

3.10 POWER AND PRIVILEGE

Essential Question(s): What is privilege? How does privilege impact the criminal justice system?

Overview

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old Black teenager, was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. The officer was not indicted. The story captured the attention of the nation and the media, and in many ways became the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement. Many stories like this occurred in the following years and continued to capture the attention of the media and the world, leading to a public outcry for reform of law enforcement, the Grand Jury process and the criminal justice system overall. Understanding how power and privilege play a role in our justice system is important to moving the discussion from white privilege discourse to the protection of rights for all people.

Teacher Note: Discussions of privilege, and specifically white privilege, require advanced skills in anti-bias education. Teaching about it requires a solid foundation for you and your students in understanding unconscious bias, structural racism and other forms of oppression. To prepare for this lesson, reflect on your own comfort level and ability to discuss white privilege with students. It would be helpful for you to read and/or reread Peggy McIntosh's "[White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#)" and "[Excerpt from Privilege, Power and Difference](#)" by Allan G. Johnson. Consider the racial composition of your classroom as well as students' sophistication with and ability to talk about issues of race and power.

Snapshot

What Students Will Learn:

In this lesson, students reflect on the killing of Michael Brown through the lens of race, privilege and power. Students will examine the various levels of racial disparities in the criminal justice system and explore the role white privilege plays in the different interactions people have with the police and the criminal justice system.

Standard(s):

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.6

Time: Two class periods/50 minutes each





Key Vocabulary

perceptions
privilege
unearned privilege
race

Objectives

- Discuss and define privilege.
- Discuss how privilege impacts the criminal justice system.

Differentiation

Students will collaborate in small groups. Consider assigning groups before class.

What's Needed

- Writing utensil and paper or 1:1 technology
- Internet access, computer, screen or projector, speakers
- "This is about finding justice' for a kid" YouTube video (2014, 2:02 min., CNN, www.youtube.com/watch?v=7iZKnMhf0cs)
- Make copies of article "When youthful mistakes turn deadly," (*The Washington Post*, August 25, 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/eugene-robinson-for-african-american-men-youthful-mistakes-can-turn-deadly/2014/08/25/e8b5a092-2c94-11e4-9b98-848790384093_story.html), one for each student.
- Make a copy of the "Privilege Statements." Select 8-10 statements that will resonate with your students and cut into strips. Place the strips in a basket, brown bag, hat or box for students to draw one from. (See Day Two Step #3.)
- Make copies of the article "A Mother's White Privilege," one for each student.
- Make copies of the "Racial Disparities in the Criminal Justice System," one for each student.

Classroom Setup

Students will collaborate in small groups. Desks should be set up to best support small group collaboration.

Direct Teaching: Day One

1. Welcome students to class. Share the following information with students.

Michael Brown was an unarmed 18-year-old Black teenager who was shot multiple times and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, in August of 2014. Over the course of the following days, thousands of people protested to demand answers as to why he was shot. His story struck a chord with many people who perceived the situation to be emblematic of a trend in which a disproportionate number of young unarmed Black men have been killed by police officers and had a general feeling that there is a great disparity between white and Black people's perceptions of and relationships with the police. Since 2014, there have been many

police killings of Black people including Laquan McDonald, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, Philando Castille, Deborah Danner, Antwon Rose, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and others.

2. Tell students they will now watch actor Jesse Williams talk about these narratives.
3. Play “[This is about finding justice’ for a kid](#)” video, a two-minute clip of actor Jesse Williams speaking to a news reporter after Michael Brown was killed.
4. Engage students in a discussion about the video by asking the following questions:
 - What is Jesse Williams saying?
 - How do you think he feels? How do you know?
 - Why is he comparing the treatment of white people and Black people?
 - According to Jesse Williams, what does “privilege” have to do with Michael Brown?
 - What does he mean by “a certain element of this country has the privilege of being treated like human beings”?

Note: If you are not able to show the video (or in addition), read aloud this statement by Eric Holder, who was Attorney General of the U.S. at the time, which he made while visiting Ferguson, Missouri, on August 20, 2014:

“I just had the opportunity to sit down with some wonderful young people and to hear them talk about the mistrust they have at a young age. These are young people and already they are concerned about potential interactions they might have with the police. I understand that mistrust. I am the attorney general of the United States. But I am also a Black man. I can remember being stopped on the New Jersey turnpike on two occasions and accused of speeding. ... I remember how humiliating that was and how angry I was and the impact it had on me.”

