

GRASSROOTS POLICY PROJECT

Session Guide: Intersections of Race, Class and Gender

[Progressives must] *move those threatened from a “race versus class” reality toward a “race and class” one. A progressive politics, therefore, must include both race and class as critical points of inclusion, not as opposing or competing structures, but as multiple constitutive elements of American life and politics.*

– John Powell, “Race and Class in Progressive Politics” (Kirwan Institute)

Introduction

Bridging the race, class and gender divides is a tall order — and a critical challenge for our movements. It requires that we dedicate time and space for serious analysis, open conversations, internal struggle and deliberate action. It requires that we carefully explore the centrality of race in shaping the history of this country and its institutions, the legacy of slavery and imperialism, and the persistence of ideas around white supremacy and cultural dominance. Likewise, we need ways of examining the long history of class exploitation and the often hidden injuries of class in our society. We must seek ways of talking about the intersections of race and class that lift up our similarities while honoring our differences. Another axis of oppression in society is gender. Gender inequalities work with and reinforce racism and class oppression. Together, they are a powerful combination that is manifest in all of our social institutions and interactions.

Within our movements, race, class and gender provide opportunities for organizing around identities, for building a sense of solidarity and for developing shared analysis of social conditions and strategies for social change. At the same time, race, class and gender experiences are points of division, especially when we ignore their roles and significance for who we are, what we bring to the struggle and how our own organizations may reflect mainstream power dynamics that are built around race, class and gender oppression.

Purpose of the Session and Activities

This session was developed out of a need to explore a set of challenging questions about the state of the progressive movement and in the particular the divides within it. These questions included: Who is the “WE” of the progressive movement? Who sees themselves as part of that “we” and who currently does not? What gets in the way? How does this affect our movements? What needs to happen to get beyond that division?

These questions are central to the work of building progressive power and they speak to the need to find a way to bridge many divides. There are sharp and long-standing divisions around class and race (as well as other power differentials) that undermine not only our society as a whole, but also our ability as progressive organizations to build a unified movement that stands for all of our advancement. We cannot convince or persuade people to stand together if there is no shared understanding of the basis of that unity and what threatens to pull us apart, and keep us competing with each other.

If we are serious about building a broad and united progressive movement, we need to address the divides, disconnections and power relations that keep us from coming together. The Grassroots Policy Project developed this session and exercises as a tool for helping organizations deepen their understanding of these divides and the different forms of structural oppression that underlie and foster them. We drew on the writings of Iris Marion Young and our own research and fieldwork. Please see our summary of Iris Young’s “Five Faces of Oppression,” attached.

We believe that a true progressive “we” can only emerge from a sense of common interest that acknowledges our complex realities and a commitment to mutual advancement. The exercises included in this session design help groups move into a deeper analysis of power and oppression, gain clarity about how the divides of race, class and gender are used by the Right, and also exist in our own progressive work and organizations. The goal is to build a shared understanding of how these realities shape

and distort our ability to find and act on common cause and begin exploring paths for new thinking, collaborative relationships and a hopeful and alternative vision of a our collective future.

A Structural Analysis of Oppression

Generally racism, sexism and class oppression are understood in terms of personal attitudes (e.g. *he is racist*). And that is the focus of much of the anti-racism and undoing racism training with which organizations are familiar. This type of training is an important tool in deepening people's understanding of their own internalization of oppression and oppressive beliefs about power.

This session is concerned with a structural analysis of oppression — those divisions that are embedded in our society and day-to-day life, and that are “naturalized” by their ordinariness. A structural analysis allows us to unmask the ways in which these divisions reflect and reinforce existing power relations in society. It also shifts the focus from changes in personal attitude to the need for structural change. This creates a greater demand for organizational and institutional allies and responsibility for justice rather than just “diversity.”

