



Hi, My Name is Clueless. Another Example of Class Privilege

By Victor Santana-Melgoza

I had a conversation with a friend of mine over dinner recently about a fairly innocuous topic, introductions. Earlier in the day, I had introduced her to another friend of about how mine. We talked and where I had learned that skill, and I shared with her that it was part of my upbringing. Different "rules" of etiquette were regularly brought up in the house, always couched as good manners. We talked further about our childhood, and found out some key differences, much of which was surrounded by class identity.

As we talked and shared our stories, it occurred to me how little I knew about other class cultures, and how much I had a lack of consciousness about this identity. While I have conversations about privilege frequently, here was something that hit me in the face, and was caught off-guard by my own lack of knowledge. I have spent most of my time concentrating on areas in which I have subordinated identities (my race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and dis(ability) status).

The implications for this lack of consciousness can impact our ability to create community. Recognizing my own privilege, I see where there is a void in understanding, a couple of things can happen. Either a person can create a reality for others (as in my case, I created the reality that everyone is taught the "rules" of introduction). Or a person can fill in the realities with messages and meanings that may not be accurate (e.g., the person doesn't care enough). Either way, this area where we lack consciousness has the potential to create a distance at best, and at worst can further our own biases about communities we have little knowledge about.

The next question I asked myself was how I raise my awareness in areas to which I have not paid attention. I don't know if I have arrived at an answer yet, but in wrestling with the question, I have come to three new understanding.

1. Name it. When I first became aware of this area where I lacked consciousness, I was able to recognize where I had limited knowledge, and called it out. There was a sense of ownership I took in my own ignorance, and then a level of accountability to do something about it.

2. Continue to learn and seek out information. I seek out individual stories from blogs, documentaries, books, etc. I then pay attention to the stories shared by the people around me. It's amazing what can happen when we just listen and let people speak.

3. Pay attention to roadblocks. I recognize I can sometimes stop listening to someone's truth and invalidate their experience in my head for any number of reasons. I also try to gain a better understanding in areas that I may not have passion around, because that's where I know I probably have privilege and thus unconsciousness.

None of this is revolutionary, but more of a continued reminder of the commitment needed when having these conversations. I am also reminded of times when people point out areas where I have

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low levels of awareness and knowledge. When someone is frustrated at yet another incident where someone's privilege is taking over, I must stay in it, pay attention and try to learn something, even if his or her feedback is difficult for me to hear.

As we recognize the different areas where we lack consciousness, I am reminded of Peggy McIntosh's article, "Unpacking the White Knapsack" in how recognizing these areas make us newly accountable. I can no longer plead ignorant when someone has shared their truth, and it is my responsibility to help create change, in a way that honors others' experiences.

I feel a little bit like a juggler sometimes in negotiating the different social identities where I have both dominant and subordinated identities. While my personal energy leads me to focus on areas where I may not feel as part of the majority, I also need to give energy and focus to areas in my life where I don't have to negotiate as much... and I am grateful that I even get to recognize the juggling I do.

About the author:

Victor Santana-Melgoza has worked in the field of diversity and social justice for more than 10 years. He began his career in Student Affairs at Oregon State University where he oversaw several diversity related programs which included running a diversity peer educator program, and several social justice themed retreats and workshops. He currently serves as the Associate Director for Multicultural Affairs at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. To bring Victor to your campus to train your staff and students you may visit him at www.DiversityTalks.com.



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