

TOWARDS A PERSPECTIVE ON UNLEARNING RACISM

12 WORKING ASSUMPTIONS

Because racism is both institutional and attitudinal, effective strategies against it must recognize this dual character. The undoing of institutionalized racism must be accompanied by the unlearning of racist attitudes and beliefs. The unlearning of racist patterns of thought and action must guide the practice of political and social change. The following assumptions offer a perspective for the work of attitudinal change.

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 about deeply held convictions 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.

B. 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 unlearned. Because this misinformation is glued together and held in place with painful emotion, the process of unlearning 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 unlearning racism is the acquiring of accurate information about one's own ethnicity and cultural heritage. Reclaiming this information will show us that 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 had 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.

UNLEARNING RACISM WORKSHOPS

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