A WHITE WOMAN'S GUIDE TO MINIMIZING HARM IN THE SERVICE WORLD

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Nervous about reading this book? You're not alone. I, too, used to (and still do) feel uncomfortable at so much as the thought of being critical about my role in social justice. However, I can tell you firsthand that I have grown so much and have gotten more out of my community-focused experiences since being critical. Perhaps like you (or perhaps not), I used to glorify and romanticize the service I did, most of which was/is (organizing for) short-term trips. I came back from those trips feeling proud of myself, grounded in my values, and motivated by the work I did. But, to tell you the truth, that work was not much. Especially when you think about how much further my impact could have gone if it were monetary, donated to the respective organization, or if a community member had been equipped to do the tasks I did for a week, long-term.

Nevertheless, those reflections, as well as the ones I've had in my Alternative Spring Break and Women's and Gender Studies communities throughout my time at Vanderbilt, have inspired this guidebook. "A White Woman's Guide", as I like to call it, is not intended to call you out, or make you feel bad about yourself. Well, that's perhaps not exactly true. It is intended to do that, but in a way that is gentle, loving, and with your growth and the best interests of all at heart. After reading a page or two, if your gut instinct is to close the book and never look back, it's working. I challenge and encourage you to lean into that discomfort and tension.

My thanks to the communities that have allowed me to internalize much of this information, making for a difficult works cited experience, but a great starting point to live out these lessons. Much of the information in this guidebook originates from Break Away's national ABCs conference, and through this, Vanderbilt Alternative Spring Break, an organization I was lucky enough to serve as Education Co-Chair of. I have included links and references wherever possible. Happy reading!

PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDEBOOK

You may be asking yourself: "Self, what the f*ck is the purpose of this guidebook?" That's a great question, and I had to start there as well. If only I could include everything I wanted to include in this guidebook.

First, this book is by no means comprehensive. I have titled it "A White Woman's Guide to Minimizing Harm in the Service World" and not "A White Woman's Guide to Doing Service" because I don't believe (or at least, I don't possess) the perfect recipe to do service. Also, I am of the belief that the service experience consists of more than just the act of volunteering - it is the conversations after, it is the employees at a nonprofit, it is everything but the service.

This book is intended to be a reflective experience for anyone, ideally someone who identifies as a white woman, but I'm not one to gatekeep. Hopefully, you are entering the professional nonprofit/service/community engagement world (I use these terms interchangeably), and are excited about it. I hope that this is a grounding experience before you take that leap. It is a reflective and educational experience - obviously, because how can you unlink the two? The guidebook will, as the name suggests, guide you through three perspectives of thinking about your role in the service world. We will begin at the micro: thinking critically about you as an individual and the values you hold. Then, we will move to an organizational perspective, and after that, a communal and social one. In each of these three sections, you will find journal prompts, as well as definitions and concepts that blend theory with practice.

I assure you wholeheartedly that you will get more out of this book if you think and converse about it after reading through and filling it out. If you need someone to discuss it with, my email is always open (rose.capin@gmail.com).

INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVE

WHAT MOTIVATES YOU TO DO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WORK?

WHAT ARE YOUR VALUES IN DOING SERVICE WORK?

WHAT HAS YOUR JOURNEY BEEN? HOW HAVE YOU GROWN AND WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF GROWING?

With those questions as your guide, I encourage you to think critically about the way you think about service. These are a few things that can serve as a foundation for/inspire your values as a member in your community:

SOCIAL JUSTICE

One of the most important lessons in thinking about service is the connection with social justice. Social justice is a huge buzz-word these days, but its definition is imperative to know. First, social justice is a process and a goal; you use social justice to achieve social justice. Second, perhaps more definitionally, social justice is full and equal participation for all groups in a society that is mutually-shaped to meet their needs and full potential.

When thinking about your service issue, think about the key players in the story. It's not only about the volunteer and the community - who else is there? Maybe a better question would be: what else is there? What are the structural forces that underlie and have created the present situation?

A helpful framework to understand the difference between social justice, and lack thereof is the justice vs. charity model. While a charity lens looks at the symptoms of a problem (i.e. someone is hungry), a justice lens looks at the roots of that problem (i.e. this individual is experiencing homelessness due to gentrification). In practice, charity is often a social service (i.e. a meal donated), while justice strives to be long-term social change (i.e. advocating for more just housing policy). Charity is not necessarily "bad", but it should not exist in a vacuum.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Critical thought and analysis is also a helpful practice for minimizing harm. By constantly reflecting and questioning (yourself, your organization, others, etc.), you ensure that you are not becoming complacent. However, this is scary and uncomfortable!

