

The Music Privilege Walk

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In preparing for the American Musicological Society-Southwest Chapter meeting held on 1 April 2017, Christopher Smith of Texas Tech asked me to prepare a thirty-minute session on the topic of “privilege.” As more instructors, scholars, and practitioners of music historiography and theory have become aware of the effect that issues like social injustice, institutional bias, and educational inequalities have on student learning, research, and performance, it has become increasingly popular for institutions to offer bias training. I have been involved with recent movements to address systemic bias in musicology, and so I was eager to develop material for this session.

I felt that the session should involve as many participants as possible. Rather than give a talk or have a discussion panel with just a few people, I wanted to involve all of the conference attendees. I began researching the “Privilege Walk” as an experiential activity for the session. Privilege Walks are exercises that help people understand their relative privilege in a given society and to better understand the intersectionality of privilege. Walks are generally intended for people of high school age (14 or so) and up. A Walk is normally structured as follows: the participants line up across the center of a room. A facilitator reads a list of statements and asks participants to take a step forward or a step back depending on how each statement applies to them. It is crucial to tell participants that if they do not feel comfortable acknowledging whether a statement applies to them, they may simply stand still. Participants who do not or cannot participate by walking can take part by using graph paper. In this adaptation of the exercise, the participant begins with a dot drawn in the center of the paper, and marks “steps” forward or back by drawing a line radiating from the center spot equal to one unit per step. At the end of the exercise, the participants can observe where they are located in relation to one another. I used several sources to create twenty-five general social statements, included below.

It seemed to me, though, that simply examining general social privilege could be extended into music. I created a list of statements related to music and privilege, and then asked for further suggestions on Twitter. A number of people with various relationships to music, including professional and amateur performers, music scholars, and pedagogues contributed statements to add to my list. Like the general Privilege Walk, the Music Privilege Walk asks participants to move from their even line in response to the statements. Again, participants can gauge their relative positions with one another at the end. The list I give here is one most applicable for musicians in the United States, as other countries’ music education programs and musical cultures are often quite different.

The facilitator concludes the exercise with a guided discussion about what these exercises tell us. At the end of the general social Walk at the Spring 2017 meeting, all of the participants had moved forward from their starting places, but some were much further away than others. At the end of the Music Privilege Walk that followed, there was much greater diversity of experience and privilege. While some participants ended up dozens of steps away from the starting point, others remained only a step or so from it.

Some critics of the Privilege Walk exercise condemn it as “shaming.” I reject this interpretation. The Privilege Walk offers participants ways of thinking about class, race, gender, sexuality, and other privileging or unprivileging aspects of life, and reminds them that there are no universal experiences within any kind of group that is often assumed to be homogenous. It serves to help us understand the very heterogeneous backgrounds of our colleagues and students, and can assist us in understanding the intersectionalities of privilege and the marginalization of some populations even within marginalized groups. Privilege Walks should be conducted in non-confrontational ways: there is no winner for the least or most privileged. The discussion that follows the walk should be led in such a way that is reflective and open, so that all feel safe to speak.

These lists can be adapted for specific groups, reorganized, or modified as the facilitator deems appropriate.

My Twenty-Five General Social Statements:

1. If you identify as a white male take one step forward.
2. If there have been times in your life when you skipped a meal because there was no food in the house take one step backward.
3. If you have visible or invisible disabilities take one step backward.
4. If you attended (grade) school with people you felt were like yourself take one step forward.
5. If you grew up in an urban setting take one step backward.
6. If your family had health insurance take one step forward.
7. If your work holidays coincide with religious holidays that you celebrate take one step forward.
8. If you feel good about how your identified culture is portrayed by the media take one step forward.
9. If you have been the victim of physical violence based on your gender, ethnicity, age or sexual orientation take one step backward.
10. If you have ever felt passed over for an employment position based on your gender, ethnicity, age or sexual orientation take one step backward.
11. If you were born in the United States take one step forward.
12. If English is your first language take one step forward.
13. If you have been divorced or impacted by divorce take one step backward.
14. If you came from a supportive family environment take one step forward.
15. If you attended private school take one step forward.
16. If you have ever felt unsafe walking alone at night take one step backward.

