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Negotiating the Politics of Race through Moral Cross-Cultural Conversation

Jacob L. Diaz

Discussions about race/ethnicity are an important aspect of diversity on college campuses. This paper explores the social construct of race in the United States and the various barriers that arise when individuals engage in dialogue about this issue. I explore the tenets of the Moral Conversation and argue that this will aid us in deconstructing racial/ethnic borders and the politics of race in order to create a more socially just campus environment.

In the fall of 1999, I had the privilege of taking a course at the University of Vermont, taught by Dr. Robert J. Nash. In this course, I was introduced to a form of colloquial discourse that he coined, “The Moral Conversation.” On the surface, it sounds innocent and easy enough, but as I quickly learned it was difficult and challenging to, “first find the truth in what you oppose. Find the error in what you espouse. Then and only then declare the truth in what you espouse, and the error in what you oppose” (Nash, 1996, p. 89).

This way of engaging in dialogue gave a language to what I had been struggling with for some time. The ability to engage in constructive discussion about race and racism requires patience and commitment. In this essay, I explore the social construct of race in the United States and the challenges associated with facilitating dialogue on these issues. Furthermore, I will analyze the tenets of the “moral conversation” and attempt to illustrate how this form of conversation will encourage college students, staff and faculty to explore more deeply their feelings and thoughts about racism and its impact on all individuals regardless of their ethnic background. When facilitated effectively, a moral conversation about race can lead to individual as well as societal transformation, which is necessary if all ethnic groups are to exist as a pluralistic society. This will be a step towards deconstructing racism and the myth of a hierarchy of oppression in order to promote a socially just campus environment.

What is the Moral Conversation?

In order to discuss an issue that is both personal and intellectual, such as issues of race, it is important to establish a respectful environment. The tenets of the moral conversation help to create a situation in which the goal is to develop mutual respect among conversation participants and work towards achieving an environment in which each individual’s contribution, whether it is personal or intellectually oriented, is valued. The goal is to focus the conversation on the particular topic at hand. I offer that establishing this safe environment is critical if we are to engage in dialogue about race and the impacts of racism.

The art of the “moral conversation” is to attempt to find the truth in what you oppose and the error in what you espouse. The pursuit of the understanding of the “kernel of truth” in what someone else believes is critical when engaging in conversation about race (Nash, personal communication, 1999). In order to accomplish this requires that we practice active listening, discernment, and patience.

Each of our narratives contains within it a history, a background, and layers of beliefs, pain, and joy. In order to foster moral conversation I offer that we must acknowledge that each individual is born:

Intelligent, good, loving, curious, and with a zest for life, and that through introspection, emotional healing, and personal commitment, whether we are in a target or a nontarget group we can confront social oppression in ourselves and in our surroundings, and so make our immediate world a more equitable and creative place to live (Bower and Hunt, 1981, p. 29).

By viewing each other as products of experience that are valid and equal with others, we can work towards having productive dialogue about who we are and how racism has oppressed a piece of our identity. Through

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respectful dialogue, members of the campus community can begin to undo these accumulated painful experiences and achieve an understanding of how racism impacts each of our lives.

The moral conversation can help members of majority culture play a role in multiculturalism by setting up an environment where both people of color and white people can engage in dialogue about racism and its impacts on both groups. Again, the goal of the moral conversation is to provide parameters for fostering respectful interaction among individuals. More importantly, it creates an environment where asking questions and unraveling a topic is of the utmost importance. Author Robert Nash suggests using the following types of questions: open ended (how does racism affect you?), interpretive (what do you mean? what do you think the author means?), challenge (why do you say that? what is your evidence?), and generalization (what if everyone does it?) (Nash, R. 1996, p. 104). In discussing race and racism these types of questions can lead to an understanding of the multicultural society in which we live.

Race and Racism in the United States

Race, as it is defined in the United States, classifies people into groups of Asian, Native, African, Latino, and White American people. On the surface, these groups are defined by their common physical traits such as hair, eyes, skin color, etc. Racism, as a political and social construct is a system used to define and develop a hierarchical structure that maintains white superiority. It is from this social hierarchy that many polemical debates surrounding racial identity arise (Howard, pp. 36-37, 1993).

