

Working against Racial Injustice: Bringing the Message to Community Mental Health Providers

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Abstract: This narrative offers the experiences and reflections of two colleagues and friends in their efforts to work for racial justice including the use of Community Circles. This pair acts as a bi-racial training dyad to address implicit racial bias, racial microaggressions, and cross-racial dialogue in community mental health settings. Challenges in acting as a white ally are presented, as well as the toll being a facilitator takes on people of color.

Keywords: mental health; anti-racism

Introduction

Our national conversation about both interpersonal and institutional racism has moved this past year in response to the surfacing in mainstream media of police brutality toward black men. Some of us knew this painful legacy continued, but I can't tell you how many white folks have said to me "isn't this happening more?!" We live in predominantly racially and economically segregated communities in the U.S. and those of us with the privileges that come with being white in this racialized society have the luxury of not having to know this violence is happening. These stories are not historically covered on mainstream news media but thanks to community mobilization in places like Ferguson, MO and Baltimore, MD, the nation has been faced with issues of racial injustice. My friend and colleague Rebecca Garcia and I began talking about what we can do at a community mental health level to forward racial justice and support others who are doing so. This essay outlines some of the efforts we made to contribute to the national movement against racism, our experiences, and our reflections on what we learned.

Racial injustice in all its forms is relevant for mental health providers. We know that perceived racism is one of the stressors that research has identified as contributing to psychological distress, depression, anxiety, and poor overall mental health (Kwate & Goodman, 2015; Soto, Dawson-Andoh, & BeLue, 2011) as well as chronic and serious medical conditions and early death (Goosby & Heidbrink, 2013). We also know that "color-blindness" in white mental health clinicians can lead to a lack of empathy for clients of color (Burkard & Knox, 2004), and that racial bias is associated with

misdiagnosis, and the criminalization of mental illness (Pottick, Kirk, Hsieh, & Tian, 2007). Therapeutic relationships as well as dispositional decisions are profoundly impacted by a white mental health providers' level of racial implicit bias and whether they have the capacity to engage in reflection around racism.

The brutality visited upon black men figures into the way in which our clients of color live their lives. Our clients want and need to talk about this, and many white mental health clinicians are at a loss for how to have these conversations. Even worse, our clients may not talk to us about these issues because they can pick up on our discomfort with the topic of race and racism by what we don't say, or the conversations that we don't initiate. We are also sometimes at a loss for how to connect with our colleagues around racial justice issues. We as mental health clinicians need to know how to respond to concerns of those in communities of color who are impacted by racism on a daily basis.

The Co-Authors Response to the Killing of Black Men by Police

Rebecca: I completed my MSW six years ago, I am an African American woman, and many of the clients I have worked with are people of color, of all ages. In particular, I have a strong inclination toward working with young men of color. This is partly a result of my own experience with community violence in my previous career as a pastor, when I lost a member of my church. He was shot in the head outside of a bar and died a month later. This experience gave me a deep seated passion for working with men of color. During my time working at an agency that places social workers at police stations, I was able to work even more with young men of color, mostly ranging in

age from 16-25. These men were coming into contact with the criminal justice system, either as a result of their own activities as gang members, or their association with friends who were involved in some type of criminal activity. I consider this work to be a privilege, because the lived experiences of these young men are not fully understood in our society. To be able to sit with a young man who has lost a sibling to violence and talk to him about the depth of his pain, or to talk to another young man about what it's like to be regularly profiled by the police, and assumed to be guilty of crimes that he didn't commit, is an honor that not many clinicians get to experience. Part of this is their level of comfort talking about the issues of race, which is much harder for white clinicians, in general, than clinicians of color.

I always talk about race with my clients. In response to the murders of young Black men over the past few years, beginning with Trayvon Martin, I organized a community circle. The goal of the circle was to create space for those of us who work with young people, especially young Black men, to talk about the impact of systemic racism on their lives, and as a result on our work. The community circle is based upon Native American circle practices, in which there is a talking piece and every person sitting in the circle has the opportunity to speak (or not). There is usually an opening and closing by the circle keeper, and questions asked in the circle to prompt thought. I decided to use this format because I wanted to provide a forum that would allow people to speak freely and that would be containing at the same time. It is my belief that we do not take enough time to pause and talk about the lived experience of our clients who battle being stereotyped and targeted by the police, and are therefore at risk of being killed by a police officer or vigilante every moment of their lives. If we as clinicians are not processing this, how do we have the space in our minds and hearts to be able to talk about it with our clients? Since our initial community circle in response to George Zimmerman's not guilty verdict, we have held other circles in response to Ferguson and Baltimore. Another way that I have been working for social and racial justice is by co-facilitating anti-racism workshops with Judith Willison, a former professor turned colleague, friend, and mentor. We have co-facilitated two workshops for mental health providers in community mental health centers,

geared toward people who are doing clinical work with low income people in the inner city, mostly people of color.

