

## Session 7: ALLY

Session Seven was an evening session. It focused on the meanings and practices of being an ally. Our main objective was to collectively identify specific ways in which we can work in solidarity with feminist, queer and transgender struggles and movements as part of our commitments to challenging male supremacy.

### Preparation

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

- Continue with a daily Centering practice.
- Revise or further flesh out their two commitments, based on the work and conversations over the last few sessions (as well as any other thoughts or conversations regarding their commitments). Before coming to the session, we asked everyone to email back to a member of the facilitation team the two specific commitments they had formulated, rather than the whole worksheet. We explained that this would help us as facilitators to support each participant and the group as a whole to move toward our commitments.
- Read the following four readings (three of which are super-short) which are focused on allyship, which we introduced as follows:
  - "Learning to Listen" by Richard Orton is one person's account of being a cisgender man and working as a rape crisis center advocate. It contains descriptions of his time supporting rape survivors in hospitals, attending feminist conferences and understanding the impacts of violence on public space.
  - "The F Word" by Dumi is a blog entry on allyship and intersectionality, and also engages some similar themes to the Orton piece, although through very different experiences.
  - "Straight Privilege, Gay Reality" by Chris McCall is an article from a student newspaper that enumerates examples of straight privilege - please think of some examples that you would add to the list.
  - "Becoming an Ally" is something that one of our partners recommended, and is likely self-explanatory - again, what are characteristics that you would add?
- Have a conversation with someone outside of the group about being an ally. We explained this prep work activity as follows: "The last piece of the prep work is to have a conversation about allies with someone already in your life who is targeted by heteropatriarchy/male supremacy in ways that you are not. (For example, if you identify as straight, you can talk with someone who IDs as lesbian, gay, bi, queer. If you ID as cisgender, you can talk with someone who identifies as trans, two spirit, gender non-conforming, genderqueer. And, if you benefit from male privilege and/or identify as a man, you can talk with someone who identifies as a woman and/or who doesn't benefit from male privilege.) Before beginning this piece of the prep work, we should each do the above readings, and take some time to think about

what more we could do to be a better ally. (Our commitments might be helpful for this part.) Keeping in mind the ways we talk about consent and partnering within our group, approach someone with whom you already have some mutual trust and ask them if they would be open to having this conversation. If they are, set a time to share a little bit about your experience in this group thus far (again, keeping in mind confidentiality and also what this person may or may not want to hear about), and to discuss what they think allies should do. Share some of your thoughts about what more you can do, and ask if they have suggestions about what you could do to be a better ally.”

### **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 questions:

- Why do you want to be a better ally?
- What is one thing that you can do to become a better ally?

### **Centered accountability**

We began our discussion of the meanings and practices of being an ally by returning to the idea of centered accountability, which we had introduced in Session One. We explained that centered accountability is a necessary foundation for being a good ally, and we made the following key points in defining what we mean by centered accountability:

- Trying to challenge male supremacy from this place of shame does not serve us or the work of challenging male supremacy - it can lead to being over-accountable (trying to overcome our shame by feeling that we are wholly and solely responsible for the male supremacy that is enacted in our lives.)
- Working from this place of shame can also lead to being under-accountable (trying to push away our shame by not acknowledging the specific and continuing ways that we contribute to male supremacy, but instead focusing solely on systems and institutions of male supremacy.)
- Focusing on and working from a sense of resilience is a way to deal with these issues and feelings of shame. In this context, resilience refers to a capacity to be in and work from a place of centered accountability, that takes full responsibility for our own actions in relation to systems of male supremacy and that understands the broader contexts and systems shaping these actions.

We then returned to the “Grab, Center, Face” practice which we had used in Session Six to explore our somatic experiences of accountability. In this session we used the “Grab, Center, Face” practice to feel and discuss experiences of under, over and centered accountability. In using the “Grab, Center, Face” practice, we followed the same series of steps that we had used in Session Six.

## **Being an ally: framework for practice**

In order to establish a common framework for our conversation about and practices of being an ally to feminist, queer and trans struggles against male supremacy, we gave a short presentation on the key elements of allyship, based on a handout which we gave out to participants. This framework includes the following six components of allyship, which are expanded upon in the handout:

- Listening
- Support
- Openness
- Reflection
- Accountability
- Humanity

In particular, we emphasized that being a good ally is about our liberation not just 'their' liberation, but that it critically depends on recognizing our privileges, holding ourselves and other men accountable for the ways that we act from our privilege, and taking action to actively challenge oppression. Paying attention to our own emotional reactions when being held accountable, and re-centering around our commitments, is also critical.

## **Being an ally: learning from experience**

Following up this presentation, we asked people to find a partner to work with, again using the Consent practice and in their pairs, to take turns discussing an experience around being an ally that was hard, in terms of the following questions:

- What made this experience hard/difficult for you?
- What were the main issues about being an ally at the heart of this experience?
- What feelings came up for you during this experience?
- How did you try to deal with these issues and feelings?
- What do you think you could you have done differently?
- What have you learned from your positive experiences of being an ally?

We gave the pairs about 15 minutes to discuss these questions, which we had written up on butcher paper. We then came back together as a large group to debrief these paired discussions. Some of the key points and further questions that arose during this debrief included:

- We all have had experiences where we are doing what we feel is good ally work, but have been criticized in a way that triggers defensiveness or does not feel collaborative. How do we deal with this?
- What do you do, as an ally, when there are disagreements around strategy in relation to challenging male supremacy?
- How do we interpret and engage with survivor-led responses that potentially decrease safety and do not build toward more accountability? What is our role as

an ally in situations where we feel that the “survivor is always right” dynamic needs to be opened up for discussion rather than simply adhered to?

- How do allies balance leadership and listening in their approach?

While no general consensus was reached in terms of answers to these questions, the feedback we got from participants was that it had been useful to have the opportunity to air them and have a conversation about them.

### **Being an ally: in practice**

For the last activity of the session, we moved into practice, in order to feel what it is like to ask for, and be asked to be, an ally. We broke participants into groups of four people each. We explained that, for each group, there are three roles:

- Role A: The person who asks for an ally and chooses how he wants the allies to act
- Role B: The allies (two people), who get to practice what it feels like to be asked to be allies and what it feels like to respond to this request
- Role C: One person who expresses the problem which person A is asking his allies to help him with

We asked each group to decide what the cause of the ally request should be and to come up with a statement that can be spoken by person C, acting as the non-physical ‘grab’, to which the people playing role B can then respond by allying with person A in the ways that they had requested. We gave the groups about 10 minutes for this and then asked them to rotate the roles among them. After another 10 minutes, we then asked them to rotate again. Once everyone had had the opportunity to play all three roles (A, B and C), we came back together as a large group for a quick de-brief. The main point that came out of this de-brief was the importance of being centered as an ally, and how difficult this can be in certain situations. Part of the practice of returning to center as an ally is to stay connected both to the expressed needs and wishes of the person requesting allyship and to our broader commitments to challenging male supremacy as part of the larger project of collective liberation.

### **Closing activities**

We closed the session with a reminder on self-care, the preparation assignments for Session Eight 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.