Social Justice Definitions

**Ableism** is discrimination against people with disabilities, including the expression of hate for people with disabilities, denial of accessibility, rejection of disabled applicants for housing and jobs, institutionalized discrimination in the form of benefits systems designed to keep people with disabilities in poverty, etc. *From Feminists with Disabilities for a Way Forward*

An ableist society is said to be one that treats non-disabled individuals as the standard of ‘normal living’, which results in public and private places and services, education, and social work that are built to serve ‘standard’ people, thereby inherently excluding those with various disabilities. Persons with disabilities face many kinds of barriers on a daily basis. These can be physical, attitudinal or systemic. *From Stop Ableism Inc.*

**Activism** is about using your power and your voice to make change. *From Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for Revolutions*

Activism is quite simply taking action to effect social change; this can occur in a myriad of ways and in a variety of forms. Often it is concerned with ‘how to change the world’ through social, political, economic or environmental change. This can be led by individuals but is often done collectively through social movements. *From Permanent Culture Now*

Progressive **social movements** are “processes that build the collective power of an organized constituency of excluded, marginalised, oppressed or invisible people, around a change agenda that enables them to access the full body of human rights, challenge the distribution of wealth and control of resources, challenge dominant ideologies, and transform social power relations in their favor” (Batliwala 2010a). *From Social Movements: Evolution, Definitions, Debates and Resources*

**Anti-racism** is the active process of identifying and eliminating racism by changing systems, organizational structures, policies and practices and attitudes, so that power is redistributed and shared equitably. *From NAC International Perspectives: Women and Global Solidarity*

Antiracism is an inclusive and anti-oppressive framework that addresses the intersections of oppression in order to address the full complexity of dismantling racism. *From ERAC/CE:Our Focus*

**Ally** is one whose personal commitment to dismantling oppress is reflected in a willingness to educate oneself about oppression, challenge one’s own prejudices, learn and practice the skills of anti-oppression, interrupt oppressive remarks, behaviors, policies and institutional structures. *From ICASA Resource Manual*

Someone who advocates for and supports members of a community other than their own. Reaching across differences to achieve mutual goals. *From the Gender Equity Resource Center*

**Black Consciousness** is Steve Biko’s term to describe the importance of validating the black self through ideological, political, social and cultural resistance. Similar to the Black Power, Black is Beautiful and Black Nationalist, movements. *From Lisa Brock’s Post-ERAC/CE Training Workshop*
**Cultural Appropriation** involves members of a dominant group exploiting the culture of less privileged groups, with little understanding or acknowledgement of the latter's history, experience and tradition. Because of white privilege, commercial cultural appropriators profit from the cultural property of others, often without just compensation being given to those to whom it belongs.  
*From Lisa Brock’s Post-ERAC/CE Training Workshop*

**Discrimination** is a showing of prejudice in treatment; specific policies or actions directed against the welfare of a group.  
*From Inclusion of Social Justice in Outdoor Leadership Training at 2009 Association for Experiential Education International Conference, Montreal, Canada*

**Dominant Narrative** are the stories told by the dominant culture that reflect the ideologies of those who have the most power in the society; they define our reality and guide our lives like an invisible hand, and when the dominant culture is oppressive, so are its narratives.  
*From Speaking Truth to Power: Understanding the Dominant, Animal-Eating Narrative for Vegan Empowerment and Social Transformation*

**Double Consciousness** is WEB DuBois’ term to describe the internal struggle of African-Americans to feel good about the “dark self” in a white supremacist world. The notion of a double sight or a “warring of two unreconciled souls” describes how oppressed people are forced to see themselves through the gaze of their oppressor, while trying to be whole and proud of who they are.  
*From Lisa Brock’s Post-ERAC/CE Training Workshop*