5. Distribute the article “[When youthful mistakes turn deadly](#)” to each student. Read aloud together as a class or have students read silently on their own.
6. Engage students in a discussion about the article by asking the following questions:
 - What is the author saying?
 - When the author says, “If they are white—well, boys will be boys. But if they are Black, they are treated as men and assumed to have malicious intent,” what does he mean?
 - What are some examples provided of the disparities (differences) between how white and Black people are treated in the criminal justice system? Why do these disparities occur?
 - How does the article challenge your thinking?
 - What did you learn that you didn’t know before?
7. Write the term “privilege” on the board/smartboard or chart paper. Ask students to share what they think it means.
8. Display the following definition of privilege:

Privilege: The unearned and often unrecognized advantages, benefits or rights conferred upon people based on their membership in a dominant group (e.g., white people, heterosexual people, men, people without disabilities, etc.) beyond what is commonly experienced by members of the marginalized group.
9. As an example, use students’ common identity as young people. Ask them if, as teenagers, they are in a

privileged or non-privileged group. Have students reflect on the ways they may lack privilege as teenagers (not being able to go in stores in groups, people making assumptions about their maturity and intelligence, etc.). Then make the connection to white privilege, explaining that white people have privileges and advantages that people of color do not have, which will be explored in the next activity.

10. Explain to students that people identify themselves in many ways, such as race, religion, gender, gender identity, age, religion, residency status, sexual orientation, ability, ethnicity, etc. People are advantaged by certain aspects of their identity and disadvantaged by others. For example, a heterosexual young woman does not have to worry about name-calling or harassment by walking in the school hallway with the person she is dating. The same young woman, however, may be disadvantaged by her gender due to the fact that over time as she grows up and enters the workforce, she is likely to earn less money than a man when she is equally qualified and doing the same job.
11. Ask students to raise their hands if they believe they personally enjoy unearned privileges based on an aspect of their identity. Elicit a few examples of these privileges from students.
12. Display the following questions. Have students self-reflect on their privilege, quietly considering these questions:
 - What is the privilege that you have?
 - What is the impact of your having that privilege?
 - Who is not receiving that privilege? Are they disadvantaged or being discriminated against? What is the impact on them? As a result, how is their situation and life different from yours?

Day One Closing

Have students write a short reflection that addresses one or more of the questions above in Step #12.

Direct Teaching: Day Two

1. Quickly revisit the definition of privilege. Have students share any thoughts from the reflections they wrote at the end of the previous class.
2. Explain to students that they will be reading statements that describe privileges some people enjoy in our society. Some of them will take a strip of paper out of the basket and read it aloud.
3. Give the basket of preselected privilege statements to a student who will start; have them draw a statement and read it aloud. Then ask students, “Are there identity groups for which this is true? What groups is it not true for?”

After a few responses have been given, have the student pass the basket to the next person and repeat the process (student reads aloud, you ask the two questions). Have students continue to pass the basket and read the statements until all the statements have been read aloud.
4. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:

- What stood out for you as you heard the statements being read aloud?
 - What is an example of how you have been personally affected by one of the privileges read aloud?
 - How do you think the existence of these privileges affects people or society in general?
5. Have students silently reflect on whether they believe they personally enjoy unearned privileges based on an aspect of their identity. Elicit a few examples of these privileges from students. For each example given, ask, “What is the impact of your having that privilege? Who is not receiving that privilege (and who is disadvantaged) and what is the impact on them? As a result, how is their situation and life different from yours?”
 6. Tell students that they will be working in pairs to explore some of the unearned privileges associated with different aspects of identity. Have students get into pairs.
 7. Assign each pair one of three identity categories: race, gender or ability. Instruct each pair to brainstorm as many unearned privileges as they can think of that are associated with their assigned identity category; they should record their notes on paper. Clarify that when they list privileges associated with the dominant (societal power) group, for *gender* it will be male, for *race* it will be white and for *ability* it will be people without disabilities. Provide an example if you feel the students need one.

Allow 5-10 minutes for this task.

8. Reconvene the whole class and draw three columns on the board/smartboard or chart paper and write the words RACE, GENDER and ABILITY, one at the top of each column. Take turns asking each pair to share one item from their list to record on the chart under the appropriate column. Continue moving around the room with students sharing one item from their list; if the idea has already been stated, they should move on to the next item on their list. Continue this process until all their items have been shared.
9. After sharing their examples, engage students in a large group discussion by asking the following questions:
 - Was it difficult or easy to come up with unearned privileges?
 - What are the impacts and consequences of privilege on people in the nondominant/marginalized group?
 - What are some of the structures in our society that support these systems of privilege?
 - How are stereotypes used in the system of unearned privileges?
 - What does privilege have to do with the shooting of Mike Brown? (Remind them about what Jesse Williams said.)
 - Are Black people unfairly and inequitably targeted by the police? How do you know?
 - How do you think white privilege plays out in dealing with the police?
10. Ask students, “How would you define the word ‘power’?” Elicit and explain a definition as follows:

Power is possessing control, authority or influence over others or groups.

