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## PERSPECTIVE OPEN ACCESS

# ‘Pedagogical Perspectives to Ponder’: Engaging With Social Justice—An Integrative Pedagogy of Discomfort and Love in Psychotherapy

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The purpose of this perspective piece is to illuminate the urgency of focussing on pedagogical approaches that facilitate social justice and anti-discriminatory practice. We propose novel experiential activities for the classroom, which can then be applied to the diverse contexts and communities where trainees live.

**Aim:** The aim of this paper is to propose a pedagogical prime to be utilised by psychotherapeutic training educators, to help trainees to engage with the use of anti-discriminatory and socially just practices early in their academic training.

**Materials and Method:** A pedagogical prime of experiential learning activities for social justice and anti-discriminatory practice is proposed. Examples of engaging with an integrative pedagogy of discomfort and love in psychotherapy training are presented as a method for facilitating a depth of reflective practice.

**Results:** The process of engaging with this pedagogical prime has a powerful impact on self-awareness, reflective and reflexive practice. These facilitate the trainees’ personal and professional development, and integration of theory and practice. The pedagogical prime activities also serve to develop culturally informed, anti-oppressive and relational attributes as part of a firm commitment to social justice.

**Discussion:** Attainment of these attributes in social justice and anti-discriminatory practice enable trainees not only to develop into professional psychotherapeutic practitioners, but also into global citizens with an awareness of social justice. As educators, we have a responsibility to continue to work to decolonise the curriculum, starting at the grass-roots level with how we engage pedagogically with anti-discriminatory, socially just language in the classroom. As psychotherapeutic practitioners, we are also ethically required by law to engage in anti-discriminatory practices whilst serving diverse populations, yet we often lag behind in training approaches which aspire towards social justice.

**Conclusion:** This paper advocates for further research into the proposed pedagogic prime, utilising an integrated pedagogy of discomfort with a pedagogy of love. It also advocates for early lessons on language in psychotherapeutic and psychological training programmes, shifting the focus of social justice and anti-discriminatory practice to the forefront of trainees’ consciousness from the start of training.

The pedagogy of social justice in psychological therapies, while considerably well advanced in the United States of America,

has arguably spread more slowly and less fervently to other geographic regions across the globe that offer these higher

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## Summary

- Implications for practice
  - This perspective paper proposes a pedagogical prime to facilitate social justice and anti-discriminatory practice, developed through experiential training activities in the classroom throughout psychotherapeutic programmes.
  - This perspective paper proposes that utilising our pedagogical prime, and engaging with the use of anti-discriminatory and socially just practices early in a student's academic training, can have a powerful impact on their self-awareness, reflective and reflexive practice, academic writing, research lens, and developing culturally informed and relational attributes.
  - Attainment of these graduate attributes in social justice and anti-discriminatory practice enable students not only to develop into professional psychotherapeutic practitioners, but also into global citizens with an awareness of social justice.
- Implications for policy
  - This pedagogical prime can inform higher educational policies by continuing to decolonise the curriculum, teaching educators and trainees alike how to engage pedagogically with anti-discriminatory, socially just language in the classroom.
  - It also advocates for further research into the proposed pedagogical prime, utilising an integrated pedagogy of discomfort with a pedagogy of love, and providing early lessons on language in psychotherapeutic and psychological training programmes, shifting the focus of social justice and anti-discriminatory practice to the forefront of students' consciousness from the start of training.

educational training programmes (Rupani 2013). While psychological therapies have a long history of promoting social justice, they have made inadequate progress in actualising socially just outcomes, particularly in institutional practices, some of which remain inherently racist (Buchanan et al. 2021).

Experts in the field of psychological therapies and social justice have challenged us as a profession to urgently discuss, develop and deb of psychological theory and to champion anti-discriminatory practice (Charura and Lago 2021). As educators, we are also called to attend to and reflect upon our own personal and professional attitudes and behaviours in relation to individuals of all heritages, to enable active mitigation of discriminatory practices in the classroom and beyond (Charura and Lago 2021). Yet, if we are to embrace these challenges and effectively advance social justice alongside the students we teach, we must first consider if we possess the *language* to do so.

