

I have been thinking about you quite a bit in preparing for this day and for this academic year. I have been thinking about our collective work, and about our shared world.

I wanted to offer a few things *you* might think about as we start our work of learning, studying, writing, teaching and growing, all of us – together – under the big tent that is Organizational Psychology.

I made a list of what's been on my mind lately, some things going on in our shared world, and I want to offer a few thoughts with you about how those things relate to what we do and what we *can* do in Organizational Psychology.

Here's what's been on my mind this summer:

- ✓ North Korea's missile launches
- ✓ Fires in the Amazon rainforest
- ✓ Protests in Hong Kong
- ✓ The election of Boris Johnson, the new British Prime Minister
- ✓ That South Africa's cabinet is now 50% women for the first time ever, joining 10 other countries (only 10) with gender parity in their cabinets
- ✓ The numerous and crowded Democratic primary debates in the U.S.
- ✓ The 50th Anniversary of the Stonewall riots
- ✓ The continued unbearable mass shootings
- ✓ Trade wars
- ✓ Immigrants and immigrant families
- ✓ The experience of studying in America as an international student
- ✓ And, what does it mean to be an American in 2019?
- ✓ Facebook's 5 billion dollar fine and our pervasive lack of privacy
- ✓ Chicken sandwich wars
- ✓ Research from Temple University and the University of Nebraska Medical Center that showed scientists were able to cure HIV in mice
- ✓ Research from a University of Oregon study that suggested that a critical component in being a successful entrepreneur may be getting a good night's sleep
- ✓ And, surprise! It looks like vaping is dangerous for teens and maybe for everyone.
- ✓ Also, surprise! Pop singer, Shawn Mendes, IS, indeed, dating pop singer, Camila Cabello.

I left many things off this list, I know. Your list would be different, most certainly. But, each of these, in its own way, is related to our work in Organizational Psychology. (Except that Shawn Mendes thing; that's probably not.)

So, how can we, as organizational psychologists, learn to manage difference more effectively, constructively, justly and sustainably? How can we be sensitive to our constituencies while also opening up painful discourse? How can we collaborate on common goals across the most

seemingly intractable and fractious divides? The increasing interdependence, mobility, contact and consequences of modern society intensify these issues immeasurably. Technology, big data, artificial intelligence and social media are revolutionizing everything about work, relationships, social norms, the political processes, healthcare, the exponential growth of knowledge, the care or disrepair of our planet, the perception of truth and facts, how we access and consume music, visual entertainment and food, how we drive or are driven and on and on.

You, our students, are professionals from around the world in a variety of industries and organizations including for-profit, not-for-profit, government, NGOs, educational institutions, and officers in the United States military. Together we are millennials, members of generation X, the silent generation and baby boomers. We work directly with change leaders across all these contexts and populations and in doing so we, faculty, always hold a systems perspective. That is, we always consider multiple levels of analyses including the individual, the group, the organization, and the environment in understanding and tackling any problem. You, too, will learn to see organizations through this lens throughout your time in the program.

And a systems perspective has never been more relevant. Indeed, what is happening in the world is also, of course, happening with you, our students, in our classes and in all the organizations we touch. We are surrounded by as many examples of leaders acting badly and authority that is mistrusted and untrustworthy as we are of exemplary leadership and responsible authority. In response, we work to hold multiple viewpoints, to consider differing perspectives, to navigate complexity and to expect continuous change as the new steady state. We are committed to freedom of speech but we vehemently reject racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, homophobia and all forms of discrimination and oppression. That includes rejecting discrimination against those who hold differing political perspectives, differing worldviews, and opinions that may vary from the majority in the classroom or in the College.

I teach *Group Dynamics* and in my class students often say they want to learn better how to talk to people who hold “different values” than they do.

I get it, I do. Don’t we need to all learn how to do that better? When people have different ideas, backgrounds, perspectives, interests, experiences and values from our own, how do we talk to each other? How do we build a learning community together when we are so different? How, indeed?

