

Anti-Oppression 201: Levels of Oppression

Trainer Names:

Learning Objectives:

What skills, knowledge, and attitudes should learners take away from this session?

- Visualize ways to intervene and disrupt oppressive patterns in real-world scenario
- Learn basic vocabulary and concepts for Anti-Oppression
- Understand how oppression manifests in personal actions, institutions, and culture

Achievement Objectives:

What tangible steps will learners will take to advance real or simulated campaign work?s

- Reflect on how we can practice allyship in our lives and work

Time: 135 minutes (2 hrs 15 mins)

Normal = say out loud

Underlined = flipchart this!

Italics = trainer notes/instructions

Bold = key point

Preparing to Facilitate:

All Sprog trainers should review the [SSC Anti-Oppressive Facilitation resource](#), and AO trainers are strongly encouraged to read it over together. As you read the curriculum and prepare to facilitate, you may want to make a plan together about how you will respond to conflict and “Ouch” moments during the training, and how you will check in with each other about on-the-spot facilitation decisions.

White trainers leading this session are also strongly encouraged to read the following resources:

- [Tips for White Trainers Leading Multiracial Groups](#), from Training for Change
 - [The Sugar-Coated Language of White Fragility](#), by Anna Kegler
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1. Opening the Space [10 min]

Reference the Safe Space Agreements established at the beginning of the program, and briefly read over any additional agreements added during AO 101.

Give a content warning: This training includes discussions about systems of oppression and examples of how oppression shows up in our lives and movements. If at any point during the training you feel triggered by these discussions, please feel free to step away and take care of yourself however you need to.

Explain: Feeling **triggered** is different from feeling **uncomfortable**. When someone is triggered, it means that something in the present has caused them to re-live the pain from a past trauma. The term “trigger” in this context was first used to describe symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). On the other hand, feeling discomfort – especially when discussing subjects that are new to us, or difficult to face – is a

natural and expected part of the learning process. Learning happens at the edges of our comfort zones – we encourage everyone to practice leaning into feelings of discomfort during this training.

Remind the group who the designated Safe People are on the training team.

Read the training Objectives ([flipchart Objectives](#)).

Anchor: The ANCHOR step invites learners to reflect on past experiences which relate to the learning of the session. (e.g. “Think back to a time when _____. What did that feel like?”)

2. Reflection on Real-World Examples [10 min]

Act out a short dialogue between two people: One person is minimizing or trivializing the experiences of an oppressed group. The second person, while clearly uncomfortable with the statements being made, does not stop them – they either do not intervene at all and only laugh nervously, or their attempts at calling in their friend are feeble, cautious, and unsuccessful. The first person should use phrases like, “They’re pulling the race card” or “Christians are being persecuted.” In response to any comments from their friend, they may say, “Why are you forcing this on me?” or “I feel attacked,” etc. Act out the dialogue for the group.

To start of this training, we are going to reflect on an example of a situation that may come up while you're doing organizing work. Practicing anti-oppression requires us to respond when situations like this arise. As you watch, think about what is going on. Ask yourself if you have ever experienced something similar, and think about how you might react.

Trainer #1 - Hello everyone, welcome to our weekly campus women’s liberation meeting. Today we will be working on our campaign to secure free contraception for everyone on campus. Our agenda today will begin with drafting our letter to the university president, followed by a discussion on our social media strategy. Anything else we need to discuss tonight?

Trainer #2 - **raises hand and is called on** Yeah, I was hoping we could start off with talking quickly about co-sponsoring the rally being held by Black Student Union next week. They reached out to us last week about showing our support, and it feels really important to get back to them about that.

Trainer #1 - **grimaces and side-eyes other campaign members** Ohhh yeahhhh, about that... A few of us were talking earlier, and doesn’t that seem too controversial to be involved in?

