

OPINION

I'm a recovering anti-racist educator. Here's what I've learned since leaving the activist space**SHAKIL CHOUDHURY**

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Anti-racism demonstrators reflect anger at the police killings of black people, in Toronto on June 5, 2020.

NATHAN DENETTE/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Shakil Choudhury is the co-founder of Anima Leadership and author of the new book Deep Diversity: A Compassionate, Scientific Approach to Achieving Racial Justice.

Right after 9/11, almost exactly 20 years ago, I burned out and walked away from community activism – not because of the terrorist attacks themselves, but rather because of being emotionally disconnected from myself as well as the nature of the work I had undertaken as an anti-racist educator.

I recall a specific situation that unmoored me. In a community meeting, I watched a group of my activist peers squabble and snipe at one another as they tried to decide how to respond to this immense tragedy. People competed to influence the room with their various world views: anti-war, anti-racism, anti-globalization, anti-poverty, union, direct-action and feminist perspectives. The environment was very ideological, sharply divided and terribly unfriendly – which was surprising,

considering that these people were supposed to be working toward a socially just world.

I remember anger and frustration boiling over inside me, and I remember that instead of engaging the room, I began to emotionally detach. This detachment also spread to my personal life; many of my relationships frayed, as I became unable to meet my obligations to those I loved. I grew to feel resentful about giving so much of my time to the outside world and began to question what I was doing and why. I was worn out, and walked away.

As someone who's worked as a racial justice educator for more than 25 years, I've had a front-row seat to the progress in my field and the struggles we continue to face. And after a great deal of personal healing, I did eventually re-enter racial justice work with new tools and perspectives including psychology, neuroscience, conflict mediation, organizational change and trauma therapy – and a clearer understanding of how to do this work better.

We are in a unique moment today, as the concept of “systemic racism” is finally being discussed on a mainstream level. We enjoy the fruits of the civil rights era, with overt racism rendered unacceptable in society. But we need to have a public conversation about how to effectively *teach* – not just talk – about systemic forms of racism, as the lives and well-being of millions of people are on the line, not to mention the mental health of justice educators themselves. The ideological rigidity that's too often present in progressive communities shapes the ways we train activists; it doesn't have to be this way, if we make space for human emotions.

We also have to go deeper to tackle the systemic forms of racism, which are more subtle yet ubiquitous in all sectors of society. With overt racism, it's obvious who we have to confront: the racists. But challenging the *system* of racism is much more complex because it's not easy to find bigots spouting overt racial slurs inside organizations – such “bad apples” are rare today.

Systemic discrimination isn't intuitive unless you experience it directly, and only becomes widely visible through data analysis. Various studies show that résumés submitted with white-sounding names such as John or Jessica can have a higher chance of a callback for interviews than those with names like Jamal or Jagdeep. We may not even be aware we are acting with this bias, something any of us can be implicated in regardless of skin colour or identity.

To address such racist patterns, we have to confront ourselves. This is tricky because self-interrogation makes many of us feel defensive, angry or ashamed. My experience and research demonstrates that *emotions* are critical to facing the racial equity puzzle. Yet, as a society, we don't do emotions well – nor do academics, the de facto leaders of social justice work.

In a social justice setting, leadership tends to come from history and sociology professors with non-traditional, or “critical” perspectives.

Understanding such viewpoints matters, as it helps us integrate perspectives of marginalized groups and uncover hidden racial patterns. If you don't know the violent history of residential schools, then understanding the importance of reconciliation with Indigenous communities may be hard to grasp. Sociological research has helped illuminate institutional racial patterns such as the

underservicing of Black and Indigenous peoples in health care and the over-policing of these same communities. This knowledge can both relieve and empower marginalized communities, as it makes clear there's something wrong with the system, not us.

An intellectually driven historical-sociological lens, then, fortifies social justice work – but it can also be its weakness. It forces people to stare unblinkingly into the endless abyss of social inequities and tragedies, which can make people feel overwhelmed and despairing – emotions that can lead to turning away or burning out, since most activist or academic spaces provide little space for processing.

It's not hopeless, however. Rather than throwing the baby out with the bath water, the answer is to integrate emotional literacy within traditional approaches to social justice.

I've seen promising results when we give more space for emotions and compassion in a process that values relationship-building; in these situations, both racialized and white people benefit because learning, not perfection, is the goal. Recently, a workshop participant shared that they often felt emotionally off-balance as the only racialized person in rooms full of white people, affecting their ability to speak or ask questions. A white person followed up with how they were often silent during conversations about race because they felt incompetent and anxious about making mistakes. My colleague pointed out that such vulnerability is an indicator these two were engaged in a conversation about racism and its effects, rather than blaming, getting defensive or shutting down. Our data shows that such processes increase buy-in and accountability, with more ability to talk about complex issues related to social power and racial privilege. And tough issues honestly faced are more likely to be fixed.

Recently, I watched a group of activists organizing against neo-Nazis marching through their city. As they organized, they bickered and criticized each other in a manner that made me wonder if they were clear who they were fighting with. Trying to exclusively *think* our way through social change keeps our hackles high, ready to unleash our emotions on any perceived slight or misstep; it clouds our ability to distinguish ally from antagonist.

I have the benefit of understanding that more clearly now. And real progress can be made if we recognize that emotions aren't an impediment to advancing the work of racial justice. Emotions *are* the work.

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