

Being The Only

By Rita J. Andrews

Scenario: It's 4:30 and you step up to the table to register for your first laboratory training experience. You're running a little late. The registrar greets you pleasantly and gives you all the necessary program materials. As you enter the meeting room, you do a quick scan and notice there is no one here who looks like you. You are curious about what this experience will be like. Should you be worried, should you be concerned. You tell yourself to go with the flow...what will be will be. This is a professional experience, surely there will be someone to connect with. You find your way to an empty seat and introduce yourself to the person beside you. This could be a typical entering experience of an "only" into a lab.

SO WHAT:

You may be wondering what's the big deal? So what if a person attending a laboratory training finds they are the only member of their group in attendance? The so what is that being an only impacts the individual and the group. Why is it important to pay attention to this phenomena? It's important because who is present and who is missing has an impact on the lab experience. It's important to notice what we gain and what we miss when there is an "only" in a laboratory. Often this dynamic is not noticed, acknowledged or discussed.

SIGNIFICANCE OF GROUP IDENTITY AND BEING AN "ONLY":

Granted, much like falling snowflakes, pebbles on a beach or leaves on a tree, we are all different and unique individuals. And we are all also members of groups that we identify with and are identified by, whether we think so or not. Our group identities shape our values, perceptions and experiences. Our group identities also distinguish us from others who have different world views.

In a group a person may be an "only" around any group identity dimension. Pay attention to this dynamic in your laboratory experience, and any group you are involved in. Are there people in the group who are singular in their group identity?

The pattern for many people in group settings and other arenas, is to ignore differences. Instead, most people want to focus on similarities. Or if they notice difference, they tend to want to concentrate on the fact that we are all different in some way, e.g.—personality, handedness, political affiliation, food preferences, , etc.

In this laboratory experience, and other times as well, begin to be aware of group identities. It is also crucial to acknowledge that some group identities bring us positive attribution and some bring us negative attributions. Some group identities have us as dominant members of this society and some group identities have us as subordinate members of this society. Such acknowledgment will make for more valuable understanding and allows the possibility of building bridges across difference.

DOMINANT AND SUBORDINATE GROUP IDENTITIES:

Dominant group members have the power, make the rules, determine values and are classified as normal. The power dimension has major significance and cannot be ignored. Dominant group members may be larger in numbers. But this is not always true. Consider South Africa...Black South Africans were larger in terms of demographic numbers, however the White Afrikaners were the group in power.

Subordinate group members have a different experience, i.e., following the rules, adapting to dominant group values and often feeling that their difference is seen as abnormal. Subordinate group members sometimes exhibit victim behaviors—put themselves down, withdraw, act aggressively, etc. They sometimes come to believe in the myths and untruths about themselves. They may be legitimately angry. And they may or may not express anger in ways that are comfortable for others.

When a subordinate group member is the only person from their identity group in a workshop, that individual can have experiences that impact them personally, their one-on-one interactions, any small group they are a part of and the total community as well.

If you are an “only” subordinate group member in a laboratory experience you will probably expend a great deal of psychic energy dealing with your experience. If you are an “only” dominant group member you will feel and sense something, but you will probably expend a lot less energy dealing with the experience.

WHO MAY BE AN “ONLY”:

A person may be the “only” in many ways. But being an “only” around the following group identities is particularly significant in a lab experience in the U.S.:

	<u>Dominant</u>	<u>Subordinate</u>
Age	Middle Agers	Youth, Elders
Gender	Male	Female
Race	White	People of Color
Nationality	North American Western European	EasternEuropean, African, Asian, Latin American
Ability	Able Bodied--- Physically/Mentally	Persons with Physical/Mental Disabilities
Language	Native speakers of English	Native Speakers of Other Languages
Religion	Christian	Jewish , Muslims, Buddhists, Hindi Agnostics, Atheists
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual

WHAT THE ONLY PERSON MAY EXPERIENCE OR DO:

● **Isolation**—The only person may feel alone, isolated and unconnected to the group experience. He or she may separate from the group because they don't feel included. Pay attention to who greets the "only." Sometimes you'll see that the only person is not greeted by some members of the group. Or the only person may be found sitting by themselves. As the lab experience develops, notice if the only person's ideas, perspectives and opinions are listened to.

● **Denial/Discounting/Minimizing Experiences**—The only person's experience is often denied or minimized. When you hear statements like-- "It's a level playing field, discrimination is a thing of the past." Or, "subordinate group members get more opportunities today than dominant group members. Or, "the Holocaust didn't really happen."—your hearing the suggestion that subordinate group members experiences are not credible or significant and do not need to be addressed. And sometimes the subordinate group member will deny the significance of their experience themselves, e.g., "I've been a victim of discrimination, but it's no big deal."

● **Own your group identity(ies)**— Don't get upset when another group member notices/pays attention to your group identity, e.g., calls you a heterosexual male, a white woman, or a physically able person. Know that if you are a dominant group member you have access to privilege at some level. Know that you are advantaged in some way. Own that part of yourself.

● **Legitimize dialogue about differences**—Difference influences our lives every day, and we don't typically talk about it. Talk about differences and provide an opportunity to learn from each other. Listen to the "only" person. Hear their experience and understand and give credence to their experience even though it may be different than yours. Believe it is real for them.

● **Talk with people like you rather than interrogate the "only"**--Don't expect subordinate group members to teach you about your racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, etc. Talk with other dominant group members. Take responsibility for learning about your own privilege.

Being an "only" person in a laboratory experience does not have to be a lonely, isolating experience. It can be wonderful and productive for the "only" and for the group as well. It does require acknowledgment, understanding and dialogue.