



Dispatch

Navigating Intergroup Distrust: Reflections of a Senior University Equity Leader

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Introduction

From the vantage point of a senior university equity administrator and scholar-practitioner, this paper offers some reflections on the current sociopolitical context for social justice leadership in higher education and the institutional cultural milieu within which senior equity administrators are expected to successfully advance their remit. The paper discusses the dynamics of intergroup distrust and elaborates on two key challenges and opportunities for cultivating climates of trust and understanding where senior equity administrators are facilitated to advance mission-critical university social change priorities: (1) better deployment of non-adversarial educational and dialogic tools to prevent and respond to contemporary bias-motivated behavior, where possible; and (2) better application of an integrative ethic of justice *and* ethic of care and the creation of brave spaces and processes that protect rights and freedoms while promoting psychological safety.

Social change efforts in Canadian universities have been taking shape and shape-shifting for the past 40 years. Today, these efforts are referred to as EDI – equity, diversity and inclusion – and most, if not all, Canadian university vision and purpose statements reflect a commitment to social change as a means to contribute to societal betterment through the tri-partite academic mission: teaching, research, and service. A 2024 National Survey (Nanos, 2024) conducted by Nanos Research found that universities continue to be seen as the top contributors to Canada being a better country, suggesting that, at some level, Canadians believe that universities should play an essential role in improving human and social conditions. Despite this contemporary public expectation that universities will contribute to social betterment, commitments to advancing social justice in and through higher education continue to experience fits and starts coinciding with the ebb and flow of social movements

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for and backlash against change efforts, influenced by ever-shifting sociocultural and political forces.

Perhaps there can be no better indicator of this oscillating momentum than the ever changing language that Canadian institutions use to articulate their social justice commitments based on what society has found most palatable at any given moment – from language of human rights and equity, to diversity and inclusion, to respect and belonging, to inclusive excellence and EDI, to the addition of justice for the acronym JEDI, to the explicit articulation of anti-racism, and there is talk of reverting back to a more benign and apolitical discourse of respect. The current upswing of anti-EDI sentiment reflects a deliberate campaign to co-opt EDI by grossly distorting its goals and methods and maligning and disparaging those of us advancing the work.

While much has changed with respect to the institutional landscape in and from which social change efforts are continuing – and in many ways progressing – the sense of impending risk and reality of recurring backlash and targeting of those of us seeking to advance social justice through academic work and professional practice not only persists but feels more dangerous with the global rise in right-wing populism (Aziz & Esposito, 2024) and increasing national incidents of police-reported hate (RCMP, 2024) finding broader reach through social media and the world wide web. Observing the devastating effects of the anti-DEI movement on the post-secondary education sector in the United States, many in Canada wonder how resurfacing anti-EDI sentiments may manifest in the Canadian university sector.

While the ways that EDI is uniquely imbedded in the social fabric of Canada and across the higher education policy ecosystem as well as the relatively high degree of autonomy from government intervention that universities in Canada enjoy may help to safeguard against the wholesale dismantling of EDI-related academic and administrative work, university leaders cannot be complacent nor capitulate to pressures from governments or donors who may espouse anti-EDI attitudes and ideologies. Now is the time for leaders across the sector to come together with social justice scholars and practitioners to thoughtfully assess the phenomena at play, to lean on and strengthen potentially protective factors, to plan for the prevention and mitigation of efforts to erode or reverse gains, and to reassure social justice scholars and practitioners of the ways that the institution will stand against infringements and attacks on their rights and reputations. In doing so, university leaders will be symbolically and substantively counteracting a culture of targeting and modeling behaviours that will contribute to fostering a climate of trust-building.

Fostering a Climate of Trust-Building in Higher Education

Having set the sociocultural context in and from which senior university equity leaders are working, I turn to elaborating on some of the intergroup dynamics of distrust which are at play. In this discussion, I centre racialization in my

commentary given the continued saliency of racial inequities in our work to advance social equity and also given my unique experiences of racialization in my work. I am one of very few racialized women among my administrative peers at my institution and the only queer Muslim Arab administrator when considering my intersecting marginalized identities.

