

How to Build an Anti-Opressive Practice

What is an Anti-Opressive Framework?

An **anti-oppressive framework (AOP)** refers to the processes and methods through which we understand how systems of oppression (colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc.) can result in individual discriminatory actions and structural/systemic inequities for marginalized groups in society (The Office of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Anti-racism, 2023). AOP shares similarities with other forms of study and praxis that seek to disrupt dominant ideologies, discriminatory systems, and structural barriers: Critical Race Theory; anti-racism; queer and trans liberation; intersectional feminism; and decolonization of education.

AOP is a participatory approach in which the person in a position of authority intentionally collaborates with people who are directly impacted by the work (The Office of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Anti-racism, 2023). Promoting deep reflection and **critical consciousness**, AOP is an approach rooted in mutual learning and in co-production of knowledge. To explore more, please visit our [recorded AOP Lunch and Learn workshop](#).

Critical Consciousness: "The process of continuously reflecting upon and examining how our own biases, assumptions and cultural worldview affect the way we perceive difference and power dynamics" (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005, p. 441).

AOP in Action

The following tools are not all-encompassing; there are many ways you can incorporate anti-oppressive lenses, but we hope this provides you with a stable foundation.

HAVE A REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Allowing for consistent and critical self-reflection is a key component of building an AOP. By highlighting how you occupy positions of power and privilege through your access to resources and unearned advantages, you can pinpoint ways to correct these imbalances and avoid recreating oppressive behaviours and spaces.



Critical Concept: Anti Oppressive Practice



Video 1: [University of Houston's Anti-Oppressive Practice](#). Used under Fair Dealing.

Questions for Reflection

- How does my identity create positions of privilege? How many of those privileges impact my ability to best meet this person's needs?
- Who is accessing my support vs who is not? Why or why not?
- What barriers are preventing people from accessing my support?
- How can I work collaboratively with people (especially marginalized) to intentionally meet their needs?

ENGAGE IN ACTIVE LISTENING

Allow others to share their perspectives and various lived experiences. To be an active listener is to position ourselves as learners. People may express things in ways that we might not fully understand in virtue of different social locations. Listen and gather information with intention to do something with it, if that's what the person disclosing wants. You can ask questions, take notes, offer support. Active listening looks different based on the context.

IDENTIFY THE BIGGER PROBLEM

Our practices must aim to address root causes, otherwise we may be complicit in oppressive behaviours. Here are the Top 9 Identified Systemic Issues Faced by Students in Canadian Higher Education (The Office of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Anti-racism, 2023). Which ones can you and your team work towards addressing?

Affordability: Cost of higher education has increased significantly. This can lead to high levels of debt and financial stress.

Access to Education: Indigenous individuals, those with disabilities, and those from low-income families are underrepresented and underserved in post-secondary.

Mental Health: The high-pressure environment of education leads to mental health issues; we need better campus mental health support and resources.

Student Engagement: Many students feel disconnected due to a lack of opportunities for involvement in campus life.

Culture Shock: International students face unique challenges in adapting to new environments (language barriers, financial challenges, social isolation).

Accessibility: Physical barriers on some campuses make it difficult for disabled students to access education and campus resources.

Employment Opportunities: Students struggle to find employment after graduation, leading to financial instability and underemployment.

Campus Safety: There is a need for institutions to prioritize the safety and well-being of their students.

Institutional Funding: A lack of stable funding for higher education institutions in Canada can lead to cutbacks in programs and services that students rely on.




WORK COLLABORATIVELY

With this tool, empowerment becomes the key focus. Giving marginalized individuals and groups the tools to be active agents in their own success allows for them to be included as much as possible in decision-making processes, offering them necessary autonomy. It is important to be intentional in collaborative work, constantly reflecting on our purpose and action plan regarding support and practices. Working in partnerships across identities attempts to balance out unequal power dynamics, creating supportive and informed environments.

CHALLENGE POWER AND PRIVILEGE THROUGH SOLIDARITY

Solidarity work is integral to AOPs. You might be familiar with the term **allyship**: this refers to actions and practices that those from dominant groups can take to support and amplify oppressed groups (Women’s College Hospital, 2023). However, allyship tends to turn performative, often co-opted from existing movements that have been organized by oppressed peoples. It asks oppressed groups to put in the labour of education, without dominant groups investing personal cost in the work needed to challenge inequities. While many allies properly leverage their power to make real change without seeking validation, allyship—especially performative—oftentimes make a negligible impact in equitable balancing of resource and power distribution.

In contrast, **solidarity** actively and intentionally aims to redistribute unfair advantages of systemic oppression. Rather than being an ally—which can function as a label—engaging in solidarity work is an action-based approach. Calling for a deeper commitment to equity work, it removes the onus from oppressed groups to provide education and resistance. To explore this distinction further, here is [a journal article by Jenalee Kluttz, Jude Walker, and Pierre Walter](#).



**Fearless Futures' Differences
Between Allyship and Solidarity**

Solidarity	Allyship
Intention aligns with impact	Static state of action
Sacrifices privilege to dismantle systems	Performative, showing how 'good' we are
Liberation is bound together	Allies placed outside systems
Connects the micro to the macro	Focuses on interpersonal transgressions
Creates meaningful, lasting change	Symbolic, but lacks investment in resources

Figure 1: Table created by Asher Firestone to highlight the differences between Allyship and Solidarity. Used under Fair Dealing.

References

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