

**The
truth-of-being- different: The
experiences of BIPOC in
Division 39**

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Context and background

Following the killing of George Floyd and the ensuing Black Lives Matter movement and nation-wide protests, many public and private institutions were forced to reckon with racial injustices in America. Floyd's dying words "I can't breathe" as he pleads for his life echoed in every corner in the US. After that moment, no one could claim ignorance. This singular, yet common event opened the door to talking about the policing of black and brown bodies in various institutions. In the end, George Floyd's murder exposed not only the pervasiveness of violence but also the corresponding consent silence carried.

Like many organizations, Division 39 or Society for Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalytic Psychology (SPPP) was also called by this event to examine the way it engages the racialized Other. This is the beginning of such a process.

The Problem

- "Addressing issues of racial inequity, bias and *violence* towards BIPOC members."
- "SPPP has been blind to racial injuries experienced by some members."
- "This situation mirrors, replicates and is implicated in a much wider situation of systemic injustice in our society at large."

Project Goal

- "Open the divisions' eyes and ears to the injuries experienced by some members."

Project Question

- What is like to be different, something else, and or unusual, in this organization?

Main Focus

- The focus on dealing with existential issues, the lived experiences.

Seeking Truth and Reconciliation.

To start the dialogue, the division president sought my guidance into facilitating this process. Although they recognized that the problem exists, the pervasiveness, the depth and impact was not fully understood. However, there was genuine desire to engage with this exploration.

Reconciliation presupposes two or more parties, divergent at the least or warring at worst. Therefore, seeking reconciliation necessitated that the supposed divergent parties to engage. Because the charge already assumed that there were members who have been and continued to be injured. So, the author of this report, with help of the division president, Dr. Schaller reached out to marginalized members to sit down for interviews about their experiences in the division, and to speak their truth.

Sources of the truth

Interviews

- The interviews were conducted via zoom.
- They followed an existential phenomenology qualitative research interview style.
- They were all opened-ended questions.
- All the participants were first asked to describe their experiences as member of the division.
- All the subsequent questions sought explanation and elaboration.
- The follow up question were raised based on what they said.

Participants

- Five individual division members were interviewed
- Each participant averages 22.4 year of membership in the division.
- Conducted interviews with six graduate students and early career psychologists. (Who attended at least one division meeting)

Group Processes

Group 1. (4 sessions)

- Overall, 14 active division members participated but not all the sessions from beginning to end. Others missed one session or had to leave one session before it ended.
- Four zoom meetings.
- Two hours each meeting.

Group 2 (President consultation group)

- Eight Division members selected by the division president Dr. Schaller
- Discuss a formation of a consultative group on racial injustices and other injustices.
- Set the framework of the group including its mission.
- Establish and articulate how they will engage each other when deliberating.
- Explore and articulate how to engage the board and general membership.

Truth: What happened?

- **Experiences/Truth of the Division**

- “To think yourself as psychoanalyst it’s a very protective class.”
- “Division 39 inclination is insularity.”
- “Division 39 is not comfortable dealing with Blacks, Queers and Latinos.”
- “The whole organization is tribal, so self-serving.”
- “It’s the last stronghold of absolute white supremacy (outside the formal clinical psychology in APA).”
- “It is an incestuous white lineage” organization.
- “If you couldn’t have some claim of whiteness regardless of your ethnicity, you had nothing to say, you couldn’t be heard.”
- “My brain works very well outside Division 39, I don’t have dissociative moments when I am outside Division 39. I only have them when I am dealing with division 39 and the people in it.”
- “The division functions in a top down” approach.
- “One of the reasons they won’t remove the barriers and create access for people like me [Black], (it’s), because I am a descendant of an American slave, I am not an immigrant.”
- “The division does not speak to Black people in the division.”
- “Those of us who tend to be involved as POC, tend to be POC who are like not Black or Native American, we tend to have appearances that a little bit adjacent to whiteness.”
- “Other than the insiders, it is hard to know how that division functions.”
- “There is a lot of racism that is active in the organization.”
 - ❖ “that is very active and belligerent,”
 - ❖ “and it’s perpetrated by comparatively few people,”
 - ❖ “and then there is like, unrelenting microaggressions all the time.”
 - ❖ “you have white people witnessed racism but would do nothing.”
- “There is a problem in the meeting of feeling like he belonged. I felt the same way when I joined.”
- “You go to the meeting, unless you are known by your writings, political positions; it’s hard to feel that you are part of the organization when you are not of the power part of the organizations.”
- “It’s hard to feel at home, how do you find a home in Division 39?”
- There is a culture of insiders talk that, for example, would refer to people with the first names and if you don’t know those people you have no idea who they are referring to.”
- “Every three years the conference comes back to NYC (Manhattan).”

