



Create **Action**

Anti-Oppression Backgrounder

A resource for supporting youth well-being through anti-oppression principles.

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Introduction

This backgrounder was developed by *CreateAction* partners, led by Mythri Vijendran with overall guidance from Sonya Howard, SRDC-affiliated consultants, and included the collective input of over 12 staff members. This backgrounder is by no means intended to be an exhaustive list of resources. Our hope is that the information in this resource may initiate greater dialogue and discussion within our organizations on the importance of anti-oppression (AO) principles to our work in community economic development. It is a goal within *CreateAction* to create accountable spaces that are embedded in trauma-informed and AO principles where youth well-being is prioritized.

Adopting an AO lens for this program is aligned with efforts to adopt diversity, equity and inclusion practices into employment settings. By adopting this lens, you may be better positioned to foster a trusting relationship and develop a safe, inclusive, and supportive working environment with youth in the program, which may contribute to a more successful placement experience for both you and the youth.

We acknowledge the program includes employers with different degrees of experience in supporting youth experiencing barriers to employment. Regardless of where you are in terms of your learning journey, establishing a process of compassionate self-reflection, and a commitment to ongoing learning and adaptation, can serve to foster a more supportive relationship with your *CreateAction* youth.

Additionally, an important related concept is **intersectionality**, which refers to one's exposure to the multiple, simultaneous, and interactive effects of different types of privilege and/or oppression.^v In applying an intersectional framework, a person's experiences would not represent the sum of their parts but represent intersections of axes of privilege and/or oppression.^{vi}

Figure 1 shows examples in a Canadian context of a person's identity and social location variables, as well as processes of power and oppression, which would be included in intersectional analyses. Note that the further away from the center of the circle a person's identity falls, the more marginalization they will experience.

Adopting an Anti-Oppression Lens

Adopting an AO lens can help you as an employer to understand the privileges you carry while engaging with youth. This can help minimize the chances of unintentionally reinforcing power dynamics that could contribute to a harmful relationship with youth. By understanding your privileges, you can also reflect on how you can leverage them to support youth during their placement. For example, this could include changing mindsets, behaviours, and attitudes to foster a more inclusive workplace culture for youth and leveraging your networks and social capital to support youth in gaining employment after their placements.

This process can begin by identifying your social location and acknowledging the power and privileges you experience as an employer, especially in relation to the work dynamic between you as a supervisor and with the youth as an employee. Acknowledging this power imbalance is an important step towards creating an accountable space and fostering a trusting relationship with youth to help them feel comfortable sharing experiences about their social location while it relates to barriers to employment.

An example of the social location experienced by a *CreateAction* youth intern can be: person of colour, male, able-bodied, gay, and NEET status.

The intent here is not for youth to be encouraged to disclose information about their social location, but rather for you to foster a trusting relationship with youth of all social identities.

Additionally, acknowledging this power imbalance can help to move beyond fostering safe and brave spaces to creating more accountable spaces when engaging with youth. This refers to implementing guidelines, approaches, and practices that acknowledge the burden on marginalized youth to be brave and, instead, placing the accountability on the employer to act equitably and inclusively.^{vii}

Microaggressions

One way that youth may experience oppression during a placement is through microaggressions. Microaggressions take place through interactions or behaviours that are related to one's membership in a social group, which is discriminated against or subject to stereotypes.^{viii}

Microaggressions are everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to a person based solely upon their marginalized group membership.^{ix}

The difference between microaggressions and other forms of discrimination is that they can be so subtle that they go unnoticed and the person perpetrating them may not be aware of their comment or behaviour's impact. In a workplace setting, this can potentially create a psychologically unsafe environment for marginalized employees. Psychological safety refers to "a shared belief that the team is safe from interpersonal risk, and safe teams are teams in which members feel accepted and respected."^x

Microaggressions can be categorized into three types of aggressions:^{xi}

TYPE	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
Microassaults	Explicit violent or non-violent attacks (conscious)	Telling hurtful "jokes" about a youth who is an immigrant
Microinvalidations	Verbal comments or behaviours that negate someone's psychological thoughts, feelings or experiences (often unconscious)	Youth sharing that they are constantly being interrupted at meetings and employer being dismissive of this
Microinsults	Behaviours or verbal comments that are insensitive and come from a place of privilege (often unconscious)	Regularly mispronouncing a youth's name because "it's too difficult to say"

