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PRACTITIONER KNOW THYSELF! REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-WORK FOR DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE PRACTITIONERS

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Abstract
In this essay, the author discusses the importance of self-work for diversity and social justice practitioners. In fact, she asserts that it is not only important for practitioners to increase their self-awareness; it is paramount to the success of the initiatives they are leading within any client system. As many organizations are still gripped by their fear of diversity efforts, the call for practitioners to embark on this in-depth exploration is loud and clear. Given the changed landscape from overt discrimination to covert forms of discrimination, this call to action includes being well versed in personal values, biases, assumptions, privileges and pain. The author articulates her point of view regarding these challenges as a scholar-practitioner, in an attempt to renew diversity consultant's commitment to their own personal development.

Keywords: Diversity practitioner, Personal development, Subtle discrimination, Micro aggressions, Cultural competency, OD practitioner.

The Case

In many organizations, the case for diversity elicits no real debate, the evidence is undeniable, workforce diversity is smart business. "To choose not to engage in dialogue about diversity in almost any modern organization is just plain dumb." (Davidson & Ferdman, 2001, p. 36) The competence and skills required of today's diversity practitioner are more sophisticated in response to the greater complexity found inside workplace contexts. "One of the greatest challenges facing our nation and our institutions is the increasing diversity of our society." (Sue, Bingham, Porche-Burke & Vasquez, 1999, p. 1062). However, even in the best intentioned learning organizations, led by competent leaders, many diversity initiatives fail to have sustained results. Why? There are a variety of reasons for

this failure, but, the core areas are notable and consistent. These four core areas, drawn from practitioner experience and multicultural research include: 1.Absence of a Diversity/Multicultural OD framework; 2. Lack of Integrative practices; 3.Lack of skill and self-awareness by OD practitioners, and, 4.Lack of awareness, competency and attitude to confront systems of power and privilege (Rasmussen, 2006; Romney, 2008; Rowe 1990). For the purpose of this essay, I will discuss one issue I have experienced and have begun addressing in my own practice: lack of skill and self-awareness by OD practitioners. Through my examination of the scholarly research as well as practical applications, I will shed light on why this work is so complex and yet so meaningful to organizations that are focused on sustainable results via inclusive, respectful, compassionate work environments.

Practitioner Know Thyself

As previously stated, the lack of skill and self-awareness of the OD diversity practitioner can severely damage the diversity consulting experience. The work of diversity consultants is comprised of significant rewards as well as hardships. The workplace is much more complex today than it was five years ago due to globalization, cross-cultural teams, multiple languages, changing demographics and persistent forms of subtle discrimination (micro aggressions). Diversity consultants are being called upon to face their greatest challenges and greatest opportunities today. Practitioners are expected to serve as instruments that guide change, role models that possess deep self-awareness and social astuteness, and, be prepared to encounter barriers that arise during the change process. (Sue, 2008) A disservice is made to both the practitioner and the client system when a multidimensional awareness of self is not achieved. This means a close examination of their cultural values, biases and assumptions that shape their worldviews. (American Psychological Association, 2003). A worldview is the framework of beliefs through which an individual interprets the world and interacts with it. They are shaped and reshaped by experiences in society. Practitioners utilize these lenses to define, analyze and solve client issues (Bennett & Bennett, 2001/2004).

As a diversity practitioner I have recognized and leveraged three significant shifts in this field and they are: 1. Introduction of the integration paradigm (Thomas & Ely), 2. A new developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett

& Bennett) and 3. Expanded research on micro aggressions (Pierce, Sue, Solorzano). Introduced in 2002 by Thomas and Ely, the integration or learning-and-effectiveness paradigm transcends both the assimilation paradigm and the differentiation paradigm. One of the traditional ways of approaching diversity work has been the assimilation paradigm that focuses on equal opportunity, recruitment efforts, compliance with policies and mandated laws, etc. This paradigm makes the assumption that everyone is the same and therefore deserves equal treatment. On the other side of diversity efforts, the differentiation paradigm focuses on valuing differences through education, affinity groups and company-wide cross-cultural events. The integration paradigm not only promotes equal opportunity, it also demonstrates the value of cultural difference. The DMIS (Developmental model of intercultural sensitivity) model also allows individuals to examine their own level of intercultural sensitivity by beginning conversations about unconscious ethnocentrism and conscious ethnorelativism (In Dan Landis, Bennett & Bennett, Eds., 2004).