Truth: Meetings/Conference

- **Experiences/truth of the conferences**
 - “For a while, certain cultural perspective were not readily available in the division.”
 - “There is a problem in the meeting of feeling like you belonged.”
 - “It’s hard to feel you will find a home in Division 39.”
 - “There is a culture of insiders, referring to people by first names.”
 - “Conference is cliquish.”
 - “If you are there, nobody talks to you.”
 - “If you came alone no one would talk to you.”
 - “Went to talks and nobody talked to you.”
 - “The racism was so blatant that I would be walking in the hallway and someone who call me by the name of the other Black person. They would do the same thing to her as if we were interchangeable.”
 - “I am hopeful, I come, I get punched in the face. I leave feeling dejected.”
 - “Many times, you pay your money to get yourself hurt by this division.”

- **Violent Encounters during the conference**
 - “I guarantee you, every person who approaches that registration desk, if it’s lily white, they will know this is Division 39. They are entering into an alter universe when they put their [registration] money down.”
 - “That’s how serious I am about that registration desk. Because the anxiety it creates colors your whole experience for the three or four days.”
 - “What are you doing here?” (at the conference)
 - “Oh no, you go over there to there, The Action Network Coalition.”
 - “I have never been in the conference were there weren’t people of color crying in the hallway or bathroom because of things that were said to them.”
 - “If you had gone through an analysis, you would have worked/resolved your issues.”
 - “Somebody would say a racist thing and then every other white person won’t say a word. The silence is brutal.”
 - “I broke down, was sobbing [in the hall], I called my daughter and said could you just talk to me I can’t even breathe.”

The problem: You, the host

Hostility Vs Hospitality

Division 39 hosts a once-a-year conference. This is the event that most of its members gather and interact. It is not just a reunion between old members, is also an introductory platform for new members. Therefore, whatever transpires during the conferences, they represent the culture or attitude of the division.

The division is the host and therefore bounded by all the conditions and obligations of being host, which is hospitality.

- **Ubuntu on Hospitality:**

According to Ubuntu, inherent to being a host is either hospitality or hostility. The host is responsible for preserving the humanity of the guest, a stranger, a foreigner. The only way for the host to manifest their own humanity, they must welcome and serve the guest and therefore preserve the guest's humanity.

- The foreignness or strangeness dictates the terms of services.
- You are the one who receives, and you only give by receiving.
- It's an asymmetrical relationship because the host is the server.

- **Derrida**

“This is where the question of hospitality begins: must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our language, in all the senses of this term, in all its possible extensions, before being able and so as to be able to welcome him to our country, with all that that implies, if we already share everything that is shared with a language, would the foreigner still be a foreigner, and could we speak of asylum or hospitality in regard to him?”

- **The gate or door keeping sign.**

Based on experiences, it seems as though the Division hangs a sign that says Closed to Strangers.

“They never ever thought for a minute to diversify their registration desk. You have, this society that would have a meeting in the city and never think to have one person of color at the registration desk or involved in anyway, like you have to show a pass to get into a meeting. They would have never think to have some diversity in there. I have never gone to the division meeting where the person on the door is not white. They get the whitest person, it's so galling and they have the nerve the charge Black people.”

- “It starts at the gates. The gate keeping matters.”
- “Oh no, you go over there, The National Action Network, You don't belong here.”
- “I am not paying to present at their conference. I am never presenting at the division conference as long as I am Black until I see something change.”

Be-fore Forging ahead

BE-FORE (in front of, in presence of, because, for the sake of).

- **Two Conditions of Reconciliation.**

Since the division is also seeking reconciliation and forgiveness. It is crucial to note that truth and forgiveness are the preconditions for reconciliation.

a. Truth

b. Forgiveness

- **Truth (agent of violence)**
 - Own your aggression and violence.
 - Speak it, confess it.
 - Face the victim.
 - Give back the humanity you took.
- **Forgiveness (recipient of violence)**
 - Giving back for being seen.
 - I, for (the truth), give you the humanity you lost.
- **Other Current Challenges**
 - “What is going on in training programs such graduate programs in psychology, psychiatry residents; psychoanalytic psychotherapy is not taught anymore.”
 - “The division is not paying enough attention to what is going on in graduate programs”
 - “Division caught up in internal struggles or challenges and does not have a vision for sustainability institutionally in academia.”
 - “They have a huge anxiety about intergenerational replacement. We are seen as the wokeness police who are inimical to debate and reason.”
 - “We are seen as castrating radicals, just because we are brown.”

Forging Ahead

- **Two Possible ways to forge ahead**
 - Reform
 - Transform

Forging ahead, are you looking for reforms or transformation?