**Ethnic Group:** While one could argue that both ethnicity and race are socially constructed, their influence in terms of power and inequality is in the way that racial identities have been constructed historically. One could argue that they’re both illusory and imagined. But racial categories have had a much more concrete impact on people's' lives, because they've been used to discriminate and to distribute resources unequally and set up different standards for protection under law. Both public policy and private institutional and communal actions have created inequalities based on race. To be sure, groups defined as "ethnically" different have been discriminated against in the U.S. too, but not in ways that had nearly as dramatic an impact. Indeed, those "ethnic" groups that suffered from severe discrimination were usually labeled, at the time, as "racial" groups as well. Consider the history of discrimination against the Irish, Italians, and Jews, for example. People commonly make these distinctions between race and ethnicity as being biological, or cultural, or based on national origins and things like that. But it's really important to remember two things. First, both ethnic and racial identities have changed a lot throughout history. And second, there's very little evidence that people actually see great distinctions between race and ethnicity culturally, politically, and in daily life.  
*From Race: The Power of an Illusion and David Freund*

**Gender** is the socially constructed scale of masculine to feminine according to how much a person complies with the characteristics associated with the sex male or female accordingly. This is not necessarily linked to sex. Agendered persons are completely outside of this gender binary.  
*From Vox’s gender identity infographic*

**Gender Nonconforming** describes a person who doesn't conform to society's expectations of gender expression based on the gender binary, expectations of masculinity and femininity, or how they should identify their gender.  
*From the Gender Equity Resource Center*
Hegemony is the process by which dominant culture maintains its dominant position: for example, the use of institutions to formalize power; the employment of a bureaucracy to make power seem abstract (and, therefore, not attached to any one individual); the inculcation of the populace in the ideals of the hegemonic group through education, advertising, publication, etc.; the mobilization of a police force as well as military personnel to subdue opposition.

From Dino Franco Felluga

'Hegemony' in this case means the success of the dominant classes in presenting their definition of reality, their view of the world, in such a way that it is accepted by other classes as 'common sense'. The general 'consensus' is that it is the only sensible way of seeing the world. Any groups who present an alternative view are therefore marginalized.

From Michael Goldberg from the University of Washington

Intercultural communities that include many cultural groups of people based on comprehensive mutuality, reciprocity, and equality; this involves building relationships where all individuals and groups learn from one another, not just about one another. No one identity or culture is centered as normal.

From The United Church of Canada/L'Église Unie du Canada


From the International Socialist Review

Internalized Oppression is a complex, multigenerational socialization process that teaches target groups (women, people of color, LGBTQ people etc.) to believe, accept, and live out negative societal definitions of self and to fit into and live out inferior societal roles.

From ERAC/CE Training Workshop Resources

Internalized Superiority a complex, multigenerational socialization process that teaches dominant groups (males, whites, straights, etc) to believe, accept, and live out superior societal definitions of self and to fit into and live out superior societal roles. These behaviors define and normalize oppression.

From ERAC/CE Training Workshop Resources

Language regulates the forms of thinking, feeling, and meaning making to which we have access, which in turn constrain how we see the world and act on it.

Liberation is the act of struggling against systems of oppression with the ultimate goal of self-determination: the right to opportunity, thought, expression, and action.

From Mia Henry at the Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership

Microaggressions are commonplace verbal or behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults.

From The American Psychologist: May- June 2007

Multicultural communities that include many cultural groups of people based on values of tolerance, equal status of the groups, and celebrating one another’s culturally distinctive cuisine, dress, music, dance, and related outward expressions of culture; it usually requires only superficial and polite social interaction.

From The United Church of Canada/L’Église Unie du Canada
**Norm** signifies what is “normal,” acceptable, and desirable. “The norm” is something that is valued and supported in a society. It is also given a position of dominance, privilege and power over what is defined as non-dominant, abnormal and therefore invaluable or marginal.  
*From Ignite! An Antiracist Toolkit*

**Oppression** is prejudice towards a targeted group plus the power to unjustly distribute the resources through control of institutions, cultural attitudes, economy, and political systems.  
*Based off of information in ERAC/CE Training Workshop Resources*

Oppression has been defined as the following:
- It is institutionalized power that is historically formed and perpetuated over time;
- It allows certain ‘groups’ of people to assume a dominant position over ‘other groups’ and this dominance is maintained and continued at an institutional level.
This means oppression is built into institutions like government and education systems. It gives power and positions of dominance to some groups of people over other groups of people. For example, can you think of ways that heterosexism is built into laws around marriage, property ownership and raising children where you live, both presently and historically?

