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Institutional Language of Control: Race, Class, and Gender Issues

by Harry Morgan

Controlling discourse is a common practice among colleges and universities, public and private schools, political parties, libraries, departments of government, and funding institutions, just to name a few. The control of discourse is essential for maintaining their power, status, and influence. The goals and missions of these institutions are shaped through conversations between individuals at various levels of power, status, and influence. The ongoing behavior of these institutions—as dictated primarily by those in positions of power, status, and influence—is reflected in discourse among and between themselves, and their counterparts in other institutions.

These institutional interactions create *in-groups* and *out-groups*. The *in-group* understands and participates in how discussions must be framed in order to be accepted and considered. The *out-group* either does not understand or accept the framing of discourse around particular issues or events. *Out-group* members are not permitted to participate in shaping national events or issues unless they learn, accept, and participate, in the rules governing discourse as defined by the *in-group*. Institutional discourse is framed to maintain levels of power, status, and influence away from those who do not ascribe to the discourse that serves to maintain a status quo on class, race, and gender issues in the United States.

The framing of discourse in schooling has been articulated by several philosophers in education. Michael Apple, in his book *Ideology and Curriculum*, suggested that schooling in the US is designed to get students to accept prevailing thought and dominant values.¹ Jules Henry proposed that because of predetermined attitudes that dominate the curriculum, neither students nor teachers can engage in discourse that challenges hegemonic social and intellectual structures.² There is a continuing reinforcement among students through out their lives, so as adults, the same values are reinforced by them through the institutions where they are employed. The Black writer, Ralph Ellison (1953) pointed out in his novel *Invisible Man*, that hegemonic discourse systematically dismisses the existence of racial issues when the mere acknowledgment posed a threat to white male power structures.³ Mary Roth Walsh brought professional women's issues to our attention in a similar vein.⁴

Framing Discussions and Controlling The Discourse

The manner in which discussions are framed can act as

a screen to truncate the content. *The framing of discussions* is often a rite that establishes agendas in a broad sense, but more important, the act of framing leads to *a priori* characterizations of phenomena, and ultimately controls how issues and events are investigated, acted upon, and recorded. This approach leads to understandings among participants about how things should be valued, the direction of social thought and discourse, and common agreement on permissible conclusions. One of the earliest pre-1960s referents is the use of the word *tolerance* to describe white characteristics that are free of racial bias. Such characteristics, it was surmised, enable whites to be more *indulgent, patient, and forbearing*, toward African-Americans. In this context, African-Americans would, a priori, possess qualities that would call forth *indulgence, patience and forbearance* on the part of whites. In other words, the pathway toward racial equality in the United States is to foster attitudes among whites that *tolerate* African-Americans.

This term has been resurrected by The Center For Racial Justice, an effective organization in Alabama that has successfully litigated cases against persons guilty of racial hate crimes. This organization publishes a journal that is free to classroom teachers titled "Teaching Tolerance." Thus, unwittingly, framing the racial equality question in terms of Black dependency and white superiority.

We also observe media commonly referring to "minorities and women" in writing and oral discourse. This approach serves to ignore gender differences within minorities and creates two groups—minority males and minority women in one—and white women in the other. This novel *framing* of discourse concerning gender, provides a cleavage between minority women and white women, and substantially reduces the power of all women in numbers. A modest change in re-phrasing the discourse to, "women and minority males," would place this referent in its proper semantic perspective.

As another example, the current construct labeled *Affirmative Action*, was introduced into the lexicon of social policy, and quickly became a concept in public discourse to mean—unearned advantages for minority males and women. In reality, the legislation and public policy that brought about affirmative action as practiced, has been with us for many years. For example, following WWII, *affirmative action* was introduced to civil service employment by various federal, state, and municipal governments to grant special privileges to veterans of the war.

