Advancing the Ontario Human Rights Commission's Policy and Education Function

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the significant barriers that should be considered in the process of developing a policy that addresses the issues of race and racism. These include a deeply entrenched ideology and system of White dominance that ensures a backlash to racial equity policies, programs and practices.

The starting point for the development of a policy on systemic racism must be based on an acknowledgement of the powerful but invisible presence of dominant White racialized ideology that is embedded in organizations, institutions, and systems. If we do not understand the nature of institutions developed out of the belief systems of this racialized society we are more apt to be blindly integrated into them; consistently excluded from them or find ourselves at some point in between, rather than achieve the quality of access, participation and equity it takes to truly transform them (Giroux, 1988; Lee, 1995).

One of the important characteristics of organizations is that they resist change of any kind, but as the overwhelming body of scholarship demonstrates, there is deep resistance to anti-racism approaches to social change (Dei, et al, 2004; Razack, 1998; Bannerji, 2000). The mantras of "I am not a racist"; "she/he is not a racist," "this is not a racist institution;" "Canada is not a racist society" are familiar refrains to those who study institutional and systemic racism or work in any area of anti-racism.

Fundamental racial inequality continues to affect the lives of people of colour and Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Racial prejudice and discrimination is systemic in Canadian workplaces. However, it is also manifested in other domains. The racialized assumptions and practices of the print and electronic media marginalize racial minorities by portraying them as invisible and by depicting them as outsiders. Arts and cultural organizations ignore and exclude the creative images, words, and voices of people of colour. Patterns of policing and the attitudes and behaviour of police officers are marked by prejudice and the differential treatment of people of colour, particularly Blacks and Aboriginal peoples. The school and university are sites of struggle and inequity for ethno-racial minority students and staff. The justice system fails to give fair and equal treatment to Aboriginal peoples and people of colour. Eurocentric barriers impair the delivery of accessible and appropriate services by social and health-care agencies. The state, through its legislation and public policies, further reinforces racist ideology and practices (Dei, et al, 2004; Henry, et al, 2000; Bannerji, 2000; Li, 1999).

Racism as a commanding force in this country is constantly challenged and denied by applying the arguments of democratic liberalism. In a society that espouses equality, tolerance, social harmony, and respect for individual rights, the existence of racial prejudice, discrimination, and disadvantage is difficult to acknowledge and therefore remedy. Canadians have a deep attachment to the assumption that in a democratic society individuals are rewarded solely on the basis of their individual merit and that no one group is singled out for discrimination. Consistent with these liberal, democratic values is the assumption that physical differences such as *skin colour* are irrelevant in determining one's status. Therefore, those who experience racial bias or differential treatment are considered somehow responsible for their state of "otherness," resulting in a "blame it on the victim" syndrome.

This conflict between democratic liberalism and the collective racism of the dominant culture creates a dissonance in Canadian society. There is a constant and fundamental moral tension between the everyday experiences of people of colour and Aboriginal peoples and the perceptions of those who have the power to redefine that reality — politicians, bureaucrats, educators, judges, journalists, and the corporate elite. While lip service is paid to the need to ensure equality in a pluralistic society, most Canadian organizations and institutions and the individuals working within them, are far more committed to maintaining existing power relations.

While resistance is generic to all large-scale change initiatives, a major factor of resistance to anti-racism is rooted in the extent to which organizational leaders believe that racial equity is a legitimate force to motivate change. Denial of racism operates as the unseen but ubiquitous force, which ensures that substantive change is deflected and deterred. The following

are some of the challenges in the development of a policy on racism and anti-racism, as well as a discussion of factors that directly impact on the role of the Commission in addressing other areas of activity that are related to protection of the rights of people of colour and First Nations people. It is important to emphasize that these indicators of resistance apply not only to external organizations and institutions but also to the Commission itself.

Individual, institutional, and organizational resistance is most clearly demonstrated by the kind of everyday narratives and discourses that operate within organizational systems and their cultures. Rhetorical strategies are wittingly or unwittingly used to establish, sustain, and reinforce inequalities and oppressive power relations. Institution by institution, the power of Whiteness is established, maintained, and reinforced through a set of racialized discourses that are framed in everyday commonsense notions of "normality." In this discursive framework minorities are often essentialized, stigmatized and marginalized (Razack, 1998; Dei and Calliste, 2000; Dei et al., 2004). Discourses of dominant or democratic racism include explanations, accounts, rationalizations, justifications, and hidden codes of meaning about the "other." These discursive tactics serve to mask the reality of how the ideology of Whiteness manifests itself.