Trainer #2 - What do you mean, controversial? I think it seems like a pretty obvious partnership. We are targeting the university president with our demand, they are targeting the university president with their demands, and it seems like a pretty clear way to strengthen our narrative of being students united together for justice. Plus, as students working for justice on campus, it is important that we show up for each other!

Trainer #1 - It’s just that... They have been using a lot of controversial tactics lately! That sit-in in front of the president's office was kind of a lot... Also, I hear a lot of their members have been speaking out against Israel lately. We don't have time for this - we have to stay focused on the issue at hand - getting free contraception for everyone on this campus. We will have a better chance of winning if we don’t associate with rabble-rousers and stick to our original plan!

Trainer #2 - Wait! We were just called out as a majority white group for not being inclusive of the diversity of voices on campus. As a majority white group that often works with the administration, we have a lot of power to bring legitimacy and power to other groups. Are we really not going to act in solidarity when we have this power?

Trainer #1 - Now you are just playing the race card, and we have already wasted five minutes. Let's get into this letter to the president.

Ask: What's going on in this conversation? *Take a few responses from the large group.*

Next, ask participants to turn to the person next to them and reflect on these questions:

- Have you ever experienced something like this before?
- How did you react?
- How did it all make you feel?

Give ~10 mins for discussion in pairs, then participants back to the big group. Ask if anyone would like to share, with their partner's permission, anything they talked about.

Add: The ADD step introduces new information and tools for learners to consider.

4. Basic Definitions Gallery Walk [30 min]

In this activity, participants are invited to explore new vocabulary in the form of a gallery walk. To set up the activity, flipchart the definitions below on six separate sheets of paper and hang them around the room.

Next activity, we're going to define some terms that are important for talking about AO. We recognize that this language that may be brand new to some folks, and that learning new language can be challenging. We believe these words are important to learn for several reasons:

- 1) Shared language helps establish shared understanding. Establishing shared vocabulary about this work can help us get on the same page and make sure we have a common understanding of the issues that we face. Shared language also helps us be precise with what we're talking about.
- 2) Language is a powerful tool. When we have the ability to name our oppression and oppressors, we can better organize to dismantle these systems.
- 3) The language we use should reflect our values. Because language is influenced by dominant culture, a lot of the language we learn in our lives reflects the values of systems of oppression – subtly or not-so-subtly. It's important that we each do the work of unlearning oppressive language, and learning language that is anti-oppressive, non-offensive, and inclusive.

Stage 1: Individual Gallery Walk. Give participants **10 minutes** to walk around the room and read the definitions. As they do, they should mark on the papers if the term is new or confusing to them, or if they disagree with the definition as written (but encourage them to focus on the whole definition rather than nitpicking wording). Encourage people to find a partner to walk with for the activity, although they can also walk alone if they prefer.

Stage 2: Group Gallery Walk. When participants have had a chance to consider the definitions by themselves, gather the group and go over the terms together, in the order they are listed below. Aim to spend **20 minutes** on this walk, or **2-3 minutes per term**, but you may take an additional 10 minutes if

needed. At each paper, trainers should “unpack” the definition for participants using the explanations provided below, and should also read aloud a few of the comments or notes that have been written on the page. If you find an especially interesting comment that you think the group should explore further, you may invite the comment’s author to identify themselves and elaborate on what they wrote. Be sure to ask for any burning additional comments or questions after each term.

→ *Trainer Note: It may be helpful for facilitators to choose a specific example to use when running through these definitions. You can use one that is familiar to most people, like racial oppression (as in the examples given here), but this can also be an opportunity to use an example that participants are less likely to be familiar with. Facilitators should find an example that both can contribute to personally – ideally, one as a privileged identity and the other as an oppressed identity.*

Definitions:

Anti-Oppression: The work of fighting to end all forms of oppression by taking concrete steps to dismantle and re-envision the institutions, belief systems, and power structures that uphold them.

Power: The ability to get what you want.

- *Unpack that:* This is a very simple definition of power, but it covers a lot. It can include the ability to influence others, or to enforce your own beliefs.

