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Social Justice and Intercultural Development:
New Views on Campus Intergroup Relations

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These days, all student affairs officers are charged with handling issues of group identity and intergroup relations on campus. Part of the controversial history of how this is done is captured in the changing language of the charge. From the initial demand for "racial equity," the issue expanded to include groups defined by criteria other than race – e.g. ethnic or religious heritage, sex (gender), sexual orientation, physical ability, etc. The issue became "diversity." Since it was usually unclear what this term meant, there were various attempts to clarify it, such as "valuing diversity," or "managing diversity," or "including diversity."

People who were assumedly diverse were called "people of color," harkening back to the race-based beginning. But as the issue of group identity was extended to more and more groups, particularly white Hispanics and white women, the idea of "color" became increasingly metaphorical. One mercifully short-lived variation was "people of diversity," but for the most part the generic term has become "non-dominant group members," which refers to the condition of institutional power rather than to color or diversity.

Increasingly, the idea of "culture" has entered the lexicon of intergroup relations. For instance, the term "multicultural" has largely supplanted the more political term "pluralistic" to describe the condition of having many groups around, although the term "global" in reference to international diversity is gaining ground. Contact among groups is "cross-cultural," which demands that everyone gain "intercultural" skills.

Throughout the sometimes odd semantics of this movement, there have been some stable elements. One is the concern with the power of one group to impose its way on other groups, referred to in an evaluative way as the "oppressors" and "the oppressed" or more descriptively as the "dominant group" (with power to define institutions) and the "non-dominant groups"(usually minorities, always with less institutional power). The issue of inequitable distribution of power and its abuse is generally termed "social justice."

In this article I begin with some comments on the evolution of the issue from institutional social justice to personal prejudice and racism, and then expand on what I believe is the more constructive development of a competency-based intercultural approach. I will make some generalizations based on my work with over 100 college campuses and offer some suggestions to student affairs officers on how to manage (and talk about) these processes.

Seeking Social Justice through Civil Rights

It has been 50 years since the subject of civil rights was ignited in our public consciousness by the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott. Sparked by Rosa Park's famous refusal and fanned by the young Martin Luther King, the reverberations of this event still echo on US college campuses today.

The approach to race and intergroup relations with which most student affairs officers are familiar is this demand for social justice. Originally through the Supreme Court's interpretation of the constitution and later through specific civil rights laws enacted by Congress such as Equal Employment Opportunity, the approach encourages lawsuits and specifies penalties for discriminatory behavior.

In other words, the civil rights approach is one that specifies "what not to do." If individuals or organizations do what the law says they should not, the courts can impose penalties that discourage future transgressions. And indeed, civil rights enforcement seems to have successfully limited discriminatory behavior and contributed to raising consciousness about social justice in the United States. I believe that judicial remedies will continue to be necessary to curtail the worst of our human inter-group behavior.

However, the legal approach has been asked to remedy problems for which it was not fashioned. The original concern of the civil rights movement was institutional racism, and civil rights legislation appropriately targets institutional behavior. But judicial remedies for discrimination are not very effective for individuals. At best they lead to a kind of grudging political correctness, but more often they engender active resentment and polarization. While resentment of "special treatment" such as affirmative action is more often expressed by dominant culture members, the recipients of affirmative action also resent the inference that their advancement is due to factors other than competence.

The Psychologizing of Social Justice

At least in part to address the limitations of civil rights in addressing individual discriminatory behavior, attention turned to the ideas of individual intolerance and prejudice. Armed with Gordon Alport's psychological definition of intergroup prejudice, efforts were mounted to change individuals, not just institutions. Thus began the ubiquitous racism-reduction and prejudice-reductions training programs that most student affairs offices have organized and/or endured.

The prejudice reduction approach is based on at least three assumptions:
1. Institutional racism is a result of bigoted individuals who, by virtue of their dominant cultural status, are able to incorporate their prejudicial attitudes into the policies and procedures of organizations.
2. Attitudes can be changed, including attitudes of intergroup hostility and prejudice.
3. Without bigotry and prejudice, intergroup relations would return to some more pristine state in which cooperation and trust prevailed.

These assumptions are all arguable, and the third is easily the most unlikely. There is really no historical evidence that human beings have ever lived in states of intergroup harmony. Of course the definition of who is "us" and who is "them" changes over time so that, for instance, warring tribes might have coalesced against a common enemy and even created a lasting new federation or union. But the relative harmony within the in-group was (and is) still balanced by hostility to a newly defined out-group.