Micro aggressions (In F. Barbour (Ed.), Pierce 1970) (forms of subtle discrimination) have not been explicitly linked to this work, however, given the unintentional nature of these everyday experiences, OD practitioners need to add this to their own individualized development plans. In 1970, The Black Seventies included an article by Dr. Chester Pierce, entitled Offensive Mechanisms. It introduced the scholarly community to the concept of micro aggressions in race relations. Since then, many social scientists have dedicated their lives to the study of micro aggressive acts and the role they play in our society. As Pierce stated then, “this article will consider black-white relations, although it may be true that offensive mechanisms are used generally in many other areas of inter-personal interactions” (Pierce, in Barbour, 1970, p. 265).

Historically, little emphasis has been placed on the smaller forms of discrimination, the everyday small actions that are delivered during our interactions with others. By understanding the subtle rather than the overt, social scientists may have a stronger view of the nature of prejudice at this level (Pierce 1970; Solorzano, 2000; Sue, et al., 2008). “The enormity of the complications they cause can be appreciated only when one considers that these subtle blows are delivered incessantly” (Pierce, 1970, p. 266). Both the cumulative effect and the

target experience needs to be understood and more thoroughly examined. "We have found that these forms of discrimination are relatively common. People report two to three of these incidents per week in diary studies" (Swim, Hyers, Cohen & Ferguson, 2001; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Ferguson & Bylsma, 2003; Swim et. al. 2004).

It is important to note that the call for practitioners to be more culturally competent is not a new one. In the 70's Caplan highlighted that having un-addressed cultural variables could have negative effects on the consultation process. In the 90's several researchers (Ramirez, Lepage, Kratochwill & Duffy, 1998) pointed out that consultants are regularly placed in situations where their clients represent cultures different from their own, placing greater need to understand a wide variety of cultures. Also, in the 90's Sue called for the need to balance *emic* and *etic* when in a consulting relationship. These two terms derived from anthropology, have to do with being a part of the culture one is "studying" or in this case consulting to, emic. The other is truly someone who is culturally neutral and acting as an observer to the culture, etic. This call to action not only implies that practitioners explicitly state their role but also reinforces the need to balance each depending on the intervention being designed. Practitioners are also called upon to adapt their behaviors according to the cultural norms, values and beliefs of the system they have been hired to work with. Rosenfield (2002) stated that the failure to address cultural differences has a high probability of damaging the impact and effectiveness of the consulting practice. More recently, scholars have articulated that cultural competence is one of eight necessary skill sets for competent consultants today. (Dougherty, 2006)

So, what does it mean to be culturally competent? Whaley and Davis (2007) define this as "a set of problem solving skills that includes (a) the ability to recognize and understand the dynamic interplay between heritage and adaptation dimensions in culture in shaping human behavior; (b) the ability to use the knowledge acquired about an individual's heritage and adaptational challenges to maximize the effectiveness assessment, diagnosis, treatment; and (c) internalization of this process of recognition, acquisition, and use of cultural dynamics so that it can be routinely applied to diverse groups" (Whaley & Davis, p. 565). Romney (2008) calls this cultural competency and cultural humility. Practitioners need both. We