Prejudice: A conscious or unconscious negative belief about a whole group of people and its individual members.

- *Unpack that:* Prejudice is a pre-judgment, an idea that we form about a person based off of stereotypes or assumptions about aspects of their identity, instead of real knowledge or experience. It’s important to note that prejudice is not connected to power. Anyone can hold prejudices about a group that they do not belong to, and we all do.

Discrimination: The act of denying opportunities, resources, or access to a person because of their membership to a group.

- *Unpack that:* Prejudice + power = discrimination. When a person or group holds prejudices AND has the power to act on that prejudice by denying opportunities, resources, or access to another person or group, then those actions are examples of discrimination.
- *Example: Racism. (Give one or two examples that show the link between prejudice and power. It may be helpful to show both an interpersonal and an institutional example, e.g. “An example of racism at an interpersonal level is a judge giving a harsher sentence to a black person than they give to a white person for the same crime, because of conscious or unconscious prejudices. Jim Crow laws or the Indian Removal Act are examples of institutionalized racism.”)*

Privilege: The unearned advantages that members of a dominant group receive because of their membership to that group.

- *Unpack that:*
 - When systems of oppression marginalize and oppress one group, it empowers another group. This is part of how oppression works; systems of oppression wouldn’t last long if they didn’t benefit anyone.
 - If a certain group is privileged by a system of oppression, it does not mean that all members of that group will always be able to get whatever they want. It does mean that they will have specific advantages that people who are not members of the dominant group will not have.
 - Privilege often seems invisible to those who have it. In our earlier activity, it was easier to identify places where we had each been part of the margin than it was to name the ways that we’ve been part of the mainstream. It’s often easier to recognize when you are a victim of a negative stereotype than it is to see when you are benefitting from a positive stereotype.

→ *Example: White privilege. (Trainers select examples; one trainer should speak from personal experience and name privileges that they hold in relation to the example).*

Oppression: The systemic mistreatment and marginalization of people based solely on their membership in an identity group. Oppression is institutionalized, historically formed, and perpetuated over time.

- *Unpack that:*
 - When we say oppression is “institutionalized,” we mean that it is **built into social institutions**, like government and education systems.
 - When we say oppression is “historically formed,” we mean that it has **developed and evolved over time in specific social and political contexts**.
 - You’ve probably also heard the term “systems of oppression”. This term points out that there are multiple, overlapping forms of oppression, and the systemic nature of oppression. Systems of oppression run through our culture and language, and shape our beliefs and how we have learned to act. **They shape what is broadly understood as “normal” or mainstream** – and what is understood as abnormal, unacceptable, undesirable, or marginal.
- *Example: White supremacy. (Optional: Give a bit more detail about the historical context or how norms are shaped in the example you are using, e.g. “Under white supremacy, white skin color is the assumed norm, and white people are given power and dominance over cultures, nations, and people of color, who have been and continue to be exploited and oppressed for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of white power and privilege. We can trace white supremacy and the very concept of ‘race’ to European colonialism in the 14th Century.”)*

Allyship: An active, consistent, and arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person of privilege seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalized group of people.

- *Unpack that:*
 - The most important thing to recognize about allyship is that it is NOT an identity – it is a lifelong process of building relationships based on trust and accountability. Allyship is also not self-defined (i.e. we do not get to proclaim ourselves “allies”).
 - When we act in allyship, we don’t act out of guilt or because we are striving to earn the title of “ally”. We act because we dream of a world that isn’t divided by oppression and hate, and we have a genuine interest in challenging oppressive power structures. We don’t expect special recognition for our work, because we know that we are confronting issues other people live with – and struggle against – every day.
- *Example: (Give an example that models specific language we can use to talk about allyship as a process and not an identity, e.g. “White people may strive to ally themselves with POC. Through the work they do and the relationships they build, they show their commitment to dismantling white supremacy. They may seek out ways to use their privilege to help POC-led organizations.”)*

Intersectionality: A framework for seeing how different axes of privilege and/or oppression manifest in our lives. Intersectionality recognizes that all systems of oppression are connected, and to fully understand how oppression operates we must pay attention to the places where those systems interact and intersect.

