

October 1999

Artificial Equations, Artificial Distinctions: Language that Poisons the Waters of Ethnic Relations

Kenneth D. Richardson
Ursinus College, Philadelphia, Pa.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/pocpw4>



Part of the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#)

Richardson, Kenneth D., "Artificial Equations, Artificial Distinctions: Language that Poisons the Waters of Ethnic Relations" (1999).
Fourth Annual National Conference (1999). 39.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/pocpw4/39>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the People of Color in Predominantly White Institutions at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Fourth Annual National Conference (1999) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Artificial Equations, Artificial Distinctions: Language that Poisons the Waters of Ethnic Relations

Kenneth D. Richardson

Ursinus College
Philadelphia, Pa.

“It is my contention at this point that when race relations on campuses get better, it is in spite of, not because of, the proliferation of jargon-based rhetoric about diversity.”

Institutions of learning faced with increasing degrees of ethnic and cultural heterogeneity must now consistently confront the consequent curricular and human relations issues. Many have reacted by seeking expertise in a domain of activity loosely referred to by some as "multiculturalism" and attempting to apply that expertise to their own situations. Reviews of such publications as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* as well as the proliferation of books, commentaries, workshops and persons claiming to be experts in the area suggest to us that the need for relevant knowledge is great.

Language generated illusions

Implicit is an assumption that such expertise is readily available by purchase, and therein lies the rub. Since "multiculturalism" consists of neither specified content material nor methodology, the notion of expertise in this area is curious. As an African American I find myself frustrated with the barrage of abstractions regarding "culture," "race," "otherness," "difference" coming from commentators who speak much and say little. As a trained social psychologist, I find reasons in my reaction. Much of the rhetoric involved is riddled with what I call "language generated illusions"—equations and distinctions which are convenient to use in conversation, but completely dysfunctional in their effects on human relations. It is my contention at this point, that when race relations on campuses get better, it is in spite of, not because of the proliferation of jargon-based rhetoric about diversity.

Copy-cat syndromes and illusions of knowing

It takes no special insight or expertise to produce stock commentaries that advocate diversity. The linguistic conventions involved are easily copied and can be reproduced by anyone who wishes to appear knowledgeable or politically correct. "Ending racism," "promoting inclusiveness" and "celebrating diversity" are things that can be verbally advocated at no cost. I have talked to numerous college students who admit to pandering to certain professors by tossing them jargon-based scraps in search of better grades. In such cases, hypocrisy and cynicism are promoted while education and human relations are degraded.

A second problem related to the proliferation of "jargonese" related to ethnicity and culture runs somewhat deeper. People not only wish to appear knowledgeable, they also routinely make the error of equating labels with understanding. Hence I have encountered commentators who are secure in their personal knowledge of mathematics and science as

"Eurocentric" or "patriarchal," which of course precludes studying them.

Most fascinating to my psychologist side is the current proliferation of untrained, self appointed experts on "self esteem," yet another term that has been rendered less than meaningless by abuse. Many concepts that now serve as buzzwords were once the focal points of serious inquiry—each receiving careful consideration, analysis, and attention to definition. They now serve as examples of what appears to be a decline in the importance of clear communication among human beings in general. The value of this in promoting inter-ethnic harmony has yet to be explained.

Artificial equations, artificial distinctions

What used to be condemned as stereotyping is now regarded as insight into "cultural identity," which fundamentally means that individual differences *within* groups will not be discussed. The artificial equation, "culture = individual person" emerges. This is very different from the realistic view that people tend to be culturally biased in identifiable ways. The latter notion is very useful in human relations—the former is a language-generated illusion that is neither helpful nor meaningful. Equating people within categories while simultaneously condemning stereotyping does little more than reinforce public perceptions of multicultural rhetoric as confused and contradictory.

Accompanying the above have been artificial distinctions: Depictions of the world's people as consisting of separate and incompatible "cultures" that determine every aspect of their lives about them. This treatment of culture suggests an array of monoliths that have no common elements and that there are no universal "human" concerns. This may promote "multiculturalism," but it degrades human relations by suggestion.

The language of genuineness and the pursuit of common goals

It is culturally very fashionable to feel and appear highly knowledgeable in regard to multiculturalism and diversity. This bandwagon effect, however, does more than impart a sense of competency to those who leap abroad. It reduces people to impersonal categories and discourages the search for common ground. The importation and abuse of jargon from various academic areas such as postmodern literary theory and psychology is contributing to confusion and cynicism about programs designed to increase minority representation on campuses, and needs to be actively discouraged. Research on conflict and cooperation among social groups has reliably demonstrated that identifying areas of shared concern (e.g. quality of schools, air, water, etc.) improves relations, while focusing discussion on group differences reliably inflates animosity. Perhaps in this case the language of practicality needs to supplant the language of ideology.

PRESENTER:

Kenneth D. Richardson was born in Johnstown, a small steel town located in the southwestern region of his home state of Pennsylvania in 1952. He was the seventh of eight children produced by Mr. and Mrs. Fred Richardson who had moved from the rural South two decades earlier to escape bad economics and Jim Crow laws. His parents stressed the importance of honesty, fair play, education and familial love, ever putting the interests of their children before their own. He did his undergraduate work at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, graduating with a bachelor's degree in psychology in 1974. He received his Ph.D. from Arizona State University in 1986 in the field of social

psychology. From then to the present he has been a member of the faculty in the Psychology Department at Ursinus College outside of Philadelphia, Pa. teaching social and organizational psychology.