

Institutional Culture and Diversity: Engagement and Dialogue in a South African University

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Universities are complex institutions where people congregate to teach and learn, conduct research, take part in public events and administer the day-to-day processes by which the institution reproduces itself. These activities contribute to a unique culture that shapes the relationships between members of the campus community (Hall, this volume). Affirmative action is designed to transform such cultures by countering the injustices of discrimination—particularly those based on race, gender and ethnicity—with accelerated and focused policies for change. But such policies can just as readily be undermined by the persistence of those very prejudices that are making life intolerable for the excluded. Very often, success or failure will depend on everyday slights or acceptances, scowls or smiles, greetings or snubs—the actions that James Scott has termed “everyday transcripts” of domination and resistance, or inclusion and acceptance.¹

South Africa’s University of Cape Town is still recovering from a long history of segregation and prejudice. The intervention program the University has devised to overcome this prejudice can be compared with Gurin, Nagda and Campanella’s account in this volume of the Intergroup Dialogue approach, which was designed to promote the recognition of diversity and the value of critical citizenship at an American university.

Perhaps the most obvious contrast between these two programs is the difference in their national-historical context: in America, the national impetus for civil rights is already a full half-century behind us, whereas in South Africa, the end of apartheid was recent enough that many current university faculty and staff spent the formative years of their careers within a segregated system.

In particular, then, such programs in South Africa must address “whiteness” and its assumptions of entitlement to positions of power and influence within institutions such as universities. These distinctions do not allow us to rely on universally-applicable policies. Instead, we must ask new questions in each case: What sort of interventions work best? How can we measure their effect? Or would it be better not to intervene at all?

The 1997 White Paper, which has done so much to shape the post-apartheid reconstruction of South African public universities, acknowledges the significance of institutional culture in affirmative action efforts.² One of universities’ primary purposes, it explains, is to “contribute to the socialization of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens,” who “help lay the foundations of a critical civil society, with a culture of public debate and tolerance which accommodates differences and competing interests.” The Paper saw much need for improvement in this area, both within individual institutions and in their relationship to the community at large: “to strengthen the democratic ethos, the sense of common citizenship and commitment to a common good.”

All of this depends on what is really only a very general definition of “institutional culture.” The pressing question of South African higher education is whether we can define the term more specifically, in order to permit targeted interventions with measurable results? Can we break this broad category up into individual domains—architecture and the physical plant; curriculum; service learning; working conditions and professional development; organizational structure, and others— that can be targeted for interventions?

In the rest of this chapter we describe one such intervention at the University of Cape Town. Khuluma (Zulu for “speaking out) is a program of three-day staff workshops that addresses race-based stereotypes of superiority and inferiority, directly tackling the recent legacy of segregation.³ The largest exercise of its kind in a South African university, with more than 600 participants over an eighteen-month period, Khuluma tests the ability of a university to improve its institutional culture through planned and direct intervention and raises questions for future policies of this kind.

Institutional Climate

UCT's Khuluma program was prompted by a survey of the university's institutional climate, carried out in 2003. The results of this survey were buttressed by several surveys of student views and have been further reinforced by the findings of a second Institutional Climate Survey that was carried out in 2007.⁴ A reading of the institutional climate—understood as the manifestation of institutional culture at a specific point in time—enables us to see where interventions can be targeted, and to devise measures for tracking change over time. Here, we focus on surveys of staff opinion and subsequent interventions; clearly student opinion is of equal importance in seeking a full understanding of the dynamics of institutional culture,

Both the 2003 and 2007 Institutional Climate Surveys were based on anonymous questionnaires, to which all categories of employees were invited to respond. The aggregate results reveal durable institutional perceptions and attitudes, which can legitimately be termed “culture.” These cultural measures reveal two major, intersecting fault lines: employment status and race.

Employment status places administrative, professional and support staff on one side of the line, and faculty on the other. The former are more likely to be dissatisfied with their conditions of service, and more likely to feel that they are treated unfairly. For their part, faculty often express dissatisfaction with the quality of work performed by “the administration.” This was a prominent theme in the 2003 results, and again in 2007, when the survey was carried out shortly after a strike by the administrative employees' union over working conditions.

