Sisters in Crime®

Creating an Equitable and Inclusive Environment for All Members and Guests

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Many members may have some experience with the ideas and/or implementation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion—also known as DEI. Many members may not. This chapter of the handbook aims to set out: 1) basic definitions, so that chapter leadership can guide their membership as needed to understand the common terms used in the DEI sphere; and 2) considerations to be addressed when creating local events and experiences which are welcoming and inclusive for everyone.

Marginalized groups are not "monoliths" within themselves. The opinions and preferences of the individuals within any given marginalized group will not all be the same. For example, a single Disabled individual should not be assumed to represent all Disabled people. Sensitivity to and acknowledgement of these differences is an important step to creating an inclusive and welcoming environment.

Related to this, it is best practice to avoid asking marginalized people to educate curious members on DEI issues. This request can end up being emotional labor for the person asked. It can be the equivalent of asking a marginalized person to explain and justify their existence, their humanity, and their lived experiences. Some people will offer to help with this education; others will not. Please be sensitive to this possibility.

DEI work is complex and evolving. This section is not meant to encompass all the available scholarship and theories, nor can it address all the resources available by geographic area. We encourage chapters to explore areas for improvement and available training for themselves. Please consider this a starting point for a meaningful DEI practice.

I. Definitions

Diversity | Equity | Inclusion

Diversity is the way the members of our group are different. This can include age, disabilities, ethnicities, gender, and more. A quick way to understand is to imagine that Diversity asks, *Who is in the room?*

Equity is about a mindset that seeks to ensure potentially overlooked groups or issues are considered on an equal footing as more mainstream groups or issues. For instance, Equity includes (but is not limited to) questions such as, *How can we ensure that we represent the perspectives of marginalized people? How can we ensure that under-represented voices have equal opportunity to speak? How can we ensure that everyone has the same access to resources?*

Inclusivity is how all those members are brought into the group and empowered to be involved. A group can be incredibly diverse, and wish to hear from all its members, but if members don't feel safe to speak or listened to, the group is not inclusive. For example, Inclusivity includes (but is not limited to) questions such as, *Have we actively invited and welcomed everyone with an interest or stake in this conversation? Has everyone been heard from and their unique needs/concerns considered?*

Ethnicity | Race

Ethnicity and Race are often incorrectly used in an interchangeable fashion.

Ethnicity is used to refer to things like cultural background, including language and nationality.

Race, used colloquially rather than scientifically, refers to physical characteristics like skin color and hair texture. For example, a person can be Black (race) and Brazilian (ethnicity).

Contrary to theory invented by 18th-century European naturalists, there are no genetic or inherent traits that define Race. Like Ethnicity, Race as a concept can include social or geographical or cultural identity markers.

Race and Ethnicity are now recognized as social and cultural constructs which nevertheless have real-world consequences. They are ways which human beings use to define themselves and others, as well as their attendant relationships.

When people are "racialized," this means white people have defined them—usually detrimentally—by their racial appearance.

Disabilities | Neurodiversity

Disabilities are conditions that make full participation in society difficult. This is not because of the disability, but because societies fail to take into account the full spectrum of its members.

Disabilities can be visible (eg: using a wheelchair, having a service dog) or invisible (eg: diabetes, depression). They can be physical or psychological. One person can have several disabilities.

When referring to people with disabilities, there are two schools of thought. One is to use "identity first" language, meaning we would say "autistic person." The other is "person first," where we would say "person with autism." There is no perfect consensus on which is better—because individuals with disabilities hold varied opinions and preferences on the ways to be addressed with respect. For example, many disability activists prefer identity first language, as it states upfront something that is an integral part of their lives; it doesn't minimize their disability.

This is a subject where we should listen to and follow the preferences of our disabled members. As with pronouns (see below), we can respectfully ask our members with disabilities about the most appropriate forms of reference.

Neurodiversity is a portmanteau of neurological and diversity. It is the concept that certain neurological distinctions are a result of normal brain differences and not of defects or deficiencies. Conditions such as ADHD, Autism, and Dyslexia are some more well-known examples of neurodiversities.

Neurodiversity recognizes that these "atypical" conditions are part of the broad range of human brain functionality. There are various opinions within the Neurodiversity community as to whether or not these conditions are disabilities, so it is a good practice to listen for and respect the preferences of people who identify as Neurodiverse regarding this distinction.

