

Lesson 2 - Racial Privilege / Affirmative Action

How do our racial identities affect us as individuals?

NGSS connections: **Practices:** Asking Questions and Defining Problems; Developing and Using Models; Engaging in Argument from Evidence; **CCCs:** Patterns; Cause and Effect; Systems and System Models; **DCI:** HS-ETS1-1.

Starting point for instructors

- Do [Unit 0 - Setting the Stage](#) before this, and review norms if needed
- This lesson is designed so that the topics of racial privilege and affirmative action can be taught separately, or one but not the other. However, we have found that conversations about racial privilege often raise affirmative action, so we present them here as a pair.
- This lesson focuses on students' personal experiences with race; other lessons ([Unit 2 - Meritocracy](#); [Unit 2 - Systemic Racism](#)) take a more systemic/societal approach. The two are related, and we encourage educators to include both in their implementation. (If this lesson follows those lessons, possible framings include "Now that we have described systems of racial oppression, how do these manifest in an individual's life?" and "Now that we have talked about systems of disadvantage, are there systems of advantage?")
- Finally, be sure to modify this lesson to fit your students. This lesson might look very different in a setting where most of the students benefit from racial privilege than one in which most are targets of racialized oppression. [Unit 0 - Setting the Stage](#) expands on this idea.

Instructor Note:

Talking about race can slip into framing privilege and oppression solely in terms of Black/white racial identities. This is both inaccurate and problematic. At the same time, we recognize that conversations have to start simple before gaining complexity - a lesson that isolates race from other identities, for example, is an attempt to do this. This tension is present in all lessons but especially here, and we mention it here so instructors are thinking intentionally about how to balance both sides. As noted above, the unique demographics and dynamic of your class will shape the way you navigate this.



Pre-Lesson Student Exploration / Bell-Ringer

At the start of class, students could be asked to:

1. Write for five minutes in response to the following prompt: "My first science education memory is..." This writing will be revisited in the Affinity Group activity described later on.
2. You could assign the reading(s) and video in the next section as homework to be done before class if your time with students is limited.



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In-Class Investigations

Reflecting on White Privilege Reading [15-20 minutes]

For homework, or at the start of the class, students read an article describing white privilege. Note: privilege is a topic on which extensive excellent resources exist - see [Lesson Plan Resources](#).

- ["Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" by Peggy McIntosh](#)
- ["What I Said When My White Friend Asked for My Black Opinion on White Privilege" by Lori Lakin Hutcherson](#)
- ["How Does Race Shape The Lives of White People" by Robin DiAngelo](#)

In class, we ask students to choose a quotation from the article that they read and then write a response that reflects their personal experience. (*Optional:* To narrow the focus of the class, ask students to choose from [this list](#), which can be shared or projected, or from quotations of the instructor's choosing.)

We then group students by quotation choice - so they are talking with others who made the same choice - and give them time to share out. If time allows, you can ask each group to share out with the larger group

Optional: How Does Race Affect Us All? [10-15 min]

We sometimes find it useful to include an activity that helps students to see that race affects all students (though not in the same way). Options include:

1. A [Stand Up Slips](#) activity, in which the prompts illustrate how students' experiences are shaped by their race.

Please be honest as you check each statement that applies to you.

We will be looking at the results anonymously.

- I have felt proud of my racial identity.
- I have felt embarrassed by my racial identity.
- I have been discriminated against because of my racial identity.
- I have benefited from my racial identity.
- I believe that racial bias exists here at our school.
- I have acted in a way that was biased towards one race or another.

A question I have is:

2. An [Anonymous Poll](#) in which students respond to the prompt: "What's hard about talking about race?"

In either case, the activity will give the facilitator an entry point into a daunting conversation, and an opportunity for students to see the Discussion Norm of "We're All In This Together" made real.



