

A Working Definition of Racism: Revised 7/88

— By Ricky Sherover-Marcuse

1. Human beings are members of the same species. The term 'racism' is useful as a shorthand way of categorizing the systematic mistreatment experienced by people of color and Third world people both in the United States and in many other parts of the world. But this term should not mislead us into supposing that human beings belong to biologically different species. We all belong to one race, the human race.
2. The systematic mistreatment experienced by people of color is a result of institutionalized inequalities in the social structure. Racism is one consequence of a self-perpetuating imbalance in economic, political and social power. This imbalance consistently favors members of some ethnic and cultural groups at the expense of others. The consequences of this imbalance pervade all aspects of the social system and affect all facets of people's lives.
3. At its most extreme, systematic mistreatment takes the form of physical violence and extermination, but it occurs in many other forms as well. Pervasive invalidation, the denial or the non-recognition of the full humanity of persons of color also constitutes the mistreatment categorized as racism.

Putting the matter in these terms may clear up the confusion, which is generated by thinking of racism merely as 'different treatment'. If we examine the facts, we will see that what is often called 'different treatment' is in reality inhuman treatment, i.e. treatment which denies the humanity of the individual person and their group.

4. The systematic mistreatment of any group of people generates misinformation about them, which in turn becomes the 'explanation' of or justification for continued mistreatment. Racism exists as a whole series of attitudes, assumptions, feelings and beliefs about people of color and their cultures which are a mixture of misinformation, fear and ignorance.

Just as 'the systematic mistreatment of people of color' means 'inhuman treatment', so 'misinformation about people of color' designates beliefs and assumptions that in any way imply that people of color are less than fully human. These beliefs and attitudes are not just neutral errors; they are impacted misinformation: ideas and opinions which are glued together with painful emotion and held in place by frozen memories of distressing experiences.

5. Because misinformation about people of color functions as the justification for their continued mistreatment, it becomes socially empowered or sanctioned misinformation. It is recycled through the society as a form of conditioning that affects everyone. In this way, misinformation about people of color becomes part of everyone's 'ordinary' assumptions.

6. For purposes of clarity, it is helpful to use the term 'internalized racism' or 'internalized oppression' to designate the misinformation that people of color may have about themselves and their cultures. The purpose of this term is to point out that this misinformation is consequence of the mistreatment experienced by people of color. It is not an inherent feature of their culture.
7. The term 'reverse racism' is sometimes used to characterize 'affirmative action' programs, but this is inaccurate. Affirmative action programs are attempts to repair the results of institutionalized racism by setting guidelines and establishing procedures for finding qualified applicants from all segments of the population.
8. The term 'reverse racism' is also sometimes used to characterize the mistreatment that individual whites may have experienced at the hands of individuals of color. This too is inaccurate. While any form of humans harming other humans is wrong because no one is entitled to mistreat anyone, we should not confuse the occasional mistreatment experienced by whites at the hands of people of color with the systematic and institutionalized mistreatment experienced by people of color at the hands of whites.
9. Racism operates as a strategy of divide and conquer. It helps to perpetuate a social system in which some people are consistently 'haves' and others are consistently 'have nots'. While the 'haves' receive certain material benefits from this situation, the long range effects of racism short change everyone. Racism sets groups of people against each other and makes it difficult for us to perceive our common interests as human beings.

Racism make us forget that we all need and are entitled to good health care, stimulating education, and challenging work. Racism limits our horizons to what presently exists. Racism makes us suppose that current injustices are 'natural', or at best, inevitable: "someone has to be unemployed; someone has to go hungry." Most importantly, racism distorts our perceptions of the possibilities for change; it makes us abandon our visions of solidarity; it robs us of our dreams of community.

Working Assumptions and Guidelines for Alliance-Building

— By Ricky Sherover-Marcuse

Since, under present world conditions, everyone either is now, or has been, or will be at some time a target of social oppression, and since everyone is now, or has been, or will be in a non-target group in relation to some other group's oppression, alliance-building is for everyone.

Everyone of us needs allies, and everyone of us can take the role of an ally for someone else. The following guidelines are based on this premise. They should be equally applicable from the perspective of the target and the non-target group.

STRATEGIES FOR WINNING ALLIES

1. Assume that you and all members of your group deserve allies.
2. Assume that your liberation issues are justifiably of concern to all people outside your group.
3. Assume that people in other groups are your natural allies; assume that all people outside your group want to be allies for you and that it is in their interest for them to do so.
4. Assume that it is only other people's own oppression and internalized oppression that prevents them (temporarily) from being effective allies to you at all times.
5. Assume that your allies are doing the best they can at the present time, given their own oppression and internalized oppression. Assume that they can and will do better.
6. Assume that you are the expert on your own experience and that you have information which other people need to hear.
7. Speak from your own experience without comparing your oppression to theirs.
8. Assume that your experience is also an experience of victories; be sure to share these- as well as the stories of how things are hard.
9. Expect perfection from your allies; expect them to be able to deal with the "difficult issues" in your struggle. Assume that allies make mistakes; be prepared to be disappointed, and continue to expect the best from them.
10. Assume that you have a perfect right to assist your allies to become more effective for you. Assume that you can choose to do this at any time. Take full pride in your ability to do this.

