

Oppressional “TNT” (The Next Time) Versus White Fragility: And the Winner is ...Oppression

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INTRODUCTION

Microaggressions, implicit bias, covert discrimination, acts of intergroup insensitivity, privilege, and other manifestations of oppression directed at marginalized communities often engender a gamut of negative emotions and behaviors ranging from frustration to outbursts of anger (Wortham, 2015). Mostly covert and indiscernible to members of oppressor groups, these modes of oppression are often daily repeated episodes and experiences (i.e., this is the second, third, or fourth occurrence today) that psychologically and emotionally distress oppressed people (Smith, 2014; Nadal et al., 2014). Intergroup relations and interactions between different social identities are commonly fraught with tension, conflict, and cross-cultural misunderstandings, as diverse people interact and communicate with each other in an attempt to collectively work, live, and study.

Certainly, one arena in which people from diverse backgrounds are present and mixing is higher education (Hurtado, 1992). Given the increase in diversity on college campuses, it is not uncommon to find a variety of groups on college campuses including women, men, Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders, Blacks/African Americans, LatinX/Hispanics, American Indians/Native Americans, gay men, lesbians, bisexual individuals, people with disabilities, veterans, international students, re-entry students, Jews, Catholics, Muslims, conservatives, liberals, individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds, and many other categories of students. Unfortunately, research on intergroup relations suggests that integration and contact between diverse groups does not necessarily lead to positive intergroup relations. The most common results of intergroup contact are conflict, stereotyping, discrimination, microaggressions, and emotional discomfort (Stephan & Stephan, 2001). These negative outcomes impact the targets of oppression disproportionately in all aspects of life, and in

particular, their psychological, emotional, and physical well-being (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007).

There is research that speaks to the emotional and physical toll that acts of oppression exact on marginalized people (Williams, 2013; Sue, 2010). For example, anxiety, and various types of stress are some of the psychological results of racism (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). In addition, many incidents of oppression can be cumulative to the point that a small act can trigger anger and other emotions resembling trauma (Williams, 2013; Carter 2007). Historical events can also have a negative impact on oppressed communities to the point of inducing trauma on members of those groups (Brave Heart, 2000). Marches and protests across the country clearly demonstrate that women, LGBTQ+, people of color, Native Americans, and other marginalized communities are angry, rightfully so, at the chronic oppression perpetuated by members of majority groups (Kaster & Crary, 2017; Torino, 2017). This is not to suggest or support the stereotype that all people of color or other marginalized communities are angry and must be approached carefully at all times. People from diverse backgrounds still communicate without conflict and have positive relationships with members of other social identities. However, it is not difficult to understand that discrimination breeds frustration and anger, which sometimes manifests itself during intergroup interactions (Lorde, 1981).

One way to conceptualize the legitimate and justified emotional outburst of emotion by marginalized people engendered by daily and degrading incidents of oppression is what the authors refer to as Oppressional “TNT” (The Next Time). That is, the next time that someone touches my hair without permission, I am going to get very angry, or the next time that someone asks me where I am really from, I am going to let them know the problem that I have with that question. Similarly, the next time that someone mansplains, I am going to tell them off, or the next time that someone states that the Washington Redskins’ logo is meant to honor Native Americans, I am going to scream, or the next time that someone wants to pet my service dog, I am going to express my frustration. There are many other day-to-day examples of acts of insensitivity, discrimination, and microaggressions that frustrate and anger members of the LGBTQ+, Jewish, Muslim, LatinX, bi-racial, and multiple other communities (Sue, 2010). In sum, the authors define Oppressional TNT as: the expression of emotions and behaviors, such as anger, sorrow, frustration, raising one’s voice, and gestures, directed at members of

oppressor groups during intergroup interactions resulting from a history of oppression, as well as on-going systemic and daily encounters with oppression.

Oppressional TNT can manifest itself in a multiplicity of settings, including staff meetings, conference proceedings, interpersonal interactions, open forums, campus protests, professional meetings, family gatherings, and other venues where intentional or unintentional acts of oppression are present.¹ One critical arena in which Oppressional TNT often emerges is in spaces designed to create awareness, train, and educate people about social justice, diversity, and inclusion (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997). These include such initiatives as workshops, courses, institutes, retreats, seminars, and educational events that attempt to create intergroup interaction and promote learning about diversity. As participants discuss contentious and controversial issues in those contexts, often a member of an oppressor social identity makes an insensitive comment, an unintentionally hurtful observation, or provides a different perspective that triggers a person from a marginalized group to, in turn, unleash an emotional and often angry response. As stated previously, there are various possible reasons for anger-laden responses, including frustration over daily microaggressions, experiences with discrimination, reminders of historical oppression, and a sense that intergroup relations are not improving. The expression of frustration and anger tied to oppression is real, legitimate, and is important to acknowledge.

