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Hidden Challenges: Social Diversity in Conflict

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“Diversity” is a word loaded with meanings. When applied to people it can mean differences such as intelligence, eye color or favorite food, but is most often taken to mean *social diversity*, such as class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and level of able-bodiedness.

Diversity is necessary for robust systems. When only one strain of corn is cultivated, it takes only one disease it cannot resist to wipe out all corn. When all people in an organization think the same way, creative, effective solutions are missed. When social diversity is avoided, we lose opportunities to understand what is most fundamentally human and to enjoy the many ways it can be expressed.

However, diversity also brings conflict. Strains of corn compete for water and sun, lines of thought compete for acceptance and, in social groups, people compete for the right to define collective assumptions. Of the many ways that people can differ, social differences are among the most likely to arouse and exacerbate difficult conflict.

One reason for this is the *fundamental attribution error*: the perception that members of groups to which we belong (ingroups) behave well by nature and badly because of external forces, while members of groups of which we are not a part (outgroups) behave well because of external forces and badly by nature. When we find ourselves in conflict with someone not within our ingroup, we may assume they have acted badly or fit them into a negative stereotype. This may lead them to respond defensively and makes conflict resolution more difficult (Kimmel, *Culture and Conflict in Morton and Deutsch Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, Jossey-Bass, 2000).

Another reason that conflicts involving social difference can be difficult is that they are rooted in the ways people identify themselves, tending to be about emotions which often lead to personal attacks. These are different dynamic than more common resource- or interest-based conflicts within which the issues are generally clear, possible solutions are determined by available resources and those solutions often include creative, positive exchanges and constructive collaboration (De Dreu & Van de Vliert, *Using Conflict in Organizations*, Sage, 1997, Rothman, *Resolving Identity-based Conflict*, Jossey-Bass, 1997).

Identity-based conflict is found at all levels of social organization, from international conflicts to neighborhood squabbles, and concern intangibles such as if parties feel respected, treated fairly, and safe, and if they have a sense of control over their own lives. These are critical factors in conflicts with elements of social diversity. If conflict interveners do not understand this, an already difficult situation can be made worse. Rothman (*Resolving Identity-based Conflict*, Jossey-Bass, 1997) found that applying the tools of resource-based conflict to identity-based conflict could make resolution more difficult: Resource negotiation is about compromise, but when people feel they are being asked to compromise on the details that make them who they are, they may dig in their heels in fierce refusal to give anything.

To this mix of attribution error on the part of the disputants within identity-based conflict and application of inappropriate tools by third party neutrals, we add one more element: power imbalances. As currently conceived and enacted in our social structures, social diversity is in part about the differences between groups defined as subordinate/dominant: working class/upper class, female/male, people of color/white, gay/straight, persons with/without disabilities. Relationships across these dichotomies can be emotional minefields of disenfranchisement, privilege, guilt, denial, resentment, anger, misunderstanding, and mistrust. This can be very difficult material.

This material is difficult for members of subordinate and dominant groups in different ways. Even before conflict surfaces, different issues face each group. The following descriptions are generalizations, and exceptions can be found to all of them, but they are accurate enough for this short article and useful to understand.

For members of subordinate groups the question of survival, or at least safety, is a constant undercurrent: Am I the only one “like me” here? What do the others here think of me? Will I be believed if I report an experience different from that of the others here? What are the consequences if I am not? Should I speak up? How much of what happens to me is due to my membership in a particular group? Members of dominant groups rarely have to ask themselves these questions, and if

they are in a situation where they come up, they generally have the option of leaving. Related to this is “bi-culturalism,” a self-reported state experienced by many people in subordinate groups. They must know more about the behavior of people in dominant groups than vice versa. It is a survival issue. One example is how much attention a woman out alone at night needs to pay to nearby men compared to the attention a man must pay to women.

For members of dominant groups, the key question is how to relate to their privilege. If one accepts that social differences sometimes lead to power imbalances, then it follows that members of dominant groups have access to opportunities that members of subordinate groups do not—not necessarily because they have been given extra help, but because they encounter fewer barriers. Since this is an *absence* of a symptom and there is little public discussion about privilege, members of dominant groups are often mystified when told they are holding others down. Because this often comes as an accusation, and perhaps because of repressed guilt, it can be uncomfortable to hear. Since it is emotionally confusing, many people in dominant groups would like to skip talking about privilege and consign it to history. They do not know how to talk about it. When they try, they may be confronted with anger or told they are using the wrong words. Part of the resistance people in dominant groups have to speaking about social differences may be a desire to keep privilege, but part of it is not knowing *how* to have the conversation. For example, many white people avoid mentioning race, as if noticing it is the same thing as being racist.

When these concerns show up in conflicts that include issues of social diversity, they manifest differently for members of each group. People in the subordinate group may be cautious about engaging in the conflict until they feel that it is safe or the cost of not doing so is too high. Once in the conflict, they are likely to have more information about the dominant group than members of that group have about them. This can be an asset to the subordinate group, but adds the burden of trying to translate their meaning into the meaning of another “culture.” People in the dominant group may not understand the issue as one of social difference or they may be made uncomfortable by the topic, afraid that acknowledging it will bring up unpredictable, uncontrollable and difficult responses. This can lead them to reject it early on as a possible explanation of events.

Conflicts related to social diversity surface in every arena in which people of diverse backgrounds share resources or work toward common goals. They are seen in electoral politics as redistricting battles, in school systems as debates over the best way to make sure that all kids get access to a decent education, and in the workplace as conflicts over what constitutes good

performance, whose ideas are supported and developed, and on whose assumptions group norms are based.

The influence of social diversity in conflict is complex and challenging. It may be on the table for discussion or buried in the taken-for-granted background. No matter where or how social diversity presents, it shapes assumptions and options for everyone involved. Acknowledging the realities of these dynamics opens up difficult conversations, but is a necessary step if we are to understand how they already shape our conflicts and their possible resolution.



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