

Beyond the Myth of Race: A New Approach to Multicultural Education for the 21st Century

We are currently in a time period where corrective measures are being taken to address the excesses of discrimination on one hand and political correctness on the other. Political correctness seems to have run its course and is now experiencing a strong backlash. With affirmative action under siege, multicultural education programs are next on the agenda of assault. In addition, schools are also promoting the study of “Whiteness” to further understand the basis of racism and how to eliminate it. Yet, the evidence is clear, there is no biological basis for the myth of race. Biologically there are no human racial categories, only variations of one humanity. So why do diversity training initiatives and multicultural education programs continue to focus on biological differences, such as color, race, ethnic origins, cultural preferences, and phenotype as the source of the problems of human relations?

Roger Bastide long ago exposed this fallacy when he declared: “Color is neutral; it is the mind that gives it meaning” (Bastide, 1967). Yet, the usual theoretical approaches to multicultural education to resolve racial, ethnic, gender, and other forms of group conflict, even the latest one addressing the meaning of “whiteness,” still focus on these superficial, horizontal differences—the human *container* and how it looks. But to effect lasting change we have to look deeper, to the *contents* of the container, the deep-level Value Systems

within—our paradigms, mindsets, and worldviews—that determine how we “see” the world, think, and act in harmony with that vision

Race Is One Lousy Sorter¹

It is human nature to categorize people by trying to distinguish one person from another. All cultures do this. The question is: Is such action for-better or for-worse? good or bad? invidious or constructive? fair or unfair? accurate or not? PRE-judicial or merely a sorting?

There is abundant evidence that race is a one lousy sorter of human differences. It just isn't very predictive at all. But it's a good visual sorter and is thus a great tool for small minds that don't care to delve further than the follicle line, dermal layer, or bone structure. Nonetheless, with other things like opportunity and information being equal, the statistics simply don't stack up. Now, that isn't to say that cultural artifacts which surround members of a “racial” or “ethnic” category in a particular context don't matter—they obviously do. They're just not hard-wired into the DNA. This is where the “majority” and “minority” issues become important— who sets the rules for the dominant culture? Who gets to be the judge? Who's scorecard applies? What determines a “win?” Who exploits whom?

What I am proposing here is a more objective method of multicultural education to understand human differences without resorting to the invalid categories of race. It provides a language of difference that transcends those

superficial categories (and characteristics) and forces the user to look beneath the surface to the deeper thinking systems within—the worldviews, paradigms, and operational Value Systems. Jungian models and other assessments can do the same sort of thing, but the approach introduced here suggests both more data points along the spectrum of difference and a trajectory of change. It can serve as common ground for widely diverse people to open up dialogue on what divides and unites us.

Furthermore, and I believe this to be central to the argument, it demands that one look at *both* the neurology inside (our Coping Mechanisms) and the context outside (our Life Conditions)—the bio-psycho-social milieu. Two members of the same race can sense the world in profoundly different ways. Two members of different racial heritages can perceive exactly the same reality. How one has experienced living because of one's race matters, but it doesn't guarantee a thing. When one breaks through the colors of skin, one sees a different set of colors, i.e., the colorful pattern of ways of thinking about “the real world” and the diverse decisions systems for acting accordingly.

A New Theoretical Model

There is a basic flaw in multicultural education models that focus on race to unlearn racism. They fail to recognize that racism and other forms of exclusion function on *two* dimensions—Horizontal and Vertical—not just one. The

approach here introduced represents a new theoretical model, a fresh approach that adds the other critical dimension to unlearning racism—the vertical. If multicultural education is to survive its current attacks, it will need to shift the focus from surface horizontal differences of race, color, gender, culture, to below-the-surface vertical layers of Value Systems.

A “value system” is a worldview, a set of priorities, a paradigm, a mindset, an organizing mental framework for deep-level thinking at the bottom-line—the threshold of no negotiation. Values Systems are complex Coping Systems—decision making motivators and ways of thinking—that emerge in response to Problems of Existence. There are nearly 6 billion people in the world today, and though we all come from some 100,000 genes—ALL of us—we share only a few basic value systems.

