Prejudice Reduction Workshops in Ireland

by John Lampen

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A good deal of prejudice is born of ignorance, often culturally transmitted. Such prejudices are not always negative—they may also lead one to idealize a group. Unless these prejudices are linked to traumatic experience, they tend to disappear in the face of straightforward personal encounter. A good deal of anti-prejudice work, through meeting and sharing experiences, has been done among children in Northern Ireland.

But many prejudices are not so easily dispelled. With these, emotional factors are clearly at work, in addition to ignorance and cultural attitudes. Perhaps we should call such attitudes “bigotry,” although they are found more widely than this term usually suggests. Those who hold such prejudices will deny evidence and experiences which run counter to their expectations, and avoid situations where these attitudes may be challenged. A more intensive model of anti-prejudice work, beyond simple encounter, is thus required.

To understand this, we may borrow Freud’s distinction between the “aim” and the “object.” There may be one kind of reason (e.g., ignorance or stereotyping) for the choice of an “object” of prejudice. But the intensity and persistence of some prejudices involve other factors linked to the “aim.” In the prejudice reduction model we are using, the assumption is that the aim of prejudicial behavior and attitudes is to discharge feelings of rage, which stem from internalized experiences of hurt. In simple cases of displacement of feelings, the choice of “object” is almost immaterial in terms of the “aim.” But where the projection involves deep-seated prejudice, there is an important link between the two.

There are also other factors which “glue” prejudice in place: fear, guilt, shame, politeness, tolerance and moralizing all reduce the possibility of working through such feelings. In Northern Ireland, for example, attitudes based on biased beliefs have been strongly reinforced by experiences which are all too real. Events which damage the group with which one identifies are felt as personal hurts. We must also acknowledge that many people know they are prejudiced, and regret it. They may say that they are ashamed of certain attitudes, and struggle to be free of them. But they find that a remark, a newspaper report or a journey through “alien territory” suddenly reawakens the old feelings. Another element which must be addressed is the feeling of powerlessness in the face of prejudicial attitudes.

These are all elements which we attempt to address in our “prejudice reduction” workshops. The techniques which we are using were developed by Cherie Brown of the National Coalition Building Institute in Massachusetts, and have been used throughout the U.S. and in other parts of the world.

Participants in our workshops come expecting to be asked to focus on their feelings about themselves and about other groups. We start with unhurried introductions, in which people list the groups they identify with and say why they take pride in being a member of one of those groups. Volunteers are asked to make public statements in the form: “It’s great to be (Irish, black, a woman, etc.) because....” It is revealing how often the voice betrays apology, belligerence or caution. Even those who say they are really proud of their heritage have usually taken on board some of its negative stereotypes. Speakers are helped to relax and shed their defensiveness, while the other listeners cheer their statements with approval.

People then divide into pairs. Using one of the identities which have emerged in the group (but not belonging to the respondent), one person keeps repeating the word (e.g., Catholic, unemployed, etc.). The other responds spontaneously with his or her first thoughts. After a few minutes, the couple exchanges roles. A wide range of slurs on people from different backgrounds are stored in our minds, however much we try to disown them. If this exercise is lightened up and laughter allowed, it reduces the embarrassment in the room, showing that it is possible to bring out “those awful things” which nice people are not supposed to think. The exercise is debriefed afterwards, raising issues of self-censorship, honesty, and the effects of hearing prejudicial expressions (particularly towards your own cultural group).

Caucuses are then formed of people who identify with the same background, to reflect together on what was good and what was bad about their growing up. This helps people feel safe and supported in two ways: first, by being among others who share bits of their own life experience, and second, by the workshop’s recognition of the significance of their subgroup. Everyone has a chance to reflect on his or her own experiences of hurt and discrimination, the experiences which—according to this model—underpin prejudicial attitudes towards others. Men, for example, in work against sexism, may use this space to confess their feelings of weakness and vulnerability, and the burden of being “manly” and hiding gentler emotions.

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Summer Courses:

Contact: Professor Neil Katz, PARC, 712 Ostrom Ave., Syracuse Univ., Syracuse, NY 13244, (315) 443-2367
Contact: Center for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason Univ., Fairfax, VA 22030, or Frank Blechman of Conflict Clinic at (703) 764-6225
4) University of Missouri-St. Louis: “Conflict Management in Organizations,” June 18-23, 1990
Contact: Miranda Duncan, UM-St. Louis Dispute Resol. Prog., UM-St. Louis, St. Louis, MO 63121, (314) 553-6040
Contact: Environmental Law Center, Vermont Law School, South Royalton, VT 05068, (802) 763-8303 or (800) 227-1395
Contact: Office of Summer Session, 50 Ames St., Rm. E19-356, M.I.T., Cambridge, MA 02139, (617) 253-2101

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1) Christian Conciliation Service of Los Angeles announces an opening for position of Executive Director, top staff position in organization. Christian attorney with conflict resol. experience preferred. Send resume and letter of interest to CCS, 1800 N. Highland Ave., Suite 507, Hollywood, CA 90028, (213) 467-3331
2) MCS will fill a new position in its central office in mid-1990. The new Staff Associate will focus on conflict-related issues in urban and/or ethnically diverse communities in the U.S. Training and/or work experience in conflict resolution useful, but not required. Must be able to work in both church and broader community settings. Life experience in one or more of target communities desirable. A variety of staff arrangements (salary and office location) are possible. Send resumes and inquiries to: Mark Sprunger, MCC, 21 S. 12th St., PO Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500.