It is more likely that we human beings have met strangers with one of three strategies. The first was to avoid them, a response that continues in our tendency toward actual and de-facto segregation. The second was to convert them into being "us." Aside from the obvious case of religious conversion, societies have long engaged in informal assimilation efforts such as that of the "melting pot" in recent US history or the more formal assimilation policies that some European countries have instituted in the face of massive migrations of workers.

Our third major response to strangers was to kill them. Unfortunately, we need not look far to find current examples of genocide or its euphemism "ethnic cleansing." From an evolutionary perspective, we might assume that avoiding, converting, or killing strangers had a kind of survival value. The integrity of a particular group that was necessary to find food, support families, and thereby perpetuate a genetic heritage was protected by suspicion, intolerance, and prejudice toward outsiders who might threaten the group's existence.

In any case, it appears that our natural human behavior, whether ancient or modern, whether Eastern or Western, whether matriarchial or patriarchial, is not very friendly to strangers. It therefore seems unlikely that simply reducing individual prejudice would result in more constructive intergroup behavior. The removal of a group protective mechanism like prejudice is likely to just create vulnerability – an openness that will disappear at the first hint of newly-valued strangers not having your best interest in mind.

Assuming that we humans have not heretofore lived harmoniously in multicultural societies and global villages, what we need is a model for "what to do" rather than just what not to do

Regarding the effects of bigotry, it is certainly true that members of the dominant group have more influence than others on the rules of institutions. That is, after all, the definition of "dominant." However, it is unclear that if non-dominant groups had more equitable influence on institutional policy, the policies would therefore be more equitable. Rather, it is likely that non-dominant influence would simply yield more "inclusion." This is, in fact, the stated goal or even the title of some diversity programs.

The problem is that inclusion is often really assimilation, and then it is no different than the new coalitions of "us" and "them" mentioned earlier. For instance, immigrant groups who have been included into the institutions of their adopted society are apparently no more accepting of new immigrants than longer-term natives. This and other examples should lead us to conclude that the

inclusion of non-dominant groups into institutions does necessarily make those institutions more equitable.

Can attitudes change? Well, yes, according to learning theorists and other neo-behaviorists. This assumption lies at the heart of not only prejudice-reduction programs, but the entire US American education and training enterprise. If attitudes could not change, then it would be fruitless to work on attitudes of "self-esteem" in school children, to create the proper attitude toward sex and drugs amongst teenagers, and to sell the entrepreneurial attitude of multi-millionaires to striving adults.

Leaving aside the argument some might make against any of these enterprises, the fact remains that attitudes can and do change. The question is, does it make any difference? Particularly in the area of intercultural relations, a "positive attitude" toward people of different cultures does not necessarily contribute to greater respect or improved skill in communicating across cultural divides. For instance, some racism-reduction programs have the goal of making people of dominant groups much more critical of the oppression perpetrated by their group and much more sympathetic toward those their group has oppressed. In research I will mention later, this "reversal" of polarization is not indicative of any increased competence in dealing with cultural difference.

Unlike civil rights programs, which I believe must continue, I doubt that prejudice-reduction programs have contributed much to improving intergroup relations. In my experience, they have more often exacerbated the very polarization that they ostensibly try to counter. Scarce programming resources can be used more effectively.

Developing Intercultural Sensitivity

Intercultural sensitivity means the ability to experience one's self and eventually others in terms of cultural identity and behavior. Intercultural sensitivity is not meant to exclude sensitivity to institutional power issues, or sensitivity to individual personality issues. An intercultural approach to group identity, intergroup relations, and social justice has three underlying principles:
1. Social equity is served by assuming the equal complexity but essentially different experience of all human beings. To this end, it is appropriate to describe the normative behavior of people according to broadly-defined groups (subjective culture) and for people to identify with one or more of these groups.
2. Intergroup relations is served by improving intercultural communication. This involves identifying relevant cultural differences and predicting potential misunderstanding.
3. The avoidance of abuses of power in cross-cultural situations is served by mutual adaptation. When people of different cultures equally attempt to adapt to one another, they generate "virtual third cultures" that allow constructive communication to occur.

On college campuses today, student affairs officers have no trouble identifying a myriad of "identity groups." But these groups may have very different goals and effects on the campus climate. Sometimes the groups are largely political, orientated to exposing oppression, and providing their members with an "us" identity opposed to all the other "thems." According to models of ethnic identity development, it is not surprising that such groups are popular at the age and circumstance of non-dominant college students, so some element of polarization is probably inevitable on campuses.

The identity groups that contribute more effectively to improved intercultural relations are those that identify their own subjective cultures and how they differ from the cultures of other groups of students. For instance, a group of African Americans could identify ways in which an aspect of their

communication style generally differed from that of European Americans on campus. With some basic intercultural training, such observations can be made without stereotyping either group.

