From Being to Doing: Anti-racism as Action at Work

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Land acknowledgment

I am presenting from the University of Dayton on the traditional land of the Shawnee and Miami Peoples, as well as many other sovereign nations of this region, both past and present. As we come together to focus our attention on issues of equity and social justice, let us take a moment to honor with gratitude the Indigenous peoples who have stewarded this land throughout the generations and who continue to deal with the painful legacy of colonization, genocide, and forced removal.

- Do you know whose land you are on?

- What does it mean for you to be a guest on those lands?

- What action steps can you take in solidarity with the indigenous peoples on whose land you live and work?

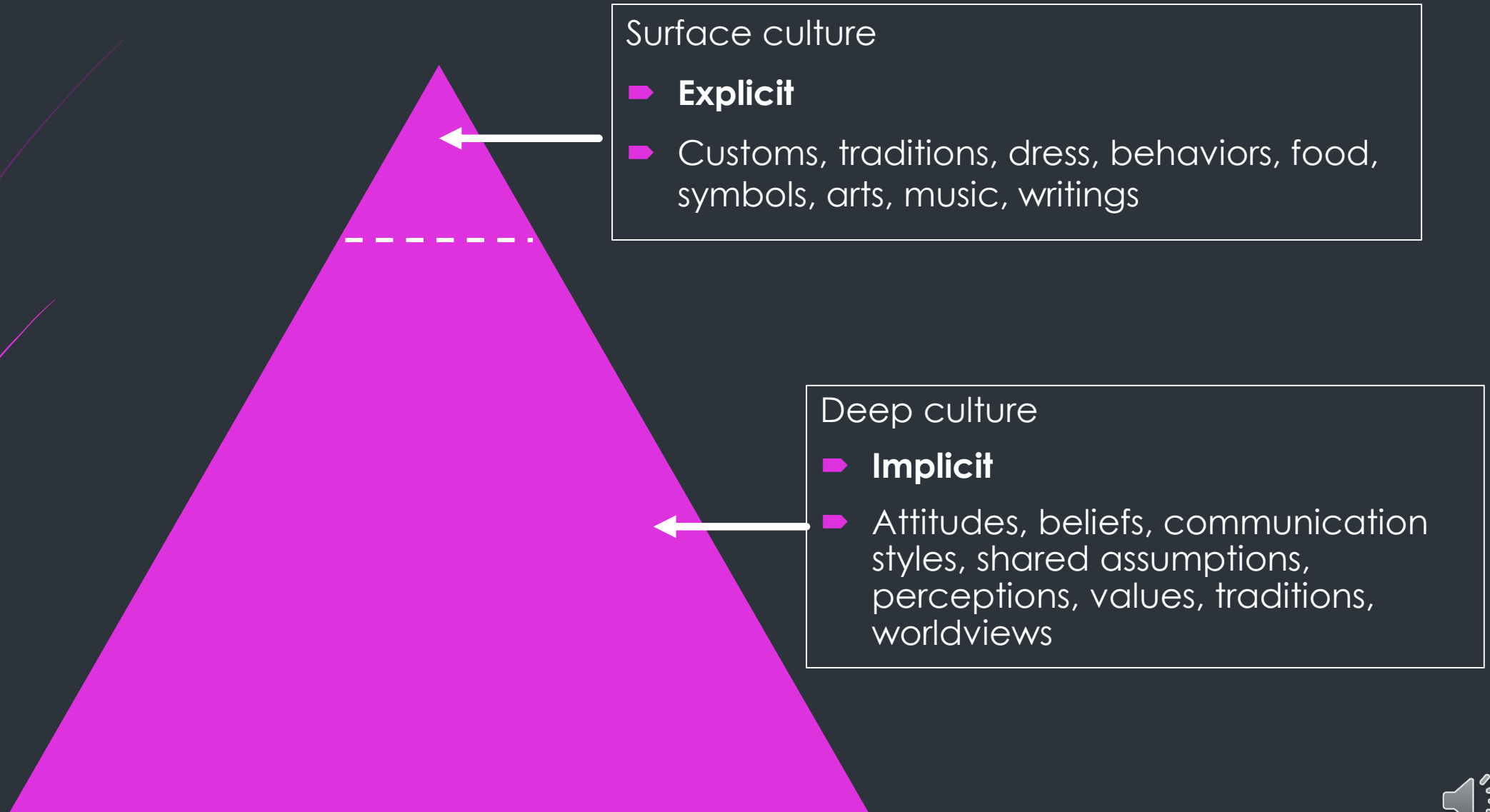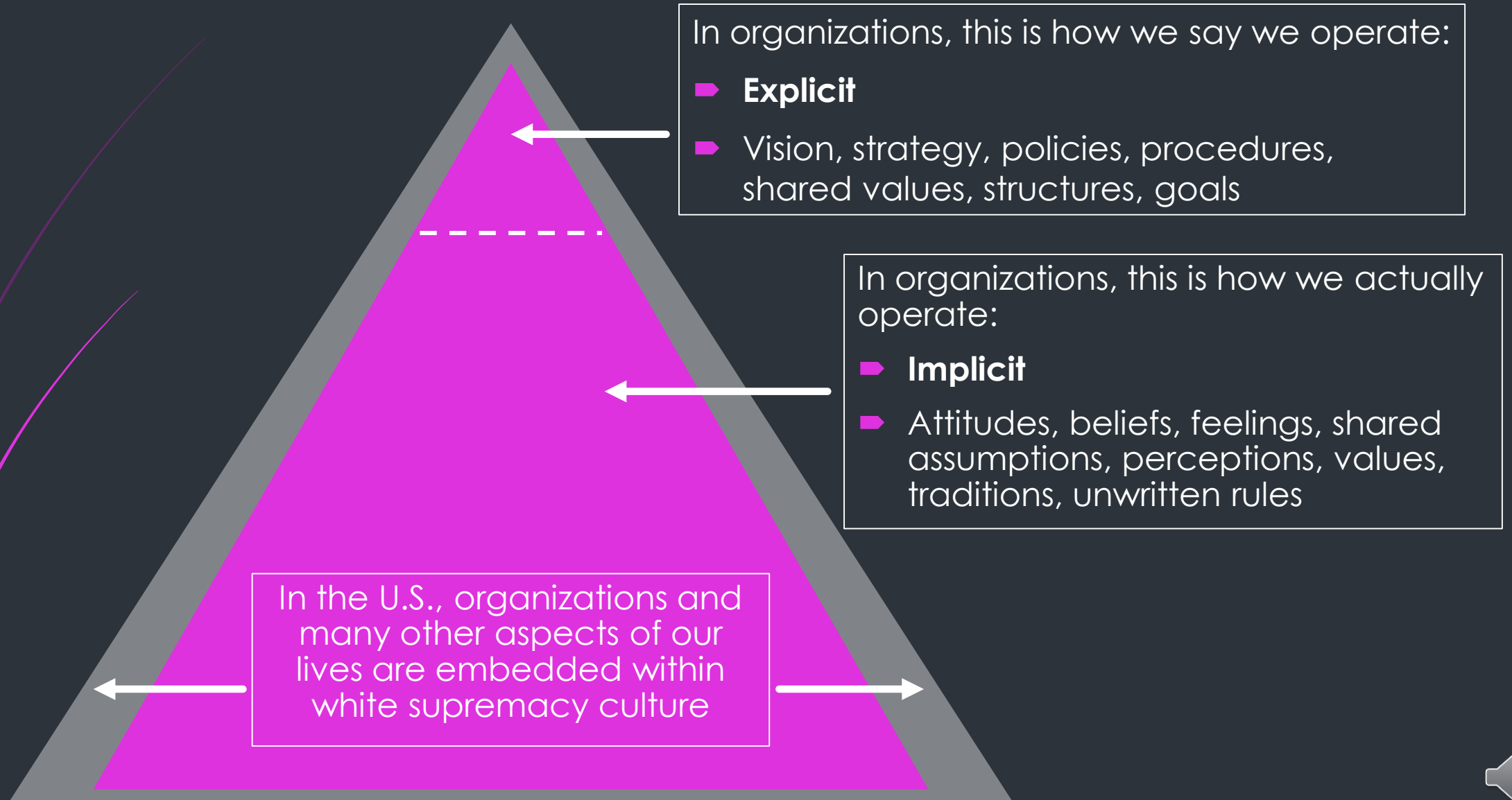Start with accepting this statement: white supremacy culture exists

