

Working at the Intersections: Promoting Access and Accountability

U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women
2016 STOP Administrators & Coalition Directors Joint Meeting, Chicago, IL

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Remarks by Z. Ruby White Starr, March 29, 2016

I joined Casa de Esperanza as their Chief Strategy Office in July of last year after working at various mainstream organizations. Since then I've had some time to reflect on some of the differences in the way the work is approached. And it is clearer than before to me, what power is and power is very much what we are talking about here today. **Power is the ability to decide what a problem is, to decide what needs to be done about it, to decide who will be included to solve it, in what capacity, and with what resources.** I have that power within my own organization to a greater extent now than in previous positions, but it is also juxtaposed to power of a lesser degree within the broader domestic violence field because we work at the intersections of domestic violence. Not being one of the direct TA providers for STOP, I originally felt unclear about what I specifically could share with you until Michelle Brickley mentioned that there will be a room full of administrators and coalitions from all over the country and suggested I consider, "what would you want them to know about working at the intersections".

So I thought of what I'd seen since I arrived at Casa de Esperanza and what the communities that reach out to us for help ask for and need. I wonder if you would be surprised by how often we are reached out to, to provide training or participate on an advisory meeting because our issues are so important, but then told we need to cover our own expenses; or to review a tool or product after it's in its final stages to "infuse" cultural competence. I wonder if it would mean anything to you to know that many requests we get to "collaborate" come after everything is already decided and with little info except a request for a budget covering 10 days of work to review what the greater "they" come up with. I wonder how you approach the communities you want to "learn from" since many call us asking in different ways, who are these people? Why should we help them? Do we have to? What is this they are asking for? How do we get them to stop speaking for us about what they've learned about us, from us?

Promoting access and accountability by unpacking oppression and mapping the margins is beyond the scope of what can be addressed in my five minutes, these few days, and even the durations of your projects. But applying the concepts presented by Tonya and Farah can only begin, and continue, with a commitment to understand and resist structural racism as an explicit part of our work. This requires that you analyze how every issue you work on is shaped by it, how what you design is influenced by it, and how each of our organizations is shaped by it. To assist in this, I would offer three general strategies and reflections to apply in your work as you move from the center to the margins.

First, **Use a Multilayered Approach Right from the Start** (not as something extra). Work with culturally specific TA providers and communities working from an anti-racist foundation to put important issues on the table, frame issues around the most marginalized, and put them to work in different situations when examining a problem, developing approaches, or considering policy. "Our services are for everyone" is not enough. Universal goals are important, but different groups of people need different supports to reach that shared goal and all have different needs.

As an example, a universal goal might be that all children have access to a pleasurable and meaningful education. But if your strategies evolve from that, you may focus on resources and supports to cultivate, retain, and nurture good teachers and administrators; specialized curriculums; and increasing standards

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which might help middle class children of all races. But if you want to reach low socio-economic status children, you need to add nutritious meals, stable housing, and access to health care to the list of core strategies. If you want reach African American and Latino children, the list needs to include curriculums and pedagogical approaches that teach relevant history and counter the unconscious impact of pervasive negative stereotypes. And if you want to bring recent immigrant and limited English proficiency children out of the margins, your strategies include:

- Resources and supports to cultivate, retain, and nurture good teachers and administrators, specialized curriculums, and increasing standards;
- Nutritious meals, stable housing, and access to health care;
- Curriculum and pedagogical approaches that teach relevant history and counter unconscious impact of pervasive negative stereotypes; and
- English language supports, First language supports, and interpretation and outreach in parent's first language.¹

This process needs to continue to the most marginalized and be the starting place for targeting your approaches. Policies that dismantle racism need to account for the most marginalized, not incorporate their needs as resources allow. They should explicitly address disparate outcomes based on race, and provide mechanisms to reduce those disparities from the start.

Second, **Engage in Meaningful Collaboration.** Referral to a program is not collaboration. Coordination so you are aware of one another's activities is not collaboration. Asking for feedback on your activities without prior or further participation is not collaboration. Expecting time to be provided for free because "there is very little funding" is not only not collaboration, but exploitive.

To engage in meaningful collaborations, projects and initiatives need to effectively engage diverse communities through intentional, fully equitable, and reciprocal partnerships. Models, approaches, and research to respond to domestic violence often frame the issue, decide what the problem is, and develop tools to respond without ever seeking congruence between these and those that will be most affected--culturally specific communities and critical at-risk populations such as limited English proficiency or undocumented survivors. The lack of meaningful partnerships between mainstream domestic violence service providers, culturally specific organizations, and law enforcement can compromise victim safety. For example, in 2014, the absence of adequate language access resulted in the death of victims Deisy Garcia who made three domestic violence reports in Spanish to the New York Police Department stating that her husband intended to kill her. They were never translated or even investigated. Deisy's husband did kill her and then stabbed their two daughters to death as well.

¹ Adapted from a workbook prepared for National People's Action by the Grassroots Policy Project, Race, Power and Policy: Dismantling Structural Racism.

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The Trickle Down Community Engagement practices of our current systems have got to stop. Trickle-Down Community Engagement is used to describe the lack of effectively engaging diverse communities in intentional, fully equitable and reciprocal partnerships. It happens when we bypass the people who are most affected by issues, engage and fund larger organizations to tackle these issues, and hope that the people most affected will help out in the effort with little or no resources. You can avoid and eliminate Trickle-Down Community Engagement.

- Review your projects and budgets for an equitable distribution of resources.
- Examine the role and the dynamics you play to perpetuate trickle down.
- Identify the culturally specific community based nonprofits that should tackle the issues.
- When they don't have the capacity to respond (often due structural racism itself), mentor them through strategic partnerships.
- And above all, adequately resource them to participate fully, build their own capacity in the process, and design strategies from the inception of an idea to implementation.

Culturally specific, community based organizations need assistance to fully engage. They may often agree to participate on projects despite lack of funding because of the intense need for better responses for their communities. They may organize trainings, sign on to coalitions late in the process without being included in its formation or priority setting, and conduct outreach and translation for free. They may lack, or be stretched beyond their, capacity (making them appear inept or unreliable) or they may not have the knowledge of unwritten rules designed and navigated by mainstream organizations. Meaningful collaborations can address this. They can promote equity, diversity, inclusion, and meaningful engagement. They will create more space; produce tools that will help build new strategies; and minimize tokenism and the replication of institutional oppressions.

And last, **Turn the Mirror on Yourself.** Deepen your understanding of how racism impacts the issues you work on; study feminist work by women of color and deepen your understanding of the intersections of oppression, privilege, and liberation; question frames of reference that elevate sexism as a primary issues and others as auxiliary, that create qualifications for jobs based on historical assumptions not really ones needed to do the job, and that question different communication styles, attitudes toward conflict, and approaches to completing tasks; learn from your mistakes with humble and honest reflection. And if you think you got it down, look around and make sure people of color are thriving in your institutions, that they are occupying leadership positions in majorities, that your approaches to the work could not be more closely aligned with what your communities reflect otherwise keep challenging privilege and oppressive behaviors in yourself and others from a place of love like I challenge you today.

If this makes you uncomfortable, or you think there's just not enough money or time to do things this way, or you find it "racist against whites" (which is something we hear quite often), then ask yourself why you feel this way. **Equality can feel like oppression when you are used to privilege.** And when it comes time to speak about these things, don't speak for or about me or my community. It's an inside out job, so share what you have learned along your own journey with your people, because change can only come from within.