

# PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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## Changing Institutions: A Short Primer for the Individual

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Working in the field of race relations, I regularly attend a variety of talks, workshops, and other types of presentations about race and racism. It's an incredibly rich and diverse area of scholarship and activism, and even after more than 10 years, I almost always learn something new. I also often leave somewhat unsatisfied--not because of anything that was said or done but because something I wanted was left out.

On the one hand, that's just the nature of talks and workshops: it's impossible to be all things to all people. On the other hand, I can't help but observe that speakers often do a tremendous job of describing, illustrating, and researching the problem, whatever that problem might be, but rarely offer anything specific in the way of either response or prevention. This is the case despite the fact that the audience is often remarkably hungry for anything prescriptive.

This is not to say that there is a dearth of writing on how to work toward social change in general and racial justice in particular. To the contrary, entire books, not to mention countless websites, have been devoted to this topic. The purpose of this brief is to introduce the reader to a representative sampling of different methods and ideas for creating institutional (as opposed to individual) change, along with some personal observations. To facilitate action, each idea is framed as a prescription.

**1. Work within your sphere of influence.** At the university where I currently work, there is a large system of fraternities and sororities that is almost entirely segregated. Many of the students in my *Psychology of Race and Ethnicity* class are part of this system. By the middle of the semester, they are likely to notice the racial segregation and lament (in their personal journals) that it exists. Yet, few feel sufficiently empowered to try to create change, even within their own fraternity or sorority. Social change may not come easy, but everyone has some influence, even students. For psychologists, possible spheres of influence include work colleagues, their field of specialization (e.g., psychotherapy), and of course any organizations they are a part of. Student spheres of influence may include classmates, teachers, school administrators, clubs and sports teams.

When we notice racial (or any other form of) injustice occurring within our sphere of influence, it is our responsibility to speak up, to label the injustice, to refuse to condone it, and, if possible, to suggest a way of redressing it--even if we are not personally affected by it, even if we derive personal benefit from it. But there are other ways to exert influence besides confronting specific acts of racial micro-aggression. We can encourage organizations or subgroups within our sphere of influence to engage in a process of self-examination in regard to racial climate. Who gets hired? Who gets promoted? On what basis are these decisions made? Does the decision-making process tend to benefit some racial groups over others? Or, in the specific case of a fraternity or sorority on campus, do we want to have a racially diverse organization, and if we do, what are we actively doing to make it an attractive option for students of color?

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**2. Before coming up with a solution, make sure you identify the right problem.** Who decides? There is no single appropriate answer to this question, but in the context of racial issues, people of color should have a say on the agenda and not only have a voice but also veto power over proposed solutions. While this may seem obvious, in a plenary session of the 2007 APA convention, members of the women's committee of the Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA) publicly enacted a number of ways in which members of marginalized groups get silenced, sometimes by well meaning and well intentioned colleagues and professionals who thought that they already knew what members of the marginalized group needed and wanted.

**3. Become an ally to members of an oppressed out-group.** There are many talented, progressive, and creative individuals and groups of individuals among oppressed groups that are working toward racial justice. Local chapters of the NAACP, the Urban League, and many other organizations may already have an infrastructure to deal with the specific problems that concern you. Becoming an ally not only reduces redundancy but builds alliances and bridges and models inter-group dialogue and cooperation for the community.

**4. Take initiative but maintain accountability.** Remember what the road to hell is paved with. It is unfortunately the case that many well intentioned people have done considerable harm in an attempt to be helpful. As just one possible example, advocating a color-blind approach is considered undesirable (even racist!) by many people of color who feel that such an approach fails to recognize essential parts of their humanity and individuality. Initiative is important, but if we're trying to help a community we are not ourselves part of, we need to be sure to check in with that community's leaders and representative members.

**5. Find allies within your own group.** Toward the end of the documentary film *The Color of Fear*, Hugh, a Latino male tells David, his newly motivated White ally that unless he finds other white people to join him in doing anti-racism work, he will eventually stop doing it. Anti-racism work is challenging on many levels. For one, the system is so entrenched that change is hard to come by. For another, the work is emotionally taxing, as many people have considerable emotional (and financial) incentive to maintain the status quo. In-group allies support us when we need it and inspire us to keep at it.

*Psychologists for Social Responsibility seeks to bring greater psychological knowledge and public awareness to the issues highlighted in this brief overview. For more information, please contact us at [info@psysr.org](mailto:info@psysr.org). We encourage new PsySR members to join in these efforts. Media inquiries are also welcome.*

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