In this perspective paper, we aim to provide a pedagogical prime for engaging with social justice. We outline how we can contract safely with students, underpin ourselves pedagogically, formulate an ontology of self, critique our often Eurocentric epistemologies and harness the language and resources to be able to talk effectively together in our educational institutions about social justice. This paper also prompts the reader to consider whether

we, as practitioners and educators, hold or have the ability to harness the words, phraseology or depth of understanding of language that is congruent with social justice. We also ponder together whether we possess the skills to facilitate the development of an attitude of social justice, raising an awareness of its importance within learning contexts.

Firstly, we invite the reader to ponder with us our own positionality as *learners* (Plumb 2008). This active stance acknowledges that while we are dwelling alongside students in the classroom, we are also continuing our own learning journey as they share their own narratives and intersectional experiences of social injustices (Crenshaw 1989). As educators, we have an ethical duty to remain open to engaging reflectively and curiously with an ever evolving field, and its dynamic dictionary of current and colloquial terminology. Reflexively, as individuals, we must also enable ourselves through reflective practices (Gibbs 1988) to examine our own prejudices and presuppositions to be able to speak with an orientation of social justice based on our own worldview, understanding of other people and cultures, with an awareness of our often inherently colonised psychological 'truths' (Lago and Charura 2021; Phiri, Sajid, and Delanerolle 2023). We argue that dialogue concerning social justice is a foundational and necessary requirement for all psychotherapeutic training programmes, as we are committed to working with diverse populations, utilising anti-discriminatory language, with an awareness of the impact of culture, equality and diversity on our practice (Health and Care Professions Council [HCPC] 2023).

Colleges and universities emphasise the importance of building and fostering multi-cultural *competencies* in psychology and psychotherapy, with students of predominantly White institutions reportedly being highly motivated to learn about diversity and social justice for the purposes of education and personal growth (Hicks, de la Caridad Alvarez, and Rodriguez 2023; Littleford 2013). However, we would argue that instead of aspiring to *cultural competence* which is often mistakenly seen to be accomplished through the completion of a finite checklist associated with a singular course, we would propose an aspiration towards being *culturally informed*, being continuously socially and theoretically motivated to seek further knowledge in the advancement of social justice (Majid 2023).

There is also a clear ethical requirement for (dis)comfort in the classroom, creating spaces where students and educators alike are able to talk about race, social justice and anti-discriminatory practice openly and honestly. We, therefore, propose a pedagogical prime for further research, which is underpinned by an integrative pedagogy of discomfort, alongside a pedagogy of love, which we will now explore together.

Zembylas (2015) proposed the use of a 'Pedagogy of Discomfort' for social justice which combines an ethic of discomfort within a safe classroom. Zembylas (2015) suggested that using this pedagogy can enable us to collectively reflect and talk about topics of social justice which inherently incorporate ethical violence. While arguably it may be difficult for students and educators to fully grasp experiences of social injustice and ethical violence purely through the means of pedagogical exercises, even when they are discomforting or painful (Mintz 2013), discomfort and pain in social justice education may be unavoidable

(Zembylas 2015). Yet, alongside a pedagogy of discomfort (Zembylas 2015), we also integratively take inspiration from the work of Freire (1998), who claimed that education is an act of love (Darder 2017). Freire (1970) noted in his work on the 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (Freire 1970) that love becomes synonymous with dialogue and freedom because they depend on each other.

Therefore, by utilising an integrative pedagogical approach, it can encourage us as students and educators to engage in uncomfortable dialogues about social injustices (Hall, 2021). A pedagogy of discomfort integrated with love can enable us to tolerate the tension between the discomfort of holding potentially opposing values and lived experiences within the classroom, while being highly supported to share these experiences by utilising a parallel pedagogy which promotes a learning environment of love. This leads us on to reflect together about how we begin to have these dialogues concerning social justice in the classroom using an integrated pedagogy of discomfort and love.

