

Appropriately Uncomfortable: A Conversation Among Three Colleagues About Structural Oppression Focusing on Racism and the Need for Action

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Abstract: In this reflection, three social work colleagues discuss three different perspectives on one statement about racism. We detail our emotionally challenging conversations about racism, microaggressions, and the meaning of social justice in social work to build a different bond and sense of understanding. We delve into how we understand each other, our differing viewpoints on the murders of Black people in American society such as George Floyd, and our perspectives on social workers' relationships to social justice, racism, and social change in the context of the 2020 turmoil.

Keywords: oppression, racism, social work faculty, higher education

Background and Context for the Conversation

After the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, many businesses, universities, and social service agencies released anti-racism statements acknowledging that the long-standing tradition of police violence against Black and Brown people should end, and that Black and Brown people will no longer be sidelined or ignored by many people in the United States of America. We are faculty in a social work department at a state university in the New England area. Our university mission speaks to the need for social justice in and outside the university and, as social workers, our profession also speaks to social justice in its core values and mandates. To realize the social justice mission of our university and discipline, the management committee of our department decided to put forth a statement outlining our commitment to anti-racism while also admonishing the behaviors of the individuals that facilitated the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, or those complicit in covering up the deaths of these individuals.

One author of this paper, Dr. Tomczak, a White male tenured faculty member, volunteered to draft this letter and send it to the faculty community for review and suggestions. After the meeting in which the letter was discussed, a White female non-tenured faculty contacted the faculty member that agreed to write the letter and suggested that he reach out to others, particularly faculty of color, to collaborate on a draft letter that could integrate multiple perspectives on racism, Black Lives Matter, and the police. While the male faculty member acknowledged the value in doing so, to the surprise of the White female faculty member, this did not occur. The draft letter was then emailed to all faculty. Two faculty members of color quickly shared their concerns and reactions to this letter, including questions about the positionality of the management committee in relation to the current events, the role of faculty of color in discussing racism in society given the differential impact of racism on Black people in the department compared to other non-Black or Brown faculty members, and the underlying frustration that a social work faculty which espouses its commitment to social justice through its

mission and vision still struggles to discuss oppression within the department. One faculty member of color questioned why an all-White management committee thought it would be a good idea to have a White man single-handedly write a letter on behalf of the department addressing anti-racism.

Our discussions occurred outside of departmental tensions and interactions. These conversations were difficult at times, and we challenged one another in diverse ways. What follows are our separate reflections, followed by descriptions of our positionality, and then an integrated reflection based on looking back now on the conversation. We include our inner thoughts and interactions to help explain our different positionalities. We then discuss the larger departmental process for change, and finally we pose reflection questions for readers derived from our discussions to provoke the emotionally challenging reflection of one's role in racism and racist structures in American society.

Carmela Fuscillo Smith

Dr. Tomczak recognized that our department wanted to communicate our commitment to anti-racism by adding a statement into the ring of anti-racism statements. We, the management committee, composed a statement that Dr. Tomczak volunteered to draft because everyone has a letter out. After the meeting, I suggested he reach out to others, particularly faculty of color. This would bring people together to collaborate on a draft with multiple perspectives. While he acknowledged the value in doing so, to my surprise, he never contacted the other faculty. When the draft was distributed by email, two of the faculty of color shared their concerns regarding an all-White management committee thinking it would be a good idea to have a White man single-handedly write a letter on behalf of the department addressing anti-racism. One of the responses to one of the faculty of color by a White male tenured faculty stated, "Okay then, can you change the letter?????" This suggested that the faculty of color write it themselves. The topic of anti-racism requires collaboration, particularly from the very population it has an impact on—people of color—where their voices take the lead. However, this does not mean they shoulder the work in writing the letter, but that a place is created for all to join. I decided to write a response to the group calling out this microaggression. The White male faculty that drafted the letter was upset with me for using the term "microaggression" to describe his action. Prior to this, we had an excellent working relationship, and I considered him a friend. The White male faculty defended his actions in the group email. He suggested to the group we take a vote on whether to keep the letter or not. Our department has rules for voting, and this could have been done. I responded to the group email stating that suggesting a vote with majority rule further marginalizes faculty of color since the majority of faculty are White. Yes, I called out another microaggression.

He texted me how upset he was. He needed time to process the emails. We set up a time to meet, via Zoom, the following week. He shared with me his tireless efforts for social justice. He went on to defend his actions of being a "social justice warrior" and that he has been "woke" before the term came about. I gave my perspective of his actions. I asked him to consider viewing this from another lens—from a lens of people that continue to be oppressed—and to consider how his actions and defensiveness over his right to draft a letter without including the voices that it

directly impacts comes from a place of White privilege.

