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"IMPOSSIBLE PEOPLE: HOW ACADEMIC CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF ETHNICITY AND CULTURE HELP TO MAINTAIN RACIAL TENSIONS"

Kenneth D. Richardson Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology, Ursinus College

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The presenter examines some of the confusions that have characterized college and universities' attempts to diversify their student populations.

If one were to choose a singular word that would be most applicable to the state of inter-ethnic relations on American college campuses, it should be one that denotes confusion or uncertainty. Although frequently discussed, the term "race" displays a fragmented and disorderly pattern of reference despite the entreaties of scholars such as Cornel West and others. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the confusions that have characterized college and universities' attempts to diversify their student populations. An ironic theme of this analysis is that academic discourse itself, with its emphasis on abstractions and categorizations often contributes to our difficulties in communicating with one another through our differences.

A subsidiary theme is that in much of the rhetoric advocating cultural diversity that appeared during the 1990s included both condemnations of ethnic stereotyping and demands that people be regarded as ethnic or cultural identities rather than as individuals, confusing even the most well intended of citizens. The importance of these issues for inter-group relations will be discussed below, along with suggestions for minimizing some of the potential negatives.

Academic discourse: From the concrete to the abstract
Academic discourse, among other things consists of frequent exercises in what some observers call "lumping" and "splitting". Academics frequently operate by "lumping", or regarding things that might be considered distinct in categorical terms and ignoring the differences among cases (e.g., "primates"). Also called stereotyping by sociologist Walter Lippmann during the 1930s, this tendency to "lump" provides one of the inputs into the unfortunate human propensity for entertaining prejudices of various kinds. Categorizations and generalizations, seductive though they are, need to be used tentatively if not sparingly.

"Splitting" is also a favorite academic pastime. This generally consists of creating separate categories within which things can be "lumped", so that the two tend to be inter-related. Both of these tendencies are essential to human functioning, since people are dependent to a certain degree on constructing order out of chaotic complexity. An over-emphasis on this kind of thinking however, can also separate us from what might be important, though less than orderly realities.

An American problem: EEOC category labels are not "cultures"

Both lumping and splitting are in evidence in much academic theory and rhetoric as it pertains to diversity. During 1980s and 90s a strange practice of equating Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) categorizations of people with "cultures" became common in Academe', creating some very odd and impossible illusions. Discourse containing abstract and offhand references to Asian, Native American, Hispanic (or Latino) or other "cultures" became common, treating them as undifferentiated masses of all-or-none. Recently I have noticed increasing numbers of confused college students who use the term "African American" to refer to any black person, regardless of continent of origin. Form seems to have over-ridden content.

The EEOC category "white" is generally equated with "European" in theory, but any traveler abroad would object to the equation of white Texans with the French and the English almost as much as any of the above certainly would. Such pervasive stereotyping sets the stage for poor communication and misunderstanding among students exposed to this confusing context.

A few subtle changes can make a difference: A field demonstration
Three young colleagues (Timika Lightfoot, Robert Cranmer, and Jodi Leventhal) and I compared two techniques for facilitating communication and understanding between white and African American students based on the above considerations. We placed them in either (a) mixed-race or (b) same-race pairs and had them generate through discussion either (1) five ways that the world views of whites and African Americans would likely differ (orientation toward cultural differences), or (2) five problems facing the human race that would require a lot of cooperation among people to solve (orientation toward cooperative problem solving).

After this we assessed our participants' optimism regarding the future of race relations in the U.S. and found sharp differences. Most optimistic were those from mixed-race dyads oriented toward cooperative problem solving. Our most pessimistic participants were also those from mixed-race dyads, but they were those who had been asked to theorize about cultural differences. This latter group also reported the least satisfying personal interactions with their partners.

Suggestions
While ethnic and cultural identities are important, there is also a potential for over-indulgence. Acknowledgement and acceptance of cultural differences is essential in a pluralistic society, but the exacerbation of them can sometimes impair human relations. No group is homogeneous, and theories that do not formalize that aspect are at this point exercises in convenience. A more limited and careful usage of abstractions is in order, with a greater emphasis on the human ambiguities and disorderliness that theory so neatly puts away.

Presenter:
Kenneth D. Richardson was born the seventh of eight children in 1952 in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. His parents, Fred and Josephine Richardson were civil rights activists who placed a high priority on education and put their children's needs before their own. With

interests in astronomy, music, and psychology he enrolled in Indiana University of Pennsylvania in the fall of 1970, earning a bachelor's degree in psychology in 1974. After a less than satisfactory experience in the field of industrial engineering, he went on to earn his Ph.D. in social psychology at Arizona State University in 1986. He is currently an associate professor of psychology at Ursinus College in southeastern Pennsylvania, having taught at Arizona State University and New Mexico State University. His research interests include epistemological styles as determinants of human relations, social influences of various kinds, and motivation in work and educational settings. By the way, he still dabbles in music and astronomy.