



# **RACIAL AFFINITY GROUP FIELD GUIDE**

*Produced by*  
Interaction Institute for Social Change

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# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the **Affinity Group Field Guide** produced by the [Interaction Institute for Social Change](#) (IISC). Affinity groups are an important part of the journey towards understanding and promoting racial equity and racial justice. We are so glad that you have signed up to support people in having these important conversations.

This guide provides practical advice for leading and facilitating racial affinity groups in your organization or community. It includes the nuts and bolts of organizing affinity groups; potential topics to cover in your groups; the importance of managing your own interior condition while participating in an affinity group; and links to various tools and resources.

Many questions are likely to arise as you design and lead your affinity groups. It's important to remember that there are no perfect answers to these questions; there are always pros and cons to trying different things. We encourage you to avoid a false sense of urgency and the pressure to make everything perfect, both of which are characteristics of white dominant culture. Some things will work and some things won't. You'll make mistakes and that's okay, particularly because that means you are learning along the way.

We encourage you to try out different affinity group content and techniques, and eventually you will have greater comfort and ease in the role. If possible, surround yourself with a community of other facilitators so that you can learn, experiment, and grow together. Please know that there are many others doing this work; you are not alone!

*Please note this is written for people living and working in the United States. Racism is a global phenomenon, as Europeans displaced and oppressed non-white people all around the world. However, racism in other countries may operate in unique ways based on the historical context and the expression of modern-day racism in that location. We encourage you to further adapt the ideas in this guide to reflect your own local context.*

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is structured to address the most common questions that arise when designing and facilitating race-based affinity groups. It addresses the who, what, when, where, why, and how of all things related to affinity groups. Read the whole guide or skim to get the answers to your most burning questions.

# WHY

## ***Why are racial affinity groups important?***

Racial affinity groups<sup>1</sup> provide a structure for powerful conversations that build awareness, knowledge, and action for racial equity and justice. They are facilitated so that white people and Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) have unique spaces to acknowledge or discover shared experiences, support one another, share victories, and identify shared aspirations and ways to advocate for change.

When they meet separately (which will be most of the time), BIPOC participants are affirmed as other BIPOC people share their experiences of racial injustice, commiserate, and share victories. White affinity group space is important because it creates the conditions for white people to recognize the profound impact of racism on their lives and the lives of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color. White people teach one another about racism and the privileges that uniquely accrue to them because of our society's history, policies, and preferences. It is a space of support for white people to work through the emotions that arise from this exploration, and to begin (or continue) to build an anti-racist culture without burdening BIPOC communities with the role of teacher.

It can feel awkward to be in a separate space, and it is important to note that affinity space is NOT the same as segregation, which serves to uphold racism. Rather, it is an honest and brave space tailored for discovery, healing, and action. Author [Robin D'Angelo](#) reminds us that many white people live very segregated lives but only feel uncomfortable with that when asked to gather to explore whiteness and racism.

Both white and BIPOC affinity groups should come together occasionally to share insights and steps for action and accountability. This can include relationship-building time and reports of what they are learning and building or anything more they want the other group to know. In many cases, it can be important for the BIPOC group, if it wishes, to name needs or expectations of the white affinity group.

For further reading on the importance of affinity groups, see the following resources:

- ❖ [Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People](#)
- ❖ [Racial Identity Caucuses](#)
- ❖ [Race Caucusing in an Organizational Context: A POC's Experience](#)

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<sup>1</sup> In grassroots organizing and movement circles, affinity groups are more likely to be called racial caucuses. The intention and structure are the same.

# WHAT

## *What is the purpose of affinity groups?*

Before launching an affinity group, it is useful to clarify the purpose(s) of your group. Affinity groups may focus in one or more of these five categories:

1. **Connectivity:** A critical part of any affinity group is developing relationships and learning more about each other. Affinity spaces can be a space for developing trust and mutual support. Understanding each other's values and backgrounds and journeys can help form bonds of trust that allow for deeper, more honest conversation. BIPOC group members often need opportunities to discover shared experiences and “reality check” situations that might seem to only be happening to them as individuals. White affinity group members need to collectively explore their anti-racism journeys and support one another along the way. This work can increase the likelihood of creating positive change.
2. **Learning:** In order to address racism, it's important to understand its systemic nature, to develop a shared analysis of the history of racism, and to build shared language related to racism and racial justice. While affinity groups are not the same as a workshop, they can be spaces to read about an idea (e.g., white supremacy culture) and discuss how it manifests in everyday life. Learning can also happen through stories, sharing anti-racism journeys, and examples of work by one of the participants. Learning through concepts or stories can help participants to make sense of the current inequities and injustices that need to be repaired.
3. **Skill Building:** Participants can learn and try on skills for being more effective anti-racist leaders. The first skills implicit in affinity group work are deep listening and developing the muscle to engage in these types of conversations. Another important skill is developing a racial equity “lens” through which to view any major decision, practice, or policy.
4. **Strategic Action:** Participants may use affinity group space to form a collective understanding of the levers of change they can engage for individual and institutional change. Organizational change is generally the work of multi-racial change teams with membership from across different functions in the organization. Whether or not there is a formal racial equity change process, affinity groups often bring issues forward into ongoing decision-making and problem-solving spaces within organizations.

