

Racial Identity Caucusing: A Strategy for Building Anti-Racist Collectives

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Racial identity in the United States is not shaped in a neutral environment. The identities of People of Color form in response to racial oppression, and the identities of Whites form in response to racial superiority. These two identity dynamics manifest in a complex range of attitudes and behaviors that support and perpetuate the racist paradigm in this country. In order to work together to dismantle individual, institutional, and cultural racism, People of Color and Whites must understand how these identity dynamics operate in specific institutional settings, and devise strategies to overcome the barriers and oppression that are created by them.

Crossroads Ministry builds and equips teams within institutions to dismantle institutional and cultural racism. Identity caucusing is one strategy we use to confront the effects of internalized racist oppression and internalized racist superiority. Team members work in their respective racial identity groups, either as People of Color or White People. In this context People of Color work as a racially mixed group struggling together to understand and confront the effects of internalized racist oppression and to experience themselves as an anti-racist People of Color collective working together to dismantle racism. The White team members also meet in caucus to deal with issues of internalized superiority and to build an anti-racist White collective working together and with POC to dismantle racism. When the two caucus groups come back together as a team they are better able to understand, confront, and dismantle racism within the team itself and within the institutional setting that it is working. Caucusing creates a foundation upon which to build concrete organizing strategies for People of Color and Whites to work together as anti-racist allies.

Over the last sixteen years Crossroads Ministry has worked with teams in a variety of institutional settings – primarily in religious institutions, but also in educational and secular settings. In all of these settings we have introduced the concept of identity caucusing. Among the teams that have used it consistently, we have seen progress in changing attitudes and behaviors of oppression. In our own organization, caucusing has helped us make some profound shifts in our institutional structure and culture, in addition to building authentic anti-racist partnerships between People of Color and Whites.

The Reality of Internalized Racist Oppression (IRO) in Our Lives and Institutions

This section of the essay briefly explores the identity shaping power race and racism have in the lives of People of Color in the United States, and suggests ways in which identity caucusing can assist diverse groups of People of Color resist the effects of internalized racist oppression. Additionally, this essay explores the importance of caucusing for teams made up of POC and Whites working together to dismantle institutional and cultural racism.

Caucusing for POC creates a safe and liberated environment in which to explore IRO and how it has shaped our individual and collective lives. A definition of IRO that has emerged from Crossroads team training work is *a complex, multi-generational socialization process in which People of Color ACCEPT, BELIEVE, and LIVE OUT negative societal definitions. These behaviors support and help maintain the racist construct.* While there are a broad range of behaviors and beliefs that manifest due to IRO, they can generally be grouped into four distinct areas:

- Self concept and self esteem—ways in which the individual perceives his or herself in the face of negative societal messages about his or her own racial identity. For example: an individual may internalize the negative societal definitions about who they are and act in ways that heighten visibility, are self destructive or risky, include substance abuse, risky or dangerous sexual activity, violence and abuse. Or an individual may deny the negative societal messages by thinking they are different or special and that while racism may affect some people, it doesn't affect them.
- Within the racial group—ways in which individuals behave within their own racial group and what they believe about their racial group that perpetuates the racist paradigm. Examples of behaviors within racial groups include colorism and other visual forms of differentiation like hair texture, facial characteristics, body shape and size. Sexism, classism, and homophobia are also ways in which group cohesion is eroded. As a way of avoiding some of the negative aspects associated with the group, some individuals distance themselves from their group.
- Between racial groups—ways in which individuals in one racial group act toward or interact with members of other racial groups and how racial groups perceive and behave toward one another in ways that reinforce negative societal messages. For example: ethnocentrism, competition, believing and perpetuating prevailing societal messages about other groups, and refusing to acknowledge other groups' oppression.
- Within institutions—ways in which individuals and racial groups behave within specific institutional settings toward one another and how they interact with the power structures and White People within the institution. For example: acting in ways to reinforce, rather than challenge, existing power structures; not being allies with other POC; not creating alliances with other POC; being individualistic and sacrificing other POC for self advancement; accepting forced competition with other POC; acting as an unaccountable gatekeeper that lets in only "acceptable" POC and not those who rock the boat; participating in divide and conquer institutional dynamics; behaving as one of the group while in the company of POC but distancing from POC when Whites are around; not advocating for POC in the presence of Whites; not supporting POC who are in leadership positions; and going to White colleagues or superiors to complain about or diagnose POC instead of confronting or negotiating with POC directly.