What is culture?

➤ "…**culture** is defined as the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization. These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group."

➤ "The essence of a culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies; it is not material objects and other tangible aspects of human societies. People within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts, and behaviors in the same or in similar ways."

➤ "A culture is a way of life of a group of people--the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next."

Iceberg Model of Culture

Surface culture
- **Explicit**
- Customs, traditions, dress, behaviors, food, symbols, arts, music, writings

Deep culture
- **Implicit**
- Attitudes, beliefs, communication styles, shared assumptions, perceptions, values, traditions, worldviews

Iceberg Model of Culture for Organizations

In organizations, this is how we say we operate:

- **Explicit**
- Vision, strategy, policies, procedures, shared values, structures, goals

In organizations, this is how we actually operate:

- **Implicit**
- Attitudes, beliefs, feelings, shared assumptions, perceptions, values, traditions, unwritten rules

In the U.S., organizations and many other aspects of our lives are embedded within white supremacy culture

What is white supremacy culture?

- White supremacy culture is most often associated with groups like the KKK or other white nationalist, segregationist groups, as well as acts of individual violence and discrimination.

- BUT…these groups are not the only manifestation of white supremacy culture in the United States. These are just the tip of the iceberg, above the water line.

What is white supremacy culture?

Let's expand the definition of white supremacy culture to include more of the iceberg:

➤ "…series of characteristics that institutionalize whiteness and Westernness as both normal and superior to other ethnic, racial, and regional identities and customs. While people often don't view this theorization of white supremacy as violent, it can lead to systemic discrimination and physical violence."

➤ "The explicit to subtle ways that the norms, preferences, and fears of white European descended people overwhelmingly shape how we organize our work and institutions, see ourselves and others, interact with one another and with time, and make decisions."

Defining racism

Kendi defines racism in the following ways:

- Racism is the intertwining of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities.
  - Racist policies are any measures that produce or sustain inequities between racial groups. Policy in this sense includes written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations, etc. that govern people.
  - Racist ideas are any ideas that suggest one racial group is inferior or superior to another racial group in any way. These ideas argue that racial inferiorities or superiorities of racial groups explain racial inequities in society.

Defining anti-racism

Kendi defines antiracism in the following ways:

➡ Antiracism is a powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to racial equity and are substantiated by antiracist ideas.

➡ Antiracist policies are any measures that produce and sustain equity between racial groups.

➡ Antiracist ideas argue that racist policies are the cause of racial inequities.

Given these definitions, how can we think critically about antiracist actions at work?

How do the definitions of white supremacy culture, racism, and antiracism intersect with the iceberg model of culture in our workspaces?

