Complex Identities and Compassion in Equity Training

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Equity Training

Teaching about awareness of:

- The different sources of privilege and disadvantage that mainstream culture perpetuates
- People’s own complex social locations
- How to engage in a constant self-reflective effort to work towards equity in our everyday interactions amid diversity
Sociological Perspective

- Public issues vs. personal troubles
- Social structure vs. Individual agency
Complex Identities

Various dimensions:

- Objective & Subjective
- Privilege & Disadvantage
- Intersectionality: Experience of various dimensions of disadvantage add up
- Also, individuals may experience privilege and disadvantage at the same time
Equality vs. Equity
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FOR A FAIR SELECTION EVERYBODY HAS TO TAKE THE SAME EXAM: PLEASE CLimb THAT TREE
“Uneven playing field”

- The literature confirms that equity work must recognize that the field is not even:
  - Realizing that we can be part of the system that creates suffering.
  - Reflecting on our own privilege in an unequitable world is essential.
Guilt

- Awareness of privilege brings up feelings of guilt.

- For example: Hernández-Wolffe & McDowell found that family therapists who worked with people in marginalized positions had to deal with feelings of guilt:

  “Increased awareness [of their privilege] involved personal struggles with guilt” (2012, p. 175).
Awareness of Privilege

- Requires challenging our own prejudice
  - Constantly confirmed by the dominant culture.
  - Wide-spread belief in individuality and meritocracy.
- **Guilt** may be a signal that may trigger awareness of privilege.
- But it is not sufficient on its own to elicit commitment to equity.
Guilt vs. Compassion

Principled morality
• What is morally right or wrong?
• Judgemental
  • Guilt due to undeserved privilege

Compassionate morality
• Based on the ideal of Universal love
• Compassion both for oppressed and oppressor
  • Especially for the oppressor within oneself

Privilege

Disadvantage

SELF
Compassion

- Controversial when theorizing about morality
  - Central focus of many spiritual traditions
  - Central moral philosophers have treated it critically; e.g. Kant: “this good natured passion is nevertheless weak and always blind” (cit. by Goetz et al., 2010)
  - Has been described as a “moral barometer”: closely tracks suffering, responsibility, vulnerability harm-related concerns; an intuition that guides us in seeking to remedy undeserved suffering
Compassion

- Has been associated to: sympathy, pity, empathy, kindness, tenderness, warmth, caring.

- In psychology, it has been generally seen as a feeling directed to others (see Goetz et al., 2010).

- I have found it is useful to also pose it as a feeling directed to one-self in this context.
Compassion

- Based on the ideal of universal love.

- A “hermeneutics of the heart,” an understanding of our shared humanity:
  - Modern individual self is posed as rational, powerful, free.
  - Actual human beings are vulnerable, fragile, moody and needy—especially as infants (feminist literature).

- Empowering as a source of courage:
  “...managing internalized voices of prejudice that are constantly reinforced in society... committing to this process takes both courage and compassion” (Hernandez-Wolfe & McDowell, 2012, p. 175)
Compassion for one-self involves:

- Being kind and understanding to oneself:
  - To our own suffering or perceived inadequacy.

- A sense of common humanity:
  - Suffering, failure and inadequacy as part of the human condition.

- A balanced awareness of one’s emotions:
  - The ability to “face (rather than avoid) painful thoughts and feelings, but without exaggeration, drama or self-pity” (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007, 908-909).
And all the little monsters said in a chorus:  
You must kiss us.

What! You who are evil,  
Ugly and uncivil.  
You who are cruel,  
Afraid and needy,  
Uncouth and seedy.

Yes, moody and greedy.  
Yes, you must bless us.

But the evil you do,  
The endless ado.  
Why bless you?  
You are composed of such shameful stuff.

Because, said the monsters beginning to laugh,  
Because, they said cheering up.  
You might as well. You are part of us.

Suniti Namjoshi
(cited by Warner, 1994, xvii)
Why Self-Compassion in Equity Work?

- Perceived inadequacy in having internalized:
  - Prejudices in the dominant culture and assumptions that we deserve our privilege.

- Common humanity:
  - Equality in common human condition, forgiveness and less judgmental attitude towards one-self (Neff, 2003).

- Objective approach to our own emotions (mindfulness):
  - Without this approach there is a non-acceptance of our negative emotions (to ourselves, but also to others).
Also Compassion Directed at Others

- Judgment allows hierarchies and orders of desert.
- Compassion overcomes our meritocratic impulses.
  - An expansive individual self.
  - Compassion for the oppressor.
  - Freedom from hate and fear.
Equity Training—The Project

- An equity workshop designed under the principle of compassionate morality and complex identities (20 workshop participants and 20 non-workshop participants)

- This project will follow a qualitative research methodology (open-ended questionnaire responses and semi-structured interviews)

- Analysis of research data will include a mixture of *apriori* categories and grounded theory methods

- Can the principle of compassionate morality in an intersectional framework in equity training make participants more responsive to the ideas of equity and fairness than a guilt-based judgemental orientation?
REFERENCE LIST:


