

15 Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture

- Perfectionism
- Sense of Urgency
- Defensiveness
- Quantity Over Quality
- Worship of the Written Word
- Only One Right Way
- Paternalism
- Either/Or Thinking
- Power Hoarding
- Fear of Open Conflict
- Individualism
- I'm the Only One
- Progress is Bigger, More
- Objectivity
- Right to Comfort

Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones,
Dismantling Racism Workbook, 2001

ANTIRACISM LITERACY PARTNERS

A NEXT RIGHT ACTION

“Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture” Discussion Guide

General Discussion Guidelines

1. What is racism and antiracism? To begin your discussion, start with the same understanding of these terms. See “Being Antiracist” on p. 4 of this reading guide.
2. Keep in mind that racism exists whether people are aware of it or not. A racial identification as white and privileged or as a person of color will affect our ability to see racism.
3. Speak to your own thoughts, behaviors, feelings, experience, and beliefs. Refrain from hopelessness and absolutes such as “Racism is never going to end,” or “I can’t do anything.”
4. Expect discomfort but avoid defensiveness. There is a difference between agreement and understanding; consider whether “I don’t agree” may actually mean “I don’t understand.”
5. Consider how your antiracism work furthers the values, mission, and ends of Unity Church-Unitarian. See on p. 5.
6. This guide is meant only to serve as a conversation starter. Feel free to create a format that works best for you, and create and discuss topics and questions as you think best.

Covenants

We will listen from the heart.

We will speak honestly from the heart about our own experience, not that of others.

We will respect the confidentiality of what is shared here.

We will not interrupt.

We will not give unasked-for advice.

We will not judge others by what they say.

We will honor the diversity of thoughts and feelings.

We will honor and respect our time together and our commitment to our learning partner.

Suggested 1-hour Discussion Format

5 min	Opening: Review of covenants
10 min	<i>Check-in.</i> What, briefly, is going on in your life today?
30 min	Discussion
10 min	<i>Check-out.</i> How are you feeling now?
5 min	Next discussion: where, when, scheduled on Zoom?

About

“**The Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture,**” from From Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups, by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun (ChangeWork, 2001)

View the article on the Showing Up for Racial Justice website:

<https://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/white-supremacy-culture-characteristics.html>

This resource lists of characteristics of white supremacy culture that show up in our organizations. The characteristics listed below are damaging because they are used as norms and standards without being proactively named or chosen by the group. The authors explain in detail why these characteristics are harmful and offers antidotes to help dismantle white supremacy culture.

Characteristics/Antidotes for Discussion

Perfectionism

- little appreciation expressed among people for the work that others are doing; appreciation that is expressed usually directed to those who get most of the credit anyway
- more common is to point out either how the person or work is inadequate
- or even more common, to talk to others about the inadequacies of a person or their work without ever talking directly to them
- 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
- making a mistake is confused with being a mistake, doing wrong with being wrong
- little time, energy, or money put into reflection or identifying lessons learned that can improve practice, in other words little or no learning from mistakes
- tendency to identify what is wrong; little ability to identify, name, and appreciate what is right

Where does this show up in our system?

Antidotes to Perfectionism

- develop a culture of appreciation, where the organization takes time to make sure that people’s work and efforts are appreciated;
- develop a learning organization, where it is expected that everyone will make mistakes and those mistakes offer opportunities for learning;
- create an environment where people can recognize that mistakes sometimes lead to positive results;
- separate the person from the mistake;
- when offering feedback, always speak to the things that went well before offering criticism;
- ask people to offer specific suggestions for how to do things differently when offering criticism

How might these show up in an anti-racist system?

Sense of Urgency

- continued sense of urgency that makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, to think long-term, to consider consequences
- frequently results in sacrificing potential allies for quick or highly visible results, for example sacrificing interests of communities of color in order to win victories for white people (seen as default or norm community)
- reinforced by funding proposals which promise too much work for too little money and by funders who expect too much for too little

Where does this show up in our system?

Antidotes to Sense of Urgency:

- realistic workplans;
- leadership which understands that things take longer than anyone expects
- discuss and plan for what it means to set goals of inclusivity and diversity, particularly in terms of time
- learn from past experience how long things take; write realistic funding proposals with realistic time frames
- be clear about how you will make good decisions in an atmosphere of urgency

How might these show up in an anti-racist system?

Defensiveness

- the organizational structure is set up and much energy spent trying to prevent abuse and protect power as it exists rather than to facilitate the best out of each person or to clarify who has power and how they are expected to use it
- because of either/or thinking (see below), criticism of those with power is viewed as threatening and inappropriate (or rude)
- people respond to new or challenging ideas with defensiveness, making it very difficult to raise these ideas
- a lot of energy in the organization is spent trying to make sure that people's feelings aren't getting hurt or working around defensive people
- the defensiveness of people in power creates an oppressive culture

Where does this show up in our system?