Racism is a form of oppression where people of color are the targets. Oppression can be divided into two types: Institutional and non-institutional. Institutionalized oppression is woven into the fabric of dominant society, the laws, policies, and ways of living reflect the beliefs of those in the dominant group.

Racism is a form of institutionalized oppression that contains three components: (a) the oppression is in the national consciousness - it is an attitude or belief shared by the dominant group in a society; (b) that attitude or belief is reinforced through the institutions of society (i.e. the church, the government, the family, and the schools create policies that reflect the attitude); and (c) it is maintained through an imbalance of social and economic power (Bower & Hunt, p. 29-31, 1981).

As a result of racism, one of the challenges for white majority group members is learning about “the historical perspectives and cultural experiences of other races in America” (Howard, 1993, p.38). For many, this is new information that is incongruent with the commonly held belief that the United States is a democratic society where each individual, if they work hard enough, can succeed. With this insight, members of the majority culture may experience a state of dissonance that provides an opportunity to recognize the privilege associated with being white. White privilege includes the ability to not wonder if skin color affected the outcome of a loan application or the quality of service in a restaurant (Howard, p. 38, 1993). This is only part of the process; naming and accepting the privilege that comes with being white creates possibilities for societal change.

The moral conversation can be used as a tool to draw out a multicultural history that brings into question commonly held misconceptions of Asian, Latino, African, and Native American people. Through respectful dialogue, the conversational process exposes the racist foundation that this country was founded upon and forces majority culture to examine the reality that their “... collective security and position of economic and political dominance have been fueled in large measure by the exploitation of other people” (Howard, 1993, p.38). The social construct of race creates a dichotomy for white students in which, “the ethnicity they claim is more often than not a symbolic one,” (Waters, 2001, p.434) whereas for people of color it may feel socially enforced. This distinction is important because it gets at the core of the social construct of race in the United States. The ability to name one’s reality versus having it defined externally is empowering.

Additionally, the social construct of race provides a definitive measuring device for the pain that one has experienced in her/his life. Many white allies feel that their pain, or experience, is valued less than their “ethnic” counterpart’s, but, what they can often miss is that racism doesn’t just impact people of color, it also affects white people. It robs white people of their identity and dictates that their cultural past only reflects the racist past in which some of their white ancestors actively participated.

Moral Cross-Cultural Communication

Discussing racism and institutional oppression and their impact on both white people and people of color requires a respectful environment and a commitment to take the moral conversation to the next step. To do so, we acknowledge the inherent class, race, and power differentials that each person participating in the conversation brings to the table. The tenets of the moral conversation provide a foundation for creating a respectful environment for moral cross-cultural communication.

The phrase *cross-cultural communication* describes when two or more individuals of different cultural backgrounds successfully establish a means of respectful and honest communication. This communication involves taking into consideration every aspect of what defines their ethnic identity and personal narrative. This requires a willingness to gain a deeper understanding of self in order to become aware of the prejudices and biases that we all carry and that influence the way the world appears to us.

I encountered ethnic difference for the first time when I transferred to the University of California, Santa Barbara. Until that point, I had lived in a neighborhood where most people were Filipino, Black, or Latino. Upon reflection, I now recognize that because of the number of people of color that lived in my neighborhood I was not forced to contend with my ethnic identity as a Chicano male and as an “other” in relation to white society. When I arrived at the University of California campus, however, I was thrust into a community where I was in the minority. The community that I had been accustomed to no longer existed in my new reality.

I was now in the competitive world of academia where students of color were viewed as “affirmative action” cases or “special” examples of those who made it through the system by working hard and assimilating into dominant society. I began to confront my ethnic identity through the lens of my fellow white students, some of whom believed that I did not belong at their university because I was not qualified. Thus, I had many discussions about race and about what it meant to be ethnically and culturally proficient as a Chicano male. Throughout my experience I struggled with the politics of race. As part of my process I often asked myself questions such as: What does it mean to celebrate multiculturalism? How do we work towards achieving a culturally pluralistic society? Why does society deem white people as superior and people of color as inferior? How do we talk about these issues in an open, constructive, and moral way? Is this possible?

