

Can white heterosexual men understand oppression?

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I am a white heterosexual man. For years I have struggled to understand oppression and its impact on my life and the lives of others. For the past 12 years I've been leading workshops on sexism, homophobia and racism for white heterosexual men. It is clear to me that these men have a difficult time accepting the notion that systemic oppression is real and has an impact on all people. I believe that I understand some of our resistance to coming to terms with oppression. ("Our," "us" and "we" in this article refer to heterosexual white men.) In this article I'm going to use my own experience in learning about oppression to explore some of the barriers heterosexual white men come up against in opening themselves to the meaning of oppression.

My Encounters with Feminism

I met my first outspoken feminist, a co-worker, in 1975. Like many men I refused to accept her words and experience as valid. With other men at my side, I teased her when she called attention to the sexism in our workplace. I didn't understand what she was saying. I thought that I knew what was true in the world, and her version of the truth was different from mine. I was angry that she wanted a set of rules different from the one by which I had so carefully lived my life as a man. I also suspect that I was afraid of what she was proposing.

I liked this woman, and in the process of spending time together I began to question my assumptions about the world. One day we were rock climbing. She was able to complete a climb, while I got stuck below the difficult part of the rock face. I had always assumed that I would teach her about rock climbing; instead, I had to confront the fact that I needed her to teach me, to get me out of a tough spot.

Over the next few years the process continued. As I allowed her experiences to sink in, they began to make sense to me, and I began to make connections between the oppression she experienced and my masculinity. I realized that my participation in sexism was restricting me as well as oppressing her. I began to feel angry about the ways in which I was limited to a particular set of human qualities which the society had arbitrarily labeled "masculine."

Connecting Homophobia and Racism

In time my questioning led me to think about the impact of homophobia and racism on my life and other men's lives. Why was I so afraid of other men? Why did I work so hard to avoid the "feminine" part of myself? Why did I know so little about racism? Why was I afraid of people of color? I was also afraid that I might do or say something which

would be racist or homophobic! I struggled to do the right thing, to say what was politically correct, and I was stuck in having to be in control. I found myself afraid of being in new situations with lesbian and gay people and people of color. I feared that I would not know how to behave “appropriately.”

For many years I either avoided such contact, or in situations where I did make contact I tried to be the expert on homophobia and racism. Both strategies prevented me from telling others who I was and listening to who they were. During these years, I began to hear and read about the privileges I get as a man, a white person, and a heterosexual. I was able to see how oppressed persons – particularly women, people of color, and gay people – are denied some of the rights I have. But it was difficult to translate that into the day-to-day experiences in which I benefited from the oppression. It was easier to see the ways in which the system was unfair to me. I had to be willing to stretch my perspective to see how I was privileged.

Barriers to Change

From my experiences I have identified four barriers which kept me, and which I believe keep many of us, from understanding oppression.

1. A lack of information about the experience of oppression.

As a child, and even as a young adult, I received little or no direct education about the oppression of women, gay people, or people of color. No one ever consciously sat me down and explained what oppression means, what it looks like, what it feels like, etc. Rather, in many subtle and even ways I had been taught that “anyone” could be successful in this egalitarian society, if only they worked hard enough. If they didn’t succeed, they had no one to blame but themselves.

At the same time, through “jokes” told by family and friends, I learned many stereotypes about gay people, people of color, and women, and “learned” that they were all “less than” heterosexual white men. I seldom got information to counter the stereotypes. How, then, could I as an adult believe the claims of the oppressed? Even if I believed that there were some “legitimate” cases of oppression, like slavery, I could easily see them as isolated, extreme and belonging to another era and mother place. Or I could blame the oppressed for their oppression, saying that the injustice was due to something they had done. I saw myself as a well-intentioned person who would not knowingly hurt another person. How could I be an oppressor?

I believe that many, perhaps most heterosexual white men have similar perspectives grounded in what we learned and experienced as children and young adults. Ironically, most of us were oppressed as children through the impact of adultism. But because we were males, most of us 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 others’ pain?

2. Belief that we, the dominant group, have a market on the truth.

Although I was never told directly that heterosexual white men are the bearers and protectors of truth in the world, I could not believe otherwise. Political leaders, philosophers, judges, sports heroes, my father, even images I saw of God -- all were white men. The result was a skepticism about the validity of other people's perspectives. Could we believe what women were telling us? Weren't we smarter? Could we believe what gay people were telling us? How could they be objective when we suspected they had another agenda? Could we believe people of color? What were they trying to pull on us?