Sometimes you will hear the words ‘intersectionality’ or ‘systems of oppression.’ These terms point out:
- that there are multiple forms of oppression
- the extent and systemic nature of oppression

*From Ignite! An Antiracist Toolkit*

The hierarchical systems that positions some over others socially, politically, and economically and uses institutions to reinforce this system; oppression can manifest in social or legal exclusion, discrimination, inequitable distribution of resources, and emotional and physical consequences.  
*From National Education Association’s Diversity Toolkit: Social Justice*

**Patriarchy** is about the social relations of power between men and women, women and women, and men and men. It is a system for maintaining class, gender, racial, and heterosexual privilege and the status quo of power – relying both on crude forms of oppression, like violence; and subtle ones, like laws; to perpetuate inequality. Patriarchal beliefs of male, heterosexual dominance lie at the root of gender-based violence. Patriarchy is a structural force that influences power relations, whether they are abusive or not.  
*From the Asian and Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence*

**Prejudice** is a negative or hostile attitude, opinion or feeling toward a person or group formed without adequate knowledge, thought or reason and based on negative stereotypes. Prejudice is the result of "prejudgment" and often leads to discrimination.  
*From ADL: Anti-Defamation League*

**Privilege** is an unearned, special advantage or right that a person is born into or acquires during their lifetime. It is supported by the formal and informal institutions of society and conferred to all members of a dominant group, by virtue of their group membership.  
*From Ignite! An Antiracist Toolkit*

In unpacking this invisible knapsack of white privilege, I have listed conditions of daily experience that I once took for granted. Nor did I think of any of these perquisites as bad for the holder. I now think that we need a more finely differentiated taxonomy of privilege, for some of these varieties are only what one would want for everyone in a just society, and others give license to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant, and destructive. I see a pattern running through the matrix of white privilege, a patter of assumptions that were passed on to me as a white person. There was one main piece of cultural turf; it was my own turn, and I was among those who
could control the turf. My skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make. I could think of myself as belonging in major ways and of making social systems work for me. I could freely disparage, fear, neglect, or be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms. Being of the main culture, I could also criticize it fairly freely. In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence, which I was being subtly trained to visit, in turn, upon people of color.

From Peggy MacIntosh’s *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*

Privilege is the “special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to one person or group of people”. Privilege is constructed and normalized by the established frameworks of society – narratives that have been developed based on the power struggles of history. This means that people are classified by those who encounter them, and since these viewers are so influenced by the constructed norm, the classification may be an unconscious act.

From *Equity Matters*

**Race** is a socially constructed concept that is fluid and changeable, as opposed to rigid and natural, that places individuals into categories based on appearances that are ascribed with cultural characteristics; this concept assigns human worth and social capital to whiteness, not to other races or ethnicities, and perpetuates this value through racism.

Race is a specious (intentionally deceptive, untrue) socio/biological classification created by Europeans during the time of world wide colonial expansion, to assign human worth and social status, using themselves as the model of humanity, for the purpose of legitimizing white power and white privilege.

From *ERAC/CE Training Workshop Resources*

Omi and Winant define **racial formation** as “...the socio-historical process, by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed,” and explain that this process is accomplished by “historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized.” “Projects,” here, refers to a representation of race that situates it in social structure. A racial project can take the form of common sense assumptions about racial groups, about whether or not race is significant in today’s society, or narratives and images that depict race and racial categories throughout mass media, for example. These situate race within social structure by, for instance, justifying why some people have less wealth or make more money than others on the basis of race, or, by pointing out that racism is alive and well, and that it impacts people’s experiences in society. Thus, these theorists see the process of racial formation as directly and deeply connected to how “society is organized and ruled.” In this sense, race and the process of racial formation have important political and economic implications.

From *Racial Formation: A Sociological Theory of Race by Michael Omi & Howard Winant*

**Racism** is a form of systematic oppression that intersects with other forms of oppression (e.g. sexism, heterosexism, classism and ableism) in complex ways, therefore resistance to racism requires resistance to all other forms of oppression...When organizing around other systems of oppression takes into account how racism operates within those systems, fighting for all forms of social justice is more effective.

