

Readings for Diversity and Social Justice

Second Edition

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Developing a Liberatory Consciousness

Barbara J. Love

All members of society play a role in keeping a "dis-equal" system in place, whether the system works to their benefit or to their disadvantage. Through the socialization process, every member of society learns the attitudes, language, behaviors and skills that are necessary to function effectively in the existing society. This socialization prepares individuals to play roles of dominant or subordinate in systems of oppression.¹ For example, men are assigned the role of dominant and women are assigned the role of subordinate in the system of dis-equality based on gender. Whites are assigned to play the role of dominant and People of Color are assigned the role of subordinate in the system of dis-equality based on race. The socialization process of the society works to insure that each person learns what they need to know to behave in ways that contribute to the maintenance and perpetuation of the existing system, independent of their belief in its fairness or efficacy.

No single human can be charged with the creation of the oppressive systems in operation today. All humans now living have internalized the attitudes, understandings, and patterns of thoughts that allow them to function in and collaborate with these systems of oppression, whether they benefit from them or are placed at a disadvantage by them. The patterns of thought and behaviors that support and help to maintain racism, sexism, classism and other manifestations of oppression are not natural or inherent to any human. They are learned through this socialization process.

Many members of society, both those who benefit from oppression as well as those who are placed at disadvantage, want to work for social change to reduce inequity and bring about greater justice, yet continue to behave in ways that preserve and perpetuate the existing system. This happens because humans are products of their socialization and follow the habits of mind and thought that have been instilled in them. The institutions in which we live reward and reinforce behaviors that perpetuate existing systems and resist efforts toward change.

To be effective as a liberation worker—that is, one who is committed to changing systems and institutions characterized by oppression to create greater equity and social justice—a crucial step is the development of a liberatory consciousness. A liberatory consciousness enables humans to live their lives in oppressive systems and institutions with awareness and intentionality, rather than on the basis of the socialization to which they have been subjected. A liberatory consciousness enables humans to maintain an awareness of the dynamics of oppression characterizing society without giving in to despair and hopelessness about that condition, to maintain an awareness of the role played by each individual in the maintenance of the system without blaming them for the roles they play, and at the same time practice intentionality about changing the systems of oppression. A liberatory consciousness enables humans to live "outside" the patterns of thought and behavior learned through the socialization process that helps to perpetuate oppressive systems.

ELEMENTS OF A LIBERATORY CONSCIOUSNESS

The process for developing a liberatory consciousness has been discussed by many educators working for social change and social justice. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator, described it as developing critical consciousness. Carter G. Woodson described it as changing the “miseducation of the Negro.” Michael Albert’s humanist vision and bell hooks’s feminist critical consciousness are examples of other ways that a liberatory consciousness has been discussed.

Four elements in developing a liberatory consciousness are described here. They include awareness, analysis, acting, and accountability/ally-ship. The labeling of these four components in the development of a liberatory consciousness is meant to serve as reminders in our daily living that the development and practice of a liberatory consciousness is neither mysterious nor difficult, static nor fixed, or something that some people have and others do not. It is to be continually practiced event by event, each time we are faced with a situation in which oppression or internalized oppression is evident. These labels remind us that every human can acquire the skill to become a liberation worker.

Awareness, the first part of the task, includes practicing awareness or noticing what is happening. The second part includes analyzing what is happening from a stance of awareness along with the possibilities for action. The third part of the task includes deciding on the basis of that analysis what needs to be done, and seeing to it that the action is accomplished. The fourth part may be the most troublesome part for it requires that individuals accept accountability to self and community for the consequences of the action that has been taken or not taken.

With a liberatory consciousness, every person gets a chance to theorize about issues of equity and social justice, to analyze events related to equity and social justice, and to act in responsible ways to transform the society.

AWARENESS

The awareness component of a liberatory consciousness involves developing the capacity to notice, to give our attention to our daily lives, our language, our behaviors, and even our thoughts. It means making the decision to live our lives from a waking position. It means giving up the numbness and dullness with which we have been lulled into going through life. For some, facing life with awareness may at first seem painful. One student, in a class examining oppression, declared with dismay, “You have taken the fun out of going to the movies. Now I can’t watch stupid movies and laugh anymore.” This student had observed that even while watching “stupid movies” certain attitudes were being instilled in his consciousness. He noticed that some of these were attitudes and ideas that he would reject if he were consciously paying attention.

