

Introduction

The Study-into-Action process brought men together to build our capacity, individually and collectively, to take effective action to challenge male supremacy - in our intimate relationships, our organizing work and society as a whole. In support of such action, we designed the Study-into-Action around three core themes: an intersectional analysis of systems of oppression, a Transformative Justice framework for addressing harm, and a somatic methodology working to shift not only our consciousness but how we organize our entire being, including emotions, sensations and embodied practices. In the following sections, we discuss our preparations for, and implementation of, the Challenging Male Supremacy Project's Study-into-Action process.

Background

Some of the initial impetus for forming the Challenging Male Supremacy (CMS) Project came from our informal work to address gender-based violence in our lives, and specifically in the social justice organizing contexts within which we worked. Through our involvement with several community accountability processes, each addressing a specific man's harmful behavior toward one or often many women, we began to reflect on how necessary it was, and powerful it could be, to create something where we are working with more than one person/incident at a time. To use a crude analogy, we felt that doing accountability responses alone was like playing that carnival game "whack-a-mole"; each time we addressed a particular situation, two more would pop up. We wanted to continue to be involved with community-based processes addressing specific incidences of harm and also wanted to support prevention and the deep transformation of people who have caused harm, as well as grow the capacity of more men to take effective action to challenge the male supremacist context within which the harm occurred.

Inspired by the Study-into-Action framework being developed by generationFIVE, a Bay-area based organization that we knew well and admired, we began designing our own Study-into-Action process as a way to bring more men into the work of challenging male supremacy and grow our collective capacity. We saw the process as a way to create community amongst men, from various social justice organizing contexts across New York City, around a common commitment to challenge male supremacy in our intimate relationships and activist formations. We wanted to study together, in order to learn about and discuss the workings of male supremacy in our lives and to better understand what we could do to confront it. We wanted to practice specific skills for taking action to challenge it and to build supportive and accountable relationships with each other and with those in our lives most targeted by male supremacy.

The men who were keen to participate in the group came from a broad spectrum of experiences. Some were in the midst of being called to account for their harmful behavior. Others sought out the space as a place to support their growth, whether they had received challenging feedback regarding their behavior or not. We have run the

Study-into-Action process twice, in 2009 and 2011, and in both cases built participant groups that were majority men of color, including queer identified men and mostly working class social justice organizers.

Before beginning our Study-into-Action, we sought out individuals and organizations from feminist, queer and trans justice struggles to work with us as Accountability and Support partners. As people in New York City doing related work, we wanted to actively seek their feedback and support in our development and implementation of the Study-into-Action process. As people coming from communities and contexts most targeted by male supremacy, we wanted to formalize ways of being accountable to them for the work we were doing to challenge male supremacy. In the role of Accountability and Support Partners, these individuals and organizations gave us feedback on a curriculum outline several months before our first session, helped to shape its structure and content, and met with us halfway through the nine-session program to again provide insightful feedback. These partners were the Safe OUTside the System (SOS) Collective of the Audre Lorde Project, Sisterfire NYC (a collective affiliated with INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence), Third Root Community Health Center, the Welfare Warriors Project of Queers for Economic Justice, and individual members of the Rock Dove Collective and an emerging queer people-of-color anti-violence group. Incorporating our partners' suggestions, we fashioned a Study-into-Action process, whose goals and timeline are discussed below.

We also received crucial support from Staci Haines and generative somatics, whose training and mentoring strengthened our team and our Study-into-Action process toward embodying a challenge to male supremacy, and whose co-leadership of the first sessions of our Study-into-Actions set a powerful foundation for the rest of our work.

Goals

We set the following ten goals for our Study-into-Action process:

ANALYSIS: Build an understanding of the roots and workings of male supremacy in relation to other systems of oppression – in our own lives, histories, and communities.

PRACTICE: Strengthen a practice of confronting male supremacy, as it intersects with other systems of oppression, toward eliminating intimate and interpersonal violence in our personal and political relationships and institutional violence in our communities.

ACCOUNTABILITY: Create space and practices for collective accountability and support for men (cisgender and transgender) so that we can further the work of owning and changing our oppressive behaviors while challenging gender binaries and heteronormativity. “Cisgender” is the term used to describe someone whose assigned gender at birth matches their present gender identity, in contrast with “transgender”.

RACIALIZED MASCULINITIES: Explore the ways in which masculinities are racialized within our society and hold ourselves to a complex understanding of how this impacts our experiences of male supremacy.

GENDER COMPLEXITY: Develop an understanding of gender as a range of experiences, practices, identities and representations—feminine, masculine and otherwise—which are located and take shape within systems of privilege and oppression.

TRAUMA & SUPPORT: Make room for the histories of trauma and violence that people bring into the room, and connect people with resources that can support them in engaging with these histories transformatively.

RELATIONSHIP: Strengthen the relationships between us, to help us hold the work we will do together and support each other in our processes of change.

ALLY: Build a practice of solidarity with feminist, queer and transgender struggles and movements.

LEADERSHIP: Explore the meaning and practice of taking leadership as an ally to confront male supremacy in our own communities.

