

White Heterosexual Men Can Understand Oppression

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As a white heterosexual man who has led workshops on diversity for the past 17 years, I've come to believe that we face unique barriers as we try to understand the experiences of people of color, women, and gay people. In this article I'm going to explore some of those barriers and make suggestions about overcoming them.

Barriers to change

Lacking information about the experience of oppression

As children, we received little information about the negative impact of sexism, racism, or homophobia; as adults we sometimes ignore the oppression experienced by others. Even if we acknowledge that, historically, there was oppression, we can easily see it as belonging to another era and place. I believe that we experienced a form of oppression as children through the impact of adultism. But, as boys, we were taught to deny our feelings and get on with the business of life. If we can't feel our own pain, how can we acknowledge that of others?

Believing that we have a market on the truth

We were never told directly that people like us are the bearers of truth in the world, but how could we believe otherwise? God, political leaders, philosophers, judges, sports heroes, and our fathers were all white heterosexual men, or so we believed. Consequently, we are often skeptical about the validity of the perspectives of people who are not like us.

Discounting the anger felt by oppressed people

When women, people of color, and gay people express their anger at the oppression they experience, we generally stop listening. Instead of trying to understand, we get defensive, as if we were the cause of their oppression. Or, we blame them for what has happened. Maybe we have said or done something offensive, and maybe they could have done something different. But sometimes, they are simply venting their frustration at a system that treats them as 'less than.' Ironically, they may be expressing their anger to us because we are seen as potential allies who will understand.

Belief in the superiority of heterosexual white men

Our culture bombards us with information about the accomplishments of white heterosexual men and the deficiencies of people of color, gay people, and women. We don't see ourselves as needing help: we can't imagine *them* teaching *us* anything. Not surprisingly, we wonder if they are "qualified" to work alongside us, and we resist their full participation at every level of decision making. As women, gay people, and people of color request—or demand—a place at the table, we tell ourselves that standards are declining.

Overcoming the Barriers

Despite these barriers, I believe we can begin to understand how racism, sexism, and homophobia affect people's lives. I have found the following guidelines helpful.

We can listen to one another rather than judge one another

Listening, in this context, is the process of accepting others' experiences as real and true for them, with a goal of simply understanding; it doesn't mean interpreting others' experiences through my frame of reference or getting enough information so that I can "solve their problem." In addition, it's critical that we not blame ourselves for the prejudices we've inadvertently learned, but take responsibility for learning new information.

We can speak about our own experiences

When heterosexual white men are encouraged to speak about our past, we often recall painful memories of witnessing the oppression of others or being oppressed ourselves as children, working class men, or older workers. A colleague of mine believes that we are unable to recognize our privilege until our pain has been acknowledged. Telling our own stories creates the space for hearing others' stories.

We can encourage feeling as well as thinking

As a heterosexual white man, I have been taught that the search for truth is an intellectual process. But actually my own experiences have taught me that my heart knows as much as my head. If we are willing to feel the pain, anger, and fear associated with prejudice and discrimination, then we can begin to understand why others feel the way they do about racism, sexism, or homophobia.

We can identify the way that oppression has hurt us

Because of oppression, we have limited or no personal contact with people who are different from us. Our understanding of the world is based only on the perceptions of other heterosexual white men. We live with the contradiction that the United States promises, but does not deliver, a commitment to equality.

We can explore the benefits of living in a multicultural, inclusive society

The world is a richer and more exciting place when we have relationships with diverse people. We need the creative thinking of all people to solve the problems facing our world. If we are willing to work cooperatively and equally with all people, we can free ourselves from the legacy of injustice we have inherited.