
Being the Only©

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*S*cenario: It's 4:30 p.m. and you step up to the table to register for your first laboratory training experience. You're running a little late. The registrar greets you pleasantly and gives you all the necessary program materials. As you enter the meeting room, you do a quick scan and notice there is no one who looks like you. You are curious about what this experience will be like. Should you be worried? Should you be concerned? You tell yourself to go with the flow. . . what will be will be. This is a professional experience, surely there will be someone to connect with. You find your way to an empty seat and introduce yourself to the person beside you. This could be a typical entering experience of an "only" into a lab.

So What?

You may be wondering what's the big deal? "So what" if a person attending a laboratory training finds they are the only member of their group in attendance? The "so what" is that being an "only" impacts the individual and the group. Who is present and who is missing have impacts on the lab experience. It's important to notice what is gained and what is missed when there is an "only" in a laboratory. Often this dynamic is not noticed, acknowledged or discussed.

Significance of Group Identity and Being an "Only"

Granted, much like falling snowflakes, pebbles on a beach or leaves on a tree, we are all different and unique individuals. Yet we are all also members of groups we identify with and are identified by, whether we think so or not.

In the group, a person may be an "only" around any group identity dimension. Pay attention to this dynamic in your laboratory experience and in any group in which you are involved.

The pattern for many in group settings is to ignore differences and to focus on similarities. Or if they notice difference, they tend to concentrate on the fact that we are all different in some way, e.g., personality, preference for using right or left hand, political affiliation, food preferences, etc.

In this laboratory experience, become aware of group identities. It is crucial to acknowledge that some group identities bring positive attributions and some bring negative attributions. Such acknowledgment makes for more valuable understanding and allows the possibility to build bridges across differences.

Dominant and Subordinate Group Identities

Dominant group members have the power, make the rules, and determine the values. The power dimension has major significance. The dominant group consciously and unconsciously maintains the political and economic conditions that benefit them and bring them privilege and power.

Subordinate group members have a different experience, i.e., following the rules, and adapting to dominant group values. Subordinate group members sometimes exhibit victim behaviors, put themselves down, withdraw, act aggressively, etc.

If you are an "only" subordinate group member in a laboratory experience you will probably expend a great deal of energy dealing with your experience. If you are an "only" dominant group member you will feel and sense something, but you will probably expend a lot less energy dealing with the experience.

The "Only"

A person may be the "only" in many ways. But being an "only" around certain group identities is particularly significant in a lab experience in the U.S. (Table 1).

Table 1. Dominant and Subordinate Groups.

| | Dominant | Subordinate |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Age | middle-aged | youth, elders |
| Gender | men | women |
| Race | White | People of Color |
| Nationality | North American Western European | Eastern European, African, Asian, Latin American |
| Ability | persons physically/mentally able | persons with physical/mental disabilities |
| Language | native English speakers | native speakers of other languages |
| Religion | Christians | Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindi, Agnostics, Atheists, etc. |
| Sexual Orientation | heterosexuals | gays, lesbians, bisexuals |

What the Only Person May Experience or Do

The only person may feel alone, isolated and unconnected to the group experience. He or she may separate from the group because they don't feel included. Pay attention to who greets the "only." Sometimes you'll see that the only person is not greeted by some members of the group. Or the only person may be found sitting by themselves. As the lab experience develops, notice if the only person's ideas, perspectives and opinions are listened to and heard.

Denial/Discounting/Minimizing Experiences

The "only" person's experience is often denied or minimized. When you hear statements like: "It's a level playing field, discrimination is a thing of the past," or, "Today, People of Color and women get more opportunities than white people or men," or, "The Holocaust didn't really happen," you're hearing the suggestion that subordinate group members' experiences are not credible or significant and do not need to be addressed.

Denial and discounting is also happening when a woman (subordinate group member) says "I get charged twice as much as the men I know for car repairs." And you hear a man (dominant group member) say, "Yes, but overcharging happens to men, too." Or a lesbian says "I am frustrated because I can't get health care benefits for my partner." And a heterosexual woman says, "Yes, but I've lived with my partner for five years and we can't get health care benefits either." Dominant group members who respond in this way refer to their individual experience and ignore the impact of group identity. Sometimes, subordinate group members will deny the significance of their experience themselves, e.g., "I've been a victim of discrimination, but it's no big deal."

Having to Prove Yourself

The "only" person may have to do some things (speak, explain, provide credentials, give examples, complete a job, think on their feet, present a concept, etc.) more or better than anyone else to be accorded respect. They are required to prove how smart and intelligent they are. Prove that they are as good as others. Prove that they can be "one of the boys." Prove that they can stack up to dominant group standards. This requires an enormous amount of energy.