Queer | LGBTQIA2S+

There are a number of ways to refer to people with non-heterosexual sexualities and non-cis gender identities. Cis-gender refers to someone who identifies their gender as the same as their sex at birth.

Some of the terms include:
- LGBTQIA2S+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual/Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic, 2-Spirit+
- LGBTQIAAP+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual/Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Aromantic, Pansexual+
- QUILTBAG: (Queer/Questioning, Undecided/Unlabeled, Intersex, Lesbian, Transsexual/Transgender, Bisexual, Asexual, Gay/Genderqueer.

As with all terms for non-straight, non-cis identities, there is conflict over using the "best" term of reference. Again, we should aim for a respectful attitude and use of terms, so we should follow the preferences of people in these communities.

Privilege | Privilege Distress

Privilege is unearned access to resources. Having privilege does not mean someone hasn't struggled, or that they haven't been marginalized in another way. It just means that, in some areas, they have an advantage, whether they're aware of it or not.

Privilege distress is the discomfort of having a privileged position changed. It can feel an injustice for a privileged person to be seen as equal to someone with less privilege. For example, people who find closed captioning an annoying distraction might be upset at its integration at a conference. However, the inclusion of closed captioning means that people who previously couldn't attend are now included, and perhaps can provide a broader range of experiences which will benefit all attendees.

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are actions that create an unsafe space for members in indirect, subtle, or unintentional ways. Things like telling a wheelchair user "you're so brave," or saying "I don't see color" are small, painful reminders that the people they're said to or about are not considered "normal" members of the space they're in. This is the most common form of exclusion and oppression our marginalized members will face and possibly the most challenging to overcome, so therefore is all the more important to tackle.

II. Creating Inclusivity

Part of being inclusive means ensuring that Sisters in Crime and its chapters demonstrate that we value diverse membership through equitable and inclusive practices. No SinC member should feel they are only valued because they come from a different background than the majority of their chapter. We want all of our members to feel that being a member of SinC is both valuable to their career and free of marginalizing experiences. SinC is strengthened by including writers from all backgrounds, and the crime fiction community as a whole is made better by stories which share diverse experiences. We have to make sure we lift our entire membership up.

Age, class, body size, and religion are just some of the forms of diversity that we should consider when creating inclusive spaces. Chapter leadership is encouraged to survey their community and do their best to include crime writers and readers from all backgrounds and lived experiences.

Creating an Inclusive Space

What is a safe space? A safe space is a space where people feel empowered to have all sorts of conversations. It ensures that no one will be made to feel unsafe or unheard. It does NOT mean a place where no disagreement is allowed. It does mean that disagreements will be carried out respectfully, with no name calling or derision.

- **Ways to listen:** One way to help create a safe space is to have a method of anonymous feedback. For members who are too shy to speak up or are afraid they won't be listened to, being able to speak up without fear of reprisal can help them make their voices heard.
It's incumbent on the leadership of safe spaces to monitor the space and keep them safe. Many local colleges hold safe space training for leadership that is unsure how to tackle such a project.

- **Members' Private Lives**: All members should be protected from value judgments aimed at physical appearance or perceived abilities, eg: "unprofessional hair" or "overblown dependency." Similarly, members who are curious about those from a different background from themselves should be encouraged to research (Google) their questions on their own. These kinds of unsolicited and unexpected questions often result in "othering" or further alienating those from marginalized backgrounds, thus creating the opposite of a safe space for them.

- **Ways to stop microaggressions**: A first step can be rooting out the ways "majority" members view marginalized members with well-meaning condescension and/or patronizing sympathy. Taking a few moments to reconsider a comment about a marginalized person's "fortitude" or "bravery," or questions about how they "manage," is another important step in stopping oneself from performing a microaggression. These examples are just a beginning. There is ample reading and viewing material available for chapter members to find and learn from. To varying degrees and depths, the work of ending microaggressions means searching within oneself for the attitudes that "other" marginalized people and then, getting rid of them.

Inclusive Language

One of the simplest ways to create a more inclusive space is to change the language used in meetings to be more conscious of inclusivity. For example, it can be helpful to open meetings with a general reminder of things like pronouns and ableist language.
Please note that language is constantly evolving, so things that are considered acceptable now may be inappropriate later, so it's incumbent on all of us to stay informed of best practices.