Heterosexual white men in this society tend to have a dualistic view of the world: we are either right or wrong, winners or losers. There is only one truth, and we will fight with another to determine whose truth is right. To understand oppression requires that we accept others' experiences as truthful, even though they may be very different from ours. To live with equality in a diverse, pluralistic society, we have to accept the fact that all groups and individuals have a legitimate claim to what is true and real for them.

3. Fear of offending members of oppressed groups and fear of their anger.

I was raised to be polite. I was taught that it was inappropriate to say mean things about other people in their presence. In my family it was inappropriate to be angry at all. I had little preparation, therefore, for hearing the anger of oppressed people directed at people like me, particularly when I didn't believe that I was a bigot. I didn't say those mean things; why were they angry at me?

Many heterosexual white men raised with similar values are honestly confused about the anger which is directed towards us. We don't understand that this anger comes from many sources: our privilege and our failure to recognize the oppression which seems so obvious to others; our willingness to stand back and quietly watch the oppression unfold without using our privilege and power to challenge it; our belief that we can't do anything about the oppression; and, of course, intentional and overt prejudice. When anger comes our way, we often unintentionally intensify and contribute to it by our defensiveness. Instead of listening, we plead our innocence.

On a very practical level, one of the results of "trying not to offend" members of oppressed groups is that heterosexual white men find it difficult to join any dialogue about oppression when members of oppressed groups are present. We become extraordinarily cautious about what we say, for fear of being called racist, sexist or homophobic. We fear others' anger should we "accidentally" say the wrong thing. Although we may behave this way for good reason -- self-protection -- the result is that we remove ourselves from contact with the oppression and the oppressed. If we keep it up, we sabotage our own learning.

4. Belief that being white, heterosexual and male is better than being a person of color, gay, or female

Throughout my life, the culture has bombarded me with information about the accomplishments of white heterosexual men and the deficiencies of people of color, gay people and women. Furthermore, my parents taught me to be grateful for what I have and to pity those who are not as fortunate. Even when as an adult, I began to understand the nature of oppression, my attitude was still one of pity. My anti-oppression work was about "bettering" the oppressed. The notion that our lives might be improved by egalitarian relationships with people of color, gay people, and women is difficult for us to understand and accept. We don't see ourselves deficient or needing help. We can't imagine them teaching us anything. We tend to focus on the ways in which we will have to give up control and share scarce resources if greater numbers of people (who don't look like us) participate in all aspects of our society.

In workshops, I sometimes ask white men to describe some of the ways we are hurt by racism. Their responses include comments about job loss due to "reverse discrimination" and feelings of increased tension in the workplace as more people of color join the workforce at managerial levels. Curiously, these responses are examples of the ways that we are affected by attempts to reduce institutional racism, not racism itself.

Beyond Denial

The workforce is changing in profound ways. Heterosexual white men will soon be a numerical minority, if we aren't already. (On a worldwide scale we are definitely the minority.) We realize that women, people of color, and gay people are requesting – or demanding – a place in the power structure, but frankly we don't know much about power sharing. I've heard men describe how they believe that "power" is finite: sharing it with others is equivalent to losing it.

I believe that it takes a leap of faith for us to even speculate on the benefits to us for ending oppression. We have to first be willing to admit that all is not well with the way that we have constructed reality and lived our lives: we die sooner than women; we experience tremendous amounts of stress; we are cut off from intimate relationships with our parents, peers and children; we have an understanding of the world based only on the perceptions of other heterosexual white men; and we live in a society that professes – but does not deliver – a commitment to freedom and equality. As I watch heterosexual white men interact with one another, I sense that some of us have lost our spirit. We seem disconnected to ourselves, our colleagues and the world around us.

Yet, many of us choose to avoid contact with people from different cultures by living in white communities, socializing with other white people, competing in sports with other men and working with other heterosexual white men. Consequently, we don't know what we're missing by continuing to live in a monocultural environment.

But the benefits to us for living in a multicultural society, and ending oppression, are real. We need the creative talents of all people – women and men, people of color and white people, gay people and heterosexuals – to solve the problems facing our world. The world is a richer and more exciting place for me as I take in information based on others' realities. Options for how I can live my life are increased when others' lives are valued. I can be free from deep and crippling feelings of guilt for creating and perpetuating a system of oppression. Having to be responsible for the welfare of others is not fun; living with the anxiety that the oppressed will rise up in anger against me is not pleasant.

An Effective Educational Program

I believe that carefully designed and gently led educational programs on oppression can help heterosexual white men understand the reality and impacts of oppression. "Educating" people about oppression must not be a euphemism for forcing someone to accept the party line. Education can be a process in which learners willingly engage with one another and the material in ways that are helpful to them. I have used the following guidelines and approaches in my work with heterosexual white men and have found them helpful.

