

EQUAL - We seek to understand every type of prejudice and fight them all

We aim to assist everyone, customers, staff, partners, volunteers to achieve equality of opportunity and respect.

Achieving this involves recognising that there are structures in the world which act against some specific groups in a negative way and prevent them from achieving their full potential. The mechanisms by which society denies people equality are not random or accidental; they are systematic and all pervasive. Many of them are operated by good people who are simply unaware of the effect of their behaviour or misconceptions. For this reason, we need to counter these mechanisms with an equally sophisticated, very specific and conscious package of thinking and actions.

Oppression

The mechanism by which society denies people the equality that is due to them is called oppression. Oppression is where a group of people **systematically** deny someone else the right to be proudly and powerfully themselves on the basis of that person's **membership of a particular group**. Oppression is usually, but not exclusively perpetrated by groups which are seen as being more powerful than their target.

This definition clearly distinguishes between oppression and many other forms of undesirable behaviour that we would all deplore. For instance, it does not cover bad behaviour by neighbours who know each other but just don't get on.

Oppression leads to behaviour from jokes at the expense of particular types of people to harassment at work or hate crimes like street attacks, rape or murder. Although some oppressive behaviour can be seen as harmless, it should never be tolerated because it becomes part of a relentless pattern and even relatively harmless jokes can erode self esteem when combined with the systematic assault which a member of an oppressed group has already suffered.

Oppressive behaviour is part of a systematic assault on a person's power. Typically it begins with early childhood when stereotypical views of groups of people are peddled as though

they were the norm and young people are punished if they step out of these stereotypes (big boys don't cry, nice girls don't get angry, only cissies like poetry, foreigners don't behave properly). During childhood the oppression of young people is omnipresent and makes the imposition of stereotypes and a reduction of self worth easy to achieve. Children are comparatively powerless and are not expected to have views, opinions or behave in ways that contradict those of the adults who are expected to "control" them. From an early age we are taught that children should obey their parents and teachers because they are too young to have sensible views and opinions. (Mummy/Daddy/teacher knows best, you will understand when you are older and wiser, respect your elders). We come to believe that this is the way the world is.

Internalisation

As we grow older we are likely to escape from the role of the oppressed and powerless youngster into the relative comfort of believing what we have been told about the group(s) we belong to. We internalise the limiting effects of the misinformation in preference to fighting the system all our lives (wives should obey their husbands, working class people should know their place, gay people should stay away from children, there is only one "right" way to do things so people who are culturally different from us are "wrong")

We may not have made a conscious decision to believe these things, it becomes part of our frame of reference. They are so deeply ingrained within us we can struggle to think that things could be any other way. This process of **internalisation** is particularly dangerous, because it means that many of the people who belong to oppressed groups will reject the leadership of those who seek their liberation. Their voices will be quoted to give support and justification to the oppressor (I think these feminists take things too far, I've never suffered from racism, disabled people can't expect everything to be changed to accommodate them).

Stereotypes

Oppression is targeted at those who are (or are perceived to be) a member of a particular group. Attached to each of these groups is a series of oppressive **stereotypes** which purport to describe inescapable characteristics of each member of the group. They are, in fact, dangerous and damaging myths. Thus it is said that **all** older people are slow or all young people are reckless. It is often suggested that all Pakistani people are religious (actually, increasing numbers are very secular even though they probably identify as Muslims). Even worse, all Muslims are sometimes seen as terrorists (this was a charge that used to be levelled at Catholics during the Troubles in Northern Ireland). It is easy to see why stereotypical labelling is dangerous. If all women are good at caring it makes it difficult for those who are drawn to something else to feel proudly and powerfully female. If real men are protectors of a family, it makes it hard for gay men to believe in themselves.

We can use our knowledge of the oppressive stereotypes in our work to help to refine the

support we offer to colleagues or customers. For instance if someone is an older colleague in a younger team, we can check out (but not assume!) whether they feel less able/energetic or flexible than their colleagues. A customer who is gay or a woman may find it harder to understand sexual exploitation as anything other than an inevitable part of their lot.

We have all picked up stereotypical images of certain groups as we have grown up. It is important to identify these and to recognise that they are not our fault. They were put in place at a time in our lives when we were being systematically denied our power. They will often be unconscious feelings and should be treated as such. They are now an anachronism which must be re-examined in the light of our experience and the available evidence.

We can help this process in a number of ways:

- By finding out the diverse groups that are represented amongst our colleagues or customers.
- By reading about these groups (ethnic and sexual minorities have newspapers and other periodicals, there are novels and factual accounts of almost every oppression).
- By asking our colleagues and customers what it is like to be part of their group (and always being aware that they might not wish to provide this evidence and may have internalised much oppression)
- By visiting relevant places (Mosques, Gudwarra`s, gay clubs, womens centres, day centres for older or disabled people.....)
- By examining our attitudes and history to work out where the oppressive stereotypes might still lurk.

Organisationally Brighter Futures is committed to monitoring all its work so that we can be aware of any unwanted stereotypical bias that creeps in. It is important for us all to contribute to this statistical work because it is only by monitoring the facts and figures that we will detect potentially unconscious bias.