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To Show up and Step up: A Reflection

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“How many of you have ever faced racism at work?” I had been sitting in a workshop on Abuse Prevention when the first comment about abuse to STAFF came up. Being relatively new, I was paying more attention to the people around me than to the content of the workshop but, when the first staff made a comment about being subjected to racism at work, I saw the haunted look in many eyes. A couple of timid responses followed and, when I (rather boldly) asked that question...almost every hand shot up. An avalanche of words crashed into me as I tried to discern each individual comment, even as I struggled to understand some of their accents.

Reflect on: Accents

Consider accents for a moment: To me, they have an accent. To them, I am the one with the accent. There is a fine line here that can translate into an unfair judgement of the other person. The aim is to be mindful of the belief in our own centralized superiority and domination. The English language being North America’s dominant language may imply that anyone who does not speak English (like a newscaster) is not from ‘here,’ and is seen as an outsider – as an ‘Other.’ And it is this notion of the ‘other’ that helps explain unjust and often violent acts of oppression on one hand; yet it also shows us an area where anti-oppressive practices can take place. How many people are made to feel like second-class citizens merely because their accent is not a given society’s dominant one, and how many citizens feel a false sense of their own superiority merely because they happen to speak the dominant language? And we, the people, start dividing.

The massed huddle of people that surrounded me after the workshop as I sought to understand the dynamics at work, and the fervency with which they were willing to tell their story told me that there was something going on here. Our work in human services often leads us to accept more personal injury and give too many chances for others to remedy their behaviour than we should. Yet this perspective can lead to less productivity at work, declining outcomes for the lives of those we support, and the suffering of our health and family life.

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Both of us were no strangers to racism. Coming from quite disparate backgrounds, disciplines, and education, we were united nonetheless by the shared experiences that many visible minorities face, and that many people who are ‘different’ in some way that matters only to the aggressor seem to face even to this day. Ask any member of the queer, trans, non-binary community, persons with a disability – anyone who has displayed any type of mental health concern at work, or anyone with the slightest imperfection on their perfect being, and they will tell you a similar story. We empathize with all of them. But this is not about victimization. This is about stepping up in order to stand up for something that was not right.

**“An injustice to one is a menace to all”
Montesquieu**

I pondered for a while about what to do. I was new. I tend to speak too quickly for those whom I believe need a voice. Was I doing that again? In the end, I did not think so. I brought my concerns and opinions to a very concerned and very empathetic boss who encouraged me to pursue my convictions and consult with him as I progressed. When we accept responsibility as a group, only then, can true change occur. After the article “Staying buoyant while under attack” came out in this Journal, I found a person who understood the pain and sheer UNFAIRNESS many who have faced prejudice felt. Together we generated ideas....

“We want to empower people.”

“We want to start a dialogue.”

“We want people’s story to be heard.”

“We want to raise awareness.”

“We want to provide a space where the person can relate their story. Providing an opportunity to explore their experiences can offer immense validation. We know the trauma some people have faced both at work and in their personal lives, and this can affect their work with those they support as well as their own families.”

Trauma-informed practices remind us to: 1. recognize the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledge the role trauma may play in an individual’s life, and 2. provide support services in a way that is accessible and appropriate to those who may have experienced trauma.

Racism, colourism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, and ableism (all the ISM’s) can result in traumatic experiences. We know this firsthand working directly with people living with disabilities. Having a dialogue about issues that affect human rights can be a beginning step in addressing these collective traumas, and so began the kernel of an idea and a plan for how to accomplish it. With the support of our management we started the conversation...

Dare to Imagine

How would things be better if issues of racism and inequity were mentioned as easily as maladaptive behaviour patterns and incomplete data recording? Like many things in life, one must get their thinking straight before they get their actions straight, so that they can get their outcomes er...straight (ok at least so they can get their desired outcomes). We wanted to let staff know their concerns were heard, and we wanted to create a space for meaningful conversations to let staff know that we cared. We imagined direct support staff, management, maintenance staff, and everyone else hearing the same message. “I’m used to being called names” should not be the norm, nor be praised as a skill of resilience – we have a social and organizational responsibility to address this.

We imagined that we could create an environment where people would be willing to come forward and speak up for themselves, without fear of repercussion or (perhaps worse) apathy because they did not think their supervisors or managers would do anything about it or cared to do anything about it. We imagined this training would be the start of a curriculum that raised awareness for everyone and provided on-going support not just for isolated issues but as a **policy in practice**. Every organization has anti-racism and anti-bullying language embedded in their policies, procedures, and even in some protocols, but how many have provided training on HOW to enact the policy rather than checking off a box from a master list? Racism and inequity, are, essentially, an ethical issue, and the HOW leads us from theory into practice. This guides us to generate conversation and address these issues with dignity and respect.