Characteristics and norms of white supremacy culture in organizations

- **Perfectionism**
- **Sense of urgency**
- Defensiveness
- **Quantity over quality**
- **Worship of the written word**
- Only one right way
- Paternalism
- **Either/or thinking**
- Power hoarding
- Fear of open conflict
- **Individualism/competition**
- I'm the only one
- Progress is bigger, more

- **Objectivity**
- **Right to comfort**
- Comfort with predominantly white leadership
- Comprehensiveness
- Transactional relationships
- Transactional goals
- **Over-working as unstated norm**
- Skeptical management
- Official title outweighs experience
- White mediocrity
- Narrow valuation of intelligence/performance
- **Unwillingness to discuss race**

Perfectionism

Oppressive

- Appreciation for work rarely shared; when it is, directed at those most often get credited for the work (even if others contributed)

- More common to point out how a person or their work is inadequate

- Mistakes are seen as personal

- Making a mistake is confused with being a mistake

- Little to no investment in reflection or identifying lessons learned that can improve practice

- Tendency to identify what's wrong; little ability to identify, name, and appreciate what's right

- Often internalized leading to overemphasis on "faults" or "failures" rather than acknowledging good work

Perfectionism

Liberating

- Develop a culture of appreciation where the organization takes the time to show that everyone's efforts are appreciated

- Create the expectation that everyone will make mistakes and those mistakes are learning opportunities that can lead to positive results

- Separate the person from the mistake

- Offer constructive feedback that opens with what went well before offering criticism

- Ask people to offer specific suggestions for how to do things differently when offering criticism

- Recognize being your own worst critic is an impediment to actual improvement, contributes to low morale among the group, and does not help anyone realize the benefit of learning from mistakes

Sense of urgency

Oppressive

- Continued sense of urgency that makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, to think long-term, to consider consequences

- Frequently results in sacrificing potential allies for quick or highly visible results, for example sacrificing interests of communities of color in order to win victories for white people (seen as default or norm community)

- Emphasis is on deliverables, not prioritizing community-building, capacity-building, or equity work implementation

- Reinforced by promises of more deliverables with less resources

Sense of urgency

Liberating

- Priorities and timelines are set for sustainability and equity

- People are given the space to address important issues as they come up in the moment

- Setting realistic timeframes

- Allow for the unexpected and build timeframes on how long prior processes actually took

Quantity over quality

Oppressive

- Focus and value is placed on quantity
- Less focus is put on the cost of growth of people, communities, and relationships
- Value is not placed on process, only measurable outcomes
- No understanding that when there is a conflict between content and process, process will prevail
- Discomfort with emotion and feelings

Quantity over quality

Liberating

- Focus is on sustainability
- A cost-benefit analysis includes all costs, including human costs
- Include process or quality goals in your planning
- Look for ways to measure process goals
- Learn to recognize those times when you need to get off the agenda in order to address people's underlying concerns

Worship of the written word

Oppressive

- If it's not in written down in a memo or other document, it doesn't exist

- The organization does not take into account or value other ways in which information gets shared

- Those with strong documentation and writing skills are more highly valued, even in organizations where ability to relate to others is key to the mission

- If it's written down in any way other than "Standard American English," it is seen as incorrect or less intelligent

Worship of the written word

Liberating

➤ Take the time to analyze how people inside and outside the organization get and share information

➤ Figure out which things need to be written down and come up with alternative ways to document what is happening

➤ Recognize that language involves culture, power, lived experience, and geography

➤ All forms of communication are valued—for example, in some communities information is shared through relationship networks and the spoken word

➤ Make sure anything written can be clearly understood

Either/or thinking

Oppressive

- Things are either/or — good/bad, right/wrong, with us/against us
- Linked to perfectionism in making it difficult to learn from mistakes or accommodate conflict
- No sense that things can be both/and
- Results in trying to simplify complex things
- Creates conflict and increases sense of urgency—people feel they have to make decisions to do either this or that with no time or encouragement to be creative and consider alternatives
- Can be used by those with a clear agenda or goal to push those who are still thinking or reflecting to make a choice between 'a' or 'b' and/or to suppress alternative ideas

Either/or thinking

Liberating

➡ Systems and complexity thinking

➡ Develop an understanding of context and intersectionality

➡ Recognize patterns and the ability to hold contradictory thoughts and feelings simultaneously.

