

My Experience Giving My Nonhuman Identity 101 Presentation: Outcome & Insights

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Last night I finally gave my Nonhuman Identity 101 lecture to my fellow therapists who are in my PhD program with me. I'd been working on making the presentation on and off for a couple of months, so there was a lot of excited build-up and anxiety going into it. I'd like to share my reflections on the experience because it went better than I could have imagined – it absolutely blew away my expectations and decimated my fears in a way that was so profound, surprising, and I think deeply healing.

My partner said that at the beginning I had a tone of trying to “convince” people of my points but that by the end my tone was just of sharing information. That resonates with my own experience as well. At the very beginning, when I was just setting the framing, I was so nervous and anxious. Going into this, I figured my friends would be fairly accepting/understanding, but I also had a lot of fears that I would have to defend significant parts of our existence or that they would be “accepting” but not really get it, which would feel dismissive, invalidating, and confirming of fears that this identity is too weird/out there for people to understand. It turns out that I think those fears were largely internalized negativity that did not bear out in reality during the lecture at all. I was already prepared to be defending my points or trying to convince people of my perspective and experiences from the very beginning talking about anthropocentrism, but immediately everyone was so receptive. Right off the bat, we had great conversations about anthropocentrism, the word “human,” and personhood as it is afforded (and not afforded) to nonhuman living beings and minoritized groups of humans. It was such a lovely, refreshing conversation that my fears and sense of needing to “convince” people were pretty immediately abated.

Even so, throughout the night, my concerns stemming from internalized negativity kept coming back as we approached new topics, each time leaving me with nervous thoughts: “Well, surely now *this* will be too much/they won't understand.” Some notable examples of those topics were fictionkin and associated multiverse beliefs, the importance of the distinction between identifying as vs with something, mental and phantom shifts, social difficulties, the severity/reality of species dysphoria, the idea of body mods and gear as being akin to transition and prosthesis, “ugly instincts,” exotrauma, intersection of nonhumanity and sexuality, the impact of anti-kin rhetoric, and the severity of the impact misinformation and KFF has had on our community. Looking at that list clearly laid out now, I realize those are all topics that have either been incessantly belittled by anti-kin and/or have become even taboo within our communities to talk about, so it makes sense that those are the topics around which I have most greatly internalized these negative beliefs that we're “too much,” “too weird,” or that our struggles are less important than other groups'. Yet, for every single one of those topics, my friends consistently met the conversation with immediate understanding, validation, and rich, engaged discussion. They asked thoughtful questions and brought up nuance on their own that kept shocking me as they were things I thought either I would have to explain (from that place of “convincing”) or that I was going to gloss over because I thought it would be too much (e.g., some of the sexuality stuff). But no, they were so open, made the connections themselves, and were so understanding that we ended up having these really rich conversations throughout the whole night. The whole lecture ended up being a full 7 hours (double my 3.5 hour practice run-through!) because of all the wonderful engagement and discussion we had.

I mentioned earlier that I think this whole thing was deeply healing. I've realized over the past few years, since being in grad school and being exposed to language about minority stress and especially internalized negativity, that I have *a lot* of internalized negativity about my nonhuman identity. In a

way I've always been aware of this given how highly anxious it always makes me to talk about it even with my partner of 8 years and best friend of 14 years. I think it's only been in the last ~2 years that I've gotten to the point where I can actually talk about my therianthropy pretty comfortably with my partner and best friend, and even then, sometimes I still get anxious that it'll be "too weird" or "too much" for them to understand. Since learning about minority stress, I now recognize those feelings as internalized negativity, which makes sense given all the anti-kin rhetoric I've been exposed to over the years. However, I didn't fully realize how far/deep the internalized negativity ran until doing the lecture last night. I had two really profound realizations about it last night: 1) the negative messages about my identity started younger and have been more consistent than just anti-kin talking points on tumblr, and 2) I really drank the Kool-Aid (to use a phrase that came up during the discussions last night), believing in my own invalidation.

To expand on the first point, I realized as I was sharing personal experiences with my friends that negative messages and lack of understanding about my identity/experiences from others started really early in my life. In kindergarten, I tried to have my mom help me ask my teacher if I could be the class pet; I always "played" as an animal during recess and didn't understand why I couldn't be like that (i.e., myself) all the time. Unsurprisingly, my mom and teacher did not understand what I was asking, the teacher said, "Of course you can still play as an animal during recess," and I learned to not talk about my feeling that being an animal or occupying a pet social role were what felt right to me. Fast forward to high school when I had learned about therianthropy and had been part of the community for 2-3 years. In my health class, we had an assignment to anonymously share a secret that would be posted in the room by completing the prompt "If people really knew me, they'd know..." I wrote, "If people really knew me, they'd know I experience species dysphoria. It affects me every day." I hoped that a health teacher might have heard of it or that maybe someone else who saw it might know what species dysphoria was. I was young and desperate for IRL connections with people who might understand my experiences. However, that did not work out the way I hoped. One day a student in the class asked the teacher what species dysphoria was, which prompted the teacher to google it. He read the definition out loud (which was more or less accurate), chuckled, and said, "Well, not everyone may have taken the assignment seriously." The girl standing next to me turned to me and said, "Wow, that seems so sad, to not even feel like you're human." I, keeping my identity as the writer unknown, said, "Yeah, and it seems sad to feel so uncomfortable in your body, too." She indicated some agreement but her focus was clearly on the anthropocentric idea that to not consider oneself human is inherently degrading. So that day I not only received that direct message of anthropocentrism but also the message from the teacher that it's more plausible that I was joking than that I was serious about experiencing species dysphoria.

