

OTSD: Ongoing Traumatic Stress Disorder
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OTSD: Ongoing Traumatic Stress Disorder
- a diagnosis for what ails us and keeps us apart

I began this essay as a response to a Facebook friend's post about feeling overwhelmed by all she has to struggle with and fear on a daily basis. She is a prominent disability activist who exists within the interstices of several categories of oppression: as a woman, as a lesbian, as disabled, as poor, as black (with no particular order of significance implied). For such activists it is easy to feel extraordinarily depressed about how much still needs to be done, and how little effect our efforts seem to have had in the present.

Because I specialize in helping graduate students and faculty who are marginalized by our society by virtue of one or another (or many) classes of oppression, I developed my Facebook note into a longer essay, expanding it to address a larger audience, in hopes that it can reach and comfort many others with the same struggles.

I have been thinking a lot lately about what it means to have OTSD – Ongoing Traumatic Stress Disorder – a label that came to me as I was writing my post supporting my friend (and later found has been used by others). This is not and probably will never be entered into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual – the psychiatry/psychology profession's bible, because the concept violates the fundamental framework that grounds

their understanding of their practice...that is, that people's emotional and psychological problems are based on the individual's processing of the conditions of their lives, separate from those of anyone else who experiences the same conditions.

Here's an example from my own experience:

I am doing EMDR therapy for PTSD symptoms. It's supposed to be about re-processing feelings, such as powerlessness and fear, into positive ones, where you feel safe and in charge. I get stumped at that. I am supposed to imagine being in a safe place, with a guide who will protect me. But how do you imagine a safe place if you have no idea what it feels like to feel safe? What if you have *never ever EVER* felt safe? And how do you imagine a guide you can trust when your experience has been that the people charged with caring for you are the very ones who hurt you the most? And what if you understand that your own experiences represent the experiences of millions of others, because it isn't about individuals, but systems?

And this is me, white person. Oppressed and subjugated as an invisibly disabled aging woman and non-neurotypical person (ADHD) who has experienced deep trauma, but without the extra burdens of being LGBTQ and black. (There are many other categories that can be piled upon those, increasing the feelings of oppression exponentially.) I've been coming to terms with the fact that this program isn't designed for people who have been harmed by *the system* as well as by individuals. No matter what we do to struggle against our individual demons from the past, there is next to nothing we can do about the systemic harm experienced every single day. We can imagine pretend safe places and a pretend guide, maybe. But the reality is, there *is no place* where we are, in fact, safe.

All the psych stuff designed to purportedly help us focuses on individuals rather than on systems. It all boils down to one fundamental question: what if there is no “post” in PTSD? What if the trauma is ongoing, even if the individual, immediate cause is in the past?

How do we deal with OTSD - ONGOING Traumatic Stress Disorder?

There is no place in the DSM for such a diagnosis, because psychology is always aimed at the individual and doesn't recognize the trauma caused by ongoing systemic trauma. As I told my friend, there's a really good reason it is imperative that you *not* just “go away and die” – if you give up, the system wins and claims one more rebellious life, and the rest of us who are struggling will miss you. Your life has enormous value, first, intrinsically, and second, because of all the work you do, even though the system refuses to acknowledge it.

I have begun to identify what I see as the common emotional threads among all forms of oppression, whether at the individual or systemic level, for whatever reason. The concepts I delineate here owe much to the students/scholars with whom I have worked so far. I have come to understand these common elements through reflecting upon their scholarship and our conversations. I could not be writing this without them, for I also was a clueless white person (and no doubt am still – just not so much!). I own the fact that I have perpetrated much of what I write about here as oppressive.

SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION in OTSD:

Systemic oppression includes (but is not limited to) being a woman, a person of color, a disabled person, poor, elderly, a gender queer or gender fluid person; being a non-neurotypical person; being a person whose ethnicity contrasts too much with the

dominant culture...etc. (please remind me of anything I have left out). Just to be clear, anyone may fit under one or many of these categories enjoying privilege or suffering from lack thereof depending upon our relationship to the dominant culture. For example, even being male can be oppressive when you do not measure up to the stereotyped requirements for masculinity. Some of those requirements cannot be met because of other categories, such as being physically or cognitively disabled. Nonetheless, such a person STILL has the privilege that generally accrues to the cisgender male identified body, just as an able-bodied middle class cisgender white woman is marginalized by gender, but very definitely otherwise enjoying the privileges of being a member of the dominant culture.