➡ Push for more than two alternatives when either/or language comes up

➡ Notice when oversimplification of complex issues occurs and surface aspects of those issues that are being missed

➡ Slow down decision-making processes and encourage deeper analysis

➡ When people are faced with an urgent decision, take a break and give people some breathing room to think creatively

Individualism/competition

Oppressive

➡ Focus is on single charismatic leaders

➡ Working in isolation from each other and from other organizations

➡ Little experience or comfort working as part of a team

➡ People believe they are responsible for solving problems alone

➡ Accountability, if any, goes up and down, not sideways to peers or to those the organization is set up to serve

➡ Desire for individual recognition and credit

➡ Competition more highly valued than cooperation

➡ Creates a lack of accountability, as the organization values those who can get things done on their own without guidance

Individualism/competition

Liberating

- Collaboration, community, and collectivism
- Understand that creating change and transformation takes everyone
- Focus on "building a bigger pie" rather than fighting over a single slice
- Engage in mutual support
- Hold groups accountable, not just individuals
- Create a culture where people bring problems to the group
- Use team meetings for problem-solving, not just reporting
- Teamwork is a stated organizational value and people are evaluated by their ability to work in teams, not just their ability to get a job done

Objectivity

Oppressive

- Maintaining the belief that there is such a thing as being objective or "neutral"

- Maintaining the belief that emotions are irrational and should not play a role in decision-making

- Dismissing people who show emotion

- Requiring people to think in a linear (logical) fashion and ignoring/dismissing those who think in other ways

- Dismissing any thinking that does not appear 'logical'

Objectivity

Liberating

- Accept that everybody has a world view and that everybody's world view affects the way they understand things

- Accept that this means you too

- Actively listen when people are expressing themselves in ways which are not familiar to you, even if it makes you uncomfortable

- Assume that everybody has a perspective that comes from their lived experiences, and it is your responsibility to understand that perspective

Right to comfort

Oppressive

- The belief that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort (another aspect of valuing "logic" over emotion)

- Scapegoating those who cause discomfort

- Equating individual acts of unfairness against white people with systemic racism which daily targets people of color

- Connects to a fear of open conflict

Right to comfort

Liberating

- Welcome/embrace discomfort
- Understand discomfort is the root of all learning and growth
- Deepen your political analysis of racism and oppression so you have a strong understanding of how your personal experience and feelings fit into a larger picture
- Understand that not everything should be taken personally
- Develop skills that enable you to participate in uncomfortable, challenging conversations

Over-working as unstated norm

Oppressive

- Directly or passively encouraging people to work outside of scheduled work hours
- Creating work plans with timelines/deadlines that are unrealistic
- Creating a climate where doing more with less is the norm, not the exception
- Unequal distribution of work (for example--diversity work is often expected of BIPOC workers, but not white employees)

Over-working as unstated norm

Liberating

➡ Self-care/community care

➡ Create a culture where people support one another's mental, physical, and emotional well-being

➡ Support time boundaries that are considerate of needs outside of work, such as care-giving responsibilities, personal health issues, etc.

➡ Work plans should include 20% unscheduled time for unpredictable and unexpected tasks that can emerge as part of the process

➡ Leaders should signal to employees that they are also drawing work-life boundaries

➡ Account for emotional labor when BIPOC employees are assigned "diversity work"

Unwillingness to discuss race

Oppressive

➡ Changing the subject away from the role of race/avoiding race conversations

➡ Limited understanding of how racial and cultural biases intersect with all aspects of our lives and systems

➡ Framing difference as "bad"