I also mentioned to him that I noticed he used the same draft letter in his role with another committee on campus—the faculty leadership committee. He smiled and said they welcomed and appreciated the letter. I asked if the committee was diverse. He said there was only one Asian faculty member and that the others were White. I asked, if after the board reviewed the letter, the draft prompted any discussion on the lack of diversity on their board and if any efforts were being made to engage, include, and recruit faculty of color and other oppressed populations on the faculty leadership committee. His proud smile disappeared as he reflected on this question and said, “Well, no.”

To that I asked, “Then what exactly is the purpose of the letter? Who does it serve? Did it move anyone to take anti-oppression action steps?” It’s like the term “courageous conversations.” It is passive; where are the “courageous actions”? Just talking about oppression is oppressive in and of itself. Having conversations that do not include action steps, accountability, or a change in culture enables oppression to continue.

I have concern around the oppression I see in our department, our university, our community, and our world. I know there’s a risk with being non-tenured and speaking up. One tenured faculty stated, “Be careful; the very people you are calling out serve on the Department Evaluation Committee and on Promotion and Tenure.” I’m not sure if this was a friendly warning or a threat. Either way, it’s a warning. I view racism through my experience as a woman dealing with sexism. I have experienced sexism from my first job, when I was a teenager, to my present position. When people say, “We’ve come a long way”—which seems to suggest that we can rest as if we are almost there—I respond with, “We still have a long way to go,” to communicate we are far off from equality, yet alone equity.

In many places of employment, I have seen how trainings around anti-racism, sexual harassment, and cultural competency have not always yielded changes in the behavior of people who hold power—which, in my experiences, have usually been White men. We need authentic actions and changes in behaviors. We need to stop defending our good intentions. We need to be humble. Is it possible to be humble in academia? Yes, it is possible. We need to listen and learn from others and be honest with ourselves that we do not know what is best. Let go of the ego. We need action. We need to hold our anti-racist, anti-sexist, and other anti-oppression actions accountable through the lens of the people who are oppressed, not our own (D’Angelo, 2018). This means being uncomfortable, which is a daily feeling of people who are oppressed.

Stephen Monroe Tomczak

“Microaggressions??” The word stood out to me as I scanned the email. How could this be, I thought? Surely my colleagues knew of my long history in anti-racist activism. Perhaps they did not know that I was involved as a student at our university in the anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s, but they certainly knew of my more recent work to advance social justice in our department, university, and the broader community. Indeed, it was my dedication to that work, and to the movement against police violence in particular, that had prompted me to volunteer to

draft our department statement on the killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor.

I had disclosed to my colleagues in our department management committee that I had a personal experience of losing a dear friend to an egregious incident of police murder in 2001—an incident that had ignited my now 20-year involvement in the struggle against police violence, including work with local African American activists who had experienced similar losses.

Not only this, but, as president of our faculty union, I had been a tireless advocate for non-tenured faculty—many of whom were faculty of color—in our department and outside of it. Surely these more recent demonstrations of my clear allyship had to count for something? Indeed, this concern had also prompted me to volunteer to write this draft, as often faculty of color are asked to assume responsibility for addressing racial justice issues, placing additional burdens on them at times when they may be experiencing great emotional discomfort.

And yet this statement was now being questioned as coming from a “White perspective” when I had clearly tried to frame it in a way that expressed universal yearnings for social and economic justice! Unbelievable, I thought! I had called out every intersecting system of oppression I could name in this draft statement, and yet it seemed not to be appreciated!

It took several weeks to get beyond this emotional reaction that I now understand was the product of what D’Angelo (2018) and others have termed “White fragility”—a state of consciousness that particularly seems to afflict White allies such as myself.

My whole identity, indeed, was wrapped up in my work as an opponent of injustices: social, economic, political. My teaching, heavily influenced by dissertation chair Dr. David Gil, was focused on encouraging critical consciousness of intersecting systems of oppression. I had been “woke” before there was woke, for goodness sake!

And yet there was a missing piece of this critical consciousness, one I was not fully aware of, one I am still working to understand and overcome. While I prided myself on my great empathy for various oppressed and exploited peoples, and my understanding of, and fierce support for, their struggles, I did not fully recognize the limitations imposed on my perception by not being able to experience the world through their eyes.

Although some in the management group had suggested that we might involve some of our faculty of color, I had no understanding initially that drafting and distributing this statement—which I saw as being significantly more critical of systemic injustices than many I had seen—could be seen as inadvertently excluding faculty of color, and thereby unintentionally committing, yes, microaggressions.

Indeed, this issue of intentionality was central to my initial understanding of the whole process. To me, intentionality mattered. Since this time, and in large measure as a byproduct of the discussions that have led to this article, my perspective on intentionality has shifted. While I don’t believe it to be entirely irrelevant to assessing the meaning of people’s actions, I am more

aware of how so-called “good intentions” can mask a blindness to the consequences of one’s actions and the harm it causes to others.

