Invisible Knapsack Role Play
Benefits and Facilitation Options

Benefits: To provide a lighthearted, engaging introduction to the idea of white privilege.

Time required: 5-10 minutes

Ideal Group Size: Any

Support Materials: Backpack with slips of paper in it of various types of white privilege.

Activity description: Two Facilitators, one white and one person of color, role play “The Invisible Knapsack” (based on the article by Peggy McInstosh) of white privilege.

Recommended Lead-in: A possible lead-in is as follows: “Next we are going to do a role play to introduce the idea we will be working on for the next section.”

Key Instructions:
1. Two facilitators are at the front of the room, one a person of color, one a white person. The white facilitator is wearing a backpack on their back.
2. The Role Play
   The facilitators begin a friendly conversation about how they are both waiting for a job interview. The FOC says they didn’t know they were supposed to bring something to the interview. The WF agrees that they didn’t need to bring anything. The FOC points to the knapsack and says “But you brought a backpack”. The WF innocently claims they do not have a backpack and begins looking for it but can’t see it (because it is on their back…). Finally the FOC takes off the backpack and together they go through the contents; pulling out various slips of paper that have aspects of white privilege written on them. They read each out loud with much naïve exclamations on the part of the WF.
3. Debrief the role play and begin discussing white privilege and its definition.

Key Points:
1. White privilege is something that white people often don’t know they have and find it difficult to recognize even when it is pointed out to them.
2. White people have white privilege whether they want it or not.
3. It is important to begin recognizing and counteracting white privilege.
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Examples for the Role Play

(These are not all the examples from “The Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McInstosh – and you will only want to use 10 or 12 of them)

I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.

I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.

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.

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.

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.

I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.

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.

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.

Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.

I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.

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.

I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.

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.

I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.

I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

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.

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

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.

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 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.

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.

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.

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.
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.