

## Session 6: ACCOUNTABILITY

Session Six was an evening session. In this session, the objectives were to deepen our collective understanding and practice of accountability while owning and changing our own oppressive behavior as well as working to transform our communities and larger oppressive systems. In terms of deepening our practice of accountability as men committed to challenging male supremacy, the session focused on a practice of asking, and being asked, for accountability while prioritizing the safety, healing and agency of those who have experienced oppression and/or violence. In support of this deepening of understanding and practice, the session was grounded in both the accountability work that others have done as well as in the envisioning of transformative ways that we can hold each other accountable while challenging heterosexism and oppressive gender norms.

### Preparation

In order to prepare for this session, we asked participants to:

- Continue with a daily Centering practice.
- Finish filling out the Commitment Worksheet, if they hadn't already done so prior to Session Five. We encouraged everyone to continue to revise or further flesh out their commitments based on the conversations from the last session, as well as any other thoughts or conversations that they may have had regarding their commitments. We reminded everyone that the group would continue to share, explore and develop these commitments over the remaining four sessions of the Study-into-Action process.
- Read the Executive Summary of Toward Transformative Justice. This is a piece outlining generationFIVE's framework for Transformative Justice, as an approach to the harms of child sexual abuse that seeks to secure justice in relation to individual incidents of abuse in ways that also transform the underlying community and social conditions that help to generate such abuse. We encouraged people to read this document with reference to the usefulness of a Transformative Justice approach in addressing the violence of male supremacy in all its forms, not only child sexual abuse. We also gave the following trigger warning: "This document focuses on responding to and preventing child sexual abuse, and includes multiple short case studies of situations where generationFIVE has been asked to help respond to abuse."
- Read an accountability letter from a male-identified person who caused harm. We gave the following trigger warning: "This piece includes depictions of physical, emotional and other kinds of abuse within an intimate relationship, as well as denial and other kinds of efforts to evade accountability."
- Write an accountability letter. We gave the following suggestions for this piece of writing:

“Keeping in mind the issues of accountability and Transformative Justice raised in the readings for Session Six, think back on an instance or instances (past or present) in which you have caused harm to either an individual or a group. Write a letter to the person(s) harmed. Keep in mind that this letter will not be shared at any point in the future unless you want it to be. Be sure to identify some of the (sexist/homophobic/racist) beliefs and assumptions that contributed to your actions.

With that in mind, what are some of the steps you have taken or intend to take in order to be accountable? What conditions should be shifted in order to prevent that harm from happening again, and how do you intend to access support for this process? How are your actions rooted in transformative justice and what relation does that bear to broader politics that you hold? Be sure to leave room in your letter for the person(s) harmed to explain what their needs are and what accountability might look like for them. Although, this letter will not be shared with them, it's important to leave space for this as their conditions for you being accountable may differ from your intended path. Also as you write, keep track of what is happening somatically and note some of the difficulties that arise for you when thinking of a transformative way to approach accountability in your specific situation.

This is a difficult exercise, so be sure to take time for yourself and access some of your resilience practices if that helps. As always, please email or call us with any questions, especially if you feel confused or daunted by the assignments. As a reminder, the reading and the writing assignment may be triggering, both for you and anyone you might talk with about them. Please ask for consent from others around you (“Do you mind if I talk with you about \_\_\_\_\_?”) before initiating conversations about child sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, etc.”

- Complete and return to members of the Facilitation Team a Midpoint Feedback Form. Before coming to Session Six, we asked everyone to look back at and think about the answers that they had given to the questionnaire, particularly the answers to the following two questions:
  - What are your goals for your personal transformation during the course?
  - What are your goals for your political development, and for shifting your social justice/community work, during the course?

To guide participants in reflecting on their answers to these questions, we made the following suggestions: “Take some time prior to Session Six to assess your relationship to these goals, and specifically what steps you can take to reach these goals over the remaining sessions. This may include reaching out to one or more facilitators to discuss your goals and how to move toward them over the next couple months, or discussing them with others in your life.”

## Opening activities

We began the session with an overview of the day’s objectives and agenda, and a review of the goals, timeline and working agreements for the Study-into-Action process as a whole. We then led a Centering practice and a mutual connection practice,

focusing on the question “Why is it important for you to be talking about accountability?”

### **Experiences of accountability**

We began this activity in our support groups and discussed the accountability letter, which everyone had been asked to read as part of their preparation for the session. In these small groups, each person took it in turns to talk about how this example of an accountability letter had affected the way that they framed and drafted their own accountability letter. Participants were then asked to share and discuss experiences where they had not been accountable for their abusive or harmful behavior, using the following questions to help structure the discussion:

- In general, what prevents men from being accountable (shame, entitlement)?
- Specifically, what prevented you from being accountable?
- What would have helped you to be (more) accountable?