- **Reform (Forging ahead) Counterfeiting**
 - Keep your current culture and practices.
 - Change faces or rebrand.
 - Nothing is lost.
 - Continue to pretend the division is acultural.
 - Continue to pretend listserv is not a warzone.
 - Transform
 - Get rid of the current culture and practices that sustain violence.
 - Clearly articulate the ethical reasons and obligation for being different.
 - Interrogate all the formal and informal structures and institutional practices.
 - Giving up your form and open yourself to dying.
 - Start to clearly articulate the ethical role of the listserv.

Challenges to Transformation/The Implicit Biases

- **NOTE: psychoanalysts are not above the fray, they are the fray.**

The division has acknowledged that the racial inequities “mirrors, replicates and is implicated in a much wider situation of systemic injustice in our society at large.”

Despite this acknowledgement, the general challenge within the division, psychoanalyst, and psychodynamic therapist is;

- After psychoanalytic training one becomes a clean slate.
- Psychoanalysis is a purifying agent; it gets rid of all your biases and unacknowledged aggression.
- Psychoanalysis is your first language and your only language.
- This is used to mask first language, which is peppered with all forms of injustices.
- Psychoanalytic practitioners disown their violence and aggression.
- The listserv is no different from your conferences.

- **Levels of Push Back (against inclusivity and openness)**

In addition to behavioral and attitudinal challenges to change, this process is likely to encounter push back. It will largely manifest in three ways

Discourse level.

Usually, the main arguments at this level largely focus on legitimacy or relevance. This is accompanied by another concern, which is quality or standard. The most potent argument is the one that frames this as a political and/or ideological move.

Individual level.

At this level, individuals tend to react because they perceive change as targeting them or what they stood for and what the organization stood for and for them.

Organizational level.

Organizations exist and carry themselves as neutral or object. Organizational cultures, traditions and history are usually seen as a reflection of nobody but everybody. There is an assumed general ownership and consent by all the members of the organization. This is the assumption behind both the discourse and individual pushback. For transformation, changing rules and procedures are not enough when all the other aspects of the organization are intact.

The Listserv

The listserv is a uniquely positioned space wherein all levels of pushback play out. It seems to be an organizational space where individuals act out at a discourse level. Like the conferences, the listserv is the other platform for hostility within the division.

- "The listserv is a sh*tshow."
- "I no longer subscribe because I didn't want to deal with microaggressions and overt aggression."
- "Most of the tension on the listserv is about race."

Clarify or articulate the role of the listserv.

Like the conferences, the division must articulate the listserv's role, is it a space when you demonstrated intellectual hospitality or hostility. Theoretical and philosophical debates are what enriches the division but that is different from violence or war.

- What is the role of the listserv?
- How does its role tie with the division's vision and mission?
- Who does it serve?
- Is it meant to bring people in or drive them out?

Recommendations

Embrace the evil within

- Start to genuinely challenge the antagonistic articulation of clinical work versus social existence (like social justice).
 - ❖ This antagonistic articulation invariably creates a perception that one is more important than the other, in this case, clinical work. This is equivalent to statements that one does not see color, which one way of saying, I don't see who you are and only see who I want you to be. More importantly, it denied the fundamental nature of social injustice, which is violence. By its very nature violence is trauma. Challenging the antagonistic articulation of clinical work versus social just would signal the division of acknowledgment of the lived experience of marginalized communities.
- Examine whether it's the same people who rotate within leadership structures.
 - ❖ Although this practice of rotating same people within leadership might be due to the commitment those people have demonstrated, it nevertheless forecloses the possibility of new and or different ideas. Also, and unintentionally, it insulates the leaders from learning the impact of their decisions. Finally, it sends message that the division is a closed system.
- Articulate race as inherently intersecting with class.
 - ❖ Develop various cost offsetting mechanism to encourage African American graduate students to join or participate in the division matters.
 - ❖ For example, create space for psychoanalysis and race.
 - ❖ Think outside the circle of clinicians to include other disciplines.
- Start to genuinely address the hazing culture within psychoanalytic circles.
 - ❖ There is a difference between rigor and being inhumane.
- Interrogate dialectical relationship between your demands for silence and an abusive culture.
- Violence is violence, you don't need to explain or analyze it, Just Act.

Empower the President Advisory Committee to:

- Articulate culture of engagement.
 - ❖ They should engage all levels membership for feedback and guide leadership or board on what it needs to work on.
 - ❖ Contribute to the rearticulation of the listserv.
- Foster a space of visibility.
 - ❖ Come up with customs and rituals that celebrate and connect new and veteran members.
 - ❖ Examine ways the listserv can contribute to such an endeavor.

• Strategic Involvement Recommendations

- Get involved in the APA committee of accreditation
- Get involved in the education directorate of the APA
- Division 39 needs to get involved in the core of the organized psychology trainings
- Beef up the scholar's program, consider doubling it.
- Take advantage of their energy. Scholars' program brings more vitality and youth.