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After a time, caucus groups share with the larger gathering those things which have been difficult about growing up Jewish, poor, Protestant, etc. Because of the isolation which prejudice creates, many people have never properly heard the life experiences of someone from a contrasting background. Following the exploration of one’s own hurts in the caucus, it becomes easier to be receptive to others. With a skilled facilitator, individual volunteers may be asked to tell very personal stories of discrimination to the whole workshop. Although this can be hard, it also is very healing to have a group listening seriously and sympathetically to one’s experiences. When we work with teenagers in Northern Ireland, we often find that there is just one identified polarization (Protestant-Catholic or female-male). Then we may join pairs from subgroups into mixed “fours” to share stories.

Unless we have a full day or more for a workshop session, this is usually as far as we will go initially. But we emphasize that without work on future strategies, any gains are likely to be lost. We often close these short sessions by asking all participants to suggest one relevant thing which they would like to be different in the future. If these are recorded, they can be used as material in follow-up sessions.

Follow-up sessions should begin by recapturing the sharing and understanding of memories achieved in the previous meeting. An opening circle, in which everyone recalls something from the earlier encounter, is helpful. If participants have truly heard each other’s pain, and related it to their own, they should now be ready to work on their feelings of powerlessness. Such feelings often underpin inappropriate responses to situations. For example, if a man was humiliated for stealing as a boy, he may respond when one of his own children steals either by ignoring it or by a harsh and unhelpful overreaction. Children who were teased

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by classmates for being from a racial minority or for being fat may be overcome with feelings of helplessness as adults, when they witness bigotry against others. Their desire for group approval may be very strong.

The following three exercises work at this sense of powerlessness. They may be based on "the things I would like to be different" from an earlier session. In the first exercise, we ask for a volunteer who would like to become a more effective ally to members of another group. He or she is asked to describe three things in order: a) a way in which you were mistreated when growing up; b) a time when you interrupted or protested slurs or mistreatment of another group; and c) a time when you failed to interrupt or protest slurs or mistreatment. Because people often feel guilty about the many times they have kept silent, it is important to recall success and applaud it, before moving on to the third focus.

The volunteer is asked to re-enact the occasion of failure, but this time from a position of capability. This may begin as a simple description, but it will be better if it is then turned into an active role-play. Throughout this, as with other demonstrations, the hearers are instructed to involve themselves in the experience of empowerment by encouraging and applauding the volunteer's efforts.

Ideas or solutions should not be imposed on her or him, however. The facilitator may model this exercise with one volunteer, and then split the workshop into small subgroups for practice.

The second exercise has each caucus list things its members never want to hear said about themselves again—names, jokes, accusations, etc. A number of these statements are chosen to work on, perhaps one from each caucus. Most of us have had very little practice interrupting bigoted statements in a way which challenges the statement without leaving the speaker humiliated—and therefore confirmed in his or her prejudice. The whole workshop brainstorms ways to intervene by reaching the human being behind the entrenched attitudes.

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The third exercise may be used after either or both of the first two, and works best when those present belong to a single organization or otherwise work together. It comprises a brainstorm of ideas which could reduce prejudiced behavior within their common setting. Smaller groups are then formed to develop some of these ideas into specific policies or programs. A modification of this is needed when the workshop members are not colleagues, classmates, etc. It is important, however, that every workshop or series includes a progression of exercises from raising one's awareness to planning definite courses of action for oneself or one's organization.

Throughout the workshop, and particularly in these exercises, it is very important for the facilitators to be able to model possibilities if the participants get stuck. But this should be done without becoming too committed to having a facilitator's ideas take preference to those generated in the group itself. Issues of hurt and powerlessness arouse intense feelings. It is helpful and possible to run such workshops with a light touch and plenty of laughter. Each workshop in the series should close with an exercise of affirmation and hope for the participants. If part of a series, take time for participants to report back on real experiences of confronting prejudice which have occurred between sessions.

This prejudice reduction model requires the presence of members of different groups which have experienced discrimination. Listening to others' histories of hurt is as crucial a part of the workshop as recalling one's own. We have used some elements of the program, however, to look at sectarian divisions even in a one-sided group setting. We have also used this approach with secondary-level youth from one religious background—focusing primarily on issues of sexism—in preparation for these same students to move on and work on issues of sectarian discrimination at such point as a mixed group could be set up.

The method presupposes that participants are willing to work on their prejudices. In school settings, where participation may not be fully voluntary, we may first work with them on more general affirmation, trust and problem-solving exercises, to break down resistance to looking at prejudice itself. In adult groups, the motivation for attending workshops may be conscious or unconscious. Consciously, people may wish for change in existing situations, from the personal to the international level, and be aware that their own prejudices are contributing to the problem. At a deeper level, we know that bigotry is not a healing response to the memory of hurt. I believe some are brought to workshops through the unconscious drive towards health and wholeness in each of us. This drive for healing allows them to enter into and cooperate with this process for reducing prejudice. ●