

# DIVERSITY

## What Is Diversity?

**Kathy Castania**

### **Introduction**

Despite all the talk about *cultural differences* and *diversity*, confusion remains. Behind these words still lie the basic underlying assumptions about the people who make up this nation, how they get along with each other, and how well they are living up to ideals of equality.

The words cultural differences and diversity conjure up different impressions depending on people's own past experiences. Some who feel historically excluded respond to the notion of diversity with the question, "Different from what?" Others question what the fuss is all about and want to quickly turn attention to similarities—with the good intention of easing interpersonal tension and strain. And some people have attended a workshop, talked to a friend, or read an article that made them think about differences in a new way.

The dynamics of these differences and how we have been taught to perceive them are what we will explore in this series of fact sheets to bring clarity to a complex subject. This clarity will allow us to work to eliminate discrimination from our personal and professional lives, learn to be in more authentic relationships with members of other groups, and ensure that we are inclusive, rather than exclusive, in all that we do. The first two fact sheets will explore some of the dimensions of diversity and later ones will discuss specific oppressions.

This fact sheet begins by acknowledging that most people think diversity means celebrating different international identities. But diversity also encompasses all the differences

among groups in the United States. Then it explains how all people have both individual and group identities which affect their perceptions and how they are treated. Following that is a discussion of how group prejudice combined with institutional power leads to social oppression.

Next is an explanation of how individuals take on the imposed roles of their group identities and how some people have tried to reject those roles—dominant groups taking on ally roles and excluded groups becoming empowered. Then the fact sheet describes the elements of oppression and how people can learn to overcome them, with the ultimate goal of all groups sharing power.

### **International Diversity**

The idea of cultural differences has been connected primarily to ethnic cultures outside the United States and has focused on examining the values and belief systems of cultural groups from many countries. Experiences in other cultures are important because they can heighten people's awareness of differences and give them the experience of being outsiders in a group of people who look, behave, and think differently than they do. Some people in the United States have experiences with international cultural diversity when they travel to other countries to study or visit or when they have extensive interactions with newly arrived immigrant groups. But these experiences, if limited, can lead to the "tourist approach" to diversity, only examining different cultures from their most evident manifestations: food, celebrations, dance, etc. People can get the impres-

sion that everything that is different is also "exotic," apart from the norm.

Many white people in the United States were reared with television and film images of people in other countries, particularly Africa, that were shaped and framed from the white perspective only. Africans, in stories like *Tarzan*, were shown in inferior roles to white people. This approach negates genuine relationships and knowing the depth and substance of another culture. It can also lead people to avoid learning about differences within the domestic United States. Some people are more willing to go to another country than to bridge the divisions in their own communities.

### **Domestic Diversity**

Domestic cultural diversity has evolved to mean not only differences among ethnic and racial groups within the United States but also differences among groups defined by gender, religion, age, abilities, sexual orientation, education, and class. The focus here is U.S. socialization—what we learned about differences growing up in our society. Although many of us are interested in and would like to know more about people from other countries, there is an urgency for a similar interest in domestic intercultural relations, yet sometimes it feels more uncomfortable and threatening to deal with differences so close to home. Despite this feeling, awareness of our domestic intercultural relations will improve our sensitivity to international cultures and give us a larger identity with which we can more accurately represent the United States.

Every country has a unique history of how minority and majority populations get along—some with similarities to us, but some also very different. Understanding our uniqueness in this regard is an important first step for people in the United States.

Many communities are composed of people who have been a part of this nation for generations and are still not considered part of mainstream U.S. culture. The United States mostly has maintained a system of separation between groups despite ongoing civil rights legislation for equality and integration.

### **Defining Diversity—Group and Individual Differences**

Cooperative Extension gives a working definition of diversity in the document *Pathway to Diversity: a Strategic Plan for the Cooperative Extension System's Emphasis on Diversity*; it states: Diversity is defined as differences among people with respect to age, class, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental ability, race, sexual orientation, spiritual practice, and other human differences.

Implicit in this definition is the awareness of our group identities as well as our individual differences. We are unique as individuals, while our group identities determine our historical inclusion or exclusion. We often see ourselves only as individuals, even though historically we have been treated based on our group identities.

For example, for a long time in schools, women have been guided into certain occupations that have been considered more acceptable for them, and men have been encouraged to feel and show some emotions and avoid others despite their individual differences and attributes.

When learning about racial and ethnic differences, we have been taught the common misconception that once we learn about each other's groups, our future relations will be harmonious. This may be true to some degree between individuals, but societal divisions based on our group identities have been maintained through legal, educational, religious, and other institutions. Therefore, in thinking about diversity, we also consider the historical power imbalance among groups, allowing us to move toward a view of diversity that values equality.

### **Perceptions and Attitudes**

One common myth is that by talking about and examining our differences, we are encouraging divisions. Most people in excluded groups are aware that divisions have always existed and do not believe that talking about divisiveness encourages it but instead removes the veil and allows change to begin.