Student affairs officers should encourage the development of such identity groups for all cultural constituencies on campus, including those of the dominant culture. Groups of White Men can and should discuss their cultural differences with other groups on campus. If the White Men's group instead becomes a political instrument to decry what it might define as "reverse racism," then it becomes as troublesome as a Black Men's group that does the same thing.

By the way, I think it is consistent with an intercultural approach to use culture terms rather than color terms to refer to groups. This is already pretty much standard for African Americans (US Americans of African heritage). The parallel term would be European Americans (US Americans of European heritage). European Americans need to resist the impulse to define themselves in more specific terms, such as German American, or Italian American, since only recent Americans of African heritage are also able to place a national boundary on their heritage. People of Mexican, Guatemalan, or Argentinian Latino heritage could look to their Asian compatriots for a model of how to use the general term "Asian American" while maintaining the country-specific terms – Chinese American, Japanese American – when appropriate. This practice of "semantic equality" is really rather important in establishing the kind of social equity necessary for good intercultural communication.

Intercultural programming establishes the existence of culture and defines frameworks for identifying cultural differences. The frameworks are culture-general, in that they apply to a wide range of cultures, and they are learning-to-learn tools, which means they alert the user to categories of important differences, but don't include much detail. In other words, they are not ethnographies. A typical list of such frameworks would include
• language use (the social context of language, such as ritual greetings)
• nonverbal behavior (eg, variations in gesturing, or eye contact)
• communication style (eg, linear vs. circular, or emotionally restrained vs expressive)
• cognitive style (eg, inductive vs deductive reasoning, or strategic vs tactical planning)
• cultural values (eg, the importance of hierarchically-defined ascribed roles vs egalitarian-defined achieved roles.

In designing such programming, student affairs officers need to resist the call for information about specific cultures, such as a whole program on Peruvian culture. While such programming looks "cultural," it usually doesn't do much to improve intercultural relations. It helps to remember that intercultural always needs to look at some interface between groups, rather than just at the normative behavior of the group itself.

Mutual adaptation can only occur when people are roughly similar in both their cultural self-awareness and their sensitivity to other cultures. For that reason, intercultural programming needs to proceed in developmental steps.

Developing Intercultural Competence

I defined the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) for the purpose of diagnosing the level of sensitivity of individuals and groups, for targeting training and other programming to the appropriate level of sensitivity, and for putting training topics and activities into an effective development sequence. The model is actually a piece of grounded theory, based on my observations of the intercultural experience of students, expats, and others over many years. I explained the sequence, or

stages, that emerged from that observation with concepts from psychosocial constructivism, drawing on theoreticians such as Berger and Luckmann, Bateson, Watzlawick, Barnlund, and my own theoretical work. Other models of this type, but with different theoretical bases and operational details, are William Perry's model of cognitive and ethical development and William Cross's model of ethnic identity development.

The DMIS has been tested in two ways. It was initially used successfully to provide categories for several content analysis studies of intercultural experience, and studies of this type continue to use the model. In the process of creating a quantitative instrument to measure the DMIS– the Intercultural Development Inventory – the model survived multiple tests of validity. For the last ten years the IDI has been used successfully to assess levels of intercultural sensitivity in individuals and organizations.

The DMIS describes the development of an ability to experience cultural difference. At one extreme, the most ethnocentric, people can only experience their own culture as the single reality. At the other extreme, the most ethnorelative, people experience their own culture as one among a myriad of possible experiences of reality, and they are adept at shifting their perspective among different experiences. The movement along the continuum moves through the following "stages," or positions. I will describe the positions in the context of college campuses and social justice.

Denial. This position at the beginning of ethnocentrism represents the inability to perceive alternatives to one's own cultural reality. It is difficult to recognize the essential humanity of others who are obviously different from one's self, and naïve questions about the other culture may appear disrespectful. In the extreme, power may be used to exploit others without sensitivity to their feelings of degradation.

Ideally, early college provides a rude and exhilarating awakening to the idea that other people are experiencing the world differently than one's self. Programming can facilitate this discovery with relatively non-threatening exhibitions of cultural difference in the context of lots of support for cultural identities.

Defense. Success in moving from Denial generates a protective response. As people of other cultures become more "real," they also become more threatening. Negative stereotypes of others flourish and one's own group seems clearly superior. People are polarized into "us and them." Power derived from institutional dominance or from non-dominant mau-mauing is used to support segregation.

