

With All of Who We Are

INTRODUCTION

I am a white woman who has been doing unlearning racism work for the last four years. I was asked to be part of the opening plenary panel for the National Association of Women and the Law, a feminist organization of lawyers and law students. Most of the members of the association are white women involved in the legal profession. I wanted to look at the fact that although as feminists we are accustomed to think of ourselves as the victims of oppression, we are also, as white people, part of the oppressive structures of the society. I wanted

to look at the ways our internalized dominance works. To do that I drew on my own experience doing unlearning racism workshops, and reflecting on the multiple aspects of my own identity. And I tried to get the women at the conference, particularly the white women, to reflect on the many different aspects of their identities. Unless we can acknowledge and deal with both the ways we are oppressed and the ways we

participate in the oppression, at the same time, we will never be able to move toward a world of justice, fairness, equality.

This is the speech, pretty much as it was given.

WHERE I STAND/WHERE YOU STAND

My name is barbara findlay. I am a fifty-seven year old, white, lesbian woman lawyer. I was raised working class, Anglophone, and Christian. I want to talk to you today from all of those parts of me. I want to talk as a white woman who has been thinking about feminism for twenty years and who has been working on racism for four years. And I invite you to listen with all of who you are.

Are you:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• raised working class or poor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• raised middle class
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a woman	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a man
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• lesbian, gay, or bisexual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• heterosexual
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a survivor of physical abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• not a survivor of physical abuse
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• under 25	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• over 25
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• over 55	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• under 55

• Francophone	• not Francophone
• a Native person	• a non-Native person
• someone whose first language was no English	• someone whose first language was English
• a survivor of sexual abuse	• not a survivor of sexual abuse
• a person of colour or a person of mixed heritage	• a white person
• transgender or transsexual	• non-trans
• a survivor of mental hospitals	• not a survivor of mental hospitals
• a person with a disability	• a person with no disability
• a person with Jewish heritage	• a person with no Jewish heritage
• a survivor of addictions	• not a survivor of addictions
• someone who has trouble with reading and writing	• someone who has no trouble reading and writing
• ever called fat	• never called fat
• a refugee	• not a refugee
• a person of Muslim heritage	• a person not of Muslim heritage

These are some of the ways that you may be targeted (if you are in the left column) or may be in the dominant place (if you are in the right column) in this society.

What do you think? In what aspects of your life are you in the dominant place? In what aspects of your life are you in the targeted place?

What would you add to the list above? My list is by no means complete. And the oppressions do not all operate the same way. One oppression is not “the same as” another. But oppressions have things in common. Typically, the non-target people (in the right column) have more power, the target (those in the left column) less. Typically the target people suffer from systematic mistreatment ranging from violence through economic disadvantage to ostracism. That mistreatment is institutionalized in the laws and social mores of the society; it is also carried out within personal relationships. Typically the non-target people feel “normal”; they think that the target group people are “abnormal”. Typically the non-target people feel that the target group people somehow deserve the mistreatment they are getting. And the target group is typically granted less credibility than the non-target group. The target group both feel and are excluded from the mainstream.

What I would like you to notice is that each of us is located in different ways in relation to the oppressions of this society. In some ways we are the targets of oppression. In other ways we are in the dominant place.

What I want to suggest today is that in order to work toward a full understanding of the world, what each of us must do is to look at both the ways we have been oppressed in Canada, and the ways in which we participate in oppression, at the same time. I particularly want to focus on the experience of white feminists.

FEMINIST WORK AND THE CHALLENGES

Those of us who are feminists have identified the ways that we are victimized by sexism. We have had to learn language to talk about the ways we have been hurt. We have had to come up with language where none has existed to describe our experience: for example, terms for ‘sexual harassment’ and ‘wife battering’ and ‘date rape’. And we have had to use, and talk into, the language used by men, and make space for ourselves within its framework

Now, here’s the trick. In coming to understand feminism, the tools we had to work with were the thinking tools that we learned essentially from sexist society. So we were operating within a male way of talking and writing while at the same time trying to critique it. For example, we criticized men for thinking they were being “objective”, but we operated against an assumption that objectivity remained possible.

Feminist work began by describing and analyzing our experiences as victims of sexist oppression. Later, our language changed, and we focused on the ways in which we were survivors of that oppression. The strength of feminist work is that we took very seriously the proposition that “the personal is

political”, and our analytic work grew out of our experiences of, and the work organizing around, the oppression we were undergoing.

