

Session two: The politics of language

- Goals:**
- ★ to clarify the terms and concepts related to organizing and anti-oppression work that are used in this workbook.
 - ★ to understand and challenge these working definitions
 - ★ to raise consciousness about the complexity of concepts related to diversity
 - ★ to identify areas of consensus and disagreement about the terms that affect organizing against "isms"

Materials: WOVP Concepts handout (or write on pad or blackboard)

Time: approximately 1 hour

Some thoughts about concepts

The pages labeled "WOVP Concepts" (pages 28-31) summarize our collective thinking about some concepts related to diversity and the "isms." We think of these ideas as evolving concepts, not rigid definitions. They can serve to ground discussion and to provide context for the sessions in this workbook. The Notes to Facilitator, pages 32-35, provide some additional background information for those words followed by asterisks.

Why discuss concepts?

People often have strong feelings about the terms relating to ethnic and cultural groups in this society. In a group, the emotions that are brought up are sometimes expressed by silence or confusion, fear of saying the wrong thing, or sometimes by excited or angry disagreements. These emotions are themselves a sign that the issues are important. We believe it is imperative to confront this language to understand the implications of what we, and others, say. Discussing these definitions is an opportunity to clarify misunderstandings and to raise consciousness about the underlying issues, even if these discussions don't end in consensus and we still don't agree about the meanings of terms.

Many of these are not neutral words and phrases. These words have different histories and meanings depending on where and when and by whom they are used. They have been socially constructed, like swearing and namecalling, to hurt and control people. Sometimes groups of people reclaim "hurting" words to take control of them and transform their meanings. Remember also that definitions change and often relate to what is happening in the world, in your life, or in your organization. (For example, see the reprinted excerpt by Barbara Joseph on page 5_.) We need to be aware of these word-histories so that we know what we are saying and how other people may interpret its meaning. Using words that have with more than one implication or ambiguous meanings can cause unintended misunderstandings and

divisions.

Thinking about these words and their implications is also a way to continue to raise our consciousnesses, by making the words we use more of a reflection of the humanity we would like to express to one another.

Suggested exercises

Some members of WOVP believe that the main use of these concepts is to express our understanding of these terms to the users of this workbook. Other members believe that concepts could be explored in exercises to sensitize a group to the implications of the politics of language. You, the facilitator, will decide what approach is most relevant to your group. Here are some options:

A: Copy the pages labeled "WOVP Concepts" and ask the group to read them. (In the meanwhile, you might review the "Notes for Facilitators on Concepts" to bring up your own points.) Then read each term out loud, and discuss your group's questions, disagreements or comments.

B: Chose 5-10 words that are relevant to the issues or background of your group. Read the definitions to the group, and discuss any questions or disagreements they may have. Then break up into smaller groups, and ask each group to discuss:

- In what ways are you affected by these terms?
- How can you incorporate your new understanding into your work?
- What are some examples of the use of these terms in your organization or community?

C: Ask the group to read through all the concepts. Then ask if they found any definitions difficult to understand or if there were any they disagreed with. List these contentious or confusing terms on the board or pad. Choose about 10 words, and break up into small groups to discuss these disagreements. Present some of the information from your own knowledge and the facilitator's notes as you listen to the groups' discussions.

D: Some words that are similar have different and sometimes hurtful implications. In large or small groups, discuss examples like the ones below, referring to the facilitator's notes to explore what are the differences between:

- homophobia/heterosexism
- disabled/differently abled/...
- Black/Negro/African/African American...
- woman/girl/...

It is a good idea to review the group's understanding of the concepts again at the end of the training. Question to ask include:

- How have your ideas and understandings changed about these concepts?
- How will you use them differently in the future?

→ How will or can you educate others about their usage and implications?