One common *affirmative action* for these veterans was to grant them a number of "points" to be added to their civil service test score, and/or place them at the top of the list for employment in a specified job. In addition, they were granted government backed mortgages and free college tuition. These actions were legislated, and therefore legal; and in most cases deserved by the veterans. Intended primarily for white males, these special accommodations aided relatively few minority males and women who had also served in WWII. For veterans of the

war, this affirmative action was viewed as their **right**. When special accommodations were legislated for minority males and women for past discrimination in the work place—media framed the discussion as a **privilege**. This model successfully diverts attention away from persons who affirmative action has historically advantaged—as in the case of WWII veterans—and framed it in a context that implies unearned advantages for today’s minority males and women.

Many individuals and institutions in framing discussions have what they consider good intentions. Their good intentions have resulted in African-American History Month, the Martin Luther King national holiday, and programs aimed at equity for women and minority males in the market place—some existing under various labels associated with affirmative action. They have also lent their support to such groups as The Rainbow Coalition, a cross-racial group that supports women’s issues and other liberal causes, and which was founded by Reverend Jesse Jackson.

When Jesse Jackson was a candidate for the presidency of the United States, reporters who followed his campaign would ask frequently, “Reverend Jackson, what is it you really want?” He would respond with the answer that to him seemed obvious given his rigorous campaign, “I want to be president of the United States.” Reporters would follow up with the same question placing more emphasis upon *really want*, and Reverend Jackson understood the true intent of their query. Reporters and candidates were aware that at that time the presidency of the United States was the *affirmative action* domain of white males, and being an ambassador to a Caribbean or African nation was the highest office to which minority males or women could aspire. Jesse Jackson and his tracking reporters during this experience did not have a forum or lexicon to enable such a discussion to arise. They were mired in social policy and common agreement that *framed* the *affirmative action* discourse in a manner preventing the discussion of such realities outside of perceived privileges for minority males and women. We also know that when the U.S. is at war, the sons and daughters of the president and his staff who wish to be, are tucked away in universities, or nested in careers because of *affirmative action quotas* set aside for them. It is also true, minority male and women elected officials have yet to be admitted to the policy-making bodies of major political parties where the articulation of issues is framed. In that regard, their influence is limited to their own personal choice about which party they wish to become attached.

During the 1990s a major issue affecting all citizens was crime, and discussions were framed in media, academic institutions, and governmental agencies, by the majority who directed policies from their dominant policy making positions. As a result, unlawful activity in the African-American community was framed as “Black on Black” crime, and this gave rise to another example of reductionism that emanates from the framing of the discussion. In this particular example, crimes perpetrated against whites by whites were never framed as “White on

White” crime. This selective framing suggested that Blacks committing crimes against other Blacks created a *race problem*, while whites committing crimes against other whites represent a social problem for the nation.

Following the period of the popularization of the “Black on Black” crime chant by journalists and others, institutions in the Black community like churches, social agencies and schools mounted programs, projects, and marches, designed to “reduce” Black on Black crime. Essentially, the Black community selected-in to the *framing* that was created by popular media. Such an acceptance suggested to African-American children that crime was a social problem created primarily by people with whom they identified. Ultimately it was accepted as *their* problem and not a problem of their country that affected both Blacks and whites equally, as perpetrators and victims. How these discussions were framed was important, but who *framed* the discussion was an equally important question.

On many university campuses of the 1960s and 1970s, authorities at first rejected requests from Black students for a building of their own where they could attend to issues and events that were of interest primarily to themselves. University administrators suggested that buildings set aside for racial groups would represent divisiveness in a social environment that had begun to desegregate, and many Black and white professionals agreed. The fact that on practically every campus in the US there already existed white-only fraternity houses, and religious centers, was not given equal attention. At Brooklyn College in the mid-sixties, confrontations between authorities and students became violent during student demands for a center for Black students. The rejection of the idea for a Black student center by college authorities came during the same period when a building for Jewish students was being constructed, and the street on which it was located was renamed, Hillel Place. These latter issues never became a part of the serious discourse between Black students and the college administrators. The discussion was *framed* as disrespect for authority, civil disobedience, and student responsibility, thereby excluding the issues of student concern like self esteem, racial pride, and religious identity. These same issues would be excluded from the framed discourse between Black students and university authorities on the campus of the University of North Carolina in the 1990s.