John Dovidio, Samuel Gaertner, Kerry Kawakami, and Gordon Hodson (2002) studied how contemporary manifestations of racism can be “systematically damaging to race relations by fostering miscommunication and distrust” (p. 88). Dovidio et al. (2002) proposed that four aspects of contemporary racism expressed by non-racialized people contribute to “divergence of perceptions and interracial distrust” (p. 89) from and with racialized people: (a) contemporary racism manifests as subtle forms of racial biases; (b) subtle forms of racial biases are often unintentional and unconscious; (c) the same behaviours that manifest from unintentional and unconscious racial biases are perceived and experienced differently by racialized and non-racialized peoples; and (d) given the different perceptions and experiences of racial biases, they have different consequences and impacts for racialized and non-racialized people. Also studying contemporary forms of racism, Derald Wing and his research team (Wing et al., 2007) described four “psychological dilemmas” (p. 272) that arise for racialized groups who encounter contemporary forms of racial bias and inequities and which contribute to intergroup distrust:

1. *Invisibility of Unintended Biases*: The racial biases, while subtle, are saliently felt by racialized persons but difficult to “prove” because they are frequently invisible to non-racialized persons who express them implicitly, unconsciously, and unintentionally.
2. *Clash of Realities*: The experiences of racialized and non-racialized groups represent two vastly different realities whereby racialized individuals experience the biases as “everyday” occurrences that are not random but rather recurrent and generalizable patterns of behaviours facilitated by systemic cultural norms, while non-racialized individuals perceive the comments or conduct to be isolated and idiosyncratic events attributable to individuals and “bad actors”;
3. *Minimization of Impacts*. The cumulative effects of exposure to recurring biases contribute to substantive negative psychological impacts for racialized individuals, while non-racialized individuals tend to mistakenly minimize the extent of the harm caused.
4. *Secondary Harm*: The experiences of denial, defensiveness, and sometimes retaliation, when racialized persons address biases often result in further psychological harm and marginalization, while non-racialized persons often hold judgements that the racialized person is hypersensitive.

While both Dovidio and Wing Sue presented their scholarship on intergroup dynamics and distrust over two decades ago, their findings remain relevant as studies continue to provide evidence of the manifestation of subtle,

unconscious and implicit biases and their implications on intergroup relations. A plethora of studies have since been published demonstrating the presence and persistence of gender and racial biases in the academy. In the Canadian context, Henry et al.'s (2017) *Equity Myth* demonstrates the implications of these persistent biases, particularly for racialized and Indigenous faculty.

Considering Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe's (2003) Four Layers Model of Diversity, I suggest that the elements of contemporary racism that influence racial dynamics and contribute to intergroup distrust are applicable more broadly and intersectionally not only across other social dimensions of diversity but also to organizational dimensions of diversity in the academy. Management status, as an organizational dimension of diversity, is particularly relevant to this discussion. While the dynamics of intergroup distrust exist between management and non-management groups in the academy, reflected in the highly unionized academic environment, it has been my experience that these dynamics of distrust are also present in relations between senior university administrative groups and senior university equity leaders as well as between senior university equity leaders and marginalized campus communities.

An important contextual factor is that minoritized and racialized people are significantly under-represented among senior administrative leadership yet considerably over-represented among senior equity leaders. Senior equity administrators like myself occupy an insider-outsider positionality with respect to their positions among senior university leadership and their minoritized community membership. The intersection of management status with minoritized status presents complexities to the psychological dilemmas and dynamics of distrust that senior equity leaders must navigate. In addition to contending with distrust and targeting from segments of the campus and the public who are vocal and active in their pursuit of our censure, administrative equity leaders also often contend with distrust, and sometimes targeting, from both senior administrative teams with whom they must collaborate as peers and the marginalized community groups they serve and to which they also hold an affinity. The distrust may not manifest in overt targeting but rather subtle private and public discrediting and distancing. Senior administrative bodies may distrust the senior equity leader's motives given our marginal positionality and proximity to lived experiences. This can lead to excluding senior equity leaders from strategic deliberations and decision making due to a perception that our loyalties are with minoritized groups, and a perception that we are displaying a conflict of interest when we advocate strongly for any given social justice issue. At the same time, marginalized students, faculty and staff may distrust senior equity leaders' motives given our administrative positionality and proximity to power in the institution. This can lead to the exclusion of senior equity leaders in community organizing to address systems change due to a perception that our loyalties are with the university, and a perception that we are perpetuating structures and relations of power.

While both dynamics are troubling, the most untenable of the two, in my experience, is the distrust between the senior equity leader and their senior administrative colleagues. A hospitable and supportive team of senior-level peers and superiors is essential to the empowerment of the senior equity leaders and their ability to thrive and meaningfully lead and contribute to the university's social change goals. The distrust of senior equity leaders by their senior administrative colleagues based on perceptions that we are displaying a conflict of interest when we advocate strongly for any given social justice issue reflects, in my view, either a lack of understanding or disagreement with our responsibilities as social justice champions as well as a weaponization (intentional or not) of the concept of advocacy. Senior equity leaders and the offices that they oversee should, of course, be impartial change agents – therefore, they should be advocates *for systems change and social justice*, which is not the same as being advocates *for particular individual interests and outcomes*. Ramsey and Latting (2005) identify advocating for systems change as one of the higher order intergroup competencies required by leaders to champion social justice. Impartiality, in the domain of advancing social justice, should not be mistaken for neutrality, which may connote a value free stance. Instead, impartiality in this context requires a keen consciousness of historical and sociopolitical contexts that contribute to inequities and a commitment to both procedural equity and integrity as well as to relational empathy and humility – applied at all times and for all parties. These values align with the integrated application of an ethic of justice *and* an ethic of care advocated by Annatjie Botes (2000), which is further discussed later.