In the South African workplace, dissatisfaction about employment status is invariably coupled with race because apartheid created labor aristocracies. Continuing skills shortages, the skewed nature of the education system and the close relationship between race and class continue to reproduce these aristocracies, no matter what the overt policy of the institution (Featherman, Hall, this volume). Thus lower-paid, lower-status administrative and support jobs tend to be held by black staff—particularly Africans: the more senior the position, the more likely it will be occupied by a white person. The 250 or so members of Senate (the body charged with academic governance of the university, predominantly full professors and chairs of academic departments) are overwhelmingly white and male. Despite the rhetoric of change, at UCT this demographic

pattern remained stable from 2003 to 2007 . There were no significant shifts within the various employment categories, and some 40% of all new appointments to the staff were white people, which is just over four times the representation of whites in the South African population as a whole.⁵

Here is a black (African) woman administrator commenting in the 2003 Institutional Climate Survey:

They figured that because of the colour of my skin I could not cope with a challenging job, and I quote “ Shame, we heard that you are struggling in that office, how are you doing now?” I dealt with these comments accordingly. Afterwards I was known as a rude person. But I did not care. When you are black you are expected to perform immediately even if the environment is still new, but when you are white everybody understands that you are still new, therefore your colleagues should be patient. Again, I asked for R100 in change from a white colleague, her response was, I do not have change but shame I can lend you some money if you want. She took out two twenty rand notes!”

The respondent’s anecdote captures the legacy of generations of race-based segregation in a few words. By expressing pity and offering a loan, the white co-worker positions her black colleague as a domestic worker asking a favor from the mistress of the household.

A second respondent offered a similar observation:

Blacks are always observed with suspicious eyes. For example, things like keys, stationery etc. are moved from accessible places to a highly secured place, once a Black person comes in the office.

Not surprisingly, when asked whether they have been treated differently in the workplace because of their race, a large majority of black staff in all categories of employment reply that they have.

In contrast, about half of white men and women in all job categories believe that their employment conditions are race-blind. This comparative silence of white employees on affirmative action and its consequences is striking: while black staff openly express their concern about the pace and adequacy of change, white staff generally remain silent. As one of us commented in reference to the 2003 Institutional Climate Survey, “the silence of white staff on the employment equity policy and on student access, issues, redress, diversity and affirmative action is deafening in the reports submitted and it is critical that these areas are explored as there are clearly issues regarding fairness, equity and vulnerabilities that have to be dealt with.”⁶

Only one white staff member took advantage of the anonymity afforded by the 2003 survey to complain that she felt her professional advancement was being threatened:

Frequently when applying for a position at a higher grade (or occasionally even at the same grade but which promises to be more interesting) I have been told that I am wasting my time—that the position has to go to a person of colour, presumably to fit in with employment equity plans. It is extremely disheartening and discouraging, even though understandable to some extent. But if that is not racial discrimination what is?

Taken together, UCT’s 2003 and 2007 Institutional Climate Surveys show how the workplace is understood by the university’s employees as a set of strong stereotypes, defined predominantly by interlinked factors of race and employment status. In broad terms, black staff believe change is slow and insufficient, while white staff see transformation as either complete (because they do not believe that employees are treated differently on the grounds of race) or as discriminating unfairly against them.

Khuluma

Such outcomes confirm what is already intuitively apparent—that institutions which are grounded in a system of unfair racial discrimination will carry that legacy forward, even in the face of official efforts to ensure equity. To be effective, in other words, interventions cannot just be policy decrees: they have to address stereotypes of superiority and inferiority, and have to be scalable to the institution as a whole.

One of the early influences on the design of the Khuluma intervention was IBM's diversity task force initiative, one of the few such programs implemented across a large institution that has been comprehensively described and analyzed.⁷ IBM's initiative was rooted in the work of eight task forces, each comprising about twenty members from pre-identified staff constituencies: Asians, blacks, gays/lesbians/transgender individuals/bisexuals, Hispanics, white men, Native Americans, people with disabilities and women.