This new theoretical model, called “Spiral DynamicsTM”, was developed by Don E. Beck and Christopher C. Cowan (1996) of the National Values Center, Inc. in Texas. It derives primarily from the seminal work of Clare W. Graves, late Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Union College in New York, whose research gave rise to the Theory of Levels of Existence (Graves, 1974), and secondarily, from biologist Richard Dawkins' (1976) concept of “memes” (rhymes with “themes”). Graves’ research went far beyond that of other scholars to explain why people are different. “Human beings exist at different ‘levels of existence,’” Graves declared. “At any given level, an individual exhibits the behavior and values characteristic of people at that level.” These levels are open-ended, as

there is no “final stage,” nor are they tied to horizontal variations, but are manifested as a dynamic spiral of levels of human development.

What moves one from one level to the next is when old explanations and experiences no longer adequately explain one’s reality as a result of changes in one’s Life Conditions, which now exceed the parameters of one’s present worldview. Like Russian Matroshka Dolls that are “systems within,” when one’s cup overflows one then moves to the larger, more encompassing system. Previous Value Systems, however, do not go away; they just shift down the spiral. And, if changing Life Conditions warrant, we may return to these previous systems. It is this interaction between our “real life” experiences and our mind/brain capacities that causes these Value Systems to awaken, ebb, and flow. Without our latent mental capacities, the *world outside* has nothing to trigger, as is the case with Alzheimer victims and the insane. Without the stimuli from outside, *systems within* may not have cause to be awakened, the case of closed communes and the Amish. Thus *both* nature and nurture are important. Within this spiral of emerging Value Systems are found the various responses and approaches to education today, as well as reactions to multicultural education.

Dawkins’ contribution explored how cultural ideas (memes) impact our social development, much like genes determine our physical development. Thus, memes, like genes, self-replicate, but by means of thought-contagion from brain to brain as cultural units of information, that use the human mind as a host, and

attach themselves to individuals, organizations, entire cultures, and societies. Racism is a meme—a contagious ideas—that infects individuals, organizations, entire cultures, and societies. And, like a deadly virus, it has contaminated all areas of life. What divides us in society, however, is not our *genes*, but our *memes*. We look different because of our *genes*; we think and act different because of our *memes*. Our genes are only Horizontal differences. It is the deep, memetic, magnetic forces on the Vertical axis that attract and repel humanity.

The implications of Spiral Dynamics™ for a theoretical and applied methodology of teaching and designing a multicultural curriculum to unlearn racism and other “isms” are rather simple but profound ones. Racism is not a problem, it is a *symptom* of a problem. Prejudice, discrimination, sexism, concerns for diversity are not social problems; they are *social symptoms* of a larger problem. The problem? The need to understand the conflicts and confluences of emergent Value Systems at the deep decision levels within people, which emerge in response to the life conditions persons encounter. These Value Systems, or memes, serve as social “magnets” that attract or repel beliefs, behaviors, and bureaucracies—the cultural “stuff”—that give shape, surge, and substance to racism, sexism, and other expressions of exclusion, aligning them with congruent lifestyles or rejecting them if out of sync. They are the “invisible forces” within people and systems from which emerges the various “isms” that fail to recognize variance in the human family. Result? A mind/brain selective vision that

excludes the value of the other, so as to harmonize Conditions Outside (our external world) with Systems Inside (our internal world, our mindset).

Spiral Dynamics™ moves beyond racial and ethnic stereotypes, which are the fossils of human activity in the past and which will have no role to play in the new millennium, to explore deep-level Value Systems. Only human values count, as these are expressed at the various levels of human development and existence. It is here at the root sources of Value Systems where teaching and research about racism needs to focus. Yet, ninety-five percent of all multicultural education, race relations coursework, campus workshops on diversity, unlearning racism and sexism, conflict resolution, and social policy planning focus on surface differences, the Horizontal dimension. Such efforts merely celebrate or seek to understand biocultural differences—skin color, ethnic origins, cultural preferences. While these differences may impact one's life conditions, focusing on them does little to resolve group conflicts. Of greater importance are Value Systems and ways of thinking from which emerge choices that impact what happens at the surface level of human interactions. It is at this Vertical dimension of the spiral of awakened thinking systems—memes—where genuine multiculturalism and human relations training can effect change by showing the influence that diverse Value Systems have on the socioeconomic development of human societies.