need the knowledge, attitude and skills that are essential in working with people across cultures, *cultural competency*. We need the commitment to continually engage in self-reflection and self-critique as lifelong learners and reflective practitioners, *cultural humility*. (Romney 2008, Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998) This requirement calls upon practitioners to regularly peruse diversity literature and engage in learning experiences outside their areas of specialization. As consultants we have to listen intently to the spoken and the unspoken around diversity. Often the unspoken shows up as the elephant in the room, challenging practitioners to have both the capability and the mindset required to address it. The elephant represents the ways in which both psychological and systemic dimensions reinforce the dynamics of oppression and domination. In my OD consulting practice, our Diversity in Action model implies practitioners do their homework to engage in effective interventions. As we describe our model, the what and the how of enabling diversity integration in an organization system, we feature seven key actions. The key components of the framework include: Foster deep self-awareness*,* Gain Senior Leader Buy-In, Conduct Organizational Audit, Define Strategic Plan (the what), Identify process/tactics (the how), Involve constituents, and Promote continuous institutional learning. This framework enables us to lead our clients into action. This requires being change competent as well. There are many places for practitioners to go to expand our competency in becoming interculturalists, multiculturalists or integrative practitioners in diversity work (Adams et al., 2000; Alderfer, 1987, 1990, 1997; Andersen & Collins, 2007; Jackson, 2005; Thomas, 2005). Before we can enable organizations to take action we must do the work on ourselves. This means immersion in a rigorous examination of our worldviews, our own privilege and points of disadvantage in order to connect with the range of diversity within the client organizations we serve. As we continue to examine the essentiality of knowing ourselves as diversity practitioners, we must remember the emotional demands that are placed on us when implementing this work. We can face hurtful or damaging projections by client organizations and/or equally draining, the high expectations placed on us by other members of social groups in which we belong. (Romney, 2008; Thomas, 2008) As diversity consultants we can face blatant assaults, such as: (a) “who do you think you are?”; (b) “why should I listen to you?”; (c) “is this the data speaking or your opinion?” These types of verbal hits

can be common retorts when offering our expertise on diversity related topics.

When facilitating a multi-cultural education event at a Fortune 500 manufacturing organization back in the mid 90's, I was confronted by a participant after leading a section on sexual orientation in which I disclosed my identity as a lesbian. The participant shouted, "I don't care what you and *your* people do, I just know it's morally wrong and you'll go to hell for it in the end. Why do you feel the need to be in our face with it – just keep it to yourselves, that's all I'm asking." Being aware of my own emotional response during this encounter was extremely challenging. I felt personally invalidated. I was concerned about modeling behavior for the other participants involved and also being courageous enough to explore his worldview. However, before I could speak, other gay men and lesbian women were coming out and sharing how his anger and fear were upsetting and hurtful to them. In this case, I was able to rejoin the conversation by asking more questions of this participant and others to begin to better understand his worldview and share ours. I was reminded of Covey's "seek first to understand, then to be understood" (1989) and how difficult that really is in practice when you are the target of prejudiced attitudes. The group ultimately made a shift from cautious dialogue, to candor with compassion and deep listening. As we all committed to stay in the learning zone throughout the weeklong intensive, we shared our own personal experiences and engaged in self-reflection that illuminated biases and blind spots. In the end, the individual who struggled the most with the topic demonstrated a shift in self-awareness both in his words as well as in his actions. By the end of the week, he said that this experience had changed his life, both professionally and personally.

When hostile clients are expressing their fear and anger in the form of resistance, the best stance a practitioner can have is one of compassion and empathy. In his work, Wells states that "the consultant must understand the heart of the group," (Wells, 1999, p. 383) and by that he means understand their position, perspective, worldview and experiences. He also means for us to find ways to keep them close in our heart. Finding the empathy to remain steadfastly present in these consulting engagements is the work of the OD practitioner (Jordan, Kaplan, Stiver & Surrey, 1991; Jordan & Romney, 2005). In order to build this individual accountability, a practitioner must focus

on building effective relationships. An essential part of this accountability is the development of empathy for the experiences of individuals and groups different than us. As practitioners, we can demonstrate true empathy for others by attending to their personal biographies. Through our curiosity, we can probe to understand both the personal experiences as well as the institutional factors that make each person unique (Hill-Collins, 1989).

The work to develop our emotional intelligence may begin with empathy but certainly goes well beyond that one dimension. As a practitioner, I have examined my own emotional intelligence by using the EQ map® (a self-assessment instrument by Essi Systems) on a regular basis throughout my career. This practice has enabled me to set some important goals with regard to enhanced self-reflection, development of competencies and insight into attitudes and beliefs.

