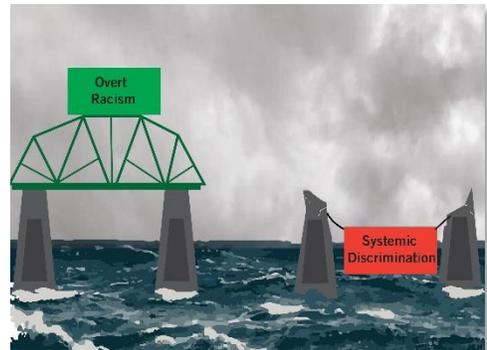


Part 2. The Hole in Racial Justice: The Master’s Tools Won’t Build the Bridge

This is Part 2 in a series of articles designed to encourage community dialogue regarding cleaning up our own house with regards to racial/ social justice education so we can be more effective and compassionate, both within justice-based communities and society at large.

The First Bridge Was Never Built

If the overarching goal of racial justice is to eradicate racism in all its forms and create the socio-economic conditions in which people have the opportunity to achieve their human potential, then a critical part of our work today is helping people understand the *systemic* nature of discrimination. And this is where most of the confusion is in society—most people don’t know the difference between overt racism and its systemic or institutional forms. As a result, they can’t fully see the problem described from the justice perspective. And it’s not their fault. It’s partially ours.



We’ve failed to build what I call the *First Bridge*, which helps people cross the chasm from understanding racism as overt and obvious, to grasping its systemic, subtle and pervasive nature. Instead we have a metaphorical goat path that requires a great deal of effort to find let alone cross. As a result, we have fewer allies than needed to truly create culture shift. Part of this failure is because our main tools have come from the sociological-historical perspective, which may help us understand *what* has happened (or is happening), but not fully *why*.¹

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The outsized influence of academics—particularly sociological and historical perspectives—coupled with the direct link to social activism has resulted in what I describe as a *protest orientation* in the work that prioritizes a political analysis with an in-your-face type of approach from activist culture.

Of course these perspectives and strategies are important—after all, systemic discrimination today is a direct result of a variety of historical factors including colonization, slavery, residential schools and political-economic policies of exploitation. This is helpful as it tells us where we came from and current sociological research helps us connect with the problems of today, whether it’s the over-policing of marginalized communities or the school-to-prison pipeline.

But the protest orientation does not help us fully understand *why* humans do what we do, nor how to teach

¹ A traditional approach to approaching social justice through a political-historical lens is aptly demonstrated through the widely used, *Teaching for Diversity & Social Justice* (2nd Edition) by Adams, Bell and Griffins. See pages 53, 129.



subject matter that is emotionally or politically loaded. History is presented as linear and logically sequenced events—loaded with the benefit of hindsight bias—but human psychology is anything but predictable and straightforward. Human behavior in the present moment is confusing and filled with uncertainty, especially when dealing with complex systems magnified by the participation of large numbers of humans.

As I stated in Part 1, the solution I'm proposing lies in integrating **psychological literacy** into our political frameworks. Similar to the reason we use steel in construction—an *alloy* of iron—rather than pure iron itself, which is more brittle and less resilient, we need a hybrid approach to social justice education in order to be more effective. Furthermore, my conviction is that the current brittleness of our work also contributes to the dysfunction within progressive organizations and grassroots movements, environments that are often high in judgment, ideology and unprocessed pain.

Using the Master's Tools on Each Other

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.
-Audre Lorde

Social justice culture often reminds me of growing up in the Pakistani Muslim context in southern Ontario. As first generation immigrants attempting to keep connected to culture and customs, families would gather, usually renting rooms in community centers. Inevitably, an older brown man would stand up and start sermonizing, reminding the community to fear the wrath of God—a lecture parked perpetually at the intersection of Brimstone and Hellfire.

My teenager eyes were always glazed over as the Good Muslim vs. Bad Muslim duality was evoked. The holier-than-thou energy always turned me off, so I spent most of the time strategizing for ways to get to the exit early, knowing that true salvation lay at the samosa snack table in the hallway beyond. Of course, it's the same internal dialogue with all belief systems—Good vs. Bad Catholic, Jew, Sikh, Hindu, etc. This is no insult towards any one faith or tradition, as people's beliefs can also ground them in very healthy and important ways. But I've always noticed the human tendency to clamber towards the center of the circle by using the *you-are-not-enough* tools to shame others into margins.

Which is why it always felt so disturbing yet familiar when I encountered these dynamics within social justice circles. From the time I first entered grassroots organizing to now, the culture of social justice has been fraught with judgment, silencing, shunning, egos, and power plays. The duality of the Good versus Bad Activist has been forever present, with the game of Leftier-than-thou always in session.

Of course, that is rarely our conscious intent...but it is our impact.



As a result, we enable a lot of bad behavior within our ranks using the complex language of oppression and the justification of power dynamics (See Table 1). Perpetually cynical attitudes are passed off as “critical” thinking. The conscious use of anger—which can be helpful in many ways—is replaced by the voices of deregulated activists who feel they can lash out at anyone who disagrees with them. Important concepts like “privilege” and “fragility” are compromised educationally because they are hurled about like slurs. Conversations become stifled as many people worry about saying the wrong thing or using the wrong words, fearing judgment from their peers.

Just like iron on its own, we are breeding a progressive culture that might look strong on the outside but is actually brittle within. Like me as a child, there are lots of people glazed out, eyeing the exits in hopes of dousing the self-righteous flames of hellfire with some cold mango lassi.

I’ve come to see the master’s tools that elder Audre Lorde invoked decades ago to include processes and environments that make us, or others, feel *less-than*. Just because we have justice on our side, or we have been oppressed or we have less social status does not mean that the less-than instruments are outside our reach. And such tools will never help build the bridge needed to get the masses to the side of generosity and justice.

This is another avenue in which psychological literacy could help us out.

In the next article I’ll offer exactly how to do that, sharing the work of our organization in creating a hybrid approach—what could be referred to as an *alloy* of racial justice. Using an evidence-based approach, we’ve identified 8 factors in teaching racial justice education that not only help increase buy-in from both learners and decision-makers but supports behavioural change.

Until then,
Shakil Choudhury
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Table 1: Examples of Misuse of Power With Our Ranks

- A civil rights organization with a reputation for biased promotion strategies and treating its staff as disposable.
- A racial justice activist silencing their peers with complex political language and grounding a community project to a halt—all the while insisting they have no real power because of their non-dominant identities.
- A labour union with a culture that treats their own staff so badly that multiple human rights complaints are lodged.
- Queer feminists excluding a bisexual colleague because she decided to date a heterosexual man.
- Staff member publically disparaging their colleagues and managers, using the politics of oppression as a shield from personal accountability.