11. Ask students to share examples of how they have seen power take place in their school, community or society. Then ask students, “How do privilege and power work together?”

Explain that in interactions with the police, the police have power. They can handcuff you, arrest you, hurt you and even kill you. In these situations, people often feel powerless because police have the power to threaten their freedom and life. One is rendered powerless (or with limited power) since there is very little they can do about it. In addition, those with more privilege in these situations might not feel as powerless and threatened as those with less privilege (e.g., Black people, Latin American people) who are at a greater disadvantage, may feel more powerless and are in greater danger.

12. Distribute the article “[A Mother’s White Privilege](#)” to each student and read the article aloud or invite students to read silently on their own. Explain to students that this article was written after Michael Brown’s killing in Ferguson in 2014.
13. Engage students in a discussion about the article by asking the following questions:
- What thoughts and feelings came to mind as you read the article?
 - What is the author’s perspective?
 - How are the author’s statements about the privilege of being a white mom to white sons similar to or different from the privilege statements we discussed in the activity?
 - How does the author define white privilege? Can you give an example she provided?
 - What role does power play in this situation?
 - Why do you think she wrote this article?
 - What did you learn by reading this article?
14. Share the following information from the Innocence Project’s 8 Facts You Should Know about Racial Discrimination in the Criminal Justice System with students.
- Black people are more likely to be stopped and searched. Black people, Latino people, and communities of color are more likely to be stopped, searched, and suspected of a crime — even when no crime has occurred. Data shows that when Black drivers are stopped, they are more likely to be searched, but contraband is less likely to be found.
 - About one-third of unarmed people killed by police are Black. Despite thousands of police shootings since 2005, only 110 officers who shot a person while on duty have been charged with murder or manslaughter and less than half were convicted.
 - More than half of death row exonerees (people who are proven to be not guilty of a crime for which they were previously found guilty) are Black.
 - Police misconduct occurred in more than half of all wrongful murder conviction cases involving innocent Black people. Black people exonerated from wrongful murder convictions were 22% more likely to involve police misconduct than similar cases involving white defendants.
 - Nearly half the people currently on death row (where inmates in prison are housed who are awaiting execution after being convicted and sentenced to death) are Black. The death penalty is more likely to be used in cases in which a white person is killed — people convicted of killing white people are executed at 17 times the rate of those convicted of killing Black people.
15. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
- Knowing these statistics, how do you think this impacts the level of trust Black people have for the police?
 - Do you think racism, power and privilege play a factor in these statistics? Why or why not?
 - Do you think white and Black people have similar interactions with and perceptions of the police? Why or why not?
 - What does this have to do with power and privilege?
 - What is your biggest takeaway from these statistics?

Day Two Closing

Have students share one new thing they learned today. Make the points that certain groups in our society have power and privilege, and other groups that lack that power and privilege are more likely to receive harsh, unfair or inequitable treatment. It is important to understand this in the context of our laws and foundations of government.

Extension Activities

- Engage students in a deeper analysis of the different strategies that have been proposed to address police use of excessive force and police-involved deaths of Black people. Over the past several years, there have been various ideas proposed, from reforming to transforming to abolishing policing. These ideas address the power police officers have as well as the privilege some citizens have and others do not when interacting with the police. In their analysis of the different ideas proposed, have students consider issues of power and privilege in coming up with a proposal of their own for how to improve and ensure public safety for all, especially those who have disproportionately lost their lives to police violence.
- Have students learn more about implicit bias and how implicit bias impacts issues of power and privilege. Define **implicit bias** as “the unconscious attitudes and stereotypes and unintentional actions (positive or negative) toward members of a group merely because of their membership in that group.” Ask students share examples. Then, have students read two APA (American Psychological Association) studies: “Black Boys Viewed as Older, Less Innocent than Whites, Research Finds” and “People See Black Men as Larger, More Threatening Than Same-Sized White Men,” or you can have half of the class read one of the two articles and then share with each other. Have students write an essay or make a speech that reflects their thoughts about the two studies, specifically (1) how an understanding of power and privilege impacts these perceptions and stereotypes of Black and white men and boys and (2) how power and privilege has dangerous consequences.

