

The Immediate Need For Emotional Justice

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Guest Post by Yolo Akili

Oppression is trauma. Every form of inequity has a traumatic impact on the psychology, emotionality and spirituality of the oppressed. The impact of oppressive trauma creates cultural and individual wounding. This wounding produces what many have called a "pain body", a psychic energy that is not tangible but can be sensed, that becomes an impediment to the individual and collective's ability to transform and negotiate their conditions.

Emotional justice is about working with this wounding. It is about inviting us into our feelings and our bodies, and finding ways to transform our collective and individual pains into power. Emotional justice requires that we find the feeling behind the theories. It calls on us to not just speak to why something is problematic, but to speak to the emotional texture of how it impacts us; how it hurts, or how it brings us joy or nourishment. Emotional Justice is very difficult for many activists, because historically most activist spaces have privileged the intellect and logic over feeling and intuition. This is directly connected to sexism and misogyny, because feeling and intuition are culturally and psychologically linked to the construct of "woman", a construct that we have all been taught to invalidate and silence. So by extension we invalidate and silence the parts that we link to "woman" in ourselves: our feelings, our intuition, and our irrationality.

This disdain leads to many things: a dismissal or minimization of our own and other's feelings, a fear of revealing oneself as "emotional" (instead of as sternly logical) and a culture of "just suck up your feelings" or shrug them off. All of these responses to our emotions have consequences that contribute to a range of emotional and spiritual stressors which impact our lives. In this article I am going to focus exclusively on the reasons I believe activist communities struggle with emotional justice and why the integration of our emotional selves into our activist work can't wait.

Reasons I believe activist communities struggle with emotional justice

1. Activist Organizations Are Often Over-capacity

Many grassroots organizations and non-profits operate with a small staff that is expected to complete herculean tasks. This expectation leads to fatigue, stress and emotional imbalance. Asking to add emotional justice discourse(s) to the workplace/organizing is seen as a waste of time when organizations are trying to survive and fulfill grant/monetary obligations with limited resources. Yet it is an emotional discourse that could offer many movements opportunities for self-evaluation, especially as it relates to perpetuating models of capitalist productivity that they are often seeking to end. Regular guided dialogues and retreats must become a priority and should be led by outside consult. They can help build connections, clarify the mission(s) and re-energize the collective.

2. Emotional Justice Has No Succinct Time Line

There simply is no timeline that can be put on someone else's healing. Within an emotional justice framework, someone is able to bring up their pain as they feel the need. Our patriarchal emotional discourses will push back against this, however, and will instead encourage us to deny, dismiss, and move on as quickly as possible from difficult emotions. Engaging emotional justice requires us to check this attitude within ourselves and develop ongoing strategies that allow us to express our concerns and feelings.

3. Emotions are Used as a Tool for those with Privilege to Avoid, Minimize or Escape Accountability

In an experience working with a group of queers on a racism project, a white identified cis gendered woman in the group would constantly break into tears whenever someone challenged her on the choices she was making that perpetuated racist themes. Her crying, which happened in several sessions, led to the entire group, especially the women of color, to comfort and assure her that she wasn't a "bad person."

Yet in the midst of attending to her emotional expressions, she continued to evade accountability and perpetuated the same dynamics. When she was challenged on her use of crying, she was able to come to an understanding that as a child, crying had been a tactic she had used within her family to avoid being held responsible. This awareness led her to participate in the space in a much more accountable manner.

Stories like these happen all the time. Unfortunately in most spaces there are not always individuals with the skills to compassionately address these kinds of emotional dynamics. This lack of skill prevents many from engaging in emotional justice for fear they will get lost in these issues. This is another reason seeking the support of healing justice/emotional justice educators is necessary.

4. Very Little Knowledge of the Emotional Body or Emotional Language

What is a feeling? What are the lessons they offer us? How can they invite us into ourselves? These are the questions that emotional justice guides us toward. Emotional justice can help many begin to work with their feelings in constructive ways that can help the movement as a whole.

An example: If someone asks many activists, what do you feel? The response may be something like, "I feel like we just need to hurry up and make this thing happen because they keep on trying. yadda yadda."

But that was not a feeling. That was a thought. A feeling is one word. The feeling for this statement could be: "I am anxious, or I am frustrated". Aiming directly for the feeling, as opposed to the thought around it, can help save time and address deeper issues. If feelings are continually confused as thoughts, then the intellectual debate process kicks in, and before you know it, we are battling for philosophical dominance instead of saying that we are hurt.

5. Lack of Self-Awareness into how our own unique Psychological Frameworks, Trauma and Social locations inform our Interpretation of Reality

Journeying into our own narratives and seeing how they inform our current understandings of others around us can be invaluable in times of challenge. There are many tools for this; one in which I find very effective is Psychological Astrology; as it invites us to explore, whether we believe in Astrology or not, what our motivations are, what we need to feel emotionally satisfied, the root of our personality conflicts with others, and how we express our aggression. This exploration can help us recognize an area of difference that is predicated on the ways in which we psychologically experience the world around us, a recognition that can help us understand and hear each other better in conflict situations.

6. Ideological Violence

"We were often poised and ready for attack, and not always in the most effective places. When we disagreed with one another, we were far more vicious to each other than the common originators of our problem. " -Audre Lorde

It is apparent from Audre Lorde's words that ideological violence was a big problem for her generation. Many years later it continues to be, as unproductive ego wars rage amidst our

movement spaces.

These ego wars (or as many of my friends say, "intellectual dick fights") are for many a part of the academic environmental training that encourages us to battle for philosophical dominance. While debate in itself is healthy and can be empowering, the challenge here is that this "training" is colored with patriarchy and a "power over others" construct. Tactics such as Interrupting, yelling, belittling each other, and personal attacks, are dynamics of patriarchal communication and must be seen as the acts of emotional violence that they are.* As this is acknowledged, steps must be taken to train and understand assertive communication and the myriad of cultural communication styles that allow us to express our hurt, rage and frustration in ways that minimize harm.

Emotional Justice is not anything new to our movements. It is already being enacted in many spaces and in organizations all across the country. My hope in writing this is that this work is expanded, illuminated and raised to a level of importance on par with our intellectual critiques.

It is my hope that we realize that just as we must construct new systems and institutions, we must also develop new ways of relating with each other and to our emotional selves. These models of relating will call on us to develop skills and to work with our feelings, our trauma and our pain. It calls on us to recognize that emotional justice is an immediate need, not only for our movements, but for the world at large.

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