In my workshops, for example, participants are asked to discuss the treatment they get in their daily lives based on color differences. White people examine the privileges they are afforded in the society, and people of color look at their lack of privileges. Inevitably, people of color come up with long lists of privileges that they didn't get, while white people can only name a few that they got. Both groups operate in the same society but get and perceive different treatment.

So when we discuss differences, we need to consider not only how we are different but also how we are treated because of our differences. Clearly, differences themselves are not the only issue; the value we place on differences presents more challenges. These value judgments have consciously and unconsciously helped shaped our deep-seated attitudes and beliefs about others. Working on diversity issues involves attitudinal change as well as organizational change.

### **Group Prejudice + Institutional Power = Social Oppression**

Because of a long history of separation of groups and domination by one, we now have institutionalized forms of exclusion. In their article "Social Oppression: an Operational Definition," Rita Hardiman and Bailey Jackson contend that ours is a system of domination with many interlocking parts that are mutually reinforcing. Discriminatory individual behavior is a part of this system as is a common ideology that asserts one group's superiority over another. For example, when current individual acts of racism are eliminated, then public policies intended to right the wrongs of the past can be dropped.

In one community, for example, there has been an effort to get jobs in school districts for more people of color. Superintendents were encouraged to assure equal access to employment by distributing job postings more widely in the community of color. In the past, jobs that became available were

quickly known to the people working within the system, who were predominately white and tended to socialize with other white people only. Therefore, the job openings inadvertently were known about faster and easier in the white community. There was no intended racism, but this example shows that a form of historic racism in modern institutions continues to exist. To change these systemic and institutional forms of racism, temporary public policies to bring these subtleties to light are needed as well as an approach to help individuals become aware of the daily harmful effects of their unconscious attitudes and actions.

### **Group Identities and Prescribed Roles**

All of us have learned to play roles that perpetuate the power imbalance. These roles seem natural and normal to us because we were born into them and they were taught and reinforced through our families, schools, and other institutions. People in dominant groups (such as men, able-bodied, white, native-English speakers, adults, Christian, wealthy) assumed roles of superiority.

Much of our learning came in subtle forms and without language, so we often learned from nonverbal communication as well as media images. The lack of positive models left us without guidance about how to think and act toward others and how to think about ourselves.

Lillian Smith in *Killers of the Dream* writes, "This process of learning was as different for each child as were his (*sic*) parents' vocabulary and emotional needs. We cannot wisely forget this. And we learned far more from acts than words, more from a raised eyebrow, a joke, a shocked voice, a withdrawing movement of the body, a long silence, than from long sentences."

For example, white people were taught the hierarchy by witnessing acts of racism and negative images of people of color in the media. People who attended schools or lived in neighborhoods with no people of color may have felt it was normal to be separated from people who looked different from them. They assumed that the distorted view of history based only on the white perceptions and deeds was true, and this reinforced their learned assumptions about racial inferiority.

Many people deny this conditioning and its power and assume that because they also heard words of brotherhood and equality that they now only act from that perspective.

White people caught up in these contradictions often act from unconscious superiority. A white teacher may have lower expectations of the students of color and offer help to their families instead of looking for what they could teach him or her. The teacher may feel unconsciously that if only she or he could teach the students to be more white and/or middle class then they would be successful and the pain of their lives would stop. With the well-intentioned desire to see the injustice end, the teacher falls into the colorblind trap of denying differences to avoid dealing with the historic devaluing messages that he or she carries.

Most people have fallen into this trap at some time, even some people of color who want the devaluing to end and feel that a shortcut is to pretend that the differences don't exist, thus denying all the good things that cultural differences bring to us as individuals and a society. What we all want is for each of us not to receive mistreatment based on the lower status we have been given in the hierarchy, which is different from just acknowledging our group's uniqueness.

The following assumptions help us understand ourselves and how we learned our roles as members of groups:

- All people are born with an enormous capacity to be powerful, loving, caring, cooperative, creative, curious, and intelligent.
- We have learned the "isms" (all the forms of social oppression). We can't be blamed for having learned them because we got the information when we were young people.
- As adults we now have responsibility to change.
- The "isms" hurt all of us—the oppressor as well as the oppressed.
- We all have the experience of being in both dominant and excluded groups, so we have knowledge about both sides.
- We are taught not to see the ways we are in roles, so our behavior appears "normal" and "natural."
- We may learn to respond to differences with guilt and pity. Guilt leads to inaction, and pity doesn't allow us to see the strengths in other identities.

## Changing from Agent to Ally

In our dominant roles, we can choose to act on the misinformation that we received and be an *agent* of the continued perpetuation of the system of inequality or we can be an *ally* and work to change the way we think and act. The process of moving from *agent* to *ally* is long. It requires commitment and conscious behavior. It means making mistakes and continuing to act in alliance with people in target groups.

The first meeting of a racial equality group provides an example. In attendance was a quiet and wise African American woman. When it was her time to talk, the white people there expected praise for helping to form such a group in her community. Instead, she looked at them with all the years of struggle and survival in her eyes and said, "Where have you been all these years?" Acting in an agent role, the white people would have felt guilty and ashamed, feeling that they should give up on what seemed like a hopeless endeavor, wallowing in their sense of powerlessness to make change. As emerging allies, though, they listened intently and without defense to her stories of exclusion and mistreatment. This deepened their level of commitment to overcome their fears and make changes in their community.