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Instructor Note:

It is important for the facilitator to frame this entire lesson in a way that helps students to engage. How you do so depends on your context, your identities, and the nature of your students' prior discourse about race. Some things that you could touch on include:



- A personal reflection about your motivation to have this conversation
- A personal anecdote about how race has shaped your life
- A reminder that not wanting to have difficult conversations is natural (for a range of reasons) but that we agreed to Discussion Norms to help us persist.
- A reminder that this conversation (and curriculum) is not about saying the right or politically correct thing, but learning to listen and be able to see through a certain lens.

Given the emotional nature of personal conversations about race, we like to have the [Emotional Check-In](#) slips ready in case the moment calls for them.

Affinity Groups [20 minutes]

In affinity groups, participants discuss prompts with peers who share a similar social identity (see [Unit 2 - Multiple Identities](#) for more on this). Since systemic racism and racial privilege affect students differently by race, we find value in using affinity groups for discussion in this lesson. [For those with questions, anti-racist educator Rosetta Eun Ryong Lee does a beautiful job of addressing common concerns [here](#). Some of us also offer students the opportunity to speak in a racially heterogeneous group if they prefer - you can decide whether this is right for your context.]

If you decide to do affinity groups, start by briefly explaining why you're doing it: what you're hoping to accomplish that you couldn't in whole-class discussion, some of the benefits and dangers, and what outcomes you want to achieve. Share the groups that students can choose from, and allow them to consider which group they will join today. Broadly speaking, the basic options are White Students and Students of Color (see *Instructor Note*) [and, potentially, Heterogeneous Discussion, depending on whether you choose to offer that option.]

Students move to designated locations for each group. Depending on the size of your class, how many facilitators you have available, and your comfort with students speaking without a facilitator, you may ask students to break into sub-groups no larger than 7.

Share these prompts with students, remind them of Discussion Norms, and give them time to discuss.

- In what way does a system of racial privilege hurt your group?
- What do you want done to address or fix that?

- Has white privilege affected your experience as a science student? If so, how?
(Look back at your "my first science memory" writing: what happens if you replace the phrase with "my first science memory as a <your racial identity> person is..."?)

- What's a question you have for the other affinity groups?
- What's one other thing you want the other affinity groups to hear? optional

Once the group comes back together, ask students to share out their answers to the last two



questions (and anything else that they wanted to share). Depending on how much time you choose to allot to this activity, this may lead to further discussion.

Instructor Note:

Allowing students to self-select into an appropriate affinity group is critical: we cannot always tell by looking how a student identifies racially, and some students may hold multiple racial identities (i.e. may identify both as white and as a student of color). Do clarify for students that they should only join an affinity group for an identity that they have - this is not the time to learn more about an identity that they do not have.



If your class size allows, let students of color break into sub-groups by racial identity (i.e. Latinx, Black, Native, etc.). While students of color share certain elements of their experience, the goal is to find as much affinity as possible and the experience of an Japanese-American student might be very different than that of a Black student. Depending on your context, this may not be possible and it's important not to leave any students without someone to speak with.

If your context allows, you may want to recruit facilitators from outside of your class to help facilitate affinity group conversations. Students are capable of speaking without a facilitator, and having more facilitators may not be possible, but it can be a nice addition if possible. Whether you participate in the group that aligns with your identity is up to you, of course. Reasons for participating include modelling how we are all still learning and growing (it's not just for kids) and for being able to facilitate conversation; reasons for not participating include giving students more opportunities to lead difficult conversations and because the conversation may be more open and honest without you there.

Optional: Structured Academic Controversy about Affirmative Action [25 minutes]

A [Structured Academic Controversy](#) is a routine for exploring contentious issues, borrowed from history instructors, that moves beyond the either/or framing of debate. Instead, students develop skills of deep listening and understanding all positions on questions that have many answers.

In this activity, students apply this structure to the claim: "Affirmative action on campus does more harm than good." The structure is laid out in [this handout](#). Instructors should make one copy for each student, as well as half as many copies of each of these brief articles articulating the [YES](#) and [NO](#) positions. [These readings were chosen because they were concise articulations of each position; please feel free to substitute your own to match the reading level of your students and time allotted.] It can be fruitful, if you have capacity, to assign students to the position that is *not* what they believe.