Thus, I may experience oppression as an aging non-neurotypical, invisibly disabled woman, but I still have the privilege of being white, cisgender, and heterosexual. That position can and *has* made a HUGE difference my power to persuade others to accept my description of things as they are for people of color...an acceptance not accessible by a person of color because of the deeply ingrained assumption that people of color do not have the authority to speak about their own experiences without having them discounted – whether openly or covertly. Of course, the accuracy of my description of “things as they are” for people of color depends on how well I have listened and put my own ego aside in the process.

INDIVIDUAL OPPRESSION in OTSD:

On the individual level, ongoing trauma can be the experience of having your family members and friends constantly mis-framing who you are based upon lies or false frameworks that have been used in the past. Example: an ADHD person being judged as

morally, inherently flawed, with the framework being things like: “you could get organized if you wanted to; you just don’t want to, and that is your fatal flaw.” Or a person who is in the midst of a panic attack due to PTSD being judged as “crazy” and “dwelling in the past.” Or a person with depression being defined as “lazy” (so many other adjectives could be applied, but I will leave those details for an expansion of this essay). There are so many ways that we are judged by the people who are supposed to love us because they have no idea what we are, in fact, dealing with.

The point is that, with individual oppression, you can do your damndest to try to get your friends and family to understand you, but chances are you won’t be able to get them to let go of the original lens through which they judge who you are. Indeed, chances are they will interpret your efforts to inform them of their errors as being yet more examples of your inherent moral and personal failings (narcissism being one of the biggest).

Through understanding what individual oppression is about, we can perhaps begin to understand what systemic oppression is about. As women, of course, we all experience systemic oppression, but differently – and more intensely – depending upon other loci of oppression we may encounter.

Common threads: invisibility and fear

So far I have identified two major common threads among various kinds of systemic and individual oppression:

Invisibility – **that is**, being seen by others who have a framework for interpreting everything I do that bears no relationship to who you actually are. *This can be extraordinarily frustrating*, whether you are dealing with it on an individual or on a

systemic level, because no matter what you do, it probably won't change the framework for others' interpretations of who you are. This is true whether it is the system that is denying your reality, or just the people who know you and/or encounter you in some arena of life (such as, for instance, applying for a job or housing, or in a doctor's office, etc.).

People of color must constantly deal with misrepresentations and misinterpretations of who they are based on conscious or unconscious, unacknowledged stereotypes. (If any white person tries to say that they don't instantly – if only momentarily – cringe with fear at the sight of large groups of black men, chances are 99.99999% they are lying, with the .000001% being people who have lived at length as a white minority among black people...and even *then* their statement on it is questionable. I know because I spent 20 years as a white minority in black neighborhoods in Rochester, NY, and I *still* feel those twinges of fear that I have to talk myself out of.) Furthermore, people of color when in groups of whites always engage in a painful internal dialogue, worrying about whether a person they encounter will interpret them from within the frame of, for example, "The Angry Black Woman/Man." And that internal dialogue often prevents the person from speaking their truth – which means, of course, that the oppressors won't ever see the depths of what it feels like to be black in white America.

It is also extraordinarily lonely, because when few if any people can see you as you really are, you cannot feel connected to a community. You feel, always, like a complete outsider, and you seek groups of people like you in order to have a safe community to turn to for respite. You know that certain inherent characteristics you have will always put you *on the margins of the dominant culture*, as well as on the margins

of smaller communities. For example, despite my education and artistic talents (both visual and verbal), I am low-income due to my disabilities. When I am in groups of other artistic types, I remain on the margins because of my income. It is not something readily visible (thank goddess), but in many ways that can make it even more painful, for instance, when the group is involved in a project that requires money that you do not have. THEN you either have to make your situation visible, or opt out of the group activity. Either choice is painful.