- *Unpack That:*
 - Intersectionality helps us think about oppression in a way that takes into account our complex layers of identities. It helps us see the ways that those of us who hold multiple marginalized identities can be simultaneously impacted by multiple systems of oppression. It also helps us understand how we may hold privileged identities and marginalized identities at the same time.
 - The term “intersectionality” was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black feminist scholar. Crenshaw saw that when her fellow feminists or anti-racist activists discussed racism or sexism individually, women of color were getting left out of both conversations. For example,

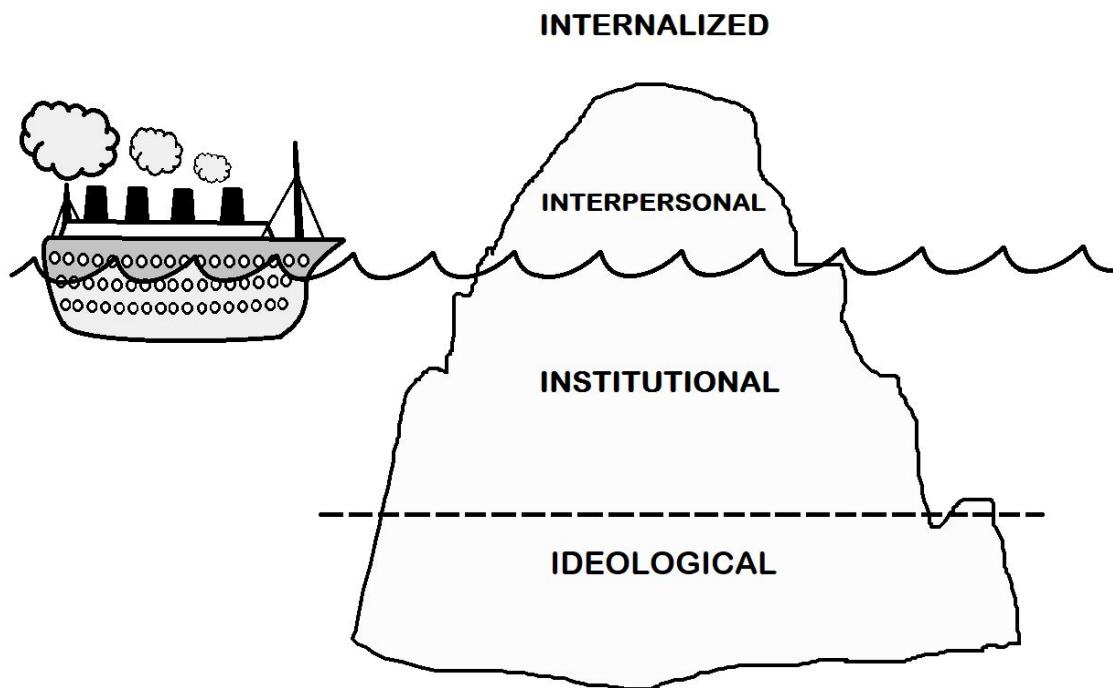
Crenshaw saw that organizers seeking to provide resources for victims of domestic violence often presented their information only in English, which made it inaccessible to many immigrant women who did not speak English. When the domestic violence workers approached the problem of confronting domestic violence, they didn't consider women who were also marginalized by their status as non-English speakers and migrant People of Color.