We sought to fill the gap, not just because we thought people would benefit, but also because on a very real, personal, visceral level when we hear stories like that of the recent wrongful death of George Floyd – that part of EVERYONE’S spirit that rails against injustice cries out to do something. This process started for us more than a year ago, but each story of humans being treated worse than animals urges us further to be more and do more. It is our social responsibility to respond to the injustice around us. As people who work directly in support of people with disabilities, we understand conditions of the human spirit on a level that many other professions maybe do not. We wanted to contribute to a social environment that created a safer space for all oppressed peoples and having an open dialogue can bring about great comradeship, which is rewarding in itself. This desire urged us to teach more so that, in our small part of the world, perhaps some people can really come to believe that we are all one.

If you’re uncomfortable you’re on the right track

When addressing racism, it is critical to know and accept the nature of how this topic can provoke us. Political issues are personal. Each person will process and respond differently based on their own lived experience, cultural upbringing, personal philosophies, and interest in the topic. *Nonviolent approaches lead to more productive conversations.*

For some of us, it may bring up memories of trauma and feelings of anger, hopelessness, and frustration. It can remind us of both ongoing and unresolved issues in our communities and workplace. And for some, it can result in the denial of its existence or the choice to be distant from the issue.

Some people privately disapprove of racism and may console themselves with the thought that they themselves are not a racist and will never be one; therefore, they do not need to speak out on these issues. By staying complacent, we comply with, participate in, and contribute to oppression.

The more we talked, the more we realized that there were some uncomfortable questions being asked. “Good!” piped Virginia. That is a sign that the topic should be explored further, feelings should be analyzed, and questions (regardless of outcome) should be asked. Perhaps dealing with conflict is one of the core natures of our jobs as a behaviour therapist and an expressive arts therapist. Our roles prepare us to dive into uncomfortable and sometimes difficult conversations. We do not and cannot run away from conflict, instead, we embrace it and work with it. We humanize the experiences of difference and hurt and find ways to contain it – to name it. This is an important lesson when we attempt to identify areas and strategies for overcoming oppression.

What do we say when someone says they feel like an outsider at work? What do we say when a staff member says management put you up to this, and nothing will get done? What do we do if a staff becomes angry or upset? What if they say, “You have no idea what it’s like to come to this country, not speaking the language and people thinking that *because you speak with an accent you think with one*”? We thought of these things and prepared to confront them. What we had going for us was that we HAD been in many of those situations and KNEW of others who had, and we WANTED to provide answers because we cared about the outcomes. Leading with your heart is a good place to start. Why were we doing this? We knew why, and while there would be some that questioned our motives, the benefit to the majority would far outweigh the skepticism of the few.

Making it a safer space

We began our first conversations with “This is a safe space.” Oh really? What makes it safe...because you said so? Did we declare it a safe space and people believed us? Well, partly yes! You can declare a space safe because, as the organizer, you will not tolerate ridicule of someone’s opinion nor negation of their experience. You can declare you will not tolerate shouting over another, disrespectful comments, or someone monopolizing the conversation. You can declare that you will give anyone who wants the time and chance to speak and will respect anyone who chooses to remain silent. And you can declare that no one will be identified but will remain anonymous if they choose to share a thought. You can declare that you seek clarity not condemnation, illumination not obscurity, opinion and thoughtfulness, not baseless accusation and apathy.

When all this has been done, in however many words you want to fling at an audience, in the end, a safer space is created when the group of people slowly start to first respect and then trust those sitting with them. The first you can help to create with your words – the second is created ‘in the moment’ when common goals are approached, and shared experiences are revealed. Change and transformation takes time.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead

The more you know the less you know

We all have our own experiences. Each one of us knows what it feels like to be rejected, laughed at, taunted, and ostracized.

Reflection on personal experiences:

Virginia:

Understanding the ways that I have experienced oppression gives me a deeper sense of empathy toward the oppressions of others. Psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, describes this phenomenon as the ‘wounded-healer.’ The narrative and colour-metaphor of the Yellow Peril is a story that holds some of the oppression of East-Asian, specifically Chinese people in the West. The racist ‘Chinese Exclusion Act’ resulted in the uprising of a movement and the coming together of people through allyship. Many years later, change was made, and the discriminatory Act was repealed. And that is just ONE story. In learning, I am mindful of not just focusing on

our oppression but also our resistance, and the many ways we have developed resiliency. I am deeply committed to the liberation of all peoples. My research in individual, historical, and collective trauma informs an intersectional, politically conscious approach in clinical practices through expressive arts therapy. Learning about my people's history propels me to be an agent for change. It gave me a deeper empathy to those who live with systemic injustice and on-going racism: "Black Lives Matter." I choose to practice *cultural humility*. There is no way for me to truly understand what I am not, but I am willing to listen and learn. I am a cis-gendered, queer, woman of colour who grew up in a low-resource, predominantly black community, raised by immigrant parents – English was my second language. I am also an avid fan of all elements of Hip-Hop.

I know what it's like living on stolen land and not knowing much about its original keepers. I want to continue to learn what reconciliation looks like from Indigenous people. I know what it's like growing up in a black community, as a non-black person of colour. I know what it's like to be in non-binary relationships and be queer. I know how it feels to be the only person of colour in a room and feeling 'othered.' I know childhood trauma – I have also developed emotional intelligence and coping strategies. I still occasionally get called 'aggressive' and 'difficult' because I speak up and refuse to stand down. I have witnessed the power of community spirit. I acknowledge the vulnerability of speaking one's truth and appreciate how that act in itself can be healing. I am still learning to unapologetically be myself because that is my right...even if sometimes things go left.

