



# Writing for Change

RAISING AWARENESS OF DIFFERENCE, POWER, AND DISCRIMINATION

## 1.14 Developing Definitions

### Objectives

Help students clarify their understanding and assumptions about various factors affecting people's status and treatment by others.

Establish common referents (consensus) for the terms listed.

### Materials needed

Pen and paper, or copies of the handout

### Time needed

Ten to twenty minutes

### Instructor directions

Have students work in groups to synthesize definitions for one or several of these terms.

Have each group present a definition and discuss the relevance to their daily lives.

### Definitions

*antisemitism*: Systematic discrimination against, disparagement of, or oppression of Jews, Judaism, and the cultural, intellectual, and religious heritage of the Jewish people.

*classism*: A system of power and privilege based on the accumulation of economic wealth and social status. Classism is the mechanism by which certain groups of people, considered as a unit according to their economic, occupational, or social status, benefit at the expense of other groups. The effects of this imbalance are pervasive in the social system, affecting all facets of people's lives.

*complicity*: Collusion, or partnership in wrongdoing, such as the oppression of a target group. Social critic Kate Millett defines complicity as the act of "identifying—even if involuntarily or momentarily—with the society which force has brought into being."

*compulsory heterosexuality*: The assumption that women are "naturally" or innately drawn sexually and emotionally toward men, and men toward women; the view that heterosexuality is the "norm" for all sexual relationships. The institutionalization of heterosexuality in all aspects of society includes the idealization of heterosexual orientation, romance, and marriage. Compulsory heterosexuality leads to the notion of women as inherently "weak," and the institutionalized inequality of power: power of men to control women's sexuality, labor, childbirth and childrearing, physical movement, safety, creativity, and access to knowledge. It can also include legal and social discrimination against homosexuals and the invisibility or intolerance of lesbian and gay existence.

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*co-optation*: Various processes by which members of dominant cultures or groups assimilate members of target groups, reward them, and hold them up as models for other members of the target groups. “Tokenism” is a form of co-optation.

*difference*: A characteristic that distinguishes one person from another or from an assumed “norm,” or the state of being distinguished by such characteristics. Social justice issues such as racism, sexism, classism and homophobia usually center upon the negative perception of difference by a dominant group. Viewed positively, difference can be a catalyst for equity, a recognition of interdependence, and a source of personal power.

*discrimination*: Unequal treatment of people based on their membership in a group.

*dominance*: The systematic attitudes and actions of prejudice, superiority, and self-righteousness of one group (a non-target group) in relation to another (a target group).

*Internalized dominance* includes the inability of a group or individual to see privilege as a member of the non-target group.

*ethnocentrism*: The emotional attitude that one’s own ethnic group, nation, or culture is superior to all others or is the norm by which others are measured.

*gender*: A cultural notion of what it is to be a woman or a man; a construct based on the social shaping of femininity and masculinity. It usually includes identification with males as a class or with females as a class. Gender includes subjective concepts about character traits and expected behaviors that vary from place to place and person to person.

*heterosexism*: A system of beliefs, actions, advantages, and assumptions in the superiority of heterosexuals or heterosexuality. It includes unrecognized privileges of heterosexual people and the exclusion of nonheterosexual people from policies, procedures, events, and decisions about what is important.

*homophobia*: Thoughts, feelings, or actions based on fear, dislike, judgment, or hatred of gay men and lesbians/of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex. Homophobia has roots in sexism and can include prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and acts of violence.

*in-group* (non-target group): The people in each system or relation of oppression who are in power in that oppression. Members of non-target groups are socialized into the role of being oppressive, becoming perpetrators or perpetuators of the cycle of oppression, either actively or indirectly. A non-target group may retain its power through force, the threat of force, and/or misinformation about the target group. Members of non-target groups also have a history of resistance that usually is not recognized.

*invisibility*: The absence of target groups from the media, policies, procedures, legislation,

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social activities, and other milieus, which reinforces the notion, conscious or unconscious, that non-target groups are the “norm.” Invisibility contributes to the disempowerment of target groups and the perpetuation of the cycle of oppression.

*oppression:* The systematic, institutionalized mistreatment of one group of people by another for any reason. Oppression is based on a complicated and changing network of unequal power relations.

*out-group* (target group): The people in each system or relation of oppression who are without power in that oppression. Members of target groups are socialized into the role of being oppressed, internalizing the mistreatment and misinformation about the group(s) to which they belong. Each target group usually also has a history of resistance, which may not be recognized by people outside the target group.

*power:* Generally, the accumulation of money or goods, authority, sway or influence. Specifically, the differential ability, based on unequal distribution of wealth, influence, or physical force, to control the economic, political, sexual, educational, and other important decisions of others.

*prejudice:* An opinion, prejudgment or attitude formed without sufficient knowledge about a group or its members.

*privilege:* An invisible set of unearned rights, benefits, or assets that belong to certain individuals simply by virtue of their membership in a particular non-target group. Privilege is a dynamic system of overlapping benefits which may act to any particular individual's benefit in one set of circumstances and to that person's detriment in another.

*racism:* The systematic mistreatment of people of color based on the belief in the inherent superiority of one race and thereby the right to dominance. Racism is one manifestation of institutionalized differences in economic, social, and political power in which members of some ethnic and cultural groups benefit at the expense of others.

*sexism:* The systematic economic, sexual, educational, physical, and other oppression of women as a group; the exploitation and social domination of members of one sex by another.

*social justice:* A combination of laws, behaviors and attitudes promoting equal rights and fair treatment of all members of society. The practice of social justice includes resistance to racism, sexism, classism and other forms of oppression.

*stereotype:* An exaggerated belief, image or distorted truth about a person or group — a generalization that allows for little or no individual differences or social variation.



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## 1.14 Developing Definitions Handout

### Directions

Choose one or more of the following terms and write a one- to two-sentence definition for each.

Discuss how these concepts operate in your school, your community or the larger society.

difference

power

discrimination

stereotype

prejudice

racism

classism

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ethnocentrism

sexism

antisemitism

gender

homophobia

heterosexism

compulsory heterosexuality

dominance

co-optation

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complicity

in-group (non-target group)

out-group (target group)

invisibility

oppression

privilege

social justice