→ *Example: (Trainers give examples from their own experience, each giving an example of two marginalized identities that impact them simultaneously OR a marginalized identity and a privileged identity that they hold at the same time.)*

-- Break [10 min] --

5. Levels of Oppression [20 min]

Now that we've established some common language, let's talk about what oppression looks like in our lives. To help think through the different ways that oppression shows up, we use the metaphor of the iceberg of Oppression. (*Flipchart the iceberg*)



Explain the four levels of the iceberg, starting at the bottom (or, if you prefer, have Sprogers read these descriptions aloud from their handouts). After reading each level, ask Sprogers for examples to share, or share examples of your own. This will help encourage dialogue and allow you to check comprehension.

Ideological:

At the core of all systems of oppression is the **idea** that one group is somehow better than another, and therefore has the right to control the other group. This idea gets elaborated in a lot of ways: more intelligent, more hardworking, more advanced, capable, noble deserving, etc. Those ideas turn into

dominant cultural narratives. People in the dominant group learn to believe the ideology and see the world through its lens.

Institutional:

The idea that one group is better than another and has the right to control the other gets embedded in institutions in of the society, the laws, the legal system, police practice, the education system, hiring practices, housing development, media images, etc.

Interpersonal:

The idea that one group has the right to control another, which gets structured into our institutions, gives permission and reinforcement for individual members of the dominant group to mistreat people in the oppressed group. This includes offensive jokes, stereotypes, microaggressions, harassment, assault – the whole range of personal acts of violence. Many people in the dominant group are not consciously oppressive, but they have internalized the negative messages about other groups to the extent that they consider their attitudes towards other groups normal, harmless, or appropriate.

Internalized:

How oppression works within the groups of people who suffer the most from it. Oppressed people learn the **ideology** of inferiority, see it reflected in **institutions**, experience it **interpersonally** from members of the dominant group, and eventually come to **internalize** the negative messages about themselves. Internalized oppression can lead to heavy feelings of powerlessness or despair.

To drive the message of the iceberg home, explain:

The ship represents our movements and organizations. Oftentimes when we talk about “-isms,” we only talk about what’s visible above the surface – the interpersonal actions that can be easiest to see on a day-to-day basis. But we can’t build anti-oppressive movements or work to dismantle these systems if we only look at the interpersonal level.

For example: let’s think about the common confusion around what some people call “reverse -isms”. Understanding all the levels of oppression can help clear up this confusion. **Can someone take a stab at using the levels of oppression to explain why “reverse-racism” and “reverse-sexism” don’t exist?**

→ *Answer: Dominant groups are supported by institutional power, and oppressed groups are not. Members of an oppressed group can have prejudices towards the dominant group or individuals in the dominant group, and they can act on those feelings in hurtful, destructive, or violent ways – but in almost all cases, their acting out will be severely punished. The oppressed group does not have the power to enforce its prejudices, unlike the dominant group, which is backed up by the legal system.*

If we only focus on interpersonal actions, our ship will sink. We can’t only think of interpersonal violence as the bad actions of individuals, we have to also learn to see the part of the iceberg that’s underwater, holding that interpersonal piece afloat: the institutions and ideologies that reinforce and give permission for those individual actions.

...And we also need to do the hard work of unlearning oppressive ideologies that we’ve internalized, and the hard, painful work of unlearning the negative messages we’ve come to believe about ourselves.

Apply: The APPLY step invites learners to utilize the new information in a task, challenge, or focused conversation. (e.g. practice, application, case studies, compare, etc.)

6. Mapping the Four I’s [30 min]

To prepare for this activity, put up signs in four corners of the room, one for each level of oppression. Flipchart a list of types of discrimination (e.g. racism, sexism, ageism, etc.). Make sure to include all the examples on the chart in the AO 101 handout, and feel free to add more.

Announce that Sproggers are now going to practice using the language of the Four I's. This activity will get people moving! Ask everyone to stand as they are able. Then, read out a number of short scenarios that depict manifestations of oppression. After each one, Sproggers should move to the area of the room corresponding with the level of oppression that they heard depicted **most prominently** – note that every scenario will likely involve all four levels, because they are all interrelated..

