

CORE Session 2: Identity Facilitator Notes

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS: *What has shaped who I am? What are my social identities? How have these impacted my experiences of privilege and marginalization? What identities do the rest of the group hold? How have they contributed to our shared and distinct experiences?*

VISION/INTENTION: Really, all of CORE is pursuing this question of identity on a broad level. We hope that the identity tree supports this and then the second activity that you choose for the session looks really specifically at social identities (e.g. race, class, gender). These identities fall within experiences of privilege and marginalization. One way that privilege functions is that you aren't always aware of holding the privileged identity; where with marginalized identities, you are consistently aware of that identity because you experience oppression around it (e.g. when you're straight, a question assuming the sex of your partner can go unnoticed, where it could sting for someone gay, bi, or queer; when you're able-bodied, you might not think about the accessibility of a building or standing in line at a coffee shop, where people in wheelchairs must always consider it). A large takeaway for this session, then, is helping students in their privileged identities think about other people's lived reality. Ideally, they'll hit up against the challenge of how that lived experience is shaped by identity, power, and injustice. In all their identities (marginalized and privileged), they'll have space to process the emotions around what they've experienced and hopefully question messages they have internalized based upon an identity (e.g. my race is inferior; men don't cry; I was asking for my assault).

STICKY POINTS:

- **Guilt:** This is a very common response when people first encounter privilege. It is important to honor that emotional reaction and also know that it is not the point of talking about privilege. Reminding people that they didn't ask for the privileges that they have, and likely don't want the world to be this way (i.e. racist, sexist, homophobic, etc.), can be helpful. It is also useful to remember that we are all hurt by oppression in that we've learned to relate to each other in dehumanizing ways. Even when we are handed a "one up" in society based upon an identity, we're still being taught some fucked up thinking/ways of being about ourselves and others. While our privilege is not our fault, we do either perpetuate or interrupt these systems in how we think, lead, and live. Shifting the conversation to responsibility and action, then, is useful. Ask, *how do we be interrupters, bending the arc of history towards justice?*
- **Self-absorption:** There are sort of three faces and causes to this in conversations about social justice:
 - (1) **DEVELOPMENTAL PLACE:** When I first started participating in identity development sessions, I was hyper-fixated on a feeling of exclusion I had from a particular clique at my college. With so much privilege, I didn't understand the structural issues we were getting at and was still quite self-focused. Looking back, I wonder what some of my peers who were one of a few people of color at the school, or with fewer resources in an affluent environment, thought of my contributions. For people in that developmental stage, honor what they share and try and move the conversation past their (sometimes small) reality.
 - (2) **EXPERIENCE OF TRAUMA:** For some, they're grappling with trauma and other pain that clouds their ability to process larger themes. If this session brings up a lot of past mental health issues for example, don't push talking about identity through a lens of power but allow the group to do the processing of their identity trees or life experiences most present to them.
 - (3) **LEARNED DOMINANCE/CENTRALITY:** In people's dismay of recognizing privileges, they sometimes still center the conversation around themselves (e.g. talking about privilege guilt without attending to the

experience of the marginalized person/group). It can be helpful to name this at the end or to use it to redirect the conversation, e.g. *“even as we are feeling pulled to better contribute to racial justice, we still spent the past half hour talking about how racism impacts/feels to white people”*.

