White Privilege and Male Privilege -- Peggy McIntosh

Peggy McIntosh, a professor at Wellesley College, describes the intersection of race and gender in the system of inequality and the resulting benefits for those in the dominant groups. As a white college-educated female, McIntosh receives privilege for her class and racial categories, but is excluded from opportunities because of her gender. Privilege works in conjunction with power to benefit some groups over others resulting in males benefiting from sexism and whites profiting from racism. Privilege exists, as explained by McIntosh, in many areas of life and may or may not be acknowledged by those receiving it. Contradictions to truth are not always welcomed by people hearing the new information (see Plato). Discussion of privilege, however, benefits all participants despite their views and positions in the social and political reward system (see Mills). From being trusted without question to enjoying easier consumer negotiations, privilege affects the quality of life for its recipients and leaves those excluded to witness the outcomes. Blacks and women understand the system and their places in the hierarchy leading them to a double consciousness of dual positio ns as Americans and marginalized people (see DuBois). McIntosh concludes that unpacking the idea of privilege can lead to insights about inequality which produces potential for change. The outcome of understanding privilege can be dismantling discrimination.

Classroom exercises:

1. In order to prompt discussion, ask students about specific life situations and how they might be experienced differently for whites or blacks, men or women, people with college degrees or without. For example, ask how applying for a job might vary for each of these groups. Pick a job dominated by one group specifically to encourage analysis of privilege. Dental hygienists are predominantly white women. NBA stars are predominantly black men. Engineering, secretarial work, leadership of Fortune 500 companies are additional examples.

2. Have all the students stand in the back of the classroom after clearing all the chairs to the side. Call out each privilege written by McIntosh for whites and have the students move forward if they have experienced it. At the end of the exercise, students will be standing towards the back of the classroom. To process, ask general questions about what the students noticed or experienced during the exercise. Students may have negative feelings of guilt, resentment, and anger so field those comments by stating that the system of inequality is bigger than the classroom and people may have many feelings about inequality and oppression based on their lives.

3. To increase awareness of privilege in students’ lives, have students get in groups and try to figure out other privileges that McIntosh didn’t include. This exercise is beneficial for those who have experienced a lot of privilege and those who haven’t. For the beneficiaries, they get to express personal experiences and for those who don’t benefit, they get to describe opportunities from which they have been excluded.

4. Set up a trivia game for the class and organize the groups according to race and gender. Deliberately give some groups questions about a different culture or country so that have not been exposed to the information and won’t succeed at the game. Give a few groups very easy questions about their own culture so that they easily win. Grade the trivia game and share the scores of each group. Ask the groups with the lower scores why they did so
badly and process the experience by talking about how dominant groups are more visible in publishing and media, including the history books and educational curriculum. Minority groups have history and culture, but they don’t always show up in textbooks and television shows.

5. Require students to watch A Class Divided – a classic experiment on the outcomes of racism. Jane Elliot, a grade school teacher in Iowa, set up a classroom experience to inform children about the injustices of racism. The video has a powerful message and includes a de-briefing of the participants as adults. Available at the http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divided/.