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DEVELOPING CULTURAL AWARENESS IN HUMAN SERVICE PROFESSIONALS: A PERSONAL JOURNEY¹

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ABSTRACT

In order to function appropriately and sensitively in a rapidly changing multi-cultural/racial society such as South Africa, human service professionals must be aware of their own life experiences and how these have contributed to the development of their prejudices. This awareness also sensitises them to the development of prejudice, and therefore promotes a better understanding and tolerance of the prejudice of others, and the way that this prejudice can be altered. Students in the Department of Social Development are required to write an "Ethnic Autobiography", tracing their life history in terms of their awareness and experience of their own and other ethnic groups, how this awareness was developed and their current attitudes. This experience forms the experiential component of a module on anti-discriminatory practice and is described by students as a very powerful and sensitising experience.

POLITICAL CHANGE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The political changes in South Africa over the past decade have been dramatic and have brought about events that have impacted fundamentally on all its peoples. These changes have not only irrevocably altered the cultural/racial identity of its people, but also their relationship with each other. South Africa is a multi-cultural country with 11 official languages. The current population is approximately 43 million, of which about 77% are Black, 9% are "Coloured", 2,5% are Asian and 10,5% are White (Statistics for South Africa 2000). Although such racial terms are unfortunate, they are still useful in understanding the dynamics and changes in the country.

While western countries tended to deny the existence of racism with the myth of the "melting pot," institutionalised racism was the experience of the whole South African population. As this reality cannot be denied, in some ways it is easier to address openly. However, the total segregation of different groups and the experience and legacy of the disparity in power and access to resources between White and Black, with so-called Coloured people in the middle, must be acknowledged and dealt with directly and not avoided.

The shift from a country where all constructs were engineered to keep each "racial" group totally separate, to relate only within itself and be unaware of, or antagonistic to, other groups, to a country where true integration is expected is an enormous change. This shift will take time, and, I suspect, requires much more focused assistance than is currently being offered.

HUMAN SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

It is the writer's belief that in order to function appropriately and sensitively in a rapidly changing and multi-cultural/racial society such as South Africa, human service professionals must be aware of their own life experiences and the way that these have contributed to the development of their

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prejudices. If not, these experiences will impact on, or be played out, without their knowing it in the way they perform their work, including the way they relate to their client population.

Human service professionals are required to develop meaningful, trusting working relationship with client systems, whether individuals, groups or communities. In South Africa many of these relationships will be across cultural and religious boundaries, including the old apartheid classification of "race groups".

As products of the apartheid system, human professionals will not only have little knowledge of the culture or life experiences of their clients of another ethnic group, but their own life experiences will inevitably affect their own self-perception, their perception of their clients and their mind-set regarding the relationship between the two. Apartheid impacted directly on the daily life of all, and ascribed characteristics and life-style to each defined group, dictated aspirations and defined the power relationships between these groups.

ETHNIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In the training of human service professionals in the Department of Social Development at the University of Cape Town these realities are acknowledged and efforts are made in the theory and practice courses to address them. A module examining issues of culture, race and ethnicity, particularly in relation to the help-seeking behaviour of clients, is presented early in their training (Lee 1996; Dominelli 1988; Green 1995; Swartz 1998).

As part of the programme students are required to write an "ethnic autobiography" tracing their life history in terms of their awareness of their own ethnicity/race/culture and that of other racial/cultural groups; how this awareness was developed and their current attitudes. This includes how they experience being seen by other groups. They are told that evidence of taking the assignment seriously is required for them to obtain a "duly performed" certificate, but no mark will be given. They are told that confidentiality will be maintained, although the material could be used for research purposes. Over the years no student has refused to do the assignment.

Students are given a definition of ethnicity and some guidelines as to what kind of information might be helpful. The suggested definition of ethnicity given is "the voluntary identification by an individual of his/her membership of a particular group whether that group is characterised by race, religion or class." It also recognises that racial or ethnic identities are also imposed upon people by others.