Now, those of us who are white feminists find ourselves being challenged: by lesbians for exclusiveness, by women of colour for implicitly demanding that they choose between alliances with white feminists and their own people, by disabled women for failing even to make our meetings accessible; by working-class women for the over generalization of our analyses. In fact, the ways we are being challenged as middle-class straight white feminists are some of the same ways in which we challenged men.

How can we, as white feminists who have been working hard as feminists for a long time, deal with these challenges? In thinking about these questions I want to attempt to move away from what I think of as me-too analysis. As feminists, some of our work was directed at the men in this way: we said “you have left us out”. And as a lesbian some of my work has been to say to straight feminists “you have left us out”.

I think that if we are not to end up with a series of add-on oppressions, with each group in turn trying to wedge space for itself in the conceptual structures of the next-more-dominant group, we need to be able to re-examine the conceptual structures of where we live, in order that we can talk about the targeted places and the oppressive places, at the same time. And because almost all of the work feminists have done so far has been to figure out the ways that we are victimized by, for example, sexism, or sexism and racism, or sexism and

homophobia, I want to talk about the ways that internalized dominance works.

MY OWN INTERNALIZED DOMINANCE

As a woman I have been hurt by the injustice of sexism which gives men privilege over women. When I began to think about racism I realized that in relation to racism, I am the one who is over-privileged.

I want to talk to you about some of the ways that I have noticed internalized dominance in myself. And then I want to talk about some of the ways that I think we can work together to acknowledge some of the different ways that we stand in relation to each other.

Internalized dominance is the incorporation of the fact of social privilege into the thought patterns, the behaviour patterns, and the expectations of people in the dominant place.

Just as I was socialized by sexism when I was growing up, to believe that women were inferior, weak, unreliable, hysterical — you know the list — and just as I was socialized as a lesbian to believe that I was (pick one) bad/evil/crazy, I also learned that as a white person I was the norm. And that training is just as powerful, and just as pervasive, as the training I got as a woman, as a lesbian.

When we talk about the ways that we internalized hurtful messages about ourselves, we call that internalized oppression. For example, when we believe of ourselves that we cannot do

math/climb mountains/be aggressive because we are women, when we think of ourselves as flighty and worth less than men, that is internalized oppression.

When we look at the ways in which we are socialized into the dominant, powerful places in the world we have to look at our internalized dominance.

You would expect that there would be entire libraries written by men about what it is like to be male and to deal with sexism, work that we could refer to when thinking about our privilege as white women. But there aren't. Writing about or talking about internalized dominance is very difficult for people in the dominant place for this reason: it feels normal. Ordinary. We are precisely part of the norm when we operate from the dominant place. The ways in which our behaviour is oppressive is immediately clear to anyone who is in the target place in relation to us. But as non-target people we experience ourselves as being “ordinary”, “just who we are”, “part of our personality”.

These are some of the ways that I have noticed my own internalized dominance when I was working on racism. First of all I notice my shame and guilt when I admit to these things! I could equally well talk about ways my internalized dominance operates on issues of Jewish oppression, or ablebodiedness. I choose to talk about racism, first because I have worked most deeply on that issue. But also because I noticed recently when we were doing an unlearning racism workshop that the way my internalized dominance works around issues of Jewish oppression, the way that I have been trained to perpetuate

Jewish oppression, is this: I don't know, and I don't notice. I do not remark Jewishness and I do not ask about it. So I confess that the other reason that I am going to talk about racism is because I have done more of my homework around that issue.

If I wanted to create a racist society, I would put only a few people in the Ku Klux Klan. I would construct the social world so that all the other white people deplored the Ku Klux Klan...and did nothing about it. Most white people are actively socialized first of all not to notice racism, and secondly to be unable to do anything about racism when we do see it. I, an otherwise articulate woman who does not often find myself at a loss for words find myself paralyzed at how to interrupt a racist joke. I am surprised, I am shocked, I am offended, but I don't know what to say. This paralysis is not an accident. I have been taught "everyone is entitled to their own opinions", "it's only a joke", and "it's rude to say that someone is doing something bad".

I noticed about my own racism that I was unwilling to look at people of colour in the eye. I was unwilling to do that because I felt guilty. The effect of that guilt of mine is that people of colour are literally not seen.