BIG PICTURE: Work with and toward a vision of dignity and self-determination for all people.

Session Timeline

We designed the Study-into-Action as a nine-session process. In 2009, we ran the Study-into-Action over nine months, one session per month. The first and last sessions were day-long, with the remainder being evening sessions lasting about 3.5 hours.

In 2011, we changed the format slightly. While the focus and content of the sessions remained largely the same, we shortened the timeframe for the whole process from nine to six months in order to better sustain the momentum of learning and relationship-building fostered by the process. Reflecting on the 2009 experience, we felt that the length of time between sessions in the nine-month process made it harder to maintain this momentum. Doing the Study-into-Action over six months in 2011 was challenging in terms of the reduced time we had as a facilitation team to de-brief and prepare between sessions, but it proved effective in fostering greater group cohesion and participant sharing and learning. In order to accommodate this shortened timeframe, the structure for the nine sessions in 2011 included three day-long sessions (Sessions 1, 5, and 9), with the remainder being evening sessions. It is this version of the Study-into-Action process that is described here.

The nine sessions of the Study-into-Action were organized around the following themes:

Session 1: SHAPE – Lay foundation of CMS group, including expectations & support mechanisms; intro to Somatics; begin exploration of the shape of male privilege.

Session 2: JOURNEY – Explore the influences and forces that have shaped our practices of gender and male privilege, and the changes that will move us toward our commitments.

Session 3: EMBODIMENT – Look at the ways in which we embody and enact male privilege in our relationships, relating these to a framework for understanding male supremacy; identify the ways in which we are already confronting male privilege on which we can build.

Session 4: ANALYSIS – Deepen our understandings of male supremacy in relation to interconnected systems of oppression, including the role of distinctly marked masculinities (along lines of race, class and sexuality) in reinforcing these systems; identify opportunities to resist male supremacy and our commitments to do so in our lives.

Session 5: VIOLENCE – Reflect on (our) experiences of violence, from the perspectives of survivors, bystanders and those who have used violence; relate these experiences to the different forms of violence faced by our communities; identify skills and strategies for confronting this violence; center around our commitments to confront male supremacy.

Session 6: ACCOUNTABILITY – Explore and practice skills and strategies for being genuinely accountable for male privilege in our lives/relationships; discuss these in relation to a Transformative Justice (TJ) framework and our commitments.

Session 7: ALLY – Discuss the meaning and practice of being an ally; identify specific ways in which we can work in solidarity with feminist, queer and transgender struggles and movements as part of our commitments to confront male supremacy.

Session 8: INTIMACY and DESIRE – Explore intimacy, isolation, consent, abuse, and histories of violence, as they apply to us and our (potential) partners; look at the skills and support we want to build better relationships; link this to a review of where we are at with our commitments.

Session 9: MOVING FORWARD – Relate our work to other struggles for collective liberation; consider paths for bringing our work to other circles, as well as for future TJ work; honor and appreciate one another and our work together.

We held these sessions at several sites in New York City, and we are extremely grateful to our friends at the Brecht Forum, CONNECT, 16 Beaver and Social Justice Leadership for making their wonderful spaces available to us.

Working Agreements

At the beginning of the Study-into-Action we discussed and agreed the following set of Working Agreements, which we reviewed at the start of each subsequent session:

- Commit to educating ourselves and one another to reduce and challenge oppressive dynamics in the space;
- Speak from our own experiences and about a community of which we are a part; avoid speaking about communities of which we are not a part;
- Care for self and others;
- Maintain confidentiality;
- Be curious and willing to try new things;

- Step up listening, step up speaking;
- Respect everyone's time, this space and our own space;
- Respect the ways that people identify, e.g. in terms of gender;
- Challenge each other respectfully (this includes being critical of statements rather than people);
- Be curious about and question the language we use in the space;
- Welcome emotions in the space - they are a big part of our process;
- Make room to try things out - mistakes are a part of our collective growth;
- Avoid assumptions and judgements; and
- Work to trust and challenge each other.

Trans Etiquette

For our first Study-into-Action in 2009 we decided to hold the group specifically for cisgender men. "Cisgender" is the term used to describe someone whose assigned gender at birth matches their present gender identity, in contrast with "transgender". Although there was some interest from transgender activists and organizers to participate in the group, as three cisgender facilitators (Alan, Gaurav and RJ) we felt unprepared to provide the quality of leadership and support we believed a majority cisgender and trans-inclusive space would require. For the 2011 Study-into-Action, with our growing depth of practice as CMS facilitators and sustained, informed interest from potential transgender participants, we created a space that supported men across a spectrum of gender identities.

In order to support cisgender participants in a collective commitment to maintaining a space supportive of men across a spectrum of gender identities, we discussed this extremely helpful piece on Trans Respect/Etiquette/Support 101, produced by Micah Bazant (updated from from TimTum: A Trans Jew Zine). We also sought guidance from, and continue to be inspired by, the work of organizations working on Trans justice issues in New York City, including:

The Audre Lourde Project: alp.org

FIERCE: fiercenyc.org

Streetwise and Safe: streetwiseandsafe.org

Sylvia Rivera Law Project: srlp.org