

Multicultural Process of Change – Assumptions and Definitions Angela R. Bryant, VISIONS Inc.

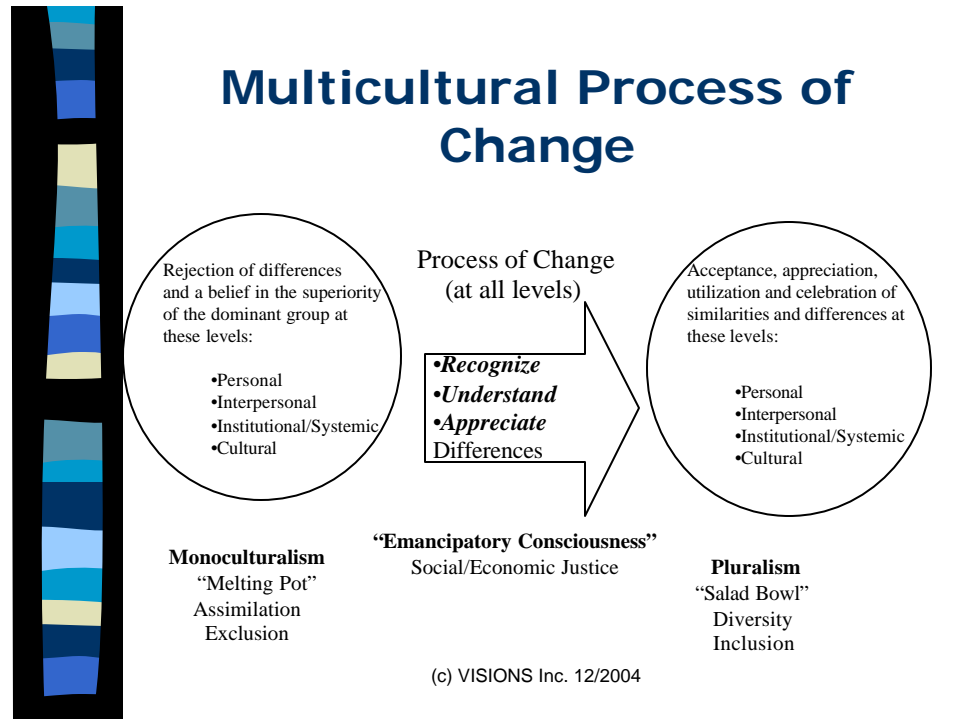


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Goal -> "Try On" a Common Language and Approach

One of the goals of diversity or multiculturalism training using the VISIONS model is to offer participants a common language and approach for understanding differences and the dynamics of the "better-than/less-than" treatment of people and groups because of their differences. The learning goal is to "try on" a language and an approach that will help us effectively discuss these complicated dynamics. This approach has been developed over twenty years of practice, and many participants have found it helpful for understanding, learning and practicing multiculturalism and looking at differences. This approach is not being offered as the "right way" or "only way" or even the "best way" to do this work. It is offered as "one way" to talk about and understand all the dynamics that are involved in understanding our differences and the barriers and hurdles that sometimes come with differences. The VISIONS approach is *"one way"* that can work well for learning and practicing the multicultural process.

The Multicultural Process

Let's start by defining – MULTICULTURAL PROCESS. Multiculturalism is the complex process of *recognizing, understanding and appreciating* our own unique cultural differences and the unique cultural differences of others. Each of these three components is important and can occur at 4 levels: the personal level of our attitudes, beliefs and feelings; the interpersonal level of our behaviors and practices; the institutional level of the rules, policies and procedures we put in place and the cultural level of the group norms we hold dear, maintain and enforce that favor and include some groups more than others.

"Recognizing differences" means developing the capacity to see and take in the ways in which people are different from us. For example, recognizing differences, at the personal and interpersonal levels, would mean, being comfortable looking at and connecting with the person who has a disability or paying attention to and speaking to people who are of a different race or ethnicity.

"Understanding differences" means having information about what differences mean. Understanding means having the *cultural humility* to know what I don't know so I can find out new information, and the *cultural literacy* to use cultural information to make meaningful linkages and connections with people who are different. For example, understanding differences would mean having some information about how the experiences of women and people of color may be different and uniquely challenging from others and similarly, how the experiences of lab assistants, administrative assistants, nutrition educators and program assistants may differ from those of program specialists, managers, faculty and directors.

"Appreciating differences" means the range from willingness to share the elements for survival – food, air, water, land, spiritual practices, freedom -- to willingness to flourish and prosper together – to live and live well together. Anywhere on that continuum is on the multicultural path. It is typical to have an uncomfortable or negative response initially to differences that are unfamiliar. Over time, appreciation occurs with mutual contact, understanding, practice and familiarity.