The role of ally is another way to keep clients in our hearts and practice empathy. As Kivel has noted being allies to people of color and those in non-dominant groups is an ongoing strategic process. (In Andersen & Collins, (Eds), Kivel, p. 551) The acts of unintentional 'isms' are pervasive and insidious. As much as we'd like to believe they no longer exist, they do. If we apply Kivel's guidelines in our work, we may be able to address these issues directly. Drawing upon a basic assumption that forms of subtle discrimination (micro aggressions) are everywhere, every day – we can then assume that based on our privileges we don't always see or feel what others see and feel. We must notice how micro aggressions are used to minimize, invalidate and silence those who do not have power. An example of a verbal micro aggression in the workplace is, "You should be prepared for the meeting with Susan, she's Asian and can be a real bitch." As practitioners we also must recognize the systemic connections and interconnectedness of all forms of injustice.

As consultants, it is important to practice transparency regarding our areas of privilege and demonstrate strong self-discovery and learning practices. Self-awareness, learning practices, coaching forums, partnerships with other interculturalists, feedback from clients, emotional intelligence development and other assessment tools, are all part of the roadmap that leads to success as a diversity practitioner. The second area that is extremely important for practitioners is the modeling of speaking out when we see both micro and macro

injustices occurring. It is part of our commitment to our clients to have the courageous conversations even in the face of extreme adversity or resistance.

There are many forms of resistance inside organizations in regards to diversity work. In their chapter on Dancing with Resistance, Leadership Challenges in Fostering a Culture of Inclusion, Wasserman, Gallegos & Ferdman, create a strong case about "conflicting narratives that live in organizations in the conversations that people have." (Thomas, (Ed.), p. 175) I refer to the exasperation found inside some organizations today at the mere mention of the word 'diversity,' as the D Word. Some of these individuals feel that fifteen to twenty years ago was the time to invest millions of dollars on this type of work and what resulted were increased levels of personal awareness with no impact to bottom-line results. Therefore they have become jaded and skeptical of the criticality of this work. The word itself, diversity, often elicits fear in individuals. "It appears to strike fear into the hearts of so many Americans." (Romney, 2008, p. 141) First and foremost, as practitioners we need to work with our clients to understand and unpack their fear in facing this word and what it means. As many organizations take the first step toward equity, they realize that it is a gateway to other questions – questions of access, equal opportunity, cultural competence, bias, conflict management, climate and culture changes and overall multi-cultural organizational development. Diversity work must also deal with issues of power and privilege as well, which many practitioners avoid, simply due to the fact that they themselves have not increased their own sense of awareness of their dominant status. Given that micro aggressions are often delivered from a dominant group member to a non-dominant group member, power and privilege play a central role. As a result, another call to action for diversity consultants is the need to examine their own unintentional and unconscious expressions of bias. This requires a concerted effort to identify and monitor microaggressions within the consulting context. If we can make our invisible acts more visible, we can be role models for the client organizations we are engaging with.

Conclusion - Why This Work Matters

For the past eighteen months, I have had the pleasure of working with the senior leadership team in a Fortune 500 retail organization based in the United States, embarking on their global expansion into the Middle East this year.

The work began as an organization development intervention examining the capabilities of their senior leadership team and preparing for a reduction in force. My work has spanned across a variety of areas over the past eighteen months including: organization assessment, capability analysis, diversity and inclusion initiatives, and, leadership development programs. The senior leader responsible knows it's more than just good intentions that will make a difference in this organization. Taking on diversity work requires courage and competence. With each part of the consulting process, I have learned more about myself by examining and re-examining my own values, biases and assumptions. I have held up the mirror to ensure that I am "walking the talk" and I have asked for feedback from others that I trust and respect. The most recent example of being a role model had to do with challenging a manager on her expression of minimization of cultural difference. She was making a point that we have more in common being mothers than we hold in levels of difference. After asking for her permission to challenge her thinking, I asked her what she thought of the difference between her role as a heterosexual mother and my role as a homosexual mother. In the silence that followed, I could see the connections and newly found awareness. She understood that in minimizing our difference she was focused on a single reality, the dominant reality, that all parents are heterosexuals. In applying universal principles and good intentions she was minimizing the deeper cultural differences that operate in a variety of cultural contexts. (Bennett & Bennett, 2004) It was only with our trusting relationship that is built on mutual respect and my willingness to be transparent, that our shared learning could occur. This type of self-exploration takes commitment, discipline, energy and often times, intestinal fortitude.

