

Diversity Dynamics

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Diversity training and sensitizing seems to be big business in the field of HR today. But how deep do most of these programs go, and what effect do they actually have in the long run. I have been part of many such programs, and often felt that participants leave without any understanding of the real dynamics that govern the field of human diversity.

In my work with groups during the past years I've come to the conclusion that there are two very distinctive processes impacting on the dynamics of diversity namely 'identity forming' and 'discrimination'. Both processes are natural and subconscious. This implies that they will take place, except if there is a conscious intervention to do otherwise. The last assumption is based on the human need to control resources in order to survive.

Let's have a close look at the two processes:

Identity forming:

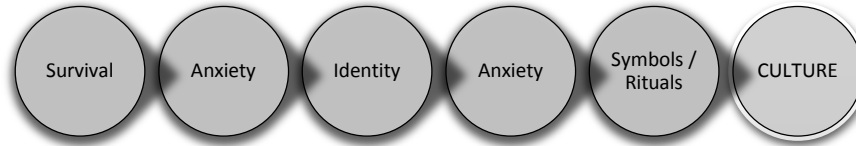
Identity forming starts with the need to survive. Resources in any area are limited. It is also not easily come by, often not without confronting danger. This was especially true for the cave man. It was beneficial for people to form groups. By forming such groups it became easier to confront danger and obtain resources like food. Anxiety of not being able to survive individually has thus moved people to form collective identities.

This is as true of modern society as it were for ancient groups. In South Africa today we see more and more multiracial consultancy groups forming. The black and white consultation group has become a familiar sight in the world of organizational consultation (observation is South African based). This is again a manifestation of people forming collective identities for the purpose of survival, a strategy to obtain resources.

Very often the forming of collective identity brings about another form of anxiety, which is the fear of the group breaking up. The group becomes a container of safety, and strategy to survive and obtain resources. As an individual, one might be expelled from the group. The group can also be absorbed or controlled by other groups. This anxiety needs to be contained and thus symbols and rituals are created. This satisfies the feeling of one-ness and belonging.

Once symbols and rituals are established, culture is born. In this context we refer to culture as being the glue that bonds collective identity. Culture can be seen as the result of a collective human evolution process. Culture also serves another very important purpose, and that is to contain the anxiety that an ever changing and evolving world brings about. Culture helps to create the illusion of stability, that things are not changing and that the group is safe and secure. The word 'illusion' is used

since change is not only a reality, but also inevitable. Yet culture has been the most powerful weapon of many strong nations. With this the implication that groups need the illusion of stability to survive, both psychologically and physically. One can see that two of the strongest dynamics in the identity forming process is survival and anxiety.



Discrimination:

This diversity process naturally follows the identity forming process. For one group to discriminate against another usually has a lot to do with power. As mentioned earlier, resources are limited. This makes each established group a threat to any other established group, since no group can survive without consuming a portion of these limited resources.

The first step in the process of discrimination is one of categorization. This starts, firstly by the group establishing its own culture, and then differentiating all other groups, e.g. the Zulus, Xhosas, Afrikaners, etc. There are a number of categorizations that relates to diversity, e.g. men and women; heterosexuals, bisexuals and homosexuals; white, black and Asian; etc.

The second step in the process of discrimination is to make assumptions of other groups. These assumptions are usually motivated by the groups own anxieties, e.g. Afrikaners are racists, if we locate racism in Afrikaners then we do not need to deal with our own issues of racism; or Zulus are violent, now we can perceive ourselves as peaceful.

The third step on the road to discrimination is one of stereotyping. This is when our collective assumptions become part of our believe system. We don't assume that women are bad drivers, we know they are; or black people are not intelligent. Stereotyping is usually an oversimplified and one-sided view, very often subconsciously used to protect a group's fantasy of superiority. Categorization usually becomes a stereotype when we start adding labels of 'good' or 'bad', 'stronger' or 'weaker', 'more' or 'less' to a category.

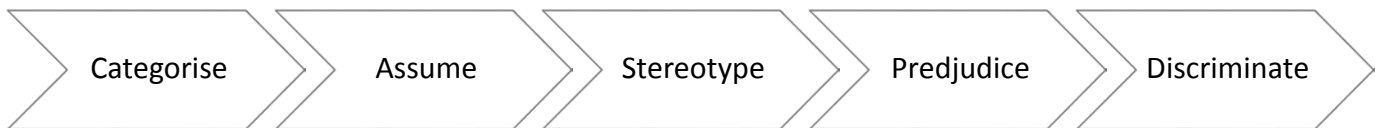
The process of discrimination, thus far explained, is quite strongly related to the dynamic of splitting and projection. This is the process of taking a part inside oneself, that one does not want to acknowledge or own up, and then locating it somewhere else. Once a group has split in parts they can start working with the evil group, or the non-cooperative department down the hallway. This brings about the fantasy that our group represents something good and the other group represents something evil.

The fourth step to discrimination is prejudice. Here we manufacture theories of 'dealing' with 'the other' group. Examples are where white people start discussing methods of controlling the black people, before they get out of hand; or where black people start making suggestions that the farms of white farmers should be taken away because the power of having land is dangerous. Prejudice is usually rooted in an inflexible generalization or on unsubstantiated data.

Discrimination is the last step. This is where we put our prejudice into action. Examples are, females not allowed being part of certain groups or holding certain positions; or specific race groups deprived from specific privileges. Mostly discrimination has to do with staying in power, and the anxiety of not being in control of recourses.

There is also another very important purpose for discrimination, which is escaping from one's own dysfunctions. Here again we refer to splitting and projection. As example we can use Hitler and his theory on a superior race. Problem was that Hitler himself did not fit the description of an Arian. He had brown hair, brown eyes and was timidly built. Fact was that very few Germans actually fitted the Arian description. These perceived impurities needed to be contained or dealt with somehow, and the Jewish people were very conveniently used for this purpose. By putting Jews in concentration camps where they can be tortured and punished, the Germans could work with their own impurities. The Jewish people were also Germans, thus the German nation has split of part of themselves, and projected their perceived impurities onto this minority group. With this action they have firmly established the illusion that one group represents something good and that the other group represents something evil.

It's important to note that the process of discrimination is a natural one. If a group does not consciously work at not discriminating, they eventually will. Human history is adequate proof of this statement.



The purpose of this article is only to demonstrate the important influence that survival, and especially the need to discriminate in order to survive, has when dealing with issues of diversity. The above two processes does not in any way degenerate other very important influences on human diversity such as values, beliefs and principles. But that is a topic for another article.

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