Appreciation means moving off neutral and having some positive regard for the survival and well-being of others who are different. Appreciation means willingness to take a step forward, make contact, get information or solve a problem or conflict with that person who is different from me. For example, appreciation can mean practicing and learning to correctly

pronounce the given name of a person whose name is not English-based instead of using a nickname or shortened name because it is easier.

Why does this process focus on differences? What about similarities? Both similarities and differences are important. The multicultural process of change assumes that most people, in jobs like ours, already understand and embrace the similarities that all human beings share and already have pretty good skills at finding and leveraging what we have in common. Interestingly, one of the things we have in common as human beings is that we are all different and unique. *The multicultural process emphasizes that differences exist and are good, useful, functional and desirable.* Multiculturalism Training also assumes that we are sometimes misinformed and uninformed about, and uncomfortable with, our differences, and that misinformation and discomfort can get in the way of successful relationships and work teams. We can increase our diversity and multicultural tool box by increasing our skills at dealing with the unique cultural differences we have from others. The multicultural process begins with recognizing, understanding and appreciating my own cultural uniqueness and then the differences of others.

Diversity

We distinguish multiculturalism, which is the process of recognizing, understanding and appreciating differences, **from diversity**, which is defined as the mix or demographics of who we are --- attributes that can be counted and measured and put on a spreadsheet. Notice the diversity and differences in people around you. What kind of chart would you make? What would the measurable categories be? Multiculturalism is the process we use to recognize, understand and appreciate those differences in order to accomplish our objective of a successful multicultural experience, interaction, climate or organization. Just getting or having the mix of people in the room is only one step to exploring multiculturalism. The "*process*" is how we are with each other, and our willingness to address the cultural differences that are a part of our work and our community. An example of multicultural process would be understanding, as a Ph.D., what it is like for the blue collar, middle-aged high school graduate who does not have the energy or motivation to go back to school and to hear as legitimate what he would need to make that happen. Another example would be a White person understanding and seeking information about the challenges and difficulties of the lone person of color on the work team.

Monoculturalism -> Multiculturalism -> Pluralism

What is the purpose of the multicultural process of change? The multicultural process of change is one way to move from Monoculturalism to pluralism ---- from the belief system and treatment system of "better-than/less- than" to pluralism -- the belief and experience of understanding the shortcomings of the better-than/less-than system, accepting and using all our differences and practicing inclusion to create better outcomes than practices & systems based on the myth of superiority. In "The Class Divided" experiment by Jane Elliot, an Iowa teacher, who simulated discrimination in her third grade class room based on eye color, all the children performed better on the day they were treated as if they were "better-than" or superior, worse on the day they were treated as if they were "less-than" or inferior and even better after the experiment concluded and they understood the impact of both "better/than" and "less/than" treatment on themselves and others.

Monoculturalism is the belief in the superiority of some groups and their ways over other groups and the rejection of differences as bad or troublesome based on a belief that the differences will dilute the superiority and related way of life of the better-than group. Monocultural beliefs can be outside of awareness or unconscious and can result in "power over" strategies, behaviors, policies and beliefs. Monocultural beliefs can have harsh consequences when the groups holding those beliefs have the power to treat other groups as less and target those "less-than" groups for less of society's benefits and resources. The mistreatment or targeting of groups *as less and for less* is called **systemic or systematic oppression**. Monoculturalism and systematic oppression have big power at the cultural and institutional levels and impact all of us personally even if we disagree with the beliefs. Even when we reject the prejudice and misinformation about other groups that is all around us, eventually, we are affected by the cultural messages and institutional structures that communicate inferiority and superiority. Similarly in U.S. culture, when we are growing up and see men in charge and leading and women serving, following, nurturing and caring, nobody has to tell us that men are "better" and women are "less", we pick up those beliefs by what we see. Even the developmental stages of integration and assimilation are a part of Monoculturalism. Those practices are based on the belief that our goal is to be like and to blend in with the superior group. Integration and Assimilation confronts the myth of inferiority of the targeted group by requiring the "better-than" group to mix with the less-than group so long as the less-than group fits in the cultural

norms and institutional structures of the better-than group. Integration and Assimilation does not challenge the myth of "better-than" for the supposed superior group because it does not require both groups to look at the unique differences and cultural norms and structures of all groups as equally valuable to assuring successful outcomes for the collective whole.