Judith: As a white educator at a public university in a School of Social Work, and a social work practitioner for over twenty years in the criminal and juvenile justice systems, I am committed to remaining involved in community-level work in order to link my scholarship to advocacy, consciousness raising, and systemic change. Although I was involved in numerous initiatives on campus this past year focused on racial justice and the success of students of color, I felt compelled to do more in the community. Fortunately, a number of my friends of color who work in urban community-based mental health centers felt similarly. The clients served by these centers are primarily impoverished people of color. My friends knew that we needed to create forums for community mental health workers to grapple with how racism impacts the lives of our clients and our interactions with those clients.

Part of the reason my friends asked me to facilitate these workshops was that they believe, and I agree, that having a white ally speak to white folks about implicit racial bias, racial microaggressions, and racial justice can be powerful. And of course, white supremacy is a problem that we white people need to fix. I can talk to other white clinicians about white privilege, how to overcome our fears of reaching across the racial divide, our mistakes and how to recover from them, and the responsibility we have to dismantle the systems of racial injustice that exist. I can talk about how moving past white guilt through understanding how the Cycle of Socialization (Harro, 2008) indoctrinates us to the laws of white supremacy is the only road to taking action to change that cycle.

However, I felt strongly that the workshops I was asked to facilitate should be done in partnership with a colleague/friend of color, and so Rebecca Garcia and I decided to partner in these endeavors. Rebecca and I talked about why using a bi-racial dyad for these forums would be important: Rebecca would legitimize my role for folks of color in the workshops; she would act as a cultural liaison of sorts, we would offer a model of cross-racial dialogue and connection, as well as provide a picture of what cross-racial cooperation can accomplish. We wanted to bring hope to folks who felt worn down and discouraged by racial injustice and

the lethal violence visited upon men of color every day. We aimed to engage in dialogue with each other in order to spark dialogue with the workshop participants.

Rebecca: As a woman of color who teaches graduate social work students part time and lives in the racialized United States full time, with a Black husband, the reality of racism and oppression is also a part of my everyday life. When I stand up in front of a mostly white audience and reveal my personal experiences, this includes the emotional weight of sharing my life with a Black man who I am fully aware is a target, I am exposing a vulnerable part of my life for the purpose of educating others. There is an emotional price that I pay to do that. I'm not always clear on what it is, but it costs me something. When I prepare to engage a class discussion about the uprising in Ferguson or Baltimore and I think about the young men that I work with, I have to be willing to share that emotion with my students. My hope is that in sharing my experience, a student in the classroom, or a mental health professional in the audience will be moved to the point of a different level of understanding and action. Perhaps that action will be having a conversation with a client that they wouldn't have had before. Perhaps it will be seeking out more knowledge about systemic racism and police brutality. Perhaps it will be getting involved in some community action and eventually leading others to do the same.

I have been teaching for four years, and have experienced multiple microaggressions as an African-American woman teaching mostly white students about systemic racism. I have also conducted multiple workshops with various audiences in which I, as the facilitator, am the target of microaggressions and misplaced anger. Co-facilitating with Judith, a white anti-racist educator, makes this experience markedly different. When Judith talks about white supremacy and systemic racism, the reaction and receptivity of a white audience is different. They're much more open to hearing about that from another white person. Working with Judith lightens the burden on me, which makes it easier for me to share my personal experiences and talk about facts without feeling as though the weight of the workshop rests entirely on me, a Black woman. It also allows me the freedom to connect more with the people of color in the

audience, who generally seem to feel relief from having a Black co-facilitator.

The Community Mental Health Anti-Racism Workshops

Both workshops that we co-facilitated were attended by a range of mental health professionals including social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, supervisors, and administrators. The first workshop of about 25 people was small enough so we could engage the participants in dialogue right away. We asked them to tell us who they were and why they were attending the workshop, what we might address that would be helpful for them in their work. We covered concepts such as racial implicit bias, racial microaggressions, and cross-racial communication. The workshop evolved into a very interactive dialogue whereby the participants shared their personal and professional experiences with interpersonal and institutional racism, and we brainstormed about possible avenues for addressing issues of racial injustice in their work with clients and colleagues. The second workshop was a more formal Grand Rounds with a larger audience of about 50 people.

Judith: In the second workshop one of my opening remarks was intended to not alienate participants who had police people in their close social circles. Rebecca and I had talked about how to address this, and Rebecca's experiences working closely with male policemen of color was on our agenda as well. I said something like "Our national conversation has been informed by the black men who have died over the past year at the hands of police people. Police people are our heroes, but their actions are shaped by the militarization of the police by the federal government, subsequent to the war on drugs, which is in reality a war on impoverished people of color." Rebecca and I immediately saw a Black woman in the front row begin shaking her head "no" vigorously. We will call her Simone. I thought to myself "She may have lost a son, or a husband to police violence, and I just called them heroes, what have I said?!" It was a stressful moment for me, but I realized that I had to address Simone's response if she wanted to discuss it.