5. **Healing:** When relationships are strong and trusting, affinity groups can be a space for processing emotional trauma from racism, and a space for engaging in practices that facilitate individual and collective well-being and restoration.

When choosing the purpose(s) of your affinity group, consider the following: Who is in the room? How well do they know or trust each other? Why might they want to be there? What's in it for them to participate? How might the affinity groups fit into the organization's larger racial equity strategy? Regardless of which area(s) of focus you choose, it's vital that connection and relationship-building are a fundamental part of every gathering, in order to promote authentic conversation and facilitate change.

### ***What happens in affinity groups? What should we talk about?***

Think about the purpose and the “why” of your group to determine your focus and agenda for each session. Make the purpose known ahead of time so that members know what they are signing up for.

Here are some examples of content for the varying purposes.

Affinity groups focused on **connectivity** will often engage in activities to facilitate personal sharing and trust building. This might be a structured exercise or asking a question or a “prompt” that everyone answers in order to promote relationship building. It could be a question that asks participants to share their various identities, values, or perspectives. Or it could be sharing music, art, a video, a quote, or a poem, and giving time for each person to reflect on how it relates to their experience and understanding of racism. In white affinity space, connectivity is an important part of shifting white dominant culture, which often emphasizes results over relationships. It's important to have some element of connectivity built into each affinity group session.

Affinity groups engaged in **learning** may review terms and definitions about racism and reflect together on their meaning and share examples of them in action. They may read an article, blog, or book, or watch a video on various aspects of the history of racism in different communities (for example, Asian, Middle Eastern and North African, Black, Indigenous, Latin, or mixed-race communities). It is important, particularly in white affinity space, to discuss not just the new information but how it feels to learn this history and to sit with discomfort--a critical skill to build. The group may want to focus its learning on its sector, locality, or an issue area.

Affinity groups engaged in **skill-building** can determine what skills might be better learned and practiced in affinity space. The group can ask: what do we need to learn or practice in order to help create change as members of this community?

Affinity groups in organizations preparing to engage in **strategic action** can consider how their group can better contribute to the overall change process. It is important for affinity groups to consider what changes they can work on or lead on their own, and which should be led either by other affinity groups or a cross-racial team. For BIPOC affinity groups, this requires balancing the need for their perspectives and needs to be centered in organizational change without over-burdening them with emotional or other forms of labor. For white affinity groups, it means balancing the need to take appropriate levels of responsibility for their own learning and action, while moving in partnership with their BIPOC colleagues.

Affinity groups engaged in **healing** facilitate exercises to help people process the personal emotional trauma and hurts of racism and white supremacy. This might be done through storytelling or by engaging in physical, spiritual, and artistic practices that facilitate well-being, restoration, and an experience of feeling liberated from oppression. For these spaces in particular, it is important to have a facilitator who is experienced with healing modalities and is able to support participants through painful discussions without doing further harm.

For resources on specific topics, please see below.

## ***How do we decide which topics to discuss?***

There is a broad range of topics to explore in racial affinity groups. The priority topics will vary from group to group depending on the purpose of the group, who is participating, the knowledge and experience they bring, and the context in which the group is meeting.