Multiculturalism and Pluralism are powerful changes because they challenge and interrupt both the "better-than" and "less-than" sides of the superiority/inferiority and Monoculturalism paradigm and the related targeting of systemic oppression. It takes a shift in world view to grab the vision of pluralism -- using differences to create better outcomes for all groups rather than using differences to keep any group down or target any group as less or for less. This shift will require "*Emancipatory Consciousness*" -- conscious changes in our thinking, feeling and practices that incorporates our seeing each other human being as equal to us and equally entitled to survive and thrive from their own cultural framework. Emancipatory consciousness of the equality of others is an important developmental stage in the multicultural process and involves an appreciation and desire for our own well-being and to support and accommodate the prosperity and well-being of others.

Learning/Unlearning/Non-blaming/Taking Responsibility

What is the root of the monoculturalism that our ancestors and founders have passed on to us in the United States? The historical record documents that these beliefs were partially rooted in survival fears, decisions to dominate and exploit others and the urgency to avoid and flee persecution and oppression at the expense of the humanity of others; however, a significant part of the superiority/inferiority beliefs and practices passed on to us were based on ignorance and misinformation. In some cases the beliefs were that other groups, e.g. Africans and Native Americans, were not fully human or that some people, e.g. women and children, should be the property of men. As educators, we can surely change any parts of monoculturalism and systemic oppression that are based on ignorance and misinformation and provide to ourselves and others updated information and experiences about cultural differences and the impact of oppressive practices and systems on all groups.

The VISIONS approach is based on the assumption that monocultural beliefs are learned, taught, caught and passed on through socialization, and can, therefore, be unlearned by having new experiences and gaining new information in genuine and equitable contact with people who come from different backgrounds than our own. For example, when children see all around them

that Whites are in charge at school, work, and government offices, they pick up the information that a White's place is to be in charge and lead, and a person of color's place is to serve or assist. Because beliefs about the superiority and inferiority of groups is learned, taught, caught and passed on, it is unhelpful to the unlearning and change process, to blame each other for that learning that most often occurred at a young age when we were not in charge of the cultural and institutional mechanisms that communicated those beliefs to us. None of us is born feeling superior or inferior to others. There is no gene for superiority or inferiority, and it is not "human nature". The silver spoon has to be put in the mouth and is not born in the mouth. From the moment we wrap the baby in its pink or blue blanket, we communicate messages of better-than/less-than status.

The "better-than/less-than" process is learned and passed on from a cultural and institutional force that is bigger than the individual, and while it is not helpful to blame ourselves and others for that socialization, we are responsible for the impact of that learning now, for getting updated information and experiences and for making adjustments based on our updated information and experiences. So understanding and practicing both assumptions – *we are not to blame and we are responsible* is a practice of "both/and" thinking that is key to the multicultural change process. Our learning goal is to build the skills and tools for taking responsibility for multicultural change without blaming ourselves and others for whatever ways we have adapted, taken in, caught, and fought against the superiority and inferiority messages and experiences about our own groups and other groups.

Target and Non-Target Groups

Types of oppression	Variable	Non-Target Groups	Target Groups
Racism	Race/Color/ Ethnicity	White European Caucasian	People of Color (African, Asian, Native/American Indian, Latino/a Descent
Sexism	Gender	Men	Women/ Transgender
Classism	Socio-Economic Class	Middle, Upper Class	Poor, Working Class
Elitism	Education Level	Formally Educated	Informally Educated
	Place in Hierarchy	Managers, Exempt, Faculty	Clerical, Non-Exempt, Students
Religious Oppression Anti-Semitism	Religion	Christians, Protestants	Muslims/Catholics, Atheists, Jews, others
Militarism	Military Status	WW I & II, Korean, Gulf War Veterans	Vietnam Era Veterans
Ageism	Age	Young Adults/ workers	Elders , Older worker +lower level (40+ by law)
Adultism		Adults	Children
Heterosexism	Sexual Orientation	Heterosexuals	Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender
Ableism	Physical or Mental Ability	Temporarily Able- Bodied	Physically or Mentally Challenged
Xenophobia	Immigrant Status	U.S. Born	Immigrant
Linguistic Oppression	Language	U. S. English	U. S. English as a Second Language; Non-English

One of the ways to visualize and demonstrate how monoculturalism and systemic oppression have occurred in the United States is using a spreadsheet that lists at least 11 forms of "Isms" or types of oppression that have been practiced in the U. S. culture over time. *Remember, that the assumption of this approach is that we are not to blame for our group memberships, AND we can take responsibility for changing the oppression of ourselves and others.* The target groups are groups that have been targeted “as less” and “for less” by the non-target groups in our culture. Social science research documents that there is a high probability that the life’s chances of target group members are affected by that group membership; e.g. the high likelihood of arrest, conviction and incarceration of Black males or the high likelihood of nurturing or caregiving roles by women at no pay or lower pay levels. “Targeting” is based on treatment, outcomes and group odds and not just the individual experience. Non-target groups are groups targeted as “better than” and with documented better odds of good life chances based on that group membership, e.g. the high odds of being in a work environment run by people from your own racial or gender group. The increased odds of success are referred to as the **"unearned**

privilege" of the non-target group. The unearned privilege is the part of the success factor that is aided by the ease or advantage that results from the "better-than" assumption and experience and that is conferred by the cultural norms and institutional practices based on the better-than assumption and position.

