Theory to Practice: Fostering Diverse and Inclusive Campus Environments

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Disrupting Prejudice in Educational Institutions

Gilberto Arriaza

Abstract

This chapter argues that the disruption of the pathways leading to stereotypes and prejudice can be monitored and, overtime, disrupted. Disruption may help to build social, cultural and intellectual capital. The chapter offers a communicative model composed of three-parts: addressing deficit, locating attribution, and growing capital.

Introduction

For a few years I organized my social science students into several small teams. One half of such teams would be "observers", and the other half, "buyers". During this activity the "observers" (usually two to three students of European or Chinese descent), would go to a local store with the "buyers" team (also two to three students mostly Black or Latino descent). Both groups would arrive separately. The observers always dressed formally. The buyers dressed as they did on daily basis. While I know I was operating on the assumption that White and Chinese descent students would not be stereotyped as much as Black and Latino, my bet was that I, sadly, would confirm such assumption. Every time I organized this activity the result was almost always the same -- the buyers were closely followed by the store security, while the observers rarely.

The observers' team was in charge of documenting the whole event through copious notes. Only when possible they would take pictures or video. We used a good chunk of the year's first semester to organize and execute the activity. The debriefing and analysis discussion took always most of our time. From this experience on I dedicated more attention to studying stereotypes and prejudice. This study lead me to confirm what is known about these topics (e.g. Allport, 1954; Devine, 1989; Troyna, & Hatcher, 1992; Stephan, Stephan White & Oskamp, 2000), and to decipher some of the mechanisms stereotyping operates from, as well as to understand how it creeps up into one's consciousness.

Many years later - while teaching courses addressing agency and organizational behavior in a master degree program for educational leaders, at a public university in California - I followed a group of 27 of my graduate students. I had explicitly taught some fundamentals on critical discourse analysis in class, and wanted to understand how they implemented the ideas and applied the skills to deal with prejudice. From this effort I have identified some effective actions one may take to disrupt the pathways leading to the sedimentation of prejudice, and build from there the ways to diligently dismantle it. But before continuing, I want to make sure key concepts are first clarified.

First of all, according to scholars such as Samuels, (1973) and Görzig (2008), a stereotype is usually a negative conception, primarily expressed through images one holds true about another person. These images are based on what one assumes as true defining attributes of the group the person is ascribed to. For instance, back to my middle school teaching in San Francisco, California, in more than one occasion my colleagues lamented they would have a majority Black student population in the coming new school year. Nothing else was usually said in such encounters.

Those colleagues' complaints masked their assumptions about said students. Opposite to this situation. I once had a Chinese and Vietnamese majority student body in my courses at the same San Francisco school. A few of those complaining colleagues came over to my classroom to literally congratulate me for my good luck. Upon asking them to explain the reason for my newfound fortune, they answered – students of such ethnic backgrounds, on top of having an excellent academic record, did not have any behavioral problem. As, among others, Takaki (1989), and Phu, (2012) have explained the label "model minority", while deceivingly positive, functions as a trap for those included in it, and conjures negative labeling of those excluded.

Even in the case where the assumption may originate on a single negative experience, the stereotype is applied to the group as a whole, such that, as Ogbu (1994, 1994a) amply showed, the individual disappears, melted in the negative notion about the group. In other words, stereotypes provide the images, and prejudice articulates a rationalized conclusion. My middle school colleagues built a stereotype of Chinese students as good students, such that an individual's profile – e.g. skin tone, type of voice, salient facial features as well as other bodily characteristics - and social markers (e.g. personal names), evoke defining images of certain social behavior, which is applied to the individual's group as a whole.

Allport (1954) pointed out that when prejudice persists, even when it has been shown as false, then it becomes racism. Authors such as Tatum (1992), Omi & Winant (1994), and Ladson-Billings (1994), have added that racism does not stop there. It really responds to a whole oppressive system the dominant group uses to keep its privileges and advantages at the expense of those oppressed. In short, racism means prejudice plus power.

