Mentorship Training Workshop

Operator Algebras Mentor Network

September 16, 2021

Abstract

This document gives a rough overview of the Mentorship Training Workshop organized by the Board of Directors of the Operator Algebras Mentor Network on August 27, 2021, and facilitated by Dr. Chandra Erdman and Erin Brown. It is based on notes that were written and shared by junior mentors Magdalena Georgescu, Kathryn McCormick, Brent Nelson, and mentee Jennifer Zhu, before being compiled into this document by board member Anna Duwenig.

Facilitators

The workshop was led by

- Dr. Chandra Erdman - Technical Program Manager and DEI Orientation Facilitator at Google
  ACE score of 9

- Erin Brown
  ACE score of 3

Topics of Workshop

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1ACE stands for Adverse Childhood Experiences and is a score that can identify obstacles but does not define your future. The facilitators pointed out that you can take an ACE test online, but warned that it can be a very emotional process.
1 Definitions

**Allyship** is the practice of actively and continuously striving towards promoting justice and ending marginalization. See Section 4 below for our discussion on Allyship.

**Diversity** is the variation found in a group; “Maximizing sums of squares.”

*Non-example:* Room of wealthy Black people.

**Equity vs. Equality:** Equity means that everyone has fair treatment, access and opportunity to succeed. Equality means that everyone is treated the same without special regard for their circumstances. While equality seems like a good goal, it is insufficient.

*Illustration shown during workshop:* Equality: people of different heights reaching for the same branch of an apple tree while standing on block of equal height; the shorter people cannot reach, while the tall people reach easily. Equity: shorter people are given taller blocks, so everyone can easily reach the branch.

**Inclusion** means unique/different identities, backgrounds and experiences are respected, valued and fully integrated into how we operate.

**Intersectionality** is the interconnected nature of social categorizations (such as race, class, gender) as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage; coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. See [https://vimeo.com/263719865](https://vimeo.com/263719865) for a video (2min49s) explaining intersectionality, and Section 3.2 for our discussion of the topic.

**Identity** is made up of characteristics determining who a person is. Some characteristics are immutable/fixed (e.g., race), others can shift over time (e.g., gender or sexual identity); the distinction between them is important.

**Privilege** is a special right, advantage, or immunity granted/available only to a particular person or group.

2 Exclusion

Examples of everyday exclusions based on flawed design/implementation:

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2See https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality?language=en
• Right-handed vs. left-handed people:
  – Selfie videos taken by left-handed people and uploaded to YouTube were interpreted to be upside down.
    Underlying problem: The upload algorithm was dominated by right-handed data.
  – fingerprint scanners for accessing buildings that are placed on the right side
  – computer mice in libraries etc. that are placed on the right side of the computer
  – lab materials that are awkward to operate with the left hand

• Lighter vs. darker skin color, and different hair types:
  – Cameras do not take adequate pictures of dark-skinned people; they are not objective.
    Underlying problem: Decisions about camera design have historically not taken people of color into account, resulting in them not being accurately represented in photos. Google is currently trying to address this issue with the Android camera.
  – Soap and towel dispensers (optical sensors) do not detect hands of darker-skinned people; the same optical trackers are used in fitness and heart monitors.
  – Background blur in video conferencing software does not work for afros or other big hair; the models they used during development had smooth or flat hair.
  – Twitter photo previews prefer white faces over Black faces; see https://www.theguardian.com/2020/9/20/21447998/twitter-photo-preview-white-black-faces

These indicate a larger problem of lack of diversity in technology design. Google has only recently reached 2% Black employees in technical positions.

In order to address these kind of issues, it is important to be aware of who is involved in data sets for training AI, and who is involved in the decision making process. Who is in the data set that trains technology? Who is in the room when technology is designed?

These issues can be ameliorated by recognizing/acknowledging them and the harm they cause; by getting “people in the room” in that will be aware and help design appropriately (e.g., if left-handed person was involved in decision-making/design of selfie video upload, might not see as big a disparity).

3 Privilege

Important to note: White privilege does not mean life is without hardship for white people.
3.1 Exercise: ‘Privileges for Sale’

We were given a list of 27 privileges; these included

- items focused on accessibility, like “All spaces are physically accessible to you.”,
- items focused on physical safety, like “Not fear sexual assault when moving through the world.”, or
- items focused on up-bringing, like “Your family never had to move due to financial inabilities.”.