Below is a link to a tool to help you design the structure of your sessions. It includes a discussion about racial identity development which is a good initial topic to explore or include as part of your sessions:

- ❖ [Session meeting structure tool](#)

Some potential topics for discussion might include the following:

General

- [Definitions](#) or [Brief videos about multiple concepts](#)
- [Historical context of racism](#) (consider your unique geography and locality)

- [Understanding Race](#)
- [4 Levels of racism](#)
- [Racial identity development](#)
- [Internalized racism](#)
- [White privilege](#)
- [White supremacy culture](#)
- [Managing Unconscious Bias](#)
- [Infiltration: How values of oppressive systems arise in organizations \(and what to do about it\)](#)
- [The Difference Between Being “Not Racist” and “Antiracist”](#)
- [Ways to advance racial equity and justice in your organization](#)

#### BIPOC Affinity Groups

- [Microaggressions](#)
- [Imposter syndrome](#)
- [Adopting White supremacy notions](#)
- [Light-skinned privilege/Colorism](#)
- [Healing from racism](#)

#### White Affinity Groups

- [White fragility](#)
- [Dysfunctional rescuing, see page 7](#)
- [Healing from White supremacy](#)
- [The role of White allies](#)
- [Application and commitments moving forward](#)



## WHO

### ***Who should participate in our affinity groups, and should it be mandatory?***

We recommend that affinity groups always be voluntary; however, they are a “stretch space” for learning and sharing. If some participants don’t want to be there, it can impede others’ learning and create a negative culture in the group. At the same time, participation can be strongly encouraged by leaders in the organization or by peers who have experienced the value of affinity groups firsthand (though it’s important that people do not experience this encouragement as pressure to attend).

If your affinity groups are happening within an organization, make sure you are clear whether the affinity group is for staff members only, or if they will include other stakeholders such as board members or other community or network partners.

Always consider power dynamics as you consider group membership. For example, will you include managers, direct supervisors, senior leaders, or human resources staff in your affinity groups? If you do, it’s essential for managers and senior staff to be mindful of listening as much as, or even more than, they talk, and to let participants know when they are speaking from personal experience versus from their organizational role. If you suspect that including human resources and senior staff in the affinity groups would hinder participation or conversation, or be otherwise problematic, then consider creating separate affinity groups for them instead. You can test out different models - the key is to be transparent about your decisions regarding the affinity group structure.

### ***Who should attend which group?***

We recommend that BIPOC affinity groups serve as spaces for only BIPOC participants, and white affinity groups for only white participants for the reasons previously outlined. Every person should have the opportunity to name their racial background(s) in order to determine in which group they prefer to participate.

If your affinity groups are large, you may find it helpful to break the groups down further into smaller subgroups. For example, during BIPOC affinity group meetings, participants may want to have breakouts occasionally by subgroup identities (such as Black, South Asian, Indigenous, mixed heritage, Middle Eastern, North African, Light-Skinned BIPOC, etc.). BIPOC affinity spaces should still work on anti-Blackness and the impacts of colorism and lighter-skinned privilege as a topic. In white spaces,

it can be powerful to break down by white cultural, ethnic, or religious identities (such as Irish, Jewish, Southern, etc.), assuring that a focus on identities that are marginalized does not replace a focus on whiteness and transforming white culture.

These subgroup discussions can provoke rich learning about topics such as historical assimilation, immigration, unique and varied histories of racism, and language oppression. These subgroups can meet in parallel, or simply happen within the BIPOC or white affinity spaces.

In the case of a participant who is of mixed BIPOC and white heritage, we would suggest always having the mixed heritage person choose where they want to go. It is likely that they have been misidentified throughout much of their life, and in this context it's not about what others perceive their identity to be, but rather how they see themselves. They may need individual support and coaching to make their decision. It may be useful to ask questions such as: "How do you personally identify? What in your life experience can help you to make a choice?" Let the participant know they will be welcomed in either group, at any time. Offering a mixed-race affinity group can help mixed-race participants of any background avoid having to make an either/or choice between their identities.

## ***Who should facilitate the groups?***

Every affinity group needs a strong facilitator - someone who has strong background and knowledge in racial equity and justice, excellent facilitation and meeting management skills, comfort working in racialized situations, and the ability to handle complex dynamics between people and within groups. The facilitator's role is to develop the agendas; to ensure that everyone is able to speak and participate; to create the conditions for collaborative learning and exploration; to keep people focused on the topic at hand; and to work with the group to meet the needs of all participants.

These facilitators can be staff, volunteers, or consultants with the requisite background and expertise. The racial identity of the facilitator should match that of the participants, or the majority of the participants, in the affinity group.

If more than one facilitator is available for the group, aim to make the facilitation team diverse by race (for BIPOC groups that include many different racial groups) and gender, and by other key dimensions of identity, if possible.

For larger groups, at least two facilitators are recommended. A good rule of thumb is to have one facilitator for every twelve participants. You can have the same

facilitators for every session or rotate the role in order to develop the group's skills and to share the responsibility more equally.