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 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 you and members of your group as allies. 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 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 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 your 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.

Guidelines for Improving Communication Within a Diverse Working Group

— By Ricky Sherover-Marcuse

1. Begin with the assumption that all human beings are natural communicators, and that we all desire warm, close relationships with each other.
2. Assume that biological/cultural/ethnic/sexual/religious/age differences between human beings are never 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 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 perpetrators- 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 these roles; no one wanted these divisions. Everyone resisted the social conditioning to take on these roles as best they could. But the hurts from this conditioning cling to us and make 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 in with each other and to really listen.
6. Assume that issues of oppression always have some connection to difficulties in communication. Assume that racism, sexism, job status, etc. always figure in somewhere.
7. Assume that target group people are always 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 always communicated as clearly as they could, and in general has always done the best that they could in every single 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 acting which have kept us separated.

Towards A Perspective On Eliminating Racism: 12 Working Assumptions

— By Ricky Sherover-Marcuse

Because racism is both institutional and attitudinal, effective strategies against it must recognize this dual character. The elimination of institutionalized racism requires a conscious project of attitudinal transformation. The deliberate attempt to transform racist patterns of thought and action must be accompanied by political and social change. The following assumptions offer a perspective for beginning the work.

1. The systematic mistreatment of any group of people isolates and divides human beings from each other. This practice is a hurt to all people. The division and isolation produced by racism is a hurt to people from all ethnic groups.
2. Racism is not a genetic disease. No human being is born with racist attitudes and beliefs. Physical and cultural differences between people are not the cause of racism; these differences are used as the excuse to justify racism. (Analogy with sexism: anatomical differences between human males and females are not the cause of sexism; these differences are used to justify the mistreatment of females of all ages.)
3. No young person acquires misinformation by their own free choice. Racist attitudes and beliefs are a mixture of misinformation and ignorance which is imposed upon young people through a painful process of social conditioning. "You have to be taught to hate and fear."
4. Misinformation is harmful to all human beings. Misinformation about peoples of color is harmful to all people. Having racist attitudes and beliefs is like having a clamp on one's mind. It distorts one's perceptions of reality. Two examples: the notion that "flesh color" is several shades of pinkish beige; the use of the term 'minorities' to describe the majority of the world's people.
5. No one holds onto misinformation voluntarily. People hold onto racist beliefs and attitudes because this misinformation represents the best thinking they have been able to do at this time, and because no one has been able to assist them to change their perspective.
6. People will change their minds and let go of ingrained attitudes under the following conditions:
 - 1) the new position is presented in a way that makes sense to them;
 - 2) they trust the person who is presenting the new position; 3) they are not blamed for having had misinformation.
7. People hurt others because they themselves have been hurt. In this society we have all experienced systematic mistreatment as young people- of ten through physical violence, but also through the invalidation of our intelligence, the

disregard of our feelings, the discounting of our abilities. As a result of these experiences, we tend both to internalize this mistreatment by accepting it as 'the way things are', and to externalize it by mistreating others. Part of the process of undoing racism involves becoming aware of and interrupting this cycle of mistreatment in day to day encounters and interactions.

8. As young people we have often witnessed despair and cynicism in the adults around us, and we have often been made to feel powerless in the face of injustice. Racism continues in part because we feel powerless to do anything about it.
9. There are times when we have failed to act, times when we did not achieve as much as we wanted to in the struggle against racism. Eliminating racism also involves understanding the difficulties we have had and learning to overcome them, without blaming ourselves for having had those difficulties.
10. The situation is not hopeless; people can grow and change; we are not condemned to repeat the past. Racist conditioning need not be a permanent state of affairs. It can be -examined, analyzed and dismantled. Because this misinformation is glued together and held in place with painful emotion, the process of dismantling it must take place on the experiential as well as on the theoretical level.
11. We live in a multicultural, multi-ethnic world; everyone is "ethnic." Misinformation about other people's ethnicity is often the flip side of misinformation about one's own ethnicity. For example the notion that some ethnic groups are 'exotic' and 'different' is the flip side of the notion that one's own group is just 'regular' or 'plain'. Thus a crucial part of eliminating racism is the acquiring of accurate information about one's own ethnicity and cultural heritage. Reclaiming this information will show us that we all come from traditions in which we can take justified pride.
12. All people come from traditions which have a history of resistance to injustice, and every person has their own individual history of resistance to oppressive social conditioning. This history deserves to be recalled and celebrated. Reclaiming one's own history of resistance is central to the project of acquiring an accurate account of one's own heritage. When people act from a sense of informed pride in themselves and their traditions, they will be more effective in all struggles for justice.