Where I worked I was often in meetings in which there was only one woman of colour, who was a native woman. She didn't get listened to much. In trying to be "helpful" and "supportive", I noticed that what I would do was to finish the end of her sentences, or repeat what she said by saying "I think

what she means is..." effectively usurping the voice of the woman of colour who was speaking and perpetuating the structure of racism where the only credible voice is a white voice.

I noticed that the language I used to describe the world is language which was shot through with an assumption that white men were the centre, the norm. For example, look at the phrase "women and visible minorities". That phrase completely excludes women of colour...where do they belong? It hides "invisible minorities" such as, for example, lesbians and gay men. It imports from the concepts of democracy the notion of legitimized powerlessness: that is what a minority is, after all. And it sets up white people as being in the majority, which, in the world, we simply are not.

I noticed as I began to work on racism that I had a tendency to romanticize and defer to people of colour, which prevented me from having real conversations.

I noticed of myself that I am systematically ignorant of my own people. And I noticed that as white people we are not invited to think of ourselves as "white." The whiteness of the dominant place is assumed; we identify the colour of someone's skin when they're *not* white. Instead we think of ourselves as "Scottish," "Ukrainian," etc. Because we never remark the presence or pervasiveness of us as white people, we mask the power structure of racism.

I noticed that when I walked into a room I immediately register the number of women. I assess the likelihood of there being

lesbians there. I noticed that I did not register the number of white people. I just didn't *see* the presence of white people and the absence of people of colour.

I noticed when I looked at who I was connected to that I was connected largely to white women, lesbians and straight women. I noticed that there were very few people of colour in my life. That has changed.

I noticed when I reviewed my own intellectual history that I had come to my current thinking first by way of philosophy, from there to sociology, through feminism—largely through a straight, white, middle-class feminism— and from there to reading what has been written by women of colour. What I noticed is that I read women of colour but I don't, largely, read men of colour: that I am in that way participating in the division of people of colour from each other, by reading only the women.

I notice that in feminist groups where the rule of thumb is consensus, consensus can operate to silence people who are different than the dominant group. It can silence women of colour in largely white collectives. It can silence lesbians in primarily straight collectives. And it can silence working-class women in primarily middle-class collectives.

The more that I thought about my own internalized dominance, I came to realize that this is the reciprocal side of oppression: that I knew a very great deal about dominance from the point of view of the target place, but almost nothing about it from the point of view of the non-target place.

If you review what you know about sexism, it provides a great scope for investigation of internalized dominance.

We have complained:

- that men have defined what is relevant and what is important
- that men have ignored what we have said about our own needs
- that men beat us up and rape us
- that men treat themselves as the definition of “normal”
- that men exclude us from economic privilege

We see those things manifested in our own lives, and we see them done by men that we know. But we also know that it is not individual men who are solely responsible: it is also the sexism of the society. And sexism does not operate only at an individual level; it is institutionalized in the law, in education, in social institutions like the family. So also it is with every kind of dominance.

CONTRADICTING INTERNALIZED DOMINANCE

I want to offer a few ideas about how to contradict internalized dominance. First, I think that we need to hang on to the idea that we are all good people. The fact that I got socialized into racist attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs, is not my fault. I got those messages about myself as a woman and myself as a lesbian. It is unremarkable and completely obvious that as a

white person I will have learned racism. That doesn't mean that it isn't my responsibility to work on it. It is.

We need to become less afraid of the "R" word. So long as we explode in righteous indignation if someone suggests that something we did is racist, we effectively prevent discussion of the issue—and silence people of colour.

I think that we need to realize that racism is not only overt, intentional behaviour; it is also unintentional assumptions and actions. That fact that we did not *intend* to behave in a racist way does not mean that we have not, any more than men's unconscious sexism is not sexism. We need to listen very carefully when women of colour criticize us. We should not be surprised by anger, and we should not run away in the face of anger. We have to believe people of colour when they tell us about racism, believe lesbians when we tell you about homophobia, believe...

I think that we need to take advantage of, in a systematic way, the experience we have had in target groups—as women, lesbians, whatever—to understand our experience in the dominant place.

I suggest that as an analytic strategy we have to embark on something that I call radical particularization. That means that we must in our analyses quit thinking in one-down terms from the straight, white, middle-class, able-bodied, Christian-raised, Anglophone male norm. Analyses of sexism or racism or classism or homophobia treat those dynamics as if they were separate. Occasionally people write about "intersecting

oppression" or "double disadvantage." But my experience in the world is *not* that one-dimensional. If someone hits me over the head with a baseball bat I can't tell if it is a sexist bat or a homophobic bat.