Roger:

Each one of us wants to belong...to something or someone. This may not be enough, however, to really understand another. It is folly for me to say I understand what it is like to be a gay Chinese man going out with my husband to a bar in a small town on the East Coast. I have no idea what it really is like for two black women to kiss goodbye on a street corner and have people look upon them with disgust. I do know, however, what it is like to have people look upon me with disgust and contempt. I do know what it is like to be a shy brown child picked up and thrown into the bushes by a gang of kids who actually fought with each other over who would get to do the 'throwing.' I do know what it's like to have two bullies seek me out every recess at school and repeatedly beat me up and not have the teacher do anything about it because this was the 70s, and kids 'just do these things.' So, can I imagine the hurt another feels? Do I bring those experiences into my work? Of course, I do. It is a part of me, as your experiences are a part of you. But I don't know your story. Within your organization there are people right now who carry the pain of past experiences with them, and this affects their work in ways that perhaps are not fully understood. When a person that is supported uses a racial slur, and there is that one person that is deeply affected by it – that should be a clue that this person carries a hurt deep inside them. What a person has endured in their life shapes them in ways perhaps even they do not fully understand. I am STILL realizing how things I've gone through shape my current behaviour...and I'm trained to recognize them! Yet, there is still so much to discover. What we are learning is that the more we learn and, as our world view expands, the more we see that we don't know. The great paradox of learning is that the more educated you become, the more you realize how little you know. Each person teaches us something and, while people may lecture about diversity, race relations, inequality and justice, and write papers, and get degrees in pursuit of these studies, a person with a great story can teach a profound lesson that can be felt by all and forgotten by none.

The pain

“I grew up in a country where the police are corrupt, constantly seeking payouts and, if you don’t have enough money, they beat you and leave you by the side of the road. I worked the afternoon shift one day and was driving home at about midnight when a police car turned on its lights behind me. I was so terrified I was going to be attacked, given that I’m a black woman alone on a lonely road at midnight, that I could barely stop shaking. When the police officer came to my window, he shone the light so bright in my eyes that I was blinded, and I kept thinking he was going to pull me out of my car at any minute. He asked me several times why I was shaking, and where was my identification, but I was dazzled by the light and terrified, and I could barely speak, and he kept asking me questions, and he said, if I wasn’t hiding anything, I shouldn’t be so nervous. He asked me to step out of the vehicle but, I was so scared, I was paralyzed for a second or two, and he got frustrated and called for backup. I got out of the car and was standing there when two other police cars showed up, and suddenly I was surrounded by lights, and people, and radios, and hardly any other cars were passing at that time of night on that lonely road, and I thought, ‘Tonight I’m going to die.’”

We sat there in silence as the woman finished her story, and I for one felt like I could see the whole scene as if it had happened to me. For those of you seeking the conclusion of the story, the woman was eventually released and told to go about her business after nothing was found wrong with any of her papers, and she never found out why she was stopped in the first place. How it ended, however, is not the point. The very real experiences of people in racially motivated incidents both at work and in the world cannot be minimized. We are at a point in history where our collective consciousness seeks answers to hard questions and an upheaval of established patterns of behaviour. It is up to each of us to make choices for ourselves that not only define us individually – it defines us as an organization, as a community, as a country, as a people.

The end of one conversation...the beginning of yours.

This is not a success story. This is a work in progress. You can share your findings with your management. You can cite examples of how oppressive our own language and actions can be even without meaning to be. Talk about the four key areas in Diversity training: Awareness (Somalis are refugees), Attitude (Christians are right – Muslims wrong), Knowledge (displaying your prejudices sometimes unintentionally), and Skills (communication – verbal and non-verbal) and think up ways to address this within your own organization. Look at the language you use in your reports. Look with ‘fresh eyes’ at how you decode problem behaviour, and the way you guide staff that support those individuals, considering the cultural and racial issues they may bring with them. More than all this, however – start a conversation. Then let the conversation grow. Start a movement! Create and formalize a group – a Diversity Group – of like-minded staff who want to further these difficult conversations and address inequality and injustice not with policies alone but with actions.

We have outlined the steps we took, and the thinking behind what we undertook out of a deep-felt desire to serve others and speak up for something that we felt needed an audience. The ‘whys’ that drove us were a sense of personal and professional fulfillment, a chance at emotional reparation, and the opportunity to help transform communities.

As this story of how we decided to Show Up and Step Up within our organization ends, the question is: How does yours begin?

About the author

Virginia Jahyu, M.A., is an expressive arts therapist and co-founding therapist of the Trauma to Trust Clinic where she works with people living with disabilities who have experienced trauma. Her work is centered around relationships and using the arts and dialogue for positive change and transformation. She uses a variety of artistic modalities: music, poetry, visual arts, movement, and play to engage and empower individual's creative spirit and expressive voice. Her passion for the arts, accessibility, and equity continues to guide her work.

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