

Kate Logan (Director of Programming and Policy, Rights and Democracy)
Building an Intersectional Movement for Social Change

I am Kate Logan, the Director of Programming and Policy for Rights and Democracy, or RAD. RAD is a member of the Racial Justice Reform Coalition and a Campaign Partner for the Vermont Coalition of Ethnic and Social Equity in Schools. We are also in the process of developing what we're calling the "Intersectional Justice League" within RAD, where those of us who experience multi-faceted identity-based oppression and our allies can work together to be sure that RAD is addressing the disparate impacts of oppressive power in our fights for social and economic justice. RAD is committed to considering, on the one hand, the disparate impacts of particular social and economic issues on the basis of race and other social identities, but on the other hand also to supporting the efforts of our coalition partners and advance reform initiatives for more directly addressing the root causes of social inequity in Vermont and beyond.

Intersectionality

The term "intersectionality" is finally making its way into everyday language in social justice organizing, but there are a lot of misunderstandings about the term that eat away at the transformative potential for intersectional justice organizing. It is understandable, just on an intuitive level, to think of an "intersection" as describing how justice issues interrelate and overlap with each other, or maybe a way of thinking about intersectionality as a way of describing the way that everything we experience is part of a complex system. This is partially right as a way of understanding "intersectionality." But it misses the focus of intersectional theory as it has developed out of black feminism in the United States.

The term became popular within academic feminism and racial studies after the 1989 publication of critical race theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw's, article, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist

Theory and Antiracist Politics.” Crenshaw argued that if we just focus on race, or gender, or class, or any other marginalized social identity for that matter, we will miss the fact that these forms of oppression are complexly interwoven in the lived experience of each individual person. Her example, in what is now considered the birth of intersectional theory a birth that has prompted an epic transformation in thinking about social justice, was that sexual violence as it is experienced by women of color is a fundamentally different phenomenon than the sexual violence that white women experience. These categories of humanity do not exist independently of each other, these forms of identity-based oppression do not exist separately and we do not experience them one by one, but they simultaneously intersect in our bodies and in our communities. Each of us stand midstream in the course of history and cannot escape the legacy of white supremacy, patriarchal power, two-party politics, environments that are built for certain kinds of bodies, geopolitical dominance of former and present colonizers, economic exploitation under crony capitalism, and religious conflict related to all of those historical developments.

Why it's important in Vermont

Where Vermont is concerned, I am going to dedicate my time to talking about an intersectional approach to combating racial inequity. Racial injustice in the United States is far more often an effect of structural racism that is embodied in unconscious racial bias and institutional practices rather than individual, conscious racial prejudice. In a state such as Vermont, where overall there is a culture of fairness, a love for equality and freedom, and a distaste for racial prejudice, many white folks may feel alarmed and confused by evidence that Vermont is not that much different than any other place in the post-slavery and post-Civil Rights Era United States. How can white folks respond to the diverse, identifiable harms that are done to people of color in

Vermont when those white folks are not racially prejudiced? Or at least not consciously so?

Why is structural racism so persistent? What can we do about it?

Studies of implicit bias, which is also known as implicit social cognition, help to reveal to the involuntary attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions. Implicit bias can be positive. For example, you may cherish children and recognize their vulnerability and so smile when you see a child and want to help them when they're in danger. But implicit bias can also be negative, especially where negative stereotypes influence our response to those who are unlike us. This is especially a threat within relatively homogenous societies where there is not a demographically diverse population or a high a level of integration among historically distinct social or cultural groups. I was lucky to grow up in a place where people of color were the majority of my peers, and where I formed my attitudes toward and beliefs about people of color based on living side by side with my friends, witnessing the good and trustworthy testimony of my peers regarding the subtle but devastating presence of implicit racial bias and structural racism, even within our own "melting pot" community. This kind of awareness is far less likely to happen organically for the average white Vermonter. As white allies, we must combat ignorance in every aspect of our social lives, especially in our political organizing.

