

Why an Anti-Racism Seminar for White People?

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Doing Our Own Work is an intensive seminar for white people who seek to deepen their commitment to confronting white privilege and challenging racism in all its forms. It is our experience and conviction that those of us who are white need to "do our own work" – educating ourselves, holding each other accountable, growing beyond shame and guilt, practicing the skills of interrupting racism, and demonstrating good faith as we seek to become more effective anti-racist allies.

Doing Our Own Work was begun in response to people of color who said they were weary of white people turning to them -- expecting to be educated about racism or advised what to do when racist words, behaviors, or policies were at play. As one person stated, "What happens when people of color are not in the room? How are those of you who are white holding each other accountable? Racism is a white problem and it's long past time for you all to do your own work!"

To understand what it means to be white in America and break the silences that surround it requires arduous, persistent, and soul-stretching work. Sadly, too many of us who are white stop short of that deep work. Assuming that our good intentions and eagerness to help are enough, we come into multiracial gatherings or organizations expecting to be liked and trusted. But trust isn't something we are granted simply because we showed up. Trust has to be earned, again and again. *Doing Our Own Work* challenges white people to engage in the deep work of examining white supremacy and white privilege, so that we might become trust-worthy allies in the struggle to dismantle racism.

Our hope is that *Doing Our Own Work* can help spare people of color the repetitious and often hurtful patterns that many white people go through as they begin to perceive racism. Expressions of shock, disbelief, and denial are frequently uttered by white people as they confront the depth of racism. Such expressions can be toxic for people of color. It is our hope that *Doing Our Own Work* can absorb some of that toxicity as white people challenge one another to recognize the racist impact our words can have.

Another manifestation of breaking through denial is the sense of shame and guilt that can consume white people. While shame and guilt are not the same, both can surface in white people as they wake up to the horrors of racism. Neither is particularly useful to people of color because both have the effect of turning the spotlight on white people once again. It is our conviction that it is not possible for white people to go *around* shame and guilt, but it is possible to move *through* those feelings into something deeper and more productive. The critical question is what we do with those feelings and the discoveries that birthed them. As Audre Lorde said, "If [guilt] leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge."⁸

Practicing the skills of interrupting racism is a critically important activity in the *Doing Our Own Work* seminar. Too often, white people fail to challenge their white colleagues, friends, and family members. This is another realm in which white people too often look to people of color to name the offense and intervene. The reasons for the silence can stem from many sources: fear of speaking up, failure to recognize the offense, inability to formulate an adequate response, or fear of doing more harm than good. Throughout the seminar, we provide opportunities for participants to brainstorm difficult scenarios, analyze how racism is at work in those scenarios, and then role play strategies for creative and constructive interventions.

Alongside the opportunities that *Doing Our Own Work* provides are the dangers inherent in an all-white group. Primary among these is the fact that privilege can be invisible to those of us who hold it. Because our Eurocentric or “white” customs and norms are not transparent to us, a seminar for only white people can implicitly “normalize” certain ways of confronting racism. Furthermore, what we as white people may prioritize as the important issues in confronting racism may be different from what people of color might prioritize.

Another danger is that a seminar for white people could reinforce racial insularity. Many white people live in predominantly white worlds. An all-white seminar could suggest to white people that they can be anti-racist allies *without* having to be in real-life relationships with people of color.

The limitations of such a seminar cannot be completely eliminated. Nevertheless, we are committed to being vigilant about the pitfalls and dangers. When unhealthy patterns and behaviors emerge, we address them openly and candidly. Throughout the seminar, we emphasize that white people cannot become effective anti-racist allies unless we are in ongoing, accountable relationships with people of color. We speak often about the dangers of acting unilaterally, warning participants that developing anti-racist strategies and agendas without being in conversation and relationship with people of color can do more harm than good. Therefore, we encourage *Doing Our Own Work* participants to become engaged in grassroots anti-racist organizations in their communities led by people of color.

A critical element in the design and facilitation of *Doing Our Own Work* seminars is ongoing consultation with anti-racist educators and activists of color.

The *Doing Our Own Work* is designed as a supplement to, not a substitute for, contexts where people of diverse races discuss and strategize together how racism can be challenged and dismantled. Nothing can take the place of face-to-face contact, dialogue, and collaboration between people of different races.