

**PRESBYTERY OF CHICAGO  
COMMISSION ON ANTIRACISM AND EQUITY  
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**Pre-Assembly Education: Navigating the Waters of White Dominant Culture  
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This workshop will explore the ways in which the characteristics of white dominant culture impact the norms and standards of organizations, including the Chicago Presbytery. We will look at the roadblocks these cultural “norms” present in becoming the multicultural anti-racist organization we strive to be. Being able to identify and name the white dominant cultural norms and working on antidotes to disrupt them, is a first step in becoming a truly multi-cultural organization.

This Handout is based upon Tema Okun and colleagues’ work found at [www.whitesupremacyculture.info](http://www.whitesupremacyculture.info) and [www.dismantlingracism.org](http://www.dismantlingracism.org)

**One of the purposes of listing characteristics of white dominant culture is to point out that when organizations unconsciously use these characteristics as their norms and standards, they make it difficult, if not impossible, to open the door to other cultural norms and standards. As a result, many of our organizations, while saying we want to be multi-cultural, really only allow other people and cultures to come in if they adapt or conform to already existing cultural norms. Being able to identify and name the white dominant cultural norms, and working on antidotes to disrupt them, is a first step to making room for a truly multi-cultural organization.**

### **EITHER/OR THINKING**

This characteristic explores the cultural assumption that we can - and should - reduce the complexity of life and the nuances of our relationships with each other and all living things into either/or, yes or no, right or wrong in ways that reinforce toxic power. This type of thinking tends to oversimplify complex issues and can contribute to polarization and division.

**Either/or Thinking** shows up as:

- Positioning or presenting options or issues as either/or – good/bad, right/wrong, with us/against us. Little or no sense of the possibilities of both/and.
- Trying to simplify complex things - for example believing that poverty is simply the result of lack of education.
- Creates conflict and an increased sense of urgency, as people feel they have to make decisions to do either this or that, with no time or encouragement to consider alternatives - particularly those which may require more time or resources.
- A strategy used by those with a clear agenda or goal to push those who are still thinking or reflecting to make a choice between “a” or “b” without acknowledging a need for time and creativity to come up with more options.

**Antidotes** or suggestions for how to show up in more connecting and healing ways include:

- Notice when you or others use “either/or” language and make time to come up with more than two alternatives.

- Notice when you or others are simplifying complex issues, particularly when the stakes seem high or an urgent decision needs to be made.
- Avoid making decisions under extreme pressure and work to distinguish what is actual pressure and what is pressure that you or others are creating.
- Avoid trying to assign a single cause to a problem or a challenge; acknowledge the ways in which oppressions intersect and reinforce each other as well as the ways in which oppression can be operating at the interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels.

## **PERFECTIONISM**

The idea that mistakes are unacceptable and that individuals must strive for perfection. This can create a culture of fear of making errors and stifle creativity and innovation. White dominant culture uses perfectionism to preserve power and the status quo. For as long as we are striving to be perfect, we have less energy, and attention, to question those rules and to remember what is truly important.

**Perfectionism** shows up as:

- Little or no appreciation expressed among people for the work others are doing. It is more common to point out either how the person or work is inadequate. When appreciation is expressed, it is often or usually directed to those who get most of the credit anyway.
- Mistakes are seen as personal, i.e. they reflect badly on the person making them as opposed to being seen for what they are – mistakes. And making a mistake is confused with being a mistake, doing wrong with being wrong.
- Little time, energy, or money is put into reflection or identifying lessons learned that can improve practice, in other words there is little or no learning from mistakes, and/or little investigation of what is considered a mistake and why.
- The person making the “mistake” or doing something “wrong” rarely participates in defining what doing it “right” looks like or whether a “mistake” actually occurred.

**Antidotes** or suggestions for how to show up in more connecting and healing ways include:

- Develop a culture of appreciation; take time to make sure that everyone’s work and efforts are appreciated.
- Develop a learning community or organization, where the stated expectation is that everyone will make mistakes and those mistakes offer opportunities for learning.
- Create a culture of support that recognizes how mistakes sometimes lead to positive results.
- Separate the person from the mistake; when offering feedback, always speak to what went well before offering critical feedback; when a mistake is jointly or collectively acknowledged, ask for specific suggestions about what the person or group has learned and how we would do things differently moving forward.

## **RIGHT TO COMFORT**

Refers to the societal norm where individuals, particularly those in positions of privilege, often expect and defend their right to remain comfortable and unchallenged by difficult or uncomfortable conversations, especially regarding issues such as racism and discrimination. This assumption supports the tendency to blame the person (or group) considered to be causing discomfort or conflict, rather than addressing the issues being named.

**Right to comfort** shows up as:

- The belief that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort.
- Scapegoating those who cause discomfort, for example, targeting and isolating those who name racism rather than addressing the actual racism that is being named.
- Feeling entitled to name what is and isn't racism; white people (or those with dominant identities) equating individual acts of unfairness with systemic racism (or other forms of oppression).
- Demanding, requiring, expecting apologies (or other forms of "I didn't mean it") when faced with accusations of colluding with racism;

**Antidotes** or suggestions for how to show up in more connecting and healing ways include:

- Understand that discomfort is at the root of all growth and learning. Learn to welcome and sit with discomfort before responding or acting.
- Avoid taking everything personally. Remember that critical feedback can help you see your conditioning as you learn to separate your conditioning from who you actually are. You need to know your conditioning if you are going to be free. While your conditioning is hazardous, you are not.
- Deepen your political analysis of racism and oppression so you have a strong understanding of how your personal experience and feelings fit into a larger picture.
- When you have a different point of view, seek to understand what you're being told and assume there is a good reason for what is being said; seek to find and understand that good reason (without labeling the other person).

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