

## Anti-Oppression 101:

### Privilege and Alliance Building

In Anti-Oppression work, the term “**privilege**,” means a right, advantage, favor or immunity specially granted to one group or class and withheld from others. In the United States, we are often taught to think of various people as “disadvantaged,” but we rarely think about how that disadvantage creates a distinct advantage (privilege) to dominant groups. Often, dominant groups in society may fail to recognize their privilege and how it comes at the expense of others. This plays itself out in every aspect of life – it can be as simple as going to the store to buy a band-aid. Chances are, white people will find a band-aid that matches their skin tone, while people of color will not. Even though it may seem insignificant, added together, these small examples reinforce whom our society is built for – and for whom it is not.

Other examples are not as small: people of color are three times more likely to be pulled over by the police, even though white people are four times more likely to actually possess drugs in their car. Passing safely by the police is, therefore, a privilege granted primarily to white people. Our organizations and movements, unfortunately, are not free of these hierarchies and often deeply struggle with them.

### Divide and Conquer: A U.S. History

*When the United States was beginning to form, there was a hierarchy of oppression that kept everyone subservient to someone above them. The King of England demanded goods from the Jamestown white elite who exploited and controlled the white frontiersman who, in order to appease the elite with money and land, did the work of slaughtering Indigenous people and hunting and brutalizing African slaves. In the pre-colonial era there were many cases of whites joining Indigenous and African rebellions against the crown. To avoid such an alliance becoming too powerful and succeeding at overthrowing the control that elite loyalists had under the King's rule, economic laws were instituted separating working class whites from people of color and privileges in the form of land and better treatment were used to segregate white and black servants. Working class Whites and indentured servants effectively abandoned the struggle for human freedoms in America and accepted a racially and class stratified movement for Freedom in America.*

- Howard Zinn, 1980.

**Today** on a global scale, movements are segregated and compete over funding, resources and attention, leading to the development of “solutions” that harm other people’s communities.

Clearly, were we able to overcome these divisions, our movements for change would look very different and be far more powerful. Working in healthy, diverse alliances in which everyone has a voice and feels respected and included doesn’t just happen because you want it to.

**Intentions are not enough.** We have many divisions to overcome if we want to work in diverse movements for change. We need to know how to be **allies** with each other. Being an ally isn’t taught. To the contrary, we are taught to maintain our privilege (often unconsciously) at the expense of others and maintain our distance out of fear. Being an ally must be learned.

### Allied Partnership:

Being an ally can mean a diversity of things. It can mean personally working to challenge and change the behaviors and institutions that support inequitable and unjust living conditions. Inequities based on things like race, culture, age, wealth, gender and sexual preference are so integrated into our everyday lives that unless we are purposefully working against these inequities as allies, we end up supporting them. This is what’s meant by the word “anti-

oppression.” It is a term that promotes the idea that “you can’t be neutral on a moving train.” It encourages the principle that taking a stand against oppression, involves also standing FOR social, economic and environmental justice and for human rights. Anti-oppression is a pair of glasses to look at the world through as well as a lifelong process of unlearning and learning; it is looking at our identities and the kinds of power we have or don’t have because of them. It also means taking action.

## **Working for Social Justice in Everything We Do**

Confronting privilege is a complicated, lifelong process, but there are things you can do to confront these issues head on. There is no comprehensive guide for how to be an ally, but there are things that we can all work toward:

### **Learning about the world**

Adopt justice work with the perspective that **social, economic and environmental issues are interconnected and interdependent**. Acknowledge that people currently have unequal access to clean and healthy food, air, water, homes and land. These are historic inequalities, and they continue to be largely based on race, class, gender and sexuality.

**Understand and learn about systems of oppression** and challenge the power structures which support those systems and the injustices they facilitate.

**Learn about the histories and struggles** of impacted communities and other groups as told by them.

**Examine the resources and privileges** we have and utilize them thoughtfully, respectfully, honestly and transparently. Wouldn’t it be cool if white people worked to stop racism, adults worked on youth issues, men supported the empowerment of women and girls, and straight people worked for queer inclusiveness. We think so. That’s why we do this work. Below are some suggestions for how (*note: this is incredibly insufficient. Missing are issues about class, ethnicity, religion, physical ability, language, citizenship, and so many other experiences and identities*).

### **Learning about self and other**

**Understand that we all have multiple and fluid identities**. There are no pure cultures or identities. One’s gender, race, class or other identifier may change over time, or one person may embody multiple races, genders, cultures and ethnicities simultaneously. Don’t box people in. Learn to work across intersecting lines of identity, culture, and awareness.

**Listen to, learn from, and amplify the voices of our allies**, yet don’t expect anyone to be a spokesperson for their community.

**Actively seek feedback and evaluation** of your work in order to be more accountable.

### **Personal Action**

**Become an ally to yourself**. If you can’t stand up for yourself, how are you going to stand up for anyone else? As taught by Hillel: If I am not for myself...