Defining structural oppression

A person lives within structures of domination and oppression if other groups have the power to determine her actions. Individuals experience oppressive conditions because they are part of a group that is defined on the basis of shared characteristics such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, age, ability, etc. These major social groups have specific attributes, stereotypes and norms associated with them. Individual membership in these groups is not necessarily voluntary. It is not necessarily acknowledged, either.

The activities in our session are built around a ‘matrix’ that helps participants explore the intersections of race, class and gender with five dimensions of oppression. A completed matrix is attached. Participants bring their own experiences as individuals as well as social change activists and members of progressive organizations and networks. The matrix is intended to surface and engage a range of experiences and perspectives. At the same time it is grounded in GPP's larger understandings of power, strategy and social change, and is built around a set of related assertions that are the starting point for the exercises.

Power and Oppression

The way we understand oppression is deeply related to the way we understand power.

The Grassroots Policy Project's approach to movement strategy rests on a framework called the *three faces of power*. The three faces are: 1) direct political involvement, in the most visible arenas where decisions are made: legislatures, courts, and government agencies; 2) political infrastructure, or networks of interests and constituencies that are able to shape and constrain what gets onto the political agenda and what is kept off of it; and 3) worldview, which refers to the power to shape political meaning through manipulation of beliefs, popular culture, media, history, myths, etc. When it comes to maintaining existing power relations, this is the least visible and most pernicious face of power because it reinforces people's sense of powerlessness. As people internalize the notion that the way things are is the only way things can be and/or that it's every person for themselves, they are less likely to get involved in social action or politics.

All three faces work together: we have power in the first face when we are able to win campaigns and get people elected and appointed. In order to gain power in the first face, we need organization (2nd face) and compelling ideas that tap people's deepest aspirations and that expand their sense of what is possible so that they get involved in social action. We need the power of ideas in order to hold together our networks and infrastructure, and we need the infrastructure to help put our ideas out into the public discourse on a footing where they compete with mainstream and conservative ideas. And to complete the circle, we need to be active in immediate campaigns to connect with people, to build organizations, and to struggle around worldview.

Defining ‘worldview’

Worldview is a particularly relevant for our approach to oppression and the fight for race, gender and economic justice. We begin with a few key ideas:

- People's ideas and beliefs (worldview) about race, class and gender are shaped by their lived experience as well as the ideas and beliefs to which they are exposed through their family, education, faith tradition, community, dominant culture, etc.
- Beliefs and ideas (and worldview) can evolve and change
- Worldview is a key arena of struggle which we can not afford to ignore if we want to a broad progressive movement
- We (progressives) can and must actively engage and intervene around the ideas and beliefs (worldview) about race, class and gender with our members and the larger public

While people have lived experiences of powerlessness, exploitation and marginalization, as workers, as people of color, as new immigrants, as women, as religious and gender minorities, in our culture there is little to no public conversation that offers a structural analysis to explain these experiences. In its absence people make sense of their experience the best they can, but are generally left angry, isolated, fearful, scape-goated/ scape-goating, and/or resigned to the 'way things are.' In addition, without collective analysis of the structural nature of oppression and of racism, it is difficult for people to see what is positive and potentially transformational about their identities, experiences and of difference in general.

These experiences also shape our understanding of the world around us, and of ourselves in that world. Without a structural analysis (or a progressive one) the dominant worldview offers the only explanation for our experiences with its emphasis on individualism, scarcity, and support of status quo power relations. These divisions also create enormous distrust and fear that others will not see or appreciate the depth of struggle faced by a specific group or will reinforce their experience of powerlessness and injustice.

This is the backdrop against which we do our organizing work. We must acknowledge its impact on us and our members and take seriously the work of shifting political consciousness. By this we mean all the ways in which we engage with people about their understanding of the world around them, how we seek to expand their ability to think critically and ways we can invite them to experience the transforming power of collective analysis and action.

Building a Multiracial Movement

The critical question for our movement is how we can be more united in fighting the various structures and supporting ideologies of oppression. This framework helps move us beyond vilifying those that benefit under the current structures and creates space for and challenges us to be allies in a broad struggle. It helps us see how our aspirations are linked — no one group can advance while another is held back.