IBM's objective was to legitimize these fixed identities as a way to foster corporate diversity, which was then to be measured through increased sales to the company's diverse customer base. The University's objective, in contrast, was to challenge the salience of an equivalent set of South African identities (White, African, Coloured, Indian), to undermine assumptions about the relative superiority or inferiority of these categories and to show that racial identity is a socially constructed phenomenon. To follow the IBM model by celebrating diversity, without an open and critical discussion of its past and present consequences, could have further entrenched the unwanted stereotypes.⁸

As such, UCT decided to look for a more appropriate model. We settled on a program used to improve race relations in the UK, based on the trainer and consultant Ashok Ohri's "Ideologies of Superiority."⁹ In South Africa this approach had been pioneered by ProCorp, an agency specializing in institutional transformation.¹⁰ It starts from the observation that all people may harbor assumptions that shape attitudes and prejudices. When those assumptions are accompanied by positional power they often result in discrimination, either direct or indirect. The ProCorp program uses experience and reflection to undermine stereotypes and encourage participants to challenge their internalized assumptions about superiority and inferiority. This approach, in other words, is aimed at developing respect for difference, and at breaking down the

structure of the stereotypes themselves. It has become part of an emerging field of “critical whiteness” studies in South Africa, which complements the work of critical intellectuals such as Fanon, Biko and Mangani by showing how the racially-defined White minority created and used the ideology of white superiority to entrench their political, social and economic dominance.

Khuluma was rolled out as a partnership between UCT and ProCorp. In mid-2006, staff were offered an open-ended series of three-day workshops, each designed to accommodate twenty participants working with two trained facilitators. The objective—not always achieved—was to have an equal number of black and white participants, a reasonable balance in terms of gender and at least five participants who were in middle or senior management positions (and who were therefore capable of translating their workshop experiences into workplace action). While some workshops were requested within organizational units (and were therefore seen as part of a larger team-building effort), others straddled faculty/administration lines. The composition of the Khuluma workshops thus confronted the two dominant fault lines evidenced in the 2003 and 2007 Institutional Climate Surveys: the racial divide, and that which separated administrative and professional work on the one hand from academic work on the other.

Each Khuluma workshop is held off-campus, at a venue that allows for easy interaction either as a plenary session or in smaller groups. The first day starts with introductions, in which the participants identify their position within the university’s organizational structure of the university. Each is then asked to describe a person or an event that particularly influenced their thinking about race and racism. The facilitators detail the structure of the workshop, its purpose, expectations and terms of participation, including guarantees of confidentiality and the aim of creating a “safe space,” in which freedom of expression is possible. In the first exercise, participants recall and analyze a personal experience in which they were subject to discrimination and then describe a second situation in which they were the one doing the discriminating. The objective of this first day is to identify the “ideology of superiority” and understand how it functions in the ways in which we make choices as individuals.

The second day opens with an open reflection on the workshop so far, in which both positive and negative points of view are heard. Participants are then divided into a white group and a black

group, which are sent to separate rooms. The groups are asked to identify and discuss the ways in which white people develop and apply negative stereotypes of black people. They then reconvene in plenary session to summarize and compare the results of their discussions. This leads into discussion about the results of this exercise, and its justification as part of the workshop. Here, the objective is to shift attention to the consequences of our actions on others, the victims of discrimination.

The third day again opens with a retrospective evaluation of the previous day's work, before moving on to assess the relationship between one's individual experience and role within the university. How does institutional culture play a role in sustaining the ideology of superiority? The workshop ends with comments and reflections on institutional change.

Twenty-seven Khuluma workshops had been held by the end of 2007, totaling 626 participants, of whom 31% were faculty and 69% administrative, professional and support staff. Among faculty participants, the highest proportional attendance was from law, the health sciences, commerce and engineering. Administrative, professional and support department participation was variable, and tended to depend on whether the opportunity for participation was created by departmental leadership; in some departments, all staff attended workshops.