Antidotes to Defensiveness:

- understand that structure cannot in and of itself facilitate or prevent abuse
- understand the link between defensiveness and fear (of losing power, losing face, losing comfort, losing privilege)
- work on your own defensiveness
- name defensiveness as a problem when it is one; give people credit for being able to handle more than you think
- discuss the ways in which defensiveness or resistance to new ideas gets in the way of the mission

How might these show up in an anti-racist system?

Quantity Over Quality

- all resources of organization are directed toward producing measurable goals
- things that can be measured are more highly valued than things that cannot, for example numbers of people attending a meeting, newsletter circulation, money spent are valued more than quality of relationships, democratic decision-making, ability to constructively deal with conflict
- little or no value attached to process; if it can't be measured, it has no value
- discomfort with emotion and feelings
- no understanding that when there is a conflict between content (the agenda of the meeting) and process (people's need to be heard or engaged), process will prevail (for example, you may get through the agenda, but if you haven't paid attention to people's need to be heard, the decisions made at the meeting are undermined and/or disregarded)

Where does this show up in our system?

Antidotes to Quantity Over Quality:

- include process or quality goals in your planning
- make sure your organization has a values statement which expresses the ways in which you want to do your work
- make sure this is a living document and that people are using it in their day to day work;
- look for ways to measure process goals (for example if you have a goal of inclusivity, think about ways you can measure whether or not you have achieved that goal)
- learn to recognize those times when you need to get off the agenda in order to address people's underlying concerns

How might these show up in an anti-racist system?

Worship of the Written Word

- if it's not in a memo, it doesn't exist
- the organization does not take into account or value other ways in which information gets shared
- those with strong documentation and writing skills are more highly valued, even in organizations where ability to relate to others is key to the mission
antidotes: take the time to analyze how people inside and outside the organization get and share information; figure out which things need to be written down and come up with alternative ways to document what is happening; work to recognize the contributions and skills that every person brings to the organization (for example, the ability to build relationships with those who are important to the organization's mission)
- only one right way
- the belief there is one right way to do things and once people are introduced to the right way, they will see the light and adopt it
- when they do not adapt or change, then something is wrong with them (the other, those not changing), not with us (those who know the right way)
- similar to the missionary who does not see value in the culture of other communities, sees only value in their beliefs about what is good

Where does this show up in our system?

Antidotes to Worship of the Written Word:

- accept that there are many ways to get to the same goal
- once the group has made a decision about which way will be taken, honor that decision and see what you and the organization will learn from taking that way, even and especially if it is not the way you would have chosen
- work on developing the ability to notice when people do things differently and how those different ways might improve your approach
- look for the tendency for a group or a person to keep pushing the same point over and over out of a belief that there is only one right way and then name it
- when working with communities from a different culture than yours or your organization's, be clear that you have some learning to do about the communities' ways of doing
- never assume that you or your organization know what's best for the community in isolation from meaningful relationships with that community

How might these show up in an anti-racist system?

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How might these show up in an anti-racist system?

Paternalism

- decision-making is clear to those with power and unclear to those without it
- those with power think they are capable of making decisions for and in the interests of those without power
- those with power often don't think it is important or necessary to understand the viewpoint or experience of those for whom they are making decisions
- those without power understand they do not have it and understand who does
- those without power do not really know how decisions get made and who makes what decisions, and yet they are completely familiar with the impact of those decisions on them

Where does this show up in our system?

Antidotes to Paternalism:

- make sure that everyone knows and understands who makes what decisions in the organization;
- make sure everyone knows and understands their level of responsibility and authority in the organization;
- include people who are affected by decisions in the decision-making

How might these show up in an anti-racist system?

Either/Or Thinking

- things are either/or, good/bad, right/wrong, with us/against us
- closely linked to perfectionism in making it difficult to learn from mistakes or accommodate conflict
- no sense that things can be both/and
- results in trying to simplify complex things, for example believing that poverty is simply a result of lack of education
- creates conflict and increases sense of urgency, as people are felt 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

Where does this show up in our system?

Antidotes to Either/Or Thinking:

- notice when people use either/or language and push to come up with more than two alternatives
- notice when people are simplifying complex issues, particularly when the stakes seem high or an urgent decision needs to be made
- slow it down and encourage people to do a deeper analysis
- when people are faced with an urgent decision, take a break and give people some breathing room to think creatively
- avoid making decisions under extreme pressure

How might these show up in an anti-racist system?

Power Hoarding

- little, if any, value around sharing power
- power seen as limited, only so much to go around
- those with power feel threatened when anyone suggests changes in how things should be done in the organization, feel suggestions for change are a reflection on their leadership
- those with power don't see themselves as hoarding power or as feeling threatened
- those with power assume they have the best interests of the organization at heart and assume those wanting change are ill-informed (stupid), emotional, inexperienced

Where does this show up in our system?

