

Notes for Workshop Facilitators - Racism Awareness

Facilitating discussions on issues of racism is layered with complications. Discussion of racism in a racially mixed group that brings together Black and minority ethnic people and White people is very different from such a discussion in a racially mixed group that does not include White people. Both of these are different from discussion in a racially homogenous group. And, discussion in an all-White group, an all Black group and a group composed entirely of another single ethnic group of people will all be different. In each case the ethnicity of the group facilitator will also have an impact on the discussions.

Conversation about racism is emotionally complex. Many BME people experience the conversation about racism in a group that includes White people as oppressive. That sense of oppression may come from an expectation that one or two Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) people may be expected to speak for all BME people, even if the experience of racism is different. Or there may be an expectation in the group that BME people “teach” the White people about racism. For many White people the dominant emotional response to the conversation is one of guilt, a sense that they are individually responsible for the system of racism and for undoing it. The dynamics of each group will vary, both according to the individual membership and the distribution of ethnic groups. The notes that follow are intended to provide some assistance in navigating these complexities.

Core Principles for the Conversation:

- Invite and obtain group agreement at the beginning to adhere to the principles outlined here. The group may want to add others to the list.
- It is important to remember that this is an initial conversation.
- There needs to be on-going conversation as the new questions raised are dealt with.
- Voice is important. All voices need to be heard. It may be important to have separate space for BME people and White people at some point in the workshop no matter what the balance of numbers.
- No ethnic group of people is a single homogeneous group. One person cannot represent or speak for all people from their ethnic/cultural group.
- This is not simply intellectual work. It is deeply emotional. The impact of the discussion on the emotions is important for the transformation of hearts. Guilt and anger will surface. Expect it. Give space for it. Don't try to make it go away without full expression.
- Discomfort is to be expected. It will happen. And it's okay. Invite a commitment to understanding, struggling and changing.
- Trust in each other is foundational. Talking about racism is not safe, and it is not possible to build a process that gives safety for everyone. Rather, the hard things that are spoken and heard need to arise in the context of shared belief that everyone in the room is committed to walking the journey of

change together. The primary task is to listen without defensiveness. This is hard work.

- What is said in the room must stay with those who were there. Without the assurance of confidentiality, participants cannot take the risks needed for the conversation.
- It is almost always beneficial to have a facilitation team of a White person and a BME person. The White colleague will need to be willing to take a supportive role rather than a lead role in many circumstances.

An all-White group

This is a group in which the White people will feel most comfortable. In a church context, it is more common than not to have groups of all kinds that are White only. Most may not even notice the irony of a group of White people discussing racism without the presence of any people who have experienced the harms of racism. (This is the approximate equivalent of a group of only men meeting to discuss the issue of sexism.)

What to watch for:

- White people find it easy to avoid clear, focused conversation about racism. An all-White group makes it easier for this to happen.
- It is easy to drift towards a conversation that downplays the harms caused by racism.
- It is not uncommon for conversations about racism in all-White groups to remain very superficial.
- When the topic of racism is addressed in any depth, the issues of White guilt and denial are raised.

Advantages:

- Racism is an uncomfortable topic. An all-White group relieves some anxiety and may contribute to honesty in conversation.
- Racism is a topic that White people must own—it cannot be dealt with by BME people alone. An all-White group may allow the participants to speak honestly, challenge one another, and not take the easy (and inappropriate) “out” of asking the people of colour in the group to take the lead in addressing racism.

Facilitator

For a White facilitator there are two dangers:

- Being drawn into the possibly racist assumptions and attitudes of the participants,
- Being drawn into a negative emotional response against the participants for the attitudes they express.

For a facilitator who is a BME person:

- The danger is being caught between being a facilitator and being a voice for people of colour who are not there to counter the attitudes and assumptions of the White people in the group.

What to do

There are two possible responses to these issues:

- Have a White facilitator who has sufficient background awareness to resist the temptations of the role.
- Use a facilitation team that includes both a BME person and a White person. In this situation the White facilitator will need to be prepared to take a more supportive role in order to validate the leadership of the person of colour.

A mostly White group with a few BME people

This group structure mirrors many situations where organisations have begun the process of becoming more racially diverse (in many cases without addressing the underlying power structures). It may be helpful to imagine a parallel gender structure—a largely male group or organisation with one or two women gathered to discuss sexism. This is not a particularly comfortable or safe place to be. It puts a number of pressures on the people of colour.

What to watch for:

It is not uncommon for White people to turn to people of colour for information, or ask them to speak on behalf of all BME folks. This can take several forms:

- White people may ask BME members: “What do people want?” This assumes that BME’s in the room can answer the question and that there is a single answer to the question.
- White people may turn to BME people to teach the White people about racism.
- White people may request that BME people teach them how to fix racism.
- There is again the possibility of White guilt that may express itself in denial.

Advantages

This group structure is probably the least desirable. The disadvantages significantly outweigh any benefits.

Facilitator

For a facilitator who is a BME person:

- The facilitator will face pressure from the participants in a way that may detract from the facilitator’s credibility as facilitator.
- The facilitator may feel the need to ally with other BME people in room to strengthen their voice, in a way that affects their ability to attend to the needs and questions of the White people.

For a White facilitator:

- The facilitator may get hooked into the White guilt and denial and strengthen that voice.
- They may attempt to draw on the BME people in the room to do the teaching of the White people about racism.
- They may find that they fail to adequately support and affirm the experience of the BME people.

What to do

Use a facilitation team that has both a White person and a BME person.

A group that is evenly divided between BME and White people

This group structure is perhaps the best context for learning and discussion. That does not mean that it will be easy.

What to watch for:

White people are used to having the dominant and majority voice, even in groups where they are the minority.

- If the group is facilitated in a way that ensures equal voice for BME people, the White people may experience this as being silenced.
- This being said, the experience of having to listen to BME people is a useful one for White people.
- The facilitator will have to monitor the emotional atmosphere around this.

Advantages

The most important strength of this group structure is that it ensures that the BME people are not lonely voices.

- The strength of numbers enables them to support and affirm each other so that this is not a role that is dependent on the facilitator.
- This structure ensures that there are a variety of experiences of racism present in the room, and it ensures that this variety is described.
- This ensures that no one BME person is expected to speak for all experiences, nor is any one BME person left to carry the burden of defending their experience on their own.

A group that is primarily BME people with a few White people

What to watch for:

A group of this structure will tend to strengthen the White participants' sense of being silenced.

- Just as the mirror image structure is not safe for BME people, this structure may not be safe for White people.

- While some level of discomfort for White people is important this needs to be balanced with the experience of the conversation space as one where they want to participate.
- A group like this may tilt the balance too far.

Advantages:

This group will even more clearly empower BME people as they will have the experience of being the majority voice.

Facilitator

If the facilitator is a BME person the lack of safety may be more sharply experienced by the White participants. If the facilitator is White, they may be drawn into attempting to defend the White participants or otherwise strengthen their voice so as to shift the balance of power in the group back to what is the norm in society.

What to do

Shared facilitation with a White person and a BME person is important. This models respectful relationships, and enables a balancing of the needs of the participants.

A group that is all BME people

What to watch for:

A group with this structure will tend to take on a different character than all the others as it may function as a group in which the participants shape ways to support each other in their struggles with racism.

Advantages:

If the group is diverse, it can provide an opportunity for the participants to explore the different ways racism has functioned to damage them and the groups they are part of.

Facilitator

It is important that this group be facilitated by a BME person and not by a White person. The presence of the White person would potentially limit the honesty and the ability of the participants to explore the pain of their experiences.

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