

Why Can't We All Just Get Along?

One of the greatest questions that has ever been asked is, “can't we all just get along?”. In this day and age, when more and more people are asking for change, “the answer is still no”. Unfortunately, “whether it's a matter of can't or won't, the truth is that we simply don't get along” (Johnson, p. 1). There are endless reasons why, but three reasons, in particular, that seem to stand out and feed the disharmony are stereotypes, privilege, and denial.

It Doesn't Matter Who We Are, It's Who People Think We Are

Throughout history, many people have come to learn that, “it doesn't really matter who we really are. What matters is who other people think we are, which is to say, the social categories they put us in” (Johnson, p. 35). It is often said that people fear what they do not know, but in reality, “it isn't what we don't know that frightens us, it's what we think we know” (Johnson, p. 13). When a person is in an unfamiliar situation or with an unknown person, that person makes inferences and assumptions in order to gain a better understand of what is happening or who the person is. Unfortunately, rather than actually finding out more information, people make assumptions based on stereotypes. These assumptions lead people to feel as if they know something significant even if they do not have any credible experience or knowledge.

Sadly, a great deal of these stereotypes lead to negative feelings and treatment, which perpetuate a sense of privilege over another. Johnson (2006) explains that, “privilege doesn't derive from who we are or what we've done. It is, as we've seen, a social arrangement that depends on which category we happen to be sorted into by other people and how they treat us as a result” (p. 35). So, regardless of what a person thinks about themselves, or what social categories they place themselves in, other people will treat them in a way that relates to how *they*

see that person, even if their vision is completely skewed by stereotypes and assumptions. In addition, the stereotyped people receive these messages and it begins to, “shape how [they] think and what [they] believe about [themselves]” and others as well (Haro, p. 48).

If There is a Long End, There Must Be a Short End

Experience has proven that it is quite easy for people to hold themselves in accordance with the standards of others, whether knowingly or unknowingly. According to Haro (2010), “we are each born into a specific set of social identities” and we are then, “socialized by powerful sources in our worlds to play the roles prescribed” (p. 43). In American society, there are multiple social identities that each person has and this collection of identities puts you into one of two groups: the dominant group or the other group. The, “stereotyped Other, is culturally different from the dominant group, because the status of the Otherness creates specific experiences not shared by the dominant group” (Young , p. 42). A significant part of why the two groups have a lack of shared experience has much, if not all, to do with privilege.

Privilege is a reality in which dominant and other groups live out on a daily basis and it, “exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they’ve done or failed to do” (Johnson, p. 19). Unfortunately, the group that is denied something of value is seen as getting the “short end of the stick” and as social interaction has taught, “there can’t be a short end of the stick without a long end, because it’s the longness of the long end that makes the short end short” (Johnson, p. 118). Social groups are interconnected and they cannot exist without interplay between them. There could not be a dominant group if there was not another group there to dominate because, “a group exists only in relation to at least one other group” (Young, p. 36).

Feeding and Breeding Denial

Therefore, social identities were created in order for the dominant group to indeed have another group to dominate. For example, “something like skin color has no importance at all in social life but was turned into something significant in order to create, justify, and enforce privileges” for the dominant group (Johnson, p. x). They use these seemingly insignificant differences between the groups to, “include or exclude, reward or punish, credit or discredit, elevate or oppress, value or devalue, leave alone or harass” (Johnson, p. 16). In America, the dominant group is white, heterosexual, and male and the issue lies in the fact that this dominant group, and the white dominant group in particular, “don’t see privilege as a problem” (Johnson, p. 69). Tim Wise discusses that it is one thing for white people to acknowledge racism, but another thing entirely for them to acknowledge that others receive privilege and benefit because of racism. White people are intelligent humans, but the reality of racism does not negatively affect them, so they do not have to know or think about it (Pathology of White Privilege).