People who are right-handed can expect to use a computer, open a can, or cut with scissors and that it will be designed for them and easy for them. Left-handed people, on the other hand, have to adapt to using things that are not designed for them. Right-handed people often don't realize that they have this privilege. But anyone who does not have this unearned privilege is very aware of it. *Students of WMNS 121 at Kenyon College. Homophobia in Our Schools; 1999*

"I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks." *McIntosh P. White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack. 1990.*

When you look down the list of target groups, everyone should see themselves reflected there in some present or potentially future group membership. For example, classism and elitism includes all types of status differences, e.g. formally and informally educated, all levels in the work place, right and wrong side of the tracks etc. Everyone has a supervisor at work, and therefore, experiences the target group of being a supervisee. Everyone, if they keep living, will be an elder and will likely experience some type of disability.

On the other hand, when you look down the list of non-target groups, everyone should find themselves reflected in one or more of those groups as well. We all are a complex combination of target and non-target group memberships in different configurations that impact our life outcomes and chances. None of the groups or individuals has the same experience; however, what we have in common on each side is that we face better or worse odds or chances. The learning goal related to this concept of target and non-target, is to honor and understand the impact of privilege and mistreatment on ourselves and others from the mixture of group memberships we each have in order to overcome the harm of the unfair allocation of privilege and mistreatment and to create more similar successful outcomes for all groups.

It can be helpful to highlight some specific information related to some of the target groups. People of color, refers to people of African, Latino/a, Native American (American Indian) and Asian descent. It is important for individuals to self-identify as to whether they have

experienced targeting “as less than” on account of the color of their skin. People who are bi-racial and multiracial often experience being both a target and non-target of racism and some experience themselves as more of a target than a non-target or vice versa. Also some persons of Hispanic or Latino/a background may identify as White or European in their racial background especially from outside the U. S., and yet experience being targeted in the U.S. by race or ethnicity. Similarly, some Asians, Arabs, Iranians or Persians may also identify as White. Again, this is a process of self-identification, and people with multiple dynamics at play in their backgrounds are invited to “try on” all parts of their backgrounds and see what their learning is. Please note that physical ability (ableism) differences can include weight and height differences, mental and emotional disabilities and learning differences. The target groups of religious oppression can include any groups that are not protestant, e.g. Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhists, agnostics and atheists. In summary, everyone has been and is in a target group, and everyone has been and is in a non-target group. We are each a combination of different target and non-target experiences and some group memberships can change over time, e.g. economic class, educational level, job level, age and disability.

The target and non-target dynamic involves both positive and negative experiences on each side. On the target side, there are strengths as well as the historic and continuing treatment as less. For example, the strengths of being a woman are the skill and capabilities for the nurturing and caring roles that are culturally expected, and the negative side is the fact that these roles are often for no pay or less pay than men receive with similar or less levels of training, responsibility and experience.

On the non-target side, there are unearned advantages that accompany the presumption and myth of superiority. There are the learned attitudes and behaviors that result in treating the target group as less, perhaps unintentionally and outside of awareness, and there is the cost or loss for the non-target group from the historic and continuing “better-than” experience. For example, men and boys are often endowed with a certain physical size and strength. Men also have the “unearned privilege” of good odds that the most prestigious jobs in their work place will be held by other men and that they will have a good chance of being tuned in and included. At the same time, men may often minimize the ways women are excluded from the networking channels for organizational success. Men often minimize the capability, contributions and qualifications of women, especially the more prestigious the job, and attribute women’s success

to affirmative action. Men may also negatively judge women's job commitment when women also have family caregiving roles while men may not even think about the impact of a man's caregiving role. The costs to men as non-targets is the loss of the full capability of women as equal partners and contributors and the loss of nurturing and caregiving roles men might play if the roles and rewards were more fairly supported and distributed across gender.

Just like the students in Jane Elliott's "Class Divided", "brown-eyed/blue-eyed" experiment, we can perform better and more successfully after understanding both our target and non-target experiences and their impact on ourselves and others at the personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels. Only from understanding both sides, will we have the "emancipatory consciousness" needed for facilitating the multicultural process of change and for creating successful pluralistic environments for all individuals and groups.

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