

Diversity in the Workshop

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BY

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I. Theory: Is Diversity Training Anti-American?

“You either are an American or you aren’t an American. You are either part of this society or you are not part of this society!” An elderly white man cried out at a diversity training workshop held recently for Professors and staff at my university back in the US. His reaction illustrates how some U.S. diversity training participants really struggle learning about issues such as discrimination, unequal opportunity and group dynamics. In my experiences conducting diversity training and teaching intercultural communication classes, I have witnessed how the material may be perceived by some as contradicting U.S. (Western) values of individualism and egalitarianism—or even appearing anti-American. In other words, diversity training challenges the worldview of the West in general and the U.S. in particular.

American participants, particularly those who do not consider themselves a member of any minority group. As diversity training becomes more global in nature, it must keep pace by recognizing the ways that different national values influence training participants. To do this, diversity trainers in the United States must become more aware of U.S. national values held by their training participants.

Let me offer some examples. Diversity training that presents the idea that certain groups have a better chance for success than others can challenge those with an extremely individualistic worldview. They believe that anyone can make it if they work hard enough.

Training participants might comment, “I think poor people should just pull themselves up by their boot straps like my family did. It doesn’t matter what minority group they belong to.” I even had a student who commented that poor, urban African Americans “can move out of the ghetto if they want to.” These comments indicate a belief in a highly individualistic worldview, where institutionalized discrimination does not exist.

An individualistic worldview can also make it uncomfortable for participants to talk about groups, a necessary step in most diversity training programs. This is evidenced by statement such as, “I’m not comfortable putting people into groups, I prefer to talk about individuals,” or, “I don’t love or hate all Japanese; for instance—I love some and hate others—it’s individual.”

Diversity training may also challenge individualistic training participants because they see the individual—not the group—as the core unit of society. As a result, individualistic training participants perceive change as occurring at an individual, not a group level. They believe that discrimination can only be eliminated when individuals treat other individuals better, not by improving the ways groups interact with other groups in society. As one training participant phrased it, “Racism is not as much of a problem since the 1960s. Racism is more of an individual problem today.”

The main assumption here is that the primary means of reducing racism is for individuals to work on their own prejudices and that societal-level cures such as affirmative action or civil rights legislation are less effective. In addition, because individualistic training participants view change as occurring at an individual level, some participants will feel personally attacked when discussing—what has formed the core of much of diversity training—race and race relations.

For instance, I often hear comments like, “I didn’t own slaves, my grandparents didn’t own slaves,” or “I feel like I have done something wrong because I was born a white male.” It is often difficult for individualistic participants to shift from an individual to a group orientation. It may be even more difficult for them to learn that far from a phenomenon of the past, structural power inequalities continue today.

Egalitarianism is deeply rooted in U.S. history. Early European immigrants came to the New World to pursue religious and economic freedom. For many, their journeys were fueled by a belief that all individuals (defined at this time as white and male) have the right to succeed—that power stems not from a king or god, but from the self. They came to build what they saw as a more just society—one that would grow progressively egalitarian. As the Declaration of Independence frames it, a society where “. . . all men are created equal” and are endowed with the rights of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

This value of egalitarianism, entrenched in U.S. American culture, can make it difficult for participants who don’t see themselves as belonging to any minority group to believe that discrimination exists. Diversity training can confront them with the fact that power inequalities do still indeed exist in U.S. society. The film, *Color of Fear* directed by Lee Mun Wah, provides an apt example. In the film, a multiracial and multicultural group of men meet once a week for several months to discuss issues of race. David, an upper class white man, does not believe the stories of racism relayed to him by the black, Latino, and Asian American men in his group. One of the most poignant moments in the film occurs when David finally admits that the experiences of oppression described to him by men of color were actually true. When asked, what if these stories were true, he responds with tears in his eyes, “Well that would be a travesty of life. You have something that shouldn’t exist. That’s very saddening. You don’t want to believe that man can be so cruel to himself or his own kind.” Society had taught David that all individuals have the freedom to succeed, regardless of status. He struggled for weeks to learn that, due to group membership and unequal power relations, the odds for economic success is better for some individuals than for others.

I recall a similar situation in one of my international classes when a student said, “Something that really hit me hard was hearing that a black friend of mine is scared that he could be hurt, beaten or killed when he gets pulled over. He is scared for his life every time a cop picks him up! As a white person, that’s something I don’t have to worry about.” Like the character David, she too had never experienced discrimination and, as a consequence, was shocked to learn that it not only exists today, but it is both widespread and persistent.

In addition to the disbelief that prejudice still exists in American society, participants with a highly egalitarian worldview may also believe that cultural differences have no bearing on success, and should not be discussed. Thus, I hear comments such as, "I don't want to talk about differences. I like to talk about how we are all the same." Or, "I dislike separation. I dislike the word diversity. I prefer a word that indicates we are all woven together." I even witnessed a student in a multicultural education class argue that, "Learning to show differences is teaching hate." Because such individuals already strongly believe that society is becoming progressively egalitarian, drawing attention to differences might indicate inequality.

Therefore, a sign of a liberated, educated individual is one who does not talk about cultural difference, let alone have tolerance for it, and better still, one who does not even notice it.