An analysis of the intersections of race, class and gender also is critical for building progressive *infrastructure*. We are up against a well-coordinated and ideologically sophisticated corporate-conservative infrastructure that brings together many groups and identities — religious, libertarian, free-market and pro-corporate conservatives, to name a few — who share a set of beliefs about a limited role for government, rugged individualism and

the primacy of the market and competition. These beliefs create a space that is antithetical to progressive values and reforms. This anti-progressive space is reinforced by a tendency to pit working class whites and people of color against one another. Race-based remedies are designed to take something away from whites and give it to Blacks, they would argue. Likewise, policies that recognize disparities and power imbalances rooted in class are tantamount to 'class warfare' in a society that is uniquely class-less, or so they say.

In order to create an alternative, progressive movement space, we need to build our own infrastructure. A movement needs 'bottom-up' leaders who can relate, as equals, to national leaders and who can grapple with important intellectual and policy resources. A movement needs a way of developing unity around broadly shared goals, and it needs different kinds of groups that have different kinds of strengths. Movements need networks and alliances that are flexible, in which roles, divisions of labor, approaches, tactics and strategies are regularly negotiated. A flexible infrastructure can provide the ongoing connections and relationships that hold these networks together. Negotiating the division of labor and complementarity of roles is critical. Each kind of group brings different strengths to the movement. But we cannot aggregate those strengths without ways of coordinating each group's efforts around common goals and shared, overarching beliefs or worldview.

We would argue that history teaches us the following: no movement for progressive social change in the U.S. can succeed without integrating racial justice issues with economic and social justice. No infrastructure, or blueprint or roadmap can succeed without real and meaningful participation from communities and leaders of color, together with working-class whites.

Using The Framework: Intersecting Race, Class and Gender

We begin a discussion of the intersections of race, class and gender and the ways we each experience oppression by stating up-front our own assumptions and beliefs about the need to do this kind of analysis.

In keeping with our framework for building progressive power, our belief in the centrality of race and the need to address both race and class, especially to address the ways in which racism has eroded class solidarity, we start these sessions on oppression by stating upfront our assumptions about the intersections of race and class. Our assertions include:

- Oppression is structural (more than attitudinal);
- Different forms of oppression as distinct yet inter-related;
- While for strategic reasons we may prioritize one struggle (e.g. racial justice) we are committed to the elimination of all forms;
- It is counter-productive to argue that one set of experiences of oppression is more significant or fundamental to progressive politics than another -- they are not 'hierarchical' or linear; they are closely inter-related;
- We need each other as allies in the work for justice

We share these assertions up front in order to be transparent about the analysis that informs our framework. This provides the starting-point for a collective conversation about race and class. People do not have to agree with our assertions in order to participate or get something out of the session. Indeed, they will get more out of the session if they know where we are coming from. They will have more space to question and challenge our assumptions as we go along.

Preparing For A Session

The following section describes the steps that you can follow in designing and facilitating a session using our framework on oppression and the intersections of race, class and gender.

A. One on ones:

Whenever possible, we highly recommend doing a series of one on one conversations with participants prior to the session. These conversations can help tailor the session to the specific experiences and needs of the group. If it is not possible for the session designers/facilitators to talk directly with each participant, then it is important that the leaders and organizers from the participating organization(s) speak with each participant, and then to convey information, questions and concerns to the designer/facilitators. For example, if a coalition or network is hosting the session, key staff and leaders from the coalition should talk with each member organization, find out who is attending from each member organization, and attempt to speak directly with those participants.

Questions in the conversations should draw out the kinds of challenges people experience and see around race, class and gender in their work as well as in their personal lives, and discern as much as possible their own views about these divides and their relationship. This background helps the facilitators know in advance where people are starting from, including the differences among participants in terms of their understandings and experi-

ences. It also helps general examples and anecdotes that can be worked into the agenda.