1. We can listen to one another, and understand our histories, rather than judging one another for our oppressive attitudes and behaviors.

Racism, sexism and homophobia are learned early. Regardless of how much I might want to rid myself of prejudicial thoughts, I find it nearly impossible to do so. I have felt guilty at times about my prejudices, but this guilt has tended to make me want to deny the prejudices rather than come to terms with them. Therefore, it's critical that we not blame one another for being prejudiced. I've often felt relief sweep over the room at the beginning of a work shop when I've made it clear that I won't allow blaming in the group. I offer the possibility that we can't help but be prejudiced in this society, and I offer my own prejudices as an example. We explore the ways in which we learned about "the other," and I encourage participants to take responsibility for their behavior given their new awareness of themselves and others.

2. We can speak for ourselves and from 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 hurt ourselves. Ironically, this telling of one's own story creates space for hearing others' stories. A colleague of mine believes that many white men are unable to hear others' pain or recognize their own privilege until their pain has been acknowledged.

In a recent workshop on racism, I noticed how the white men seemed unable to appreciate the anger felt by the women and people of color in attendance who described

how they were locked out of certain jobs with real power to create change. The white men lamented the fact that those men with “real power” weren't in attendance. Yet this group of men included a University President, a Chief of Police and several corporate Presidents and Vice-Presidents. I encouraged them to talk about the sacrifices they had made to get where they were. They believed that they had given up a great deal for these jobs, and now felt insecure about their positions, wondering who was “gunning” for them. Eventually, they were able to recognize that they did have power and that their opportunities to move up, as well as to create change in their current positions, were generally far greater than the women or people of color in the workshop.

3. We can recognize and appreciate our differences as well as the ways in which we are similar.

Even among a seemingly homogeneous group of heterosexual white men, there are profound differences in values, abilities and life experiences. These can be used as a basis for exploring other cultural differences. Recognizing and appreciating these differences is crucial, even though many of us, including myself, were taught to treat everyone as if they were the same. I've seen many white people get nervous when I simply call attention to the fact that there are African-American people in the room. Unless we recognize, and then appreciate differences across race, gender and sexual orientation, we will not see others for who they are. And if women, people of color, and gay people can't bring their culture to their work, then they are leaving much of themselves outside the door. Recognizing and appreciating differences will bring all of our creative talents to the task, not just those which are valued by white male culture.

4. We can encourage feeling as well as thinking.

As a white man, I have been taught that knowledge comes from cognition, that the search for truth is an intellectual process. But in my work on oppression I have come to value emotion as a powerful tool for learning. In many cases, my heart knows as much as my head, and if I can bring both to my work, I will have a broader base from which to make decisions. I've often noticed how white men can talk our way into thinking that a woman or a person of color deserved the treatment they got. But if we are willing to feel the pain and fear associated with prejudice, harassment and discrimination, then we may be able to understand the impact of the oppression.

5. We can identify the ways oppression has hurt us and how we will benefit from ending oppression.

It may take us a while to understand how oppression has hurt us, the oppressors. With enough time, and safety, I have seen other heterosexual white men begin to claim, at a very personal level, how they are tired of the stress and responsibility of being in a position of power; how they do want justice for all people; and how they want true

freedom in their own lives. In the long run, those of us who are motivated to end oppression out of our self-interest will be more honest with ourselves and others and less prone to burn-out. Guilt does not sustain us as agents of change nor does it lead to sound decisions about resource and power sharing which will truly benefit oppressed people.

Lingering Questions

Even after 12 years I still have many questions about my identity and my work:

Will I have satisfying relationships with other heterosexual white men? I sometimes feel isolated from other heterosexual white men; my friends are largely women, gay people, and people of color. One colleague, in his work on sexism, has described this as a sense that he has betrayed other men, and so he feels rejected by them.

Will I stay committed to this work, knowing that I can walk away at any time from the day-to-day reality of oppression? I know that in most parts of the US I can live comfortably without having to struggle against sexism, homophobia and racism. Will my self-interest be strong enough to keep me doing this work?

Will I be patient with the ways I am distrusted by members of oppressed groups? Although I understand that the distrust is both historical and functional in the present – there are many heterosexual white men who knowingly perpetuate the oppression – I can get defensive about questions of my integrity.

And finally, will I be optimistic enough to continue this work? When working with heterosexual white men, I sometimes find myself flipping back and forth between despair and hopefulness. My despair comes from the fear that those with power to affect systemic oppression will never find the reasons or courage to do so. My hopefulness comes from the experience of watching people get insights which lead to positive action. My goal is to learn more about my despair and remember my moments of hope. I believe that it is the possibility of change, and the excitement of watching people reach their potential, which will sustain me.