In the sections that follow, we provide examples of our own lived experiences of working with a pedagogy of love and discomfort using the pedagogical prime in Table S1. While we have used our own examples in this instance, any of the following intersecting identities, that is, gender, race/culture/ethnicity, (dis)ability, age, class, religion/spirituality, sexual orientations (Moodley 2009) and neurodiversity could be used or interchanged. Alongside this, we value Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, which provides a metaphor for understanding the ways in which any of these multiple identities intersect and can sometimes compound themselves to create inequality, disadvantage or obstacles not often understood in conventional ways of thinking. For example, a middle aged man or woman may also be discriminated against due to their ethnicity and social class.

We invite the reader to follow along with our examples using the pedagogical prime in Table S1. We have introduced in this paper our pedagogical underpinning of discomfort and love, and following on from co-creating a class contract, we begin by clarifying our ontologies of self (values, beliefs, etc.). We believe that it is vitally important as educators and human beings to model the holding of discomfort, love and compassion for our own experiences which underpin our ontologies of self. We then move on to exploring critiques of epistemologies we use, reflect on language, consider resources and finally decide on actions that take the experience from the classroom into the world beyond.

Divine begins by introducing his own ontology of self, stating that he identifies as a Black British man from a large extended family of African heritage, who synthesises aspects of his values from both his Afrocentric and Eurocentric upbringing. These include respect for others, respect for diversity and the importance of interdependence. Having a dual heritage, and given his own experiences of discrimination, racism and oppression, as well as the intersectionality of privilege, he shares how these experiences shape his being-in-the-world.

Divine also identifies his own unconsciously informed prejudices and biases, and acknowledges where he contributes to the oppression and discrimination of others, for example, because of their gender, class or politics. Informed by African Ubuntu

philosophy, he acknowledges and names that the work of *be-ing-becoming* (Medlock and Charura 2024) as a person involves facing this pain and discomfort with himself, as well as working to continually grow and change when he causes pain in others (i.e., evoking ontological dynamism). Divine states that this process is not without discomfort, and that it also necessitates taking deep breaths and working through it with love.

Charlie describes herself as a White female of English heritage, who values her ancestral connections with Wales and Germany, and her traditional Christian values including love, respect and service for others. Charlie is philosophically grounded in 'I am because God is', acknowledging the importance of her spiritual aspects of self as part of her holistic bio-psycho-social-spiritual-existential conceptualisation (O'Brien and Charura 2023). In sharing her ontology of self, she sees herself as part of an interconnected human family made up of her immediate family unit, but also spiritually as the body of the church, people of the world and metaphysically connected to others as particles of matter in the universe, which lends itself to an integrated philosophical conceptualisation of the collective unconscious (Jung 1943, 1966), universal humanism (Maslow 2013; Rogers 1951, 1961). She believes that each individual deserves to be loved, valued, respected and to belong and to have the right to access the existential givens (Yalom 1980). This also aligns strongly with a pedagogy of love. Her pain resides immersively in her intersectional experiences of discrimination due to her female gender and oppression from experiences of systemic power and patriarchy.

While considering our own pain as practitioners, it is also important to consider where we cause pain and oppress others. This is particularly in alignment with the use of a pedagogy of discomfort where we must embrace and model our own discomfort and vulnerabilities while we facilitate others' processes in doing the same within teaching and learning contexts. With this in mind, Charlie acknowledges her own discomfort and self-awareness of moments of pain caused by her failure to fully see another human being and all their intersectional parts of self. This includes, for example, the use of stigmatising labels, such as young offender, or pre-judgement of others due to her own experiences of discrimination.

By offering these ontological positionings of our selves and modelling authenticity, vulnerability, humanity and the importance of having compassion for others, this mirrors to trainees the capacity to hold both a pedagogy of discomfort and love. We have learned that when this is done in a space where trainees feel safe (e.g., via group contracting) and are offered a place for their own narratives and experiences of pain, shame and wounding traumas to be spoken and felt, then the learning space becomes the vessel from which personal awareness, transformation and commitment for social justice emerges. It also facilitates a process of alchemy by which we can then transform any poison in the venom of our lived experiences with an antidote of love, being seen, heard and validated as a person of worth. This is part of a trauma-informed process using the narrative of *what has happened to you*, rather than *what is wrong with you*. We have learnt through our practice that when we have engaged in this process, and trainees are invited to do the same, that the group then often grasps and grapples with the tensions they hold within and between themselves.



