

Divergent Disability: Consideration of the Opposite of Affirming Groups

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Author Note

This paper is a response to prompts quoted from our final online assignment in this class:

Please reflect on your experience in the group this semester, both as a participant and facilitator.

- *What, if anything, has changed in your understanding of group dynamics and generative conflict?*
- *Have you noticed any shifts in your behavior or the behavior of others in the group this semester?*
- *What was it like to step into the role of facilitator?*
- *Did the exercise you facilitated achieve the desired goal? Is there anything you might do differently in the future?*
- *Using the lens of a facilitator, what steps could be taken to make this a more affirming group?*

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Arriving at the temporal midpoint of this cohort curriculum, having integrated much of the outrageous difference in level of support received while within specifically facilitated group spaces as compared to extracurricular time in the back country or front country, leaves me quite challenged in terms of presenting a cohesive response representing my growth of understanding. My trauma is not simply embodied, as we learned in Clinical Considerations class, it is continually reified by those same people I would hold responsible for understanding and/or teaching how to help clients avoid such harm (regardless of my level of effort to the contrary).

Given my prior group leading experience, the validation of prior autodidactic approaches to learning about psychology and oppression has surely been transformative. Not so much in terms of newly acquired lessons, but certainly so when considering a layering, a deepening, of applications and experiences of theory in praxis.

An integrated literature review showed evidence that people within queer communities experience more emotional distress, and have higher rates of depression, suicidality, and substance abuse than cisgender-heterosexual people (Moagi et al, 2021).

Queer people are subject to “stigma, prejudice, and discrimination,” as well as “a hostile and stressful social environment that causes mental health problems” (Meyer, 2003, p. 674).

Accumulated small, even unnoticed, discriminatory experiences add up to high levels of stress and anxiety when studied in comparable medium and long term trauma (Lomash et al, 2019; Robinson & Rubin, 2016).

(Colvard & Larson, 2023)

Having perceived a lack in reception of the varying ways I was delivering news of my actually oppressed social location to (unbelieving and predominately unsupportive) up-power cohort members, I organized a diverse group of faculty advisors, registered a student group, and have held that space for learning and activism toward neuroqueer liberation ever since. Only queer cohort members have attended anything beyond initial planning phases of group formation. Zero faculty, administration, or school community has participated in any way beyond consenting to be added to a neuroqueer mailing list. One might easily argue that the people leading “inclusivity” efforts on campus have done more to exclude and disrupt this group than support or advise. Despite all this, a solitary nonbinary autistic student leader, attracted student involvement that has even seen unaffiliated community members in attendance....

Most of the shifts in behavior that I’ve observed this semester have been those moving away from consideration of disability, divergence, marginalization, or decolonizing anything. I witness more effort in hiding vulnerability than in confronting and resolving conflicts of interest. The deeply compounding and continual trauma suffered in support of supposedly prosocial demands made by those in up-power social locations is an affront to my continually refused invitations into community with a focus on mutual learning, not to mention the queer and disabled members who already abandoned hope of matriculating through this toxic space.

Very recently, we’re hearing more from the voices we hadn’t heard much during first year. I have openly expressed gratitude for these steps toward shared equitable relationship, and I also hold very little hope for most of these relationships getting any stronger, much less lasting beyond graduation. If you’re not broaching topics of concern relevant to my behavior, and you’re not engaging in topics I raise, and you’re not inviting me ... well, anywhere, ... then I

don't need to waste any more spoons on connecting with you. It's just that simple, especially since we all participated in the sessions from the Right Use of Power Institute and heard about how up-power people owe down-power people 150% in relationship effort.

I greatly enjoyed co-facilitating the *Nature Portraits* intervention. It was a fun way to shake some dust off my (recently little used) group leading skills. Leaning on a team member allowed me to rest easy knowing that together we'd catch enough of what was going on to present a cohesive experience. I do believe, despite the rush that we might avoid in devoting a full session to the work, we established space where all of our objectives were at least minimally met: self-reflection and exploration, improved self-awareness and insight, cultivation of mindful presence, and promoting appreciation for beauty and diversity of the natural world.

Owing to the aforementioned compressed timeline, we had a large body of knowledge to share about what we were about to undertake as a group creating *Nature Portraits*. While facilitating this intervention, we were able to break down a complex process of creating multiple self-portraits into discreet parts, leading everyone through an overview, answering questions and clarifying expectations, and leaving written instructions for each group member for their use upon return from collecting materials for building portraits. We also adapted and continued to clarify our intent as facilitators when questions bubbled up during the activity. This one focus in providing accessible multi-modal instruction and reference materials has a profound impact on deconstructing ableism for anyone with sensory or cognitive disability in group contexts.

For future use of the *Nature Portraits* intervention, I most want to slow the whole process down. Beginning a two-hour session at a trailhead near a picnic area with contemplative and/or meditative practices would commence a beneficial time warp. This would continue through a

brief gratitude practice and a solo walkabout with the intention of gathering materials for use in the portrait, but no other information would necessarily be shared at this early stage (excepting transparency in response to direct inquiry, an accommodating process for neurodivergent people). Continuing in this fashion, balancing varying andragogic and pedagogic needs, each of the three individual portraits would be introduced and explored one at a time. This, in addition to reducing general complexity, accommodates monotropic focus frequently found in neurodivergent populations (which significantly overlap with other queer identities).

