

An experience in relatedness, identity, power and reference systems

Sunita Ramjee

"While we will not forget the brutality of apartheid, we will not want Robben Island to be a monument to our hardship and suffering. We would want Robben Island to be a monument... reflecting the triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil."

Ahamed Kathrada

Entranced by the Robben Island and its history of abuse and oppression, as well as a symbol of hope and freedom, I was well aware of the challenges that lay ahead of me as I boarded the ferry to begin a journey aimed at a deeper understanding of diversity dynamics. The realisation that I will be spending 6 days with 24 diverse individuals on the Robben Island... with no escape route was really exciting. To the person attending the Robben Island experience, "there is no better place and context on earth in which one could ascertain and gain the skills to understand the core concepts of diversity and its effects on humanity". The aim of the experience was to develop a deeper understanding of diversity and its dynamics; opportunity to learn about core concepts; and opportunity to learn about how we manage individuals and collective diversity and to deal with diversity appropriately.

To give one a brief idea of what the entire process entailed, we were divided into various types of groups – large, small, intergroup, processing, discussion and application groups. Each group served various purposes and functions. Methodologically, the Robben Island Experience is based on the Tavistock Group Relation's Conference. The programme consists of various events in different formats and focuses on experiential learning. Consultation to the "here and now" enhances the learning experience. The here and now is seen as a place of control, nothing can be done or controlled outside the boundaries of "here-and-now". An action research method based on examining experiences of what is going on as it happens.

Collectively, the consultants had the following roles in the programme:

- Firstly, they take responsibility and authority to provide boundary conditions - task, territory and time. This is done in such a way that all participants can engage with the primary task of the experience and the specific events.
- Secondly, they try, on the basis of their own experience and observations of the events, to offer a working hypothesis of what is happening in the here-and-now.
- Thirdly, they model sensitivity, awareness and the reflection of their experience to the group.

DIVERSITY is one of the most thought-provoking aspects of my profession that I have ever encountered. It is deemed to touch people's emotions, values, beliefs and ultimately their behaviour. It asks people to question, interrogate and adjust their behaviour accordingly. I have attended many seminars, workshops, conferences, read many books and texts by remarkable authors. However, it is safe to say I occasionally come away craving for something more. In many instances my disillusionment mirrors not the meagreness of these conferences, but the extent and biases of my own queries, prejudices and assumed impenetrable behaviour. I have come to realise that the questions triggered by Diversity exist at the intersection of our work lives and the rest of

our lives, the workplace, the wider society, our national identity and our global citizenship. They go to the heart of some of the most cherished assumptions and perceptions about ourselves. PAINFULLY, they point out seemingly ambiguity and contradiction in our assumptions and perceptions. The battles and challenges that I am faced with, is what to do with my own ladder of inferences and behaviour.

There is so much about our past that we take for granted. To openly discuss emotions in a manner in which we have (Tavistock Approach) has been genuinely energizing, but extremely petrifying at times. Concepts, feelings, values, expectations, biases, prejudices etc, were scrutinised, analysed and at times criticised. Emotions were exceptionally high and the topics were really sensitive and explosive. Some of the issues discussed were:

- How Whites perceive Blacks and vice versa
- The "dogs" episode (police dogs attacking human beings)
- Views and perceptions of those who went into exiles
- The necklacing episodes
- How Coloured and Indians rode the privilege wagons during the tripartite era
- How people were discriminated and victims of the apartheid struggle
- Affirmative action and reverse discrimination
- Religious and tribal differences
- The term "African" (debate of who is classified as African)
- Understanding, acceptance and forgiveness
- And many other sensitive issues

On the personal front, I felt as if my whole being was pulled apart, and put back again with a few pieces still missing. I was accused, challenged and confronted on various aspects. Some individuals strongly believed that I was going to go to Hell for not being a Christian. Blacks saw me as a coconut – black on the outside and white on the inside. Whites saw me as pap and curry - apparently pap and curry goes well together..... Dealing with all these issues was not effortless as one realises that you are representing an entire race group (with their history!!!!). It did not make a difference what you, your family and friends done during the struggle. The process of looking head on at what you represent to other people, and what you think you know of yourself, can only be described as painful, involving much introspection and reflection. What I left the Island with is, "an enduring vocation to continuously be conscious of myself (and my biases) and of others and what they bring with them."

The Robben Island Diversity Experience is a revolutionary event in my life. It was a indication of light and hope for better things to come in SA. It is incredible to realise that the "island" will never leave me, but I can continue to live meaningfully in our diverse world when I open myself up for other interpretations. In other words, "does trust mean anything if I can't find or invoke that in people different from me".

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