The Dunning-Kruger effect is one that has helped me contextualize the importance of critical thinking. It plots confidence against knowledge - something I expected to have a linear positive relationship. However, it shows that your confidence in a field is actually the highest when you know the least. As you start to learn more, you may grow more uncomfortable and insecure about the topic. Perhaps that's you right now! Regardless, there will become a point at which you start to build that confidence back up, this time knowing that the situation is more complex than you initially (naively) believed. This type of knowledge allows for more critical engagement and transparent discussion.
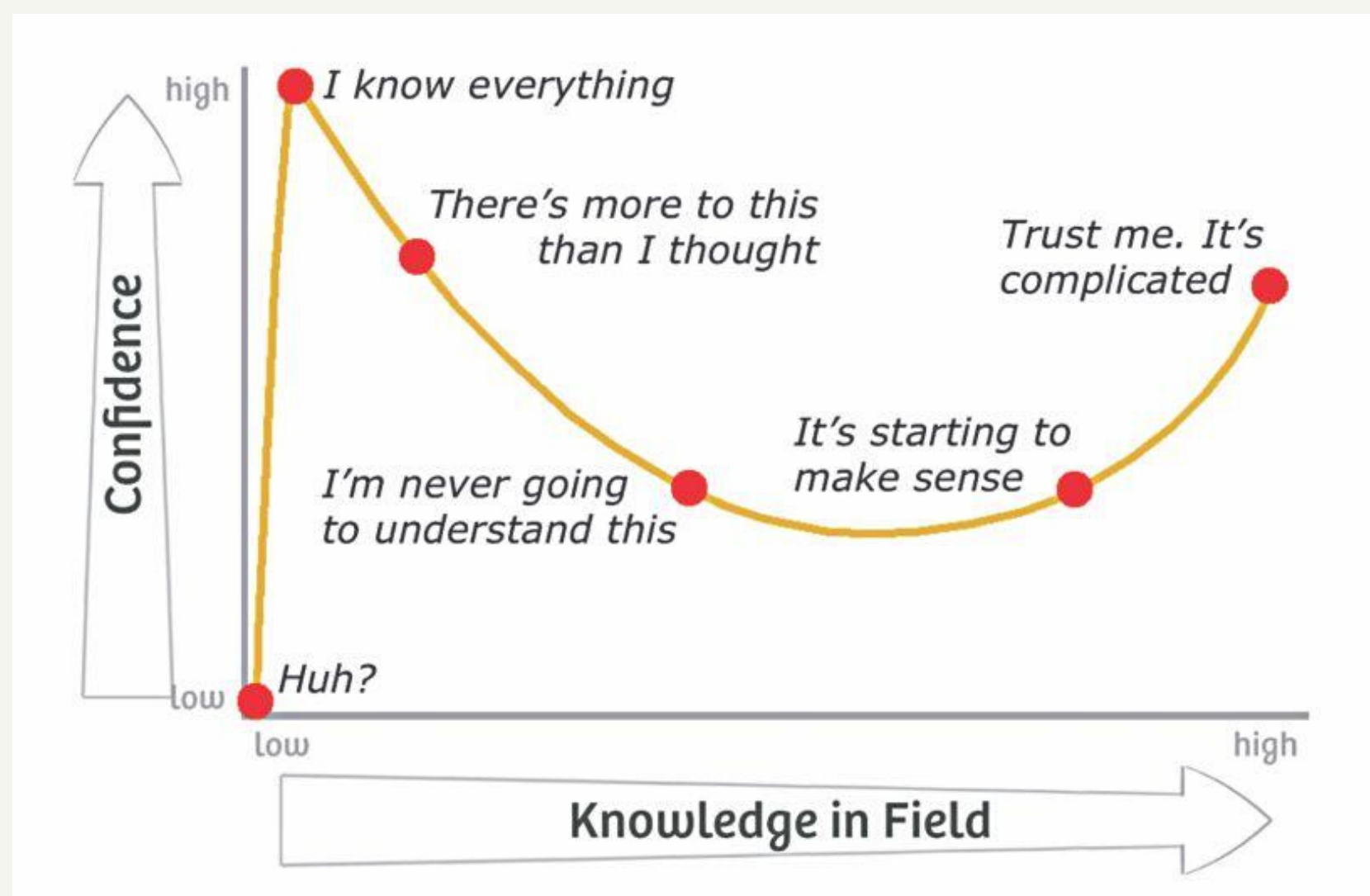
CHECKING YOUR PRIVILEGE

You have probably heard about the privilege test. If you haven't, I recommend this one from BuzzFeed: https://www.buzzfeed.com/regajha/how-privileged-are-you. Think about the ways that your identities have afforded you certain experiences, or color the way you engage with the world. This type of self-reflection is crucial to engaging in a space that is dedicated to empowering others.

