

## COUNTERPOINT

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### Sensitivity Training, Diversity Awareness, and Intergroup Conflicts on University Campuses: Some Reactions and Some Background

*Martin Lakin*

I write in reaction to the derogatory allusions to “sensitivity training” by fellow NAS members who object to programs of “diversity awareness” developing on various campuses, including my own. What I object to is the dismissive comparisons to “brainwashing” in the NAS publications as well as in *Measure* and *Heterodoxy*, and campus publications. I worry that such reflexive reactions indicate a kind of intellectual rigidity and intolerance that doesn’t seem proper for scholars, who should try to understand even that which they might criticize as inappropriate to a university setting. Perhaps the reactions also evidence underlying anxiety about insidious influences of psychological interventions, particularly in group forms, that needs to be openly addressed. They undoubtedly also reflect a basic distrust of political currents among university administrators.

Let me first state that I, too, think that many of the current programs ostensibly designed to address the problems of racial and ethnic intergroup antagonisms on campuses seem to be poorly designed and ideologically tendentious. But I also think that flawed programs call for corrective action, not simplistic rejection, that is, if the intergroup problems on campus and in the society are significant ones, and if the psychological methods might have something of value to offer with regard to understanding or ameliorating them.

To designate all such efforts “brainwashing” is to negatively stereotype (slander?) a respectable area of scholarship and practice in studying and attempting to ameliorate intergroup conflicts. It is certainly possible to use psychological techniques for political purposes, but that does not justify labeling them totalitarian incursions into otherwise pristine academic life. More importantly, I would argue that our colleges and universities are currently beset by the very sorts of problems that have stimulated and continue to stimulate interest in such psychological interventions.

In a recent issue of *Academic Questions*,<sup>1</sup> Jerry Martin critically examined the idea of the university as an agency of social transformation. Interestingly, even

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in criticizing the stance of faculty who insist that the institution act to transform the society according to their own prescriptions, he acknowledged that there have always been idealists among us who urge their students to think beyond themselves to their responsibilities to improve society. But we have come to view many such colleagues with suspicion, especially, of course, those who refer to group entitlements in their efforts to mobilize their universities as levers of social change. As James Coleman noted,<sup>2</sup> there is a very real danger that certain faculty members, seeking to foster what they regard as necessary social change, will consistently favor their preferred social policies over the “discord and diversity that characterize healthy academic inquiry”.

Few of us would deny that our society is worrisomely beset by racial fragmentation, along with manifestations of ugly divisiveness about homosexuality and abortion, and increasingly aversive relations between the sexes. It is unreasonable to expect that institutions of higher learning will be immune or insulated against these tensions. Because of the nature of campus life, we are perhaps even more exposed to verbal manifestations of these tensions than other sectors of the society.

But, one might ask, what has the sensitivity-training experience—or its root source, studies of group dynamics—to do with the intergroup problems that are reflected in campus life? What I want to tell my fellow NAS members is that, contrary to their conviction that these represent totalitarian indoctrination, the origins of such psychological interventions lie in quite different directions. The ideals of personal and group change through the group workshop-experience were democratic, not totalitarian. Its procedures evolved from interest in mutual rather than autocratic influence, how one is perceived by others, how one may learn to influence one’s group, and how groups influence the institutions and the societies of which they are part.

Depending on how they are conducted, such group-learning experiences have been experienced as transformative—as have other unique educational experiences that touch one profoundly—and this is, of course, related to the honesty, sensitivity, and skill of the individual who conducts them. I certainly acknowledge that sensitivity-training experiences are misapplied when they are used for psychopolitical indoctrination. Monitoring their appropriate use therefore requires thoughtful planning, sustained oversight, and continuing evaluation.

The educators, psychotherapists, social psychologists, and sociologists who were initially drawn to experimentation in group processes were certainly motivated to study and to remediate such problems as biased employment practices, as well as racial and ethnic antagonism, and to enhance interpersonal-relations skills in classroom as well as in boardroom. Teachers, managers, administrators, and mental health specialists were its initial target groups. The field was in many ways reactive to ideological aspects of World War II, particularly to the racist components of Nazi doctrine. The psychologist Kurt

Lewin, himself a refugee who had lost most of his family in Europe, was determined to use his knowledge and group skills to address the problems of intergroup hostility.<sup>3</sup> However, "Human Relations Training Groups" did not focus exclusively on societal issues but also examined the interpersonal relations that might influence them. Participants showed particular interest in the how's and why's of their own interactions with one another, leading them to focus on interactional process as well as on contents of discussion and, subsequently, to analysis of how group members might influence their own groups.<sup>4</sup>

The "transformative" aspect of the group experience—often conducted as a workshop—was also attractive to many people who welcomed the opportunity to "experiment" with their own behaviors in the hope of personal self-improvement. Because the groups offered the opportunity to experience things that seemed to them real about themselves and their relations with others, they accepted the idea that the groups represented a "microcosm" of much that they ordinarily contended with but could not openly speak about.