We have to take seriously once again the notion that "the personal is political" and start by examining the particularity of each person's location in relation to the oppressions of the society. My experience as a white, Christian-raised lesbian will be different than my friend's experience as a straight, Jewish woman of colour. Each of us is located differently in relation to Jewish oppression, racism, and homophobia. Those different locations in the world will affect our experience both of the world and of each other.

Some feminists have objected that this would be too "complicated." But it is not the analysis that is too complicated. It is the world. Unless we can take into account the complex realities of our lives we will end up with a partial story.

And I am not simply "multiply oppressed" as a working-class lesbian survivor of mental hospitals. I also have socially conferred privilege as a white, able-bodied, Christian-raised Anglophone. When I act in the world it is hard to figure out what part of my actions come from or are related to the ways I have been oppressed, and what part of my actions come from my internalized dominance.

Thinking about oppression as "additive" or "intersecting" is like treating them as separate colours in a braid. But if racism

is yellow and sexism is red, the experience of them together is something different than striped. It is more like orange.

If we adopt a strategy of radical particularization, then we may find that there is not “one” analysis but a polycentric understanding of the world. That idea of “one” analysis, “one” truth is a concept developed by men who were very much like each other. Perhaps we will find that truth is information prised through different experiences and locations in the world, and that we are mistaken to be striving after one unitary theory.

We need to rethink our working structures. To the extent that our organizations are not representative, and most of them are not, I suggest that we need to take the responsibility consciously for thinking about whatever the issue is from the points of view of the women not in the room. This could mean, for example, that if there were no lesbians in the room, it would be the specific responsibility of someone to find out what lesbians are thinking about the issues under discussion. I would suggest that the checklist for representativeness include all of the groups protected under section 15 of the Charter of Rights, any group legally constituted to be in a particular relationship to the issue (for example, welfare mothers or people in institutions), Native people, Francophones, and working-class people.

When we organize things we should expect and encourage caucuses around different constellations of oppression and dominance. We know from our experience as women, and I know from my experience as a lesbian, that we did not learn

about sexism and homophobia in the schools. I learned about sexism by talking to other women in places where no men were. So we need to understand that caucuses are part of a process of coming to voice.

We need new language. I hunger for a word to describe in a positive way what a non-racist society would look like, a word like feminism, so that I can envision the future rather than being caught in a reactive reconstruction of the past. And I want a word to describe my experience as a lesbian—not as a victim first of sexism, and then on a separate pass through my experience, as a victim of homophobia, but a word that reflects the fact that my experience is unitary. We need a vocabulary to talk about our lived experiences and what grows out of them, so that I no longer have to think about my life by detouring through the straight white male standard to find that I am “doubly oppressed.”

I think that when we speak and write about the world, we should check ourselves and each other to ensure that when we talk about “women” we specify which women we are talking about, and how we learned the information from which we are generating our analyses.

In that process, we need to review our work self-consciously from the point of view of women different from us, and be able to assure ourselves that what we claim as a general truth would be seen by them as a general truth.

I do not mean to say that we can never write about women whose experience is not exactly like ours. But I do mean to say

that if we do, we need to acknowledge and explore our own relationship to the questions we are investigating. As white women, we *should* be writing about racism: we should be writing about racism as we participate in its construction and maintenance.

We need to work with other white women on racism, with other able-bodied women on able-bodiedism, with other straight women on homophobia, with other non-trans women on transphobia, to learn to recognize and acknowledge the ways internalized dominance works. We must be gentle with each other in doing that work, and not fall into “white flight,” the self-righteous distancing from any white person we do not consider to be “as advanced” as we on the issue of racism.

If we continue to work against the ways we have been victimized, and at the same time work against the ways we have been over-privileged, change for some will not be at the expense of others.

POSTSCRIPT

When I first encountered feminism more than thirty-five years ago, it changed my life. It made the world understandable, and it gave me hope for change.

Looking at racism as a white person—at oppression from the point of view of the over-privileged—is also transforming my life. It is giving new shape to my hope for change.

Thinking about victimization and over-privilege at the same time is new territory. This paper is a beginning. I would like to hear your responses to it. Do you agree? Disagree? Do the ideas make sense? Where are they mistaken?

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