The Greatest Diversity of All

What this new approach enables us to understand is that human diversity at the deep levels of cultural value systems and thinking systems may be *the greatest, most empowering, diversity of all*, for these determine *how* people think, not just *what* they say, value, or do. It exposes how Thinking Systems often result in different socioeconomic outcomes between groups. The key question for educators is: “What kind of *thinking* prompted that kind of behavior?” Our struggle is not with human *types*, but with the memes within us that are at war. Since memes are deep decision systems *in* people, not *types of* people, they transcend race, gender, age, class, culture, and societies.

All of that said, there is a danger here that must not be overlooked. Some schools are barely beginning to acknowledge, respect, and celebrate the diversity of their constituencies, even though much of this is at the surface level—food, lifestyles, culture, books, art, music, history, etc. Others are not even there yet. To come along and say, “Hey, that’s nice, but you’re barking up the wrong tree; focus on the roots—look below the surface to the source of differences,” can cause some trauma and some very angry reactions. For it places people in the position of arriving late at the feast of diversity as the lights are about to be put out. Both the horizontal and vertical dimensions are important. So, while acknowledging the value of differences and what each can bring to the common table, we must move people from an emphasis on the horizontal alone to the real

source of the differences, people's Value Systems from which emerge the life choices that influence what they say and do. The idea is not to discourage those that are barely starting to make an effort to finally get onboard in respecting differences, by telling them "Forget it, that's not where its at." Such an attitude can result in their returning to the old vomit, and saying, "See, I was right in the first place. All this diversity stuff is hogwash." The idea behind the model presented here is to move people from temporary surface solutions to more lasting results, based on deep-level analyses of root causes and core memetic ways of thinking, while valuing their efforts at inclusiveness.

Multiple Futures Up Ahead

A successful multicultural education program will move the dialogue from surface concerns to deep decision systems within. At these levels it becomes obvious that there is no *single* future of racism, just as there is no single memetic level at which all of humanity is located. What the future holds for racism is one of *multiple futures* with degrees of severity, depending on the memetic level of its expression. Thus, racism will fluctuate between worsened conditions to situations where it will be non-existent, depending on people's Value Systems and at what level of existence they are operating. Failure to understand this results in a Flatlander perspective—a one-size-fits-all approach—reflected in many of multicultural education programs and race relations courses.

Edwin A. Abbott, in his fictional classic, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884), describes “Flatlanders” as persons unable to recognize the vertical, spiral structure of human development. Rather, they focus on superficial, horizontal differences, rigid categories, simplistic types, and on labels to put on people. They put everyone through the same car wash, one-size-fits-all approach, paint only with broad horizontal brush strokes, as “flavor-of-the-month” instructors who project their own values, fears, biases, and prejudices on others, due to a failure to see other dimensions and perspectives. To concentrate efforts only along the Horizontal axis, is merely to catalogue biosocial traits and inventory differences. To address problems of human relations requires managing both axes. However, the solution cannot come from the surface level, the Horizontal, but from the root sources, the Vertical. The question then becomes not one of how to “manage diversity,” but one of how to “awaken the natural flows,” the next level of development within people, organizations, systems, and environments. This enables us to understand the *multiple futures* global diversity will take in this new millennium.

This is the new direction for a successful multicultural curriculum in the 21st century. If such a curriculum is to become the catalyst for change in human relations, unlearning racism, and how to lessen racism’s impact on societies, on school systems, and between groups throughout the country and the world in preparation for the Third Millennium, then the present focus of multicultural

education must change. New times produce new minds . . . as well as new methods.

¹The ideas in this section come from a conversation with Chris C. Cowan.

****Spiral Dynamics™** is a registered program of the National Values Center, Inc., in Denton, TX.

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