In “Privileges for Sale”, the name-of-the-game was: Assume you have zero privilege; each privilege costs $100 and you have $500 to spend. Which privileges do you buy? It is important to note that while the costs were equal for each privilege, this was done to keep the game simple, and not a suggestion that the privileges were in fact equal in real-life. We were placed into breakout rooms to discuss with a group of 3–4 people and reach a consensus.

Post-exercise discussion points (●) and some replies by participants (−):

- What was it like to do this activity?
  - Heartbreaking, impossible, eyeopening, insightful, difficult
  - Made me realize how much privilege I have/how lucky I am
  - Hard to imagine what it would be like not to have something we already have
  - In an ideal world, these “privileges” should be “rights”.

- What questions did you wrestle with when trying to make this decision as a group?
  - Whether or not to buy things we already had versus things that just further extended our privilege
  - How do you assess the comparative impact of various privileges? Would it be worse to have a history of family addiction, or a history of sexual assault?
  - Were these privileges we had experience with in the present or retroactively/Chose privileges based on personal and witnessed experiences

- What was the process like deciding as a group? What do you think the value of doing this activity in groups was?
  - We started off by deciding which were essential for basic survival rather, things like food, health, and safety were discussed first.
  - Starting with zero, we tried to focus on the privileges that were basic human needs. Even that was incredibly hard.
– At first I wanted to buy privileges I didn’t have, but a group member reminded me of the exercise framework: We were starting with zero privilege for the purposes of this exercise. So, we ended up choosing mostly safety-related privileges.

– Some of these privileges make the others less worrisome

– Knowing that being a first-generation college student is a major factor in later life outcomes influenced our decisions, even if we were not personally first-generation college students. Bringing these issues to light is important!

– Focus on stability and safety. Our main concerns were privileges we already had, rather than what we did not – we were used to dealing without. Felt very psychological.

• Was there a privilege that your group did not choose that you would have if you were deciding on your own?

  – Gravitated toward privileges related to my experience, but these were not all shared by the rest of the group.
  – Felt a little awkward choosing certain items over others because it felt like that was dismissing one person’s concerns in favor of someone else’s.

• What are you taking away from this activity?

  – What I really like about this activity is that it did not explicitly ask you to identify your privileges, but in doing the activity I was able to identify them.
  – Exercise should help you identify your own privileges, but also the one whose lack weighs you down
  – The “most important” privilege is the one you need right now, depending on context. E.g., if you are currently interacting with the police you would want a safe outcome; if you get sick, you would hope to have access to health insurance. But how can you predict ahead of time which you will most need?
  – Push and pull between “I need this now” (e.g., food) and “This would make my life better long term” (e.g., no drug/alcohol problems in family)

This segues into our next topic, Intersectionality

### 3.2 Intersectionality

During our discussion about Privilege in the Exercise: ‘Privileges for Sale’ we noted that some privileges increase or decrease the importance of others:

– Having money will insulate you from a lot of disadvantages.

3See also Section 3.2
- If you live in a safe neighbourhood, you would have less contact with the police, and the privilege “Feel safe in the presence of police” might matter less.

- If you are commonly misgendered, you might be less safe in everyday interactions.

- Getting into college could increase the likelihood of obtaining other privileges.

These are examples of intersectionality; other examples we discussed were:

*Example:* If Eva is a Mexican lesbian woman, she belongs to the sets ‘Woman’, ‘Mexican’, ‘Lesbian’. She might, in different circumstances, be excluded from each of these communities by sexism, racism, or homophobia – for example, among women, she might still experience homophobia and racism.

*Anecdote:* At a women’s health conference, someone pointed out at dinner that there were no women of colour in the day’s speakers, but there was pushback from the organizers. The irony is that this was a women-organized conference in response to exclusions from a “regular” conference. This shows how privilege and oppression can sometimes intermingle. Perhaps the most salient point is that the organizers of this conference were not receptive to feedback.

4 Allyship

Allyship is **not**

- calling yourself an ally: Without action to back it up, this is merely a performance. The people with whom you are allying have no reason to believe/trust you just because of an Ally-badge. Ally is not a label, but an ongoing process of choosing to support marginalized groups. “Be clear about your values rather than claiming a title.”

- knowledge without application.