White people live in the denial that if they do not see it or experience it, then it does not exist. They also live with the belief that even if it did exist, “nothing we do can make a difference” and they, “deal with it only enough to make it seem to go away” (Johnson, p. 65, 131). Racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and heterosexism are everywhere, “but we don’t know how to talk about it, so we act as though it’s always somewhere other than here and not in the room with us” (Johnson, p. 5). Tim Wise argues that a failure to talk about race merely feeds denial (Pathology of White Privilege). White people live in a “luxury of obliviousness” and it, “makes a lack of conscious intent a path of least resistance that’s easy to following without knowing it” (Johnson, p. 117).

Fitting into the Puzzle

My social identity markers define me as white, heterosexual, female, middle-class, non-disabled, primarily European ethnicity, American, and English-speaking. The three themes of stereotypes, privilege, and denial have helped me to think differently about how my social identity markers help to shape how I am treated and how others are treated by me and as a result of me. The greatest idea that these themes have helped me to understand is how the, “categories that define privilege exist all at once and in relation to one another” (Johnson, p. 50).

As described, I am not just considered a white person or a woman or an American. I am all three of those things, plus the others mentioned above, all at once, and as a whole, they define me and how I am viewed. If I were to use the simplistic calculation of privilege that Johnson describes, I would gain a point for each of my identities, except that of being female, in which I would lose one. My net privilege would then be 6 points. This number, although not realistic, truly puts my level of privileged possibilities into perspective because the only one that could potentially lead to stereotyping and other ill-treatment is that of being a woman.

Before reading and viewing the information in Module One, I would have merely thought of myself as being fortunate for not having to face a lot of oppression, but now I see that, “misfortune is connected to good fortune and that, “the reality of [someone] having to deal with racism and sexism every day is connected to the reality that [someone else doesn’t]” (Johnson, p. 7). Personally, because I have been living in a state of denial, I have not taken the time to see how my fortunes have led to others’ misfortunes. It has been difficult to pinpoint exactly what or who was affected. Therefore, the most beneficial aspect of this module has not been to point out these instances, but to transition my mind to begin to point out such instances and then see what I

can do to make the situation better. I have seen now that, “there is no such thing as doing nothing. There is no such thing as being neutral and uninvolved. At every moment, social life involves all of us” (Johnson, p. 119). So really, the big question is not necessarily what has been done, because that is in the past, but what I will do in the future to avoid it from happening again.

This module has also challenged me to think about my profession. As a teacher, it can be quite easy to blame stereotypes to attempt to solve the mysteries of why some students have difficulties finding success in school. For example, hyperactive students have always been a challenge for me and I often stereotyped their behavior by blaming the problem on bad parenting, lack of self-control, etc. While I have never supported the use of medication, I would still teach in a way that would require students to disable their ADHD behaviors all on their own. Looking back, I see that a lot of the issue came from my teaching. Children with so-called ADHD are being taught by an education system that demands conformity, but in reality, each child is different, and teachers should be teaching to the child. Children do not need medication, they merely need more stimulating educations. I have been challenged now to find new strategies and provide such a learning environment for my students (Changing Education Paradigms).

I have also been challenged to think about, “what kind of people we are turning out”. As a teacher, am I creating a learning environment that teaches about diversity and the “isms” so that my students are, “better able to address and help end human suffering” (Critical Pedagogy)? What can I do as a teacher to ensure that my students are sent into the world able to cope with such issues and respond in productive, life and world changing ways? Am I helping myself and my students think about ways in which we can transform ourselves, our school and schooling, and our society (Challenge of Defining Multicultural Education)?

Sources

Harro, B. (2010). Ch. 6 The cycle of socialization; Ch. 7 The cycle of liberation. In M. Adams, W. Blumenfeld, R. Castaneda, H.W. Hackman, M. Peters, X Zuniga (Eds.), *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* (45-51; 52-58). New York: Routledge.

Johnson, A. (2006). *Privilege, power, and difference* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.

Young, I.M. (2010). Five Faces of Oppression. In M. Adams, W. Blumenfeld, R. Castaneda, H.W. Hackman, M. Peters, X Zuniga (Eds.), *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* (35-45). New York: Routledge.

Changing education paradigms <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U>

Critical pedagogy <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6t-HSXzkV6A>

Tim Wise - The Pathology of White Privilege <www.youtube.com/watch>