**Stories from Within: Dismantling institutionalized racism using peacemaking circles**

Structures of racism are embedded in institutions such as institutions of Higher Education (Bell, 2004). These institutionalized structures of racism leave limited opportunities for the constituents of these institutions to address aspects of power and privilege (Barndt, 2007). As a result these institutions wittingly or unwittingly function in ways that are qualitatively better for the People of Whiteness they serve and disadvantage People of Color. A significant way that racism is played out is in repressing the voice of members of the institution to express their experiences of disadvantage and oppression, and to collectively come up with solutions. The use of stories is particularly significant when studying aspects of power and privilege as stories invariably uncover the more hidden depths of disadvantage (Bell, 2003). Human beings are the storytelling species. Storytelling is in our blood. We think in story form, speak in story form, and bring meaning to our lives through story(Atkinson, 2007 p. 224)***.***  Stories can be used as a response to the need to transform oppression and inequity. In this form stories serve as a tool for social change, which is defined as “a fundamental alteration in patterns of culture, structure and societal behavior over time” (Hill Collins, 2001, p.77).

A peacemaking circle is a particularly significant methodology when studying aspects of power and privilege, as stories invariably uncover both intentional/covert and unintentional/covert racism. A peacemaking circle is a powerful elixir of human experiences. It is a mixture of the ancient Native American practice of dialogue and modern conflict transformation processes of communication. It is one of a variety of circles and is used to generate and rejuvenate relationships among members of a common group such as institutions, organizations, neighbourhoods and schools. The circle process has been brought in to Western cultures by community activist in the restorative justice movement and feminists’ movements (Umbreit, 2008) and is a useful tool to highlight and solve problems that institutions face related to racism. One of the most significant uses of the peacemaking circles in work with institutional racism, social change, and social justice is that the circle highlights differences in power constraints and the ability of the constituents in organizations to connect with each other even when having dialogue across differences. Very often privileged groups are prone to erase or negate the experiences of disadvantage that some groups experiences. In the nexus of the peacemaking circle this negation is virtually impossible because the act of deep listening, empathy, accountability and responsiveness to human experiences facilitates a change in attitude and beliefs.

This paper examines the use of peacemaking circles to enable participants to use the art of narrative to explore aspects of equality, diversity and inclusion, ensuring that those who are excluded are no longer silent or invisible (Myers, 2011; Simpson & Lewis, 2007). More specifically it examines how the peacemaking circle can encourage participants to use dialogue to begin large-scale action, call for accountability and examine openly non-merit based institutional practices.

**Key Words**:

Disadvantage, institutionalized racism, invisibility, narrative, power, privilege, stories, silence.

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