Therefore, the need for a clear, concrete and comprehensive vision statement and policy is critical to the success of any anti-racism policy. A vision statement sets out the organization's goal and binds it and its members to work toward achieving that goal. However, very few of organizations or institutions have explicitly incorporated anti-racism or racial equity in their vision statements or their policies. When an organization consciously omits anti-racism from its agenda, it is a sign of a reactive stance. Even if the organization has progressive programs, the absence of a vision statement shaped by anti-racism and equity principles and goals results in an inadequate framework for the changes required. When an organization responds purely on the basis of political or social pressures, it is often unwilling to link the change process to its mandate. On the other hand, anti-racism as a guiding organizational framework suggests a commitment to examine not only programs and practices but also the ideology motivating those programs and practices. A commitment to anti-racism is a desire on the part of decision-makers and power brokers to act consistently and systematically to challenge and redress racism. Lack of commitment is illustrated in many ways; for example, many organizations embark on anti-racism initiatives only under coercion rather than by design – that is, only when forces either within the organization or outside it demand a response in order for the organization to maintain its credibility.

Often, vision statements are vague, "motherhood" statements of high-sounding principles that are difficult to put into practice. The intent of the organization, that is, to maintain the status quo, is often masked in the vision statement or policy document. In the new millennium organizations have mastered the discourses of multiculturalism and diversity. Phrases such as "We respect diversity," "We are an equal opportunity employer," and "Tolerance in our organization is a core value," become empty promises, no more than symbolic gestures. Multicultural approaches suggest that acquiring "sensitivity" to "cultural differences" is sufficient to combat racism. Diversity labels cushion the organization by allowing it to hide behind the rationalization that managing diversity is all that is required (Bannerji, 2000). Such a view implies that racism results from diversity, and that it can be managed.

To understand the weaknesses in many race related policies, it is important to begin with a brief discussion of key elements in any anti-racism process of change. Anti-racism is an action-oriented approach to identifying and counteracting the production and reproduction of all forms of racism. It addresses the issues of racism and the interlocking systems of social oppression (Dei and Calliste, 2000; Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luke, 2004). Anti-racism implies a goal of producing an understanding of what racism is and how it can be challenged.

No institution can address the issue of systemic racism without a system of both individual and organizational accountability. A powerful example of the impact of a lack of accountability is identified by Verma and Wente (no date)[1] in the case of *McKinnon v.Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Correctional Service)*. The lack of accountability is reflected in the total absence of management action against the racial discrimination experienced by a correctional officer of Aboriginal descent employed at the Metro Toronto East Detention Centre. In the initial decision in 1998, the Board found that there were several factors contributing to a poisoned work environment and that management at every level failed to seriously investigate allegations of racial discrimination or to take measures to avoid their repetition. Mr. McKinnon was "bullied" by management when he raised the complaints. The complainants were subject to reprisals from other employees with no response from management. Despite the order of the Board to implement action toward systemic change in the Ministry of Corrections, by 2002 it was clear that the Ministry had failed to comply fully with the orders; and the environment of the workplace and organizational continued to remain poisoned. The new orders were based on an acknowledgement by the Board that the redress of institutional racism rests with every level of an institution.[2]

Anti-racism emphasizes a holistic approach to the development of anti-racist ideologies, goals, policies, and practices. As an organizational response it requires the formation of new organizational structures; the introduction of new cultural norms and value systems; changes in power dynamics; the implementation of new employment systems; substantive changes in services delivered; support for new roles and relationships at all levels of the organization; new patterns and more inclusive styles of leadership and decision-making; and the reallocation of resources. Strategic planning, organizational audits and reviews, monitoring and accountability systems and training are all considered an integral part of the management of anti-racist change.

Of prime importance in the anti-racist institutional process is a commitment to the empowerment of racial minorities both within the organization, institution, and system and outside of these structures (Dei et al., 2004). Policy development and new mission statements are not considered ends in themselves; adequate attention, priority, and resources are given to implementation strategies and programs. Effective monitoring mechanisms are put in place to ensure accountability throughout the organization. Evaluation of the change

effort is an ongoing process. Resistance to change is anticipated, analyzed, and strategies to overcome it are planned.