The work of anti-racism, and the broader anti-oppression work of which this is a part, fundamentally involves—for those who enjoy a privileged position in U.S. society—careful consideration of the implications of one’s behaviors and actions, and how they may contribute to, or challenge, existing systems of oppression and marginalization. It is frankly difficult for those of us who enjoy White privilege to be aware of how this endemic condition in our society blinds us to the way in which our actions perpetuate oppression and White supremacy, even if we ourselves are ardent foes of this.

Jemel P. Aguilar

Wait...did I read that wrong? Let me check the...yup! I don’t know if I want to respond to this email written by a White male faculty member from a White male perspective. Oh wait, a female faculty member of color just responded pointing out that our department cannot talk about racism. You go! That is right—we can’t talk about racism without the conversation going off the rails! At least someone is starting to say something, but I should also say something about this letter, the intentions, and the implications of the process for me and other people of color in the department...but I don’t want to get into this back-and-forth about the department and its widespread oppression because the conversation is going to get ugly. White people don’t like to hear that they might be doing something offensive. What can I write...let me read it again so I can decide what to target in my email. Okay, I am going to write back to the two main people and say what I think can be done with this letter. Ugh, I need to rewrite this email because it is getting too long and complicated. Let me just point out a couple of things. Email sent! Oh, *I* should write the letter...yeah, good idea...ignore the faculty of color and then saddle them with correcting your offensive behavior.

Ugh. Someone thinks we should all sign on to this letter. Why is it so hard for people to accept that we—marginalized people—see what is happening in the world differently than White folks? Why is it that some White folks think that we—marginalized populations—have to sign on to their letters? Is it to make them feel better because they think they are the exception to being racist and upholding White supremacy? I never understand why people, in general, expect everyone to agree with everything that others say. Why can’t we all just have our own opinions, even if that means we disagree? And why can’t we grow to understand that some opinions are borne out of racist ideologies, White supremacy, and oppression, while others develop in response to systems of oppression? I don’t want to align on a statement about racism with people who I have seen engage in oppressive behaviors!

This email exchange is getting tense, and I really have so many other things to do right now. Why should I make time to explain to other people that being well-meaning doesn’t do anything for me, and that well-meaning isn’t enough? I have enough to do with teaching classes, talking with students of color about their experiences in the department and the field, quarantining myself, writing chapters for a book, and keeping up my own house. I must put an end to my participation in this email exchange. I am thinking, write to the management committee because

they decided to put this out there and just bow out of the discussion and make sure that I am not explicitly or implicitly associated with this letter. I have to be careful in how I write this letter because I do not want to leave room for anyone to say that I agreed just so that they can point to another marginalized identity as aligning with the White people who act from systems of oppression. After two hours of writing and rewriting, I finally came up with a brief email to say I want out of this ongoing email conversation. Email sent!

Dr. Smith wants to talk. I know what that means...we are going to have a conversation about why I should be a part of talks about oppression in the department. In our phone conversation, we talked about the looting and racism that is happening across the United States of America, and then we discussed how we saw a comment posted on a Facebook profile about the potential for looting in a local outlet center. Our reasons why we would not go near the outlet varied. Dr. Smith as a COVID-19 risk reduction strategy, and me to reduce the risk of being shot merely because of the color of my skin. The discussion with Dr. Smith was really interesting. We decided to co-author a letter from our perspectives and thoughts about the murders of Black and Brown people. I think it is a good idea that Dr. Smith and I write a letter about our positions on the murders. I said, "I think we should send out a letter from our department to the rest of our university to make it more widely available," but Dr. Smith suggested to keep it to our department, which I guess is fine. I don't want us to hold back in the letter by acting as if we have the answers to racism; too many White folks think they have the answer to racism and simplify solutions.

A couple days later, I meet with Dr. Tomczak about bylaws documents. I don't know if I will bring up the letter that the management committee sponsored and that he wrote. I might, but I am just not sure. I have so much to deal with right now and this feels like an added burden. Wow...Dr. Tomczak is bringing this up. How do I want to approach this discussion? He is part of the group that wrote this letter, and I want him to understand how I interpreted his writing. I decide to show him how my background influences my reading of the letter by taking him line by line through the letter and telling him my reaction. I say, "Over the years of working and living in the United States of America, I have come to expect standard responses when it comes to talking about racism and oppression." When I read the letter, I found those usual responses. The first line in the letter suggests the killings of Black and Brown people such as George Floyd are recent occurrences, but this is untrue. Lynching and "driving while Black," for example, are both parts of our American history and now people are finally acting up. I say, "The murders and assaults of Black and Brown people have been going on for years, and finally White folks are waking up to it." I tell him that I don't know why anyone would describe the murders and assaults against marginalized people as "recent," or why the "solutions" such as anti-racism or diversity trainings would work. When have anti-racism or diversity trainings led to substantial behavior changes that don't include hiding one's racism or oppressive behaviors, or tokenizing marginalized people by hiring more marginalized people without changing how White people interact with marginalized people that are hired? I know that I was hired in this department because of the color of my skin, and I see that in my everyday interactions with others in the department. But I also know and get clear indications that I can't say what I feel with all the emotion that is attached to those experiences because I will be labeled by White folks as sensitive, aggressive, or difficult. White people want me to make my statements about their

racism with White fragility in mind, which means I must say what I am feeling in a way that they are willing to hear.

