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Submission No. 90. Original feedback decision – Accepted on the Condition of Revisions being Made. Revised Submission due April 1, 2019.

Session Title: Modeling Empathy through Role Play: A Classroom Exercise to Deconstruct the Privileged and the Other

Abstract: This classroom exercise has been designed, tested and modified among undergraduate students in organizational behavior and theory. The exercise is designed to have participants experience the challenges faced with relating to and empathizing with people from very different backgrounds and life experiences. It is designed to stimulate reflection and navigate through difficult conversations surrounding privilege and difference in the workplace. I provide clear theoretical background, objectives, role play scripts, discussion questions, reflection exercises, debriefing components, and instructor guidance.

Keywords: Privilege, Empathy, Role-playing

Full Paper:

Modeling Empathy through Role Play:

A Classroom Exercise to Deconstruct the Privileged and the Other

Introduction

Students are more likely to empathize with others who are dissimilar to themselves if they are given the opportunity to identify deeply with the experience of being the other. This classroom exercise is designed to encourage students to experience being a member of a minority group that is disadvantaged in the workplace, reflect upon the experience, and provide them tools

for enhancing empathy and inclusion in the future. Further, students are asked to design creative interventions and design effective solutions that foster empathy and promote inclusion.

Theoretical Foundation and Teaching Implications

The negative impact of microaggression experiences and other forms of subtle discrimination and excluding acts is well documented across disciplines (Holder, Jackson and Ponterotto, 2015; Offermann et al., 2014; Basford, Offermann and Behrend, 2014). When using this exercise in the classroom, it is recommended to assign foundational readings and/or have students view videos on microaggressions. Derald Wing Sue provides excellent introductory resources, including “Microaggressions in Everyday Life” book and YouTube videos (Sue, 2010).

This exercise enables the instructor to provide an experience for students to better understand the daily slights, transgressions and insults experienced by marginalized people. The exercise also serves as a catalyst for reflecting upon privilege, difference, social relations, and skill building with emotional and social intelligence and creative problem solving with regards to diversity and inclusion. Structured discussion questions can stimulate further conversations about resolving institutionalized sexism, racism, exclusion and bias in creative, productive and effective ways.

Learning Objectives

After engaging in this classroom exercise, students will have had the opportunity to experience the perspective of someone very different than their own perspective. Further, students will develop capacities for understanding privilege and relative lack of privilege, and empathy for persons who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and a minority group status.

This exercise would enhance course content on diversity and inclusion, as it provides an

opportunity to experience and reflect upon the relations between privilege and marginality, the privileged and the Other. After experiencing the exercise, reflecting upon the experience, and engaging in structured discussion sessions that focus on empathy and skill building when faced with persons of different backgrounds, students will be better equipped to be inclusive managers in the workplace.

Exercise Overview

This exercise is a role play of commonly experienced microaggressions in the workplace. The purpose is to get students to actively experience and address slights, biases and insults that are subtle and often unintentional, but further, to be able to prevent, address and manage these experiences as managers and leaders in their organizations in the future. In addition, students are given the opportunity to strategically implement solutions that further empathy and inclusion in small group settings.

Session Description

I will recruit volunteers in the audience to participate in the exercise. The exercise itself, including explanation and coordination should take 15 minutes. Each volunteer participant will be given an identity card. Small groups will include one participant who is marginalized, and the other members will be privileged. In Act I, the privileged will be prompted to act out a variety of microaggressions, including not giving eye contact to the marginalized person, talking over and interrupting the marginalized person, indirectly questioning the marginalized person's competency and right to be present. The marginalized will be prompted to act out what they think would be a normal response to this behavior, and to note their emotional, physical and psychological responses to the behavior.

After the role play, the volunteers will then be asked to share with the audience what their experiences felt like. The audience will be queried about what they observed and felt, why this behavior took place, and what can be done to address it in an effective manner. The participants, with advice and input from the audience if desired, will re-enact the scenario in Act 2. In this second rendition, at least one member of the team will intervene and effectively express empathy and turn the outcome such that the marginalized feels included and welcome. Then the participants will debrief the audience about why they selected the interventions they did, and how this models empathy and inclusion.

The remaining 15 minutes of the session will include a structured discussion and opportunity for the audience to provide feedback. The faculty facilitating will begin the conversation about the experience of privilege, and how to deconstruct the position of privilege and illuminate the experience of the Other in an organizational context. We will have a discussion about what organizations and their leaders and members can and should do to prevent these and similar incidences. I will engage the full audience by asking the following discussion questions:

- a. What perspectives require shifting in the workplace in order for organizations and their members to be more inclusive?
- b. How does standing in the shoes of others foster empathy, compassion and understanding of difference and privilege?
- c. What reflection questions, discussion questions, or modifications to the exercise would you recommend for enhancing the learning outcomes for participants?

References

Basford, T.E., Offermann, L.R. and Behrend, T.S., 2014. Do you see what I see? Perceptions of gender microaggressions in the workplace. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 38(3), pp.340-349.

Holder, Aisha, Margo A. Jackson, and Joseph G. Ponterotto. "Racial microaggression experiences and coping strategies of Black women in corporate leadership." *Qualitative Psychology*, no. 2 (2015): 164.

Offermann, Lynn R., Tessa E. Basford, Raluca Graebner, Salman Jaffer, Sumona Basu De Graaf, and Samuel E. Kaminsky. "See no evil: Color blindness and perceptions of subtle racial discrimination in the workplace." *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 20, no. 4 (2014): 499.

Sue, Derald Wing. *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. John Wiley & Sons, 2010.

Further Details - Submission ID: 90

Paper Track: Conference Theme Track

Proceedings: Yes, please place my PAPER in the conference proceedings should it be accepted.

Classroom: A Traditional Classroom

Course Level Design: Undergraduate Students

Time Requested: 30 Minutes

Resource Needs: none

Application to Theme: The exercise contributes directly to positive social change through classroom engagement, with the instructor utilizing the exercise enabled to be teaching agents

effecting positive social change in the form of improving empathy and understanding in the workplace.

Unique Contribution: This is original work, never presented and not under review.