PRIVILEGE STATEMENTS

My parents are comfortable with me interacting with the police—in fact, they encourage me to find a police officer if I need help.

I can hold hands with and kiss my opposite sex girlfriend/boyfriend/significant other in the school hallway and not worry about getting harassed.

Most signs, flyers and email communication for my school are in the language I was born speaking or the language my parents speak.

When I wear a hoodie, headphones or my pants sagging, no one says or thinks I'm dangerous.

People assume I am trustworthy and don't give me a hard time about my hairstyle, my clothes or how I speak.

I can walk around alone in a store without being followed or viewed suspiciously.

The media portrays people of my race in a wide range of positive and non-stereotypical roles.

People use pronouns that align with my gender identity.

I can go about my day without planning every task in advance and have easy access to restaurants, stores, bathrooms, parks and buildings wherever I go.

I can be challenging or disrespectful to those in positions of authority without worrying about significant negative consequences.

I can sit with my friends at lunch and not be accused of segregating myself.

I can fail without having the failure attributed to my race.

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

Famous people of my race or ethnicity are discussed year-round in school, not just during special months/weeks.

People do not usually question whether I am an American.

I can walk down the street or school hallway without being verbally and sexually harassed or told I need to smile.

A MOTHER'S WHITE PRIVILEGE

By Elizabeth Broadbent, August 15, 2014



What if my son was black? How would you see this picture?

As the ongoing events in Ferguson, Missouri, show us, America's racial tensions didn't disappear when George Wallace backed down from the schoolhouse door. Dr. King didn't wave a magic wand, and we never got together to feel all right. White America remembers this at ugly flashpoints: the Rodney King beatings, the OJ Simpson trial, the Jena Six, Trayvon Martin's death. White America recoils in horror not at the crimes—though the crimes are certainly horrible. It's not the teenagers gunned down, the police abuse, the corrupt trials. It's this: at these sudden, raw moments, in these riots and demonstrations and

travesties of justice, White America is forced to gaze upon the emotional roil of oppression, the anger and fear and deep grief endemic to the Black American experience. Black America holds up a mirror for us.

And white America is terrified to look.

To admit white privilege is to admit a stake, however small, in ongoing injustice. It's to see a world different than your previous perception. Acknowledging that your own group enjoys social and economic benefits of systemic racism is frightening and uncomfortable. It leads to hard questions of conscience many of us aren't prepared to face. There is substantial anger: at oneself, at the systems of oppression, and mostly at the bearer of bad news, a convenient target of displacement. But think on this.



I have three sons, two years between each. They are various shades of blond, various shades of pinkish-white, and will probably end up dressing in polo shirts and button-downs most of the time. Their eyes are blue and green. Basically, I'm raising the physical embodiment of The Man, times three. The White is strong in these ones.

Clerks do not follow my sons around the store, presuming they might steal something.

Their normal kid stuff—tantrums, running, shouting—these are chalked up to being children, not to being non-white.

People do not assume that, with three children, I am scheming to cheat the welfare system.

When I wrap them on my back, no one thinks I'm going native, or that I must be from somewhere else.

When my sons are teenagers, I will not worry about them leaving the house. I will worry—that they’ll crash the car, or impregnate a girl, or engage in the same stupidity endemic to teenagers everywhere.

I will not worry that [the police will shoot them](#).

If their car breaks down, I will not worry that people they ask for help will call the police, [who will shoot them](#).

I will not worry that people will mistake a toy pistol for a real one and [gun them down in the local Walmart](#).

In fact, if my sons so desire, they will be able to carry firearms openly. [Perhaps in Chipotle or Target](#).

They will walk together, all three, through our suburban neighborhood. People will think, “Look at those kids out for a walk.” They will not think, “Look at those punks casing the joint.”

People will assume they are intelligent. No one will say they are “well-spoken” when they break out SAT words. Women will not cross the street when they see them. Nor will they clutch their purses tighter.

My sons will never be mistaken for stealing their own cars, or [entering their own houses](#).

No one will stop and frisk my boys because they look suspicious.

My boys can grow their hair long, and no one will assume it’s a political statement.

My boys will carry a burden of privilege with them always. They will be golden boys, inoculated by a lack of melanin and all its social trapping against the problems faced by Black America.



For a mother, white privilege means your heart doesn’t hit your throat when your kids walk out the door. It means you don’t worry that the cops will shoot your sons.

It carries another burden instead. White privilege means that if you don’t school your sons about it, if you don’t insist on its reality and call out oppression, your sons may become something terrifying.

Your sons may become the shooters.

Elizabeth Broadbent does social activism and attachment parenting.

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