Racism appears in many guises – constantly mutating into new forms – speaking in different voices, operating using different discursive strategies, codes and expressions, symbols, and images. Therefore, it is important to stress that each manifestation requires different approaches and strategies.

Finally, anti-racism recognizes that no institution operates in isolation from other institutions and that racism in one arena of social life, such as education, will affect others, such as employment; that racism in police forces can be promoted by the media and in turn that the media can be influenced by market forces and government "propaganda." Thus, the anti-racist approach to systemic racism seeks to encourage and facilitate linkages and partnerships among institutions in order to identify and dismantle racial barriers and racial inequalities. (For more detail on diagnosing and removing institutional racism see Henry et al 2000, Henry and Tator 2005),

In each of the institutional sectors we and other scholars have critically examined (Henry and Tator, 2005), the various forms of racism have been shown to influence the manner in which organizations are structured and services are delivered. The ideology of democratic racism reinforces and reproduces racial inequality in these institutions. Each of the institutions is a discursive space that intersects with the others, and broader societal discourses that function to categorize, inferiorize, marginalize and exclude racialized populations. These systems and structures are not only interconnected but also interlock. The approach taken in this analysis underscores the fact that racialized individuals and communities, often simultaneously, experience individual and collective forms of racism.

There is a cohesiveness of ideologies found in the discourses, unwritten policies, and everyday practices of educators, journalists, human service practitioners, politicians, judges, and other public authorities. The same cohesiveness of beliefs and assumptions about the "others" exist in the private sector workplaces. The discourses of denial, tolerance, equality of opportunity, reverse discrimination, and colour-blindness constantly conflict with the realities of pervasive injustice, inequity, and racial discrimination. These rhetorical strategies create a climate that prevents any kind of effective engagement with racial inequality.

Public Education

One of the most powerful examples of public education initiatives is the recent public inquiry carried out by the Commission on racial profiling. The report, *Paying the Price: The Human Cost of Racial Profiling* is based on more than four hundred personal narratives documenting the nature and impact of racism on the lives of people of colour across Ontario. It was a timely and important process, which functioned to "connect the dots" between the staggering body of evidence of the pervasive and intractable reality of racism, and the lived experience experiences as told through the personal narratives of hundreds of men, women and youth.

There are several important learning outcomes from such an inquiry. First, is that it reinforced the power of personal narratives or counter-hegemonic stories to "break the silence" and, to "bear witness to what is unimagined and unexpressed." (Ewick and Silbey, 1995: 220). Such personal and collective narratives provide a primary way of uncovering the myths, assumptions and habits of thinking that make up the commonsense understandings about the role of race and racism in society (Bourdieu, 1999). These narratives create a link between personal experience and broader societal systemic patterns. Thus, the gathering and disseminating of personal accounts of racism also represents a powerful organizing tool in the process of social change. Narratives of social injustice (especially when contested) can expose complex social conflict and ruptures underlying everyday policies and practices of institutions (Oman, 2003: 18).

This leads to the second powerful learning that emerged from the Commission's study and that is the role and power of dominant discourse to deny, deflect, and silence those who dare to speak out against racism. Indeed, the Commission found out that it is "risky business" to identify that racism exists, except of course for the occasional "bad apple." Following the release of the report, there was an immediate and sustained attack by numerous White public authorities, disparaging both the Commission's findings and the process. The central narrative incorporated into these discourses was denial that racial profiling exists. The second rhetorical strategy employed was to dismiss all of the recommendations, as "junk science." Both these responses are commonly found within White institutional discursive spaces.

Perhaps, one of the unexpected learning outcomes from this inquiry was that the Commission raised the level of its own critical awareness about the nature, extent and impact of systemic racism in Canadian society. Now the Commission must translate this new collective reflexivity into a radical new policy that incorporates daring vision and bold strategies to address racism in both its overt and more insidious systemic manifestations.

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Endnotes

1 (No 3) (1998), 32 C.H.R.R. D/1 (Ont Bd. Of Inq.) and unreported decision of the Ontario Board of Inquiry, Decision No. 02-022-1M (November 29, 2002.

2 Verma and Wente's paper includes a variety of mechanisms available to employers/managers in order to address and prevent individual, institutional and systemic racism in the workplace (www.cavalluzzo.com/publications).