There have always been people who have acted to some degree outside of their agent role—abolitionists, white students involved in civil rights struggles, people who were part of the Underground Railroad, white people working with other white people to eliminate racism, men who supported and encouraged women in education, wealthy people who have financially supported publications by working class and poor people, to name a few. To become allies, people need to overcome their fears of rejection by members of their own group and their learned powerlessness in their excluded identities.

## Changing from Victim to Empowered

In our excluded identities such as women, differently abled, African American, Asian, Latino(a), Native American, native speakers of other languages, poor, or working class, we assumed roles of inferiority. The degree to which we assumed inferior roles depends on our individual experiences. For example,

a working class, Italian woman might find it difficult to sort out which identity assumed the messages of inferiority. She could have internalized stereotypes about all her groups and the ability of people in them to think well and to take on positions of leadership.

When people act on their internalized oppression and believe they are not capable of achieving certain goals, they are choosing to act as victims instead of empowered. This journey from the role of victim to empowered is a long process, just as is the journey from agent to ally. It requires knowing our true nature outside the societal limitations placed on us. Much of our behaviors that limit our aspirations and the aspirations of other members of our group are *victim* behaviors often born out of our need to survive.

Teaching each other to stay in our "places" and be submissive has been necessary for many groups to protect themselves from battering or lynching. As empowered people, we see the difference between learned survival behaviors and behaviors that help us to thrive and grow. Being powerful in this way does not mean having power over others; although, because of its newness, this power may appear threatening to members of dominant groups who are acting as *agents* and who expect *victim* behaviors such as submission, passivity, and aggression.

An example from a Puerto Rican woman illustrates this journey. As a young girl she internalized symbols of beauty from the dominant culture: hairless women with small features and light skin, hair, and eyes. She felt invisible in the mainstream view of beauty with her hairy face and dark eyes and hair. As a teenager, she withdrew and developed behaviors that hid the hair on her face, ones that reflected low self-esteem and helped her assimilate. Through encounters in her twenties with both Puerto Rican and white people who challenged the negative notions she had adopted and who reflected to her a broader definition of beauty, she began to reclaim her own personal regard. She became more confident and readopted the symbols of her culture. She tells a heartfelt story about how at this empowered stage she encountered a white man who had been socialized to have a very narrow definition of beauty. At a party he explained that he was in an organization

that raised money for people in need of help. He offered to help her get money to have the hair removed from her face so that she could be beautiful. She hypothesizes that as a *victim* she might have slunk away with all the restimulated hurt from earlier experiences, or she might have released the stored anger she felt from previous insults. Instead, she thanked him for his offer and informed him that she was already beautiful and didn't need help. He stood stunned at first and then re-adjusted his lens to see her beauty.

## Elements of Oppression

In our workshops on diversity and power with a variety of groups, some universal elements of oppression have been identified. Some of these are listed here:

- People in dominant groups
  - are given inaccurate information about people in the excluded groups.
  - discount people from excluded groups because of a lack of expectation and belief in their abilities.
  - can make change by working to eliminate prejudice among people in their own group.
  - can work more effectively on the oppressions of others when working on understanding our own oppression, i.e., as women, young people, working class, etc.
  - learn to mistreat others when young and feel powerless to change the system; therefore, adultism is important in instilling all other oppressions. (Adultism is the institutional power used by adults over young people, including anything from physical abuse to ongoing systemic disrespect for young people's thinking.)
  - can change the dominator system by changing their *agent* role to an *ally* role.
- People in excluded groups
- often take out their anger and powerless feeling on each other, within their groups, and between excluded groups.

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- feel that the closer they become to the dominant group, the safer they are.
- need to know how people in dominant groups think and act in order to survive.
- are hurt by subtle, covert forms of prejudice such as invisibility and invalidation just as they are by more overt behaviors.
- internalize misinformation about their own group and can use it to oppress members of the same group.
- can change the dominator system by changing their *victim* role to an *empowered* role.

## Shared Power

The field of empowerment addresses not only paths to reclaiming individual power, but also ways institutions can empower all people. One aspect of this work is aimed at transforming our institutions into models for shared power—moving from “power-over” dominator models (aggressive) to “power-with” partnership models (assertive) which value individual and group differences, teamwork, and the development of all human potential. *Pathways to Diversity* defines pluralism as an organizational culture that incorporates mutual respect, acceptance, teamwork, and productivity among people who are diverse in human differences. This vision challenges us to build interpersonal relationships and institutions that are not structured on domination and subordination.

Sonia Nieto, a leader in the multicultural education field, suggests that it is time to go beyond tolerance and embrace acceptance, respect differences, and move toward genuine solidarity—which would lead to constructive conflict and critique of all our cultures. Elimination of destructive conflict among groups will allow the talents, creativity, and power of each individual to be realized, ultimately strengthening all of society.

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