From *ERAC/CE: Our Focus*

**Religion** is a system of symbols...formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

From *Clifford Geertz*
Sex is a category according to the physical characteristics that you are born with and develop including genitalia, body shape, voice pitch, body hair, hormones, chromosomes, etc. defined in terms of male and female. This is not necessarily linked to gender.

*From Vox’s gender identity infographic*

Sex is a medical term designating a certain combination of gonads, chromosomes, external gender organs, secondary sex characteristics and hormonal balances. Common terms are “male,” “female” and "intersex."

*From the Gender Equity Resource Center*

Sexual Orientation is a fluid spectrum that describes who an individual is attracted to; this spectrum operates on the basis that sexual orientations range from heterosexual to homosexual including any sexuality in between and also asexual off of the spectrum. Sexual orientation is open to change.

*From Vox’s gender identity infographic*

Social construction is how society groups people and how it privileges certain groups over others. For example, you are a woman or a man because society *tells* you that you are, not because you choose to be—simple as that. Just like it tells you what race you’re classified as and what social class you belong in. It is all just a social process that makes us differentiate between what’s “normal” and what’s not “normal.”

*From Laura Flores from the University of California Santa Cruz*

Because social constructs such as facets of reality and objects of knowledge are not "given" by nature, they must be constantly maintained and reaffirmed in order to persist. This process also introduces the possibility of change: i.e. what "justice" is and what it means shifts from one generation to the next.

*From Wikipedia*

Social Justice recognizes the inherent dignity of all people and values every life equally. It calls for both personal reflection and social change to ensure that each of us has the right and the opportunity to thrive in our communities, regardless of our identities. Those who strive for social justice believe in the triumph of our shared humanity.

*From Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership*

Stereotypes are characteristics ascribed to groups of people involving gender, race, national origin and other factors. These characteristics tend to be oversimplifications of the groups involved, however. For example, someone who meets a few individuals from a particular country and finds them to be quiet and reserved may spread the word that all citizens from the country in question are quiet and reserved. A generalization such as this doesn’t allow for diversity within groups and may result in stigmatization and discrimination of groups if the stereotypes linked to them are largely negative. That said, even so-called positive stereotypes can be harmful due to their limiting nature.

*From Nadra Kareem Nittle in Race Relations*

An exaggerated oversimplified belief about an entire group of people without regard for individual differences.

*From the Gender Equity Resource Center*

Transgender is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity, expression or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth, including but not limited to trans people, asexuals, cross dressers, androgynous people, genderqueers, and gender nonconforming people.


**Transgender**

- Transgender (sometimes shortened to trans or TG) people are those whose psychological self ("gender identity") differs from the social expectations for the physical sex they were born with. To understand
this, one must understand the difference between biological sex, which is one’s body (genitals, chromosomes, etc.), and social gender, which refers to levels of masculinity and femininity. Often, society conflates sex and gender, viewing them as the same thing. But, gender and sex are not the same thing. Transgender people are those whose psychological self (“gender identity”) differs from the social expectations for the physical sex they were born with. For example, a female with a masculine gender identity or who identifies as a man.

• An umbrella term for trans, cross-dressers, transgenderists, gender queers, and people who identify as neither female nor male and/or as neither a man or as a woman. Transgender is not a sexual orientation; transgender people may have any sexual orientation. It is important to acknowledge that while some people may fit under this definition of transgender, they may not identify as such.

From the Gender Equity Resource Center

Trans Justice is a movement that works to mobilize trans and allied communities into action around pressing issues that affect trans people; it is based out of the right to self-determine gender and gender expression, free from all forms of violence and oppression, including personal and state violence.


Transformative Justice is concerned with systemic causes of violence. It addresses these systems with comprehensive outcomes that are based on safety and community accountability, not on punishment or alienation.

From Prison Culture: Transformative Justice

Transformative Leadership features inspired, collective vision towards structural change in the areas of human rights and social justice; the pursuit of that vision is done in collaboration with others and changes those who are committed to the work. It utilizes the strengths of all those involved and inspires personal growth in everyone connected.

From Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership