

MA Orientation Remarks

September 3, 2020

I have been thinking about you quite a bit in preparing for this day. My staff and faculty colleagues and I have been excitedly anticipating your arrival and we are delighted for you to join our Social-Organizational Psychology community here at Columbia. We are eager to study, teach and learn with you. We are energized to innovate our organizational psychology pedagogy, both its content - to address today's most pressing problems in an environment of constant change - and its methods - to deliver excellent on-line instruction. We are truly thrilled to begin this academic year with you.

2020.

It's been a lot.

Covid-19.

Unrelenting racism in every aspect of our society and in the daily lives of brown and black people in our communities.

Attacks on our international students' right to study in this country.

Grief, fear, anger, confusion.

And yet, 2020 has also been a year of hope, silver linings and opportunities. Millions around the world have engaged in peaceful protest of injustice. 2020 reminded us of the countless servant leaders - essential workers - who work among us every day, including grocery clerks, respiratory therapists, delivery people, daycare workers, plumbers, hospital aides, and so many more. We have seen volunteer efforts across the country to help feed families with food insecurity, to provide

encouragement and support to our front-line workers, to sew masks and create PPE, to look after our most vulnerable.

We are not being affected by COVID-19 equally. There are deep fissures in our society and among us that render the most vulnerable even more exposed to the health and economic ravages of this virus. The poor, the old, immigrants, communities of color, the uninsured--these are just some who are disproportionately suffering. We can utilize our education and skills to work on solutions to these critical systemic issues made even more apparent by these overlapping pandemics of covid and racism. As organizational psychologists our mandate has never been clearer.

As organizational psychologists, we must continue to learn to manage difference more effectively, constructively, justly, and sustainably. We must remain sensitive to our constituencies while also opening up painful discourse to expose problems and craft solutions. We must work to 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 constantly 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 all need to 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, indeed in the very air we breathe together. The great problems of our day—global health crises, pervasive structural racism, 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, racism 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 affect 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.

A dear family friend of mine — a man named Greg Boyle, who created and runs Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, the largest gang intervention, rehabilitation and reentry program in the world — stated:

“The wrong idea has taken root in the world. And the idea is this: there just might be lives out there that matter less than other lives.” Greg went on to say, “There is no 'them' and 'us.' There is only us.”

Remember that *we* are the program in Social-Organizational Psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University. All of us. We belong to each other. We have a responsibility to each other. 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.

We are living in a world that is in need of us - all of us - working on its issues, affecting positive change, contributing.

So, as you embark on earning your master's degree with us, I offer this 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. Take good care of yourself and let that self-care give you the energy to take care of each other. 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.

Thank you.