

Anti-Oppression

In 2004, at our Global Goddess Leadership Conference Lisa Tonna presented a workshop on oppression and what we can do about it.

The notes below are from her workshop.

Creating a Common Language

Ally

One whose personal commitments to dismantling racism is reflected in a willingness to educate oneself about racism and racial justice, challenge one's own racial prejudices, learn and practice skills of anti-racism, interrupt racist statements, behaviors, policies and institutional structures. (Carmen Vazquez and Betty Powell)

Anti-Racist

Intentional action which seeks to end racism. Actions and attitudes which challenge personal, cultural and institutional racism. With an understanding of the systematic nature of racism, an anti-racist works actively to counter racist stereotypes and attitudes in her/himself and others, and to dismantle institutional structures and policies. Antiracism is more than tolerating or even celebrating diversity. For instance a diverse organization is not necessarily antiracist. An anti-racist multi-cultural organization or institution is one that includes people from diverse cultural backgrounds as "stakeholders" in the work, benefits responsibilities and key decisions of the organization. (Adapted from Bailey Jackson (Carmen Vazquez and Betty Powell))

Culture

"The vast structure of behaviors, ideas, attitudes, values, habits, beliefs, customs, language, rituals, ceremonies and practices peculiar to a particular group of people, and that provides them with a general design for living and with patterns for interpreting reality" (Wade Nobles (Carmen Vazquez and Betty Powell))

Cultural Diversity

Differences in age, color, gender, ethnic heritage, language, national origin, spiritual belief or tradition, sexual orientation, physical, mental or emotional nature, and economic circumstances. Each of these differences brings a diverse perspective, reflection and insight to every life experience. (Carmen Vazquez and Betty Powell))

Discrimination

An act. A failure to treat all persons equally where no reasonable distinction can be found between those favored and those not favored (Blacks Law Dictionary (Carmen Vazquez and Betty Powell))

A showing of partiality or prejudice in treatment; specific policies or actions directed against the welfare of a group. Discrimination is a tool of oppression. (Carmen Vazquez and Betty Powell)

Racial Prejudice

A pre judgement based on myth, missing information, misinformation (lies) or stereotypes about people of color or white people. Racial Stereotype

A generalization imposed on an entire group (all Puerto Ricans, or all Italians) based on a real or perceived characteristic of some individual belonging to that group, or based on a cultural norm which has been distorted, or based on myth or total misunderstanding of the group/ethnicity/culture. (Carmen Vazquez and Betty Powell)

Racism

Prejudice +Institutional Power

A system of oppression and a system of advantage based on race/color (David T. Wellman (Carmen Vazquez and Betty Powell))

The historically constructed personal, cultural and institutional manifestations of racial prejudice against people of color. (Carmen Vazquez and Betty Powell)

Racist

Any action or inaction, intentional or not, which directly or indirectly contributes to the perpetuation of racism. Use it as an adjective opposed to a noun. People are humans not racists they may have racist behavior. Using it as a noun leads us to an us vs. them. It is dehumanizing. By using it as an adjective we are describing the behavior. (NABWMWT)

White Skin Privilege

White skin privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that white people can count on cashing in each day, but about which they were "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks. (From [White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#) by Peggy McIntosh)

Most of the anti-racist material was taken from different workshops at the Creating Change Conference 2001 from the following sources:

- National Association of Black and White Men Working Together (NABWMWT)
- Southerners On New Ground (SONG)
- Carmen Vazquez and Betty Powell

Strategies For Being An Effective Ally

1. Assume that all people in your own group including yourself want to be allies to people in other groups. Assume that you in particular are good enough and smart enough to be an effective ally. (This does not mean that you have nothing more to learn--see #6 below.)