The guidelines suggest that they explore:

- To assist students to gain a better understanding and ownership of their own ethnicity and their own value system, bearing in mind that for all groups this was damaged by the apartheid system;
- To become more aware of their own feelings towards other ethnic groups;
- To afford an opportunity for the students to get in touch with, own and deal with some of their feelings centred on the experiences of the apartheid system, such as anger, guilt and fear;
- To sensitize them to the development of prejudice, and therefore develop a better understanding and tolerance of the prejudice of others, and how this prejudice can be altered;
- To identify common student needs in terms of racial/ethnic issues.

PROCESS

Prior to 1996 these assignments were handed back to the students without formal analysis, although themes were identified. Since 1996 the assignments have been retained for more formal scrutiny. The class sizes have ranged from 26 to 45 from 1996 to 2001, and in terms of the old "race" classification system "White" students account for approximately 31%, "Coloured" for 23%, "Black" for 40%, and "Indian" for 6%. These apartheid classifications will be retained for the purposes of this presentation, as the issues that the students need to deal with have largely been created by this system. Students, however, are made aware that race is a social construction, with a suggested definition that racism is "the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance (Lorde, 1984 in Dominelli:6).

FINDINGS

As the purpose of the exercise was for each individual to explore whatever was meaningful for them in terms of their own awareness of themselves within a multi-cultural society, it is not appropriate or possible to present a systematic analysis of all the life stories.

However, the narratives were examined in detail and some common themes were identified. While certain strong themes emerged that were shared by all students, a significant finding was that themes tended to be shared within "racial" groupings. Therefore the themes are presented under the headings of these groups. The implications in relation to learning needs are also identified.

Although efforts were made to see if the themes changed over the years, the only major change noted was that students are meeting across racial lines at a younger age and so myths are being dispelled earlier. It should be noted that the transition in South Africa took place in 1994, so that the students discussed in this paper would have been in either junior or senior school at the time.

THEMES COMMON TO THE MAJORITY OF STUDENTS REGARDLESS OF ETHNICITY/RACE

- **Usefulness of the exercise**

Most students spontaneously commented on how the exercise helped them to get in touch with who they are and their value system. "I have discovered things about myself that I never realised before." "Doing this ethnic autobiography started a process in me of becoming more aware of my motives, thoughts and actions". "One will not know where he or she wants to be unless he or she knows who he or she is".

A few students found the exercise thought-provoking but painful, "This assignment has proved very difficult for me as I cannot decide what ethnic or racial heritage has been passed down to me. I am white, I am African, I am female. What does all this mean?"

- **Impact of apartheid**

Students expressed strong feelings about the effects of apartheid, which will be discussed under each race/ethnic group. "I can see a clear picture of how apartheid brainwashed people of various races into fulfilling their different roles in society".

- **Prejudice and its development**

Students were very aware of the development and impact of prejudice. "What I have found out is that things you internalise during your childhood are things that you grow up believing in." Examples will be presented under each race/ethnic group.

- **A time/event that changed perceptions or made students question the apartheid system**
Most students identified experiences which initiated a change in their attitudes to other groups. These will be identified under each race/ethnic groups.
- **Disagreement with their parents**
Many students described how their views are different from those of their parents.
- **Aspiration to an individual identity within a broader cultural context**
Most students argued that they would prefer to be seen as an individual, although not denying the values of their culture.
- **Value of university experience**
Almost all students commented on the value of university experiences in cross-cultural mixing and the openness of discussion within the Department. "I have come to be part of a new world at UCT." "Here I was able to explore this new society, a new way of life."

THEMES COMMON TO WHITE STUDENTS

- **Distress at how little they had questioned the dictates of apartheid**
This is the most significant theme among white students. Nearly all students expressed amazement at how completely they and others had accepted the *status quo*, and how only in retrospect have they become aware of the system. Most white students expressed distress at their lack of appreciation of the impact of apartheid on other groups and may need to be helped to deal with the guilt evoked by this experience that might not be helpful in their professional relationships and actions.

