Complex and Simple Responses to Tragedy: Both Needed

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At SPSSI 2016, a group of scholars convened to reflect on our communities’ responses to the Orlando shooting. In breakout groups, we discussed different lenses through which we could view the tragedy. Our group discussed the difficulty and importance of being faithful to the complexity of the event, and it is to summarize this discussion and invite further comments and actions that we report here.

In Orlando, the shooter was a second generation Muslim American who pledged allegiance to terrorist groups from Syria and Iraq. He killed 49 people with an assault rifle that he purchased legally. It was Latin night at a gay club; most of the

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victims were Latino, and almost half were Puerto Rican. A singular focus on any one of the impacted groups (immigrants, religious minorities, sexual minorities, ethnic minorities...) does not recognize the importance of intersectionality, whereby different aspects of social category identities such as ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation are interdependent and work together to shape inequality, privilege, discrimination, and power. Likewise, focusing our response on any one issue (homophobia, racism, gun control, or terrorism) does not recognize the complex constellation of societal structures that shaped this act of hatred. As a scholarly community, we hope to broaden the conversation, and at the same time add complexity to the dialogue, by recognizing the intersectionality of this event. We may mobilize to create better gun laws, challenge homophobia, and reject terrorism, and we may also seek to understand the ways that our society creates and condones the circumstances that lead to discrimination and hatred in intersection.

An effective conversation on intersectionality requires more than a simple laundry list of the relevant issues. We must fight against the tendency in some environments to ignore or actively resist intersectionality, as even naming relevant issue areas can be polarizing. While focusing the conversation on one issue at a time may be a more effective way of reaching certain audiences, there is a risk in doing so that some of the impacted groups or relevant issues will become invisible in our conversations. For example, the Puerto Rican and Latinx Queer communities were deeply impacted by this event, yet have been largely excluded from popular media coverage of the shooting. We hope to broaden the conversation by creating an environment where these voices can be brought to the forefront.

For social change to occur, it is important to balance messages that unite us with those that recognize the unique needs and experiences of different groups. Messages that unite people are very important, and it can be challenging to build and maintain solidarity while taking an intersectional perspective. In addition to shifting the balance of power to bring more attention to the voices of marginalized groups, it may also be useful to identify themes that cut across the relevant issue areas such as the political ideology of exclusion and hatred. We might also identify alternative ideologies, such as "#LoveWins", that could unite our responses across a range of issue areas. In the meantime, we need to be cautious that efforts that unite marginalized groups do not inadvertently alienate members of the majority group, whose resources and social status can be a powerful force for change. Similarly, such alternative ideologies and messages should serve to reduce rather than increase the widening ideological divide between liberals and conservatives. It may also be productive to identify common enemies—for example, the companies and executives that profit off of gun sales—and to name individuals that could be held responsible for maintaining a system in which they financially benefit (like Big Tobacco) from side-lining research and obscuring the toll from needless suicides, murders, and gun-related injuries.

While public support for gun control and awareness of homophobia increased after the Orlando shooting, we suspect that these will return to baseline unless communities like ours are active voices in the conversation. We encourage research and advocacy about the harm caused by lax gun laws, the link between

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societal discrimination, hatred and violence, and the ways in which certain groups are made particularly vulnerable.

Some people will resist an intersectional approach, wishing to highlight certain issues in isolation. While these responses may be powerful, we also believe that SPSSI members have an opportunity to educate our students and our communities about how the separate lenses through which we can view this tragedy are not really separate at all. In fact, these lenses become more powerful when used simultaneously. We invite anyone interested in joining this conversation to contact the authors with comments, responses, or ideas for teaching, research and service to take the ideas forward. We hope to continue to broaden this conversation in ways that will inspire progressive action on gun control and advance the fight against discrimination and hatred broadly.

See also this great piece by students: link

- Angela Robinson, UC Irvine, et al.