If left unexamined and unchecked, these dynamics will operate to undermine any effort of a diverse POC group to become a collective. In fact, the whole purpose of these behaviors is to destroy POC community to maintain power and privilege for the White society. Only through intentionally uncovering and confronting these dynamics can POC build the accountable relationships and alliances necessary to confronting and dismantling institutional and cultural racism in their institutional setting.

Part of the work of caucusing, then, is to look deeply at each of these four groups of behaviors and beliefs to identify their toxicity, and to collectively work toward new, life-giving behaviors with the support of the whole anti-racism team.

This is risky business for POC because it means dealing with oppression where we are most vulnerable, where it has become part of the very core of who we are. It means risking revealing ourselves to a collective and risking to try new behaviors. It means risking failure and success. Racial identity caucusing allows groups to focus on each of these categories of manifestations, identify where the behaviors originate, and to collectively find new behaviors that stop the self-perpetuating cycle of IRO.

Caucusing builds collective POC voice and power so that individuals (especially leaders) are not abandoned or sacrificed, and have accountability to a collective for actions and decisions. It takes time and intention to build collective accountability, time to understand the historic basis for IRO, and time to understand specific institutional dynamics and behavioral manifestations in specific institutional settings.

Once the initial foundations are built, the ongoing work of the caucus includes:

- Intentionally updating and sharpening the collective anti-racism/anti-oppression analysis and its application to both the specific institution and the society at large.
- Developing strategies to work in partnership with White allies to dismantle oppression – particularly to hold them accountable for this work.
- Discovering new behaviors and thought processes that are liberating and which heal IRO.
- Giving one another permission to identify and redirect negative and destructive behaviors.
- Setting boundaries about what is POC only business and what can be shared outside the groups.
- Developing leadership within the group and recruiting others to join the group.
- Putting individual people back together and restoring the community when devastating effects of IRO arise.
- Creating a liberating community that recognizes POC and calls individuals home.
- Mentoring young people and dealing with identity issues of the next generation.

Setting Reasonable Expectations

Each time a group meets to caucus, it is helpful to establish a set of reasonable expectations for behavior during the caucus. Some groups create a set of guidelines which are reviewed and discussed (not casually affirmed) at the beginning of each caucus session and which then become the covenant between caucus participants during that particular caucus session. A sample of these guidelines follows:

- Each time we gather to caucus we must re-establish our ground rules for caucusing.
- Our collective responsibility is to stay focused on the manifestations of internalized racist oppression.
- While learning to trust the collective is critical, trust between individuals is desirable but not necessary for the caucus to function.
- Try to give active listening feedback to caucus members before responding.
- Try to *care*-front versus *confront*.
- We each need to take ownership of our own feelings.
- Any member can call “time” during the caucus to breathe, collect the group, take a moment to reflect, diffuse a situation, etc.
- It is important for each member to “check-in” and “check-out” at every caucus gathering.
- Don’t just leave the room during a caucus.
- Any member can call for a “check-in” at any time during a caucus gathering.
- Caucusing cannot happen without a facilitator; a facilitator must be identified before any caucus gathering.
- We must be committed to cultural competence in our caucusing work.
- What arises in caucus needs to come back to caucus, either for a collective resolution or as a report back about the resolution between individual members.
- Seeking counsel from one another outside of caucus is ok, but all issues raised in caucus must be brought back to the entire group.
- Seeking counsel is not, and cannot be, gossip.
- Respect caucus confidentiality.

