RACISM AND MULTI-CULTURALISM IN MEDIATION

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I am pleased with the invitation to offer this article on racism and multi-culturalism in mediation. The observations contained herein come from over six years of experience in doing anti-racism and multi-culturalism training in a variety of settings, primarily church-based, including ecumenical, community and educational institutions. In this brief article, it will be impossible to document at length the many learning’s, insights and recommendations that come from this work. What I can do is give an overview of our five models using the thread of the change process to which the models are closely related. I trust that this will provide a different perspective for those engaged in the important work of mediation from which to view the cultural complexity that increased diversity has created in our culture. In order to provide the framework for the article, the Change Process, we believe, follows these steps.

Deconstruction
Behavior Analysis
Power Analysis
Visioning
Reconstruction

Our five models, which contextualize these steps in the area of anti-racism and multi-culturalism are:

Appreciating Diversity
Prejudice Reduction
Social Constructivism
Anti-Oppression
Institutional Racism

Many people have struggled, ever since the inception of our country, to address the issue of race and how it relates to our notions of justice and equity. While the common assumption is that we have made slow and steady progress over the last 300 years to address this question with varying degrees of seriousness, it is also true that there have been peaks and valleys and reversals as the culture has continued to struggle with the place of people of color within it. In today’s world, that struggle continues but in a much more complex context as the degree and the nature of the diversity that makes up our nation compounds the problem. For example, Native American sensitivities regarding stereotypes as evidenced by sport team names and logos, is easily dismissed because of the lack of social power in our current cultural arrangement. At the other end of the spectrum, recent immigrants from Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Islands find themselves forced to choose identities that are foreign to their cultural heritage and identity. Hence, an emphasis on multi-culturalism and its relationship to racism is critical due to the fact that too often the multi-dimensional nature of the problem is reduced to a conversation between blacks and whites to the exclusion of all other groups.

Fundamental to this challenge is the understanding of the change process, which is in itself, a neutral paradigm that simply outlines the steps that individuals, institutions, and ultimately nations must go through if they are going to bring about a change on both the individual, as well as, the corporate level. Recent examples in our culture which indicate that this change can occur abound. The increased sensitivity to the needs of the physically challenged, help us understand the structural nature of change, if one is to make access to public buildings possible. Similarly, systemic structural change for people of color and other dispossessed groups in our society, have to be made if access to the opportunities that exist in our society are going to be made possible. In another area, the attitude in our culture regarding smoking may be a classic example of the way in which a society can change their fundamental attitudes toward certain practices and behaviors in order to bring about a different environment, in this case, that of a smoke-free airplane, public facilities, etc. Any effort to bring about such fundamental change in attitudes and behaviors has to follow a very specific track in a developmental process that elicits the desired result. The work that we are doing on anti-racism follows that developmental process through the various stages of change that are required if a true reconstruction of our attitudes and behaviors related to race is to occur. Indeed it is ironic that the greatest opportunity that our country had to address the wrongs of slavery occurred during a period in our society called reconstruction, and it is indeed true, that the failure to follow through with that reconstruction laid the groundwork for the re-segregation of the society informally known as “Jim Crow”, and the perpetuation of another four generations of racial isolation that was transferred from the rural south throughout the urban areas of the entire country.
Since the issue of race has been, and to a large degree remains, the most divisive issue in our culture, it might be useful to refer to the closing paragraph of the chapter on Reconstruction that Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in the classic *The Souls of Black Folk*, which are as relevant today as they were nearly 100 years ago:

"Such was the dawn of Freedom; such was the work of the Freedmen's Bureau, which, summed up in brief, may be epitomized thus: For some fifteen million dollars, beside the sums spent before 1865, and the dole of benevolent societies, this Bureau set going a system of free labor, established a beginning of peasant proprietorship, secured the recognition of black freedmen before courts of law, and founded the free common school in the South. On the other hand, it failed to begin the establishment of good-will between ex-masters and freedmen, to guard its work wholly from paternalistic methods which discouraged self-reliance, and to carry out to any considerable extent its implied promises to furnish the freedmen with land. Its successes were the result of hard work, supplemented by the aid of philanthropists and the eager striving of black men. Its failures were the result of bad local agents, the inherent difficulties of the work, and national neglect."

