

Building Alliances Across Differences?

Center for Gender in Organizations
2000-2001 Seminar Series

WomenBridgeRace: The Connections Between Racial Legacies, Intimacy, and the Use of Power

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Presenters:

Rita Andrews, *President, Rijaan Consulting Services*

Toni Dunton-Butler, *President and Senior Partner, Delphi Network, Inc.*

Delyte Frost, *President, Cygnus, Inc.*

Patricia Wilson, *Organizational Consultant*

In this presentation, Rita Andrews, Toni Dunton-Butler, Delyte Frost, and Patricia Wilson discussed the role of racial legacies and the challenges involved in forming black-white relationships among women in the United States. In the first part of their presentation, entitled “Statements,” the presenters explained their personal motivations for participating in and forming the group WomenBridgeRace. In the second part of their presentation, entitled “Dialogue,” they modeled how, as a group composed of white and black women, they work through their racial legacy to sustain and nurture their cross-race relationships. After this exercise, they discussed a model that seeks to explain why black and white American women encounter “bumps” in their relationships, and what some of the obstacles are in resolving these bumps. Finally, they invited the audience to participate in a discussion of these ideas in small groups and the sharing of key themes that arose.

Statements

Question: Why are we in WomenBridgeRace?

Patricia Wilson

“I am in this group specifically because it has been a long journey for me as a young girl growing up in Detroit in the 1950s and 1960s, who realized at some point that she was white [and didn’t like what she saw]. I was just a nice person and I didn’t like what was going on. Not only did I find out I was white; shortly thereafter, I found out I was a woman and a subordinate group member. I didn’t like that either. Women who have taught me my voice, how to act with power from a subordinate group membership, have been African-American women. I can think of about ten or so women who have mentored me and given me training. Who I am today has to do with those relationships. I am uncomfortable with white women because of their indirectness and niceness. I know this behavior very well of course. But the relationships with my black women colleagues are the most comfortable and honest relationships I can have.”

Wilson explained that the relationships between the four presenters range from twenty to thirty years in length, and that WomenBridgeRace has existed for about five years.

Toni Dunton-Butler

“I was born a few years ago in segregation and came into the world as a little colored girl. Throughout my personal life and professional career, and in society, I found that I had an affinity with women, regardless of race. I would gravitate towards those relationships. In relationships across race, [I found that at some point] the relationship will hit a bump, and that [bump] will be about race. I saw the power of joining with women, but then I also found that there was all this ‘stuff’ about who we were as white women and African-American women. It would make things hard and we would eventually splinter. I saw it in my personal relationships as well as in systems where women were trying to negotiate around race or gender. I see the impact we can have and I see it as critical that we work across race.” Referring to WomenBridgeRace, she said, ‘It is rare to find a white woman who will hang in and an African-American woman who will join me in hanging in, and to also look at what happens to us in this culture of racism.’”

Delyte Frost

“I grew up in Albuquerque. I had a history of seeing myself as different and somehow better. And then there was this sense of fairness extended to some [and denied to others]. I remember early on feeling ‘this is not fair.’ I got formed early in understanding what it means to deal with systems that are not fair. As a white woman, I have worked hardest in owning my dominant group membership and my privilege. It is easy for me to deal with my subordinate group membership, [but not my racial dominance]. But as a white person in the United States I have enormous power to move, to make choices. Friends of mine, women of color, do not. What has emerged for me is that we, as white women, are moving into positions of power and influence and we are now full partners in leveling out racism. If we are not careful, we will be better at it than white men because we always do that. [We occupy positions of power and influence in major US corporations] and we bring with us a lack of awareness about how we are racist in our conscious and unconscious [actions]. We don’t partner with women who don’t play the patriarchal game. Why am I in WomenBridgeRace? I think we, as white women, can really change this country.”

Andrews

“I don’t think I have a choice [when it comes to bridging race]. I am working in a white-dominated, male-dominated society. If I am going to be effective, I have to learn to interact effectively with white men, white women, and men of color. I have to do this work if I am going to be effective and maintain my sanity. As an African-American woman, my race is always in my face. It comes with me everywhere, how I get seen, initially. I have to learn to interact and be effective. I also am in this work because of people who are colleagues and friends in the work. I know what it is like to be with white women who are willing to bump up against me and stay with me while we work it out.”

