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### Listening with Raw Openness

Listening is a crucial yet too often overlooked element in effective discussions and other forms of dialogue. The following suggestions can enhance many types of discussions, ranging from conversations among family and friends to discussions among co-workers, clients, students, and so on. I describe this process as “listening with raw openness”—a type of deep, transformative listening which requires the willingness to be open-minded, vulnerable, self-reflective, and willing to change. Here are some actions I've found useful in my attempts to create environments conducive to this potentially transformative listening process.

#### **Propose a set of shared presuppositions. Here are the presuppositions I present to my students:**

- *Social injustice exists.* People are not treated equitably. We live in an unjust society and an unfair world; the remarkable promises of democracy have yet to be fulfilled. Oppression (racism, classism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, etc.) exists on multiple seen and unseen levels.
- *Our educations have been biased.* The eurocentric educational systems, media outlets, and other institutions omit and distort information about our own groups and others. These hidden mechanisms sustain oppression, including an often invisible and normative ‘white’ supremacy. This ‘white’ supremacist thinking has affected all of us in various ways; we all have “blank spots,” desconocimientos (Anzaldúa), and so forth.
- *Blame is not useful, but accountability is.* It's not productive to blame ourselves and/or others for the misinformation we have learned in the past or for ways we have benefitted and continue benefitting from these unjust social systems. However, once we have been exposed to more accurate information, we are accountable! We should work to do something with this information--perhaps by working towards a more just future.
- *“We are related to all that lives”.* We are interconnected and interdependent in multiple ways, including economically, ecologically, linguistically, socially, spiritually.
- *Categories and labels shape our perception.* Categories and labels, although often necessary and sometimes useful, can prevent us from recognizing our interconnectedness with others. Categories can (a) distort our perceptions; (b) create arbitrary divisions among us; (c) support an oppositional “us-against-them” mentality that prevents us from recognizing potential commonalities; and (d) reinforce the unjust status quo. Relatedly, identity categories based on inflexible labels establish and police boundaries--boundaries that shut us in with those we've deemed “like” “us” and boundaries that shut us out from those whom we assume to be different.
- *The people in our conversation space have a basic goodness.* People (both the groups we study and class members) generally endeavor to do the best they can. We will all make mistakes, despite our best intentions. The point is to learn from our errors. In order to learn from our errors, we must be willing to listen and challenge ourselves.

**Respect each speaker's "complex personhood"** (Cervenak et. al.). People can be surprisingly complicated and complex; they exceed any judgment or label we might impose based on their appearance, their attire, their previous comments, or what others might have said about them. As we listen with raw openness, we remind ourselves that each person we encounter has a specific, highly intricate history, an upbringing and life experiences which we cannot fully know. We don't know the forces that shaped her; at best, we can only partially ascertain her intentions and desires. *Our understanding is always partial and incomplete.*

**Ask for clarification.** Before we respond, we should clarify the speaker's message, to make sure that we've understood as fully as possible what s/he's saying. Asking for clarification crucial when we have strong negative reactions to something that's been said.

**Take frequent pauses and be willing to *not* talk.** Sometimes it's best simply to listen, and not respond verbally (especially if those responses would involve offering solutions, drawing analogies with our own experiences or those of others, or speaking without first self-reflecting).

**Challenge the ideas, not the speakers.** We can respectfully, but forthrightly, challenge desconocimientos, misunderstandings, and expressions of falsehoods and stereotypes about our own groups and other groups. When doing so, it is vital that we challenge the stereotypes/racism/ideologies/etc.—not the speaker herself.

**Open yourself to others' perspectives, acknowledge the possibility of error, be flexible enough to change.** If we enter into a conversation with the conviction that we already have a full grasp of the situation, we have shut ourselves off from possible growth.

#### Sources

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