Divergent Affirmation: Consideration of the Creation of Affirming Groups

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Author Note

This paper is a response to prompts (paraphrased for space) from an online assignment:

1. How do you feel, knowing that ... you might be messy or make mistakes?
2. Why is it important to focus on impact over intent (in re defensive responses)?
3. Describe a reaction to a time when you received feedback over unintentionally harming someone and how you might react to a similar situation in the future.
4. In what ways has privilege shown up in the group (e.g., assumptions of "normal")?
5. In what ways have you felt activated or sought to protect yourself? What do you need to be able to regulate at these times?
6. How do we balance the sometimes seemingly competing needs within the group to be heard and to feel safe?
7. Have you ever been hurt while at the same time being told that you have caused harm to someone else? How do we address the pain experienced by all in such a complex environment? What might be needed of yourself and what might be needed of others?
8. What constitutes a good apology?
9. Pick a point that stands out to you from the guidelines and discuss its significance.
10. What questions do you have? What would you like to explore?

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Early in the American Group Psychotherapy Association's Guidelines for Creating

Affirming Group Experiences (AGPA) we are met with advice that "it is important to explore

and be aware of power and privilege and how this may lead to bias and harm" (AGPA, n.d.). In

particular, the authors note a need for preventative practices when acting to minimize the toll of

microaggressions on marginalized members. Such a path would have facilitators starting

conversations about harm reduction and accommodation of difference long before group

members face any possibility of interacting in activating ways, which is to say, before convening,

and again as the top order of business when they first convene, and again whenever unexplained

dysregulation or defensiveness presents while in session, and again whenever notification of

dynamic disability state change is made by a member….

Approaching it from a spontaneous co-creation of group norms, such as was experienced

on this cohort's initial trip, seemed to be timed reasonably and provide members some sense of

agency but accommodation of disability and divergent identities lacked centering and inclusive

focus. Non-obvious needs went without any platform intentionally provided for such

declarations. This was even further compounded by a system of notification of official

accommodation grants failing to deliver any advice to the professors of a class convening before

the official start of the cohort's first term, effectively punishing through erasure of proactive

efforts one of the members in attendance had made a month prior in the hopes of actually, for the

first time, finding their needs accommodated through an organization sanctioned process.

The extra effort and the shame, encountered by submitting unscientific and pathologizing

diagnosis to a complete stranger and being presented with my only possible support options as a

list of possible grants holding almost zero items relevant to sensory processing differences, was

all for naught if one were to analyze the facts of the case up to that point. Self-advocacy in a

frequently pain-filled hostile-by-default arena was their only path forward if they were to realize

access to any accommodation providing for equitable engagement. The sensitivity of those

enduring such exposure calls for honoring non-obvious difference via facilitation of prior

consideration by accommodated students; time to weigh options without distraction or

immediate response pressure (which may itself be activating), using any student-preferred

communication medium (e.g., AAC, email, voice).

This brings us into consideration of the various ways privilege has complicated group

interactions. The assumption that people can (or should even be expected to) change focus with

immediacy is ableism (Murray, 2020). The assumption that everyone is tracking rapid speech

exchanges, or can even parse out intelligible language from cross-talk? Also ableism. Repeated

assertions of immediate change necessity (also activating) denies honoring monotropic attention,

and as such is revealed to be inherently autistiphobic. Leaning into repeated interruptions and

contradictions before evidencing curiosity is an abuse of power also affecting needs relevant to

monotropism and audio processing disorder, thereby compounding ableist impacts. Demands for

conformity without explicit informed consent to enduring such interruptions via in-the-moment

guidance are most certainly not trauma informed practice. Such demands are almost exclusively

rooted in cis/het/white/neurotypical (i.e. professional standards) conformance, making no space

at all for a continually traumatized bi they with an operatic (e.g., BIG) voice. Injecting meaning

and/or silently replacing terminology is dehumanising, it places an autistic in demi-rhetorical

status as demi-human and incapable of producing acceptable speech patterns or mentalizing

another's experience (Yergeau, 2018). Projection of communication skills gaps is autistiphobic, completely ignorant of the Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012), and often only grudgingly admitting that both sides bear responsibility for resolving communication failures.