It is critical to train and support facilitators. Be sure to offer them resources such as this guide, and also build in training, coaching support, and time for facilitators to update each other on lessons learned. Being a facilitator takes time and energy, and you may wish to pay a stipend or bonus to those who take on this additional responsibility. For this reason, it can be important to have a lead coordinator of the affinity groups who can assist the facilitators to meet and plan together, reflect on their progress, and learn new strategies for facilitating groups effectively.

For further information about facilitation, please see the following resources:

- ❖ [IISC Training Support for Facilitators: Fundamentals of Facilitation for Racial Justice Work](#)
- ❖ [Facilitative Leadership for Social Change](#)

## HOW

### ***How many people should be in our affinity group? And should it be a set size, or allow for drop-ins?***

There's no one right size, but generally affinity groups can be as small as five people and as large as fifty people. Smaller groups allow for greater relationship building and intimacy, which allows for deeper learning and exploration. If the participants are newer to each other, a smaller group is generally best. Remember that the more participants you have, the more important it is to increase the number of facilitators available to support the discussions. Particularly for larger groups, make sure you have time for smaller breakout conversations of 2-5 people.

Some affinity group sessions are “drop-in” style and are designed in such a way that people can join a session at any time. This arrangement can easily accommodate newly hired staff or others who join after a group is first convened. That said, attention needs to be paid to supporting new participants to get oriented and to form trusting relationships within the group.

Another option is a “cohort” style in which a closed group of members agree to meet over a specified period of time. This approach can help participants to develop deeper relationships and deeper learning; it also allows for a learning arc where each session builds off of the previous one. The downside of this model is that new participants have to wait for a new cohort to begin.

### ***How should we structure the sessions?***

It's important to have time at the start of each affinity group session for people to arrive and settle in, to build relationships and trust, to agree to group norms, and to review the agenda.

We highly recommend using [maps](#) and starting with one or more [land acknowledgments](#) to honor the first Native people that resided in the location where the group is occurring and/or the locations of each participant. You can ask participants to research and share some history or at least name the Native people who first resided in their location.

For each session, you will want to select a core topic and prepare discussion questions. Articles, quotes, art, videos, or presentations can be useful tools to stimulate discussion.

You will also want a strong closing section in order to capture any next steps, hear final reflections from each person, and end with a unifying moment such as a poem or an uplifting call to action.

## ***How do we launch the affinity groups?***

We recommend that you have a small team of people along with the affinity group facilitators to plan out the timeline, flow, content, outreach plan, and logistics for the affinity groups. As discussed earlier, it's important to take time at the outset to talk about the purpose and focus of the group. Make sure to be flexible and leave room for adjustments as the participant's needs change over time.

We also recommend kicking off both the white and BIPOC groups at the same time so that they are happening in parallel and can potentially inform one another. You may also want to launch with a special kick-off with all of the participants from each affinity group coming together in order to share their hopes and fears as they start the journey. While white folks new to this work might initially need a lot of support, be sure not to over-resource the white affinity group at the expense of the BIPOC group.

Try to schedule the sessions well in advance, and on a regular basis. If it's not possible to hold the sessions during work time, consider holding them over lunch or on personal time. Try not to schedule sessions right before or after tough or stressful meetings and aim to leave a little time afterward for individuals that participated to process the discussion on their own.

## ***How do you create a sense of safety in a group?***

The truth is that there is no way to create comfort in every group experience. Exploring racial identity, racial dynamics, and white privilege will make people feel uncomfortable. The goal is to get people to stretch beyond their comfort zones while also creating the conditions for participants to feel the safety that comes with being heard and supported.

These are some things you can do to make it easier for people to speak up and feel connected to the group:

- **Let people know where you are headed.** Always share the purpose and desired outcomes at the start of your session. Give people a roadmap so they have confidence in the process.

- **Strive to build relationships.** Weave in storytelling exercises or prompts throughout the sessions, which can create the conditions for people to connect on a personal level. Even something as small as doing a “vibe check” at the start of the session for people to share how they are (really) doing can be a way to build connections. It can be very powerful to divide people into pairs or trios to share a story, a learning experience, or something about their lives.
  
- **Create affinity group norms.** Build agreements with the group on “ways of being” that will foster an environment of belonging and inclusion. Have the group generate a list of values and behaviors that would help them to build trust and connection or offer a starting list (see below) and check to see if there are additional items participants want to offer. Once a list is created, it’s important to check for understanding as well as to ask everyone participating to confirm their agreement to abide by the list of norms.