I am using here the notion of race in its socio-cultural connotation. The idea that human races exist has been debunked, in scientific terms (Cohen, 1998; Mukhopadhyay, Henze & Moses, 2007). The problem is that still today, the notion of race continues to be implemented as a way to organize societies (Ferguson, 2002; West, 2003; Appelbaum & Mellnik, 2005). That explains the fact that, in some societies, certain social groups continue to experience systematic and institutional discrimination in the labor market, education, housing, health, and politics due to them being considered from inferior races.

The idea that all human contact takes place within a local context and under specific circumstances, such as at work, public spaces, schools, offices, stores, undergirds the communicative model proposed in this chapter. Additionally, the model assumes that people, without distinction, hold different degrees of prejudice (Stanfield, 2011) and that, as Larson & Ovando (2001), Dacin, Goodstein & Scott (2002) have argued, for social change to take root, contact must happen within a social institution. Consequently, this communicative model has been based on one of the most important social institutions – schools.

Following Kramsch's (1998) proposal of language as an expression, embodiment, and symbolic representation of culture, the model here discussed embraces the added notion of language as "a medium to being about culture" (Henze & Arriaza, 2006, p.163). Language may reproduce or subvert the status quo when used by individuals to either affirm or critique existing frames of reference. In this sense, language undeniably serves as a tool for change when stereotypes, for instance, are aptly interrogated and challenged with new meanings. The use of critical discourse may, in fact, lead to the disruption of the mental processes leading to discrimination and shows, through a constructive frame of reference, how to substitute it. The model consists of three components: deficit, attribution, and capital.

Addressing Deficit Theories

It is well documented that whenever two anonymous individuals enter in contact, snap judgments inform their behavior. According to studies on cognition (e.g. Buckley & Eder, 1988; Fisman, Lyengar, Kamenica Simonson, 2006; Payne, 2006), the time it takes to say "Hi, my name is such and such; great meeting you" is enough to make one's mind--as to determine whether the speaker is, for instance, suitable to be a prospective business partner or love companion. The high speed of snap judgments plays a crucial role in difficult situations, such as in a hospital's emergency room. There the physician in charge barely counts on a few minutes to decide what procedure to use in a case, for instance, of a grave abdomen wound. She summons up what she learned in medical school and her professional experience: she takes the vital signals, airway, breathing, circulation, disability, and exposure. Deep down in her mind an unequivocal idea pulsates: She is at the ER to save human life. It is the moment Groopman (2007) defines as the point of optimum level of tension and anxiety, which enables quick decision-making.

In daily life, people function in similar ways to the physician in the ER room, or to a chance encounter like the person seeking a business or romantic partner may experience. Contrary to the idea that one needs copious amounts of data to make quick judgments, Kandel (2007) concluded that snap judgments occur as a result of the brain's capacity to gather infinite amounts of pieces of data in nanoseconds. Moreover, the author explains, in the prefrontal cortex-- the area where this activity occurs--converge both accumulated knowledge and past experience, which implies that one's biography has a great deal to do with behavior.

In the school context, the decisions made by counselors, teachers and administrators do not, by any stretch of the imagination, implicate the same degree of severity as the physician's in the ER, or the same kind of excitement as the person seeking a love partner may experience at the waiting table. Yet, those school decisions are as important, because they always have long term effects. In most cases, they seriously affect individual's and group's life trajectory. Identifying what informs such mental process and how to deal with it becomes critically important. Perhaps one of the most important sources informing behavior is theory.