WOVP concepts

Because language changes and its use may vary depending on the cultural context, and can be controversial, we are providing a list of concepts that represent the thinking of the WOVP. Please note that these definitions are from the perspective of the United States. Definitions in other parts of the world may vary. (Astericks mean that more information can be found on the Notes for Facilitators.)

anti-racism work goes beyond multiculturalism or diversity to confront issues of power and causes of inequality in society. "This is where a person or group actively participates in eliminating racism on an individual, organizational and societal level"¹

anti-Semitism* is the prejudice and discrimination which has often led to violence against people and property based on their Jewish heritage. In its extreme forms, it led to the forced ghettoization of Jews in Europe for many centuries and the holocaust in Nazi Germany.

culture* has been defined in many ways. One definition is, a "way of viewing and practicing life" which is reflected in their common beliefs, values, interests, experiences, language or communication styles, dress, or other behavior."²

differently abled/physically challenged/disabled/handicapped are the terms used historically to describe people who have different physical or mental abilities. (Note: "handicapped" is not a preferred term among people with disabilities.)

ethnicity is the "distinction among people based on region or nation of origin, religion, and/or language." ² What people find important about their ethnic heritage may change, as may its importance in relation to other aspects of their identity.

ethno-violence* refers to violent acts against people based on assumed ethnicity and what people assume are related characteristics.

feminism* is an analysis of sexism, and an anti-sexist perspective that addresses the imbalance of power between men and women.¹ Feminism doesn't assume that all women are the same, but acknowledges the diversity of women's lives and supports a woman's right to define her own life.

feminist organizing The feminist organizing model is based on women's contributions, functions, roles and experiences and is derived from their strengths. It also recognizes the limitations of their socially ascribed roles and the nature of their oppression. A feminist perspective means that women can and should share leadership and that the organizing process must empower women and build community. (See Women on the Advance about feminism and organizing.)

gender refers to whether or not someone is male or female. (The terms gender and sex are often used interchangeably but gender is more accurate.)

heterosexism is the system of oppression of lesbians and gay men based on homophobia. (Homophobia is the irrational fear of homosexuality and the hatred, disgust and prejudice that fear brings.) Heterosexism is the institutional response which assumes that all people are heterosexual and therefore excludes the needs, concerns and life experience of lesbians and gay men.³

identity means the ways one defines oneself "based on race, national origin, language, religion, sexual orientation, professional association or union, politics, or any other voluntary or involuntary marker [characteristic]."²

identity politics* refers to the idea that a person's ethnic or other identities have political, social and economic implications. Organizing based on an identity may reflect pride in one's heritage or community, be a defense against oppression by institutions or other groups in society, and a way to gain control over one's own life. It can also be a way of emphasizing differences and divisions over shared conditions, concerns and characteristics.

multiculturalism/diversity* recognizes the existence of a variety of cultures or ways of living and seeing the world, which may be based on ethnicity, color, sexual orientation and other differences in people's experiences. A multicultural approach emphasizes that we, as individuals, and our organizations and communities benefit from including people with a diversity of perspectives and experiences.

oppression occurs when a dominant group has the power to impose its way on a less powerful group in society, or has the power to define the world in terms of its own interests and ignore the perspectives of those with less power.

people of color is a commonly-used term to define people of African, Arab, Asian/Pacific Islanders, Latina/Latino and Native American descent. (Note that not everyone from these cultures use this term to define themselves.)¹

prejudice is when an unfavorable opinion or feeling is formed about a group of people without adequate knowledge, or an irrational hostile attitude towards an individual or group because of assumed characteristics.⁴ Anyone from any "racial" or ethnic group can be prejudiced.

"race" is most commonly used to identify a person's skin color or ethnicity. Because of its use historically, "race" is a contentious and complicated term. For example, many people believe that racism exists but "race" does not; it is a social construction. This is why we always use quote marks around the word "race" in this workbook.

racesexism refers to the reality that racism and sexism together have been institutionalized in the United States, though their effects are not necessarily additive. For example, the experiences of Black women are not the same as the experiences of white women or Black men.

racism* is the institutionalized and systemic oppression of people of color. Institutional racism is enforced by the system of power in which "racial" inequality is embedded in government, the economic system, the legal system, the educational system, organized religion, and the media. Racism negatively affects the life-chances of people of color in every area including access to jobs, housing, education and health care. Institutional racism can be reinforced by individual acts of bigotry, prejudice and discrimination, but has many more far reaching consequences than simply "how people treat each other". Racism is prejudice coupled with the power to enforce the prejudice.⁵

sexism* refers to attitudes, action or institutional structure which makes a person or group subordinate because of their gender, and also occurs when people's social roles are defined by gender. It is also the exploitation of women, individually or as a group, by men.⁶ Sexism has had different characteristics and meanings in different cultures and time periods. A **sexist** is someone who uses ideas about the limits and implications of female reproductive anatomy to determine women's capacities, proper roles, and relationships to other people. To a sexist, men's perspectives of the work are "normal", while women's perspectives are considered unimportant or abnormal.