Dialogue

In this segment of their presentation, the members of WomenBridgeRace discussed an issue that they had been confronted with during their preparations for the CGO seminar. The issue concerned the use of credentials in the academic environment by the presenters, and the implications of this for the differential legitimacy that would be afforded to the presenters. This issue was particularly salient given the mixed-race composition of the group.

Frost began with the observation, “One of the things we talked about was unconscious racial legacies that drive us, and even though we talk about them, they keep affecting our behavior. We predicted there would be times when [the racial legacy issue] will appear. So I was thinking [on] automatic pilot and how I move in with [talk about doctoral programs] and so on. Without thinking, I established the two white women as having higher degrees, although we all have advanced degrees. I am staking out my territory. I heard myself doing it.”

Building on this observation, Wilson responded that the dynamic was the opposite with black women. She noted that while white women may tend to overstate their achievements, black women tend to understate them.

Dunton-Butler added, “We had a conscious conversation about how we would present ourselves. ...[I asked myself] what the level of angst was that I was having with this issue. [Looking at this from the perspective of racial legacies,] here I am, not on the slave block trying to have it figured out that I am good enough, [but in the modern setting being evaluated as to whether I am good enough]. It called up for me that part of our legacy. At one level, we absolutely need to know people’s backgrounds and degrees.”

Andrews added, “The constant thing for me is not only what the white women do but what do we do to ourselves. I don’t have a PhD, but I have a lot of experience. How do I not let myself in?”

Wilson reflected further on how it feels to her, as a white woman, to receive feedback on her behavior from a black woman when that behavior, driven by racial legacies, had a negative impact on the black woman. “When I get feedback on my dominance, I just draw a blank look on my face. I get terrified. Then the tears would come. It’s been a long time to get here.”

Andrews responded, “I am glad that you can make that comment to Delyte and not have her get defensive, which is not my usual experience. [Usually she says,] ‘Why do you bring [in] the slavery issues?’ It’s affirming, [that I can] have a discussion about legacy and not have you leave.”

Frost then added, “One of the lessons about legacy is my knowing as a white person, deep in my bones, [I feel] that I have the right to determine whether you put out your experiences and claim them or whether you leave the session or not. One of the things I learned growing up white is about how I have the ‘right.’ I think it is white women who grow up not learning to be strong and powerful, often. That ability to always have the right word and be right gets submerged as ‘helpful friendship.’ [That is, it gets manifested as helpful advice, e.g.,] ‘You should really do this.’ Which lets me move on with my patronizing. If I don’t understand my legacy, if I don’t know how it relates to ‘Miss Ann’ in the house saying to you ‘this is what you should do to make him happy,’ [then I can’t deal with my privilege and its implications as a white woman]. I have

spent many years as 'Miss Ann' in this life and in past lives. Even if I let you talk about [what you want for a while], I will come in with the last word."

Andrews illustrated this problem in the dynamics of their group when she related an incident in which, during their preparation for the CGO presentation, Wilson suggested that she and Frost not present, but have the two black women, Dunton-Butler and Andrews, make the presentation. "We had some great discussion about this. 'Let's take care of you. We will be there if you need us, in case you get stuck.' Again, that we can sit here and laugh about it [is remarkable]."

Wilson: "It wasn't funny then."

Andrews: "No."

Dunton-Butler commented further on the implications of not discussing this issue thoroughly. "If you do [not discuss it thoroughly], then [the white women] don't have to own their racism. We [the black women] would be carrying it. They can guide, and then explain why we failed. Then you'd talk to your white sisters [about] how to do what you just did to support women of color. Then you wonder why two nice African-American women are really [angry] and disengaged." Andrews agreed: "And then we end up in the same vicious cycle."

Frost responded, "One of the things that keeps me from engaging across race [is that] I fear showing who I really am. My legacy is white and dominant. [The trouble, however, is that] when I try to be a good white, I hold myself back.

Andrews queried, "How do you manage yourself around that? [My concern is,] how do I talk about my [experiences] authentically, about my mother being a maid and taking care of white folks and my anger about that, and not have you shut down?"