Gender-neutral language: Gender-specific language like "hey guys" or "let's get started, ladies" or "Sisters and Misters" can be exclusionary, regardless of intent. We may not be privy to every member or guest's private history, and by using these gender-specific phrases, we would be ignoring that some of those we're addressing do not include themselves in these

binary terms, which is the opposite of creating a safe space for them. Consciously using gender-neutral greetings such as "Siblings" or "Members" will help create the inclusive environment we're aiming for.

Ableist terms: Things like "stupid" and "lame" are common in modern language, but are rooted in disdain for people with mental and physical disabilities. Much like how we avoid the R-word, terms that reference disabilities negatively should be phased out of our conversations.

Racial terms: There are many terms that are commonly used that members may not realize are hurtful. "Gypped" and "gypsy," for example, are both racist terms used to reference Romani or Roma people. Words that members of racialized communities use for themselves may not be acceptable for use by people outside of those communities, so it's important to be aware of this whenever we learn new terms related to race.

Queerphobic language: Words like "dyke" or "gay" can be used to marginalize queer people and alienate them. Words that members of the queer community use for themselves may not be acceptable for use by non-queer people, so it's important to be aware of this whenever we learn new terms related to LGBTQIA2S+ communities.

Pronouns: Including our pronouns during introductions and on nametags is inclusive both of members with non-cis gender identities and members with trouble parsing gender identity coding. Your pronouns are the ones for others to use when referring to you in third person and can be written as she/her, he/him they/them, etc. It is appropriate now to use 'they' in reference to a single individual and should be used as default when pronouns are unknown. They are no longer referred to as 'preferred' pronouns, as that implies there is an acceptable alternative to using a person's pronouns, which there is not.

Appropriative terms: There are many words and phrases that have entered common usage that are actually very hurtful to the groups that originated them. For instance, terms such as "spirit animal," "powwow," "finding one's tribe," and "smoke signals" come from historically and spiritually important cultural practices of Indigenous peoples. Use of these terms by non-Indigenous people is inappropriate as that usage debases their cultural significance to the original peoples.

III. Creating Standards of Equity

Creating policies for the treatment of members and visitors can help chapters make themselves into safe spaces for everyone.

- One important pillar to ensure our chapters are places of equity and inclusivity is setting a standard payment rate for speakers and not deviating from it. Non-standardized fees can, intentionally or accidentally, be used to create an imbalance between speakers of varying marginalization.

- Members should be assured of the same rights. No member should have to sit in the hall because their mobility device isn't accommodated by a meeting room or feel excluded because they are the only member of a marginalized group present and their voice is being devalued.

- Allow time and space for every member to be heard. If a marginalized member's voice is being silenced, creating space for them to speak can be achieved by bringing the conversation back to them as the meeting or event leader.

- We encourage all chapters to make a conscious effort to seek out speakers from a broad range of backgrounds. It's important to invite marginalized speakers to speak on subjects of interest at the level of craft or research or business, etc. Do not invite them **only** to speak exclusively on topics related to marginalization.

Accessible Spaces

It can be hard to find an affordable or free space to meet, but it's equally important that all interested members can attend. Try to find spaces without stairs, or with a fully functional elevator. Consider public transit routes to the meeting location. Try to have accessibility tools for members who are hard of hearing or deaf, or visually impaired. Members who are prone to seizures or migraines can be triggered by overly bright or flashing lights, so ensure that presentations are trigger-free, or at least have warnings.

Bathrooms: Bathrooms attached to SinC meeting spaces should have accessible stalls and a restroom that is gender neutral or, at least, single stall.

Costs: You may find that some members don't have access to the same finances that more privileged members have. To be more inclusive, your chapter may consider alternate fee options like having a sliding scale, scholarships, or sponsorships for members who otherwise couldn't join. Some groups ask members who can afford it to pay a little extra to a specially-named fund that members who need financial assistance can apply to for anonymous help. Your chapter can handle chapter fees as it sees fit. You can refer members in financial straits to SinC National to apply for a fee waiver; a limited number of these are available.

Sensitivity: Consider the symbolism and history of certain spaces when holding in-person events. Research into potential event spaces should include searching for any historical connections to misogynistic, queerphobic, and/or racist practices. For example, holding an event at a plantation is inadvisable.

Nothing suits everyone: It's impossible to have a place meet the needs of every single person. This doesn't preclude trying, but recognize that perfect is the enemy of good and it's most important to accommodate as best you can and always work for improvement. Try to vary meeting spaces and times, online offerings, topics, and other variables in order to make meetings inclusive of as many members and potential members as you can.