Getting Started

While much of caucus work is done through storytelling and autobiography, some specific exercises can help get a new caucus started and focus some necessary conversations. Recommended activities include:

Marginality and Mattering Exercise – Designed to demonstrate the connection between oppression and group behavior, demonstrates how individuals behave and contribute differently in a group based on their acceptance by the group.

Quadrants – Designed to assist participants in understanding one another’s histories in terms of colonialism and how the legacy of colonialism perpetuates oppression for each POC racial group today. Assists groups understand the differences and similarities between racial groups and POC cultures.

Identity Mapping – Designed to demonstrate the interplay of racial identity with other parts of an individual’s identity.

POC Anti-Racist Identity Development – Applying models of anti-racist psycho-social development through autobiography, for example using the work of Beverly Tatum, William Cross and others to understand individual and group identity development.

Ongoing Questions and Activities

Some questions and activities are so critical to the life and functioning of a POC caucus that they can be used in an ongoing way.

Questions

1. What strategies does the institution use to keep us divided and competing with one another for access and resources? How can we collectively resist these dynamics?
2. In what ways do we, as individuals and as a collective, perpetuate racism in the institution?
3. In what ways does IRO interfere with the functioning of our team?
4. What does it mean for POC to hold our institution accountable?
5. What relationship do we have as individuals and as a collective to POC communities of resistance?

Activities

Collective and Accountable Decision Making

Implementing new strategies of collective planning and decision making, which include structures to support one another and hold one another accountable for behavior.

Cultural Sharing

Sharing cultural expressions and norms that are traditional to POC groups, using these cultural traditions and norms when creating group and institutional structures, and extending these norms and structures when members of the group are involved in planning events for the larger institution.

Foot Analysis of the Institution

Based on the Foot Identification Power Analysis process designed by the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond. In this exercise POC identify the power structures of the institution and how they act as feet that kick POC within the institution and in surrounding communities.

Analysis Review

Refining and deepening the anti-racist power analysis by discussing an element of popular members’ culture (movies, literature, music, etc.) or a recent experience of caucus members through the filter of various parts of the anti-racism analysis.

The Reality of Internalized Racist Superiority (IRS) in Our Lives and Institutions

As members of white institutions, and more specifically white members of multiracial anti-racism transformation teams, Whites must be aware of Internalized Racist Superiority in our lives, the culture, and institutions.

A definition of Internalized Racist Superiority that has developed from Crossroads team training work is: *A complex multi-generational socialization process that teaches White people to believe, accept, and/or live out superior societal definitions of self and to fit into and live out superior societal roles. These behaviors define and normalize the race construct and its outcome: white supremacy.* When combined with the Internalized Racist Oppression experienced by People of Color, Internalized Racism supports and reinforces a kind of “dance” that helps maintain the race construct.

Having been racialized as Whites in a white supremacist society, each of us lives out manifestations of internalized superiority in our daily lives. The anti-racist collective/teams are no exception to this. While anti-racist Whites have a heightened consciousness and commitment to undoing these manifestations, they still exist in our interactions. When white people come together in an organization or team, the manifestations of IRS in each person come together to create the collective of IRS; our individual pieces are part of a whole cloth. The cumulative power of IRS on a collective becomes more than the sum of the

individual manifestations of it. We believe that this cumulative power can undermine the whole of a team's anti-racist work.

As white people in an organization we need to learn to identify ourselves as part of a collective. In our relationships with other Whites we need to develop a culture of an anti-racist 'us-ness.'

Our ability to identify and understand how IRS functions collectively – and our transforming these behaviors – will have very positive and powerful consequences on the health and life of our teams.

We have learned that IRS depends upon an invisibility to the white community - the pervasive colorblind ideology of the post-civil rights era seeks to cement this. Yet despite its insidiousness and our socialization into blindness, People of Color experience it as a powerful white collective force. Because of white supremacy we have few forces keeping us in relationship to anti-racism. In fact cultural constructs such as competition, individualism, and other institutional realities work to create the sense of individual identity at any cost. Caucusing becomes a factor that holds us to the group, despite the socialization that gives us the opposite message. Caucusing provides a setting and space in which we hold each other accountable to a vision of building an anti-racist community.