Theories, in a way, provide the explanations that confer a logical sense to the evidence. They help us explain phenomena. One of the most popular theories in education is the one that frames students in deficit terms. Deficit theory argues that due to a culture with low appreciation for education, or to the interference of the mother tongue with the official language, or to the lack of or, at best, the existence of a weak work ethic, certain social groups will always tend to show low academic performance. Looking at a recurrent event in schools, such as the examination of standardized test results, may help to understand deficit theory - whether cultural, linguistic, or socio-economic. A report on science performance in eighth grade across public schools in the United States in 2009, students - grouped by socio-economic status - attained the following results:

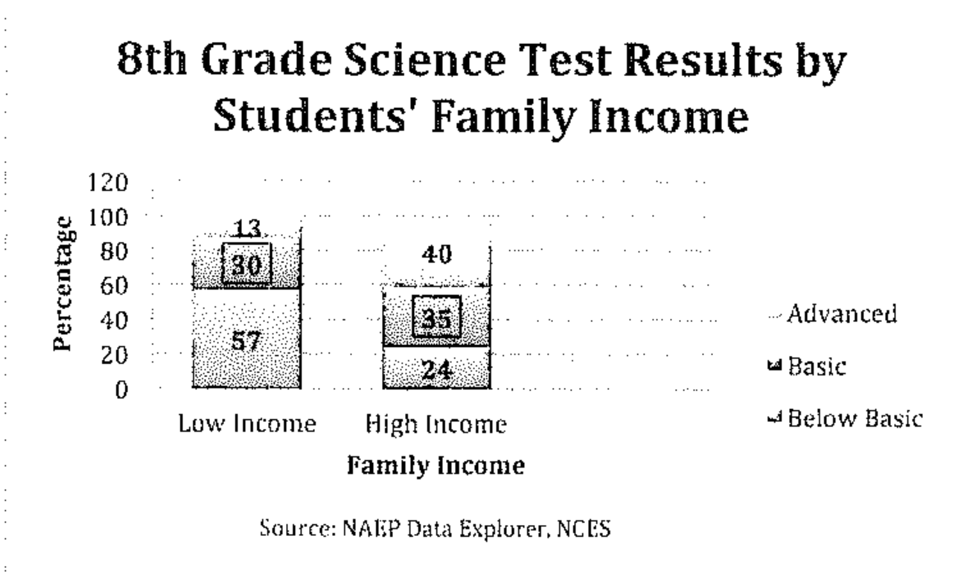

Figure 1: Graph: G. Arriaza, © 2014

This graph shows that about one out of every ten students (10%) from low-income families performed at the advanced level, and about one out of every two students (50%) from the same bracket achieved below basic. Furthermore, the graph shows that four out of every ten students (40%) from high-income families scored at the advanced level in science, and one out of every four students (25%) from this bracket performed below basic in science. The graph also shows that achievement at the basic level in science is about evenly tied for both groups -30% and 35% (only 5 points difference) respectively. Formal deficit theories apply varied interpretations to these results.

Cultural deficit theory would roughly explain these numbers like this: low-socio-economic families do not inculcate traditions, family habits, and customs that place education as a way of life and a source of happiness. That is the reason why their children's academic results are low when compared to children from high-income families.

Linguistic deficit theory would generally explain the same numbers using language as the culprit: children from low-income families are exposed to a low level vocabulary, inappropriate syntaxes, and strange phonetic structures which do not allow their children to easily decode formal academic communication. Such low-grade language leads these children to encounter insurmountable obstacles in tests and other measures of academic prowess.

Social deficit theory would roughly explain these numbers following the same logic: low-income families infuse their children with no work ethic, and lack intrinsic motivators such as hard work, postponement of gratification and persistence. The absence of these traits translates into their dismal academic performance.

Since the notion of human races has totally been debunked and shown as scientifically false – even though eugenics sometimes appears in public discourse – deficit theory tends to be preferred as the explanation for school failure. Understanding deficit theory constitutes the communicative model's first act to bring to a halt social prejudice--that is, deficit theory as a key source to explain social behavior. This understanding helps grounding one's capacity to identify the exact instances when the use of deficit thinking expressed through language in ordinary, everyday acts, occurs.