17. If you can find Band-Aids at mainstream stores designed to blend in with or match your skin tone, take one step forward.
18. If you were ever made fun of or bullied for something you could not change or was beyond your control, take one step back.
19. If you would never think twice about calling the police when trouble occurs, take one step forward.
20. If you can show affection for your romantic partner in public without fear of ridicule or violence, take one step forward.
21. If you have been a victim of sexual harassment, take one step back.
22. If someone in your household suffered or suffers from mental illness, take one step back.
23. If you can make mistakes and not have people attribute your behavior to flaws in your racial or gender group, take one step forward.
24. If you were ever uncomfortable about a joke related to your race, religion, ethnicity, gender, disability, or sexual orientation but felt unsafe to confront the situation, take one step back.
25. If you ever tried to change your appearance, mannerisms, or behavior to fit in more, take one step back.

My Fifty Music Privilege Walk statements:

1. If your parents/guardians could pay for your instrument or you had use of a free school instrument, step forward.
2. If you had access to a professional quality instrument before age 18, step forward.
3. If you experienced physical and/or psychological/emotional abuse by a music teacher, step backwards.
4. If you experienced sexual harassment by a music colleague, step backwards.
5. If you could afford to travel more than 4 hours for post-secondary school auditions, step forward.
6. If your parents/guardians could afford the time off to drive you to auditions, step forward.
7. If you went to summer music programs, step forward.
8. If you owned a metronome, tuner, music stand, instrument cleaning supplies, and method books (in your language), step forward.
9. If the language spoken in your high school music rehearsals was your first language, step forward.
10. If you had a reliably quiet place to practice, step forward.
11. If your high school offered Music Theory AP, step forward.
12. If you were ever taught "music theory" as a separate concept before college, step forward.
13. If you could afford to pay for meals on school band/choir/orchestra trips, step forward. (Two steps if the school paid for you!)
14. If you could afford to do maintenance or repairs without sacrificing something else, step forward.
15. If you had a reliably safe space to store your instrument when not playing it, step forward.

16. If your parents/guardians attended your concerts, step forward (some have to miss for work or other things).
17. If you had a piano or keyboard in your house growing up, step forward.
18. If your musical instructions conflicted with other extra-curriculars, like sports or scouting, step backwards.
19. If the music that is your passion is written down, step forward.
20. If the music that is your passion is communicated primarily through an oral tradition, step backwards.
21. If you had dance lessons or went to organized dances, step forward.
22. If you were not allowed/not encouraged to dance, step back.
23. If your religion/culture prevented you from singing/playing (certain instruments or all), step backwards.
24. If you could afford to buy new music (not copy it from library, etc.), step forward.
25. If you sang in an organized group before age 18, step forward.
26. If you had to audition by sending in a recording because you could not afford to travel to a live audition, take a step backwards.
27. If you had paid gigs as a musician before age 18, step forward.
28. If you had a disability that made it difficult to carry your instrument around, step backwards.
29. If you could name 10 classical canonical pieces and their composers before you were 18, step forward.
30. If you took piano or organ (or other keyboard) lessons before age 18, step forward.
31. If you played in an extra-curricular ensemble, like a local symphony's youth orchestra, step forward.
32. If you were bullied (by peers, family, anyone) for playing music, step backwards.
33. If you had to work instead of practice, step backwards.
34. If your family/teachers encouraged you to listen to more than one genre of music, step forward.
35. If you did not own a tux/black concert wear and/or had to borrow it because you couldn't afford it, take a step backwards.
36. If you could read more than one clef before entering college, step forward.
37. If one of your family members played an instrument while you were growing up, step forward.
38. If you have a hearing impairment, take a step back.
39. If you had advanced instruction (beyond 2 years of "conversational" language in high school) in foreign language before age 18, take step forward.
40. If you had any (formal/informal) instruction in "ear-training"/"aural skills" before age 18, step forward.
41. If you played in a school-sponsored ensemble, take a step forward.
42. If you had private music lessons before you were 18, take a step forward.
43. If you grew up in a house with more than 25 recordings, take a step forward.
44. If assigned an instrument because it corresponded to outdated ideas about your gender, step back.
45. If someone explained your career options beyond "Music Teacher" and "NYPhil," step forward.

46. If either of your parents was/is a professional musician, take two steps forward.
47. If your high school did not have a band or an orchestra, take one step back.
48. If you had your own stereo, step forward.
49. If you had dependable access/transportation to rehearsals and performances, step forward.
50. If you attended live concerts of any kind of music performed by professional musicians before you were age 18, step forward.

These lists are also available online at

<http://www.kendraprestonleonard.com/2017/04/01/music-privilege-walk-statements/>.

Sources

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