Take responsibility for **equalizing power** and creating a space where all are encouraged to actively engage, listen, speak and act with respect. Don’t place the responsibility for fighting oppression or teaching others about their oppression on those who are targeted by it. Interrupt oppressive behavior while it is happening.

**Find effective ways to confront oppressive behavior.** This means not alienating people who are actively working on their issues with racism/sexism/heterosexism, but instead talking with them honestly about it. One-on-one conversations, group discussions and caucuses are all effective methods.

**Prioritize and build relationships** with impacted communities and a broad base of constituents across social, economic and political boundaries.

**Use “I” statements when you speak.** People of privileged groups often universalize their experience, not realizing that other people don't share their feelings or experiences.

Consider what role privilege or oppression related to your gender, sexual orientation, race and class might play into your **tendency to take/avoid leadership.**

### **Systemic Change and Organizational anti-Oppression**

+Fundamental change

**Make formal organizational commitments to non-discrimination.** Put it in your charter, your by-laws...anywhere you can. Make it clear in every way possible that your group does not tolerate discrimination in any form and that no actions or speech that will alienate people because of their gender, race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, nationality or social or ethnic origin will be considered acceptable in your group.

+Meetings

Incorporate the principles of **participatory democracy** in meetings and actions and recognize that all people should have equal access to the decision-making processes that affect them.

**Make decisions in meetings with an established process.** This way, even newcomers and people outside of leadership are included and feel ownership of the group and its projects.

Explain the process before you start.

Intra-organization dynamics:

**Create a caucus system for your groups.** In a caucus, people first meet separately (people of color caucus/white folks alternative group, gender oppressed caucus/gender privileged alternative group, queer caucus/heterosexual alternative group) according to how they self identify. Each group has a discussion separately (often the caucus will give the alternative group a specific action or issue to discuss) and then meet with the alternative group to tell the caucus what they discussed and what concrete steps they will take to combat racism/sexism/etc. Caucuses don't have to reveal what they discussed unless they decide to.

Inter-organization dynamics

**Work in solidarity** with communities directly impacted by the issues we work on by taking our lead from them and supporting their efforts to determine their own futures.

### **Cultural Change and Organizational anti-oppression**

**Make sure social events are inclusive.** Not all activists are the same. Make an effort to get to know your people's interests, likes, dislikes etc.

**Go easy on the activist-speak!** Ensure that all acronyms, jargon and references to past campaigns, actions, or experiences of group members are explained so that no one feels uninformed or left out.

**Avoid inside jokes.** As hilarious as they may seem to you, nobody likes an inside joke when they're on the outside.

**Activist Cliques** It's only natural that a bunch of activist people working together to save the world will end up making friends with each other. This isn't necessarily a bad thing - it makes activism more fun, which means people are more likely to stay involved, and it helps foster good

group dynamics. It can be a problem, though, when “activist cliques” emerge. Decisions that should be made through a formal process start being made by clique members chilling after hours; meetings can become too social, making it hard to get anything done; and worst of all, potential new members can feel out of the loop when there are too many inside jokes and assumed background knowledge. Here are some tips for keeping your organization functional and open to new people:

Make decisions in meetings with an established process. This way, even newcomers and people outside of the “clique” are included and feel ownership of the group and its projects. Explain the process before you start.

### **Gender Issues for Men**

Just because guys aren’t smacking girls on the tush and asking them to make coffee during strategy sessions doesn’t mean there aren’t problems with the gender dynamics in a working group. Unfortunately, we have all been raised in a sexist culture, and even when we try to rise above it, we find ourselves playing into gender roles and reinforcing stereotypes. In our society, men are taught to be more aggressive and to take on leadership roles while women are taught to be more passive; just because we’re fighting for social justice doesn’t mean we’re free of all of this cultural baggage. In order to make the most of all that your members have to offer, active attention needs to be paid to fostering an environment where \*everyone\* feels comfortable speaking up and taking on leadership roles.

**Division of Labor.** In many groups, work gets divided in a gendered way, with women doing much of the grunt work (photocopying, flyering, etc.) and men taking on leadership roles and representing the organization in meetings and negotiations. A good way to avoid this problem is to make sure that all tasks (the fun ones and the boring ones) are assigned through a process agreed upon by the group. Don’t leave anything to be done without knowing exactly who is responsible for the task. This way, it will be easier to notice if the not-so-glamorous jobs are being disproportionately dumped on the women in your group. Also, in order to prevent women from being shut out of leadership roles, a rotation system will ensure that everyone has the opportunity to become comfortable taking on positions of authority in the group.

**Airtime.** Another major problem is the fact that male members of many groups end up doing most of the talking in meetings. Female members may find themselves either remaining silent, or simply agreeing with one side of a debate between two men. This can be really destructive since these women may have important information or insight. A good way to ensure that everyone’s voice is heard is to do frequent ‘go-rounds’ where everyone has to say what they are thinking, even if they don’t have a fully formulated opinion on the matter. Make it a habit to keep track of how often men and women are speaking during conversations.