How does a team 'do' anti-racist leadership development in light of what we know about IRS? How do individuals bring their gifts to the group, and do so in ways that are not oppressive to others? How do Whites stay engaged in the context of anti-racist work when following the leadership of People of Color? In what ways do our individual accomplishments fit into the group in a context of IRS? Caucusing aids us in addressing these questions.

Through caucusing with one another, anti-racist Whites gain greater clarity about white power and privilege, the identity shaping power of racism (power³), and anti-racism. Insights from caucus allow us to see our way through the complex web of relationships, particularly the interactions between culture, structure, and individuals.

Value of Caucus (Why Caucus?)

Difficult situations will arise in organizing against racism. As anti-racist Whites doing this work, we often find ourselves in situations that are very difficult to discuss with other white people who do not have an analysis of racism. We have a difficult time finding a place to discuss our dilemmas and to understand dynamics of racism through a lens of anti-racism. Caucus is often the only place where discussing these issues makes sense. Very simply, caucusing is one way to be white anti-racists together, with each other, working on IRS.

Caucusing is also a means to an end – it is not an end in itself. Identifying and rooting out the overwhelming consequences of internalized superiority is fundamentally important work for building an anti-racist community. However it is also a tool that empowers the entire organization to build its collective anti-racist identity and vision. This work, in conjunction with People of Color identifying and transforming the internalization of racial oppression, is a powerful organizing strategy that makes the anti-racist community possible.

Urgency of Caucus

Being together with other Whites working on IRS is an urgent issue. While many Whites recognize that it is necessary for effective team organizing, it serves a much more important value than a pragmatic necessity. When white individuals actively grapple with IRS together, we might better identify (recognize and feel) the power of racism and its shaping of our own identity. How racism imprisons us as individuals is ultimately an issue of life or death. When individuals' dynamics come together and form a collective white identity, the very life of a team can be jeopardized. The opposite is also true –when the anti-racist white collective owns and transforms itself the life of a team may be better fully realized. In Crossroads we have become clear about the following statement: "To the extent that *I* identify and transform my IRS, is the extent to which I can begin to claim an anti-racist identity. Together as a white collective identifying and transforming *our* IRS, we can claim an anti-racist identity."

Caucusing is fundamental for understanding identity development. It enables us to see that race 'has' us on more than just a psycho/socio level – it also 'has' us on a spiritual level. We are aware of this mis-shaped

identity and that it affects our humanity, yet our internalization of racial superiority stands in the way of changing this. Caucusing helps us learn how to see in a new way, it helps us experience the importance of seeing, even when it hurts. Caucusing enables us to own our ‘we-ness’ – empowering us to make “we (the white collective) statements” in place of “me (the white individual) statements.” Anti-racist white people need the discipline of coming together, just as we go to the doctor for check-ups, and check-ins.

Gaining clarity about racism’s hooks – how we act out of these narrow and limited identities – is an important part of claiming our anti-racist identity. So too, our health depends upon using the caucus as a place in which we define, design, plan, develop, dream, and envision what it means to be anti-racists Whites ... to be anti-racist Whites contributing to building an anti-racist community.

White “Double Consciousness”

Anti-racist Whites often find ourselves in a difficult space that involves actively working to live anti-racism and be anti-racist Whites. However simultaneously to this identity, we are operating out of our racial identity as Whites. To this degree, many anti-racist Whites experience a sort of “Double Consciousness” in which our IRS and anti-racism play out at the same time.

Our understanding of the concept of double consciousness (named by W.E.B. DuBois as a phenomenon People of Color experience) is that it is usually a white privilege to NOT have to function with this ‘double veil’ – or social (and spiritual) schizophrenia. However anti-racist Whites who are committed to working against racism *must* cope with dual identities. The collective sum of white individuals struggling in this space takes on a life of its own.

In the absence of a caucus, we are often afraid to talk about real struggles with race. The ‘difficult stuff’ that emerges without having a caucus space leads into silence, which becomes the complicity that keeps IRS collective.