If you've already done [Unit 1 - Why Does Representation Matter](#), you may remind students that the comments of Chief Justice Roberts were made in the context of Fischer vs. University of Texas, an affirmative action-related case.

Instructor Note:

This activity, and many in the URC, embodies a tension: it is important for students to learn to listen and discuss across disagreement *and* we must not create settings in which our students' humanities are in question. Make sure that your exploration of affirmative action does not open up a space for any student, especially students of color, to feel like the



class is having an intellectual discussion about whether they deserve to be in the room. (This balance and tension highlight, in some ways, the difference identified in the Discussion Norms between safety and comfort: hearing someone present a new view might be uncomfortable, but hearing that you don't belong might be unsafe.)

Optional: Discussing Racial Privilege at Our School [20 minutes]

Having discussed racial privilege as a societal reality, it can be important to bring the learning closer to home. If we cannot apply these conversations to our own communities, what's the point? For a refresher on the activities below, see [Unit 0 - Setting the Stage](#).

- *Activity:* Ask students to do a [Spectrum Activity](#) with the question: "Is there a system of racial privilege at our school?" As you facilitate the whole-class discussion, keep an eye out for whether there are differences along racial lines as to where students are standing - noting this can deepen discussion.
- *Activity:* Use an [Anonymous Poll](#) to ask students: "what examples of unearned racial privilege have you seen here at our school?" Ask students to use the up-vote feature to identify examples that they have seen, and then reset the voting and ask them to use the up-vote feature to identify examples that they would like to discuss as a class.
- *Activity:* [Write/Pair/Share](#)
 - Whose responsibility is it to dismantle systems of privilege?
 - Who can?
 - How can privilege be used to dismantle systems of privilege?
 - How can those who do not benefit from privilege work to dismantle systems of privilege?

Post-Lesson Homework

Reflective Debrief & Optional Further Reading

Students can write in response to some or all of the following prompts. Instructors can decide whether to collect this writing or not, and whether to ask students to put their names on it or not, understanding that students may write differently depending on these choices.

1. How did today feel to you? List any emotions that arose, and choose a few to write more about.
2. Consider one of your identities, racial or otherwise, that gives you unearned privilege. How does it feel to consider yourself as the recipient of privilege?
3. Consider one of your identities, racial or otherwise, where systems of privilege leave you marginalized. How does it feel to consider yourself as someone who doesn't have privileges other people do?
4. Did you learn anything today that was new to you?
5. How might someone say the underrepresentation we see in science is an example of racial privilege for some?
6. How has your racial identity shaped your experience as a science learner?



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7. In a few sentences, articulate how someone in favor of affirmative action would justify their position. Then do the same for someone against affirmative action.

Some instructors assign further reading as homework or give students the option of exploring if they are interested - see [Lesson Plan Resources](#) for more articles and videos.

If you plan to do [Unit 2 - Implicit Bias](#) next:

Now that we are talking with students about how racism impacts them on a personal level, [Unit 2 - Implicit Bias](#) follows this lesson nicely if you have time. If you plan to do that lesson next, be sure to assign the [pre-lesson homework](#) for that lesson.

Resources

[Lesson Plan Resources](#)

Notes from the Instructors

The word “privilege” has always been charged, and seems to have become particularly loaded more recently. Words matter, and we want our students to be able to engage in the national conversation, but in some contexts you may find that talking about “unearned benefit” (or something similar) is more productive than talking about privilege.

One approach that’s worked well for us is to use the original meaning that Peggy Macintosh put forward - an invisible package of unearned assets that can be cashed in each day - without getting pulled into conversation about the guilt and shame that often seem to come as reactions to the word “privilege”. As educator [Liza Talusan](#) has said: “Guilt is a feeling, not an action. I felt hungry, I fixed it. When you feel guilt, what will you *do about it?*”

After completing this lesson, one student summarized privilege and its invisibility beautifully: “you don’t see power, you see powerlessness”. (Meaning: we tend to be much more aware of the ways in which we are disadvantaged unfairly than the ways in which we have unearned advantages.) We find it fruitful to share with students each year at the right time.



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