Checking your privilege is a way to engage in cultural humility, a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and critique that manifests in understanding and respecting different ways of interaction and adapting one's own behavior and language to fit other norms. When you engage in service, you are not the focus of the experience; challenge yourself to centralize the narratives, voices, and experiences of the community, and change your instinct to fit that space.

ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO ENGAGE WITH THIS ISSUE?

WHAT HAVE YOUR PAST ORGANIZATIONS DONE? WHAT ARE SOME ASPECTS YOU LIKED/DIDN'T LIKE?

WHAT DOES YOUR CURRENT ORGANIZATION DO? WHAT ARE SOME ASPECTS YOU LIKE?

The most imperative characteristic for an organization to embody is being community-centered. While it may sound redundant, you'd be surprised how few organizations live out the missions they broadcast.

First, let's begin with a definition of community. Break Away provides an excellent one for abundant community: people in relationships who focus on the gifts of all of its members, nurture connections and relationships between members, and offer hospitality and are welcoming of strangers.

What does that look like in practice, though? Namely, listening to the needs of the community, assuming a passive role, rather than imposing what they believe to be the needs, onto the community. A great tell of whether or not an organization has done this is to take a critical look at the makeup of the organization. Is the staff composed mostly of individuals who reflect the community they serve? Or is there a gap between the culture of the organization and the culture of the community?

The latter poses a great threat for a savior complex to develop. Saviorism and the white savior complex (usually synonymous) reinforce the existing socially and historically-grounded power dynamics between white people and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color). A white savior acts under the guise of helping non-white individuals, but is actually just self-serving. Saviorism is both overt and covert, and can easily be internalized. The perfect example of a white savior is an unskilled, rich individual on a Christian mission trip to Uganda to build an orphanage, particularly one who posts photos with Ugandan orphans clinging to them.

While that is an extreme example, being more committed to portraying an image of "helping" - from a distance - rather than being on the ground to sustainably and ethically empower and support community members, is also an act of saviorism. Always question if yourself and the organizations you are involved with perpetrate savioristic threads.

Further, organizations should be committed to meeting the needs of the community, continuously reassessing their impact, or lack thereof. Complacency is a perfect breeding ground for saviorism.

Make sure any organization you work with has elements of being community-centered! Be critical in the type of organization you choose to devote your time to.

COMMUNAL PERSPECTIVE

HAVE YOU HAD AN IMPACT
IN YOUR COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS IN
THE PAST?

HAVE YOU HAD ANY NEGATIVE
EXPERIENCES IN DOING SERVICE?
OR TIMES WHERE YOU WEREN'T
SURE HOW TO FEEL? DESCRIBE
THOSE HERE.

