

Movement Building Definitions

Language is very important in understanding how to combat oppression. The same word can have very different meanings for different people. It is easy to offend others without intending to when we are not careful about language.

Language is important for another reason. The language we learn and use actually shapes how we think and how we see the world. You may have heard the example about the Inuit people (the people most of us know as Eskimos). The Inuit have dozens of different words for our word "snowflake." Every Inuit child can tell the difference between the many kinds of snowflakes. In our culture, we have one word. It would be very hard for us to learn to distinguish all the kinds of snowflakes, because we have grown up with a language that tells us there is only one snowflake. The way we see snowflakes has been shaped (and limited) by our language.

One of the reasons we often have difficulty talking about racism and other forms of oppression is that the same words are used in different ways by different people. We may think we are talking about the same thing when we are not understanding one another at all. The following definitions are offered to be used as a guide for non-racist/non-oppressive terminology. If we can agree to use these words as defined here, we will have an easier time communicating and understanding one another as we work against oppression in our communities and our country.

One final note--these definitions will not match those you will find in a dictionary. An important question to consider is "Who has the power to define words for a society?" As people committed to racial, social, and economic justice, we have the right to define words in ways that help us see and name oppression so that we can help create justice.

OPPRESSION: The systematic exploitation of one social group by another for its own benefit; it involves institutional control, ideological domination, and the imposition of the dominant group's culture on the oppressed group. Oppression is different from discrimination, bias, prejudice, or bigotry because:

- * it is pervasive--woven throughout social institutions as well as embedded within individual consciousness
- * it is restricting--structural limits significantly shape a person's life chances and sense of possibility in ways beyond the individual's control
- * it is hierarchical--the dominant or privileged groups benefit, often in unconscious ways, from the disempowerment of subordinated or targeted groups
- * the dominant group has the power to define and name reality and determine what is "normal," "real," or "correct"

* harassment, discrimination, and marginalization are systematic and institutionalized--they do not require the conscious thought or effort of individual members of the dominant group, but are rather part of "business as usual"

PRIVILEGE: The benefits automatically received from being a member of the dominant group. It includes not having to think about the implications of one's identity because of automatically fitting in the category that is the norm or the standard for the society.

The advantages created for members of the dominant group are often invisible to them, or are considered "rights" available to everyone as opposed to "privileges" awarded to only some individuals and groups.

RACE: A social, cultural and political concept based largely on superficial appearances and cultural socialization, used to categorize human beings into separate groups. Race has no basic biological reality.

RACISM: Racial and cultural prejudice and discrimination, supported intentionally or unintentionally by institutional power and authority, used to the advantage of one race and the disadvantage of other races. The critical element which differentiates racism from prejudice and discrimination is the use of institutional power and authority to support prejudices and enforce discriminatory behaviors in systemic ways with far-reaching outcomes and effects.

Racism can manifest itself in many different forms, such as:

The belief that people of color are inferior to whites because of biological traits that produce inferior intellectual, emotional, and cultural qualities -- that racial differences are rooted in genetic differences; that "inferior genes" produce crime, poverty and racial inequality; that biological inferiority justifies inferior social treatment for blacks and other people of color such as slavery, segregation and discrimination.

Prejudice against people of color expressed through code words and symbolic issues rather than overtly bigoted language. Many whites retain deeply imbedded racist attitudes acquired in their youth. But because of social pressures, some whites feel uncomfortable publicly expressing these underlying prejudices. Instead they profess to believe in equality while using code words, such as "welfare underclass" to mean "blacks" or "immigrants" to mean "Latinos", as a way of venting their racial prejudices; for example, public debates on crime and welfare issues can easily become polite ways to express racial resentment. They avoid dealing with the realities of racism by espousing a philosophy of a "color blind" society.

WHITE PRIVILEGE: The concrete benefits of access to resources and social rewards and the power to shape the norms and values of society which whites receive, unconsciously or consciously, by virtue of their skin color in a racist society. Examples: the ability to be unaware of race; the ability to live and work among people of the same racial group.

WHITE SUPREMACY: An ideology/philosophy that holds white culture-- attitudes, behavior, beliefs, standards, history, values, etc.-- as superior to all others and as the standard for all other groups to meet. In the U.S. white supremacy/racism has been imbedded in the foundations of all major institutions. White supremacy requires members of other races to assimilate into white culture, thereby accepting the invalidation of their own culture, history, values, etc.

CLASSISM: The institutional, cultural, and individual set of practices and beliefs that assign differential value to people according to their socio-economic class; and an economic system which creates excessive inequality and causes basic human needs to go unmet.

SEXISM: The cultural, institutional, and individual set of beliefs and practices that privilege men, subordinate women, and denigrate values and practices associated with women.

HETEROSEXISM: The societal/cultural, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that assume that heterosexuality is the only natural, normal, acceptable sexual orientation.

HOMOPHOBIA: The fear, hatred, or intolerance of lesbians, gay men, or any behavior that is outside the boundaries of traditional gender roles.

Homophobia can be manifested as fear of association with lesbian or gay people or being perceived as lesbian or gay. Homophobic behavior can range from telling jokes about lesbian and gay people to physical violence against people thought to be lesbian or gay.

AGEISM: The systematic discrimination against, stereotyping of, and devaluing of people who are either young or old. In the workplace, age discrimination tends to work against older people in terms of hiring, promotion, and retention, while it tends to work against younger people in terms of status, credibility, and recognition. Underage children and youth in the U.S. have few rights as individuals; rather they are treated more as "property" of their parents or the state.