Content Warnings

When talking about sensitive subjects, as often come up in crime writing, consider having content warnings. Content warnings are a quick list at the beginning of an article or presentation that function like the ratings on a movie. Members with trauma or discomfort with certain topics will have ample warning before things like violence, blood, or sexual violence come up so they can react in a manner that will keep them safe. This is also a useful place to have anonymous feedback so members can add things to the list of things that need a content warning or can request help managing the subject matter in a supportive and productive way. **See also: https://www.sistersincrime.org/contentwarnings**

Code of Conduct

It's imperative to have an explicit plan in place that 1) outlines what is acceptable and unacceptable among our members and 2) what will happen if the code of conduct is violated. Places that have the first without the latter are not seen as safe spaces by marginalized members because it means that nothing will happen if they are assaulted or harassed. Your chapter may use SinC National's Code of Conduct in full or as a template: https://www.sistersincrime.org/page/code-of-conduct.

Genuine Effort (or, How to Own Up to Our Mistakes)

For people who were previously unaware, it can be intimidating or frustrating to be presented with "a list of words they can't say anymore." Many people react with anger or confusion. However, please remember that perfection is impossible. Genuine, honest effort is what matters. Best practice for making a mistake, such as a misspeak of a person's pronoun, is to authentically apologize, correct the mistake, and continue on. Please don't compound the mistake with figurative self-flagellation because that puts the onus on the hurt person to reassure the mistake-maker.

For a more significant mistake, the best practice is:

- **Center the injured party**. Ask for their feelings and thoughts. This is no longer about the person or group that made the mistake, but about making things better for the injured person or group.

- **Listen and learn**. Hear what they say, sit with it, and make sure the mistake-maker has a complete understanding of their impact.

- **Apologize**. Even though it was an accident, this is important. Center the injured by focusing on taking responsibility for the hurtful actions. For example, "I'm sorry I interrupted you and silenced you."
  - Do not include self-flagellation or justifications.
  - Do not water down an apology with "if/that" statements:
    - "I'm sorry if you were offended"; or
    - "I'm sorry that you felt ignored."

- **Take steps to keep it from happening again**. If there needs to be a group training or re-familiarization with the chapter and/or National code of conduct, ensure that the injured party and any other marginalized members will feel safe and supported when doing so.

Additional Resources for Curious Members

- https://www.perkinselearning.org/technology/blog/how-be-ally-disabled-friends
- https://www.themuse.com/advice/what-is-an-ally-7-examples
- https://disabilityalliancepdx.wordpress.com/resources/accessibility-and-inclusion-in-activist-spaces/

Materials Referenced for This Chapter

Inclusivity, Diversity, and Privilege:

- https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/diversity/social-justice/understanding-race-and-privilege
- https://www.nccj.org/what-privilege
- https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/09/what-is-privilege/
- https://weeklysift.com/2012/09/10/the-distress-of-the-privileged/
- http://www.guidetoallyship.com/#how-to-handle-mistakes
- https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/06/22/problem-diversity-inclusion-equity/
- https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/03/30/colleges-need-language-shift-not-one-you-think-essay

Disabilities:

- https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/09/ally-people-invisible-disabilities/
- https://disabilitiesinclusion.org/
- https://www.meriahnichols.com/disability-organizations/
- https://www.autistichoya.com/p/ableist-words-and-terms-to-avoid.html?m=1

Neurodiversity:

- https://neurocosmopolitanism.com/neurodiversity-some-basic-terms-definitions/
- https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/clearing-up-some-misconceptions-about-neurodiversity/

LGBTQIA2S+ / Queer community:

- https://www.campuspride.org/resources/how-to-be-an-lgbt-ally/
- https://hellogiggles.com/lifestyle/straight-people-lgbtq-ally/
- https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2017/06/08/how-lgbt-ally-during-pride-month-and-beyond/381285001/
- https://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/ally-tips
- https://bolt.straightforequality.org/files/Straight%20for%20Equality%20Publications/3rd-edition-guide-to-being-a-straight-ally.pdf

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color:

- https://libdiverse.wordpress.com/2018/06/11/so-you-want-to-be-an-ally/
- https://www.vox.com/2015/2/16/8031073/what-are-microaggressions
- https://medium.com/@realtalkwocandallies/holy-shit-being-an-ally-isnt-about-me-ae2de5c47514
- https://mashable.com/2016/01/10/ally-to-people-of-color/