Encourage people to take risks and be vulnerable. It can be hard for people to share personal things, especially in work settings; but it can also foster deep awareness and change in both the individual and the group. Encourage participants to make space for everyone, especially folks from marginalized communities, to speak. The group facilitators can model healthy anti-racist norms like slowing down and being open to making mistakes. These behaviors can help participants to bring their full selves to the table. Sample group norms include:

- ◆ Show up as yourself. Avoid conformance and abandon perfection
- ◆ Speak for yourself using “I” statements
- ◆ Take risks
- ◆ Try on vulnerability
- ◆ Be curious
- ◆ Be willing to be wrong or to disagree
- ◆ Take space/make space
- ◆ Expect a lack of closure

- **Challenge unhelpful or toxic behaviors.** If you see people interrupt others, dominate the conversation, or act out in negative ways, share what you’re observing and intervene if needed. A simple, “I am noticing x is happening, and it’s not helping us to follow through on our group norms” can be an effective technique. Be sure to name behaviors and impacts that are clear to you, without assuming intentions or desires. Taking a break for people to gather their thoughts and emotions or pulling someone aside on a break to de-escalate issues, can also be helpful.

All of these suggestions can help you to “build the container” for meaningful conversations. Typically, as time goes on, the group will become more skillful in having difficult and meaningful conversations.

### ***How do I manage myself as a facilitator?***

For affinity group facilitators, it’s important to “ground” and center yourself before each affinity group meeting. Grounding is the act of putting aside other distractions, gathering your thoughts, and checking in with yourself to bring a spirit of presence, intentionality, and care into the meeting. Find ways to gather your inner strength and wisdom through breathing, meditation, music, a few moments of silence, or some other form of stress relief.

It’s important to manage your triggers throughout the session. If you feel particularly stuck or triggered by what someone says, try to breathe and decide if you need to address it in a healthy manner or let it go for the benefit of the group. Give yourself permission to release control, because what *you* need and want may not be what the group needs or wants.

To help you, remind participants it’s especially important to stay open-minded, listen deeply, share their experiences and ideas, and “try on” perspectives that may be hard to hear. Ask them not to leave it to the facilitator to make things go well; they can offer suggestions for the group to stay focused and to collaborate and model it themselves.

### ***How can we support the affinity groups in between sessions?***

In between sessions, encourage people to connect, socialize, share resources, and join other networks. Consider using a social media platform, a Slack workspace, or WhatsApp group for sharing resources and insights. You can encourage the BIPOC and white affinity groups to communicate and cross-pollinate with each other as well.

## **WHEN**

### ***When should we meet, how often, and for how long?***

Your affinity group may wish to meet quarterly, every six weeks, or even monthly depending on the focus of the group. Ideally, sessions should be approximately two

to three hours in length. 90 minutes is the minimum time needed for an effective session.

We recommend piloting the group for at least a year. Take a pause after six months to gather insights on what's working and what could be improved or enhanced. At the end of year one, extend the timeframe if you wish, and refresh the goals of the sessions going forward.

### ***When should our separate affinity groups come together?***

BIPOC and white affinity groups can come together at various points for shared learning and action, or to simply communicate about what the groups are doing. Aim to get each group firmly established before holding a joint session. In our experience, when the constituencies have been mixed too early or too often, it has created confusion and decreased trust within and between the groups.

In terms of accountability, you may choose to have explicit commitments between the affinity groups. or you might have the BIPOC group share a need or desire with the white affinity group. In the case of the latter approach, it is the white group that is accountable to the BIPOC group, as a way of enacting racial equity.

## **WHERE**

### ***Where do we meet? And what else is needed for accessibility and comfort?***

Physical space is important when it comes to fostering critical conversations. Make sure your group has access to a space that is comfortable and meets the access needs of everyone in your group (which might include wheelchair accessibility, closed captioning, interpretation, etc.) Place chairs in a circle so everyone can see each other and feel like an equal part of the group. If the group is too large for a circle, set up tables with 5-6 people at each table. If you have the resources, offer healthy and fun food from diverse cultures, and offer childcare if needed.

Affinity groups can also be done online through platforms such as Zoom. During COVID-19, people showed great creativity in using online break-out rooms and sharing slides, videos, music, links, and google worksheets to make sessions interactive.



Resources for making your meetings interactive:

- ❖ [Bringing Facilitative Leadership for Social Change to Virtual Work](#), Interaction Institute for Social Change

### ***Where can I find excellent tools on racial equity to support my affinity group?***

We recommend the Racial Equity Tools website, which has a rich array of resources. Dig in and encourage others to do the same. <https://www.racialequitytools.org/>