On campuses, there are continual waves of people at this stage in political confrontation with one another, arguing for separate dormitories and eating facilities, separate programming, and policies that advantage one group over others. Programming should stress commonality: we are all students with a purpose, and human beings with similar feelings.

Defense/Reversal. This is not the necessary next stage, but rather an alternative form of the Defense position. It has traditionally been found in non-dominant groups as internalized oppression, where the dominant group culture is valued more highly than the non-dominant one. When dominant group members discover that their own group is the oppressor ("externalized oppression"), they sometimes switch sides and take on the cause of a non-dominant group with extreme zeal. Internationally, this also may happen when exchange students "go native." In both cases, the adopted group is romanticized, while one's own group is subjected to greater criticism.

Some of the most adamant demanders of social justice on campus may be dominant group members in reversal. They tend not to support programming that equalizes criticism or in other ways describes cultural groups in neutral terms. They, like others in Defense, are polarized into us and them, but now "them" are the good guys. This reversed polarization should not be mistaken for even moderate intercultural sensitvity.

Minimization. The key to resolving the polarization of Defense is to find the similarity between the poles – in other words, to minimize the differences. This is accomplished by looking at the two groups in terms of physical or psychological similarity. For instance, it is certainly true that people from all cultures typically have two arms and need to eat. Or in psychological terms, we probably can observe both introverts and extroverts in all cultures. Yet another way to minimize difference is to assume that a single principle, such as that of a religious, political, or economic ideology, applies to people of all cultures (whether they know it or not). By focusing on such real or assumed similarities, strangers become more familiar and less threatening.

Students who move from Defense and settle into Minimization may feel that they have arrived at an enlightened position. They are likely to label any discussion of cultural difference as stereotyping, or exotification. Because they think intercultural understanding is based primarily on similarity, they tend to overestimate their sensitivity to people who in fact are quite different from them. At this position, people of the dominant group underestimate their racial and cultural privilege – their exaggerated assumption of similarity leads them to also exaggerate equality of opportunity.

Student affairs officers should be careful in enlisting the aid of students at Minimization for intercultural programming. They are capable of helping people deal with Defense, but without further development themselves, they are not very good at facilitating movement to more ethnorelative positions. Also, people of non-dominant groups may react negatively to the sometimes righteous attestations of sensitivity.

Acceptance. The movement to Acceptance is accomplished by reconciling unity (similarity) and diversity (difference). Cultural difference becomes important again, this time out of curiosity rather than threat.
In accepting difference, people acknowledge that people of other cultures, while equally human to themselves, are in fact organizing their experience of reality differently – according to the different assumptions of their culture. The recognition that people are equally complex, but different, is the strongest antidote to bigotry that I know. Bigotry is reduced, not as a case of anti-racism, but as a manifestation of extending the boundary of human similarity and difference to include the strangers.

Acceptance is the minimum goal to which intercultural programming should aspire. However, to accomplish this goal, programming needs to be sequenced developmentally. Unfortunately, this is seldom the case. More common is programming that repeatedly addresses Denial by exhibiting cultural diversity (Mexico night) or that repeatedly counteracts Defense by invoking the Golden Rule in our treatment of others. While these kinds of programs do need to be presented to each new wave of students, they need to be followed by programming that more directly addresses how to understand one's own and other cultures, and ultimately how adapt to cultural difference.

Adaptation. When people are able to experience events from another cultural perspective, even to a small degree, they are ready for Adaptation. Everyone involved in a cross-cultural interaction tries to adapt as much as possible to everyone else in the interaction. This involves people drawing on an

expanded repertoire of behavior, and realizing that they can behave differently in different contexts while remaining authentically themselves.

Successful mutual adaptation yields "virtual third cultures" – new contexts that emerge intentionally from particular cross-cultural interactions. The value of cultural diversity for education (or for anything else) depends on the creation of these third-cultural contexts. There is no intrinsic value in the existence of cultural difference on campus – the value comes from diverse people generating new behavior and ideas as they try to adapt to each other.

Integration. As people become better and better at adaptation, they may lose their sense of identity as rooted in a single culture – they become "culturally marginal." The struggle at this point is to integrate an easy shifting of cultural perspective with a stable identity. This is accomplished through "constructive marginality," where identity is clearly experienced as a process of construction, not as a thing that one has or not.

Any of the more ethnorelative positions – Acceptance, Adaptation, or Integration – are valuable assets for educational institutions. When student affairs officers are operating from these positions, they are more likely to recognize or design programming that really contributes to the development of intercultural sensitivity and competence. As students are brought into these positions, our campuses will be closer to fulfilling their potential as exemplary models of multicultural living and social justice.