Similarly a woman of color involved with a group of feminists will feel painfully marginalized when the mostly white group fails to incorporate the differences of experience inherent in being a member of a group that is oppressed in ways that the dominant group has no idea about. That group becomes a social space where it is not safe to simply be who you are, because you will always be interpreted from within a framework that either misunderstands you, or cannot even SEE you.

WARNING to all white people: saying “I don’t see color” does not, in fact, give you bona fides as someone who is not racist. In fact, such a statement at base is profoundly racist, because you are saying that people of color are invisible to you. Of course you will say “but that’s not what I meant!” The thing is, **whatever you meant is irrelevant.** When you think that what your intentions are what matters, you are saying that your intentions matter more than what the other person is *feeling*. And by doing that, you discount the person, the person’s feelings, and experiences you know absolutely nothing about, rendering them invisible.

“Unconscious” racism is often deeply embedded in the statements white people use to prove they aren’t racists. And one of the #1 ways unconscious racism rears its ugly

head is when you discount what the aggrieved person is saying, and/or you put your own aggrievement (e.g., being mis-recognized, according you your understanding, as a racist) ahead of the aggrievement of being a member of a group that is systemically oppressed and exploited. That is, your individual pain merits assuagement, whereas the experience of systemic pain repeated over and over and over and over...a thousand tiny pricks of a pin felt daily...is simply not as important as your desire not to be seen as a racist.

White people have a tendency (like all members of dominant groups) to insist on placing themselves in the center of attention. (Men are perfect examples!) The best illustration of this has been the “all lives matter” response to #blacklivesmatter – which serves to SILENCE (render invisible) the voices of people who know from direct experience that, in fact, the system does not value their lives at all. And therein lies their own *choice* to oppress marginalized people. In fact, “all lives matter” as a response to #blacklivesmatter is inherently racist because it renders the lives of black people *invisible*. And, as I’ve noted above, the sense of being invisible is one of the main experiences that all marginalized peoples share.

Ironically, at the same time, people of color experience being constantly under surveillance – a phenomenon inherent in being a member of a group the dominant culture fears, and fears irrationally. Example: a black person in a retail environment will be under constant surveillance, not only by cameras and security guards, but by individual employees, and even other customers. Acts that would be seen as perfectly innocent when performed by a white person become instantly suspicious when performed by a black person. One of the most horrifying examples of that surveillance and misreading of innocent acts is the case of John Howard, who was shot to death by cops in

a WalMart store because he was holding a bb gun he was considering purchasing. Even worse, the cops who killed him have been exonerated of all charges – because the criminal justice system at every level believes it is reasonable to fear any black man to the point of being willing to shoot him on sight.

Regardless of whatever other marginalized positions I and other white people may occupy, this surveillance and instant suspicion of criminality is not an everyday experience for us. The only position that even comes close to being surveilled and interpreted as dangerous is that of someone who has a mental and/or physical disorder that makes us appear to be dangerous, when we are not; and even if we might be dangerous, the standard approach to subduing a “suspect” – that is, instant violence against us when we don’t immediately comply with orders – is entirely unnecessary and most likely to end in tragedy that didn’t need to happen. A person who is mentally ill needs to be approached differently, and *can* be talked out of whatever violence we might be threatening. (I use “we” here, even though I have never experienced this, because I *have* experienced being misread by others as the result of moments of irrational behavior due to mental illness.)

Women are also constantly under surveillance, but in a different way and with a different purpose. The primary purpose served by the surveillance of women (what they wear, what they look like, whether they behave according to cultural norms, particularly those involving sexuality (the Madonna/whore syndrome), how they occupy geographic space (example, going to bars or parties where alcohol is served without male accompaniment; how they occupy positions of authority in business, education, government, etc. – e.g., whether they are sufficiently deferential to men; but most

particularly, whether they place themselves in locations where it is assumed they willingly take the risk of being raped, and where a rapist can count on a jury deciding she was “asking for it.”)

The second common element I have noticed is the sense of physical and emotional insecurity – that is, being constantly under threat of harm, not only by people who are deemed criminals in our society, but also by people who are supposed to care for and protect you, and/or claim to be your friend or colleague. Again, an example of this is the above discussion of the ways law enforcement, upon being sent to deal with an emotionally disturbed person, ends up *killing* that person they were supposed to be there to help!

