

Affinity/Alliance Groups Frequently Asked Questions

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I already know what it means to be XXX. Isn't it better for me to hear what the YYY folks are saying?

Affinity groups allow for an exploration of one's own identity, celebration of shared identity, and debriefing of the common challenges and experiences that members of the identity group face. To have folks from other groups present would require much time to be spent on hearing from each group's experience, explaining the nature of common experiences for different groups, and curbing conversation for fear of being misunderstood or offending.

Something to examine is WHY you want to hear what other groups are saying. Often, we want to know what's happening in another group because we worry that they are talking about us. Affinity groups are not designed to gossip or put down other groups – they are designed to affirm the group that is gathering.

It is true that we learn much from hearing people's story. However, people from marginalized groups have historically faced the burden and frustration of having to "teach others" about their experience or being asked to "represent" their group's perspective. Affinity groups allow for a space safe from that burden and frustration. A better way to learn about another's experience is to build genuine relationships and ask questions from a place of humble curiosity.

Doesn't dividing us up make things worse? Isn't self-segregation just as bad as imposed segregation?

Segregation does indeed have negative connotations because it harkens a historical injustice – separate but equal, a concept that never actualized as idealized, allowing for systemic and institutionalized oppression. However, in reality, we commonly self-segregate. Restrooms, sports teams, churches and synagogues, and school clubs are all ways we self-segregate based on interests, beliefs, sex, etc. Affinity groups are just another form of that optional self-segregation.

Wouldn't affinity groups create resentment toward other groups?

Affinity groups do sometimes discuss shared challenges and struggles, and it is true that we experience mistreatment from members of other groups at times. However, a well-run affinity space resists labeling of other groups and blanket assumptions of other groups. After all, if we are experiencing negative effects of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, why would we want to do that to others?

I am a member of a so-called privileged group, so I don't have an affinity space. Isn't that reverse discrimination?

Those of us who have privileged identities are affirmed on a daily basis in many ways – we are reflected in government leadership, in media, in school curriculum, and more. For example, those of us who are white do not have to look very far to see a role model, protagonist, or leader who looks like us. Those of us who are able bodied rarely enter a building where we have to worry about whether we can get into it or get upstairs, whether there are braille signs for us to navigate, or if announcements will be posted as well as verbally announced on the paging system. Those of us who are of comfortable income aren't consumed by thoughts of where our next meal is coming from or whether we will have a roof over our heads by week's end. We don't consider these special privileges because we are granted them almost all the time; we are like fish thinking that the water is nothing special. However, there are those of us with identities that are rarely given that affirmation – in fact, we are told disparaging things about our groups. We are like the land dwelling animals struggling to breathe and function in the water. Affinity groups offer a space where marginalized groups can experience welcome and affirmation. Sadly, for many, this is a unique space, so it is especially helpful to have affinity groups for marginalized identities. There are privileged-identity affinity groups that come together to discuss privilege and using that privilege to help create a more just world (Anti-Racist White Allies, National Organization of Men Against Sexism, etc.). If you are interested in starting such a group, please speak up!

Shouldn't we stress similarities rather than differences? Doesn't talking about it just make it worse?

Research on bias, prejudice, and stereotypes show that we naturally tend to categorize, compare, and create mental models based on limited information. Unfortunately, as much as we don't want to, we internalize misinformation about groups of people from an early age. Not talking about it doesn't improve our attitudes; even talking about similarities doesn't. What does seem to improve our attitudes is explicit conversation: talking about the differences, examining our attitudes, learning about oppression and privilege, and rejecting false notions. These conversations aren't easy or comfortable, but they are necessary. Imagine our deep-seeded attitudes are like unpacked boxes in an attic. We gathered what's inside long ago, and it's not relevant now. Eventually, we don't even remember what's in them, and yet we take them with us when we move from house to house. These unpacked boxes go from attic to attic untouched. It's only when we spend time to unpack them that we get to decide whether what's inside is something we want to carry forward or discard.

Shouldn't we be having dialogues all together rather than in separate groups?

We certainly could learn a great deal from cross-cultural dialogue, and hopefully there are already ample opportunities. However, we have unique kaleidoscopes of identities that make us see the world in different ways. Identity frames are like picture frames – they capture a limited and unique section of the overall vista. Several people can be in the same room and experience the same thing, yet a woman might notice things differently than a man. A person of color might be impacted differently than a white person. A young person may interpret the situation differently than an adult. Often, we engage in intercultural dialogue without examining our own identity frames and stumble into conflict because someone else does not see the same things we do. Having conversations in affinity groups allows us to examine some of the roots of why we see the world the way we do, allowing us to acknowledge that we may experience the world differently than someone else. This understanding engenders greater acceptance of other perspectives, allowing for more fruitful cross-cultural dialogues.

Don't affinity groups make students only hang out with people like them and not reach out?

Already in many schools, we have students who create pseudo-affinity groups at the lunch tables and in friendship groups. Beverly Daniel Tatum wrote a book about this common question that schools ask: why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? These groups naturally form out of a deep desire to connect across similarities and understand identity. The difference with these unstructured groups is that there aren't any adult facilitators, norms, or privacy. These unguided conversations can easily devolve into stereotype reinforcement, in-group chauvinism, or identity play that misleads or alienates others. They also often do not always meet the needs of identity development and thus become a stagnant place where youth gather, feeling both the relief of not having to explain their experience and the dissatisfaction of a desire unfulfilled. Affinity groups allow for a school sponsored and facilitated space where youth can explore identity, celebrate shared identity, and debrief common challenges and experiences that members of the identity group face. Having this need met, they are psychologically more ready to seek relationships outside the group. Shored up with the self-confidence that comes from healthy identity development, youth engage more in healthy risk taking like making new friends.