



Black, Brown, and Beyond

Grappling with the Stereotypes that Divide

New America Media, News Feature, Khalil Abdullah, Posted: Feb 14, 2007

WASHINGTON - In late January, a Korean American woman wondered out loud where Asian Americans fit into a workshop's "Black, Brown, and Beyond" ethnic categories.

"Are we brown?" she asked. "Beyond," the mostly Latino audience suggested good-naturedly. But her comments were telling. She said her family talks about brown people, and black people. "We talk about white people, too," she said, but the conversation about whites is different because that's "where we think the power is."

Power, Dushaw Hockett contended, is often at the root of the most divisive attitudes between ethnic communities. He said communities typically view inter-ethnic relationships "as a zero sum game," that if one group gains in power, the other must inevitably lose some portion of theirs.

Hockett, the workshop presenter and Community Organizer for the Center for Community Change, said he "has lived the life" of being the intermediary between black and brown when he worked in the streets of Brooklyn in the early 90s for then newly-elected Latina Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez (D-NY). He further honed his mediation skills at the King Center in Atlanta.

Hockett led his workshop group of community organizers through a model designed to encourage communities to recognize and confront ethnic stereotypes: why you so loud? Why don't you speak English? They're so lazy. The attendees, who had come from across the country to a meeting of the Fair Immigrant Reform Movement (FIRM) meeting in Washington, D.C., easily recognized the palette of bitter imagery.

A Latino organizer agreed that a zero-sum mindset has negatively affected the capacity for coalition building. He said he recalled when newspaper headlines trumpeted that Spanish-speaking Americans had become America's largest numerical majority, surpassing African Americans. Instead of the two communities embracing and saying, "Now, I have partner," he said they have allowed themselves to be pitted against each other.

Hockett said rivalry among ethnic groups is not a new occurrence in American history and that it's fairly predictable when there have been no formal mechanisms for dialogue. As immigrants settle into their new homeland, people who are unfamiliar with each other, who have had no prior relationship with each other, are experiencing a convergence "in the prisons, the schools, in the workplace, and in neighborhoods," Hockett said. It is too simplistic to only speak of tension without dissecting the day-to-day realities of individual lives and cultural mindsets; context is important. Equally simplistic, he said, is to talk about "a natural coalition" between black and brown, or to assume, on the other hand, that the real drivers of conflict are disagreements over technicalities like visas and work permits.

Yet, workplace competition often focuses a lens on how ethnic communities view each other. Hockett said that not understanding how the U.S. labor market functions contributes to divisiveness. Pointing to "The Job Ladder" graphic on the board at the front of the room, Hockett said, "Black and brown are crowding at the bottom of the ladder." In the graphic, the bottom rungs were broken. Here, Hockett said, is where the jobs tend to be unskilled or non-union, rarely having benefits or decent wages and whose working conditions may be unsafe. While acknowledging a range of factors – racism, poor education, lack of skills, illegal immigration status – that limit employment opportunities, he challenged the organizers to find ways to repair the bottom rungs so that members of their communities could ascend to good benefits, decent wages, and unionized workplaces.

Alicia Lepe, who had worked in the garment industry, took exception with an aspect of Hockett's characterization. Referring to the equipment used to manufacture clothing, "not everyone can run those machines," she said, "it takes skill." She said that the notion of skilled and unskilled classifications is more often a perception linked solely to the low wages a job may pay. Now an organizer for California Partnership, Lepe said she works on issues connected to poverty, like welfare and child care. She ceded Hockett's analysis as a useful framework, but said, outside the meeting, that the

labor movement has had real difficulties recognizing the contribution and leadership of women. She said she knew of women in one factory who chose to decertify from affiliation with a union representing garment workers precisely because of gender discrimination.

Lee Hitchens, the vice president of the Anti-Displacement Project in Springfield, MA, and one of the few African American organizers in the room, spoke to a different labor issue. He said that building contractors in western Massachusetts use unethical and illegal practices to drive down wages to exploit workers, especially immigrants. He explained how contractors submit bids listing how much they should earn for each occupational scale, but then pay the workers at a lower rate. Citing one example, Hitchens said his organization found a contractor receiving \$39 an hour for each carpenter on the job, but which actually paid out \$8 an hour to the men doing the work.

After a series of exercises about inter-ethnic dynamics, Hockett closed the session by suggesting practical methods of how to deal with black-brown biases, acknowledging also, the need to bring European Americans into the dialogue. Regardless of ethnicity, “How do we get the perpetrator’s story on the table?” Hockett asked, referring to those who knowingly discriminate and perpetuate negative stereotypes. Reconciliation, Hockett proposed, could be reached if perpetrators are provided guarantees of no punishment in exchange for truth-telling. This model, he said, has not only been used in South Africa, but in other communities, including one in North Carolina.

The audience appeared divided. Some appeared willing to consider the suggestion but others were leery: truth and reconciliation without punishment? One attendee shared a personal observation. He said he had assisted an attorney in South Africa during its Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings about crimes committed under apartheid. In his opinion, he thought “the exercise was tremendously divisive” and that the opportunity for those who had suffered to heal was minimal, precisely because “the perpetrators were unrepentant.”

Therein lays the problem, several attendees agreed. They said not all, black or brown, or for that matter, white or yellow, want to face their prejudices. Some want to think what they think of each other. Hockett held his ground. While admitting there will be those reluctant to confront their prejudices, Hockett said that organizers must carve out the space to allow communities to communicate and to interact. And, he added, organizers must confront their own demons. “Here is the issue,” he said later of inter-ethnic coalition building, “it’s a process. We [at CCC] have a model. There will be successes and failures. Everyone is looking for the single silver bullet to black-brown relations. There is none.”

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