Due to the covert nature of microaggressions, they may persistently go unnoticed and uncorrected in the workplace. Despite our best intentions, everybody has biases, and we have all made mistakes - recognizing and responding to microaggressions is about recognizing how they affect others and untangling them from your core beliefs and behaviours.^{xii}

Addressing Microaggressions

Microaggressions can occur despite best intentions; however, you can take steps to help reduce their likelihood of occurrence. If you are approached for committing a microaggression, resist the urge to act defensively and regard the interaction as a learning

moment, rather than a personal attack. The most important step is to listen to how the youth is feeling, the impact the microaggression had on them, and what they hope the intended outcome to be of this conversation. Once you've listened to and sought to understand the youth, it is also important to follow through on the outcomes or suggestions they've raised. Additionally, it could be of benefit to youth for you to continue to educate yourself, raise awareness of microaggressions among coworkers, and advocate for organizational changes.

If you witness a microaggressions taking place towards the youth, it is important to exercise your judgement as to whether action is needed in the moment by observing how the youth reacts. You can take your cues for your involvement from the youth. After witnessing, you can offer the youth support if it's wanted and have a conversation with them about how you can be helpful moving forward.

Anti-Racism

Racism is a fundamental force in Canadian society that shapes and amplifies all other forms of oppression, including misogyny, heterosexism, ableism, and classism, among others. Racial identities are socially constructed. In other words, race isn't rooted in biology. Race is created and upheld by the social forces that govern our lives. As social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Idle No More continue their push to dismantle racism around the world, it is vital that we develop an understanding of racism and anti-racism.

Racism can operate at macro and micro levels in society which can lead to inequitable social outcomes for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC). There are many forms of racism, including structural racism (racism among institutions), institutional racism (racism within institutions), interpersonal racism (racism between individuals), and internalized racism (racism within individuals).^{xiii} Systems of racism are what lead to poorer social outcomes and disproportionate harm and violence to BIPOC youth in all areas of life, including employment, education, housing, health, and the justice system.^{xiv} Additionally, BIPOC youth face the intersectional harms of racism and ageism.

The youth you are supervising may face systemic barriers or forms of discrimination based on race, identity, and more. It is important to work beyond recognizing racism towards becoming anti-racist to create a safe, inclusive environment for the youth, especially for those who may identify as BIPOC.

Becoming Anti-Racist

Anti-racism has emerged as an important term, as seeing oneself as "not racist" implies complicity in societal racism, and therefore it's not sufficient to merely be "not racist." Instead, we can either allow racial inequities to continue or actively confront them.^{xv}

Anti-racism is a process of actively identifying, understanding, and describing racism, in order to actively dismantle systemic racism in the workplace.^{xvi}

The work of anti-racism includes understanding how racism can operate at different levels in society, leading to inequitable social, economic, and legal outcomes for BIPOC communities, among other harms. Becoming anti-racist calls for steps to be taken at each of these levels to actively interrupt racism. For *CreateAction*, employers can take steps at the institutional and interpersonal levels to foster both a supportive work environment and a supportive working relationship with youth.

When mainstream media chooses to focus on incidents of racist violence, it can be triggering to BIPOC youth. Being triggered means having an emotional reaction due to being reminded of prior trauma.^{xvii}

At the organizational level, it's important that you as an employer foster a supportive environment for youth to process these feelings, which may include making space for challenging conversations in different employment settings, being flexible with workload, implementing holistic mental health supports, and adjusting the youth's placement to grant time off as needed.

If you would like support in discussing adjustments to the youth's placement (e.g., paid time off), please contact CCEDNet or NAFC (contact information is listed on [page 10](#)).

Figure 2 shows statements that imply what specific actions can be taken to move towards becoming anti-racist,^{xviii} many of which are relevant to you as an employer while supervising youth. Becoming anti-racist is lifelong work with a clear goal and no finish line.

