

TEACHING NONVIOLENT CONFLICT RESOLUTION: A FORM OF UBUNTO

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The following narrative describes the author's experiences teaching conflict resolution in South Africa shortly after the fall of apartheid, with a focus on the changing relationships among black, white, coloured, and Indian social work professionals, as they work together under completely new roles and norms. The author provides examples of group discussion and learning, and explores the impact of training on herself and other participants. Throughout the training, the ubuntu concept of the essence of human relationships is utilized.

"A fish is the last to acknowledge the existence of water" - African proverb

According to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, "*Ubuntu botho*" (Abundance Project, 2010) means the essence of being human, and is one of the bedrock beliefs of African culture. He says that this concept "speaks about humanness, gentleness, hospitality, putting yourself out on the behalf of others, being vulnerable. It recognizes that my humanity is bound in yours, for we can only be human together."

This narrative will reflect on how the experiences I had teaching nonviolent conflict resolution when I received a Rotary Teaching Scholarship relate to the concept of "ubuntu." The scholarship was used to spend one semester teaching in South Africa, in the year 2000. Although this experience took place ten years ago, it came at such an important time in the country's history (shortly after the fall of apartheid), that this experience still has important insights to offer about social work with diverse groups, and about personal growth and learning related to abandoning stereotypes. Until the fall of apartheid, whites, black Africans, and "coloureds" (a term used in South Africa for people of mixed ancestry) had never worked together as equals. Since my field of teaching was in the area of nonviolent conflict resolution, these issues quickly emerged in my contact with students and also dramatically impacted me and my thinking about diversity.

I worked with undergraduate and masters' degree students in the field of social work, as

well as with social work alumni who wanted to receive continuing education, as well as various professional groups, including social workers from the South African Navy. During the four months of my stay, I met with nine different groups of people, for workshops that ranged from two hours to four full days. I came into contact with over 200 "students." Although my initial official contact was with the University of Stellenbosch, which was an Afrikaner university that had only recently switched to teaching in English, I also worked at the University of Capetown and the University of the Western Cape. (The University of the Western Cape had previously been open only to black students, and now had some coloured students as well.) Most South African universities now use English as the official language of instruction, although most students speak at least one other language (either a tribal language or Afrikaans). I was easily understood in all venues, and did not feel that my lack of a second language hindered me. I did make efforts to learn phrases in each of the tribal languages of people that I came into contact with.

Getting to Know South Africa

In general, my reception was very warm. South Africa has gone through incredible stress in the last ten years, but people of all colors (black, coloured, Indian and white) were eager to tell me about their impressions of change.

As an American, I was especially warmly received, because most blacks—who constituted 79.6% of South Africa’s population in 2010 (South African Population Statistics, 2010; <http://www.southafrica.info/about/people/population.htm>)—believed that it was partially due to the United States’ sanctioning of trade with the “old” South Africa, that helped to push people towards change.

I believe that some of the most interesting experiences I had related to my ability to help people confront their conflicts, but this time in new and open ways. Some of the groups I worked with were primarily of one ethnicity (black, white, coloured), depending on the venue, but all had some mix of people, who were interacting with each other in new and different ways. For example, the South African Navy had not had many coloured or black social workers before the 1990s. As the men (and women) of the navy were learning to deal with being equals in very close quarters (e.g., submarines) where they needed to depend on each other, the social workers were also learning to have case conferences and discuss issues of their clients in mixed groups. The social workers who were coming back for continuing education were primarily white and Afrikaans, who had been educated when apartheid was “normal” for them, and now had co-workers of color with very different ways of looking at their jobs and at the world. Even more difficult, were situations where black and coloured people were supervising white workers. Members of each group had to change the ways they thought and interacted with other group members.

Most of the students were used to the “British” style of education that utilized formal lectures and minimal interaction. My first task was to let people know that my expectation (with their cooperation) would be that we would function as a small group, in order to explore ideas about conflict in a meaningful experiential, as well as intellectual way. Most groups were initially ambivalent, feeling both excited and anxious about openly discussing conflicts that had been brewing inside of them.

Conflict Resolution Groups

My assumption (which I shared with my groups) was that much of the conflict people were experiencing in the work situation was related to ethnicity, because that was the subject that people talked about informally most of the time: How will it be now that the blacks are in power? White Afrikaners were frightened at the prospect of blacks taking “revenge” on whites for their part in South Africa’s history. Coloured South Africans were frightened that they would still be second-class citizens. (During apartheid, they had been better off than blacks, but not nearly as privileged as whites, and now their fear was that they would not be given the same opportunity as blacks in the new South Africa). Black South Africans were excited at the prospects of greater prosperity, frustrated with the slow nature of individual progress, and frightened about how they would change their self-concept overnight.

One black man, whom I met at a “*shebeen*” (an illegal bar during the time of apartheid, when buying and selling alcohol was illegal for blacks) said, “For 30 years I was taught that I was nothing; now, how am I supposed to get a job, and perform, when I never, ever thought that I was capable of doing so?” This interaction moved me to tears. Here was an articulate (though drunk!) 30-year-old man, feeling that, because of his lack of self-esteem, the new South Africa was beyond his grasp. I think that day was perhaps the one that impacted me the most in my thinking. I was surrounded by a group of fairly derelict-looking, sounding, and smelling men, who, when they opened their mouths, had real truths to tell. I felt that I challenged my own stereotypes that day, and really got it, that underneath the way people appear, everyone has things to offer. This is the essence of stereotypes breaking and changing.

