

## Privilege Backpacks

**Type of Activity:** Understanding privilege, self-awareness, analysis

**Length:** 1- 1 ½ hours

**Purpose/Objectives:** To explore participant's experience of privilege in a practical way, grounding participant's theoretical understanding of privilege with a stronger awareness of the ways that they benefit from privilege in their daily lives.

**Group:** The activity is designed for groups that are working to understand power and privilege, in order to better stand in solidarity with people who experience oppression and marginalisation. Privilege and marginalisation are multi-faceted and most people experience both privilege and marginalisation simultaneously. This activity is intended for groups that are focusing on some aspect of their shared privilege (e.g. groups that are all Pakeha, all male, all middle class, all able bodied, all heterosexual, etc).

This activity is for groups that already have some understanding of their privilege and works best with small groups, as it requires in-depth dialogue. We recommend it for groups of 6-15 people. This activity is useful in the context of a longer workshop (or workshop series), rather than a short workshop.

This activity is based on the work of Peggy McIntosh and her article "White Privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack". Her article is required reading before doing this exercise and it is helpful for participants to have time to think about the article before participating in this activity. You can find the article here: (<http://www.isr.umich.edu/home/diversity/resources/white-privilege.pdf>)

**Facilitator knowledge and skills needed:** We have only used this activity when the facilitator(s) are members of the same privilege group as participants. We see education about understanding privilege as the responsibility of those that benefit from privilege, rather than those who do not, with recognition of the importance of accountability. We are open to other ideas about this and would love to hear your thoughts.

The facilitator(s) need to have a good understanding of privilege and marginalisation and be thoughtful about how this relates to their own lives. Facilitators need to be capable of leading challenging conversations and supporting a deepening of understanding and analysis by taking conversation beyond the superficial.

**Resources needed:** A number of backpacks (as many backpacks as you have small groups). These can easily be made using newsprint stapled together with newsprint straps. Write '\_\_\_\_\_ privilege backpack' (e.g. 'Pakeha privilege backpack' or whichever form of privilege the group is focusing on) directly onto the newsprint backpacks. If you are using real backpacks, make signs and attach them. If you have sufficient time, you could provide materials and get the groups to make the backpacks themselves. You also need small pieces of paper and plenty of markers. It is useful

to have a few copies of Peggy McIntosh's article available for participants to reference during their discussions.

### **Instructions:**

As mentioned above, this activity is for use within a longer workshop on understanding privilege. It is not a stand-alone session.

Break into small groups of 3-5 people and give each group a privilege backpack. Ask the groups to spend 10 minutes sharing their reflections on Peggy McIntosh's work and how this relates to their lives.

Now ask them to write specific examples of how their (e.g. Pakeha) privilege shows up in their daily lives onto small pieces of paper and put them into their backpack. Offer a few examples from your own life, e.g. I can walk into a shop and not attract attention from security; road signs are all in my first language; my culture is widely represented in the media, etc. Give each group as long as it takes until their examples are exhausted (this is not to say that they have all covered all examples, simply that the group has reached its limit for the examples that they are able to generate in this moment).

Now, ask a representative from each group to open their backpack, pull out a piece of paper one at a time and read the examples to the whole group.

Once all of the representatives have read their group's examples, facilitate full-group reflection by asking questions like 'how was that' and 'what feelings are coming up for people'. Give space for people to fully express themselves, asking follow up questions when appropriate, and allowing for silence if needed.

Now invite any key reflections or insights that people would like to share about privilege and how it works. What does it mean for society that people are walking around wearing invisible backpacks that hold all this privilege, often without being aware of it?

Finish by asking people to pair up with someone who was in a different small group than the one they were in. Spend 10 minutes reflecting together about how the reflections and learnings from this exercise will be useful in their work to challenge privilege and stand in solidarity with people who experience oppression and marginalisation.

After the workshop, typing up all the examples that the group generated and sending this as a resource to participants can be useful. In the context that we used it, it was helpful as a way of linking valuable work on privilege in the United States to our own cultural context in Aotearoa New Zealand and making this resource more relevant to participants.

**Facilitation tip:** When the group representatives are reading out their examples, it works well for them to do this quite quickly, simply reading an example and then immediately reading the next. In a group of 8 people, we came up with 41 examples in 10 minutes. Having the 41 examples read one after the other was an important moment in the exercise, as it gave a strong sense of how pervasive privilege is. The impact of hearing this can be quite heavy, which is appropriate for the topic. It's important that the facilitator is prepared for this.

**Acknowledgements:** This activity was inspired by Peggy McIntosh's work on white privilege and, in

particular, her article “White Privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack”. We are grateful for the work of all those who have contributed to understandings of power, privilege, marginalisation and oppression and, especially, to those who work to make change. Thank you. This activity was designed by Tanya Newman for Kotare Trust.

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