**Decision-making.** If your group lacks a formal process for decision making, choices may be made by ‘the group’ without the input of your female members. If your group just assumes a decision has been reached when most people seem to agree, it is more likely that women (in general - not all women) will be hesitant to voice objections. A formal process will ensure that decisions are truly made by the group and not just by its most vocal (often male) members.

### **Anti-Racist Organizing for White People**

The vast majority of university and corporate communities are dominated by white administrators, trustees, faculty, employees and students. As with all aspects of our interactions in society, white supremacist ideology is the context in which activists operate. Within the system of white supremacy, there are many common tendencies that white people need to proactively and constantly work against. One such tendency is for white activists to ask themselves “how can we get people of color to join our groups and movements?” Anti-racist organizer Chris Crass warns us that this kind of question is barking up the wrong tree. It assumes that white activists “have the answers and now it just needs to be delivered to people of color- as opposed to the truth, which is that people of color have been organizing for a long time (500+ years) and white activists have a lot to learn so maybe we should find ways to form alliances, relationships, and coalitions to work with people of color and be prepared to learn as well as share.” (Chris Crass, *Movement building and Anti-Racist Organizing*) Here are some ways your group can work towards challenging white supremacy in justice activism:

**Avoid tokenism.** When you observe racial rifts in your activist community, don't assume that the solution is to bring more people of color into predominantly white groups – the fact that your group may be mostly white is merely a symptom, not the problem itself. Instead of trying to recruit people of color to your causes, ask how you can support groups led by people of color. Also, don't assume that it would be beneficial for groups led by people of color to work with you.

**Think carefully about the issues** that you are working on and how they relate to who is attracted to the group. What issues are people of color already organizing around and in the community? Do you ever work on those issues and accept the leadership of groups led by people of color?

**Learn about your own whiteness.** Most white people have been trained to not see their own race, or even understand racism, and therefore have a kindergarten understanding of these issues. As a matter of survival, many people of color have to understand with great clarity how white supremacy works and how to deal with it. There are endless resources out there: web sites, books, speakers, workshops, etc. Google white privilege and study up.

### **Queer Inclusiveness for Straight People**

As much as our generation might see itself as totally accepting of everyone's sexuality, queers are marginalized both in general society and within activism circles. The marginalization of queers can often be invisible to straight people since campuses and corporate structures are often not safe enough spaces for everyone to feel safe sharing their sexual identity. Here are some tips for making your group a safer space for queer activists:

**Don't be Ignorant.** Bewildering as this may be, there are still people out there (even people who consider themselves to be progressive) who will complain about a movie, or even an activist strategy, by blurting out “that's so gay.” DO NOT let this kind of behavior slide. Make sure to have structures in place for dealing with these issues and a strict anti-discrimination policy.

**Don't out people!** If you know or suspect that someone in your group is queer, don't take it upon yourself to make sure that everyone else knows too. Both being in the closet and being out entails risk for queer folks, so don't presume that you know what is best for someone.

**Don't make assumptions about people's sexuality.** A key component of queer oppression is the assumption that everyone is straight until proven otherwise. (And if it's really that amazingly crucial to the survival of the world that you know someone's sexuality, they'll let you know.)

**Understand that you have certain privileges** (having your relationships valued by society, being able to kiss your partner in public without fear, etc) that queer folks are denied.

### **Take action!**

Often, confronting privilege gets stuck in personal relationships – as activists work on “unpacking their stuff” personally without integrating these principles into their organizations structurally, without working them into their strategy, and without using them to inform their work and connections to other organizations. Consciousness raising and education – and getting our own minds “in shape” – is essential. But it goes hand-in-hand with action to transform our society and our movements. We need to drastically re-think and re-make our economic and political systems. In order to do that, we need to imagine what is possible. We need to change the cultures that reinforce our belief that the world we have is the best we can do. We need to examine and unravel the false notion of supremacy designated for white people, men, able-bodied, heterosexual and middle and upper class people. We need to unravel whiteness, white culture and all of the behaviors passed down to us from events of genocide, entitlement and acquisition of land and other people's labor on behalf of those who were considered white. We need to unravel subordination and colonization and behaviors passed down to us from ancestors whose land, labor and identity were taken. None of this is simple. There are no pure identities or experiences. We each embody multiple, shifting identities. And that is beautiful.

### **Principles of Anti-Oppression from Los Angeles Direct Action Network**

- Power and privilege play out in our group dynamics and we must continually struggle with how we challenge power and privilege in our practice.
- We can only identify how power and privilege play out when we are conscious and committed to understanding how racism, sexism, homophobia, and all other forms of oppression affect each one of us.
- Until we are clearly committed to anti-oppression practice all forms of oppression will continue to divide our movements and weaken our power.
- Developing a anti-oppression practice is life long work and requires a life long commitment. No single workshop is sufficient for learning to change one's behaviors. We are all vulnerable to being oppressive and we need to continuously struggle with these issues.
- Dialogue and discussion are necessary and we need to learn how to listen non defensivly and communicate respectfully if we are going to have effective anti-oppression practice. Challenge yourself to be honest and open and take risks to address oppression head on.