It is essential that people feel some ownership in the session and its importance. Too often people come to sessions on oppression feeling corralled or obligated. Conversations that explore where and how participants see the divides of race, class and gender surfacing in their lives, their work, and in the larger movement help place the session in the context of power and organizing (rather than moral obligation or guilt). It may be helpful for participants to understand the focus of the session is not personal (although there will undoubtedly be personal learning) but societal and institutional.

B. Logistical Preparation:

Be sure that you will have adequate easel pads as well as a roll of butcher paper; about a dozen markers or varied colors, as well as colorful construction paper (approx 50 sheets each in 6 different colors. In advance of the session, you will need to construct the 2 axes of a wall-sized matrix that people can fill in. We use 15 sheets of flip chart paper (5 across, 3 down), or 3 long strips from butcher paper roll (three down, and approximately 10 feet across). Draw the axis and the categories on the margins. Please use the attached sample matrix as a guide for constructing the axis and categories.

Opening the Session

A. Setting a Tone and Creating a Learning Environment

We share a set of guidelines for creating a supportive learning environment at the opening of the workshop. The following guidelines are modified from those developed by Ceylane Meyers for sessions used by Citizen Action of New York (CANY). We recognize that the matrix and exercises are challenging and provocative and that therefore, will create some discomfort and tension. The opening guidelines help prepare people and preview why that is an important part of the learning process. Our hope is that they also help create space for people to take greater risks and listen more openly to others. Feel free to modify and add your own guidelines. To create a space for learning together:

- Everyone is welcome.
- Risk-taking, discomfort and even conflict are a part of learning
- Participate with honesty and respect
- Respect different styles of participation/ different points of view

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- The conflict itself is not as important as how we deal with it
- Everyone Participates but no one dominates
- Engage in active listening
- Silence all cell phones and pagers

B. Working with resistance and finding hope

Anticipate some resistance. It stems from at least 2 sources: fear and pain. The fears that surface may include: fear of saying the wrong thing, of being mis-understood, of being judged, or of being negated and rendered invisible or invalidated. These sessions may tap into painful feelings and memories, whether it is the pain of experience with oppression or the pain of guilt and loss as one who is privileged through the oppression of others. While this session is not designed to address this pain therapeutically, it is important to offer avenues of hope and healing, first by acknowledging the pain. Some opportunities for that include:

- Naming the forms of resistance, resilience and cultural affirmation used by groups targeted for oppression
- Exploring the ways in which we all are injured by oppression and why we all stand to gain from working for justice and liberation
- Affirming the need for and role of allies for justice
- Sharing stories of cross-race, cross-class alliances in history and today
- Reminding ourselves of what we can do together, what kinds of power we can build together, when we stand together across these divides.

C. Storytelling

We ground the session in real life experiences – both personal and organizational. First we start with a personal story (see sample agenda) of a time in their lives when a cross-class, or cross race connection worked and one that didn't. They share these in pairs and then we gathered highlights of what made the situations work or fail. We drew on these elements later in the conversations. Note: People tend to focus on, and remember most vividly, their more negative experiences — misunderstandings, miscommunications, etc.

Organizational Scenarios: many people are clear that our opposition uses race, class and gender to divide us but less comfortable looking at how our dominant worldview ideas and power differentials play out in our own ranks, These scenarios are intended to surface some of those “in house” dynamics and expose how our unity and power (and broad vision for change) are undermined

by these dynamics. It also opens the conversation about how various forms of oppression have similarities as well as significant differences, obvious manifestations and more subtle ones, can overlap and reinforce one another or stand alone. This sets up the deeper exploration of the matrix itself. You will want to make an initial set of observations about the skits and then return to deepen your understanding after building the matrix.

Using the Matrix

Please refer to the attached sample matrix. This is the centerpiece of the workshop. We use it to engage participants in participatory analysis, story-telling and sharing about different experiences with oppressive conditions in society and how those experiences are related to social categories and groupings based in race, class and gender, as well as sexuality. It helps us lift up the hidden as well as visible injuries of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia and all the other –isms in our society and to name the structural nature of these injuries.

