

Using Empathy to Create Social Change

There is a quote from Daniel H. Pink that says “Empathy is about standing in someone else's shoes, feeling with his or her heart, seeing with his or her eyes. Not only is empathy hard to outsource and automate, but it makes the world a better place”; Pink suggests that it takes understanding in how one thinks, acts, and feels within society to fully empathize with someone. Being empathetic means being able to think beyond yourself and put yourself in another person’s shoes and position. To create change in society, we first have to learn how to empathize with others. We can do this by unpacking our own privileges and understanding how we can use them to create a positive change. We can educate ourselves about various groups of people and recognize whether these groups are hegemonic powers, mainstream, subcultural, or marginalized. We can challenge prejudicial views and try to unpack where the assumptions originate from. In order to foster acceptance and change in society as well as create a social change, we must be empathetic to others in our culture by unpacking our privilege, educating ourselves, and challenging prejudicial views.

In order to unpack your privilege, you need to determine your standpoint. Your standpoint is composed of your statuses and your place within society. The statuses are: age, gender, family, socioeconomic, race, sexual orientation, ability (mental and physical), ethnicity/language, body, family, and citizenship. Within society, you can have a place within the hegemony (the institutions such as education, government, and healthcare), the mainstream (the majority of the population whose statuses and beliefs directly align with those of the hegemony), the subcultures (smaller, distinct cultures that exist within the wider society), or the marginalized (the minority groups whose statuses do not align with the hegemony, and as a result they have challenging experiences). Privilege is an unearned special treatment or right granted to someone based on one or more of their statuses; those with privilege are meant to remain oblivious, therefore it is important to take notice and unpack privilege. On a daily basis, one may recognize various aspects of their identity more than others because it may impact their day to day life; for instance, a woman may notice their gender identity more

prominently than a man because a lot of women are subject to gender based harassment such as catcalling. Usually the part of one's identity that they do not need to think about often is the one that awards them the most privilege; this can be seen when a straight person experiences a societal privilege from their sexual orientation if they can easily purchase a greeting card for a partner that depicts their relationship. Once you have recognized which of your statuses have provided you privilege, you must determine what privileges they have granted you. Are you more likely to get a job over another person? Are you less likely to experience gender based harassment? Do you see your romantic and sexual relationships depicted in the media more often than not? These are all various forms of privilege people that receive. We can use these privileges to bring attention to the disadvantages that others face by becoming allies for various minority groups and by showing empathy to them.

In order to confront oppression, you first need to recognize areas of oppression, and begin to take action against them. Begin to stand up and speak out when you hear or notice oppressive ideas or actions. The next step is to educate yourself and understand why action is important in these situations. Education can only begin when you start feeling uncomfortable. If you are already comfortable talking about a subject, then it likely means you already understand the concept well enough. When something makes you uncomfortable and you are not willing to talk about it, it means you are uneducated on that subject matter, and the comfort will come as you learn to understand it. Islamophobia, racism, sexism, serophobia, mentalism, fatphobia, ableism, and classism are just a handful of the systems of oppression that need to be talked about and understood by members of society. Educate yourself about the experiences and heritage of a target group; you can read about them, attend seminars, attend cultural events, participate in discussions and even speak directly to members of this group. An equally important way to get involved and get educated while also educating others in the process is to join an organization or group that oppose oppression and attend social action and change events; this participation is exemplary and eloquent, which is likely to be mirrored by others who take notice in your

action. As you learn about the hardships faced within select groups, you will find the behaviors and attitudes of bigots to be appalling; you may feel infuriated by the actions and words of others or even dismayed. These reactions are normal and expected from allies in such situations, but by forming this allyship with minority groups, you are reflecting empathy, feeling commiseration and revealing that you are willing to learn and understand about the struggles the group has faced. You are comprehending what life is like from their perspective and you are becoming a voice for that group to be recognized and heard as well as validating their perspective.

Everyone makes assumptions about other people, it is a part of human nature. But being able to challenge and unpack where these preconceived notions are coming from with help us to empathize with others. To start doing this, we can recognize the things that everyone shares within humanity rather than what things divide us; realize that every human body is made up of the same interior structure and everyone deserves to be treated fairly. There are three forms in which discrimination can come in: individual acts of discrimination, institutional discrimination, and discriminatory ideas and beliefs. Individual acts are based on the beliefs and preconceived notions that we hold on other people. This can be shown in a situation where a homosexual teen is bullied by someone whose religion is not accepting to gays; this individual person's beliefs are biased against this teens sexuality. Discrimination in institutions occurs at the level of policies and practices; some institutions can be social such as governments and schools. An example of discrimination in the education system within Ontario is that the history of Indigenous people and black Canadians is not widely talked about in history classes; they have made many contributions that are not being fairly recognized due to the Euro-centrist curriculum. Discriminatory ideas and beliefs is a general summarization of how the ways that individuals and institutions think about different groups is directly affecting their actions upon others; these are the ideas and beliefs that are most commonly held by members of society. An example of a common misconception surrounding the black community is that they are all violent and 'gangster'. The reality of this assumption is

that it is coming from the way that media has portrayed these people negatively, causing people to make these generalized assumptions. We need to examine our own attitudes towards various groups of people. We are not born to be biased against one another, it is something that is taught through different institutions. Denying equitable opportunities and access to employment to people who face some form of a disability is an example of systemic discrimination within businesses and shows ableism. The ability to recognize various types of discrimination can help you to unpack whether it comes from personal beliefs, a social norm that has been embedded in society, or whether it comes from an institution. Once that has been determined, you can dig deeper and try understanding where the ideas come from and why people think the way that they do. (Was it portrayed in the media? Is this a part of a religious belief or practice? Are people generally uneducated about this group?). One of the best ways to combat someone's prejudicial views is to force them to unpack their own beliefs. By continuing to question them and ask them to explain what they said, you give them a chance to really think about and understand the assumption they are repeating something that they heard someone else say, so they will be able to start questioning themselves as well. Allow yourself to keep an open mind and open heart to understand the lives of others better and become an ally for target groups.

Being empathetic means being able to think beyond yourself and put yourself in another person's shoes/position. As opposed to sympathy which means feeling pity for someone and presenting sorrow. Empathy is what will help create change in society because it allows us to be passionate about another person's life and feel how they feel. In order to foster acceptance and change in society as well as create a social change, we must be empathetic to others in our culture by unpacking our privilege, educating ourselves, and challenging prejudicial views.