While there are increasing requests from all corners of the academy for support to better navigate these intergroup dynamics, there is also a great deal of reservation about how to engage in one of the modalities that can help to transform these relationships: dialogue across difference. Below, this paper discusses two key challenges that often stall opportunities to nurture a culture of trust and understanding.

Better Deployment of Educational and Dialogic Tools

The first challenge calls for better deployment of non-adversarial educational and dialogic interventions to prevent and respond to contemporary bias-motivated behavior, thereby building campus capacity to enhance intergroup relations. Attitudes and behaviours underpinning inequities sit on a continuum from personally mediated implicitly and explicitly biased attitudes to structurally and culturally imbedded systemic discrimination. As a senior equity administrator who has overseen human rights programs responsible for complaint intake, advising, and investigation, I have often reflected that we may be over-reliant on legislative and policy interventions – compliance measures – when educational and dialogic interventions could be better options

to prevent and respond to possible bias-motivated behaviours. This over-reliance is in large part due to a deficit of intergroup competences.

Although often touted as the preferred non-adversarial modes of addressing bias and discrimination, where possible, the deployment of educational and dialogic tools remains woefully inadequate. In part, this is due to limited faculty, staff and student competencies for engaging in critical and constructive dialogue across difference, as well as challenges in developing and delivering bespoke intergroup competency-development programming for unique audiences in a format that will be conducive to deep learning and which will be embraced as necessary to build relevant 21st century educational outcomes and leadership skills.

In my work to support leadership development, I have leveraged a promising empirically grounded typology of 14 intergroup competencies put forward by Ramsey and Latting (2005), which offers an accessible introduction to foundational social justice skills on which to build further learning. Ramsey and Latting use a two-dimensional socioecological model that highlights competencies for personal, interactional, cultural and structural change, and they differentiate between competencies that deepen capacity for reflection and those that develop capacity for action. Competencies in the personal domain include becoming aware of one's own cultural values and assumptions, committing to personal change, processing emotions, and reframing mental modes. In the interactional domain, the competencies are empathizing with multiple perspectives, differentiating between intent and impact, engaging in inquiry and openness, and engaging in responsible feedback. In the cultural domain, the competencies are connecting the personal to the cultural and societal, and addressing dominant and nondominant group dynamics. Finally, in the structural domain, competencies to develop include identifying systemic patterns, identifying one's own role in perpetuating patterns of inequity, surfacing undiscussables, and advocating and engaging in systemic change.

In my work to support senior leader competency development, I have found that administrators self-report less proficiency in the critical consciousness and repatterning systems competencies, and less proficiency in the action-oriented competencies. These reports are congruent with my observations working with colleagues, and one particular gap that is apparent to me but perhaps not my peers is in the "reframing mental modes" competency. These intergroup competencies have great potential to reduce intergroup distrust and building confidence among campus community members to engage in critical and constructive dialogue across difference. When skillfully deployed, this set of competencies can create a sense of psychological safety for all members engaged in the dialogue across difference, while protecting both fundamental freedoms and universal human rights.

Attending to Psychological Safety through a Pedagogy of Discomfort in Brave Spaces

The second challenge calls for better application of an integrative ethic of justice *and* ethic of care and the establishment of brave spaces and processes that protect rights and freedoms while promoting psychological safety. Depending on the nature and context of the bias-motivated comment and conduct, it may or may not violate a law of the land or a university policy – however, regardless of whether they amount to a breach in a university policy, bias-motivated comments and conduct have been shown to have psychologically harmful impacts (Nadal, 2018). Thus, attending to psychological safety is essential in any process to address bias motivated behaviour.

Effective engagement of dialogue across difference requires deep attention to and interrogation of structures and relations of power. That critical approach is not at odds with a commitment to respecting the diverse perceptions and experiences of safety among individuals – across social group identities and positionalities. Rather than debating whose sense of safety is legitimate and worthy of protecting, I suggest, particularly in educational settings, focusing on a “pedagogy of discomfort” that seeks to establish what Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens (2013) refer to as a “brave space.” A pedagogy of discomfort (Boler & Zembylas, 2003) is an educational approach that is premised on the idea that discomforting feelings are essential to transformative learning about issues of social inequities. This approach supports the creation of the five characteristics of braves spaces: divergent perspectives are invited; emotional impacts on others – intentional or not – are acknowledged; challenging perspectives is optional; respect for personal dignity is paramount; and intentional targeting of others is not permitted (Arao & Clemens, 2013).