Be aware that:

- “Ally” is a title *other* people give you if they feel supported by you; it is an ongoing process, not a badge that you obtain and forever keep.

- It never gets easier to speak up, but it is necessary.

- Sometimes, your own pain is irrelevant; it may not be about you. If there is a discussion about how to fix an issue, do not make the discussion about how the issue is impacting you personally.

  That does not mean that you do not feel pain, but just that you do not focus on your indirect pain when talking to someone who is directly impacted.
See also: ‘White tears’; Going into a space or a comment section of a directly impacted person or people to talk about how this is impacting you.

• Calling yourself “ally” could be interpreted as a way of differentiating yourself from a group (i.e., you support it, but you do not belong to it). However, other people do consider “ally” to include the members of the group.

Discussion: At a different workshop, participants were encouraged to declare themselves “allies”, with the idea that marginalized people would feel supported and would know to whom to appeal if needed. This shows that it is important to ‘know your audience’ in order to know how to make yourself available as a resource.

In particular, just because you are focusing on equity and are making progress or “doing a really good thing”, does not mean you do not need feedback; not accepting feedback does not support the statement that you are an ally.

Comments based on anecdotes:

– Gendered language is more pervasive than you realize.

– For interviews: start with small talk; connect with interviewee as a person. “Small talk” questions can lead people to open up about their background/situation.

– Sometimes, we tend to explain what was wrong with a troubling interaction rather than checking to make sure the person is ok.

– Speak up! Do not privilege comfort of ‘authority’ (e.g., panel organizer) over comfort of person with less power (e.g., non-binary panelist).

– If you are at a table at, say, a conference, see if there is anyone you can bring along.

Discussion: Have you ever been in a situation where you witnessed someone of a different identity being mistreated and did not know what to do?

4.1 Building blocks of allyship

Believing Believe people’s experiences and offer support. The ‘aftermath’ of a traumatic experience changes the experience for the person, as does the response to recalling/relating these experiences.

Caution: Check in with people about what they need rather than comment on the situation (even if your intent is to sympathize). For example, when a mentee is in the middle of experiencing a situation, check in to see what they need in the moment rather than explaining what is bad about their situation.
**Confrontation** Take risks to confront harm in the moment and when trying to disrupt systems of oppression, even though this is never easy or comfortable. This includes the risk of getting it wrong, since the ‘right’ action might mean different things for different people (e.g., one person appreciates being supported in a public setting, but someone else feels embarrassed or annoyed by your interference).

The more risks you take, the more likely you are to make mistakes, and the more feedback you receive; this allows you to improve your response.

*Note:* Erin made the following comments regarding the decision to intervene:

- If the situation/topic is directly applicable to my own self/personal struggles, I do not always have to make noise; for example if I’m tired, I give myself a break.
- But “it is always my business if it’s not about me”: I push forward even when tired and put myself out there to advocate for those who need it. Even if it feels like a lot, proportionally it is much less emotional labour.

**Advocating** Advocating for systemic change (e.g., voting; adding your preferred pronouns to workspace e-mails, even if it is not a feature you feel you need yourself) builds awareness. It is easier for someone who is not affected by harmful policies to push for their change; additionally, their feedback may be better received. Recognize the systems which benefit you and see how you can make improvements; transfer benefits to those more in need.

*See also:* White Supremacy Culture in Organizations


**Humility** Practice cultural humility and willingness to learn: language and best practices change over time.

**Resilience** Build resilience to misstepping, to being corrected, to not being the authority all of the time.

**Responding to Feedback** Learn to adequately deal with feedback:

- If you did not mean to cause harm, the best way to show this is through your response to being corrected: Practice saying “Thank you for telling me that” and process your feelings on your own time rather than arguing about your intent.
- Try to not get defensive, especially if you thought you were doing something right. Getting defensive is natural and it will require you training yourself not to react that way.
- Keep in mind that giving you feedback/correcting you is emotionally taxing for the people doing the correcting. Offer your gratitude for feedback.
- Move forward from negative feedback; feedback is offered because they believe you care and are capable of doing better.
**Intent** The impact of your words or actions matters more than your intentions (e.g., if you step on someone’s foot, you apologize; you do not tell them ‘I didn’t mean to!’). Having said that, intent does matter, because it will modulate your reaction to having the impact pointed out to you.