With this as a background, let us look at each step in the Change Process for insights on how racism and multiculturalism impact mediation efforts that have any of these elements affecting the process.

1. **Deconstruction**
   Deconstruction addresses the fundamental basis of prejudice, which is that prejudice is ultimately based on misinformation and/or incorrect information that has been passed on from one generation to another in order to justify particular negative attitudes toward a given group or class. To overcome that prejudice, one must first deconstruct and unlearn the misinformation that has been used to justify the prejudice. It is always interesting that whenever a country prepares to go to war, or to justify the subjugation of another group of people, the first step in the process is to dehumanize the object of the oppression. The many instances in the 20th century of genocide confirm the reality of this information-based dehumanizing process. For those attitudes and behaviors to change, the deconstruction of them must occur through the exposing of the lies and countering the misinformation with the lived experiences of people, which both belie the prejudice, but also articulate the pain, suffering and other byproducts that the victims of the prejudice must undergo. It is our belief that this is best done in dialogical process that does not depend primarily upon didactic learning, but rather, on the sharing of experiences and insights in a focused manner within the context of some basic ground rules. The entire work of anti-racism has to begin with the embracing of the deconstruction concept, and is mirrored in our first model which is Appreciating Diversity.

2. **Behavior Analysis**
   As one begins to understand the nature of prejudice and the false premises upon which it is based, one begins to develop a greater sensitivity to the learned behaviors that reinforce and act out the prejudice in the form of discrimination, bigotry, stereotyping, and in extreme cases, scapegoating and genocide. Therefore, the analysis of behaviors which support this oppressive structure becomes critical if one is to begin to develop new behaviors that counter it. Hence, Model 2 focuses on the notion of Prejudice Reduction.

3. **Power Analysis**
   The third step in the change process is that of power analysis. In model three this is called Social Constructivist by which we mean that the institutionalization of oppression occurs at a structural level when the attitudes and behaviors of people are reinforced in the culture through the application of social power. Social power is simply the aggregate of legal, and statutory powers coupled with traditions, mores and values that come together to maintain a system that advantages one group and disadvantages another. Hence, we believe that this form of oppressive system that is based on racism, is a social construct. It can be deconstructed, but in order to do so, one must make a thorough social analysis which identifies the sources of power which come into play to maintain the status quo, or must be called upon in order to change the status quo. One of the tests that we use to determine whether or not the lessons of the first three models are useable to the participants is in the final step of the power analysis which is visioning an alternative to the status quo. This visioning becomes the bridge over which individuals and institutions must travel if we are to, in fact, bring about real change, for as the old African proverb says, "If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there." It is, of course, the ultimate power of the 'I have a dream…' speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

4. **Visioning**
   Visioning in and of itself is a very simple task, that is to say, to imagine what it would look like if such and such church, organization, or society was free of racism. The problem with visioning lies in the degree to which people are so attuned to the current reality, that imagining specific realities which are different, often becomes difficult because the image that
one has is simply the reversal of the power relationships to the detriment of the former oppressors and to the advantage of the formerly oppressed. It is this inability to imagine a positive alternative which fuels a great deal of the fear that attends efforts to change racial attitudes and social status in our culture. This fear is real. It is a fundamental part of the resistance to change, and it cannot be ignored or minimized if one is to take this work seriously. In the lexicon of anti-racism work, this phenomenon is known as "White Privilege". Simply put, it is the blindness to advantage which confuses white people as they attempt to understand the affects of their racism on the one hand, and the insight needed to bring about change in behavior on the other hand. At the same time, people of color who suffer the affects of racism often internalize that oppression and become blind to the self-defeating behaviors which reinforce the structure of racism. This debate is what we call the neurotic interaction between whites and people of color that passes as a conversation about race in our culture.

