collage Center for Research on Women. This essay is excerpted from Working Paper 189. “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies” (1988), by Peggy McIntosh; available for \$4.00 from the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley MA 02181. The working paper contains a longer list of privileges. This excerpted essay is reprinted from the Winter 1990 issue of Independent School.

22. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.

23. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.

24. 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.

25. 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.

26. I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my race.

27. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance or feared.

28. I can be pretty sure that an argument with a colleague of another race is more likely to jeopardize her/his chances for advancement than to jeopardize mine.

29. I can be pretty sure that if I argue for the promotion of a person of another race, or a program centering on race, this is not likely to cost me heavily within my present setting, even if my colleagues disagree with me.

30. If I declare there is a racial issue at hand, or there isn't a racial issue at hand, my race will lend me more credibility for either position than a person of color will have.

31. I can choose to ignore developments in minority writing and minority activist programs, or disparage them, or learn from them, but in any case, I can find ways to be more or less protected from negative consequences of any of these choices.

32. My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other races.

33. I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race.

34. I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.

35. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.

36. If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it had racial overtones.

37. I can be pretty sure of finding people who would be willing to talk with me and advise me about my next steps, professionally.

38. I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do.

39. I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race.

40. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.

41. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.

42. I can arrange my activities so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing to my race.

43. If I have low credibility as a leader I can be sure that my race is not the problem.

44. I can easily find academic courses and institutions which give attention only to people of my race.

45. I can expect figurative language and imagery in all of the arts to testify to experiences of my race.

46. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.

47. I can travel alone or with my spouse without expecting embarrassment or hostility in those who deal with us.

48. I have no difficulty finding neighborhoods where people approve of our household.

49. My children are given texts and classes which implicitly support our kind of family unit and do not turn them against my choice of domestic partnership.

50. I will feel welcomed and "normal" in the usual walks of public life, institutional and social.

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EXPLAINING WHITE PRIVILEGE TO A BROKE WHITE PERSON...

By Gina Crosley-Corcoran
thefeministbreeder.com



Years ago, some feminist on the internet told me I was "Privileged."

"*THE FUCK!?!?*" I said.

I came from the kind of Poor that people don't want to believe still exists in this country. Have you ever spent a frigid northern Illinois winter without heat or running water? I have. At twelve years old, were you making ramen noodles in a coffee maker with water you fetched from a public bathroom? I was. Have you ever lived in a camper year round and used a random relative's

apartment as your mailing address? We did. Did you attend so many different elementary schools that you can only remember a quarter of their names? **Welcome to my childhood.**

So when that feminist told me I had "white privilege," I told her that my white skin didn't do shit to prevent me from experiencing poverty. Then, like any good, educated feminist would, she directed me to Peggy McIntosh's 1988 now-famous piece, "[White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.](#)"

After one reads McIntosh's powerful essay, it's impossible to deny that being born with white skin in America affords people certain unearned privileges in life that people of another skin color simple are not afforded. For example:

- "I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper 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."
- "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 if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time."

If you read through the rest of the list, you can see how white people and people of color experience the world in two very different ways. BUT LISTEN: This is not said to make white people feel guilty about their privilege. It's not your fault you were born with white skin and experience these privileges. BUT, whether you realize it or not, you DO benefit from it, and it IS your fault if you don't maintain awareness of that fact.

I do understand McIntosh's essay may rub some people the wrong way. There are several points on the list that I felt spoke more to the author's status as a Middle Class person than a White Person. For example:

- "If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area, which I can afford and in which I would want to live."

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- "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."
- "If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege."

And there are so many more points in the essay where the word "race" could be substituted for the word "class" which would ultimately paint a very different picture. That is why I had such a hard time identifying with this essay for so long. When I first wrote about White Privilege years ago, I demanded to know why this White Woman felt that my experiences were the same as hers when no, my family most certainly could not rent housing *"in an area which we could afford and want to live."*

And no, I couldn't go shopping without fear in our low income neighborhoods.

The idea that any ol' white person can find a publisher for a piece is most certainly a symptom of class privilege. Having come from a family of people who didn't even graduate high school, who knew not a single academic or intellectual person, it would never occur to me to assume that I could be published. It is an absolute freak anomaly that I'm in graduate school considering not one person on either side of my family has a college degree. And it took me until my thirties to ever believe that someone from my stock could achieve such a thing. Poverty colors nearly everything about your perspective on opportunities for advancement in life. Middle class, educated people assume that anyone can achieve their goals if they work hard enough. Folks steeped in poverty rarely see a life past working at the gas station, making the rent on their trailer, and self-medicating with cigarettes and prescription drugs until they die of a heart attack. (I've just described one whole side of my family and the life I assumed I'd be living before I lucked out of it.)

I, maybe more than most people, can completely understand why broke white folks get pissed when the word "Privilege" is thrown around. As a child, I was constantly discriminated against because of my poverty and those wounds still run very deep. But luckily my college education introduced me to a more nuanced concept of Privilege; the term Intersectionality. The concept of Intersectionality recognizes that people can be privileged in some ways and definitely not privileged in others. There are many different types of privilege, not just skin color privilege, that impact the way people can move through the world or are discriminated against. These are all things you are born into, not things you earned, that afford you opportunities others may not have. For example:

- **Citizenship** - Simply being born in this country affords you certain privileges non-citizens will never access.
- **Class** - Being born into a financially stable family can help guarantee your health, happiness, safety, education, intelligence, and future opportunities.
- **Sexual Orientation** - By being born straight, every state in this country affords you privileges that non-straight folks have to fight the Supreme Court for.
- **Sex** - By being born male, you can assume that you can walk through a parking garage without worrying you'll be raped and that a defense attorney will then blame it on what you were wearing.
- **Ability** - By being born able bodied, you probably don't have to plan your life around handicap access, braille, or other special needs.
- **Gender** - By being born cisgendered, you aren't worried that the restroom or locker room you use will invoke public outrage.
- As you can see, belonging to one or more category of Privilege, especially being a Straight White Middle Class Able-Bodied Male, can be like winning a lottery you didn't even know you were playing. But this is not to imply that any form of privilege is exactly the same as another or that people lacking in one area of privilege understand what it's like to be lacking in other areas. Race discrimination is not equal to Sex Discrimination and so forth.

And listen, recognizing Privilege doesn't mean suffering guilt or shame for your lot in life. Nobody's saying that Straight White Middle Class Able-Bodied Males are all a bunch of assholes who don't work hard for what they have. Recognizing Privilege simply means being aware that some people have to work much harder just to experience the things you take for granted (if they ever can experience them at all.)

I know now that I AM Privileged in many ways. I am Privileged as a natural born white citizen. I am privileged as a cis-gendered woman. I am privileged as an able-bodied person. I am privileged that my first language is also our national language, and that I was born with an intellect and ambition that pulled me out of the poverty I was otherwise destined for. I was privileged to be able to marry my way "up" by partnering with a Privileged middle-class educated male who fully expected me to earn a college degree.

There are a million ways I experience Privilege, and some that I certainly don't. But thankfully, Intersectionality allows us to examine these varying dimensions and degrees of discrimination while raising awareness of the results of multiple systems of oppression at work.

Tell me, are you a White Person made uncomfortable by the term "White Privilege?" Does a more nuanced approach help you see your own Privilege more clearly?

Gina Crosley-Corcoran is the author and advocate behind TheFeministBreeder.com and contributing author to the recently released anthology "[The Good Mother Myth](#)" (Seal Press, 2014). Gina is also a doula, speaker, and Master of Public Health candidate. She lives in Chicagoland with her husband and three small children.

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