2. Assume that you have a perfect right to be concerned with other people's liberation issues, and that it is in your own interest to do so and to be an ally.
3. Assume that all people in the target group want members of your group and you in particular as an ally. Assume that they recognize you as such--at least potentially.
4. Assume that any appearances to the contrary (any apparent rejections of you as an ally) are the result of target group people's experience of oppression and internalized oppression.
5. Assume that people in the target group are already communicating to you in the best way that they can at the present time. Assume that they can and will do better. Think about how to assist them in this without making your support dependent upon their "improving" in any way. (Hint: think about what has been helpful for you when you were in the target group position.)
6. Assume that the target group people are experts on their own experience, and that you have much to learn from them. Use your own intelligence and your own experience as a target group member to think about what the target group people might find useful.
7. Recognize that as a non-target person you are an expert on the experience of having been conditioned to take the oppressor role. This means that you know the content of the lies which target group people have internalized. Don't let timidity force you into pretended ignorance.
8. Assume that target group people are survivors and that they have a long history of resistance. Become an expert on this history and assist target group people to take full pride in it.
9. Become an expert on all the issues which are of concern to people in the target group, especially the issues which are most closely tied in to their internalized oppression. Assume that making mistakes is part of the learning process of being an ever more effective ally. Be prepared for flare-ups of disappointment and criticism. Acknowledge and apologize for mistakes; learn from them, but don't retreat.
10. Recognize that people in the target group can spot oppressor-role conditioning"; do not bother with trying to "convince" them that this conditioning did not happen to you. Don't attempt to convince target group people that you "are on their side" just be there.
11. Do not expect "gratitude" from people in the target group; thoughtfully interrupt if it is offered to you. Remember, being an ally is a matter of choice. It is not an obligation; it is something you get to do.
12. Be a 100% ally; no deals: no strings attached: "I'll oppose your oppression if you oppose mine." Everyone's oppression needs to be opposed unconditionally.

Some Working Assumptions For White Activists Seeking To Recruit Other Whites As Allies For Eliminating Racism.

1. Assume that all human beings desire warm, close relationships with each other. This is also true of you and of all other white people.
2. Assume that you are a regular white person (not an exceptional white person) and that all whites are good people, caring, intelligent, compassionate and hard working.
3. Recognize that we have much to celebrate about our histories and our diversities; we have rich traditions of music and dance, and proud histories of struggle.
4. Assume that all white people have undergone some variety of systemic conditioning or "training" to take on the "oppressor role" in relation to people of color. Sometimes this training has been to participate in acts of violence, or to join in racial slurs or jokes; sometimes this training has been to be "extra nice" towards people of color.
5. Assume that no human being ever would have agreed to take on any aspect of an oppressor role if they had not first been mistreated or oppressed themselves, originally as young people, and in a variety of other ways.
6. Assume that no white person ever chose to acquire any of the conditioning or training and that every one of us attempted to resist taking on any aspect of the oppressor role.
7. Assume that the history of our own acts of resistance have been obscured and hidden from us and that many of us feel no pride in our heritages and traditions.
8. Recognize that most whites (at least in the United States) have a history of immigrant oppression in which their own ethnic group has been the target of mistreatment at the hands of other white ethnic groups who were in a position of relative social power.
9. Recognize that all people need acknowledgment that their liberation issues are legitimate.
10. Assume that in spite of the material rewards and preferential treatment that our society gives to white people, these spurious "advantages" do not offset the real costs of racism to us as human beings.
11. Assume that the conditioning which white people have undergone has been hurtful to us as human beings: it has betrayed our sense of ourselves, robbed us of close and trusting relationships with our families, given us a false picture of reality, isolated us from the majority of the world's peoples, blunted our imagination, limited our vision, enforced our sense of powerlessness, hampered our ability to love.
12. Assume that at some level, all white people know this. Accordingly the task of the white activist is not to persuade or convince other whites of this truth, but to make their own buried awareness accessible to them.
13. Assume that the elimination of racism is in the real self-interest of all people.