Please **note**: This analysis is **not** a substitute for a careful study of the history of racism and white supremacy, nor does it address the need for taking a closer look at the ways in which our own organizations may perpetuate experiences of domination and oppression. Likewise, it does not stand in for more careful analysis and discussion of class and gender dynamics. It can supplement race, class and gender analysis, and bring these insights together by focusing on their points of intersection.

Share a basic definition of what we mean by ‘structural oppression.’ Illustrate it with examples, such as:

1. A worker is laid off and cannot find a new job that pays a living wage;
2. A child is stuck in a failing school and, if nothing changes, will probably find it hard to participate in the economy;
3. A woman has to leave her job because of sexual harassment.

Each of these individuals is experiencing a condition that is oppressive. She/he experiences it because she/he is part of a targeted social group – downsized workers, poor children, women. While these experiences may be reinforced by individual prejudices – like to woman experiencing harassment on the job – what we are concerned with here is the ways in which the institutions create, perpetuate and reproduce oppressive conditions – like the way in which the company and the legal system have failed the victim of harassment, in this case.

We are looking at structural forms of oppression, experienced by groups, not so much at individual behaviors, biases, prejudices, which exist within these structures. Here are five forms or manifestations of oppression that we will examine today, as they relate to race, class and gender.

1. **Exploitation.** Exploitation has to do with the difference between the wealth that workers create through their labor power and the actual wages that workers get paid. Exploitation is built into the market economy; bosses want to increase profits by lowering wages. The wage and wealth gap between the wealthy owners and managers, on the one hand, and the masses of working people, on the other, is an indication of the degree of exploitation that exists in a society.
2. **Marginalization.** This refers to being left out of the labor market. Those who are unable to get and keep steady employment – because of disabilities, education levels, age (both youth and elderly can experience this), historic discrimination, lack of jobs in neighborhoods, etc. – are experiencing marginalization.
3. **Powerlessness.** The way we use the term here, powerlessness refers to the way in which workers are divided and segmented into jobs with autonomy and authority and jobs with little or no autonomy and authority. Workers in lower-status jobs experience more powerlessness than workers with professional jobs.
4. **Cultural Dominance.** Cultural dominance refers to the way that one group's experiences, cultural expressions and history are defined as superior to all other groups' experiences and histories. It is not necessary for anyone to say: "my group's culture is superior;" it simply has to be treated as universal — representing the best in all of humanity. It is considered 'normal,' which means that all others are either 'strange,' or 'invisible' or both.
5. **Violence.** Our nation's history is full of examples where violence has been used to keep a group 'in its place.' Racial segregation was backed up by violence, much of it state-sanctioned. Violence has been used to end workers' strikes, to intimidate workers during contract negotiations and to break up unions. The threat of violence is just as effective.
To explore how these experiences with oppressive

conditions intersect with race, class and gender, we have arrayed them on a 'matrix.' These five forms of oppression make up the horizontal axis while race, class and gender make up the vertical axis. We have included a sample matrix here that was created by the leadership of the Midwest States Center at a gathering in April 2006.

A. Exploring the Matrix

After you have gone over the first three forms of oppression, unveil the matrix on the wall. Go over it, explaining the vertical axis, which contains 'race,' 'class,' and 'gender.' Go back to the three categories you have just explained, and ask for an example of how exploitation intersects with race, then class, then gender. Do the same with marginalization and powerlessness. This is what they will do, in greater depth, in their small groups.

We recommend beginning with the first 3 categories — **exploitation, marginalization and powerlessness.** These three are related to peoples' relationship to the market and economic activities. Go through each one, offering a straightforward definition. Draw out examples.

Matrix: Intersecting Forms of Oppression:					
	Exploitation	Marginalization	Powerlessness	Cultural dominance	Violence
Class					
Race					
Gender					

To illustrate how the matrix works, fill in one cell for each column.