But there are other, less obvious and less life-threatening conditions that also engender the sense of physical and emotional insecurity, such as those described above in reference to the internal dialogues that marginalized people go through when they encounter people who are members of the dominant culture, constantly worrying about whether their actions and/or words will be interpreted from within the false frameworks of racial stereotypes – stereotypes that the holders refuse to acknowledge and become defensive about when they are pointed out.

These situations almost inevitably involve reinforcements of those thousand tiny pricks of a pin felt daily. As a result, the marginalized person feels a deep emotional insecurity being around those who belong to the dominant culture. They may not fear physical violence, but they fear emotional violence – and it is this fear of emotional violence that prompts marginalized peoples to create their own, temporarily safe conditions when they form alliances with people who have the same experiences in

common. There is far less chance that their words and actions will be misread under false frameworks, because everyone in the alliances has experience with being misread, with the result being deep emotional pain.

Both of these elements of oppression I have identified: feeling/being *invisible* (and simultaneously overly surveilled) and being in a constant state of *fear* are intertwined and reinforce each other. Others who have not experienced oppression in the same way as we have judge our feelings of physical and emotional insecurity as being “over the top,” as exaggerations having little to nothing to deal with reality. There is no greater evidence of this than in the white response to #blacklivesmatter – the movement that began as a way of bringing awareness to excessive police violence against black people and is now branching out into discussing other ways that the dominant culture devalues the lives of people of color.

The denial by the dominant culture that a problem exists, or that it is as “big of a deal” as activists are saying, contributes to feelings of invisibility, which in turn contributes to fear, with the two endlessly feeding on each other until they reach such grand proportions that it seems that there is no way out.

Is there a way out? I have some modest suggestions for a beginning (which are, actually, concepts that all activists pretty much already know, but bear repeating...again and again and again and again).

In the recordings my EMDR therapist has given to me there is a set of affirmations. As I was writing to my friend I realized why I have found them so irritating and have avoided listening to them: not one of them offers the affirmations that soldiers in the war against systemic oppression need to hear. So, as a small beginning (or

reiteration): *What if we create a set of affirmations that address what pains us so?* For instance:

“I know that the road to justice is long and dark and full of pain and horror, but the light that is in me will survive in the people I help.”

“I know there is no truly safe space in this world for me, but I can still find moments of temporary safety with friends and loved ones who understand and care.”

“I know there are horrible, terrifying things that could happen to me just outside my door, or even inside, because my home can be invaded by predators and by police. But with the love and support of my friends and loved ones, I can be courageous and keep on struggling against the darkness.”

“I know that I am strong and courageous, but sometimes I get tired of fighting so long and so hard. Sometimes I need a respite, a space where I can feel safe temporarily and just be a regular human being who can find pleasure in small things. It is ok if I need to take myself out of the arena so I can recover my strength and my courage with the help of friends and loved ones.”

“I know I am not SuperWoman and I can make only the tiniest dent in the system we are up against, but those of us who struggle together and pass our strength and courage on to the next generation will eventually prevail, even if it is long after my death. For them I will keep struggling, and for them I will take care of myself so I can keep on struggling.”

I encourage people to add more to these in the comments.

What has become ever so clear to me is that not one of us can stay alive (physically or emotionally) without the support of others who either share our oppressions, or who have the imagination to come to grips with what we might be feeling.

What has helped me to grasp what my clients have been saying, both in their scholarship and in conversations, is that I have an entree to experiences I have not had myself by relating them to the ways in which I have been oppressed both as an individual (the mis-readings of me within my family) and as a person caught up in systemic oppression as an aging, disabled woman, most particularly in reference to the medical profession, but also in reference to being misread by an academic system that refuses to recognize the ways in which it systematically marginalizes and oppresses people whom their dominant paradigms render either invisible or illegitimate.

I have much to say about my experiences with both academia and medicine, but I will leave those for later. Suffice it to say that analyzing my own experiences has enabled me to grasp what people who are marginalized in difference ways are saying about their own experiences and struggles.

The mantra of the second wave of feminism (I believe we are on our third or fourth by now) was *“the personal is the political.”* And it still holds true. The problem with white feminism, however, has been its discounting the different forms and experiences of oppression that people who have been marginalized in ways other than being in that category “woman.”