Refusing to mirror the identity labels as offered by a marginalized group member? That's frequently encountered bigotry in action, like when I offer perspective on "autistic people" and replies refer to the same population as "people with autism." It is bigotry so pervasive that repeated polls of autistic adults showing majority opinions preferring identity first language is a regular occurrence in *#ActuallyAutistic* community (where normative behavior allows for self-identification, and label choice contrary to majority opinion too). This specific topic, the importance of language and rhetorics defined within marginalized groups, also garnered an entire chapter by Walker (2021) in a textbook, and an entire tome by Yergeau (2018) offering historical perspective and possible futures in the struggle to be recognized as whole, and indeed human, by neurotypically conforming society.

Let us not forget transphobic actions like unapologetic misgendering, refusals to share restroom space, or indeed any space not required of them, as we close out this personally experienced sample of impacts spawned via ignorance of privilege. People who may not have worked on or even acknowledged biases have impacted my experience daily. I see this as the oblivion allowed by access to ease in conformance with normative demands commonly enforced by those in privileged social locations, the delusional belief that one's shadow couldn't possibly be so big given all their positive intentions. Witnessing injustice, and either not recognizing it as such or doing nothing to intercede, and avoiding impact at all costs; these are not compassionate

acts, nor do they meet the responsibility inherent to the imbalanced protection afforded to those

inhabiting privileged locations.

These examples, and more, also activated and/or otherwise impacted me to varying

degrees throughout our first year together, quite often in ways unique to myself among the group

by my own estimation. Given that there has not been a single day I've attended sessions at a

Naropa campus and escaped these situations, the ever evolving and deep attention to monitoring

and caring for myself that I've engaged in over the course of decades of unacknowledged

intersecting marginalization will not have any bearing without social change. I've already

outlived many estimates for the average lifespan in autistic community. The only way I'll be

able to continue beating those odds is through social supports that have yet to show up in

accommodation discussions and be met with anything but dismissal. Community support built

by neurodivergent activists for neurodivergent activists holds the keys to my success.

Social change, a vast field of possibility, might look like humanistic treatment of

marginalized group members taking priority over personal indulgence in distractions, desires, or

escapism. It might look like directly surfacing the consideration of needs expressed by those

disabled by group norms to date. It might look like prioritizing accommodation discussion every

single time we convene to address any other intent before moving into the *raison d'être* for the

gathering. It might look like explicit expectation setting up front in every context, while holding

changes to the consented expectations for later iterations of the process (e.g., deferring

adaptations based on feedback which does not absolutely require immediate change, like

accommodation of disability). It might also embrace trauma-informed, explicitly anti-ableist,

and broadly acknowledged accessibility best practices like speakers describing their own

appearance and/or identities as a prelude to taking up space in conversation (especially in digital

spaces). It might look like allowing for what seems to be commonly viewed as imbalanced effort

(e.g., mere equality) such as holding discomfort for one less privileged as a means to equitable

relationship without complaint or bargaining or ultimatum.

With such forward-thinking and inclusive practices, apologies become less frequently

necessary, though we cannot possibly expect to avoid stepping up to personal accountability and

owning our faults directly with those we've impacted. Of course, this requires willingness to

broach the topic on the part of the one offended, because assumptions of prosocial norm

violations are rooted in culturally specific and exclusive practices (e.g., "common sense" does

not exist across regional, ethic, and cultural boundaries). Unless the relationship is honored in

such a way, it is likely that one or more of the individuals in relationship is being unfairly judged

and/or excluded without any understanding of a possible blind spot.

Most importantly, from my perspective, the actions that follow the words commonly

described as the behavior of issuing an apology are the most important focus area. If sincere

words are received, it is vitally important to honor those words with matching actions. For

anyone with literal language parsing tendencies (e.g., the opposite of frequently witnessed

euphemistic applications of language), saying you're looking forward to getting together without

genuinely feeling into those words and following through on a scheduled rendezvous destroys

trust. So-called "white lies" destroy trust, so speaking with intent and integrity while working to

repair a rupture in relationship is essential.

None of this consideration of apologetic integrity matters in the slightest when bypassing

is engaged by the offending party (e.g., as a defensive reaction to getting called on/in/out).

Owning one's impact, letting the offended party hear direct confirmation and specifically named ways they were harmed is crucial to relational integrity. Expressions of sorrow for the impact may or may not land at all depending on the level of trust in effect. And, once again, follow-up actions are where the real work resides for those who have moved beyond bypassing.

References

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Recommended Reading

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