Lastly, as integrative diversity practitioners it is now our time to understand, work with and investigate the role of micro aggressions that we have engaged in so we can better serve our clients. The underground unintentional expressions of bias are the next frontier for diversity consultants. Dr. Pierce called this out in 1974, "one must not look for the gross and obvious. The subtle, cumulative miniassault is the substance of today's racism." (Pierce, 1974, p. 281). It is still an under examined, under researched issue in today's organizations. By doing our own self-exploration, we will be better prepared to engage in these types of courageous conversations and note the unspoken and the opaque. As in the counseling relationship, organization

consultants are trained to listen, demonstrate empathy, be objective, communicate with candor and compassion and leverage their own expertise to enable clients to solve their problems and address opportunities. (Grencavage & Norcross, 1990). With the trust built, consultant and client, can venture into challenging areas, such as expressions of microaggression in their organization. As a result of his work on racial micro aggressions, Dr. Sue has defined three forms of microaggressions: microassault, micro-insult and micro-invalidation. (Sue et. al 2007) The microassaults are typically verbal or nonverbal attacks meant to hurt intended victims, microinsults are forms of communication that convey insensitivity or rudeness and microinvalidations are communications that exclude or negate the experiences, feelings, thoughts of the target. In organizations, microassaults would be considered expressions of prejudice including: name-calling, purposeful discriminatory actions, etc. Microinsults are more subtle and often convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient. Microinvalidations are expressions of exclusion. Drawing from examples of racist micro aggression, it has been noted that these experiences lead to "increased levels of racial anger, mistrust and loss of self-esteem for persons of color; prevent white people from perceiving a different racial reality and create impediments to harmonious race-relations." (Spanierman & Heppner, 2004; Thompson & Neville, 1999). Given the difficulty in explaining the experience of microaggressions by recipients and the misguided self-perception by many white Americans in being well intentioned human beings that believe in equality and democracy, it is hard to truly identify microaggressive acts. In some cases, they may be harder to confront or deal with given their veiled, opaque quality. Overt acts of discrimination are obvious and often easier to handle. (Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000).

This is where integrative practitioners can make a significant impact inside organizations. The recognition of what it means to be "culturally different" from others and how that often can be subtle and invisible to others who are not different, is the first place to start the work. As practitioners, it is our job to educate ourselves on the various types of microaggressions and what our clients are experiencing in their culture. We can begin the education by listening to our client's stories and experiences of forms of subtle discrimination. Practitioners have great opportunities to educate those who deliver

these insidious insults. This area represents unexplored terrain in both the scholarly and practitioner communities.

The work of the OD Diversity practitioner is replete with triumphs and tribulations. We are often driven to develop individual and collective potential for creating workplace environments characterized by a sense of fairness and outstanding results. (Romney, 2009) Yet, our fear and our clients fear can paralyze us. It is the fear of taking responsibility for diversity work that can paralyze us. We can help others shift from awareness to action. Often this means incorporating education about privilege which leads to forms of subtle discrimination. "The ultimate white privilege is the ability to acknowledge its existence and do nothing about it." (Sue & Constantine, 2007, p. 136) As most organizations are still white, European American in origin, this is one of the greatest obstacles facing diversity practitioners today. The tendency to adopt the worldview values of the dominant culture, especially by white consultants can be a significant inhibitor in driving change. Biases are embedded in each and every one of us as well as organizational practices, policies and structures. As practitioners we need to have the courage to face ourselves first and foremost and our own forms of resistance. Then, we can dismantle and face the inequities inside the systems we serve. "Like dancing, working with resistance requires gracefully and skillfully acknowledging, engaging and moving with the forces." (Wasserman, Gallegos & Ferdman, 2008, p. 188)

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