Frost responded, "Somewhere in me there is a defense against being a member of the dominant group. [I say,] 'It is just me, I am a good person!' The shift came for me when I asked myself, 'if you are having to deal with that pain, where am I in this picture?' If I don't get to acknowledge that my ancestors were a part of that, then I cannot [engage with you in a manner that would allow us to be] true friends. I want to not just to hear your story about your grandmother, [but also explore,] where was my grandmother?"

Wilson offered an answer from her perspective to Andrews' query. She explained that the difficulty for her was "letting go of my image of myself. My knowledge of privilege is holding the belief of my perfection and kindness. It is hard for me to know someone is in pain and recognize my role in that."

In the above dialogue, the presenters illustrated how racial legacies had arisen in their past interactions, and they attended to them as they arose in their here-and-now discussions. In doing so, they modeled a way of dealing with these legacies.

Next, they presented a work-in-progress model that explains why racial legacies create disconnection for women across racial lines.

Model

The model that the presenters described relates to how black women and white women enter into relationships. A key issue is whether the individual enters a relationship thinking of himself or herself as an individual without any consciousness of group membership, or whether he or she enters a group with a strong sense of group membership. The model has four possible modes of entry into intergroup relations: as a member of a racial group; as a group member with other groups; as a group member with an individual; and as two individuals. At the center of the model is the notion of racial legacy. It is this legacy, the presenters argued, that shapes inter-racial relationships in the organizational setting. The final aspect of this model is organizational context, the setting in which racial legacies are institutionalized and invisible to the participants.

Different points of entry into interaction

Andrews began by describing the four modes of entry into a group from the perspective of a black woman. She observed that as a black woman, she enters an interaction with consciousness of herself as a member of a racial group. She noted, “As an African-American black woman, my racial identity is with me all the time. I am always thinking of me as a member of a group, as a black African-American woman. That is how I get seen, I know that, I attend to that.” This logic extends to interactions at the group level, and this is the second aspect of this model: an individual-as-group-member interacting with other group members. As a relationship evolves, Andrews observed that she might come to think of the relationship in terms of herself as a member of a group relating with an individual. When the relationship evolves and has grown, then there will be times when an African-American woman may think of herself as an individual relating with another individual. This model is not step-wise; rather, all these positions are present at all times. Thus, there could be times when, even after a relationship between an African-American woman and a white woman has reached the stage of individual-to-individual, the African-American woman would experience instances in which her group membership becomes salient.

In contrast to this pattern, Wilson described the four modes from her perspective as a white woman. “I enter as an individual. And I [as a white woman] want to stay as an individual. If we have a black friend, we say ‘my best friend is African-American.’” In this case, the white woman is taking on the third position in this model—as a member of a group dealing with an individual. The problem, she pointed out, is that because black and white women enter the interaction from such different vantage points, the opportunities for discussing their racial legacies, which are group-based, do not arise. Because for white women, their own race is not relevant, “we can’t have the conversation we need to have to do the bumping, the sorting, the responsibility, the trust, including managing the betrayal of the trust. Very rarely do we get to the position of self as a group with another group. [When we do, it is around gender:] ‘We are all sisters;’ we deal with our sisterhood group but not our racial identity group. Then this rift would come and there would be breakup of the coalitions.”

Racial legacies

Frost then discussed the notion of racial legacies, an unconscious constraint underlying black-white relations. Frost noted that racial legacies include “not just facts and information, [e.g.,] ‘What is the history about whites?’,” but also something more subjective and unconscious.

Describing this subjective aspect of racial legacies, Frost said, “What do I know in my bones? I don’t know that it is a racial identity issue unless I am with others of a different race.”

Frost indicated that legacies are the “glue in the field of energy that hold the obstacles for coalitions. They also hold the possibility for disruption [of problematic relations]. The racial legacies are the key to unlocking [and overcoming problems with forming relationships across race]. We ask, ‘Why is the US so dysfunctional around race?’ [The answer is that] we whites are stuck in denial—[we say,] ‘That’s in the past; it’s not me.’

“Why do we whites have a hard time saying ‘I’m white, I’m dominant, I have a responsibility,’ and jumping in? As women, we know a lot about misogyny; unless we take that same understanding [of oppression] into [addressing the issue of] race, we will stay in denial. There is one strategy we [as whites] love blacks to take, [and that is for them to say,] ‘That’s in the past and we are beyond that,’ because as a white, that doesn’t look at my racial identity—I’d love that. We will seduce you and you will become co-dependent around our denial.”