I want to urge my sister white feminists to take those experiences of being invisible and of being physically and emotionally unsafe, keeping them in mind when our sisters of color, disabled sisters, LGBTQ sisters, aging sisters, non-neurotypical sisters,

ethnically marginalized sisters (please add anything I have left out...the list is long and my memory is poor!) try to speak to us about their own oppression, and the ways in which we oppress *them*, consciously or unconsciously. Allow them to be visible, defining who they are in their own terms. Listen to what they say about what it is like being around us – without getting defensive and giving in to the urge to demand attention to our own feelings of being misread.

Because we know, as women, what it is like to be misread, to be subjected to stereotypes, conscious or unconscious. We know what it is like to be told, in a patronizing tone “... yes, *so you say*; I’m not yet convinced of the validity of your descriptions of your experiences...*let me tell you how *I* see you, how *I* feel *YOU* are misreading ME*...and oh, by the way, would it be too much to ask you for some coffee? Or is that out of the question because your feminism won’t allow you to do it (‘bitch’ being whispered *sub voce*).”

Yes. That is EXACTLY how we sound to women of color. We assert our own reality, our own interpretations of what we are being told, reiterating our own puffed up versions of our goodness, because “we can’t possibly be racist because...feminism! Liberalism! Progressivism! Everybody knows feminists, liberals, and progressives are superior to the rest of ‘ordinary’ whites! I mean, we have been fighting against racism since the 60s! Don’t you read history? Don’t you pay attention? WE are the GOOD GUYS (and gals). How DARE you question our civil rights bona fides!” (A brief and not comprehensive summary of liberal/progressive responses to #blacklivesmatter when BLM interrupted two rallies in which Bernie Sanders was a participant.)

...Never mind that the movement is no longer just about civil rights, but about systemic racism, which goes ever so far *beyond* civil rights. Never mind that this is about racial *justice*, which is far more than civil rights. Never mind that this is about culture as well as politics and economics – because we know that they are intricately intertwined.

Because it's not just about getting that job or entering academia or any other "affirmative action" sort of premise. It's about *what happens to us when we get there*. (Here I claim the "we" because I was ruled out of court, essentially, by my efforts to transform the curriculum to bring the margins front and center – something academia *claimed* it wanted, but clearly did not.) It's not just about whether we will get tenure and promotion – it's about getting the respect we deserve, about our own claim to the center, our own claim to power, which you (privileged whites) appear to regard as pushing you out. It's about feeling visible and safe in environments that include both of us, rather than needing to escape to a safer space.

Now, where am I going with all that? I seem to have lost track of my original question: *is there a way out?* Bottom line is that none of us is as strong as we need to be. None of us is as courageous as we need to be. None of us has the stamina we need to continue to fight against oppressive systems.

Bottom line is, we can be strong enough, and courageous enough, *together*.

Of course there isn't one person reading this who hasn't heard that all before. The difference is that up to now we haven't actually *been* together. We (speaking in my white voice, marginalized only by gender) have *assumed we are together*. We have assumed togetherness by overriding our very real differences, rendering them invisible, and prioritizing *our* understanding of what it means to be oppressed by gender relations. Our

(white, heterosexual, cisgender) relationships with men are very different from gender relations for women of color, which include relationships with men who are *themselves* marginalized by color; and very different from gender relations for LGBTQ women – and men: the “G” in LGBTQ, the transwoman/transman represented in the “T,” and the gender fluid represented in the “Q” women are very different from those of cisgender white heterosexual women.

That is to say we (speaking here in the inclusive voice “we”) must find a way to BE together without obliterating our difference or silencing divergent voices. We (white, cisgender, heterosexual women – that is women who, other than being women, remain a privileged element in the dominant culture) – must ENABLE the joint creation of a space where marginalized people feel both visible and safe, where they feel they have been heard and accepted for who ***THEY decide they are.*** (“They” here, instead of “we,” speaking again in my white voice rather than my “marginalized” voice.)