Where We Are Today, What We Are Doing, and What We Are Hopeful For

We are not going to delve too deep into the larger group process or the discussions and interactions that are occurring at this time within this group. We do not want to replicate the oppressive actions of speaking for others who can speak for themselves. Thus, we've provided a bird's-eye view of the larger group process to frame how our experiences and reactions flow into and challenge systems outside of our triad, as well as show how our triad is challenged by other systems. We joined colleagues in a larger group that initially sought to rewrite or write an anti-racism position statement. By the end of the initial meeting, the larger group collectively decided that we had preliminary work to complete before we could position ourselves within the call for changes in American society. Hence, we didn't write a letter—and that is a good thing. We abandoned the original letter and decided to continue to meet as a group to discuss our focus, our interactions, and what should be written in a letter in reaction to the continual murder of Black and Brown populations at the hands of police officers.

Much has taken place from the onset of coming together to write this article to the point of submission. There have been missteps, backward steps, and, thankfully, some small steps forward. We realize how polite that sentence is but, to be completely honest, since we started writing this article, there have been significant statements of oppression within our department. The following are a few instances which occurred while we were working on this article:

1. A statement by a White male faculty suggesting people of color do not write as well as White people.
2. A statement by a White male faculty suggesting not to hire women if they are pregnant.
3. A statement by a White male faculty suggesting he is experiencing oppression from the anti-oppression discussions.

We acknowledge our primary focus in this reflection is on racism. We wanted to illustrate an aspect of oppression and share our personal experience and collective process. However, our framework engages anti-oppression to strive for social justice for every oppressed group. If not, we fear the focus on one oppressed group allows other oppressed groups to languish. For example, the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) focused largely on racial equity concerns, with an emphasis on Black men. It wasn't until the 1970s and 1980s that it began to comprise other oppressed groups and issues (Banks, 2010; Grant & Sleeter, 2008), including gender and sexism, sexual orientations and heterosexism, language and linguicism, class and economic injustice, and disability and ableism (Gorski & Goodman, 2011).

In current-day oppression based on race, people in American society have become more aware that racist *statements* are looked down upon by many in American society; thus, many people have moved away from making explicitly racist statements. Decreasing or eliminating obvious racist statements, however, does not translate to a decrease in or elimination of racist *behaviors*.

While a person might realize that it is distasteful to say pejorative terms for marginalized populations, the same person might act paternalistically against marginalized populations by

- speaking for the population;
- tensing up when marginalized populations discuss their experiences with oppression in community and organizational settings;
- becoming silent when discussions of racism or oppression arise in mixed marginalized and privileged groups;
- redirecting conversations about racism or oppression toward their own feelings of discomfort;
- suggesting they are being oppressed when they're called out on an oppressive statement; and/or
- being unable or unwilling to identify racist or oppressive statements in the moment.

Conversely, marginalized populations also contribute to their own oppression by

- permitting the subjugation of their own marginalized people to get ahead or maintain a sense of protection;
- apologizing or excusing or minimizing the oppressive statements or behaviors of people; and/or
- espousing a need for anti-racist, anti-oppressive, or social justice efforts and then not showing up to do the work.

Although other examples could be included, the ones above illustrate how everyone can and does contribute to oppression, albeit in different ways.

We acknowledge that there will be increased resistance before the situation gets better. This increased resistance that we are experiencing means the work of anti-oppression is moving forward. This gives us hope. We must have hope with actions for change to take place. We wish we could conclude with some type of outline for how we reduced or ended oppression. Unfortunately, this process is ongoing. Racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression continue to exist in the hearts and minds of those around us. They even sit in anti-oppression groups and trainings. They can be found within organizations that put forth anti-oppression statements, and they work or volunteer in professions that espouse social justice values. This is why there is no end to anti-oppression work. We recognize we need to continue to put forth actions not just now, but for the rest of our lives, and pass on the work to future generations. We need to create and establish significant disincentives to challenge the structure of oppression. Oppression of marginalized groups must come to an end, and we must all be committed to doing the work.

Based on our experiences detailed in this article, we ask readers: How have *you* participated in oppression?

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