Similarly, in our discussion of the model of racism, you will note that it is not simply the behaviors, attitudes, and power relations of the persons who are advantaged by the status quo that come into play, but there are similar attitudes, behaviors, and power relationships that are learned and adopted by the disadvantaged group in order to survive. This internalized oppression is an important part of the dynamic of change, and is often ignored in much interracial, so-called diversity training. They would suggest that the only groups that must change are the groups who are advantaged, and that their change in attitude and behavior will simply elicit a sigh of relief and therefore automatic progress for the disadvantaged. Indeed, when this does not occur, the learned behavior of the disadvantaged is then pointed to as proof of the unwillingness or inability of the disadvantaged group to take advantage of the new opportunities presented to them and can therefore reinforce negative stereotypes, and be a justification for the continuation of prejudicial attitudes and behaviors. This is the final articulation of a mind set that has been captured by the reality of white privilege. Visioning cuts through all of this and becomes a critical part of our fourth model which is Anti-Oppression bringing about through social analysis the fundamental principles upon which a new situation can be developed. Integral to that is the recognition that access to opportunity is only the first step in a four-step dynamic which includes sustainability, equity and justice that may be built upon access, but if it cannot be sustained, becomes worse than the previous situation, and if it does not bring about a state of equity, i.e. the way in which we treat each other, then it can still lead to friction and a worsening of the situation. If it does not finally culminate in a state of justice, then the inequities which have previously existed, will simply be perpetuated in a different form in the new structure. As Orwell noted in the conclusion of Animal Farm... "You couldn't tell the difference between the pigs and the farmers." Opposition to measures such as Affirmative Action, are classic examples of this phenomenon at work. Similarly, the current debate over the future of our public schools with regard to issues of diversity and multi-culturalism is another arena in which this level of the struggle is being played out in graphic detail, for institutional change is ultimately related to matters of social and public policy.

5. Reconstruction

The final step in the change process is the actual implementation of the new vision in concrete terms. This is the action step. Our Model 5, Institutional Racism, is designed to enable participants to build the bridge from their learning's, to action in church and society to bring about desired change, based on a strategic model that is fed by both social analysis and theological reflection. In his later work, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was beginning to understand these steps and articulate this challenge as he began to develop the notion of a "Beloved Community". Certainly, within our process, that is an important objective that we must always keep in mind, for as the change process is undergone, it is a process that is not simply designed to make individuals better, but also must have as its focus, the interaction of individuals in the context of community to make it better for everyone. It is our hope that by using a developmental process that is based on the paradigm of change, an effective thread that maintains the integrity of the learning is provided, and gives greater assurance that actions that are taken based on this process, will emerge with a real chance to succeed.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, mediators who find themselves in a multi-cultural context, must, to be effective, become multi-culturally competent persons. This is the outcome of engaging in a transformative process of multi-cultural and anti-racism awareness, and will enable such persons to:

1. ... knows the difference between race, ethnicity, and culture; that culture is more than race and ethnicity.
2. ... gets in touch with his or her own issues of prejudice and stereotypes.
3. ... challenges the myth of color blindness, and is aware of the reality of color consciousness.
4 ... understands that race, gender, class, religion, and other factors are organizing principles for good or ill in everything they do.
5 ... recognizes that there are multiple centers of truth, whose legitimacy is often determined by the amount of power any given perspective may have in a particular context.

Armed with these competencies and insights, mediators should feel more comfortable working in contexts in which the dynamics of race, class, gender and other oppressions “color” the emotions underlying the conflict and potentially affecting the outcome of the mediator’s efforts. These competencies may also serve as a useful basis for beginning your own dialogue.