

ANTI-OPPRESSION

<http://beautifultrouble.org/theory/anti-oppression/>

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“If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up in mine, then let us work together.”

Lila Watson

In Sum

Anti-oppression practice provides a framework for constructively addressing and changing oppressive dynamics as they play out in our organizing.

Origins:

As long as there has been oppression, people have been working to end it. In recent decades, the Highlander Center and the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond have worked to undo racism and build collective liberation. After Seattle, a whole new wave of work began, deepening each year with new collectives emerging and new practices evolving. The work outlined here has been learned over time from many teachers.

Activist groups sometimes make the mistake of assuming that oppression (the unjust exercise of power or authority) is only what *they* do; that *we* are inherently anti-oppressive purely because of our intention to do away with oppressive structures. Unfortunately the situation is much more complex, and we ignore that complexity at our peril.^[1]

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We have been socialized in cultures founded upon multiple, overlapping forms of oppression, often leading us to inadvertently perpetuate dehumanizing behaviors, situations and structures. Our oppressive actions diminish us, divide us and inhibit our ability to organize broad-based, emancipatory movements.

In order to build a world free from domination, we offer up for discussion the following tenets and practices in the hopes they can provide a solid foundation for advancing our work and deepening our interpersonal relationships.

Tenets

- Power and privilege can play out in our group dynamics in destructive ways. For the good of all, we must challenge words and actions that marginalize, exclude or dehumanize others.
- We can only identify the ways that power and privilege play out when we are conscious and committed to understanding how white supremacy, patriarchy, classism, heterosexism and other systems of oppression affect us all.

- Until we are clearly committed to anti-oppression practice, all forms of oppression will continue to divide and weaken our movements.
- Developing anti-oppression practices is life-long work. No single workshop is sufficient for unlearning our socialization within a culture built on multiple forms of oppression.
- Dialogue, discussion and reflection are some of the tools through which we overcome oppressive attitudes, behaviors and situations in our groups. Anti-oppression work requires active listening, non-defensiveness and respectful communication.

Personal practices

- Challenge yourself to be courageously honest and open, willing to take risks and make yourself vulnerable in order to address racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and other oppressive dynamics head-on.
- When you witness, experience, or commit an abuse of power or oppression, address it as proactively as the situation permits, either one-on-one or with a few allies, keeping in mind that the goal is to encourage positive change.
- Challenge the behavior, not the person. Be sensitive and promote open dialogue.
- When someone offers criticism in an oppressive framework, treat it as a gift rather than an attack. Give people the benefit of the doubt.
- Be willing to lose a friend, but try not to “throw away” people who fuck up. Help them take responsibility for making reparations for their behavior, and be willing to extend forgiveness in return.
- Take on the “grunt” work that often falls on women, especially women of color. This includes the work of cooking, cleaning, set up, clean up, phone calls, e-mail, taking notes, doing support work, sending mailings.
- Understand that you will feel discomfort as you face your part in oppression, and realize that this is a necessary part of the process. We must support each other and be gentle with each other in this process.
- Don't feel guilty, feel responsible. Being part of the problem doesn't mean you can't be an active part of the solution.
- Contribute time and energy to building healthy relationships, both personal and political.

Organizational practices

- Commit time to facilitated discussions on discrimination and oppression.
- Set anti-oppression goals and continually evaluate whether or not you are meeting them.
- Create opportunities for people to develop anti-oppression skills and practices.
- Promote egalitarian group development by prioritizing skill shares and an equitable division of roles, responsibilities and recognition.
- Respect different styles of leadership and communication.

- Don't push historically marginalized people to do things because of their oppressed group (tokenism); base it on their work, experience and skills.
- Make a collective commitment to hold everyone accountable for their behavior so that the organization can be a safe and nurturing place for all.

1. ^[1] This article is adapted from “Anti-Oppression Principles & Practices” by Lisa Fithian, itself compiled from the “Anti-Racism Principles and Practices” by RiseUp DAN-LA, Overcoming Masculine Oppression by Bill Moyers and the FEMMAFESTO by a women’s



affinity group in Philadelphia.

Lisa Fithian has organized since 1975, weaving together strategic creative nonviolent actions, anti-oppression work and sustainable practices in student, environmental justice, workers rights and peace and global justice struggles. Whether it was shutting down the CIA, White House, Supreme Court or the WTO or working on Justice of Janitors, Camp Casey, Common Ground Relief or Wall Street banks, Lisa has supported tens of thousands of people in accessing their power and gaining the experience and skills they need to fight for justice, no matter how great or small the cause. Her website chronicles much of her work and offers great resources.

Dave Oswald Mitchell is the Editorial Director of the Beautiful Trouble project, including serving as managing editor of both Beautiful Solutions and Beautiful Rising. He edited the Canadian activist publication Briarpatch Magazine from 2005 to 2010, and his writing has been published by a smattering of small, radical magazines and journals with space to fill. His interests include books, beer, brevity, alliteration, free association, lists of things, and going elsewhere.