Throughout my years of practice I have noticed that self-monitoring one's utterances is a powerful cognitive skill; it affords the speaker with the pause needed in order to exert self-censorship, and to trigger a search for substituting deficit with constructive explanations. Once one is able to self-correct deficit language--and the more one does just that--then it will, overtime, be possible to have the ear to identify other people's utterances and to question them, and thus contribute to their own critical thinking. Yet, these actions are not enough to disrupt prejudice, and ultimately dismantle social discrimination. The other action is to place cause where it belongs.

Locating Attribution

It was proposed in the previous section that deficit theory feeds prejudice, and that understanding how it works constitutes a first step to stop the reproduction of social inequities. However, defining the source of a problem further complicates matters. This new section attempts to clarify the role attribution plays in the effort to disrupt prejudice. The need for understanding the reasons behind events, the why of things, has hunted humans from time immemorial. Why is the sky blue? How come the sun disappears in the horizon? David Hume (1711 - 1776), one of the first contemporary Western thinkers to work on the subject, among other things, proposes that lived experience and what can be empirically shown, make up the ultimate sources of understanding why phenomena happen (Hume, 2007).

Attribution has to do with the way one explains the cause of an event, a phenomenon. Once cause is clear, it is then possible to establish responsibility and come up with solutions. The attribution field has grown tremendously since Hume's time; this section briefly focuses only on one of its angles -- cause and effect. Thus, going back to the graph above, one could reliably say that students from high-income families overall perform quite high academically, when compared to the performance of peers from low-income families. That is simply a fact. Now, when one says that such results are due to the better appreciation for education by high-income families, one plainly assigns attribution of cause. Using evidence helps interrogating such assertion.

One could, for instance, ask: What evidence shows that low-income families do not appreciate education? In other words, to establish cause, research must be conducted. To this end, let's keep in mind that the cause of a phenomenon is what determines its existence. Effect, on the other hand, is the result or the manifestation of such phenomenon. In the statement "students from high-income families perform at the top academically given their appreciation for education", it can be argued that "appreciation for education" or "lack of education" constitutes the cause, and the effect is "perform at the top academically". While this reasoning may appear very straight forward, the fact is that establishing cause and effect contains great social and cultural value, simply because it allows to define attribution, ergo, responsibility.

Again, the statement "students from high-income families perform at the top academically given their appreciation for education" masks two issues: 1) When expressing "appreciation for education" as an attribute of high-income families, the opposite is implicit: "low-income families lack appreciation for education" which, of course, only leads their children to perform low academically. 2) When asserting "appreciation for, or lack of education" one displaces the full responsibility for the academic success, or failure, from the institution to the families.

These assertions make schools appear as neutral spaces, with no much to say in the matter, divorced from their own agency; the assertions also make students mere passive objects of the learning process. Moreover, such perspective puts forward a deficit view of both the institution and the students. To disrupt such view, let's consider another component of attribution – internal causal factors and external causal factors.

A fishbowl may help to illustrate what internal and external causal factors mean. Suppose that an obviously sick fish swims with great difficulty in the bowl. To save the fish one may ask first about the health of its internal organs. Then the attention moves to its immediate surroundings: the food, and the water's quality. Then one looks to the larger environment, such as the room's temperature, light exposure, noise. The process begins from inside, the fish and its food and water, to outside, the room as the larger environment. One prioritizes fish, food and water quality. The fish, water and food could be considered internal causal factors, while the room's condition could be considered external causal factors.

The context schools function is by far more complex and difficult, than the fishbowl case. Carefully distinguishing the internal from the external causal factors may, notwithstanding, aid the efforts to place attribution of cause where it belongs and, that way, position institutional efforts on a path to solve systemic problems. Internal factors are those upon which teachers, staff and administrators exert some degree of control. These factors determine the learning experience. External factors are those upon which teachers, staff and administrators exert insignificant or no influence at all. These factors wield marginal sway on the learning experience. Once these distinctions become clearer, mapping actions effectively will be possible. Delineating internal and external causal factors in the science test results above, may indeed offer a different interpretation of facts.