I coach executives on this question all the time, reminding them that their team members may not share their same values and noting that we often unconsciously create environments that support our own values. That is, we mistakenly think that others are motivated and moved by the same things we are. So, the executive who highly values money might assume her team is equally motivated by a hefty bonus in their paycheck for a job well done. “I fight for my team to get the best compensation,” many an executive has told me, “What more could they want?”

Well, plenty, actually. No one is going to refuse a bonus, of course, but money isn’t always the single most motivating factor at work for some of us. Yet, that doesn’t mean we can’t work well together or learn from each other or collaborate or even enjoy each other. In fact, we might even each other out or complement each other. At work, executives are motivated to figure out how to

collaborate with those who have different values because it's good for business. Here at Teachers College, it's good for learning. In life, it's good for our shared future.

If, as the poet John Donne wrote, no man is an island, I think the same is true of humanity as a whole. We are interconnected in ways we've never been before, via trade, technology and travel, with our fates inextricably bound together. The great problems of our day—climate change, loose nuclear weapons, the democracy-endangering gap between the world's wealthiest and poorest peoples—can only be tackled collectively. There is no path to progress but forward, and our work in this program guides us daily as educators, learners, scholars and practitioners with multiple constituencies and differing perspectives to seek understanding and ways to bridge always complex, often fraught and seemingly incessant divides among us.

How can we as organizational psychologists learn to navigate our collective path forward?

As a program in Social-Organizational Psychology, we are a community that studies these issues and we are extremely well-positioned to work on them. We have knowledge, skills, frameworks and methods that enable us *specifically* to address these incredibly complex but critical issues of today's world.

- We are scientist-practitioners. Right here, right now, we are studying change leadership, stereotype threat, sexual harassment and ageism in the workplace, intractable conflict, covert processes in organizations, the interplay of race and gender in workplace processes, the effectiveness of diversity training, learning agility, assessment design, social networks, leading continuous change, and more.
- We are consulting to organizations both corporate and not for profit, across industries, around the world, using evidence-based practice, grounded in our and others' research.
- We are systems thinkers. We never limit our understanding to what we know about the individual, but always look to the group or team, to the organization, and to the systemic issues to give us critical information to do a rigorous analysis and craft relevant and workable solutions.
- And we are committed to social justice. So, as a program, we strive to engage in work that will effect positive change and contribute to the greater good.
- The inextricable link between science and practice; the consistent use of a systems framework; and a broad and deep commitment to working for a just world – these are our values, these are foundational to our work.

I came across an Albert Einstein quote recently that made me think of you, of us.

Albert Einstein said -- and I'm paraphrasing a tiny bit here:

“A hundred times every day I remind myself that my inner and outer life are based on the labors of others, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the same measure as I have received and am still receiving.”

Remember that *we* are the program in Social-Organizational Psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University. All of us. We are a community, part of a long prestigious legacy of Psychology at TC – building on the work of those who came before us and learning, teaching, growing and working together. We are living in a world that is extraordinarily complex, that can be relentless, that is, at times, horrifying, often exciting, sometimes rewarding, always compelling.

And, remember that we are living in a world that is in need of us – all of us – working on its issues, affecting positive change, contributing.

So my piece of advice to you – Try to bring your best self every day to our collective work.

Challenge and stretch yourself again and again even when it makes you feel uncomfortable. If you are an introvert, push yourself at times to speak up more often. If you are an extrovert, remember to listen more often than you speak. Work to be open to new views, perhaps especially when you are pretty sure those views are wrong. Catch yourself making quick judgments and instead, consider that what others are trying to express might be valid. Tolerate not knowing the answer. Risk learning something new in public, even while your classmates are watching. Model that for each other. Take responsibility for your choices and look to your own role in a situation before blaming others. Assume good intentions in your peers, your colleagues, your professors, and the institution of TC. We are good people here, and we are all trying to do the right thing even when it looks otherwise. When you are frustrated, start with compassion – for yourself and for those around you – and see if that doesn’t get you to a more productive place. Share yourself, have fun, let joy in, work hard, think deeply, hold on to each other. I will try to do the same. We will try to do the same.

If we make, and keep, this commitment to each other—to our community here—we can do meaningful work.

And, get a good night’s sleep.

Thank you.

--Sarah Brazaitis