In the context of engaging intergroup dialogue across difference the concept of brave spaces can help differentiate between a comfortable versus psychically safe space. Learning and unlearning the ways that we may perpetuate biases and contribute to discriminatory behaviours or otherwise harmful acts requires leaning into discomfort. As is well known, learning happens when we safely push ourselves to the edges of our discomfort. Unsafe spaces are those that create psychic harm or trigger traumas caused by individual and systemic patterns of biased or discriminatory behaviours. Committing to establishing brave spaces for dialogue across difference requires a recognition of one’s and others’ complex positionalities, leaning into discomfort to challenge one’s privileges, and taking responsibility for perpetuating biases or discriminatory patterns that may undermine psychic safety. And, regardless of our identities we are all capable of perpetuating different intersecting forms of bias and discriminatory patterns. In this way, brave spaces can facilitate the protection of fundamental commitments to academic freedom and freedom of expression, while also exercising an integrative ethic of justice and ethic of care. Brave spaces and processes do not

compromise procedural equity and integrity while enacting relational empathy and humility – these procedural and relational values and practices align with the integrated application of an ethic of justice *and* an ethic of care advanced by Botes (2000).

Botes (2000) describes an ethic of justice as focused on the fair and equitable treatment of all people on the basis of universal principles and rules in an impartial manner, while an ethic of care focuses on the holistic and contextual treatment of people on the basis of individual needs. Unfortunately, it has been my experience that universities often fall down in the application of an ethic of care, which then breeds greater intergroup distrust. A study conducted by Sheldene Simola, Julian Barling and Nick Turner (2009) found that leader propensity towards using an ethic of care or ethic of justice was significantly, positively related to follower perceptions of transformational and/or transactional leadership, respectively. However, the researchers state that “there may well be, in practical terms, a role for ethics of both justice and care among those who demonstrate either leadership style” (p. 185). Transactional leadership refers to a social exchange between parties that seek to advance mutual economic, political, or psychological interests, whereas transformational leadership refers to a social exchange between parties that moves beyond the goal of individual benefits and towards the goal of relationship building to identify an elevated shared purpose (Simola et al., 2009).

It has been my experience that universities – that is, administrative decision-makers – often fall down in the application of an ethic of care, which can further entrench intergroup distrust. While the reasons for this observation may be complex, there may be at least two contributing factors at play: a lack of intentionality in considering the appropriate application of various ethics frameworks in their decision-making, including critically-orientated frameworks such as the ethic of care; and a lack of capacity to exercise an ethic of care, which requires complex relational skills including emotional intelligence. Eileen Johnson (2002) observed that while educational leaders must make ethical decisions on a daily basis, “too often these decisions are made using neither a deliberate process nor a specific ethical framework” (p.786). Glenn Koonce and Kurt Kreassig (2020) suggest that when a leader places an ethics of care first, “trust, loyalty, belonging, self-worth, and self-efficacy become the initial and pervasive actions taken by the [leader] to solve or resolve any issue” (p. 832). They go on to say that an ethic of care is more complex to deploy than an ethic of justice, because it requires interpersonal reasoning skills as opposed to the exercise of fairness according to laws, regulations, and rules.

Conclusion

This dispatch sought to invite reflection on the cultural milieu for social justice scholarship and praxis within the higher education ecosystem from the vantage point of a senior equity leader and scholar-practitioner. The discussion began with commentary on the rise of xenophobia and coinciding upswing in anti-EDI sentiment targeting social justice efforts in higher education emerging from certain segments of the Canadian population and some politicians. The paper then transitioned to discuss the ways that intergroup dynamics can create distrust between different social groups as well as between groups holding different organizational positions in the university. The psychological dilemmas facing marginalized groups were outlined along with the additional dilemma confronting senior equity leaders who can also experience distancing, if not targeting, due to intergroup distrust from marginalized communities on the basis of their administrative group membership, and from senior administrative peers on the basis of their marginalized group membership. The discussion then turned to explore two key challenges and opportunities to build campus community capacity to better navigate intergroup distrust. Two interrelated conclusions are drawn: (1) that universities should improve their deployment of non-adversarial educational and dialogic tools to prevent and respond to contemporary bias-motivated behavior, thereby building campus capacity to enhance intergroup relations; and (2) that universities should improve their application of an integrative ethic of justice *and* ethic of care and the establishment of brave spaces and processes that protect rights and freedoms while promoting psychological safety

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