Thinking about the large-scale impact of service work is something that should always contextualize the way you think about small, everyday actions in your role. First and foremost, humility should be the primary tone that underlies any conversation you have surrounding your work. As a white woman, you may be inclined, as some feminists encourage, to take up space and be proud of and boast your accomplishments. While this is not "bad" in itself, but it should not be your intention for service-related conversations, where you occupy a space of privilege.
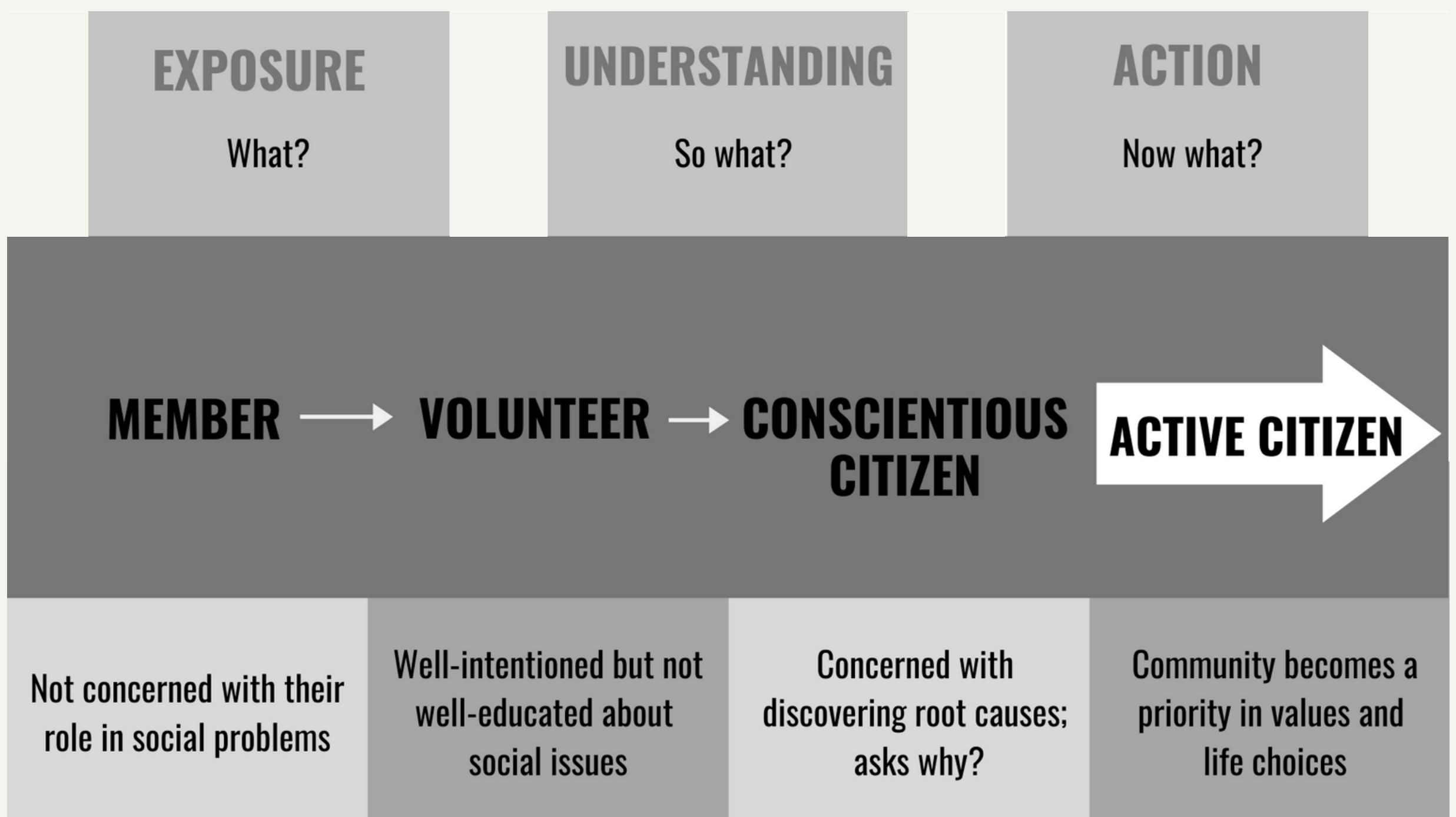
HARM SPECTRUM OF SERVICE

Next, I have two models to think critically about your role. The first is the harm spectrum of service, an uncomfortable but important one. Here is a helpful model from Break Away:

UNINTENTIONAL HARM	NO HARM/NET NEUTRAL	POSITIVE IMPACT .
Our work is done improperly and must be re-done Our work displaces local employment opportunities or contributes to undercutting the local economy. Micro-offense and lapses occur frequently. Our physical presence is harmful to the community.	There will always be small ways in which our actions have negative consequences, but on the whole, we haven't necessarily built reciprocal relationships nor helped move the needle. We are simply filling a volunteer shift.	Project goals (both outputs and outcomes) are met. Strong relationships are built. Mutually beneficial partnerships are present. The organization is better suited to do their work.

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Next is the concept of active citizenship, which has a helpful continuum of becoming a long-term, engaged member of one's community. The roles are described below, but become more advanced and in-depth as one gets more immersed in the issue, seeing it from an educational and action-focused perspective. By being an active citizen, one is less likely to induce harm on the communities they are apart of and serve, as well as more likely to have a long-term impact.

EXPOSURE	UNDERSTANDING	ACTION
What?	So what?	Now what?

MEMBER → VOLUNTEER → CONSCIENTIOUS CITIZEN → ACTIVE CITIZEN

| Not concerned with their role in social problems | Well-intentioned but not well-educated about social issues | Concerned with discovering root causes; asks why? | Community becomes a priority in values and life choices |

BEFORE YOU GO

Thanks for reading, but please don't stop your journey here! This is just an introduction. Here are some further questions to consider:

- Have I recently felt complacent or apathetic in my work?
- Is my organization tokenizing our POC employees/volunteers?
- Am I being an ally to the communities I serve, or am I being an accomplice to their oppression?
- Am I adequately utilizing my privilege?

One of the best practices I've found to live out these lessons is to think proactively about holding myself accountable. First, I embed social justice and anti-racist sources of information in my daily routine. Instagram is a fantastic platform for this, and I recommend @NoWhiteSaviors and @TheComradeCloset, as well as @ActiveCitizenHQ. Next, I try my best to surround myself with friends and mentors who will make me grow, and push me to think about hard, uncomfortable questions. However, it is imperative not to tokenize these individuals, particularly if you are more privileged than them.

Other daily tools include journaling and calling out jokes, posts, or anything that reinforces stereotypes and perpetuates inequality. At the end of the day, remember that something is better than nothing, and that even one degree of change can set the roots for a future of deeper, wider change. Best of luck on your journey!

WORKS CITED

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