Internal attribution of cause will lead us to ask: What makes this institution produce so dissimilar results for two differentiated socio-economic groups? A question like this may provoke two possible reactions: 1) The institution becomes the focus of the inquiry, and 2) Responsibility remains at the institutional level, and is not externalized to the families or to society. Honing in on internal causal factors may increase the odds of unearthing root causes of the problem. In turn, locating the action on internal factors may additionally help to explore issues such as pedagogy, instructional practices, institutional functions, believes and values systems. This array of factors exists within the reach of faculty, staff and administrators who can accordingly act upon them. In other words, it is crucial to identify those factors upon which it is possible to act through work, since they live inside the institution; such factors clearly place primordial responsibility on the institution itself, and position it as the key change agent. The potential to uncover internal causal factors would diminish considerably with questions like this: In what ways does income impact the academic performance of those students from low-income families? Certainly, answering this question may produce fascinating new sociological insights. But these may not be too helpful to resolve the institutional challenges at hand. This is so because external attribution of cause takes the institution away from its sphere of direct influence.

In other words, educators, school staff, and administrators cannot do much to solve issues related to salaries, employment, economic policy, and the nature of business. This assertion does not deny the fact that, certainly low income affects a family in multiple ways. For instance, families with low wages struggle for survival on daily basis. The amount of disposable time to help children with homework, access to resources, participation in school governance, and school involvement in general may be considerably limited. The case of a school system that produces dismal results for certain social groups and excellent for others, ought to primarily be examined honing it on possible internal causes. Focusing on external causes will only lead to the identification of a set of forces difficult, if not impossible, to influence from the position the school sits in.

In summary, this section posits that shifting attribution to prioritize internal causal factors over external ones, as the space for action, may offer great potential power to enact deep institutional change. Disrupting prejudice, though, is only half the solution to building just and equitable institutions. The other half is the content to be used to substitute it. In the following section this chapter shows the third component of the model: capital.

Growing Capital

Perhaps the most powerful form of capital is its symbolic representation –money, also called financial capital. This form of capital contains a few important features: it can be physically transported in a wallet, a bag, from one country or a region to another. It can be transferred from one place, account or person, to another. It can be exchanged for physical objects or services, such as buying a TV, a phone, or paying an engineer for her services. Money capital can also be accumulated and used as a source of enrichment, such as through a bank account earning interests, bonds, stocks, or hedge funds. Schools can certainly grow capital of a different sort among students. Here I focus on three types: social, cultural, and intellectual capital. These kinds of capital embody the same profile of money capital. Said forms of capital can be transported, transferred, exchanged and accumulated.

Capital, of a social nature, also exists. It can be said that social capital exists within social networks, through which individuals and groups constantly interact for all sorts of purposes. These networks chiefly provide access to resources that facilitate the negotiation of services within and across such networks. Family relationships, neighbor to neighbor trust and selfless support, exchange of relevant information, and reciprocity, constitute some key indicators of the degree of strength of social capital (Coleman, 1988, Putman, 2000).

While social capital refers to networks, cultural capital is about decoding cultural signals (Bourdeau & Passeron, 1977). Cultural capital embodies one's capacity to both, understand and negotiate power relations, identify and be able to engage the borders across distinct cultural groups, to possess the skills of coding and decoding the dominant language variety, and to navigate the politics of identity successfully. For instance, cultural capital may be expressed through the way one carries oneself in daily interactions, how one code switch language or dress according to the occasion, or how well one understands other people's traditions. Additionally, regardless of demographic differences, parental involvement in the educational process, both at home and the school, play a key role in building cultural capital among children (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Parents certainly can, among other things, inculcate study and work habits, infuse vocabulary and linguistic expression, and habitus from an early age.