Feeling invisible and feeling terrified of those who possess the power inherent in being a member of the dominant culture cut across all categories of marginalization. All women (including LGBTQ women and women of color) are vulnerable to being raped, assaulted, and killed for the very fact that we are women or “out of bounds” women (LGBTQ). All women, to varying degrees, experience both physical and emotional insecurity in relation to men.

In addition, some women experience both physical and emotional insecurity in relation to other women.

There are varying intensities and varying degrees of *real* risk to our (privileged white) physical and emotional integrity. But bottom line, we all know fear that inevitably

accompanies being female regardless of our gender identities. Similarly we all, to varying degrees, have experienced feeling – and being – invisible. Cisgender heterosexual able-bodied young-to-middle-age white women of the upper classes are less so, but even they – in corporate boardrooms and in political arenas – experience a degree of being rendered invisible. While they experience less physical and emotional insecurity because the relative power that money and fitting into the cultural “norm” for femininity can buy, the potential for a radical change due to economic, social, and political upheavals is there. Middle class women can and do frequently fall into poverty as a result of divorce (whereas wealthy women have securities against that).

Creating this desired inclusive “we” that both acknowledges differences *and* draws upon our common experiences with fear and invisibility can result in a powerful unit of rebellion against the status quo. It is, of course, a complicated task fraught with the peril that of creating division rather than unity. But I as a cisgender, heterosexual, white, formerly middle class by income but still middle class by culture and education woman and therefore member to a large extent of the dominant culture (whew! that is a very long dependent clause!) can say with certainty that to the extent division arises it will be because the dominant “we” has failed to listen to the marginalized “we.”

Yes, the *dominant we* is the “we” who must listen and *enable* the *marginalized we* to speak without fear of being shut down and ruled out of court by the dominant “we” by creating spaces where the *marginalized we* can feel safe. It is our responsibility because we are the ones who have made those spaces unsafe in the first place. Yes, the feelings of the dominant “we” must be suppressed until the marginalized “we” feels visible and emotionally and physically safe.

Will the dominant “we” feel that our identities as good liberal, progressive people who can’t possibly be racist feel that *we* have been misread, mis-framed, misunderstood? Yes. Deal with it! Because being mis-framed by someone who has less political/social/economic power than we do isn’t nearly as bad as being mis-framed by a more privileged person from within a position of relative powerlessness. (This follows the same line of argument that marginalized peoples can’t be racist, although they *can* be bigoted.) Because listening to criticism without feeling the need to contradict those criticisms will, in the end, create a more powerful and desirable *inclusive we*. Because listening to the *marginalized we* without immediately challenging what we see as mis-readings of ourselves (*dominant we*) is the *only* way to enable the creation of that space where each participant feels visible and safe in both their individual identities and their group identities. It’s like asking men to shut up and listen when we speak – because nobody can hear and speak at the same time. It’s like that rule in the old feminist consciousness raising groups where we would go around in a circle and let others speak with their own voices without challenging them or reinterpreting them from within our own frameworks, in order for each and every one of us to find strength in our own voices.

Until those feelings of visibility and safety are strong, the only appropriate response by the *dominant we* to the *marginalized we* is “I hear you saying...” and then offer a summary as best we can within our understanding of *their* voices, not our own.

As in:

“I hear you saying that when you are with white people you are constantly thinking about how you might be interpreted within xyz stereotype, and in the process you end up censoring yourself. I hear you saying that is exhausting.”

As in:

“I hear you saying that when you are around white people you are afraid we will say something that is unconsciously racist and that will cut to the very core of your being, while *we (dominant we)* will defend it as ‘no big deal’ and ‘why do you have to make *everything* about race?’ and that such a response will leave you feeling invisible and unsafe.”

NOT: “I hear you saying that you think I am a racist.” Because that is *not at all* what is being said!

So *we* (all of us *with* our varying individual and categorical differences) can build an *inclusive we* (all of us *inclusive of* our varying differences) that is strong enough to counter the forces against the *exclusive we* of the dominant culture. Each of us in our differences can fight the fights required specifically *because* of our differences; each of us can support the other’s struggle as well as our common struggle because we have recognized *both* our commonalities *and* our differences.

Ultimately the goal is for all of us together and each of us individually to feel visible and safe so that both the *marginalized we* and the *inclusive we* can survive and eventually *win* the struggle.