Liberation Theory: A Working Framework

— By Ricky Sherover-Marcuse

1. Liberation is both the undoing of the effects and the elimination of the causes of social oppression. The achievement of human liberation on a global scale will require far-reaching changes at the institutional level and at the level of group and individual interactions. These changes will involve transforming oppressive behavioral patterns and "unlearning" oppressive attitudes and assumptions.
2. No one is naturally or genetically oppressive; no human being is born as an oppressor. No one is naturally or genetically destined to be oppressed; no one is born to be oppressed.
3. Oppression is the systematic and pervasive mistreatment of individuals on the basis of their membership in various groups, which are disadvantaged by the institutionalized imbalances in social power in a particular society. Oppression includes both institutionalized or "normalized" mistreatment as well as instances of violence. It includes the invalidation, denial, or the non-recognition of the complete humanness (the goodness, uniqueness, smartness, powerfulness, etc.) of those who are members of the mistreated group.
4. Biological/cultural/ethnic/sexual/religious/age differences between human beings are never the cause of oppression. The use of these differences to explain either why certain groups of people are oppressed (or) why certain groups of people behave oppressively, functions as a justification of oppression.
5. Differences in class, in social and economic power, in educational opportunity and achievement, in health and physical well being, are the expression and result of institutionalized inequalities in opportunity. Such differences perpetuate and increase the social imbalances in power and thereby serve to maintain all forms of oppression.
6. The perpetuation of oppression is made possible by the conditioning of new generations of human beings into the role of being oppressed and the role of being oppressive. In a society in which there is oppression, everyone (at one time or another) is socialized into both of these roles. People who are 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 perpetrators- either in a direct, active form or in an indirect, passive form. Neither of these roles serves our best interests as human beings.
7. The conditioning of both groups, the target group and the non-target group of any given oppression takes place through a specific form of oppression, the oppression of young people. In a society in which there is oppression, all young people will be the targets of this systematic mistreatment, i.e. all young people will be oppressed.

8. In addition to force and the threat of force, oppression is perpetuated through the generation and recycling of systematic misinformation about the nature, history, and the abilities of the target group. -Because this misinformation is socially empowered and sanctioned, it functions as the justification for the continued mistreatment of the target group.
9. Each group targeted by oppression inevitably "internalizes" the mistreatment and the misinformation about itself. The target group thus "mis-believes" about itself the same misinformation which pervades the social system. This "mis-believing" expresses itself in behavior and interactions between individual members of the target group which repeat the content of their oppression. Internalized oppression is always an involuntary reaction to the experience of oppression on the part of the target group.) To blame the target group in any way for having internalized the consequences of their oppression is itself an act of oppression.
10. The "positive re-enforcements" and social rewards that people in a non-target group receive for going along with their conditioning would not in themselves be sufficient to secure their acceptance of the social role of the perpetrator. The "acceptance" of this role is first made possible as a result of the individual's own experience of oppression, originally as a young person.
11. People who are the targets of any particular form of oppression have resisted and attempted to resist their oppression in any way they could. The fact that their resistance is not generally recognized is itself a feature of the oppression.
12. People who are the non-target of any particular oppression have resisted and attempted to resist their socialization into the oppressive role. The fact that this resistance is not generally recognized is also a feature of the oppression.
13. Being socialized into the oppressed role is a painful experience for all people of the target group. Being socialized into the oppressor role is a painful experience for all people of the non-target group --- in spite of the positive re-enforcements and material benefits that go along with this role.
14. Part of the conditioning experience is the misinformation that socialization into these roles is not painful. In some cases the pain of the conditioning is recognized for people in the target group. It is seldom recognized for people of the non-target group. The conditioning experiences are portrayed as "a normal part of growing up". For the most part the original awareness that this socialization was painful is obscured, or forgotten.
15. The perpetuation of any particular oppression requires that the pain of being socialized into either the oppressed or the oppressor role be forgotten, or discounted. The discounting or "normalizing" of the painful aspects of the conditioning process thus becomes a means of perpetuating all forms of oppression.

16. Liberation is possible. It is possible to recover the buried memories of our socialization, to share our stories and heal the hurts imposed by the conditioning, to act in the present in a humane and caring manner, to rebuild our human connections and to change our world.

Working Assumptions For White Activists On Eliminating Racism: Guidelines For Recruiting Other Whites As Allies

— By Ricky Sherover-Marcuse

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 systematic 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 keep silent in the face of injustice. Sometimes this training has been to be 'extra nice' towards people of color ...
5. Assume that no human being would have ever 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 has been obscured and hidden from us and that many of us feel no pride in our own heritages and traditions.
8. Recognize that most whites in the United States and Canada 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 the acknowledgement 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 '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 a 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 all 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
 - 1) they feel acknowledged and appreciated as individuals;
 - 2) they are listened to with complete respect on their own grievances and liberation concerns;
 - 3) they trust the person presenting the new perspective;
 - 4) the new perspective makes sense to them;
 - 5) they are not blamed for their prior conditioning or behavior.
18. Recognize that recruiting other whites to join us is also an opportunity to learn from them, and that they have much to teach us.