On the flip side of Oppressional TNT is what Robin DiAngelo, anti-racist educator, scholar, and author, refers to as “White Fragility”. In her book *White Fragility*, DiAngelo suggests that White people have very little tolerance for the racial stress that is evoked when confronted with the topic of racism (DiAngelo, 2018). In response, White people display defensiveness, anger, fear, guilt, and silence. In addition, when discussing racism, White people become argumentative, cry, minimize experiences of racism, and provide examples of people of color they know (e.g., I have a best friend who is Black.) as a way of rejecting notions that they might be racist. Reactions to racism by White people certainly emerge in diversity and inclusion

¹ The authors have conducted hundreds of workshops, diversity retreats, intergroup dialogues, institutes, and other diversity training efforts and have witnessed many instances, as described, of Oppressional TNT and White Fragility.

training initiatives, as well as other contexts in which racism is explored and discussed. Additionally, during *structured* discussions about racism, White people often express emotions and engage in behaviors as stated above, including crying, grieving, withdrawing, and sometimes leaving the discussion which results in shifting the dialogue away from those impacted by racism to those who perpetuate discrimination. (The equivalent of White Fragility has also been explored for males and heterosexuals [Allen, 2016; Schiller, 2018]).

It is important to understand that both Oppressional TNT and White Fragility are a dynamic part of educational work designed to improve intergroup relations. Social justice trainers and facilitators have to contend with and maneuver between these two undercurrents (as well as others) when undertaking social consciousness training initiatives. Success in managing both concepts requires establishing the space for positive, honest, safe, emotional, and learning processes to take place and engender greater understanding about issues of diversity (Roksa et al., 2017). Critical to that success are ground rules for dialogue, communication tools, and intergroup interaction skill-building (Adams et al., 1997). Intergroup dialogues are a perfect example of an educational approach that establishes the safe and brave structure for people to successfully dialogue across their differences. In this venue, both anger and acknowledgement of White Fragility can become dialogue tools for growth and development related to social justice. Intergroup dialogue facilitators are skillfully trained to promote dialogue by using multiple perspectives, emotional responses, experiences, and knowledge (Maxwell, Nagda, & Thompson, 2011).

But what happens when Oppressional TNT meets White Fragility in unmoderated contexts (e.g., diversity training, conference workshops, diversity courses, staff meetings, informal discussions, staff retreats) in which members of marginalized communities and members of oppressor groups interact? Asked differently, what is the impact of Oppressional TNT and White Fragility on intergroup relations when a skilled facilitator and safe space are missing? What happens for example, in a staff meeting, when a Latina, out of Oppressional TNT, heatedly confronts a White co-worker for expressing a microaggression, perpetuating a stereotype, or making an uninformed remark?

On the one hand, the Latina gets an opportunity to release frustration (and perhaps anger) and state a position she has previously withheld publicly from members of the oppressor group. On the other hand, what is the impact on and response of the White person, in particular if White Fragility is present? Does it elicit defensiveness, anger, fear, guilt, and silence, as Robin DiAngelo suggests? Do White people shut down, invoke their White privilege, and withdraw from facing and learning about racism? Worse, because of White Fragility, do they become opponents of and oppositional to diversity work and education? What about those White individuals who are honestly attempting to unlearn -isms and feel attacked or put on the defensive? Diversity learning outcomes are never achieved under these conditions. Although it is important to acknowledge that dissonance generated by discomfort is a critical part of social justice training, there is much value to taking people to the learning edge or zone where learning is optimized (Taylor, Amanda, & Baker, 2019).