We allowed about 30 mins for this work in small groups, and then called everyone back together. In the large group, one of the facilitators read aloud the accountability letter, and we invited participants to share their reactions to and reflections on the letter with the rest of the group. When we, as the facilitation team, later debriefed this part of the activity, we discussed our use of this particular example of an accountability letter. Some on the team felt that this letter was a useful example; others felt it was very specific to, and makes the most sense within, a certain community (white, anarchist, punk) that might limit its broader usefulness or relevance for people outside of this community.

We then played an audio story, gathered as part of the StoryTelling & Organizing Project (STOP), a community project collecting and sharing stories of everyday people ending violence through collective, community-based alternatives. We discussed the issues and questions raised by the story in relation to practices and processes of community-based alternatives to the criminal-legal system, and its responses to the violence of male supremacy. We invited participants to share their thoughts and feelings about listening to the story, paying particular attention to people’s emotional responses both to the violence being described in the story as well as to the practices of healing and accountability discussed in the story. For more information about the StoryTelling & Organizing Project (STOP), go to <http://www.stopviolenceeveryday.org>.

### **Visions of accountability**

Having grounded the discussion in our own experiences and other people’s practices of accountability, we then led a large group discussion of people’s visions for what processes of accountability could and should look like if they are to respond both to individual incidents of violence as well as the conditions that help to give rise to the violence. To start the discussion, we asked everyone to reflect on the following three questions, and to write out their answers on post-it notes, with one answer/idea per note:

- What OUTCOMES should accountability processes be trying to achieve?
- What PROCESSES are critical to achieving these outcomes?
- What CAPACITIES do we and other men need in order to carry out these processes?

Participants posted their post-it notes on butcher paper at the front of the room, and these answers to the questions became the basis for our discussion. A key point that came out of this discussion was the importance not only of men getting involved in such accountability processes, but also of making sure always to do so in conversation and collaboration with others, and especially those most targeted by the violence of male supremacy. As several participants stressed, it is essential that men avoid the 'hero' model, or in any way see their involvement in accountability processes as a way of protecting women from other men, as this would be to perpetuate a paternalistic attitude towards women.

### **Accountability in practice**

In the final activity of the session, we used the somatic "Grab, Center, Face" practice to explore and deepen our practice of both holding another person accountable as well as being held accountable by another person. For its specific application in this activity, we did the following:

- We asked participants to find a partner to work with, using a consent practice to continue to be in the practice of asking for and giving consent.
- Once everyone was paired up, two of the facilitators then demonstrated the use of the "Grab, Center, Face" to practice accountability, from the point of view both of the person being held accountable (person A) and the person calling for accountability (person B).
- In the demonstration, we emphasized the importance for both people of staying aware of their bodies and their emotions before, during and after the 'grab', which in this context were the words used by person B to hold person A accountable. We also emphasized the importance of becoming more aware of our breathing, and how it is affected by the 'grab', and using this awareness to help us center and then turn towards ("face") the call for accountability.
- To provide a context for the accountability, we asked participants in their pairs to use one of the commitments that they are working on during the Study-into-Action process. Thus, the accountability scenario being practiced was person B holding person A accountable in relation to an aspect of person A's commitment to challenging male supremacy.
- In their pairs, participants then practiced the "Grab, Center, Face" in this accountability scenario, making sure that each participant got to play both roles (person A and person B).

Once this was completed, we brought everyone back together to debrief the activity. Several participants noted that it felt more uncomfortable for them to be in the role of holding someone else accountable (person B) compared to being in the role of being

held accountable (person A). In part people explained this in terms of the individualistic culture of US society. This culture teaches us all that we are supposed to be left alone to deal with our own 'private' issues, so that getting involved in holding someone accountable can be seen as being intrusive and inappropriate.

As a group, we emphasized the importance of seeing these processes of accountability as acts of care and love; that is, it is when we care about someone enough that we make the effort to support them in being more true to their commitments by seeking accountability from them when they do not act in accordance with such commitments. By the same token, such acts and processes of caring accountability are not seeking punishment; rather, they are trying to foster efforts to change our behavior so that it is more aligned with our values and commitments.

### **Closing activities**

We then closed the session with a reminder on self-care, the preparation assignments for Session Seven and a closing circle, in which everyone was asked to share one learning from the session and one word or phrase to describe how they were feeling at the end of the session.