Cross-cultural communication is a challenging endeavor which requires that one, “shift frames of reference, to see the world from another’s point of view, and not stay stuck in traditional belief patterns that have proven unworkable” (Rose, 1981, p.25). The impact of each student’s narrative is important, and the moral conversation provides a natural venue for working through the issue of race and racism. Also, communicating across racial lines requires an understanding that each student’s interpretation of this issue will be unique. In the ideal cross-cultural communication setting:

No single one of us inhabits the intellectual high ground a priori. No single one of us has the final word on any issue. We are all viators (travelers with a purpose) on a journey to find meaning, and because our journey is our own, it possesses intrinsic worth, and is to be respected (Nash, 1996, p. 86).

By valuing each student’s life journey as unique and deserving of respect, we can help to shorten the disparity of power between white students and students of color. As with other forms of oppression, racism is pervasive and can stifle any conversation about race.

What is important to consider is that by valuing each person’s narrative equally, the hierarchy of oppression can be effectively eliminated. I must stress that both the majority culture and people of color must be invested in moral cross-cultural conversation. The inherent power differential between whites and people of color dictates that it is people of color who must conform to the status quo set forth by those in power. I offer that true societal change requires each individual’s commitment to ending racism. The construct of the moral conversation can most effectively accomplish this goal.

An Illustration of Internalized Oppression

Racism affects each individual differently. One of the impacts of racism on people of color is internalized oppression, which is a form of oppression that strips an individual of self worth through constant negative reinforcement (i.e. cultural stereotypes and misconceptions). Internalized racism does not allow you to fully be yourself because systems and individuals outside your cultural experience define you as a minority.

For example, when I was a student at the University of California, Santa Barbara, a close friend of mine was visiting me in my residence hall room and noticed a picture of me when I was a small child. In his words, he said, "I remember wearing clothes like yours when I was little. I know now that you're a 'real' Mexican". In that moment, I didn't know how to respond. On the one hand, I was relieved that he accepted me as an authentic Mexican, but on the other hand, I was angry and confused. Why did I need his approval to be viewed as an authentic ethnic minority, and furthermore, who was he to judge?

Being authentically ethnic is subjective and may be defined by the stereotypes that permeate our society. There can be an authentic ethnic reality as each individual defines it. However, the authentic ethnic definition by which my friend was measuring my experience is one he used to name his reality. This is an example of how my friend was measuring his pain against mine. In the picture, I was dressed in second-hand clothes and shoes, and for my friend this made me a survivor, like him. More importantly, he felt like we could relate because we had endured the pain and struggle of being poor. It was assumed that we could both understand each other and therefore were allied in our search for something to identify with in our college. The inherent problem is in the assumption that validity as a Chicano can be ranked.

My experience with my friend illustrates an assessment tool used to differentiate between "real" Chicanos and those who are labeled as "sell-outs". This ranking of validity of experience also translates into measuring each other's pain. The amount of pain that one endures is directly proportional to the amount of acceptance that one receives from his/her peers. This plays itself out for Blacks, Asians, and other minority groups as well. Either, we work really hard to prove our ethnic worthiness to our peers or "we leave our group because on some level...we feel like we can't measure up" (Bower & Hunt, 1981, p. 39). The power of internalized oppression keeps people of color constantly attempting to fulfill an image that does not exist, except in the minds of those to whom they are trying to prove themselves. The moral conversation is a tool that allows both the oppressed and oppressor to examine this dynamic.

The combination of relief and anger that I felt when my friend challenged my ethnic worthiness is a product of racism and internalized oppression. For my friend, being "ethnically worthy" meant that I must come from a working class background. Although it wasn't apparent to him at first glance, I do come from this background. Therefore, I received the message from my friend that I couldn't reveal the fact that my parents had started a business years earlier and through hard work had attained a measure of success previously unavailable to them. How could I share something that I was proud of and have it counted against me and the expectations of my ethnic identity? The answer for me at the time was not to share this with him until much later. The fact that I felt the need to hide my family's success from my fellow Chicanos is an example of how the cycle of internalized oppression plays out.

