2014 Convention Program Summaries

For those of you who either couldn't make it to the annual convention or attend every workshop we asked presenters to share summaries of their programs in the newsletter.

Thank you to those of you who allowed us to include these in our newsletter!

Exploring Psychological Privilege

Presenters: Joelle Ruby Ryan, Ph.D. (not in attendance) and Sean Moundas, Psy.D.

Summary: The concept of psychological privilege, or the freedom from chronic mental health challenges (i.e., depression, anxiety, and/or symptoms of psychosis), has been infrequently addressed within the fields of higher education and social justice. However, the experience of having a diagnosable mental health condition, which is often considered a disability, can have important effects for students, staff, and faculty's professional and personal identity development.

Within the field of social justice and education, the concept of privilege was historically viewed through the lens of race, ethnicity, and/or gender (McIntosh, 1988). Privilege was viewed as being granted specific, unique, and unearned advantages that are connected to a higher status socially or culturally (Lucal, 1996; McIntosh, 1988). According to these theorists, individuals with privilege were thought to be usually unaware of their advantages. However, by using their privileges, they would often be harming and/or excluding others without those advantages, particularly members of historically marginalized or oppressed groups.

The concept of privilege has more been recently expanded to include sanctions and entitlement that are given to a dominant group within a particular society (Black & Stone, 2005). The authors also expanded the concept in terms of content to include socioeconomic status, religious identity, age, sexuality and ability (Black & Stone, 2005) as potentially privileged or oppressed identities. There was also an increased focus on intersecting privileged and marginalized identities.

Phyllis May-Machunda (n.d.), a professor of American Multicultural Studies, specifically addressed privilege based on degree of ability and how the dominant systems of power often socially and financially oppressed people with disabilities. Though May-Machunda included how people could be oppressed based on emotional health challenges, her focus was on physical and developmental disabilities, not mental health challenges.

The concept of psychological privilege has been discussed within the context of developing business relationships across cultures (Thomas, 1996). The author postulated that those within the most powerful group were able to have experiences without a fear of being discriminated against or at least of feeling like "the other."

This session was also informed by the concept of minority stress, or the distress resulting from

membership in an oppressed, minority group (Meyer, 1995). Notably, literature in this field has repeatedly demonstrated the negative psychological effects of oppression on individuals with marginalized identities (Wong, Schrager, Holloway, Meyer & Kipke, 2014). Thus, oppression itself can lead to diminished psychological privilege and wellbeing.

The psychiatric survivors movement illuminated the existence and negative impact of psychological privilege. The terms, "sansim" and "mentalism" were often used to describe these experiences coined by Morton Birnbaum (Ingram, 2011) and Judi Chamberlin (1990) respectively.

Mentalism can manifest in many ways on college campuses. To illustrate, students with mental health challenges may feel the pressure, informally and institutionally, to "be social" with peers and face ostracism if they cannot or do not want to be engaged in this way consistently. On a more subtle microaggresisve level, students with mental health challenges may perceive stigma and therefore not want to disclose their challenges, even to trusted friends with psychological privilege who may want them to "just put on a happy face." Further, the lack of flexibility of schedules and course requirements, sometimes even when granted formal accommodations, can also pose scholastic challenges. Faculty and staff may experience parallel challenges in their workplaces on campus.

Nonetheless, there has been progress. At many universities, staff from Counseling Centers and other departments have continued to increase accessibility of services and awareness of the damaging impact of not only mental health symptoms but also mentalism. Further, the student-based advocacy group, Active Minds, present in over 400 college campus, continues to make strides in stigma reduction.

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