Using exercises that allowed people to warm up by discussing small (almost trivial) conflicts with people like themselves, we slowly began discussing conflicts with other groups that were larger. What emerged was (no surprise!) the fact that many conflicts emerged from a mistaken sense that people share the same assumptions about what behavior means

for them. People from different cultures act differently, and those differences are misread and grow when there is not enough comfort to explore the specific behavior.

For example, I asked group members to describe an annoying behavior on the part of a co-worker. A white woman (taking a big risk) tried to describe what she felt was a "disgusting noise" that a black coworker would make on a regular basis; it was a combination of a snort and a snore. She went on to say that the person must have no manners, and why didn't she just control herself? After the nervous giggling had died down, I asked the group what they would think about the behavior if it came from their best friend who was like them. They said things like, "I'd guess she had a cold, or an allergy," or "I'd guess she had a breathing problem." When we talked about why the same assumption wasn't made about this coworker, the woman who had offered the example was able to admit that she'd never thought of those things, because she just assumed the woman wouldn't have any manners.

This led to an intense discussion of how people need to look at themselves to start to challenge the assumptions they had about others. In this group there were no blacks, but two coloured women talked about how they had felt judged by their white coworkers, too, and gave examples, which were then explored by the group. When I ended by asking people what was the one thing they'd learned that they could take away from the workshop, the response was that they learned they had to look at themselves first, before wishing other people would change. This truth also is the underlying essence of ubuntu: that one needs to think with compassion and kindness before being able to counter stereotypes. Of course, one always wonders if people *will* take those changes home with them, but the group was powerful in its ability to allow its members to look at a frightening subject in a nonthreatening way.

There is an African proverb that says, "A fish is the last to acknowledge the existence of water" (African Proverbs, 2009). The meaning comes from the idea that a fish never realizes that water is part of its environment.

For years, white people in South Africa believed in the reality that black people were inferior; it was just "the way it was." Until the laws changed, and people had to examine that belief, there was no reason to think it might be wrong. Of course, this is oversimplified, because there never was a time where all white South Africans believed that black people were inferior. There were many incredibly brave people, who were white, black, Indian, and colored, who fought for years to change the regime in power. However, government policy held that inferiority was a fact, and people were not encouraged (in fact were actively discouraged) to challenge the laws and policies that backed up those beliefs.

Learning and Exploring Differences

I learned and grew in powerful ways. For me and for anyone teaching in this area, the frightening part was, and continues to be, allowing the discussion to unfold, knowing that initially it was hurtful to people, and yet trusting that the process would lead to a place of greater understanding. When the discussion described above first began, I was terrified that it would escalate into bashing blacks (who were not in the room). I had to ask myself to listen nonjudgmentally, and then ask group participants to explore the issue without threatening the original speakers' thoughts and feelings. Having other participants offer alternative explanations is always more beneficial than my offering them, because participants feel more like one another (despite being white and coloured) than like me: a white American, from a completely different background and culture. I believe that in teaching, this is a lesson that is almost universally true. When we can get students to feel safe enough to express what they are feeling (by creating a safe, nonjudgmental classroom atmosphere), the class participants will learn from each other to a greater degree than from the teacher in front of the room.

In a different setting, at a university undergraduate social work class that was 95% black, I helped the class to explore the topic in a different way. Black Africans have their own mistaken assumptions about coloured and white people, and in a discussion, one woman

wondered why coloured people often shared one meal from the same plate, which seemed unsanitary and rude to her. A coloured student was able to tell her directly that it had to do with a strong cultural norm about sharing and not allowing someone to sit without food when you have some. Thinking of the behavior in this way is less alienating than thinking of it as unsanitary or rude. The lesson is that if we assume positive intentions, we wait to find out what behavior means, instead of integrating it into our own sense of the world in a way that portrays someone else in a negative fashion.

In the longest workshop I led, where our group of 11 students (white and coloured) met for five hours, four days in a row, honest conversations emerged as I “pushed” people to explore the depths of their conflicts between those two groups. What emerged among white participants were long-felt feelings that coloureds were not as hardworking as them, not as capable at supervision and management, and not willing to recognize differences in education and past achievement. The coloured people felt that whites ignored their abilities and potential, given a fair opportunity, and were not able to acknowledge their own past mistreatment of others. Coloureds also felt that whites were unable to understand the issues that people of color dealt with.

After much painful discussion, both groups were able to realize that what they had in common was perceiving black people as third-class citizens (if whites were first-class and coloureds were second-class). This was reflected in the dynamics of the group. I felt that this was an incredibly successful workshop, because the comments about the last session were along the lines of, “I’m learning a lot, but I’m not having any fun any more.” What I hoped and wished for was that participants would be able to go back to their work environments and begin to treat their coworkers in a more egalitarian way, because these insights had become part of their way of thinking in the world.

In almost every workshop, there were epiphanies such as the ones that I have described, that allowed me to have a sense of hope that people are willing and wanting to change, if they can overcome their fears and

acknowledge their ignorance about the people they have long been in contact with, but whom they have not really known. These truths are directly applicable to our own country as well, where we have a history of pretending that differences do not exist, instead of directly facing and understanding them.

References

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