"We should all just be American, not all these labels—they're too confusing." Another consequence of an egalitarian world view expressed in this quote is unease with discussing labels. One city diversity training participant expressed this discomfort clearly when she said, "I don't really think of myself as having a racial or ethnic identity. We should all just be American, not all these labels—they're too confusing." Similarly, during my office hours, a student in one of my courses also struggled to label a classmate: "I'm not sure what her name was, I think she said . . . I don't know if I should say this it sounds so bad . . ." at this point he lowered his voice, looked me in the eyes, and continued, ". . . but I think she said she was Jewish." Students and diversity training participants express confusion over which labels to use or why certain labels sound inappropriate. They have been socialized to believe that society is a place where everyone has the same opportunities regardless of group membership, and therefore, it is inappropriate to notice, or discuss cultural labels.

At the beginning of this article, I quoted a gentleman who exclaimed, "You either are an American or you aren't an American. You are either part of this society or you are not part of this society!" His worldview was under attack. He reacted to a training simulation that brought out issues of structural-level inequalities and group dynamics. In his worldview, there are no groups, only individuals, and they are Americans; and there is no inequality, we are all equal—all Americans. This far right ideology has indoctrinated millions of educated folk world over, and poses a serious challenge for diversifying the global workforce and workplace.

His reaction is similar to many U.S. American training participants who have highly individualistic and egalitarian worldviews. They may even perceive the training as anti-American; but it is not. Their extreme view of individualism and egalitarianism mitigates other equally compelling U.S. values such as pluralism. He implies that the ideal of equality has been realized in the U.S., a fact contradicted by the many voices in Nepal, for example, who have found a "cultural voice" in recent Nepali history.

As organizations continue to “go global,” diversity training will continue to take on a more international flavor. Leaders of diversity programs must recognize how the national values of participants influence reactions to training. Individualism and Egalitarianism are just two examples of national values that may influence U.S. Americans’ responses to diversity training.

To reach international participants, diversity trainers have to explore national cultural values and be aware of their impact on diversity training. Perhaps this calls for more dialogue between diversity specialists—who have traditionally focused on issues of race, class, and gender—and interculturalists—who have a long history of exploring national values.

II. Application: The Dynamics Between Diversity Training, Intercultural Communication, and Development

But for over three billion people in Africa, Latin America and Asia, (the ‘Third World’), the lack of material comforts and the stresses of everyday living are hardly ever conceptualized as problems of intercultural communication.

The role of cultural and diversity communication in development is barely addressed by development communication. It is also highly unlikely that you will meet more than a handful of cross-cultural or intercultural communication specialists working in the world’s prominent development agencies. However, as international development efforts are concerned, at least in a self-proclaimed way, with understanding and restoring the dignity and basic needs of people, finding ways to communicate effectively across cultures would seem to be an indispensable task.

The need for cultural and diversity communication in Kathmandu

Understanding the role of cultural communication in aiding development is foremost about conceptualizing development in more human and interpersonal terms. This has several implications for the development practitioner.

Development (*bikas*), as intercultural communication, is about us, not them. It is fundamental for development practitioner to understand that development is the practitioner’s problem, not the developing society’s. It is not about a group of people who are too traditional or backward to develop, rather the solutions lie with the practitioners, who may not know how to understand the aspirations of the people they affect or are not able to communicate their strategies.

Development, as intercultural communication, is about human dignity and not about the implementation of a pre-fabricated magic formula. Practitioners should balance the developing society’s cultural values with the goals of the overall development efforts. While development practitioners are committed to ending human suffering, they are all too often focused on the right combination of resources and incentives that will deliver

a predetermined goal. Practitioners need to go a step further by listening, and not dictating, to the individuals most affected by their solutions. As cultural communication specialists, we would be better disposed to find out what people value in their lives and the kinds of everyday habits – conceived broadly as culture – that inform such values.

“Aid International” by S. Gurung in the *Kathmandu Post*, February 22, 2009 page number 4 under the “Sunday Expression.” I strongly recommend all of you to read it which makes the point eloquently and with respect to the role of foreign agencies, NGO’s and INGO’s in keeping Nepal as a economic, political, and social colony that largely contributes to Nepal’s underdevelopment.

Development, as intercultural communication, is about dialogue. Development practitioners are often portrayed as elite workers with specialized information who are to be given access to local resources and populations. As practitioners in a dialogue, it means recognizing our humanity as well as those of people affected by our interventions. Development as cultural communication involves thinking about communication among equals, not hierarchies.

What needs to be done?

Development involves re-configuring or modifying the socio-economic rules and institutions that govern the daily lives of people. The iceberg model of culture presents the rules and institutions that govern society. These societal rules and institutions are placed at the tip of the culture iceberg above the cognitive maps and the learning processes of societies – what is so often and so simply called the beliefs and values of cultures. Given this context, development as cultural communication can proceed in two ways, not mutually exclusive.

By understand a society’s culture, practitioners can modify the existing development rules and institutions that are hindering the overall development effort. Here we start from the top of the iceberg with the task of building trust and relationships. Take a very simple example of elite multilateral development agencies that are often perceived in a negative fashion by the very people they are trying to help.

By understanding culture, practitioners can empathize with the society’s values and beliefs – the cognitive maps. Here the task is to understand what types of institutions and rules are even possible, given the values and beliefs in a particular culture. The cultural communication specialist must reach her audience here much like an anthropologist in order to determine the set of development alternatives that are feasible in any society. Participatory development programs thus cannot go into the field with a predetermined set of goals seeking input from people. Instead they should seek the goals from the people themselves.

One of the most successful slum dwellers program in Mumbai, India, asked groups of slum dwellers to design their own housing rather than providing them with blue-prints. The boundaries between the NGO working with the slum-dwellers and the latter