Many white people engage in ‘looking good strategies’ in their teams and organizations. This manifestation of IRS, often unconscious (though sometimes very conscious), is evident itself in competition with other Whites. ‘Looking good’ is intended to demonstrate that we are superior in our anti-racism. This involves aligning ourselves with People of Color, and putting down other Whites who we claim don’t “get it” in an attempt to make ourselves look better and somehow less racist. It breaks up the collective by scapegoating other Whites, and pushes us into a space where we attempt to see ourselves as separate from (better than) the white collective.

Caucus & the Courage to Risk

Anti-racist caucusing is risky business. The caucus is a place for personal support, and yet it must be the place where significant identity-changing issues are faced. As Whites we have to live with the tension that while important issues get raised and we will be challenged, caucus is the only safe setting where we can risk being honest with other Whites regarding our own racialization and desire to become anti-racist.

The Benefits of Caucus include:

- Supporting and sustaining each other while looking at the difficult stuff.
- Loving each other as white people ... standing together in a new way.
- Clarifying where we’re at, what is lacking, what we’re doing well.
- Owning and holding each other.
- Clarifying accountable ways to use our gifts.
- Deepening our commitments to one another, the team, and ultimately the anti-racism movement.
- Living with ambiguity and discomfort (knowing we have each other).
- A place to feel whole while looking at the difficult stuff.
- Deepening our understanding of anti-racism.
- Having authentic relationships with other Whites.
- Being clear about racism’s power in and over us as individuals, and as a collective.
- More effectively doing the collective work of our team (and thus more effectively dismantling racism in society).
- Gaining a sense of what is possible in forging an anti-racist white identity.

- Envisioning and strategizing the building of anti-racist white identity that makes possible the anti-racist organizing of the team.
- Returning to the overall collective better equipped to take up the task of building an anti-racist community.

Nuts & Bolts of White Caucusing

Before Caucus: Consider Logistics

- Adequate space – privacy for each group
- Adequate time for caucuses
- Assigned/identified leadership
- A topic and/or process for setting the agenda
- Group size – break a large caucus group into 10 person max – have a process for sharing what was learned/discerned back to the whole caucus
- Develop a clear covenant/ground rules
- Caucusing is not group therapy – sometimes a one-on-one may be called for
- Only caucus with folks who have a shared analysis

Getting Started

Getting started in white caucuses is frequently the hardest part of the caucus. Because white people are racialized into beliefs that racism can only be discussed in the presence of Persons of Color, many of us feel uncomfortable in these settings. Most of us are also ill-equipped in determining the directions caucuses take if they are to be effective and valuable tools for dismantling racism. There are some common traps that white caucuses fall into: discussions that are strictly intellectual in content and process, which often reflect and result in a distancing of one's self from IRS; discussions that focus upon People of Color rather than focusing the lens around us and our internalization issues; and finally, at a loss for the substance of what to discuss, many caucuses are spent talking about the caucus itself ... while pondering what we're doing, we avoid doing the important work of examining how IRS has its "hook" in us as individual and collective white people. Several questions that prime the pump are very useful in digging into the manifestations of IRS:

Analyzing Individual IRS

- Recalling the lies & liars ("I remember" exercise from Phase 2 training); how did IRS get "baked into" me?
- How does IRS affect my participation on a team; in leading a caucus?
- What are some of my/our 'looking good' strategies as individuals, teams, and institutions?

Analyzing Collective IRS

- How do you see white privilege and power (Power²) working in your institution/team?
- What is the White culture in your institution/team?
- What is welcoming, affirming, and inviting about your institution/team for white persons?
- How have you been made welcome in your institution/team?
- What about your institution/team looks "white"?
- How does white individual IRS come together in your institution/team (at meetings, in organizing, day-to-day life)?

Ending Caucus

- Check in (debrief) on where people are at the end of caucus.
- Note issues that are still on the table for future discussion.
- Decide what will be reported back to the large group.
- Summarize items to think about and apply for the next gathering ... commit to areas in which you will heighten your anti-racism and IRS consciousness.