Antidotes to Power Hoarding:

- include power sharing in your organization's values statement;
- discuss what good leadership looks like and make sure people understand that a good leader develops the power and skills of others;
- understand that change is inevitable and challenges to your leadership can be healthy and productive;
- make sure the organization is focused on the mission

How might these show up in an anti-racist system?

Fear of Open Conflict

- people in power are scared of conflict and try to ignore it or run from it
- when someone raises an issue that causes discomfort, the response is to blame the person for raising the issue rather than to look at the issue which is actually causing the problem
- emphasis on being polite
- equating the raising of difficult issues with being impolite, rude, or out of line

Where does this show up in our system?

Antidotes to Fear of Open Conflict :

- role play ways to handle conflict before conflict happens;
- distinguish between being polite and raising hard issues
- don't require those who raise hard issues to raise them in acceptable ways, especially if you are using the ways in which issues are raised as an excuse not to address the issues being raised
- once a conflict is resolved, take the opportunity to revisit it and see how it might have been handled differently

How might these show up in an anti-racist system?

Individualism

- little experience or comfort working as part of a team
- people in organization believe they are responsible for solving problems alone
- accountability, if any, goes up and down, not sideways to peers or to those the organization is set up to serve
- desire for individual recognition and credit
- leads to isolation
- competition more highly valued than cooperation and where cooperation is valued, little time or resources devoted to developing skills in how to cooperate
- creates a lack of accountability, as the organization values those who can get things done on their own without needing supervision or guidance antidotes: include teamwork as an important value in your values statement; make sure the organization is working towards shared goals and people understand how working together will improve performance; evaluate people's ability to work in a team as well as their ability to get the job done; make sure that credit is given to all those who participate in an effort, not just the leaders or most public person; make people accountable as a group rather than as individuals; create a culture where people bring problems to the group; use staff meetings as a place to solve problems, not just a place to report activities
- i'm the only one
- connected to individualism, the belief that if something is going to get done right, I have to do it
- little or no ability to delegate work to others

Where does this show up in our system?

Antidotes to Individualism

- evaluate people based on their ability to delegate to others
- evaluate people based on their ability to work as part of a team to accomplish shared goals

How might these show up in an anti-racist system?

Progress is Bigger, More

- observed in systems of accountability and ways we determine success
- progress is an organization which expands (adds staff, adds projects) or develops the ability to serve more people (regardless of how well they are serving them)
- gives no value, not even negative value, to its cost, for example, increased accountability to funders as the budget grows, ways in which those we serve may be exploited, excluded, or underserved as we focus on how many we are serving instead of quality of service or values created by the ways in which we serve

Where does this show up in our system?

Antidotes to Progress is Bigger, More:

- create Seventh Generation thinking by asking how the actions of the group now will affect people seven generations from now
- make sure that any cost/benefit analysis includes all the costs, not just the financial ones, for example the cost in morale, the cost in credibility, the cost in the use of resources
- include process goals in your planning, for example make sure that your goals speak to how you want to do your work, not just what you want to do
- ask those you work with and for to evaluate your performance

How might these show up in an anti-racist system?

Objectivity

- the belief that there is such a thing as being objective
- the belief that emotions are inherently destructive, irrational, and should not play a role in decision-making or group process
- invalidating people who show emotion
- requiring people to think in a linear fashion and ignoring or invalidating those who think in other ways
- impatience with any thinking that does not appear logical to those with power

Where does this show up in our system?

Antidotes:

- realize that everybody has a world view and that everybody's world view affects the way they understand things
- realize this means you too; push yourself to sit with discomfort when people are expressing themselves in ways which are not familiar to you
- assume that everybody has a valid point and your job is to understand what that point is

How might these show up in an anti-racist system?

Right to Comfort

- the belief that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort (another aspect of valuing logic over emotion)
- scapegoating those who cause discomfort
- equating individual acts of unfairness against white people with systemic racism which daily targets people of color

Where does this show up in our system?

Antidotes to Right to Comfort

- understand that discomfort is at the root of all growth and learning
- welcome it as much as you can
- 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
- don't take everything personally

How might these show up in an anti-racist system?

Only One Right Way

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How might these show up in an anti-racist system?

Our Next Right Action: Unity Church began exploring Our Next Right Action shortly after the killing of George Floyd. “Antiracism Literacy Partners” is one of several “next right actions.” Further education, advocacy, and lifestyle changes that shift our awareness and privilege are part of how we can sustain antiracism as a lifelong commitment. What next right actions might you take next?