I talked about how cross-racial dialogue about racism is difficult and often avoided by us white folks because we are afraid we will say the wrong thing and offend a person of color. In fact, I continued, I may

have already done that this afternoon. . . I asked “Have I offended anyone so far?” And much to her credit, Simone answered my question and made it clear, with emotional passion, that police officers are not considered heroes in communities of color, but rather an extension of the criminal justice system which targets men of color. . . she made excellent points about the role of the police as enforcers of the laws of white supremacy which oppress people of color. All the points Simone made are points I have made in the past. . . I thought, “Yes, I agree! Didn’t I mention Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow*? I am a white ally, I agree! But I had to temper my message in order to reach the white folks in the room and not alienate anyone!” I felt like my values and commitment were in question. But then I realized that this was not about me, it was about her, and the other people of color in the room. I had made a terrible mistake through my use of language about police as “heroes” and that in fact, first and foremost I needed to connect with her, to validate her, to reach across the racial divide and to demonstrate cultural humility in that moment, to really act like an ally. And so instead of defending myself, which is what I was compelled to do, I listened, I moved toward Simone, I looked her in the eye respectfully and nodded, and I agreed with her, and then I apologized and said I would never use that word again to describe police people, that I had misspoken, made a mistake, and that I appreciated her perspective and feedback. After the workshop, both Rebecca and I approached Simone and spoke with her more about her views and she thanked us for making space for her experiences in the workshop.

Rebecca: When I saw Simone, who was sitting right in the front row, vigorously shaking her head in response to Judith’s statement. I smiled and nodded at her because I thought I knew what she was thinking: “the police aren’t our/my heroes.” Having worked with police officers, this conversation is one that challenges me. I know from personal experience that not all police officers are bad, and not all police officers are heroes. But some are. I’ve talked to some of my police officer friends about the killing of Mike Brown in particular, and their perspective is much different from a civilian perspective. I have to respect that, and hold the complexity of multiple perspectives while maintaining my own personal lens, which is informed by diverse stories that I’ve

been privileged to know. When Judith responded to Simone by genuinely agreeing with her, it freed up the space for me to share my nuanced perspective on the police. As a Black woman, I can say that I know police officers who are making a positive difference, and I also have had clients who’ve been abused by police officers in the very station where I worked. This type of nuance is not easy to express in such a diverse audience, but having Judith and Simone openly share allowed me to do that.

Judith: Later in the workshop, a white participant discussed her attempts to connect with clients of color and characterized her attempts as ‘lame.’ She asked what our advice was about making a cross-cultural connection with clients. We validated her attempts, and I discussed my opinion that as white clinicians we need to demonstrate to our clients early on that we are open to talking about race and racism, and that we see racism exists in order to establish a safe place to talk with us. I offered specific ways to talk about current events with clients to indicate our values and our position on racism. But the most helpful comment came from Simone who told the white participant that simply acknowledging that we are trying to communicate across culture and are open to learning from our clients of color is a truly powerful way to connect. It seemed to me that this was also a moment of meaningful cross-cultural dialogue between colleagues.

Rebecca: It has been my experience that clients are often relieved to have their clinician name racism as a factor in their lives. However, this is often very difficult, particularly for White clinicians. Perhaps because of white guilt, perhaps because they don’t know where to take the conversation, or perhaps because they don’t know how to hold the conversation and simply sit with the despair and hopelessness that often accompanies these discussions.

Reflections on Our Learning

Judith: As Rebecca and I reflected on the presentation afterwards with the friend who had invited us, they pointed out to me that I had used a potentially conflictual interaction as an opportunity to act as a white ally who was open to hearing when I was wrong, or when I had offended someone of color. I reflected that it is only after 25 years of this work that I could gain that sort of perspective and respond the way I did.

I also thought about how important it is that we white folks can bear witness to the pain and anger that some people of color experience, without responding out of guilt or defensiveness, but rather, truly validating that person and accepting that a legacy of racial injustice and violence has led them to the point they are at today.

Later, in talking with Rebecca further, I expressed that one of the reasons I had been able to make an attempt to connect with the participant was that Rebecca was there by my side. I knew that Rebecca understood my commitment to racial justice, and I knew she would support me in my efforts to connect with Simone. I felt truly grateful to be in partnership with Rebecca.

Rebecca: I shared with Judith that I did not feel any anxiety during her encounter with Simone. This mostly comes from my thorough trust of Judith, which I hope our audiences see and can provide some hopeful modeling of cross-cultural relationships. I knew that Judith would handle this situation gracefully, and I also wasn't left with the pressure of handling it by myself. I think the open way in which we addressed this disagreement, allowing space for multiple perspectives, is what needs to happen more in order for social justice to become a reality, which will require people from diverse backgrounds and different life experiences to come together in a common cause. This unity cannot happen without the open airing of grievances, disagreements and the exchange of different stories.

Rebecca: Lately I have been struggling with the feeling that talking, creating space to talk, is not enough. As a co-worker of mine said 'we need to do something.' I agree. But as another colleague often points out, we can rush to action without spending enough time in the relationship building. Without this, we don't even know what to do or where to do. If we don't understand what the problem is, what another person's story or experience is, how can we 'do something?' We cannot 'do' without first having knowledge and understanding. This is not just a goal, it is a process. The more we have space to share our stories with those who are different from ourselves, the more equipped we are to bridge gaps and help create lasting change. We must be

committed to communicating our hurts and hearing the hurts of others so that we can work together to fight for social and racial justice.

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