

Distancing Behaviors

Many of us use distancing behaviors- things that separate us from the issues at hand, in an effort to avoid dealing with a very painful subject such as racism. This sheet includes some of those behaviors that we often use against each other to the detriment of dealing with racism.

1. Definitions Game: Requests for clear, absolute definitions of racism or related terms. Usually leads to involved discussion. Not to be confused with actual need to clarify differences among concepts like racism, discrimination, prejudice, etc.
2. Where are the People of Color: Assuming/insisting that in order to make progress combating personal racism we must be in a discussion with people of color. Combined with this is the idea that there are no or few third world people in a given community, that racism isn't a problem. (In fact, racism may be such a great problem that few Third World people can stand to live there.)
3. Racism isn't the only problem: Assuming/insisting that racism is only a facet of a larger problem, or that we can't just deal with it, we have to talk about how we are hurt too etc. while it is true that there are other oppressions, this is often a resistance to dealing with and focusing on racism.
4. Being an Expert: Being an expert on the experience of another race or culture and on how to deal with racism, the "I'm the okay white person in the group" distinction. This leads to intellectualizing and not dealing with the ongoing need to change.
5. Instant solutions: Oversimplification by choosing and pushing single solutions to racism may be a kind of avoidance and might, even if sincere, be unproductive because it is not looking deep enough.
6. Find the Racist: Rather than acknowledge that we all are racist by socialization and all white people benefit from racism, including oneself, it can be easy to focus on the person in the group who may be more open about her racism, or have thought the least about it. Regardless of how much we have done, we still have more to learn.
7. After I...: Focusing on all things that prevent oneself from acting right now to challenge racism. It will be done when...(some magic occurrence).
8. Geography: Focusing on places with the reputation for racism, rather than looking to discover how racism is affecting your own community. For instance, in the sixties, everyone thought the racism only existed in the South, now many of us think

From "Distancing Behaviors Among White Groups Dealing with Racism," Jim Elder and Bruce Irons.

that it only exists in Boston or in a place where there is a visible third world presence. This is not necessarily true. In a white dominated society, there is racism everywhere.

9. You've come a long way...: Focusing on what changes have or may have occurred since people of color began the recent struggle for civil rights then liberation, as though to suggest that they should be satisfied. Though we should acknowledge victories have been won, it is important not to discount what is left to be done.

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