While schools play a central role in the reproduction of the habitus and culture of the dominant elites in a society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), they also offer the spaces to critically deal with both of them. In this sense, one's habitus - understood here as internalization of one's relationship with and position in society (Dumais, 1998) - has the potential to be shaped to fit new identities. In a school context, teachers embody, while at the same time transmit, cultural capital. They facilitate the interactions of children, and may intentionally expose them to the rules of power, such as excelling in standardized tests. In the United States these instruments, and the accompanying procedures, play a fundamental role as filters for social stratification –to a large extent they determine who goes to what type of college.

Intellectual capital composes school's core purpose. Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998) noted that it consists of knowledge and its transmission, as well as enriched creativity, social and technical skills, work and patterned study habits; this means that for schools to grow intellectual capital they embrace the development of flexible reasoning, and of organized reflective practice. Intellectual capital also offers the potential to engage institutional barriers advantageously, at the same time that it may release students' imagination. In the context of institutions of learning, when teachers explicitly increase students' chances of successfully addressing scholastic challenges--e.g. passing graduation exams or society's expectations for being economically independent--it can be argued that those teachers are growing intellectual capital among students. Learning fastens all efforts to grow this capital. Thus, organizations promoting structures and practices such as communities of practice, learning-communities, double loop learning, collaborative reflective practices boast strong intellectual capital, which manifests in its individual members' and their collectivity's high levels of focused conversation on learning.

Cultural and Intellectual capital are closely linked to social capital for many reasons. Social networks contain cultural and intellectual capital, and may play a crucial role as transmitters of the two. Faculty, staff, and administrators function as protective agents in schools (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Katz, 1999). They labor on daily basis developing students negotiating skills, to both succeed in their dealings with the institution itself, and to redress social conflict. They equip students with the understanding of, say, how power relations operate in society, and how formal and informal structures of society function. Moreover, they provide students with the skills to successfully decipher tracking practices, such as the case of testing in general, and standardized testing in particular.

The enormous potential of using the privilege embedded in the functions of protective agents, might afford the creation of the three forms of capital here presented. This is particularly important when these efforts target student groups who given ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status, gender, and other social markers, have otherwise little or no chance to access such forms of capital.

Conclusion

The central purpose of the model here discussed is to both disrupt prejudice and dismantle inequities based on prejudice. Change, it is assumed here, becomes institutionalized when it takes place within human organizations. That explains why the model's three components were explained in the context of institutions of learning. The chapter argued that while snap judgments take complex routs, the disruption of the mental pathways leading to stereotypes and ultimately to prejudice might be monitored and, overtime, disrupted.

The model's three components do not function separate or sequentially. They all can simultaneously be activated, and one may be prioritized over the others, according to who acts, the place, and the moment. They were here exposed one at a time for clarity reasons. First, the chapter discussed the powerful role of deficit theory, whether it is social, cultural, linguistic or of another kind. Once awareness of its existence has risen, it is then possible to constantly keep it on check by following one's own utterances; over time this meta-cognitive skill may avail the critique of other people's utterances and help them throughout.

Next the model advances the notion of internal attribution as the locus for placing possible cause. In the case examined, understanding attribution comes handy to explain why students produce the test results they do. Attribution of cause is central to understanding how deficit theory works, and to increasing bias control (Gomez & Wilson, 2006). The model proposes specifically the use of internal factors as the basis for attribution of cause. Parallel to this approach, the model states that external factors of cause ought to be considered, but as complementary to the internal ones. Yet, disrupting deficit theory and prioritizing causal internal factors make up only one half of the effort, the other half is capital.

Growing capital sits at the center of the efforts to disrupting deficit theories. Social capital contains cultural and intellectual capital. The stronger the life of social networks the better the chances for cultural and intellectual capital to grow. When this happens in institutions of learning, students' life chances may considerably improve.

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