- Defense, resistance, or deflection: It is quite common for people to react strongly against some of these ideas. This is a part of why the session is so firmly rooted in students sharing about their experience and identities. It is a lot harder to dispute people’s stories than it is some theory or concept of social justice. Allow for disagreement and resistance while ensuring the emotional safety of the rest of the group. When the conversation is co-opted by this, try and gently return to and highlight voices, stories, and experiences that help students see beyond their own lens and blindspots. If the resistance is along the lines of someone with privilege feeling oppressed by social justice movements (i.e. complaint of reverse racism), I would first honor their emotional experience and acknowledge growth edges of some activism. If there is space for students to receive it, I would then make a distinction between prejudice and oppression. Gay people can be prejudiced against straight folks and treat them poorly as a result, but the system as a whole is still stacked in favor of heterosexuality. Meaning reverse racism isn’t a thing: racism works in one direction. Prejudice plagues and injures us all. There could also be a jokester who wants to deflect their discomfort by lightening the mood. That can be a helpful outlet for the group so long as the jokes are sensitive. If the whole group is in that space, roll with a lighter session that doesn’t dig in as much. If it is one or a few people distracting from something more significant going on for others, hold what some are experiencing by reminding folks (in demeanor or words) that this is serious and deserves respect. If the jokes are insensitive, address it kindly but firmly.
- Tokenizing: Because our students are disproportionately privileged in a lot of social identities (namely: race, socio-economic status, and sexuality), there is sometimes just one person representing an oppressed identity. Don’t ask or allow other students to force that person to become a spoke person for the entire black community, gay community, etc. If they want to share their experience, express your gratitude for that. But it isn’t their job to educate the group and it can be another form of oppression for their individual experience to be treated as if it represents a whole groups’ (another way that privilege functions is that you maintain individuality while marginalized identities get collapsed/lumped together).
- Intense emotions: Regardless of people’s identities, talking about these things can be hard. Remember that allowing ourselves to feel emotions is where healing occurs. Don’t try and tackle all of this at once. Practice really good self-care. And do something to recalibrate the group after a difficult session. Do something light, then give people space/time away from the large group. HQ is here to help and talk you through any issues that arise or things you are challenged by as you engage with this material.
- Simplification: These issues are really complex and paradoxical. The overarching principle in navigating these tensions is to work away from two opposing camps and towards a “both/and” understanding...
 - Sameness/Difference: You see this is in the controversy in the States about saying black lives matter versus all lives matter. The root of the tension is that while we are all human, injustice is so deeply woven into our history and realities, that only focusing on sameness denies or erases the very different experiences people have had (this is part of why colorblindness is not helpful). Race is the best example of this: we made it up and we’ve been telling the story for so long that its impact is very, very real. One thing I point out when this arises is that the issue is with the hierarchies that are created around different identities; whether you think gender is socially constructed or biologically derived, it is the superior/inferior, assertive/bossy distinctions that are the problem. So, how can we hold this both/and: our identities are largely false divisions between one common humanity [both]and our experiences are dramatically shaped by those prescribed identities [and].

- Pride/Pain: Around our oppressed and even oppressor identities, can we allow people to hold both the pride of their ancestors, history, community, and culture while also speaking to the pain and hurt inflicted by the hierarchies we've learned? If people are only pitying an oppressed group they are not a part of, encourage them to see the resilience, strength, unique beauty. If "pride" is being used to gloss over the weight of oppression (in a privileged or marginalized identity), can you bring them back to the heavier side of it?
- Privilege/Marginalization: You might be thinking- wait a minute, you spent the past page talking about these as two separate things. True. AND, we cannot separate out our experiences of privilege and marginalization. My experience of being a woman (a one down) is completely shaped by my experience of being white (a one up). That idea is called "intersectionality" and just reminds us that these are not simple or clean categories.
- Personal/Systemic: Privilege and oppression functions on all levels- systemic/societal, institutional, and interpersonal. The threats and harm is different on each level, yet how can we see injustice's ugly head in all forms? You can sometimes have a student recognize injustice on one level but not the other (e.g. acknowledging that women get paid unequally (macro) but resisting the idea that sexism impacts individual relationships (micro), or conceding that racism exists between individuals such as instances of police killing or KKK members (micro) but denying that there are systemic differences in access/threat—e.g. police brutality, incarceration, or poverty— based upon racial identity (macro).
- Intention/Impact: There is a bit of a fallacy that racism (or any ism) only shows up on the interpersonal level through bigotry: openly hateful and prejudiced people and acts. In reality, there are often more subtle ways we perpetuate oppression even with the best of intentions (e.g. asking a person of color 'where are you really from' when they told you Chicago already). That's called a micro-aggression and they're significant because folks on the margins deal with them *all the time*. So, while the individual comment/look/etc. was minor and unintended on your part, it can be thought of as a thousand little cuts on the same wound that people experience day in and day out. At the same time, intention matters and we want a space of learning for people (see below).
- A new "us" and "them": The core issue of social injustice is that we've created categories of "otherness" and relegated this group(s) as inferior (or restricted access, or sent them to conversion therapy/prisons/concentration camps, or killed them outright). Yet, as people learn about these dynamics, there is often a trend of a new us v. them (other), of those who "get it" and those who don't. Students learn what a microaggression is and then call people out in aggressive ways or dismiss everything their peers said once they've noticed something remotely oppressive. From policing language to having a general intolerance for anyone less conscious of these issues than yourself, American colleges (and social media platforms) are building up a cohort of social justice warriors who are recreating a lot of the same divisive behaviors. Some of this is because people are tired of feeling unsafe and have finally found communities that honors their voice and their pain. Some of this is because it is hardest to look at someone who reflects back to you the developmental stage you just left. Here is a list of some good practices that help counter this pattern, invite the group to practice them: calling in rather than calling out, valuing intentions *and* action, making room for mistakes and accountability, welcoming people trying to learn, and avoiding activist hierarchies. If you have a particularly activist-y student that this is an issue with, you can point out the classism and elitism of having a particular script or vocabulary you need people to adhere to. You can also point them to Everyday Feminism's "Compassionate Activism" program; I find their work nuanced and kind.