For More Information

From “Talking About Race,” National Museum of African American History & Culture: Being Antiracist

To create an equal society, we must commit to making unbiased choices and being antiracist in all aspects of our lives.

Race does not biologically exist, yet how we identify with race is so powerful, it influences our experiences and shapes our lives. In a society that privileges white people and whiteness, racist ideas are considered normal throughout our media, culture, social systems, and institutions. Historically, racist views justified the unfair treatment and oppression of people of color (including enslavement, segregation, internment, etc.). We can be led to believe that racism is only about individual mindsets and actions, yet racist policies also contribute to our polarization. While individual choices are damaging, racist ideas in policy have a wide-spread impact by threatening the equity of our systems and the fairness of our institutions. To create an equal society, we must commit to making unbiased choices and being antiracist in all aspects of our lives.

Being antiracist is fighting against racism. Racism takes several forms and works most often in tandem with at least one other form to reinforce racist ideas, behavior, and policy. Types of racism are:

- **Individual racism** refers to the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of individuals that support or perpetuate racism in conscious and unconscious ways. The U.S. cultural narrative about racism typically focuses on individual racism and fails to recognize systemic racism.
Examples include believing in the superiority of white people, not hiring a person of color because “something doesn’t feel right,” or telling a racist joke.
- **Interpersonal racism** occurs between individuals. These are public expressions of racism, often involving slurs, biases, or hateful words or actions.
- **Institutional racism** occurs in an organization. These are discriminatory treatments, unfair policies, or biased practices based on race that result in inequitable outcomes for whites over people of color and extend considerably beyond prejudice. These institutional policies often never mention any racial group, but the intent is to create advantages.
Example: A school system where students of color are more frequently distributed into the most crowded classrooms and underfunded schools and out of the higher-resourced schools.
- **Structural racism** is the overarching system of racial bias across institutions and society. These systems give privileges to white people resulting in disadvantages to people of color.
Example: Stereotypes of people of color as criminals in mainstream movies and media.

No one is born racist or antiracist; these result from the choices we make. Being antiracist results from a conscious decision to make frequent, consistent, equitable choices daily. These choices require ongoing self-awareness and self-reflection as we move through life. In the absence of making antiracist choices, we (un)consciously uphold aspects of white supremacy, white-dominant culture, and unequal institutions and society. Being racist or antiracist is not about who you *are*; it is about what you *do*.

Being Antiracist at the Individual and Interpersonal Level

When we choose to be antiracist, we become actively conscious about race and racism *and* take actions to end racial inequities in our daily lives. Being antiracist is believing that racism is everyone’s problem, and we all have a role to play in stopping it. In “[The Racial Healing Handbook](#),” Dr. Anneliese A. Singh reminds us of the importance of being purposeful: “You need the intentional mindset of *Yep, this racism thing is everyone’s problem-including mine, and I’m going to do something about it.*”

Being antiracist is different for white people than it is for people of color. For white people, being antiracist evolves with their racial identity development. They must acknowledge and understand their privilege, work to

change their internalized racism, and interrupt racism when they see it. For people of color, it means recognizing how race and racism have been internalized, and whether it has been applied to other people of color.

All racial groups struggle under white supremacy. People of color groups are not always united in solidarity. People of color can act by challenging internalized white supremacy and interrupting patterns of prejudice against other racial groups. For everyone, it is an ongoing practice and process.

Accessed Sept 1, 2020: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/being-antiracist>

Unity Church-Unitarian Values, Mission, and Ends

Values

Unity Church-Unitarian honors the ambiguity and uncertainty in the search for greater truth, meaning, and equity. In all we do, we strive to embody:

- Wonder
- Open-hearted engagement
- Courageous action

Mission

Unity Church-Unitarian fosters transformation through a free and inclusive religious community that encourages lives of integrity, service, and joy.

Ends Statements 2018-2023

Working within ourselves, among our church community, and beyond in the larger world, we the people of Unity Church-Unitarian:

- Create a multicultural spiritual home built on authentic relationships.
- Ground ourselves in personal practice and communal worship that grows our capacity for wonder and spiritual deepening.
- Articulate our Unitarian Universalist faith identity, teach it to our children, share it with others, and live it courageously in the world.
- Know each other in all our fullness and create an ever-widening circle of belonging for all people.
- Generously give and openly receive compassionate care in times of joy, sorrow, and transition.
- Discover and pursue our individual and collective work to advance justice, wholeness, and equity for people, our Earth, and all life on it.
- Create brave space for racial healing and dismantling dominant culture.
- Sustain and steward the church and our larger Unitarian Universalist movement for the future.

Accessed 8.29.20: <https://www.unityunitarian.org/values-mission-ends.html>

Covenants adapted from UU Small Group Ministry Network, accessed 8.29.20:

<http://www.smallgroupministry.net/public/covenants.html>