14. Assume that all white people are eager to join in the project of eliminating racism and that appearances to the contrary are the result of feelings of despair and powerlessness caused by the individual's own experiences of oppression and mistreatment.
15. Recognize how the temptation to classify other whites into "good whites" and "bad whites" is often a mechanism for perpetuating other forms of oppression such as classism and regional oppression.
16. Recognize that engaging in anti-racist activity commits us to the building of real connections with people and functioning as allies for them.
17. Assume that white people (like all other human beings) will change their minds and let go of deeply ingrained attitudes and behavior patterns when they feel acknowledged and appreciated as individuals; when they are listened to with complete respect on their own grievances and liberation concerns; when they trust the person presenting the perspective; when the new perspective makes sense to them; when they are not blamed for their prior conditioning or behavior.

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Improving Communication Within A Diverse Group

1. Begin with the assumption that human beings are natural communicators, and that we desire warm, close relationships with each other.
2. Assume that biological, cultural, ethnic, sexual, religious, and age differences between human beings are seldom the real cause of difficulties in communication.
3. Assume that the real cause of such difficulties is the division and separation resulting from institutionalized imbalances in social and economic power, i.e., social oppression. The conditioning which perpetuates the divisions between us separates us into target and non-target groups.
4. People who are in the target group of a particular form of mistreatment are socialized to become victims; people who are the non-target group of a particular form of mistreatment are socialized to become perpetrator either in a direct, active form or in an indirect, passive form. Neither of these roles serves our best interests as human beings.
5. Assume that no one wanted those roles; no one wanted these divisions. Everyone resisted the social conditioning to take on those roles as best they could. But this conditioning clings to us and makes it difficult to see and hear each other clearly. We make unaware assumptions about what other people are thinking and feeling. We forget to check with each other and really listen.
6. Assume that issues of oppression have some connection to difficulties in communication. Assume that racism, sexism, job status, etc. figure in somewhere.

7. Assume that target group people are the experts on their own experience and that they have perspectives and information which non-target people need to hear.
8. Assume that when everything is taken into account, every human being has communicated as clearly as they could, and in general has done the best they could in each situation.
9. Assume that in spite of the ways we have been divided, it is possible to reach through those divisions, to listen to each other well and to change habitual ways of action which have kept us separated.

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How You Can Be An Ally

We each have complex identities. From our different identity groups, such as our gender identity, race, age, religion, sexual orientation etc., we experience different levels of oppression and privilege simultaneously. Recognizing the privileges we receive from an identity can help us to act as allies. It is important to note that within any form of oppression- such as racism, ableism, sexism, ageism, and classism- the person who belongs to the dominant identity group could act in the following ways as an ally. (For example, change the title of this handout to: "How you can be a male ally" or "How you can be a white ally," etc.)

REMEMBER that _____ people are human beings first and foremost. RELAX. Don't worry about what to say or do. Just be yourself.

COMMUNICATE with people and find out what each individual is like rather than making assumptions about _____ people as a group. If you don't know, ask respectfully. If people do not wish to answer or explain, however, respect their choice.

LISTEN to how each person chooses to self-identify, ("lesbian," gay," "she," "he," "black", "white", "Asian", etc.) and then respect that in conversations with them and about them. Using words, names, or pronouns someone uses to self-identify is one way of showing respect.

ENABLE children to ask questions about _____ people. Open communication helps to overcome fearful and misleading attitudes. Answer children's questions honestly and at the emotional and intellectual level of that child.

THROW AWAY all your stereotypes and assumptions about _____ people. Examine your attitude and work on your fears instead. Look at how stereotypes are used to oppress other groups of people as well.

INTERRUPT offensive language, insensitive jokes, mocking behavior, etc. Speak up when you are in that situation and let people know their language, behavior, and jokes are not acceptable.

ENCOURAGE the inclusion of _____ people on your staff, board of directors,

committees, volunteer program, etc. Seek the input of people in your program and projects. They have a unique perspective that can enhance any program or project.

PAY ATTENTION to the possible existence of racist, homophobic, heterosexist, or prejudice attitudes and behaviors in places or activities you go to. CONSIDER that (homophobia, racism, sexism and prejudice) are the invention and therefore, the responsibility of non- _____ people. Educate yourself and other heterosexual people about these issues.

Workshop given for Global Goddess Women by Lisa Tonna 2004