During the 1980s and 90s, national media reported with great frequency, violence between Blacks and whites in South Africa. As Black South Africans pursued voting rights and power-sharing with white South Africans, Blacks and whites formed coalitions within, and between groups. All factions, at some time during the confrontations, were reported to have committed violent acts against others. When Black factions committed violent acts against Black individuals, journalists framed their reporting, as “Black on Black” violence.

Contemporary Europe provides another example. The former Yugoslavia, a nation made up of multiple ethnic and religious groups, has crumbled in a tumultuous

process involving genocide and violence on a grand scale. These events have not been framed as “White on White” violence by media or scholarly institutions where such events are discussed. Here, *the framing of the discourse* has implied that whites committing violence against other whites is a problem for humanity—while Blacks committing violence against other Blacks was a problem for Blacks.

Over the same decades within the United States, the government has recognized the World War II imprisonment of Japanese Americans as an unwarranted wartime policy, and has paid retribution to some of the survivors. The discussions of this incident in Congress or the academy, however, was not framed in terms of **concentration** camp survivors but rather, *framed* in terms of **internment** camp survivors.

In 1995, the Smithsonian Institution was planning an exhibition that included the Enola Gay, the airplane that delivered atomic bombs to Japanese cities near the end of WWII. Some powerful members of the U.S. Congress and others who served in that war were displeased with the way the information to be disseminated was being framed. The U.S. still remains the only country in human history to use an atomic bomb to kill other humans. Veterans of WWII, many who now serve in the US Congress, want our use of atomic weapons to kill Japanese civilians *framed* with a humanitarian twist. Those who were intent upon framing the official history of that event in this fashion were influential enough to get the U.S. Senate to schedule hearings designed to bring pressure on the Smithsonian Institution. Rather than *reframe*, the Smithsonian canceled the event, and the director of the project resigned.

There is persistent and systemic rhetoric concerning something called “Reverse Discrimination.” The implications here include the notions that only whites (primarily white males), are bestowed with the power to discriminate, and if people of color choose to discriminate, it is merely the reverse of what whites do.

This practice of framing discussion is an effective form of maintaining power and control. This reductionist activity takes place in the media as well as scholarly institutions and is one of the remaining barriers to efforts

by some writers, journalists and intellectuals who strive to create public dialogue that includes issues of importance to minority males and women.

Selective framing serves to perpetuate attitudes and styles of discourse that tend to marginalize African-American people and issues that directly affect all of our lives. This cuts across all groups when the framing relates to gender, because women of all races are affected. To the extent that women of all races and African-American, Hispanic, Asian and Native American males learn and adopt this approach to defining ideas, these narrow routines of framing may seem to take on a life of their own, but in fact we are all responsible.

Conclusion

An understanding of issues related to the framing of discourse is essential to educators and other human service providers whose goals include empowerment of their clients. The narrow framing of national discourse works against empowerment. Those with the power to frame media and institutional discourse most effectively do so in a marketplace which responds to profits. Until profit and media ratings create pressure for change, financial resources and policy will be directed toward leaving things as they are, and barriers to inclusive discourse will not be lowered. For this reason, educational resources become all the more critical. Educators must start to train a critical consciousness in the early grades in order to challenge students to identify, confront, and define issues from a number of perspectives. Moreover, educators must bring a critical consciousness to their own work to be alert to the framing of dialogue on race, gender, and ethnicity within our textbooks and classrooms.

Notes

¹Michael Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum* (New York: Routledge & Kegan, 1979).

²Jules Henry, *Culture Against Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965).

³Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953).

⁴Mary Roth Walsh, *Doctors Wanted: No Women Need Apply* (New Haven, CT: Yale Press, 1977).

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