

Popcorn style vs. Sharing circle

By Julián Gutiérrez Castaño

Something that I have noticed over the years is how difficult is to participate in a group dominated by white people. No offense to my friends from the Global North, but I think that white people tend to talk too much and too loud when they are in a group, and are not very good at paying attention to dynamics of participation and exclusion that are present in those spaces. The most common style of participation that I have experienced in groups within white spaces is called 'Popcorn style'.

By contrast, I was amazed about the high level of participation and respect paid to participants when I was introduced to 'Sharing circles' in the Anishinabe culture. Not that I have never been in something similar to a sharing circle before, but I have never heard stated in a clear way the principles of this style in the past. Usually, someone starts sharing her/his reflections, and then the next person to her/his left does the same, and successively until everybody has had a chance to participate. It's common to pass a talking stick and participants are asked to speak only when they hold it. People do not have to share if they do not feel like doing it. When everybody has shared, the circle can go once again, sometimes with a different emphasis in the subject that they are talking about. This continues until everybody is done, and by done I mean people feel that they have exhausted the subject.

On a personal level, I have experienced that when I am in a white space, speaking in English, and using 'Popcorn style', eventually, I prefer to shut down rather than fight to make my voice being heard. I don't do this because I'm afraid or tired of fighting to be able to talk, I do this because I think that if that group of people is not wise enough to understand the value of listening all voices (mine included), they don't deserve to be exposed to the very important ideas that they are shouting down (mine included again). I think that people react different in this situation, some people would fight more to be able to talk, some people would shut down because they are shy, some people would leave the group. In any case, there is a common pattern, the 'Popcorn style' is a methodology that affects participants in different negative ways. People have to struggle with it, and therefore it is an oppressive methodology of participation.

This is a characterization of the 'Popcorn style' and the 'Sharing circle'. I hope that it is helpful to start practicing new methodologies of participation in groups.

Sharing circle

Everybody has a chance to participate.

Participants can really choose to talk or to keep silence.

It is not ok to interrupt another participant when he/she is talking.

Participants have to wait to intervene, this means that they can not react immediately to other interventions.

I find very interesting that it is called 'Sharing circle', as an externalization of the cultural practices of Anishinabe people. This characteristic can be extended to other Indigenous and non Western groups.

Popcorn style

People have to jump in to participate.

Participants can not really choose to talk or to keep silence. Shy people, participants who are not very fluent in the language, etc. tend to participate less or not at all.

Participants tend to interrupt other people when they are talking.

Participants tend to be more impetuous, they can answer immediately after other people are done with their comments.

I find amusing that it is called 'Popcorn style', which is a very iconic food of North American culture. This is quite ironic, given the fact that popcorn was created by Indigenous people in Turtle Island before Europeans arrived.

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