The context of the oppressive system

Dunton-Butler explained the last component of the theoretical model: the larger societal/organizational context. She explained that the denial of racial legacies among white women (one might extend this to members of the dominant group) is obscured due to the tendency for white women to think of their relationships with black women in the context of oppressive systems at the individual, rather than group, level. She explained that in reality, their relationships are circumscribed by a larger racially biased context. Of the relationships between white and black women, she said, “It is a dance that keeps us at the individual level, and not group membership.”

Group identity task and fishbowl

Wilson described the last segment of the presentation as an opportunity for the larger group to have a conversation about racial legacies. This conversation was framed by the following task: the audience was asked to assign themselves to one of five identity groups—white woman, male of any race, biracial, African-American women and black women, and women of color. They were asked to join small groups of no more than ten individuals with similar identity designations. The small groups were assigned the task of considering the following question: “As we hold our racial legacies, what do we want from a bridge across race?” This question differed slightly across the groups. For instance, men were asked to consider their role in supporting women in forming cross-race relationships with other women. The audience was told that once this exercise was complete, they would be asked to assign a spokesperson who would then join a smaller group that would report on the main themes discussed in their group. Below is a description of the themes that were reported.

White women

- There is role confusion about how to befriend in a non-superficial level. “The challenges are real. We talked about situations in our lives, experiences that felt awkward. I live with a black woman, a powerful black woman. Our communication styles are very different.

In settings in her family I notice there is more directness, the joking is different. My upbringing has taught me to be soft and sensitive, with a sentimentality that doesn't let you get at a deep level. I don't have that level of deepness with her and it hurts. I live with her. I am in a position to help her, as she is dying of cancer [and I] am in a direct care role."

- "Some talked about wanting mutuality. I don't want guilt. I want learning on all sides. We don't want learning to be coming from one side."
- Some talked about "walking on eggshells. We want to be able to speak with safety."
- Some wanted not knowing to be an acceptable state. "We are afraid to not know, so we can't ask questions."
- Some said they wanted to bring their "whole self to the relationship. I am a Jewish woman. I am white, but my Jewishness shapes my relationships to people of color. And [we want] the other person to bring their whole self to the relationship also."
- We observed that "no matter what we did, we were still asking women of color to do something for us. 'Help me with my guilt,' 'help my child have a better life by giving him or her a multicultural experience.' [It was still about,] 'How can I use my privilege to get something?' We wanted different things: to make connections so that resources can be distributed, personal relationships, enrichment, do we want to give women of color power? We didn't want to go there."

Men

- "We wanted more men in the group. We could only satisfactorily deal with how we could support women if the men themselves did the cross-race dialogue."
- "If you are coming from a white [male] perspective, give resources and support that would empower people."

Bi-racial

- "We were not discussing whites and African-Americans specifically. We were discussing races, backgrounds from all different countries and cultures. The underlying theme was not being categorized and not being labeled. Keeping an open perspective on the meaning of diversity. Our physical appearance may not represent our heritage, legacies, and background."
- "[We wanted to] have a bridge with everyone despite the category. We saw ourselves as reflecting everyone."

African-American women and black women

- “We need to have an acknowledgement [from white women] that there is an issue. We need to admit that there are these issues and concerns. Then we can move in a different phase and try to address those issues.”
- “We want to communicate without guilt. If something happened to me today, don’t look at us as having a problem. We do see things that your privilege protects you from, such as walking into a store and not being noticed, or the waiter at a restaurant passing the check to the white woman [you happen to be dining with].”
- Some wanted to let white women know that they did not want to be elevated in importance when white women tell others about their “black friend.” For instance, “telling others ‘I have a black woman friend; she is strong’ and so on. Why do [white women] need to offer a “curriculum vitae that has to go along with having a black friend, suggesting this is why she is worthy of being my friend?”

Women of color

- “Only one person [in our group] was born here [in the US]; we came from many different places. We realized a problem with race when we came [to the United States]. In some of our countries, ethnicity was more relevant. [We found ourselves] being labeled without knowing [why or that] there was a problem.”
- “[We wanted to] have a bridge with everyone, despite the category.”

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