Building on this, we then encourage trainees in an exploration of the critiques of epistemologies that we use. For example, we engage with Critical Race Theory (Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Stefancic and Delgado 2012) and Black Psychology (Fanon 1952; Moodley and Lee 2020) perspectives to critique Eurocentric models of therapy. These invite and value counternarratives from those who are marginalised or whose ontologies and ways of being are not Euro/Ameri-centric. We also draw on feminist philosophical and theoretical perspectives as we value their strength in challenging patriarchal discourses, seeking to equalise power with others using an I-thou or power-with stance (Buber 1958; Proctor 2021), and also invite trainees to discuss their own epistemologies.

By engaging with trainees and colleagues, we both acknowledge how human language not only influences how we organise and categorise our thoughts, but also influences our communication, social relationships, behaviour and understanding of constructs of self and others across different cultural and ideological groups (Jackson et al. 2021). We must recognise that socially just language is not only shaped by the world *out there*, but also *in here*, in our own research, clinical practice and teaching in higher education (Hudley and Flores 2022). It is therefore vital that we acknowledge and use language in a way that actualises and values an ethic of appreciation for human difference, and utilises anti-discriminatory language as a way of optimally meeting the goals of a socially just profession (Hansen 2008).

Maulucci and Davis (2022) note that teachers must grapple with issues of their own identity when seeking to enact pedagogies of social justice, recognising the personal nature of this work, while engaging their students on a journey of becoming social justice-orientated practitioners. We, therefore, propose using the pedagogical prime (Table S1) to improve the teaching of foundational lessons on anti-discriminatory and socially just language across all psychological therapy programmes, shifting the focus of social justice to the forefront of student consciousness from the very start of training. For example, we may start in the first semester of the first year of training with an exercise exploring what terms I prefer to use when I talk about myself, and which terms I find offensive and why. By sharing these as a group, we can begin to assert the importance of the use of terms, or the impact of derogatory labels, and how individuals can feel empowered by using their language of choice, which is also vital in the therapy room. We also encourage this to feed-forward into research where we have often modelled a section in our research papers on use of language, using a clarification or critique of terms (see, for example, Charura and Smith 2024). This is also a good example of action and taking our learnings out from the classroom and educational spaces into the world.

Given the inequitable distribution of resources relating to social justice when compared to other subjects within the psychotherapy or psychological curriculums, exploring how to improve communication and resources to advance social justice and anti-discriminatory practice is important. Following on from the examples that we have given in this paper, we have often drawn on research articles, books, films, creative arts, poems and various different mediums which are often freely available. We have invited learners to engage, for example, with Yancy's (2015) letter, where he describes the use of an urgency of love to explore the pain that sexism and racism cause, and which are endemic in

our societies (Denyer et al. 2022; Yancy 2015), using this as a reflective exercise in our teaching. We have also taken value in taking trainees to diverse immersive spaces (both free and paid), such as museums, to reflect on their own identities, privilege and historical and present oppression of others over time, of which we are all a part.

All of these steps in our pedagogical prime facilitate necessary anti-discriminatory and social justice orientated commitments and action. This is not only within learning spaces but also in communities and societies at large, thereby having a psychotherapy curriculum that contributes to graduates with social justice, trauma informed and social justice agendas as global citizens moving out into the world.

We have proposed these pedagogical perspectives as a stimulus for further thinking, practice and research to advance social justice and anti-discriminatory practice.

We also recommend the following:

1. Research into the efficacy of the use of an integrative pedagogy of discomfort and love in the advancement of social justice.
2. Creation of a social justice outcome measure, performed before and after the pedagogic prime to analyse its impact and success.
3. Assessing the social justice impact, if any, on the educational institution or local community employing this pedagogic prime.
4. Engaging in an iterative process within education and as educators that acknowledges the importance of holding discomfort from a position that is trauma informed, relational, dialogic, fostering safety, respect and love.

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#### Ethics Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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