"It was only in 1994 that I began to fully understand what had been happening in the country for so many years. I am shocked, horrified and ashamed." "I was not even aware that most schools were only for whites." "The school was subtly poisoning our minds against black people, especially through history." "Until recently, I had not realised what harm it had actually done to South Africa." "To put it simply, we were totally isolated, so at a young age Black people were not even an issue in my life." "It is significant that the mere lack of non-white people in everyday activities could have had such a negative impact on my personal beliefs and actions."
- **Brought up by "nannies". Black people seen as gardeners or maids**
For the majority of white students the closest contact with Black people were with Black nannies. Although intellectually students are prepared for working as colleagues and subordinates to Black people, students may need help socially and emotionally. "I had a black nanny. I am still grappling with whether I saw her as different from me." "Most black people worked as domestic workers. It didn't strike me as completely unjust as I had not known any different."
- **Feel parents, although liberal, were really racist**
Many students explored this possibility with some distress, and possibly are currently engaged in conflictual relationships with family members. "My parents were always 'good to them', but always seemed in some way superior."
- **Afraid of black violence, but feel guilty**
This is an increasing issue with the levels of violence rising and needs to be handled very carefully, particularly in relation to student safety on academic assignments. Many students raised this issue. "If white guys approach me, I tell them to get lost. If black, I am scared. I am

aware this is racism." "It is assumed that if your car or house is broken into, it's by a black person."

- **Aware of own current prejudice/racism**

Most students were able to admit to struggling with current race/ethnic issues. This openness should be encouraged and debate encouraged across ethnic boundaries. "My brother started dating a Muslim girl which for me is difficult to accept." "My father has been retrenched as a result of affirmative action."

- **Role of religion**

Most students claimed a strong faith which rejected discrimination. While the religious persuasions of students must be respected, dogma can sometimes prevent students acknowledging and then dealing with their real feelings. Such issues need to be debated in class. "I believe there is a God in control of everything." "God made us all in his image." For some, there was little connection between their religious beliefs and other issues they raised, while a minority raised issues such as "I am aware of the necessity to be critical of my religious instruction and to see that there are no hypocritical holes in my behaviour."

- **Events that changed perceptions**

Ironically, mixing with other race/ethnic groups initially generated racial tension and the teaching of stereotypes by parents; only later did this lead to the dispelling of these things. The openness of the students is notable and allows for real dialogue between the racial/ethnic groups if handled sensitively. "I admire the black people in my class for not hating us as whites for treating them so badly in the apartheid time". Some students noted problems such as "at high school races formed cliques." "Even though I am more open-minded, I think there is still an element of ethnic groups sticking together." "I feel I have to be supersensitive and politically correct all the time."

- **Feelings towards the current political dispensation**

Students were generally very positive, but with some reservations, particularly regarding job opportunities. These issues will need to be addressed openly in class. "I am proud to be a 'New' white South African." "My friends say I will never get a job in the new South Africa."

THEMES COMMON TO COLOURED AND INDIAN STUDENTS.

"COLOURED" IN SOUTH AFRICA REFERRED TO PEOPLE OF MIXED "RACE"

There was more discrepancy in the narratives of these students than in any of the other groups, and it became evident that the life experiences and issues facing these students varied greatly.

- **Questioning their identity**

Coloured and Indian students, more so than any other group, debated their identity and questioned the significance of this identity. The distress experienced by these students needs to be acknowledged. "Have outside influences changed or distorted what I had been to what I am now, or have I remained consistent throughout?" "I think that if who I was had anything to do with my ethnic history I would be a very confused individual." "Am I Indian or Coloured?" "I am a little bit of everything." "In the Coloured community there is a definite separation between English and Afrikaans speaking, straight and frizzy hair and light- and dark-skinned peoples." "I have been discriminated against in my own community." "I was accused of trying to be white."

- **Awareness of apartheid**

While some Coloured and Indian students were politically aware from an early age, others only became aware more recently. However, most students were very aware of the implications of the Group Areas Act as many of their families had been moved. "The move all Indians had to make to the dull, desolate area caused much resentment and anger." "As I grew older I began understanding the racial situation of South Africa and I started hating white people."

Perhaps as a result of area of residence, some students described little contact with other groups until late adolescence, while others were exposed to other ethnic groups most of their lives. "Exposure and socialisation with other racial groups were extremely limited." "Even during apartheid my mother had friends from different races."