Some examples that get the discussion started:

- Column Three, Row One, intersecting powerlessness and class: A worker who has no say when major changes are made to her/his job and working conditions.
- Column Two, Row Two, intersecting race and marginalization: A Latino or Native American youth who cannot find a job and is ready to give up.
- Column One, row Three, intersecting gender and exploitation: A woman who loses her job when her boss learns that she is planning to start a family.

B. Small group Discussions

Divide into small groups of no more than 6 people (4 or 5 is ideal). Assign each group one of the three forms of oppression (for example, groups 1 and 2 may be assigned 'exploitation,' groups 3 and 4, 'marginalization' and groups 5 and 6 will look at 'powerlessness'). These three

forms of oppression will make up the first 3 columns on the matrix. Each group will look at the intersection of their form of oppression with each cell in their column. The cells will be headed race, class and gender, which comprise the three rows on the matrix. Starting with the examples that surfaced in the large group, the participants in each group will brainstorm more examples of how race and exploitation intersect. Float as a facilitator. The participants do not have to agree but you don't want them to get stuck on who is right or one person's view. The point is to surface experiences from a number of vantage points. The group should note any tensions and move on. At the end of the conversation they should post examples in their row up on the matrix wall. It is useful to have each group walk through their examples, name any tensions and see if there are any clarifying questions. (Note to shift agenda to reflect this last)

It is very important to take the time to unpack the differences and similarities of structural oppression as it relates to class, race and gender. People often find the differences and similarities are confusing – if we have experienced one form we may think we automatically “understand the others” or conversely that our experience is unique and disconnected from other types of experiences of oppression. (Do not expect to iron out all confusion. This kind of conversation often occasions discomfort, tension and confusion as our prior ideas are stretched and challenged. You may want to remind people of that and stress the guidelines for a learning environment.) We also recommend looking at how the differences can feed the divisions, and so on.

It can be useful at this point to go back briefly and reflect on the real-life skits. See if there are any additional insights, note what types/cross currents of oppression were at play, how they would undermine progressive unity and most importantly what this means for building power. Optional: you could come back later to the same skits and explore “worldview interventions” (e.g. what could we say in the moment and what would we want people to know or experience longer term).

C. Addressing Class

There may be some tension and confusion around the discussion of class. This is hardly surprising given that we live in a country that barely acknowledges the existence of class. It is also the case that various movement organizations and leaders have at different times stressed either the primacy or irrelevancy of class.

The Matrix seeks to expose the ways in which people are subordinated within our society, how that gets natural-

ized, how people are pitted against one another and in particular, how that undermines progressive unity and power. In regard to class we look at a range of ways that people are de-valued and excluded within our “market economy” and the way our movement too often either reinforces or ignores that oppression. Our framework suggests that class is not merely a structure of economic benefit but, like race and gender, a way of categorizing and valuing people, relatively privileging or oppressing them. The rationale for privilege or subordination in each case is promoted and carried in worldview, and permeates our society.

D. Introducing “Cultural Dominance” and “Violence” As Forms of Oppression

Cultural Dominance. You can have fun with the first – share examples (even bring in examples) of cultural stereotyping, white-washing, cultural invisibility, etc. Video clips from popular TV shows can be a good way to get this discussion started. *The Cosby Show* and *All In The Family* are especially good for illustrating the ways in which groups are depicted in popular culture.

To encourage sharing and story-telling, we suggest using a fishbowl where various people share examples and discuss their impact. Select participants for the fishbowl who represent a variety of experiences – working class, rural, various communities of color, woman, LGBT, etc. For example, we used this at a session in the Midwest. The fishbowl participants included: an African American woman who organizes in Milwaukee; a Native American lesbian who is active in South Dakota, a white working class woman organizing in Iowa, a white working class man who is a union activist in Iowa, and an African American working class man, also a union activist in Iowa.