Impact of Racism on White People

For members of the majority culture, racism manifests itself differently. When confronted with racism, some white students will react with indifference. They may say that racism doesn't exist. They may reflect on their own experience and cite stories of how they've persevered to attain their social status and wonder why people of color do not choose to work as hard. Author Lillian Roybal-Rose calls this "misunderstanding the difference in experience and, ultimately, minimizing their own experience" (Bower and Hunt, 1981, p. 40). The process of white students minimizing their own pain eliminates any possibility of understanding the experience of people of color. From the white perspective, the experience of people of color is viewed as deeply painful and sorrowful. Some white students, in an effort to be allies, operate from a place of condescension rather than awareness and understanding. When white students cannot acknowledge the pain they have as a by-product of racism, the result is a dismissal of an important piece of who they are as human beings. The hierarchy of oppression implies that white people can never feel as much pain as people of color because they are non-targets of racism. Author Viktor E. Frankl wrote:

A man's suffering is similar to the behavior of gas. If a certain quantity of gas is pumped into an empty chamber, it will fill the chamber completely and evenly, no matter how big the chamber. Thus suffering completely fills the human soul and conscious mind, no matter whether the suffering is great or little. Therefore the size of human suffering is absolutely relative (Bower & Hunt, 1991, p.41).

Ranking suffering leads us to "invest in the pretense of an authenticity based" (Bower & Hunt, p. 41, 1991) on statements like the one my friend shared in the earlier story; "I know now that you're a 'real' Mexican." The genuine sharing of personal narratives in a moral conversation creates a much needed opportunity to understand the encompassing power of racism.

By focusing on the congruence of our realities, we eliminate the hierarchy created by ranking each other's experience. It allows us to see that oppression is universal and, "to see that, on the receiving end, pain is not black or white or brown, or any other color. It is pain" (Bower & Hunt, 1991, p.41). As we broaden the scope of how we view each other's experiences, we are forced to think about the role we play in perpetuating different forms of oppression. We can either be targets or non-targets. Regardless, we feel pain as a result of the institutional nature of oppression. The elimination of a hierarchy of oppression provides us an opportunity to voice our experiences in order to work through the meaning embedded within it. This leads towards moral conversation about the politics of race.

Conclusion

The history of American society has been delivered to us from the point of view of the majority culture. History, as it has been told, depicts colonization by white Europeans as the norm, whereas the history for black people has been one of slavery. What has been left out is the rich multicultural history that has gone untold to much of society. Through the moral conversation we can learn each other's histories and experience a more realistic and complete view of society.

In my own experience the debate about how to respond to racism is in itself an ongoing conversation. There are many forums in which we can make a concerted effort to create an environment that is inclusive of all voices and no one of us has the final word on any issue (Nash, 1996, p. 86). For example, the classroom setting, meetings, and day to day conversation are all venues where one can practice the skills of active listening, discernment, and patience. All of these suggestions are a part of the ongoing conversation of how to infuse multiculturalism into the curriculum and institutional system of higher education. The power of racism cannot be dismissed, but recognized as a factor when engaging in dialogue about this issue. There may be inherent power differentials between individuals and having a discussion utilizing the tenets of the moral conversation as a guide can help to deconstruct these barriers so that change may occur.

In my work at the ALANA (African, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American) Student Center at the University of Vermont we work hard to create a campus environment that is inclusive of all students. We attempt to accomplish this through workshops and multicultural events that expose the campus community to a rich multicultural society. One of our hopes is that these events promote a respectful environment where faculty, staff, and students may feel comfortable sharing their experiences with one another. This is only one example of how change can begin to occur. I argue that it takes a concerted effort on behalf of both majority culture and people of color to address the issue of multiculturalism to make diversity an institutional component rather than an add-on. The tenets of the moral conversation can help support this process.

Engaging in the moral conversation about race requires that both students of color and white students shift their frame of reference while learning and translating each other's experiences. White students must be willing to engage in moral conversation to regain the humanity that they have lost because of racism. To respond to racism only with intellect causes one to remain paralyzed in guilt and frustration as well as political correctness. I offer that through the use of "moral cross-cultural conversation" we as people can gain both an intellectual and an emotional understanding of racism. This may allow us to better appreciate our ethnic experience, not in spite of it, but in celebration of it. Furthermore, working towards a culturally pluralistic society requires patience and humility, and an understanding of each other's history, which are all essential components of a moral cross-cultural conversation.

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