In shifting focus to how one might facilitate a move toward more affirming process in the class of '25 cohort, I don't have anything of substance beyond the year and a half of advocacy and educational offerings I've already made (Larson, 2023*). The problems most present in this group have very little to do with small moves toward more equitable relations. We missed too many opportunities for that during our first year in relationship, when oppressive paradigms were scaled to fit. It is time for marginalized and disabled cohort members to witness more inclusive efforts, now that we've all had ample opportunity for similar learning and integration.

This group, much like our entire academic field, is facing a reckoning (Yergeau, 2018). Entrenched policy and perspectives are crumbling under the weight of a new generation of research. Sustained protest over harms suffered will escalate until recognized; there may be temporary relief, then the cycle begins again as shame and resentment replace assumption of privilege. Each cycle also shows brief glimpses of more inclusive futures, but the bulk of the work that remains belongs to the up-power people in attendance. These same up-power people have generally shown themselves loathe to embrace accountability during my experience over decades of mostly unexplained othering in social, religious, and professional communities.

Unfortunately, the perspective that comes from marginalized experience is seldom integrated within change control processes; too often, consideration of disability accommodation arrives only after complaints of exclusion (as opposed to part of a more universal design approach). Most often, those in power thoughtlessly act to retain power; often ignoring that representation matters, language choice matters, identification matters, as they rest in unconsidered self-serving defaults. Those without power accept abuse, or protest, and remain largely without power; these situations are entirely depressing and persistent in the lives of disabled people. The public discourse, the academy, the institution, the cohort; all systems producing harm, all mirrors of the others, and all denying agency to those they're disabling.

I have come to embrace the opinion that there is nothing micro about (micro)aggressions, because it is never simply one little offense too trivial to broach in polite conversation. It is a continuous onslaught of messages about how one is somehow less than (see also: Appendix). I've endured very few things more directly controlled by conscious behavior, with a more pervasive and insidious presence, acknowledged across the globe in academic and professional circles as deeply harmful, yet met without any urgency in planning or adopting change.

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Recommended Reading

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Appendix

Group Stagnation: Reflections on Lacking State Change

“It is important to explore and be aware of power and privilege and how this may lead to bias and harm” (AGPA, n.d.). I have witnessed a remarkable lack of discussion regarding harm reduction and embracing differences spawned from engagement with our curriculum.

Accommodation of disability and divergent identities only rarely enters conversation unless activists force the issue. Non-obvious needs continue to go without any platform intentionally provided for such declarations, or much deserved accommodation. Inclusive this is not.

This cohort has not made any collective space for prior consideration of (officially, or otherwise) accommodated students. While appreciative of the intent, much of the advocacy effort witnessed has been more aligned with saviorism than alliance. I have yet to be invited into shared contexts explicitly providing time to weigh options without distraction or immediate response pressure. I haven’t heard *anything* in shared contexts about using alternative communication mediums (e.g., AAC, or Text-to-Speech). This all stems from deeply entrenched ableism based in assumptions embedded within “professional standards,” frequently used to silence or eliminate marginalized degree candidates (e.g., cis/het/white/neuro-normativity).

Returning to the various ways privilege has complicated group interactions. The following topics, previously named and predominately rooted in ableism and autistiphobia, have not been sufficiently addressed during this program of study to date:

- assumption that people can (or should even be expected to) change focus with immediacy
- assumption that everyone is tracking rapid speech exchanges, or can even parse out intelligible language from cross-talk
- assertions of immediate change necessity overriding monotropic attention (Murray, 2020)

- repeated interruptions and contradictions (advising) without explicit informed consent
- dehumanization through injection of meaning and/or silently replacing terminology (Yergeau, 2018)
- projection of communication skills gaps in re Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012)
- refusal to mirror the identity labels offered by marginalized people (Walker, 2021)
- continued transphobic actions like unapologetic misnaming or misgendering, refusals to share restroom space, or indeed any space that is not perceived as required
- lacking action in re daily encounters with bigotry and bias on Naropa campuses
- sensory issues, perceptual difference, and repeatedly ignored and continual impacts

(Larson, 2023b)

Assumptions of prosocial norm violations are rooted in culturally specific and exclusive practices (e.g., “common sense” does not exist across regional, ethnic, and cultural boundaries). Unless a relationship is honored by broaching discussions in healthy conflict, it is likely that one or more of the individuals involved is being unfairly judged and/or excluded without any understanding of a possible blind spot. I’ve heard too many apparently sincere words that lacked congruent action honoring those expressions to continue holding trust in these contexts. It would equate to self-harm to allow myself to give anything more than absolutely required to pass by another gatekeeper as we move forward.

Apologetic integrity flounders when bypassing is engaged by the offending party (e.g., as a defensive reaction to getting called on/in/out), regardless of intentions. Owning one’s impact, letting the offended party hear direct confirmation and specifically named ways they were harmed is crucial to relational integrity. And, once again, follow-up actions are where the real work resides for those who have moved beyond bypassing and ego-dystonia in their efforts to embody truly inclusive and radically accepting practices. *Nihil de nobis sine nobis.*