sexual orientation or identity* refers to whether a person is bisexual, gay, heterosexual, lesbian or transgender (?). Sexual orientation has also been referred to as sexual preference.

stereotype is a conventional and often oversimplified conception or belief about a person, group, event or issue which is considered conform to an unvarying pattern.⁷ Prejudices are often based on stereotypes.

white privilege* refers to the economic, political and societal benefits that white people [people of European descent] receive as a result of systemic oppression and discrimination of people of color, in housing, education, judicial system, in physical safety, and media images.¹

white supremacy* is the belief that "whites" are better than people of color.

Sources:

1. Ferguson, Roth and Walber, 1992.
2. Simons, 1989, in PCPS: 4

3. Homophobia and Heterosexism, M. Smith.
4. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1981.
5. Adapted by Barbara Smith
6. Fact Sheet on Institutional Sexism, compiled by the Council on Interracial Books for Children, quoted in Rothnberg; 20-1).
7. American Heritage Dictionary 1979.

Notes for the facilitator about concepts

Following are some additional ideas and thoughts on the concepts introduced above that may be useful to bring up in your group's discussions. Words people use to describe themselves often have moral, social and political implications, and consequently are the focus of debate. We encourage you to refer to the Resources at the end of the workbook and the Women Organizers resource collection for further reading on these issues.

anti-Semitism Not all anti-Semitism is as extreme or obvious as Nazism or neo-nazi vandalism that has increasingly occurred in Jewish synagogues and cemeteries in many parts of the United States. Stereotypes about Jews are part of anti-Semitism. Some people distinguish between anti-Semitism (discrimination against Jews), and opposition to Zionism (the idea and existence of Israel as a Jewish state), while other people do not accept this distinction.

culture refers to one or more of the following things: the ways people think, their beliefs and values, language or dialect; things people make or do, like food, dress, music, family relationships, or styles of problem-solving. Anthropologists consider the ways people organize their social lives (family, friend and work networks), economic survival, cultural expression and political involvement all part of culture. (see Session Six, Celebrating Ourselves and Our Work).

However, making the assumption that all members of a particular group like the same things, act the same way, etc. is stereotyping. People sharing the same culture can be as different from each other as people from different cultures. Also, people often share or participate in more than one culture at different times or in different contexts; for example with parents or relatives, at work, and with friends. Cultures change: we know that how we live in the United States today is different than even 20 years ago; the same is true for Nigerian, Japanese, and Native American cultures.

ethno-violence Nationalist violence is based on the belief in pure ethnic heritage that some ethnicities or nationalities are better than others, should be dominant, or must avenge recent or past wrongs by other ethnic or national groups. Recent examples of ethno-violence can be seen in attacks by German and French youth against North African and Turkish immigrant workers; by Serbs against Bosnians, in the former Yugoslavia; in several areas of the former Soviet Union and in Rwanda in Africa.

feminism has a long history, with many debates and changes in emphasis and understanding. The feminist women's movement since the 1960s (often referred to as "second wave feminism") has sought to obtain equal rights and treatment of women economically, politically, and socially: for example, the right to work in any job for which she is qualified, and receive equal pay for equal work, the right to choose whether or not to have children. Using the slogan "the personal is political" feminists have raised issues such as child care, equitable divorce and child support payments, and spousal abuse. However, this primarily "white" feminism has been criticized for

ignoring the experiences, knowledge, contributions and needs of women of color. In recent years white feminists have become more sensitive to their own racism and ethnocentrism.

identity politics There is a difference between being stereotyped by someone else, and self-identifying - labelling oneself with a group identity. What people choose to call themselves may differ at any one time, as well as historically. For example, today some people prefer to be called "African American" while others prefer to be called "Black." In the 1950s, "Negro" was considered by many to be more respectful than "Black" or "colored." The term one prefers may also depend on the particular context. For example, the same person may be alternatively identified as Latina, Puerto Rican, Hispanic, American Indian or Native American, or simply as a woman: one can't choose another person's identity for them.

multi-culturalism and diversity refer to the fact that there are a variety of cultures and ways of seeing the world, based on ethnicity, color, sexual orientation and other differences in people's experiences or backgrounds. A multi-cultural approach emphasizes that we as individuals, and our organizations, benefit from including people with this diversity of perspectives and experiences. Techniques using this perspective focus on prejudice reduction and ways of managing differences in organizational work and community life.