Evaluation

While the challenges of institutional transformation in South Africa are well known, Khuluma took participants into uncharted territory. ProCorp's challenge to the ideology of superiority had been well-tested in other settings, and in early pilots at UCT; but there was no precedent for an intervention on this scale in a South African university. Consequently, we decided to commission an independent evaluation of the program's effectiveness as it was rolled out. An ethnographic approach allowed us to consider multiple perspectives: that of the university management launching the Khuluma, of participants' perceptions and experiences, and of their overarching observations about the program. UCT's Department of Social Anthropology was commissioned to carry out the study.¹¹

More than 90% of the Khuluma participants polled were positive about the experience.¹² Participants had been prepared to invest considerable trust and emotional energy in the process, despite the fact that the experience could often be personally upsetting and even traumatic. Many respondents felt that participation should be compulsory for all university staff. The evaluation report summarized this investment as a “hunger” for the opportunity to speak out about what was so often left unsaid in the workplace.

Individual perceptions of the program’s benefit depended in part on the respondent’s work circumstances. Thus, for one participant:

I went into this thing with the view that I’m not... in any sense consciously racist in any sense. I don’t make those kinds of pre-judgements. But the simple fact is I do, because of the upbringing and that kind of thing. I would like to think that it never gets to the stage where it would be overt, but I can’t ignore the fact that sub-consciously it’s going to be there.

While for another:

I don’t need a sensitised agenda. I’m fully aware of the race and gender issues and all the ‘isms’ that there are around, and I don’t need to spend two days going through that process. So for me there was nothing constructive.

The evaluators concluded that the experience changed a number of participants’ views, and altered their behavior in small but significant ways. Almost everyone who commented on Khuluma saw the program as having improved their relationships with their professional colleagues. Greeting, and being greeted, was often commented on:

You know, you always see them storming past... one guy, I never used to greet. Now I would go out of my way and say “HELLO! How are you?” you know, that person will turn around and the greeting you get back is so

amazing. Whether he's doing it from the heart, that's his baby. But it made me feel good.

That white manager upstairs who never looked at me before in the parking lot now greets me.

These and similar small changes are significant interventions in the daily institutional culture. One participant commented to the evaluation team on the “internal conversations” she has with herself about her white colleagues. While she was confident in her identity as a black Muslim woman, the Khuluma experience made her aware that she judged people in ways that she would not have wanted to be judged herself.

This personal framing of transformation hints at the possibility of lasting change. Consider, for example, this participant recalling their experience as a victim of racial discrimination:

You don't realise what you actually, how you were affected; how deep it runs. You think it's all in the past, but it's out there. It just needed that trigger to surface it again. But I think it did me some good. You don't forget things like that. They're still there. But I can manage it.

At the same time, though, the experience of the Khuluma workshops was unsettling for some participants, who found what the evaluation termed “conceptual assaults to personal identity” threatening and unsettling in a way that could not be brought to closure within a three day workshop format. This is in itself not surprising—it would be superficial to assume that internalized ideologies of inferiority or superiority could be washed away in three days of talk. A few respondents— university staff who are not South African—felt a strong sense of xenophobia. And some younger staff members, who had joined the workforce after the end of legislated segregation, felt that the program's emphasis on the past was irrelevant. The breadth of responses, negative as well as unambiguously positive, raise questions about the connection between an intervention such as Khuluma and institutional mechanisms for counseling and personal support. Should a program such as this be part of a wider network of continuing support for members of the university community?

Participants also asserted the importance of momentum. Individuals could feel that they had benefited personally, while simultaneously expressing frustration at not seeing individual awareness matched by institutional transformation:

It's bigger than the individual, but it's also bigger than the department.

Responsibility is personal, departmental, and across the whole university.

There is still nowhere you can go to, to voice your opinion. Like we did in the last general meeting, we put up a suggestion box. But there is no person, say you had a problem, that you can actually go to and talk, who will handle these problems. So that support is not there as far as transformation goes.

In the words of the evaluation report

it seems that informants feel that Khuluma did “transform” them: but that it is left at the level of the individual, or small groups of individuals and, because it is not taken further, it cannot begin to “transform” UCT. Thus, though participants will mention how relationships at work may have changed after the workshop, there is a sense that it needs to be much larger than this: that Khuluma should be a doorway of sorts to a shift in UCT’s institutional culture, and that this is not yet happening.