At this point I can imagine my colleagues objecting, "OK, so this is a form of group therapy; maybe it's not 'brainwashing.' A therapy might be useful to those who need it, but what has it got to do with intergroup conflicts on our campus?" In response to this question it is necessary to provide a bit more background. As we have already noted, from its inception, the focus of group-dynamics study and research was not only on within-the-group experience, but on intergroup relations as well. This involved laboratory observation and field research, using contrived as well as natural groups and included attempts to ameliorate tensions between groups. One of the most sobering findings was the difficulty of defusing tensions between antagonist groups. It appeared that even assignment to "contrived" groups, coupled with minimally competitive tasks, is sufficient to generate mutual hostility. Given such results,<sup>5</sup> is it not foolhardy to think of ameliorating tensions between groups whose hostilities are historically rooted in genuine conflicts of interest? Common sense would suggest that real improvement in conflictful intergroup relations requires cumulative efforts to ameliorate the conflict and multiple rather than solitary exercises in cooperation for mutual benefit. So what might be expected from one-time conflict-resolution workshops?

Intergroup conflict-resolution models developed out of efforts to understand and ameliorate significant social problems. Labor-management relationships and conflicts provided one avenue of opportunities. So did community conflicts in the wake of civil-rights legislation and reactions to it. Interested behavioral scientists found themselves working with local groups but also involved with enduring tribal, ethnic, religious, and national conflicts in other parts of the world. Many, if not most of these, were launched as exploratory efforts. Almost all had to meet under some of the stresses they are trying to alleviate. Thus, one of the early workshops involved tribal groups in the Horn of Africa;<sup>6</sup> another was organized for Israelis and Arabs after the 1967 war.<sup>7</sup>

Others have been organized for Greek and Turkish Cypriots, Indians and Pakistanis, Francophone and Anglophone Canadians and for other racial and ethnic groups. (The religio-political struggle between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland was the basis of another effort.<sup>8</sup>) None of the reported workshops claimed to have resolved an intergroup conflict. However, J.W. Burton and R.J. Fisher propose that these workshops have generated important insights for participants and illuminated psychological dimensions of their intragroup and intergroup interactions that can be applied to other conflict-resolution efforts.<sup>9</sup>

Responsibly conducted conflict-resolution workshops are undertaken on the assumption that psychological obstacles to mutual understanding are mutual misperceptions, overuse of stereotype about the others, and misinterpretation of their motives. Of course, real conflicts of interest may be taken into account, but the focus is on attitudes and affects that preclude mutual accommodation. Experimentation with the idea of familiarization and socializing among participants from antagonist groups has resulted in the conviction that it is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. Conducting intergroup workshops on campuses as well as other places requires recruitment with an eye to balance of educational as well as intellectual levels. The process must also balance evocative aspects of intergroup exchanges with support for individual participants, particularly when they deviate from positions taken by their own groups.

In the interest of promoting collaborative productive thinking about their intergroup problems, Burton and Fisher have emphasized the importance of reviewing ingroup positions among ingroup members *prior* to meeting with the members of the other group. In other words, understanding of the own-group agenda and of one's own reactions to it is a necessary preliminary to reacting to the other group. This sort of understanding has a moderating effect on the tendency of group members to use intergroup sessions for personal and group catharsis. These ideas have been operationalized, most saliently in intergroup-conflict workshops described by Kelman and Cohen.<sup>10</sup> It has been suggested that similar methods have been employed in quasi-diplomatic exchanges as a way of preparing for peace conferences.

I have said that conflict-resolution workshops may be misapplied. I think that the following illustrates the problem and can be related to my colleagues' concern. In the civil-rights activities of the 1960s, supporters of equal rights and opponents "faced off" in many American communities. In the wake of charges of "police brutality" there were workshops—essentially guided confrontations—between policemen (mainly white) and the "community people" (mainly Afro-American). In 1964, intergroup techniques were employed to "integrate" white student volunteers working on voter registration among rural blacks with their Afro-American co-workers. This was a quite dangerous activity at the time, and, needless to say, the white students believed themselves to be deeply committed to it. However, the leaders of the movement felt

that the white students would become more sincerely committed through intergroup encounters where personal motives and beliefs could be examined. In brief, a pattern of accusations of racism and corresponding confessions of racism was set; no white volunteer was exempted from the requirement.

At this juncture the reader may well exclaim, "So now it comes out! Doctrinaire ideological programs determine what goes on in these groups! Who needs them?"! I deliberately introduce this case example of ideological coercion because it certainly illustrates the potential for indoctrination and bullying. But there are no ethically "fail-safe" approaches to examining and working with these sorts of antagonisms. The ethical caveats must be emphasized, but so must the need to consider the use of any and all possibly ameliorative methods—especially those that might have educational functions. The question is whether well-conducted and ethically responsible conflict-resolution workshops can increase mutual understanding and self-understanding. My argument is that, when and if skillfully conducted, such workshops can help volunteer participants understand not only the other, but also their own group identities. Using cognitively as well as affectively balanced interactions, we might facilitate shifts toward more mature and reflective self- and group-assessments, away from automatic identification with own-group grievances as the only basis of interactions with members of other groups. Attention would be paid to questions about how group members assess their own groups and their own adherence to its norms of conduct. What stereotypes do *we* have about them? What aspects of *my* group membership motivate *me*? (Not only what do *they* think of *us*.)