Combining those experiences with all the anti-kin rhetoric I've been exposed to online, and suddenly it makes a lot of sense why I have so much anxiety around my identity and tend to assume people will respond in a dismissive or invalidating way. However, I didn't realize the extent to which I had bought into those ideas (i.e., drank the Kool-Aid) until I was sharing these experiences and prominent anti-kin talking points with my friends. I got through the list of anti-kin rhetoric, and everyone was immediately jumping to our defense, condemning the anti-kin emphasis on playing Oppression Olympics and invalidating our experiences as lesser or unimportant compared to other groups' struggles. Instead of having to "convince" them that our problems still mattered even if we aren't technically oppressed, my friends shocked me by arguing that we actually are oppressed. (It's worth noting that my friends are all trans and were making direct comparisons to their own experiences, as well as making broader sociopolitical points about the conceptualization of "systemic oppression.") Even after that conversation with them, I'm not sure I'd feel comfortable saying we're oppressed, but now I'm really wondering how much of that is my own genuine belief vs the effects of having drunk the Kool-Aid.

Either way, to have them genuinely recognize the impact and legitimacy of our struggles was a profound experience.

Additionally, when I shared the things anti-kin will say about hunting nonhumans “like real animals” or telling us to kill ourselves for being so weird/crazy/etc, one of my friends looked me in the eye and said, “That’s horrific.” I felt myself squirm a bit – isn’t it not that big of a deal since it’s all on the internet? Even though I always felt like it was bad, that’s what all the anti-kin say, and I didn’t realize how much I’d internalized it until I had so much trouble receiving their comment. I think they noticed me struggle to take in their comment, and they said it again, slowly, with so much genuine empathy: “That’s horrific.” That was the moment I realized how healing it was to be sharing all this and to be so attuned to by my friends – as well as how much I had drunk the Kool-Aid. People talk about hunting us for sport and tell us to kill ourselves, and while I always found that messed up, I had been convinced on some deeper level that it truly wasn’t a big deal, wasn’t a “real” problem, wasn’t serious enough to take seriously. And I had been so afraid my friends would only perpetuate those Oppression Olympics dynamics but instead they tore them down and affirmed how fucked up and horrific it is that we’re treated this way. Honestly, even reflecting and writing about this, I’m getting emotional again. The idea that anyone outside of our community beyond a few stray individuals would take us seriously, would take our pain and struggles seriously, felt like a fairytale. To have it happen and to be able to start to take in that empathy? I really feel like my soul is being healed. I feel so much more confident in my own perception of my identity and experiences, particularly negative anti-kin-related experiences.

I think my other friend also noticed my difficulty taking in some of what they were all saying, and she pointed out that the other resilience factor in the minority stress model is identity pride. I had never thought of myself as lacking pride in my nonhuman/therian identity before. As it’s generally my most salient identity and the identity I’ve built my whole professional life around, I think I usually think of myself as having a lot of pride in it, actually. But my friend making that comment as I was noticing my own impaired receptive capacity for my friends’ validation made me realize that I don’t think I had as much pride as I thought. Fortunately, it feels like this experience of sharing with my friends and having them meet me with such warmth, empathy, validation, and understanding has shifted something in me that feels like more genuine pride, not bogged down by such internalized negativity, is able to shine through.

And I’m so glad, too, that now my friends are educated about our identities and communities so that they can correct misinformation in their personal lives and be affirming therapists in their professional lives. I feel confident in saying they’re allies for us now (which is striking to me because I was previously torn about even using the word “ally” in relation to our communities given that internalization that our problems aren’t real or important enough to warrant allyship).

As a bit of a tangent but on the topic of me feeling shocked by how deep my internalized negativity ran (and I guess probably still runs given that I probably won’t be able to unlearn all of this literally overnight), it really surprises me that I have so much baggage about this identity. I, who saw anti-kin rhetoric and our communities’ desire for research and decided to dedicate my life/career to research for the community – so that we could have answers for ourselves and also something “legitimate”/“scientific” to point to when anti-kin say we’re not real or don’t have real problems. My whole life is focused around debunking anti-kin rhetoric and defending our community, yet here I was so deeply buying into their rhetoric without even realizing the extent of it. I’m really glad I’ve had these realizations, not only for my own personal healing, but also for my ability to advocate for the community. People with a lot of internalized negativity are typically not the best for leading advocacy for their communities as it tends to lead to minimization of the struggle and thus moderate solutions. I

don't think at this point I've had any concrete situations in which my internalized negativity adversely impacted my professional work related to nonhumanity, but it irks me to realize that may have been a problem. I am thus extremely grateful to my friends for giving me these insights and greater confidence/pride in my identity so that I can really put my best self forward in continuing this work.