- **Role of religion. Religious differences, Christian or Muslim**

For most students religion played an important part in their lives. The majority of students commented on the Coloured community consisting of Christian and Muslim influences and the differences between them. Some described amicable relationships between them and others focused on the difficulties. Students will need to deal with these issues if they are to be effective in working in this community. "Jesus handled all the hurt I had experienced." "They told me stories of how Muslim women are generally mutilated and that Muslims are sly individuals."

- **Aware of stereotypes/racism, past and present**

Most students described early stereotypes of black and white, which have changed over the years, but which to some extent are still evident. These attitudes need to be acknowledged and discussed openly in class. "Blacks were either maids or gardeners." "Blacks were seen as dirty, whites were seen as intelligent." "After Whites came the Coloureds and, lastly, the Blacks." "People developed stereotypes based on what the government had led them to believe." "White people were to be respected and obeyed. I did not understand why this was so, but I accepted it and never really thought about it." "When African students came to our school the treatment they received, when I think about it now, was appalling. They were called all sorts of names, one of which was kaffir." "I now know that Whites are the same as us." "I am still afraid of black people." "I am still distrustful of my white colleagues. I do not share my deep felt emotions with them."

- **Events that changed perceptions**

While the students were aware of apartheid from a reasonably young age, it seems they started to question its legitimacy when encouraged to do so by influential people in their lives.

- **Feelings towards the current political dispensation**

While generally students were positive, a sense of confusion and despair was evident in some student narratives regarding their current role in society. This reality needs to be addressed in class. "We fell into the category in the middle." "In the apartheid era the whites had all the power, while in the post-apartheid era there seems to be a major shift of power from whites to the 'blacks'. These shifts are necessary, but unfair to us Coloureds." "Where do we fit in?" "People should start to realise that there are not only two races in this country, there are also Indians and Coloureds." "This was supposed to be a new democratic South Africa, where all people have equal rights. Instead it seems as though apartheid is alive and well, but in the opposite form."

- **Afraid of violence**

Some students comment on the level of violence in their communities, particularly gang-related violence.

THEMES COMMON TO BLACK STUDENTS

- **Impact of apartheid**

All students were well aware of apartheid, although most described how the dictates of apartheid were accepted as the *status quo* for most of their youth. Stories of great hardship and personal hurt were presented. Some students used this opportunity to express strong feelings regarding the impact of the apartheid system on them and their families. Considering that these narratives would be read by a white lecturer, it is significant that students felt safe enough to share such strong feelings. This phenomenon could be interpreted in several ways. It could indicate a relationship of trust between the lecturer and the students. Hopefully it could also indicate an important shift in the power relationships between black and white, with the black students recognising their feelings as legitimate. The experience could also possibly have afforded students the safe opportunity to "tell" a white person of their experiences. This debate and sharing of experiences needs to be encouraged within the whole class.

"I saw the firm rule of a White man as a natural thing which would never be questioned at any stage." "There were limited opportunities and resources for Africans, which led to anger, bitterness, depression, low self-esteem, rebellion, desire for revenge, uncaring, disrespect and crime against whites." "My father felt enslaved for the benefit of his boss." "I had to go to the toilet and granny said I should go to the bush because I cannot use the white toilet." "My mother was spoken to like a child." "I wondered why whites did not suffer like we do. I got involved in politics and developed attitudes towards other race groups."

- **Contact with other race/ethnic groups**

Students from rural areas or small towns described a progression of how they initially only mixed with their own language group, then with other Black language groups, and lastly with White or Coloured people either in private schools or later, in high school or at university. Students from urban areas were forced to live in black townships, and often in demarcated areas of same-language speakers in these townships. Some students described difficult cultural experiences they had to deal with if circumstances forced them to live with cultural groups other than their own. Strong stereotypes were presented regarding each group.

- **Aware of stereotypes, past and present**

Most black students shared common stereotypes of white people and of themselves. Considerable stereotyping of other black language groups is also evident. These stereotypes have largely changed with closer contact with other groups.

"A white is a person who has everything, who knows everything, and owns the world as a result." "Whites have no limits in accomplishing their aspirations, they are the most intelligent people on planet earth." "School textbooks and magazines always show whites in top positions." "I stereotyped whites as unfair, selfish, individualistic, not caring and having no mercy." "Zulus are obstinate, Coloureds are drunkards and sellouts and whites are clever." "Vendas are uncivilised."