If an intergroup experience can help its participants to become productively self-conscious (questioning, not only affirming, their primary-group loyalties), it will contribute to the mutual understanding, tolerance, and civility that a peaceful pluralistic society requires to preserve its democratic institutions. But current programs of "diversity awareness" on many campuses do not appear to be conducted with that objective in view. If they are conducted with racial or ethnic ideological agendas, they can only be emotionally and ideologically coercive. In the monitoring and evaluation of current and proposed programs on campuses, faculty have an essential role. They should not abandon it to others.

I have presented the issue from a relatively narrow perspective, as though the intergroup problem on our campuses—as in our major cities—is confrontation between black and white students—between Afro-American and white citizens. It is true that it is a preemptive conflict: the legacies of slavery will not easily pass. There are however, other intergroup tensions—those of ethnicity, sex, class, and sexual orientation—that could also benefit from finding alternate ways to increase mutual understanding and nonviolent solutions to disagreements. Whatever the purpose of the intergroup sessions, participation must be voluntary and uncoerced. Ideologically balanced leaders who are skillful in managing a group's dynamics should be engaged for the task of con-

ducting them. They must be clear not only about the workshop's objectives, but also about limits to their own interventions.

Most of us academics pride ourselves on being open, rejecting bigotry of the Left or the Right as inimical to the search for truths about life and society. At the same time, some of us may think of ourselves as old fashioned "liberals" whose self-concept includes a commitment to human betterment and societal improvement. Our proprietary feelings about our teaching and research functions include a sense of responsibility for inculcating openness to new understandings and readiness for experimentation in our students. I hope that we can be less negatively reactive to the realities of groups and group identities. Perhaps the reaction of which I complained is due to our current involvement in fighting against the politics of "group entitlements" being enacted in our universities. On the other hand, I believe that we must face the reality that group identities are powerful motivators and strong influences for good as well as for ill in our society and in our educational institutions. Responsibly and ethically conducted intergroup workshops on college campuses that generate insights into these could be a significant pedagogical as well as socially significant contribution.

Finally, I cannot be sure whether my own social agenda is based on wanting to do good or on plain self-interest. (An uncivil campus atmosphere is not pleasant!). But either way, it's OK with me. One could do worse than try to diminish intergroup hostility.

## Notes

1. Jerry L. Martin, "The University as Agent of Social Transformation: The Postmodern Argument Considered," *Academic Questions* (Summer 1993), 55-72.
2. J.S. Coleman, "The Power of Social Norms: Address to Duke Association of Scholars," March, 1992, *Duke Faculty Newsletter*, vol. 3, no. 7, April 1992.
3. Kurt Lewin, "Frontiers in Group Dynamics," *Human Relations* 1 (1947): 5-41; and, by the same author, *Resolving Social Conflicts* (New York: Harper and Row, 1948).
4. Martin Lakin, "Human Relations Training and Interracial Social Action; Problems in Self and Client Definition," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 2 (1966): 139-147; Martin Lakin, J. Lomranz, and M.A. Lieberman, *Arab and Jew in Israel: Case Study in a Human Relations Approach to Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: N.T.L. Institute for Applied Behavioral Science, 1969); and Martin Lakin, *Ethical Issues in the Psychotherapies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
5. M. Sherif and C.W. Sherif, *Research on Intergroup Relations* (Monterey, Calif.: Brooks/Cole, 1979); H. Tajfel and J. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. W.G. Austin and S. Worchel (Monterey, Calif.: Brooks/Cole, 1979); M. Rothbart, "Intergroup Perception and Social Conflict," in *Conflict Between People and Groups*, ed. S. Worchel and J.A. Simpson (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1993).
6. L.W. Doob, *Resolving Conflict in Africa: The Fermada Workshop* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970).
7. See Lakin, Lomranz, and Lieberman, Op. cit. n. 4.
8. L.W. Doob, "The Belfast Workshop: Application of Group Techniques to a Destructive Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 17 (1973): 489-512.
9. J.W. Burton, *Resolving Deep-Rooted Conflict* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987); R.J. Fisher "Prenegotiation Problem-Solving Discussions: Enhanc-

- ing the Potential for Successful Negotiation," *International Journal* XLIV (Spring 1989), 442-474.
10. H.C. Kelman and S.P. Cohen, "Resolution of International Conflict: An Interactional Approach," in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, 2nd ed., ed. S. Worchel and W.G. Austin (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986).

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