Some questions to pose to the fishbowl participants:

1. Describe something in mainstream culture that affirms something about your own experiences and beliefs.
2. Name something(s) about the mainstream culture that make(s) you feel more like an outsider — mis-represented or un-represented.
3. Name something about a cultural experience with which you identify that gives you resilience, joy, affirmation, sustenance, hope, etc.

Make sure to talk about how this too undermines us and our power. It also robs all of us of the ability to enjoy the richness and diversity of human experience.

Ask the group why this form of oppression is relevant to our efforts to build unity across race, class and gender. Some things to draw out in discussion include:

- It is another way that the divisions and segments among working people are intensified and sharpened.
- It also speaks to experiences that extend beyond economic structures – to identities, prejudices and stereotypes that constrain peoples’ abilities to have access to decision-making; that make it harder for them to be political actors. And that make it harder for them to have control over their lives.
- These cultural forms of oppression also confer privileges on those of us who appear to be part of the mainstream culture. We have to be aware of the ways in which these privileges affect us.
- Note how conservatives say alternative cultural expressions are foisted upon us by amoral elites. They are using the ‘culture wars’ to their advantage.
- Especially, they use this to sharpen the wedge between white working class and other members of the working class.
- We cannot avoid the culture wars, but we don’t have to let it define the issues, either.

After this discussion, go back to the matrix and unveil the row on ‘cultural oppression.’ Add some of the examples about intersection of cultural oppression with class, race, gender. You will see some examples of things that might fit under the race, class and gender rows on the attached sample matrix.

Violence. It is important for people to note how violence or the threat of violence is a reality for any targeted and oppressed group. You can brainstorm the ways this shows up in different forms now and historically. Here are some possible examples to share and/or draw out in discussion:

- Police brutality against Black and Latino men;
- The way in which rape and sexual harassment keep women vulnerable;
- Attacks on people of Arab descent (or assumed to be of Arab descent — many victims are Asian), especially since 9/11;
- Hate crimes against gays, lesbians and trans-gendered people;
- Attacks on immigrants at day-labor gathering places.

Discuss how this dimension of oppression affects our efforts to build unity. Go back to the matrix and add examples to the race, class and gender cells.

General Discussion: Power and Oppression

Step back and discuss the picture that emerges by bringing the discussion back to power. Experiences of oppression affect people’s sense of their own power and how power works in society. It can obscure structural aspects of power and inequality – like corporate power – while justifying inequalities as natural and inevitable. Consider the ways in which biological sex is used to justify socially-constructed gender dynamics.

It also affect how people think about the role of government and whether they can imagine it being a force for good or whether they see it primarily as one of the many things that oppresses them. Have them share examples: People’s experiences with social services, with bureaucracy, with a sense that taxes are not fair, etc. goes back to reinforcing conservative policy agenda. Questions can include:

How does this affect a community’s sense of its power? Its belief in collective action? Its likelihood of fighting for its rights? How does it affect its belief in public/ government solutions? Where do we see this in our work on issues, elections? In our member organizing?

Summary

This session is intended to open conversation and give people a framework both for better conversations and better strategies.

Using these five forms of oppression as a tool for understanding the structural causes of oppression (economic, social and cultural) allows us to look at any social group’s experiences without necessarily privileging one particular form of oppression over another, or any groups’ experiences over another’s. At the same time, these five ways of looking at oppression help us see that people cannot be divided neatly into the ‘oppressed’ and the ‘oppressor’ columns.

In terms of strategy, this framework about oppression may help groups develop more effective ways to challenge social arrangements that favor a privileged few over the many, first by helping its constituencies analyze structural oppression and their own experiences, toward finding common ground with other groups’ experiences with structural oppression. Ultimately, this is about how we build power – the power to change and replace oppressive conditions and relationships. A long-term goal is gaining the power to become social change actors, to work together in ways that enable all people to develop their capacities to the fullest. ■

Grassroots Policy Project