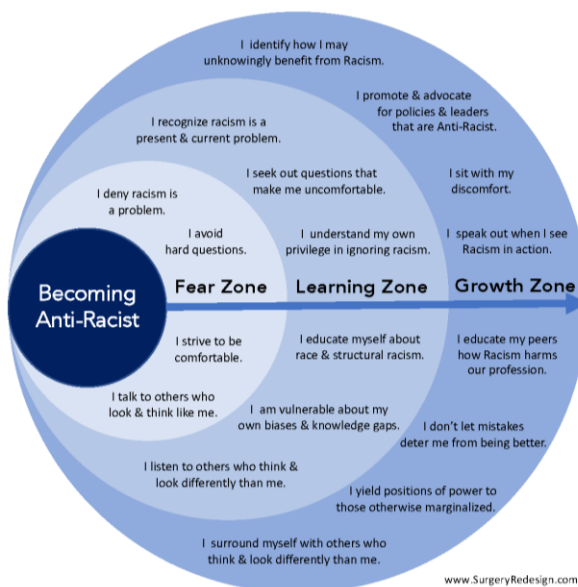


Figure 2.
Becoming Anti-Racist

At the interpersonal level, it is important to acknowledge that unintentional interpersonal racism – as a symptom of systems of racism – may be present within your employer-employee relationship. One step towards becoming anti-racist is understanding sources of **white privilege** that you may benefit from as an employer and supervisor.

As a social category, whiteness is dynamic and context-specific. For example, in 19th century Canada, English settlers were considered white whereas Irish, Polish, and Italian settlers were not. However, that has since changed, and in the context of 21st Century Canada, whiteness is a social category that encompasses all people of European descent.^{xxix,xx} While whiteness does not negate the oppression that many white people experience along the lines of class, gender, ability, and sexuality, it does confer a set of both obvious and less obvious passive advantages on all white people that are denied to those who are not white. Peggy McIntosh describes this as an “invisible knapsack of unearned assets.”^{xxi} It’s important to note that those of BIPOC identity can also carry white privilege as a result of being white passing, which refers to lighter-skinned BIPOC being perceived as white.^{xxii}

It is important to acknowledge and take accountability for the impact of words or actions that have been addressed as racist, whether intentional or unintentional. Through *CreateAction*, this may look like listening to the youth intently, validating their feelings, and addressing the harm you may have caused by discussing with the youth their desired outcome, which requires critical self-reflection.

White Supremacy Culture

White supremacy in this context refers to an overarching political, economic, legal, and social system that privileges those who are white and those who uphold the myth of white supremacy. White supremacy culture is a culture that has resulted from both conditioning and colonization, reinforcing a racial hierarchy of power and control.^{xxiii} White supremacy culture is reflected in the current realities of the disproportionate amount and systemic forms of harm and violence directed towards BIPOC people and communities.

White supremacy culture refers to broader political, economic, and social systems of domination that influence all of us, and how this ideology becomes the basis of our beliefs, values, norms, attitudes, and behaviours that show up in all of us.^{xxiv}

Furthermore, the impacts of colonization, oppression, cultural genocide, and ongoing experiences of racism and discrimination result in intergenerational and contemporary trauma for many Indigenous peoples. This may show in the form of **lateral violence** that occurs when feelings of dissatisfaction or anger are shown against each other, rather than the true adversaries, such as colonialism and patriarchy, among others.^{xxv}

As a *CreateAction* employer, it is important to identify how characteristics of white supremacy culture have shaped broader political, economic, and social systems that we are all subject to, and how white supremacy culture may be present in your workplace.^{xxvi} According to

author and activist Tema Okun, “We are all swimming in the waters of white supremacy culture. We are all navigating this culture regardless of our racial identity.”^{xxvii} Anyone, regardless of racial identity, has the potential to contribute to white supremacy culture in the workplace.

Characteristics

Many characteristics of white supremacy culture can unintentionally show up in our organizations, which may be extremely difficult to identify and can impact every part of our work. This culture unconsciously trains us to internalize attitudes and behaviours that can be harmful. Each characteristic, on its own, may not necessarily be harmful. It depends on how the characteristic is expressed, how many characteristics are expressed, what impact this expression has on the youth and the organization, and if the combined expression of some or all these characteristics directly or indirectly reinforce a hierarchy of power and control.^{xxviii}

Consider a new placement where you may be looking for youth to complete certain placement activities. One characteristic of white supremacy culture is “perfectionist culture.” An employer or youth may have perfectionist tendencies which may help them complete a task to a high standard with few, if any, errors. However, in the context of white supremacy culture, this perfectionistic tendency may be potentially harmful if taken to extremes at the expense of the individual, and if it reinforces the broader “perfectionism” belief that we can or should be perfect, which raises questions such as who decides what perfect is and why would we want to be perfect.^{xxix}

Below are distinct characteristics of white supremacy culture^{xxx} and examples of how each may show up in a *CreateAction* placement, and how it may be addressed. These examples are provided to help program staff and employers reflect on and see our cultures so that we can transform and build cultures that support us individually and collectively.