The **lack** of awareness of implicit racial bias and systemic racism is part of what it has meant to be a white person in the United States. Similarly, it has been the burden of non-whites to know that white people see them differently than they see themselves. As early as the 19th century, African-American social commentators were aware of the fact that white people did not know about black experience. The fact is that stereotypes move in to fill the void when we do not have concrete knowledge about those who come from historically distinct groups. Humans are creatures who form opinions about things so that we can make decisions about how to act.

As such, there is no such thing as neutrality when it comes to race in the United States. Either one is aware of what race means in the real lives of people of color, or one is not, and if not then implicit bias arises, implicit bias that is structured by prejudicial stereotypes or false beliefs that things are not as bad as they really are. In fact, these false beliefs makes sense. As a white person, I do not personally experience the sharp end of systemic racism. In fact, the world seems to welcome my presence and reward my hard work and my talents. Further, I do not consciously harbor racial prejudice myself and so cannot imagine that I am doing anything wrong. However, this lack of awareness of the experience of people of color creates two harmful barriers toward systemic change, especially in places where whites are the majority demographic group.

Among scholars of social injustice, the term “epistemic injustice” has become increasingly common. Epistemic injustice refers to the power imbalances that exist among different social groups when it comes to **knowing**. It occurs when implicit bias structures one social group’s ability to hear and believe members of other social groups when they speak about their experience. These are the two barriers: hearing and believing. In the context of race relations in the United States, the inability to *hear and be heard by* another person is what scholars call “testimonial injustice,” that is, “when the hearer gives a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word.” We have all likely experienced a time when someone spoke over us, or thought so little of us that the meaning of our words seemed to not register in the least. Likewise, the inability to *believe and be believed by* another person is called “hermeneutic injustice,” that is, when another person’s knowledge about the world as they experience it is discounted. It creates a situation in which members of the oppressed group are not given the space to effectively *create knowledge* about their own experience and then have it regarded as having equal status.

This creates a conundrum: we want to address systemic racism, but white folks in Vermont are likely highly unaware of the lived experiences of people of color in their communities. This means that white folks are more likely to be skeptical of the testimony and knowledge claims that people of color make. This does not mean that we should walk up to the nearest person of color and ask them to educate us on their lived experience. That might be something that a person of color would want to do, but it might not. Rather, we must systematically address ignorance and its negative consequences by creating educational and training programs and data gathering infrastructure, as well as opening seats of power to people of color. Only by combating implicit bias and sidestepping involuntarily prejudiced decision making processes of well-intended white folks will we be able to address systemic racism. This is especially true where organizing around gender justice is concerned. I celebrate the explicitly intersectional approach that the Women's March leaders have taken towards gender justice organizing, and it is my hope that we can emulate that here in Vermont.

Not a theory of difference, it's a theory of power and oppression, and it is also a theory of how to organize so that we can achieve intersecting freedoms

Until our understanding of oppression and injustice are intersectional, our fights for human rights and a thriving democracy will be ineffective. Our fights for human rights need to be more *specific* even while we are arguing that they are universal and that everyone deserves them. We need to understand the complex forces that prevent each of us from experiencing freedom and dignity. Intersectional justice organizing will transform our society at the roots of injustice, it will require that we develop democratic processes that give voice to and directly address the diverse oppressions in our communities, and it will establish the concrete practices that provide liberation to each one as we move forward out of our past and toward our collective liberation. In

other words, intersectional theory is crucial to the **science** of movement building. In the words of the amazing M. Adams, an intersectional justice leader out of Wisconsin, “movements are not stumbled upon, you do not stagger your way into freedom, and you don’t wake up to liberation.” Our freedom will be hard fought. The barriers are so many and they are systemic and they are deeply ingrained in our bodies and our communities. Intersectional theory can provide the analytical ground--the thought leadership--for smart, effective movement-building strategy so that we can understand the problems that we face in fine-grained detail and grow a movement that will help us fight together toward our collective liberation.