

Introduction to Diversity



There is diversity in every group, however similar people appear to be. Our understandings, assumptions and approaches to that diversity will affect the functioning of the group, its development and its impact.

Take our language and ways of communicating about or with diversity as an example. Language that is likely to be considered appropriate in some times and places, could be considered inappropriate, even offensive, in other times and places. This might be true even with the same group. We take risks in communicating about diversity. But not to communicate about it is to risk obscuring or ignoring that diversity, supporting oppression or prejudice, and to hinder us from understanding our own experiences.

The context of group diversity

Economically, socially and politically, some groups of people have demonstrably benefited more than others in Western societies, be they white people, men, heterosexuals, or non-disabled people, for example. Perhaps less obvious, but also benefiting in society would be, for example, people with mental health issues, people in certain classes or age groups, cis people* or employed people. This is not to say that all people in a particular group have benefited similarly, just that it is likely to be the case that they have benefited more than people not in that group. However, people in those groups may have also been penalised and had limits put upon them; there are more men than women in prisons, for example.

'Intersectionality' refers to the 'intersection' of multiple forms of discrimination. Some people will

* cisgender - a term for people whose gender identity matches the anatomical sex they were assigned at birth

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experience oppression from more than one set of people e.g. a disabled person may be discriminated against by non-disabled people, a woman may be discriminated against by men, a black man may be discriminated against by a white woman. A disabled black woman may not know why they are experiencing discrimination – it could be on any or many of the grounds of their difference.

People who identify as, or are perceived to be, in the mainstream of society are those that appear to have more benefits and opportunities in life. Those who are, or are perceived to be, on the margin of society are likely to have had different life experiences, with fewer benefits and opportunities. The differences will inevitably affect the way they behave.

How might diversity show itself?

In groups there is often a mainstream group – people perceived to be in the centre of the organisation. The mainstream may appear to be friends, or be people who appear to think or behave in similar ways. People outside this group – in the margins – may feel lonely, or angry, for example. They may try to join the mainstream group, adapt to those group norms, or resign themselves to being in a marginalised position. They may link up with other outsiders. People in some margins may never bother to join the group in the first place.

Why does dealing well with diversity matter?

Not dealing well with diversity in a group will affect its ability to achieve its aims:

→ some people will not feel able or willing to contribute what they could;

- some people will express frustration in inappropriate ways or at inappropriate times, risking decision making becoming time consuming, difficult or impossible;
- some people may become disenchanted, disenfranchised or ill, and people may start to disparage the group to people outside of the group, or display other difficult behaviour;
- some people in the mainstream group may begin to take sides;
- ultimately, some people may leave the group, or the whole group collapses.

So why don't we manage diversity well?

We may only see and understand a small fraction of diversity and the ways in which that diversity has affected us. We may have a range of emotional reactions. These will affect our ability to deal well with diversity.

Rhizome as a collective is committed to understanding intersectionality, working positively with diversity, tackling oppression and making the most of diverse perspectives, bringing them into all of our work. We are always learning ourselves, and are open to discussing any of these issues.

Integrating diversity and anti-oppression issues into working with groups:

In all training and facilitation there are ways of bringing in anti-oppression and diversity issues, whether it be simply using a variety of cultural references in anecdotes through to training exercises explicitly aimed at increasing understanding or motivation to tackle oppression. Ultimately if any group is going to work well together, members of the group need a common understanding of oppression and the confidence to be able to tackle it constructively.



Diversity Training

Here is a broad summary of some of the main approaches:

Awareness training

Often, but not always, about one type of discrimination and oppression and often, but not always, delivered by someone who has experienced that particular type of discrimination. As people talk, read or listen to others, their awareness and understanding can increase. But simple awareness isn't sufficient if the aim is to empower everyone.

Anti-discrimination training

Developing, agreeing and using some clear rules about how to behave or not behave on issues of Equality and Diversity.

Legally based training

Particularly about the current relevant legislation such as the Equality Act 2010. This training concentrates on clarifying the organisational and personal responsibilities for not discriminating against people on specific grounds.

Policy training

Often about how and why to be a fair employer, fair recruiter and/or fair provider of services and what that might mean in practice in an organisation.

Anti-oppression training

Training that works on the emotional basis and experience of oppression and discrimination, that aims to increase people's understanding of the experience of oppression and how to actively challenge discrimination.