"I internalised the stereotype of being disadvantaged, stupid and no good. This was like a label." "It was like we were the only people who were cursed by God." "I had a sense of powerlessness, being aware of being a lower class race." "I was afraid because I did not think

I was the right person to share a room with someone in whose neighbourhood I was not allowed to walk, but in the end I found I was the person with the problem.”

“My stereotypes were all wrong because whites were not what I thought they were. They were very caring of others.”

- **Importance of respect**
The concept of “respect” was highly valued and mentioned by most students. “I must love and respect the other person. He/she is also a human being. This notion is strongly upheld by my family.”
- **Importance of cultural values, extended families and “Ubuntu”**
Most students commented on the importance of their cultural values, rituals and traditions and described these in some detail. “I must not run away from my customs as this would bring bad luck.” “Ubuntu means a person is a person through association with other persons. I am because we are.” “We place a high value on sharing.” “I have to speak and write in English and this sometimes makes me feel I am getting too Anglicised.” “Any suffering we experience was made more real by song and rhythm.” “I do not feel content with some of my culture’s ideas as they infringe on other people’s rights.”
- **The importance of language**
Many students commented on the importance of their language. Because of poverty and forced removals often they had to live with people other than their parents. “I believe language is the most important aspect of culture.”
- **Feelings towards the current political dispensation**
Interestingly, students generally did not discuss this in any detail, except to note that the country had changed dramatically. This perception needs to be discussed in class. “The Madiba generation has started to shift their thinking at a tender age. As adults and professionals it is important that we come to terms with who we are and celebrate the rich diversity that our country represents.”

DISCUSSION

The deep commitment demonstrated by students in attempting to recall and critically reflect on very personal and often highly emotionally charged life experiences suggests that this experience is important to them. It implies that there is much unfinished business in this area of their lives, as there probably is in the lives of many South Africans. As beginning professionals it is crucial that they start this process to enable them to relate helpfully to clients of different ethnic backgrounds.

As noted earlier, a number of common themes were expressed by all students, while other themes were clearly specific to a particular ethnic/race group and remained such over the six years of the study.

For all students it was evident that the process of reflecting on their personal ethnic experiences within an apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa was both emotionally difficult and intellectually enlightening. On an experiential level, they were shaken by how effective the apartheid system was in separating people and in the strength of its propaganda. They were surprised to discover the origins of their prejudices and described how contact with other race/ethnic groups changed these. Although they felt the process was difficult, there was optimism and commitment to a common nationality, although maintaining their own cultural identity.

The responses of the white students clearly indicated their immense guilt and anger concerning their ignorance of the effects of apartheid and their shock at their own acceptance of the stereotypes of Black people. Their openness regarding their ongoing struggle with racism and their worries about violence and obtaining employment in South Africa is very positive. These feelings and concerns need to be openly addressed in class.

The pain and confusion experienced by Coloured students was very evident and is disturbing. It appears as if the way forward for them is unclear and relates not only to past issues, but also to their perception of their current status as fragile. Much fragmentation along the lines of language, religion and cultural origin is experienced leading to discomfort regarding identity issues. Space needs to be given in class for these feelings to be acknowledged and worked through.

Black students appeared to use this opportunity to share past painful, often humiliating experiences. The impression gained was that telling these stories possibly was helpful in the process of reaching some closure and affirming their intrinsic worth. Surprise and anger were also expressed at their acceptance of the negative stereotypes ascribed to them and to others. More than any other group, and possibly because in the past they were discounted, the students strongly affirmed their pride in their customs. The strength of these responses suggests that perhaps the opportunity should be created in class for sharing these experiences more widely.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed how the task of writing an "ethnic autobiography" brings into awareness experiences and feelings of students regarding their own life history within a period of enormous structural change in the country. As relationships between groups have changed so dramatically, this self-awareness is essential in helping students to relate cross culturally/racially in ways helpful to their clients. Identifying the common themes presented by the students alerts the teaching staff to racial/ethnic issues that should be addressed during the students' training.

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