Lead a short discussion about each scenario. Ask for volunteers to:

1. Explain why they are standing where they are. If the group is split between areas of the room, hear from people from each area. Invite a variety of opinions, e.g. "Did anyone have a different take? Did anyone hear a different level of oppression in this example?"
2. Identify the type of discrimination portrayed in the scenario. This can also be an opportunity to check for comprehension on the types of discrimination, e.g. "Yes, this is misogynoir. Is this anyone's first time hearing the word 'misogynoir'? Can someone unpack that term for us?"

Internalized- Xenophobia/Ethnocentrism- During a meeting, a non-immigrant continuously interrupts and talks over someone of immigrant descent.

Internalized- Sexism/Patriarchy/Misogynoir- A feminine person feels afraid of wearing feminine clothes, or showing skin, and instead feels a need to wear more masculine clothes in order to gain respect or avoid harassment at work.

Interpersonal- Colorism/Racism/White Supremacy- A white person crosses the street or locks their doors when a Black man is walking towards them.

Interpersonal- Colorism/Racism/White Supremacy- A dark-skinned parent tries to buy the family toothbrushes at the store and is denied by the store owner. So, the lighter-skinned child must make the purchase for the family.

Institutional- Ableism- Only 2 out of every 10 train stations in NYC are wheelchair accessible. It takes someone in a wheelchair 2 more hours to get to school on public transportation than someone not in a wheelchair.

Institutional- Capitalism/Classism/Racism- Wealthy districts, and essentially predominantly white districts, have three times as many supermarkets as poor ones, or predominantly POC districts, do.(Food Empowerment Project)

Ideological- Ethnocentrism/Imperialism/Racism- A multi-ethnic feminine person is constantly told they are "exotic" and is asked where they're from.

Ideological- Heterosexism- A stranger asks a person who was assigned male at birth and is masculine presenting if they have a girlfriend.

Away: The AWAY step invites learners to connect their new understanding to the real world context of their lives. (e.g. a personal action plan, commitment, projection into future, etc.)

7. Closing [10 min]

Return to the flipchart page with the bell hooks quote: "Until we are able to accept the interlocking, interdependent nature of systems of domination and recognize specific ways each system is maintained, we will continue to act in ways that undermine our individual quest for freedom and our collective liberation struggle." –bell hooks

In the rest of our workshops this week, we've been learning the nuts and bolts of organizing – but as bell hooks says, Anti-Oppression teaches us that to enact real change in the world, we need to address systems of oppression. We need to address the patterns of oppression as they arise in our organizations and movements, and we must strive towards dismantling all of these systems.

To close this workshop today, let's turn our attention to what we will be taking away from the space.

Pass out sticky notes to participants. Give them ~10 mins to journal and/or reflect silently on any or all of the following questions, and ask them to write down something on the sticky note to share with the whole group (it be a response to one of the questions, a different question they're still sitting with, an a-ha moment they're taking away from this training, etc.):

- Where do you see systemic oppression manifesting in your own organizing work?
- How can you incorporate anti-oppression principles in your life and organizing work?
- What is this training leaving you curious about?

When the ten minutes are up or participants are finished writing/reflecting, ask them to come post their sticky notes on the flipchart. Ask if anyone would like to share what they wrote on their sticky note aloud with the group. Then ask if anyone would like to speak to the last question specifically and share a goal they have set for themselves.

Optional: Close the workshop by having everyone stand in a circle and hold hands. Sing a song together, "pass the pulse", or simply take a moment of silence or a deep breath together and center yourselves in the moment. Alternately, if you want a more high-energy closing, you could say a chant such as the Assata Shakur freedom chant.

8. Pluses and Deltas [5 min]

*Collect feedback on the training session by asking Sprogers for training **pluses** (things that went well) and **deltas** (things that could have gone better/could be improved/that are growth zones).*

Resources:

[Grassroots Institute for Fundraising Training](#)

[AORTA](#)