CHARACTERISTIC	EXAMPLE OF CHARACTERISTIC	POTENTIAL RESPONSE
Perfectionist culture	Identifying what’s wrong more often than what’s right in the performance of youth and seeing mistakes as a personal shortcoming.	Consider if enough time, space, resources, and information were provided so youth could ask questions and co-create their placement experience.
Only one right way	The belief that there is one right way to do things and that once youth are introduced to ‘the right way’, they will willingly adopt it.	Consider asking youth for their input on different ways to go about their work and sharing your openness to different approaches.
Either/or thinking	Binary thinking as it may relate to successfully completing placement activities, instead of recognizing multiple/co-existing	Provide time and space for youth to try out various ways of completing tasks to see what approaches work best for them to

	truths or ways of completing activities.	confidently complete their activities.
Defensiveness	Responding to new or challenging ideas from youth with defensiveness.	Model, with others in your organization, how to ask for and receive critical feedback. Name defensiveness as a problem/challenge when it is one.
Fear of open conflict	If youth are raising difficult issues during check-ins or at meetings, the youth is seen as being rude.	Distinguish the line between being polite and bringing up difficult issues. Model, with others in your organization, how to identify, raise, and work through difficult issues, starting with something small.
Individualism	Ascribing more value to youth who are able to accomplish their placement activities on their own, with little supervision, guidance, or assistance.	Partner youth with a more experienced staff member to complete an activity in a collaborative way using a peer learning approach.
Objectivity	Invalidating and/or being dismissive of youth who may think in ways that don't appear 'logical' or 'rational'.	Consider approaching discussions with the youth from a place of curiosity, encouraging them to share their views, input, or suggestions.
Quality over quantity	Placing a focus on youth producing deliverables or measurable outcomes, rather than helping youth understand the process of producing quality deliverables.	Consider providing more time to discuss work quality and processes, and ask youth for their views, experiences, and suggestions.
Sense of urgency	Youth activity timelines driven by funder timeline requirements, leaving little time for youth reflection and learning.	Consider if enough context was provided for conducting the placement activities, and regularly reassess if more time is needed at different points for youth to complete activities.
Worship of the written word	Expressing frustration towards youth who don't respond with written communication.	Encourage youth to share how they prefer to communicate information, which could be orally.
Power hoarding	Feeling threatened if youth suggest changes to their placement alternative to what was planned for them.	Embrace change and adopt the "tell me more" approach.

Paternalism	An employer pre-defining the placement experience, without much room for flexibility.	Involving youth in key decision-making processes related to their placement.
Right to comfort	Expecting youth to raise things you didn't know in such a way so that you don't experience any discomfort and dismissing youth or their input if you do experience discomfort.	Welcome discomfort and not knowing as the root of learning and learn to sit with them before responding or acting.
Progress is bigger/more is better	Basing the success of the youth placement on accomplishment of many tasks and/or growth for the organization.	Place value on the youth developing stronger relationships with existing partners at organization.

Each and all of these characteristics and qualities can lead to disconnection within the placement between the youth, the supervisor, and/or the organization. Therefore, it is worth reflecting on how these characteristics may influence organizational and team culture, which may have an impact on the working relationship between you, your colleagues, and the youth. Through self-reflection and mindful engagement with others, we can better understand how we may be unintentionally embodying this culture in our working relationships, particularly as an employer/supervisor and youth in *CreateAction*.

Next Steps

This resource introduces key concepts for adopting an anti-oppression lens during the *CreateAction* placement. While it is not an exhaustive list of resources and suggestions, we encourage you to deepen your understanding of anti-oppression by diving deeper into:

1. Sources referenced in this backgrounder - [see below!](#)
2. Practical tools/strategies/resources curated by *CreateAction* staff - [read more](#)
3. Building your own AO reading list based on a [CCEDNet-curated collection](#)

If you have any questions, comments or would like one-on-one support in how you can go about unpacking these concepts further to aid you in supervising the youth, please reach out to us through the contact information listed below!

NAFC Employers	CCEDNet Employers
Monida Eang meang@nafc.ca 1-613-858-4892	Lauren Brooks-Cleator lbrookscleator@srdc.org 1-343-488-2142

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