Living with awareness means noticing what happens in the world around you. If a salesperson reaches around you to serve the person in line behind you, a liberatory consciousness means taking notice of this act rather than ignoring it, pretending that it did not happen, or thinking it is of little consequence. If disparaging remarks about people of a different group are made in your presence, awareness requires taking note that an event has occurred that effects the maintenance or elimination of oppression. It means noticing that the remark was made, and not pretending that the remark is harmless.

ANALYSIS

A liberatory consciousness requires every individual to not only notice what is going on in the world around her or him, but to think about it and theorize about it—that is, to get information and develop his or her own explanation for what is happening, why it is happening, and what needs to be done about it.

The analysis component of a liberatory consciousness includes the activity of thinking about what needs to be done in a given situation. Every human has the capacity to examine any situation in order to determine what seems to be true about that situation. Awareness coupled with analysis of that situation becomes the basis for determining whether change is required, and if it is, the nature of the change needed.

If what we observe to be true about a given situation seems consistent with our values of an equitable society, then the analysis will conclude that the situation is fine exactly as is. If, on the other hand, the observation leads to the conclusion that the situation is unjust, then a conclusion that the situation needs to be changed is reached.

Analysis will reveal a range of possible courses of action. Each possibility will be examined to determine what results are likely to be produced. Some possible activities will produce results that are consistent with our goals of justice and fairness while some will not. Analysis means considering the range of possible activities and the results that each of them is likely to produce.

ACTION

The action component of a liberatory consciousness proceeds from recognition that awareness and analysis alone are not enough. There can be no division between those who think and those who put thinking into action. The action component of a liberatory consciousness is based on the assumption that the participation of each of us in the liberation project provides the best possibility of gaining liberation for any of us.

The action component of a liberatory consciousness includes deciding what needs to be done, and then seeing to it that action is taken. Sometimes it means taking individual initiative to follow a course of action. Sometimes it means encouraging others to take action. Sometimes it means organizing and supporting other people to feel empowered to take the action that the situation requires. And sometimes, locating the resources that empower another person to act with agency is required. In still other cases, reminding others that they are right for the task, and that they know enough and are powerful enough to take on the challenge of seeing that the task is completed will be the action that is required. In any event, the liberatory consciousness requires each human to take some action in every situation when the opportunity to transform the society and move toward a more just world presents itself.

ACCOUNTABLE/ALLY-SHIP

The socialization to which we have been subjected results in our thinking and behaving in very role-specific ways. We have been socialized into roles of dominant and subordinate. One result is that our vision of possibilities for change is limited by our confinement in the roles to which we have been assigned. Many white people flounder in their efforts to extricate themselves from racist conditioning. They become stuck while working on racism because their socialization to the role of dominant provides very little opportunity to understand what life might be like outside that role. A Person of Color will often have

a perspective or “window of understanding” that is unavailable to a white person because of the latter’s socialization into whiteness. Left alone in their struggle, some individual white people do eventually figure the difficulty out; many do not. When a Person of Color chooses to share her or his “window of understanding,” the growth and development of a white person, away from racist conditioning, can be significantly enhanced and quickened.

Similarly, a Person of Color can become stuck in patterns of internalized racism and left alone to struggle. A white person can hold a perspective that is outside the socialization into racial subordination that, when shared, boosts the efforts of a Person of Color to eliminate patterns of internalized racism. The same holds true for men addressing sexism and for women addressing internalized sexism, as well as for “owning-class” people, those raised poor, and working-class people who are concerned with classism.

People raised on one end of patterns of gender, race, and class subordination or domination can provide a different perspective for people raised on the other end. At the same time, people within role groups can assist other members of their own role group to recognize and eliminate those patterns of thought and behavior that originate in internalized subordination or domination. For example, women, People of Color, those raised poor, and working-class people can help each other better understand the ways that our automatic responses help to perpetuate and maintain our own oppression.

