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CHECK YOUR PRIVILEGE: Understanding and Building Awareness

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Overview & Rationale

This lesson gives participants an opportunity to learn about and discuss cisgender privilege through a mini-lecture, a brief video clip, small- and large-group activities, and scenario brainstorming. Through this lesson, participants will learn the definition and origins of the term “cisgender” and understand cisgender privilege. Exploring how unquestioned privilege means not having to think about things that those without cisgender privilege face on a daily basis will help cisgender people develop empathy, awareness, and skills as more effective collaborators in social justice and social change work. This lesson works particularly well when paired with **Lesson 15: In Solidarity With: Allies as Agents of Social Change** on page 137.

Audience

This lesson works particularly well with cisgender participants who are likely to have professional or social interactions with transgender people. Works best with 30 participants or less.

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- Define cisgender and cisgender privilege.
- Explain 2 examples of cisgender privilege.

Background Knowledge for Facilitators

It will be useful for facilitators to know about and understand systems of privilege, particularly regarding the ways in which our culture favors cisgender people. It will also be useful for facilitators to be familiar with Janet Mock’s book *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More*, and/or her coming out story published in 2011 by *Marie Claire* magazine.

Time

- Preparation: 10 minutes
- Implementation: 90 minutes

Materials

- *Putting Ourselves in Transgender People’s Shoes* handout (1 per participant)
- Computer, projector and PowerPoint
- Large easel paper and markers (if not using PowerPoint)
- Technology system that allows trainer to show video clip with sound on the Internet
- Video clip: “Activist Janet Mock Flips the Script on Reporter: Asks Her to Prove Her Womanhood.”
Clip available at: <http://youtu.be/ISsdSvJhniQ>

Preparation

- Make copies of the handouts
- Read through the procedure and choose your best method (easel paper or PowerPoint) for communicating definitions to your participants. If using PowerPoint, download the slides from www.teachingtransgender.com/printables (PW: TTTprep15). If using easel paper, write the definitions on the paper.
- Review video clip in advance.
- Familiarize yourself with the talking points for the discussion questions.

Procedure

1. Introduce the lesson by explaining that, to better understand the role of transgender allies, it is important to understand the terms “cisgender” and “cisgender privilege.” Use the talking points below to explain the definitions for each.
 - The term “cisgender” refers to someone whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.
 - The term “cisgender” helps name the unstated assumption that everyone’s sex assigned at birth is congruent with their gender identity.
 - “Cisgender” is preferred to “normal” because “normal” implies that transgender people are “abnormal.”
 - The prefix “cis” means “on the same side as” (that is, the opposite of *trans*).
 - While “cisgender” refers to the alignment of someone’s sex and gender, cisgender privilege denotes how perceived gender/sex alignment is often a quiet, internal, unquestioned experience. This frequently means not having to think about or address challenges transgender people have to deal with, often on a daily basis. This is referred to as “cisgender privilege.”
2. Explain: One example of cisgender privilege is not having to answer deeply personal questions about one’s identity or body. This is beautifully illustrated by author Janet Mock’s satirical interview with a reporter. In the video clip we are about to watch, Ms. Mock shows how inhumanely journalists treat transgender women when they ask inappropriate questions. Ms. Mock “flips the script” and interrogates a journalist on what it’s like to be a cisgender woman.
3. Show the 3-minute video clip “Activist Janet Mock Flips the Script on Reporter: Asks Her to Prove Her Womanhood” Available at: <http://youtu.be/ISsdSvJhniQ>
4. Facilitate a brief conversation with the large group about their reflections and reactions to the clip using the following questions:
 - What did you see in this clip? Can you summarize the key points?
 - What are your personal reactions to this clip? What stands out to you?
 - Has it ever occurred to you that someone might question the legitimacy of your gender identity? How do you think you would respond if they did?
 - What might it feel like to have someone ask such personal questions? What might someone’s motivations be for asking such questions?

TIPS FOR FACILITATORS

If participants resist the idea that they have privilege, it is important to gently challenge them. This resistance is often rooted in the idea that they are not intending to cause harm to others, or did not ask to be bestowed with additional privilege. Challenge participants to action by helping them identify strategies for being an ally to transgender people.

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It may be useful to view other clips by Janet Mock to use as a reference point during the post-video discussion. You may find it useful to be familiar with various interviews in which Janet has been asked these types of questions. However, it is not recommended that you show clips of other interviews to audiences unless they already have a strong understanding of why/how those types of questions and comments are problematic. (Otherwise they will be more likely to focus on Janet’s personal story, rather than the problematic and invasive nature of the questions).

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Participants may exhibit frustration or resistance to the topics being presented, particularly if they have a hard time acknowledging that their actions may contribute to causing harm—even when it is not intended. It is important to stress the difference between impact and intent, and help participants see that their actions can have significant ramifications even when not intended.

5. Explain: For the next part of the session, you will be pairing up with a peer to further explore some of the challenges that transgender people experience on a daily basis. Ask participants to find a peer that they do not know particularly well and sit with that person to work on this activity together. Pass out copies of the *Putting Ourselves in Transgender People's Shoes* handout and instruct the pairs that they will have about 15 minutes to work through the scenarios and questions. (Optional: If short on time, assign each of the pairs one of the 4 scenarios to discuss). Rotate through the small groups while they are working on this task and provide additional support as needed.
6. Once pairs have completed the activity, bring everyone's attention back to the large group to discuss their answers. Use the talking points on the *Putting Ourselves in Transgender People's Shoes: Facilitator's Guide* to guide your discussion.
7. If using as a standalone lesson, conclude the activity by asking participants to return to the peer with whom they partnered and spend 5 minutes discussing possible steps that they could have taken as an ally in these situations to support the transgender person in the scenario. Have participants share these steps with the larger group and record these steps on easel paper to create a list of potential ally steps.

Evaluation Questions

- ✓ How are "cisgender" and "cisgender privilege" defined?
- ✓ What are 2 examples of cisgender privilege?