DISMANTLING OPPRESSION AND DEVELOPING ALLIES

One of the objectives of social justice education is to dismantle oppression and cultivate allies (Adams et al., 1997). Awareness of social justice issues begins by bringing people together to examine, learn, dialogue, and begin the work of addressing oppression. In pursuit of these outcomes, how do Oppressional TNT and White Fragility impact the goal of promoting greater social consciousness, developing allies, or improving intergroup relations? Do we risk losing potential allies, collaborators, or accomplices as a result of the synergistic relationship that exists between Oppressional TNT and White Fragility? Acknowledging that oppression has impacted and continues to impact people of color and other marginalized communities, how do we proceed to interact over and dialogue about the future and hope for positive intergroup relations, given the polarizing nature of the two concepts described above?

The complexity of diversity and social justice consciousness work prescribes that there are no easy answers to the questions outlined above. However, there are some strategies and implications to ponder if diversity training and education is to lead to the success of social justice education, the creation of more allies, and developing a different and positive future in the struggle to end oppression against multiple groups.

IMPLICATIONS

Communication Across Identity Differences

The manifestation of Oppressional TNT and White Fragility requires that we improve on communication across group differences if we are to make progress in dismantling oppression. There has been much written on the dynamics and practice of communicating with diverse others (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2009). Moreover, there is a plethora of research, specifically on intergroup dialogues, that contributes to our understanding of intergroup interaction for improving intergroup relations (Gurin, Nagda, & Zuniga, 2013). Creating safe spaces or brave spaces; calling-in versus calling-out; preparing individuals with the tools and skills to communicate with people who are different; teaching techniques for managing conflict; utilizing interactive education; and applying non-defensive pedagogies are all techniques for enhancing intergroup contact and communication (Adams et al., 1997). These tools can assist in minimizing Oppressional TNT and White Fragility and enhance dialogues about race and racism, as well as other challenging -isms.

Implications for Diversity and Inclusion Trainers and Facilitators

Trainers, facilitators, faculty, and other individuals in the field of diversity education should be aware of the interplay between Oppressional TNT and White Fragility. Successfully managing the two dynamics to maximize cultural competency will factor in the cultivation of allies/collaborators. In social justice education, there must be a balance between the two constructs. Too much of one will undermine the other. Both ideas are very real and can be assets in facilitated training contexts. Furthermore, facilitators and social justice trainers must be attentive to the intricate communication aspects of diversity education (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2009). Providing workshop participants with the tools for communicating across their differences before engaging in deep conversations about diversity, inclusion, and social justice is critical. Teaching people about calling-in, active listening, cognitive empathy (perspective-taking), non-personalizing issues, and White Fragility and Oppressional TNT can support the learning process during difficult conversations.

Implications for White People (and Other Majority Groups)

Increased understanding of Oppressional TNT by White people and members of other oppressor groups might lead to a greater understanding of the impact of oppression on marginalized communities and possibly a decrease in White Fragility within social consciousness training

endeavors. Understanding Oppressional TNT can diminish the negative impact of being called out during challenging contexts and perhaps minimize the activation of White Fragility. More importantly, Oppressional TNT allows Whites to put in context and understand the anger and frustration expressed by some members of marginalized groups. To be clear, the goal is not to eliminate anger or frustration from the conversation (Tang, 2019). Rather, the objective is to increase intergroup communication and interaction with the objective of diminishing White Fragility, developing allies/collaborators, and taking positive action toward improving intergroup relations.

Implications for Marginalized People

Expressing anger and frustration regarding intergroup relations issues is understandable, appropriate, and legitimate. The indignities suffered and experienced by marginalized group members gives them the right to express their feelings. However, if education and awareness is the goal, there are some factors to consider in expressing those sentiments. What is the context? Is it a training or education space designed to create social consciousness and allies/collaborators? Is the space moderated and safe, not necessarily comfortable, for everyone? Have there been ground rules and other parameters for communication established? Is it appropriate to call-in versus calling-out another person? What effect will the expression of anger have on the learning process? It is also important to keep intersectionality in mind when interacting with members of the oppressor groups. From the perspective of intersectionality, we are all both the oppressed and the oppressor depending on which social identities are being discussed (Adams et al., 1997). Thus, the old maxim of “treat others the way you want to be treated” is appropriate when interacting across differences.

SUMMARY

In the future, if we do not examine and manage the connection between Oppressional TNT, White Fragility, and the diversity learning process for fostering allies/collaborators, **oppression wins**. Attentiveness to the synergistic relationship that exists between Oppressional TNT and White Fragility will maximize our ability to successfully create greater awareness of issues of diversity, develop allies/collaborators, build coalitions, and increase our diversity networking and relationships all in the name of ending oppression for all people.

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