"race" has at least two different meanings today: it is used as a biological and genetic concept, and as a means to label and oppress people. As a biological concept, most anthropologists and biologists agree that "racial" categories are not clearly defined and that "race" as used in popular debate has little scientific basis, and little utility. In biology, the occurrence of traits that are said to distinguish "races" are less frequent than those that are shared. Also the word has had different meanings. Until the 1950s, "race" and "nation" were often used interchangeably (for example, people used to refer to the Irish "race.") In much of Latin America, a family might have children labelled with several "racial" classifications. So the word is neither scientifically or etymologically meaningful.

As a means of oppression, the concept of race has been used over several centuries to kill, enslave, shorten the life-spans, and limit the opportunities of people based on the color of their skin. There is no doubt that "race" is real in this sense.

At the same time, many people of African descent celebrate their heritage and shared culture, as African Americans, as Africans, and as members of an African diaspora. In this way, "race" is similar to ethnicity, with the crucial difference of the shared experience of racism.

racism is institutional while prejudice is individual. Institutions maintain racism by their everyday policies and practices which provide resources and services and enforce their rules in ways that are unfair. "Most of this country's institutions were set up by privileged white men determined from the very beginning to maintain their privileges and benefits and profit from unpaid labor from and taking of land." 1

DiLapi, Gay and Mitchell provide a useful table showing the differences between individual and institutional racism:

<u>individual</u>	<u>institutional</u>
one on one	group on group
intentional	unintentional
overt	covert
observable	subtle
does harm or injury	"business as usual"
public condemnation	public sanction

sexism was institutionalized throughout much of the 19th century in laws and rulings that prevented women from owning property, serving on juries, holding office, or serves as legal guardians for own children.³ Today's effects can be seen both in the differences in access to and control of decision making and resources between men and women, and in attitudes about women's and men's proper roles in society.

stereotype Stereotypes function like filters or frames that prevent you from seeing what you don't want to see, especially things that might cause you to change your mind or make the world seem less predictable. To avoid stereotypes, look for details, accept other people's individuality and be willing to be change your mind based on new information. ⁴

white supremacy The roots of white supremacy are in the construction of the global division of power and resources that began with European exploration and conquest of the Americas as well India, Africa and East Asia in the 15th century. white supremacy was also part of the founding of the United States, a built-in contradiction to U.S. ideals of freedom, equality and self-representation. For example, it was institutionalized in the U.S. constitution with "three fifths compromise" that accepted slavery, and counted enslaved people as three fifths of free persons, for the purpose of allotting representatives and apportioning taxes. ⁵

The ideas and effects of white supremacy survive today not only in extreme racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan or Aryan Resistance, but also in the institutional structures that are still controlled by whites. It can also be seen in the continuity of unequal opportunities and facilities for education, health care, employment, housing, and other social needs. White supremacy also persists in cultural assumptions such as in ways of speaking or in art forms, in defining what valued, or what is normal, what is valued what is exceptional versus what is typical behavior.

Sources:

1. Council on Interracial Books for Children, Understanding Institutional Racism filmstrip script, produced with the assistance of the Division of Life and Mission of the American Lutheran Church and the Institution for Education in Peace and Justice, quoted in Willis, p)
2. from "Challenging Racism and Misogyny" Elena di Lapi, Gloria Gay and Joann Mitchell in Third Women's Policy Research Conference Proceedings, 1992.
- 3 (Rothenberg: 9)
- 4 (Andre in Rothenberg,; 257-262)
- 5 (Article 1, Section, 2, changed by the 14th Amendment in 1868)