➡ Perception that talking about biases is an attack on white people

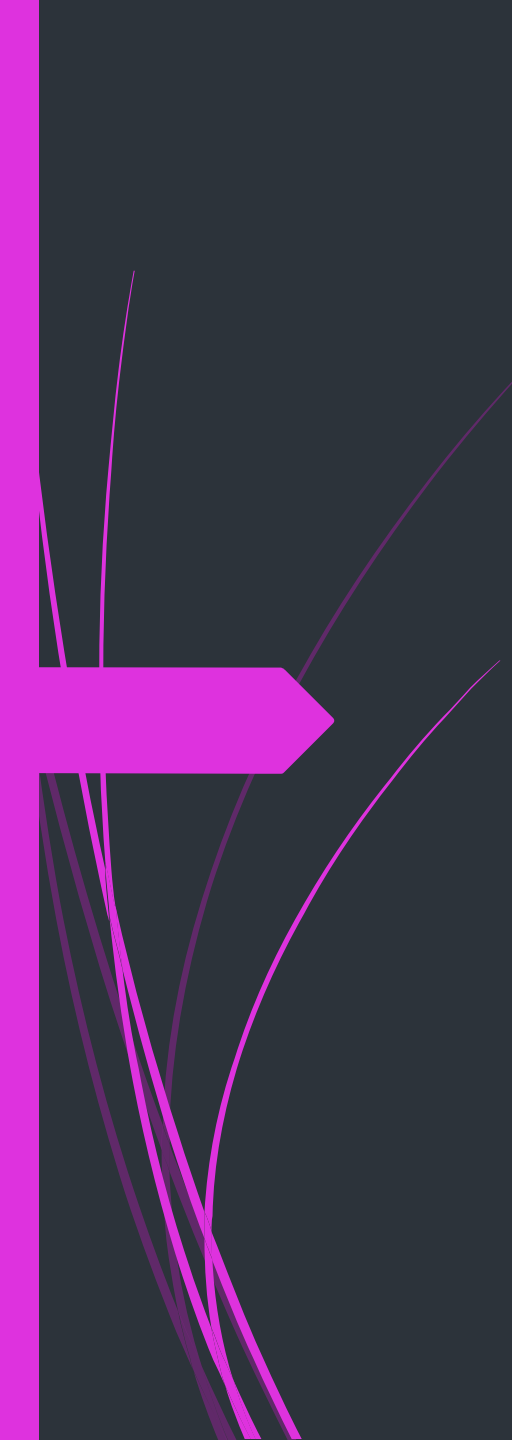➡ Perception that white people can't handle race conversations

Unwillingness to discuss race

Liberating

- Compassionate curiosity about how race, cultural differences, racial bias may be at play

- With compassion, assume there may be unconscious biases at work

- Create an environment that celebrates the courage to explore racial bias in all its forms

- Avoid 'gotcha' and good person/bad person dynamics

- Acknowledge we all carry unconscious bias, and we each have a role in addressing it

- Focus on building stamina and healing for self-reflection

- Focus on the consciousness and behaviors, not on shaming

White supremacy culture can be (and usually is) present in organizations that are led by **both** white people and people of color.

Corollary: White supremacy culture also hurts both white people and people of color.

Corollary: White supremacy culture upholds other forms of intersectional oppression around issues such as but not limited to: age, class, sex, gender, religion, and sexual identity.

Shame vs. Guilt

Shame

- "I am bad."
- Fear that we are not good enough
- We're all afraid to talk about shame
- The less we talk about it, the more control it has over us
- Shame is the opposite of empathy
- Erodes courage and fuels disengagement

Guilt

- "I did something bad."
- Discomfort we feel when what we do does not align with or goes against our values
- Can motivate us to make amends or change a behavior
- Intersects with empathy

Let go of shame.
Acknowledge when you feel guilt.
Hold yourself and others accountable.

"

Accountability is preventing, intervening in, responding to, and healing from harm.

"

McKensie Mack. Shifting the Center: Transforming Academic Libraries through Generous Accountability. June 10, 2020.

How do we hold one another accountable?

How do we hold ourselves accountable?

How often do we confuse accountability with shaming?

Thank you!

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