Inappropriate Rescuing

Sometimes in the laboratory experience the only woman in the group will say something and a man will restate what the woman has said or explain the woman's thoughts or feelings. The "only" may experience other people speaking or interpreting for them.

Expected to Be Group Spokesperson

When members assume all members of an identity group look, think and feel alike, you'll hear statements like: "Joan, what do women feel about President Clinton naming Madeline Albright Secretary of State?" "Jack, why did black people celebrate the O.J. Simpson criminal trial verdict?" "Charles, what is the gay and lesbian opinion of the Supreme Court's denial of homosexual marriages?"

Dominant group members are seldom, if ever, asked to be spokespersons for their groups. How often have you heard?: "David, what do white people feel about the Jeffrey Dahmer verdict?" "Jim, why did some men celebrate the naming of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court?"

What Other Group Members May Experience or Do

Distancing. Other group members will often make contact with the "only" by revealing their fear. For example, going to the only person with a disability in a group and saying, "I'd really like to get to know you better; but I worry that I will say or do something offensive." Other scenarios: Being afraid to interact with gays or lesbians for fear of saying the wrong thing; avoiding an Asian person, because "I couldn't possibly know what to say to him"; or, "I don't understand what she says most of the time because her accent is so heavy, so I just don't talk to her."

Smothering/Cloying. Making the only different person your ultimate friend. Always being by their side. Clinging to every word they say. Becoming so close you suffocate the "only" person.

Inappropriate Rescuing. The only East Indian in the laboratory explains a theoretical concept to the group and another member feels it is necessary to say, "What Ashook is trying to say is. . . ." Jumping in to explain, taking care of or protecting an "only" in the group is inappropriate rescuing.

Denying the Significance of Difference. Most of us were raised to be color blind, gender blind and blind to all difference. We were even told it was impolite to notice difference. So we claim we don't notice difference and that we don't treat people differently based on their group identity. As children we were reprimanded for asking questions about people who were different. All differences are off limits--race, gender, disability, religion, etc. So the programming you'll hear in groups sounds like this: "You may be White and I may be Black, but we are really the same." "The difference doesn't matter." "We might be men and women, but we are all human beings and basically the same."

Anger About Alleged Special Treatment. With the move in our society to reverse Affirmative Action legislation, there is much concern about subordinate groups getting too much special treatment. In a group you'll most assuredly hear, "Most women, people of color, people with disabilities, gays, lesbians, etc., only got their jobs because of Affirmative Action and quotas." Also pay attention to your feelings about the amount of attention that an "only" gets in the lab. Are you thinking, "Why are we always working their issues?"

What the Only Person Can Do. Know that your experience is real for you. With all the denial, discounting and minimizing of your experience, don't give in. Know that your experience is real for you and for many others like you.

Acknowledge Your Feelings. It is inevitable when you lean into your "only" experience that feelings will emerge--frustration, anger, sadness, fear, discomfort. This lab is intended to be a safe place for you to talk about your feelings.

Speak Your Truth. Be authentic and genuine in your expression of yourself. Tell your story, and let the group know your experience of moving about in the world. Agreement is not important. What is key is giving others a sense of your experience.

What Members of the Group Can Do

Acknowledge Differences. One way to treat the "only" person with dignity and respect is to recognize that being different has a profound effect on everyone. Recognize, acknowledge and speak about differences. Notice when difference is denied and minimized and speak about it.

Own Your Group Identity(ies). This often takes lots of work and energy and may not feel good. Don't get upset when another group member notices your group identity, e.g., calls you a heterosexual male, a white woman, or a physically able person. Know that if you are a dominant group member you have access to privilege at some level. Know that you are advantaged in some way.

Legitimize Dialogue About Differences. Difference influences our lives every day, and we don't typically talk about it. Talk about differences and provide an opportunity to learn from each other. Listen to the "only" person. Hear their experience and understand their experience even though it may be different than yours. Accept it is real for them.

Talk With People Like You Rather Than Interrogate the Only Person.

Don't expect subordinate group members to teach you about your racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, etc. Talk with other dominant group members. Take responsibility for learning about your own privilege. Ask yourself, and others like you, questions about privilege and share your awareness about these issues.

Conclusion

Being an "only" person in a laboratory experience does not have to be a lonely, isolating experience. It can be wonderful and productive for the "only" individual and for the group. It does require acknowledgement, understanding and dialogue. Talking about differences makes them less scary. When people can talk openly in groups about differences, it can help make the experience safer and more welcoming for an "only." And, open dialogue also may bring the added benefit of fostering and forging relationships across differences.

Source: Cooke, Brazzel, Craig, Greig, eds. *Reading Book for Human Relations Training 8th Edition*. NTL Institute, 1999. ISBN 0-9610392-7-2.