Looking Forward

It is reasonable to claim that UCT’s Khuluma program has helped answer the challenge posed by the 1997 White Paper , which encouraged universities to “contribute to the socialization of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens,” and to “help lay the foundations of a critical civil society, with a culture of public debate and tolerance which accommodates differences and competing interests.” As we know from the surveys of institutional climate, the university will not be able to generate social benefits to its fullest capacity unless the question of racial division is addressed. Khuluma has provided a structured opportunity for people to talk about these issues.

The Khuluma evaluation describes this opportunity as “a psychotherapeutic assumption of an intermediary zone where recovery, healing, rebuilding and re-empowerment can occur.” The evaluation report sees this as story-telling in the tradition of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and similar encounter group activities:

story-telling is posited to play an important role in restoring the victim to his/her status as a social person, helping people find empowering themes or “plots” in their own lives. Thus, the speaking self equates with the healed self.... Almost without exception Khuluma participants described listening to the stories of others as pivotal to the success of Khuluma.

Story-telling, as well as everyday interactions such as forms of greeting, recognition of competence and ability, are good examples of the saliency of what James Scott calls the “everyday transcripts” in which culture is written. The reflections of Khuluma participants show how these everyday experiences come together to constitute institutional university culture. We must appreciate their importance, and the ways in which the past shapes their present manifestations if we are to make the most of opportunities for meaningful change.

The Khuluma program is distinguished from both the IBM model and the Intergroup Dialogue approach described by Gurin, Nagda and Campanella in this volume by its focus on critiquing the assumption of white superiority, rather than on the values of diversity and inclusion. This difference is seen at its sharpest in Day Two of the Khuluma model when, in an environment that simulates forced racial segregation, all participants are asked to recall the ways in which those assumptions of white superiority work as a mechanism of oppression. In this, Khuluma breaks decisively with what in South Africa would be termed the “Rainbow Nation” tradition—encounter sessions that encourage whites to value the culture of those who are not white. By developing a critique of “whiteness,” Khuluma shifts what Zimitri Erasmus in this volume calls the burden of “race work.” We see this as a key distinction, with considerable potential for future transformative efforts in universities and other institutions.

This approach, however, also comes with a potentially-fatal weakness: a tendency to assume that the job is done once everyone has participated in the workshops. The challenge for a South African university, and also perhaps for an American university promoting the benefits of inter-group dialogue models is: what next? Thus, Khuluma participants express what at first appears to be a contradiction: a sense of personal achievement in liberating one's self-awareness, combined with a sense of frustration—edging towards anger—that the university as an institution is not keeping pace with the demand for change. Further strengthening of interventions such as Khuluma will show that, rather than being a contradiction, this dual sentiment is a logical and natural sign of the need for further work, such as that described in this chapter, coupled with a strategic assessment of the objectives of the university as a whole—with the way in which it is positioned as a public institution contributing to progressive change. Getting comprehensive, “joined-up” policies such as these into place will be one of the great challenges of the next twenty-five years.

¹ Scott.

² White Paper 1997

³ Transformation web address

⁴ Reference to two institutional climate surveys

⁵ 2007 Employment Equity Report

⁶ Nazeema Mohamed report on 2003 institutional climate survey

⁷ Thomas, 2004.

⁸ Acknowledge role of Jane Bennett and the AGI

⁹ Ashok Ohri reference.

¹⁰ ProCorp was founded in South Africa in 1997 by Margaret Legum, political economist and change activist. The approach has been further developed by social psychologist Dorian Aiken.

¹¹ Helen Macdonald, Monwabisi Gebhuza, Sarah Bologna and Shannon Morreira, “Feeding Hungry Souls: an ethnographic study of a climate intervention strategy at UCT”. University of Cape Town, Department of Social Anthropology, 2007.

¹² The evaluation was based on documentary sources and analysis of 47 interviews, two focus groups and 24 email responses. 66 out of 71 (93%) informants were positive about their experiences of the Khuluma workshops, 2 undecided and 3 extremely negative to the point they would not recommend the workshop to another person.