The accountability element of a liberatory consciousness is concerned with how we understand and manage this opportunity and possibility for perspective sharing and allyship in liberation work. Individuals engaged in liberation work can have confidence that, left to their own struggles, others will eventually figure out what they need to know to disentangle thought and behavior patterns from the internalized oppression, either internalized domination or internalized subordination. But working in connection and collaboration with each other, across and within “role” groups, we can make progress in ways that are not apparent when working in isolation and in separate communities.

In our liberation work, many of us have taken the position that it is not the responsibility of members of the subordinate group to teach or help to educate members of the dominant group. This is a reasonable and essentially “righteous” position. Those people who bear the brunt of the oppression should not be required to also take responsibility for eliminating it. At the same time, it is self-evident that people in the subordinate group can take the lead in setting the world right. For one thing, if people in the dominant group had access to and were able to hold a perspective that allowed them to change systems and patterns of domination, they would have done so already. Members of the subordinate group can wait for members of the dominant group to recognize that their language or behavior is oppressive, or they can share their perspective in every place where it could make a difference, including in the lives of members of the dominant group. In the end, it is in their best interest to do so.

This does not mean that members of groups who have been socialized into roles of subordination should focus their attention outward on the dominant group, or that members of dominant groups should be focused on the subordinate group. It is to suggest that when the perspective of the other group can serve as the critical energy to move things forward, liberation will be hampered if we hold our thinking and perspectives back from each other. Concomitantly, it also suggests that individual members of dominant and subordinate groups offer their perspective to other members of their role group in the effort to move forward.

As liberation workers, it is axiomatic that we will make mistakes. Rather than self-condemnation or blame from others, it will be important to have the opportunity and the openness to hear an analysis from others that allows us to reevaluate problematic behaviors or positions. If a Black person notices another Black person acting out of internalized racism, a liberatory consciousness requires considering the usefulness of sharing a

viewpoint that enables that person to explore the implications of internalized racism for their behavior. While we do not take responsibility for another’s thinking or behavior, accountability means that we support each other to learn more about the ways that the internalized domination and internalized subordination manifests itself in our lives, and agree with each other that we will act to interrupt it.

Accepting accountability to self and community for the consequences of actions taken or not taken can be an elusive concept for a people steeped in the ideology of individualism. Multiplicities of experiences and points of view contribute to problematizing the concept of accountability as well. None of us can claim for ourselves the right to tell another that her analysis is retrogressive. Recent discussions of “political correctness” can also prove troubling in the effort to grasp the idea of accountability and make it a workable concept.

There will be no easy answers here. The significance of a liberatory consciousness is that we will always question, explore, and interrogate ourselves about possibilities for supporting the efforts of others to come to grips with our conditioning into oppression, and give each other a hand in moving outside of our assigned roles. The accountability element of a liberatory consciousness requires us to develop new agreements regarding our interactions with each other. As a beginning, we get to decide the extent to which we will make ourselves available to interrupt language and behavior patterns that, in our best analysis, originate in an internalization of the ideology of domination and subordination.

SUMMARY

In the end, institutions and systems respond to the initiatives of individuals and groups of individuals. Systems do not perpetuate themselves: they are perpetuated by the actions of people who act automatically on the basis of their socialization. If we all acted on the basis of values and beliefs of our own choosing, systems and institutions would show greater flexibility and propensity for change. As it now stands, most of us act on the basis of values and beliefs instilled in us through the socialization process, designed to prepare us to act in ways that insure the perpetuation of existing systems of oppression.

The development of a liberatory consciousness would allow us the opportunity to reclaim choice in our values and attitudes and consequently, in our response patterns. It would enable us to move from an automatic response system grounded in our socialization, to the capacity to act on a range of responses based on our own awareness, analysis and decision making, and the opportunities we have to learn from our colleagues and other who are themselves embarked on a journey to liberation.

Note

- 1 I prefer the spelling *subordinant* because: (1) *subordinant* is a noun; *subordinate* is an adjective, modifying the noun; (2) *subordinant* parallels *dominant*, but *subordinate* describes what is done to the *subordinants*; (3) if we were to parallel *subordinate*, then we would need to write *dominate*; and (4) using the modifying adjective to refer to groups of people seems to further objectify and reduce.