



THE POLITICS OF “GOOD HAIR”

*Why understanding diverse cultures
is a workplace imperative.*

BY BRYANT ROLLINS & SHIRLEY STETSON

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**By Bryant Rollins and
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In our experience as consultants, we see – time and again – how the American workforce may speak the same language yet speak out of different worlds. Here is one example that has been replicated many times in many places: Two women (let’s call them Sarah and Barbara) were middle-aged African Americans from the Boston suburbs. They worked as administrative assistants in a large corporation located in downtown Boston. Sarah and Barbara were talking during the break in a seminar on cultural diversity sponsored by their company. Sarah was showing Barbara photographs of her five-year old grandson.

Barbara enthusiastically responded to the photos, “Oh what a beautiful child, so bright-eyed and he has good hair too!”

A white woman and man (Mary and John) also from suburban

Boston, and also seminar participants, stood nearby. Overhearing Barbara’s remark, they exchanged a puzzled look. Later, as the seminar reconvened, Mary repeated the conversation she and John had heard.

“What in the world is *good hair*?” Mary puzzled.

Cultural Significance of Hair

In the next 2 1/2 hours there was an intense and emotional conversation sparked by Mary’s innocent question. The group of twenty seminar participants, including men and women, whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians listened intently as blacks attempted to explain the significance – to them - of hair texture issues. Frustration and anger grew on all sides as whites, baffled by it all, insisted that it was an innocuous preoccupation not worth discussing.

Mary exclaimed, “Some of us have straight hair that we perm, and some of us have curly hair that we get straightened. So what? In the end, we’re all the same whether black, white, green, or purple. Aren’t we all the same?”

Sarah sighed, saying that she often finds herself in the wearying position of educating whites about ordinary black life. Then she explained that “good hair” is hair that is straight and European in appearance. “Bad hair” is hair



that is African, nappy, kinky. The desire to fit into the dominant culture had resulted, in her life and that of her family and friends, in attributing value to hair texture.

Bridging the Racial Divide

We often hear about a racial divide; the interchange above is a clear example. As occurs so often in our seminars, anger and resentment were produced not by a major racial incident of blatant bigotry, but because of verbal expressions reflecting a type of non-malignant *petit*-ignorance so prevalent in our culture. We have found this derives from a lack of interaction and real, authentic communication across racial lines.

Although whites and people of color work together in most 21st century organizations, there is an amazing superficiality in those workplace relationships. Whites tend to assume that their relationships with people of color are authentic. However, people of color, African Americans in particular, experience their workplace relationships as mostly superficial. In their experience, most whites at work are acutely unaware of the day-to-day, ordinary preoccupations of the private lives of African Americans, Asians, and Hispanics.

The hair texture issue at the beginning of this article is a prime example of the superficiality

extending into many areas of the cultural life of non-Europeans. Whether it is the clothes they wear, the music they prefer, the style of worship in their church, synagogue, temple or mosque, the language they use with family and friends, or the way they experience the world, non-Europeans find that most work colleagues are *clueless*, to use popular terminology. This realization, which bubbled up in the Boston seminar mentioned earlier, happens with increasing frequency.

In that seminar the discussion grew in intensity, and it grew in focus, from frustration and misunderstanding to mutual interest, to caring and understanding, and finally to non-judgmental appreciation of the differences that exist across cultural lines. Sarah spoke of her growing up years when her hair was straightened with a hot comb every Saturday night. She spoke of the scars the hot comb had left on her neck and her refusal to take swimming lessons for fear that her hair would “go back” when wet. She spoke of her mother’s preference for her younger sister who had “good hair” and how much that had hurt her as a child.

Other black seminar participants told of their experiences in a culture that values European-style beauty and hair. Barbara told of her 1960’s Afro hairstyle, grown during the “Black is Beautiful” decade. For her, hair



became a political statement as she decided to stop straightening her hair and grow an Afro. A black man in the seminar talked about going to bed every night from age 7 to age 13 with a stocking cap on his head so his hair would not look “nappy” (i.e. African) when he went to school.

In a nation where the standards of beauty, acceptance, and success are essentially European, the deep cultural messages persist for a population of dark-skinned people who are still working their way out of oppression. As dark and light face each other in the workplace, their daily interactions represent far different experiences.

Surprised and Perplexed

The whites participating in the Boston seminar, as in virtually all our seminars, were surprised and perplexed to learn of the good hair/bad hair phenomenon in African American culture. So were the Asians and Hispanics. The blacks were equally stunned to find that cultural material so basic to them was foreign to others.

Lest this example become stuck in history, consider current issues with black hair. African American pro basketball players frequently shave their heads. Others have adopted African hairstyles with corn rows, braids and dreadlocks. This is an expression of cultural heritage that perplexes many

whites. Might it also be a way to resolve psychological issues around hair texture that are centuries old? Black woman still manipulate their hair into extreme styles and use dangerous chemical relaxers (i.e. straighteners) to ease unwanted non-European kink. Yet the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has warned that such strong chemicals may cause hair loss, skin irritation, discolored hair, chemical burns, and exacerbation of existing skin problems. A recent perusal of Web sites included an Answer section in which a black female respondent suggested a veritable arsenal of hair care products including not only the usual shampoo and conditioner, but also a protein/moisture deep conditioning treatment, a leave-in conditioner, an oil moisturizer, and hair oil. All this to have “good hair” like a European instead of an African!

Such seemingly simple issues can cause a racial and cultural divide in the workplace. To bridge this divide, we focus on a strategy currently called “valuing diversity.” This is easier said than done. Racial and other prejudices run so deep in the human psyche that only equally deep methods will succeed. Those methods must include a basic comprehension of prejudice and why an issue such as hair texture must be a part of the equation.



The Psychology of Prejudice

Modern explanations of the psychology of racial prejudice go back to the mid 1900's when Drs. Mamie and Kenneth Clark, Gordon Allport, Thomas Pettigrew, Allison Davis and other sociologists and psychologists conducted research that established the conditions under which religious, racial, national bigotry and prejudice are formed. The five "steps" in the process of prejudice-formation are:

The Presence of A Difference – physical or otherwise, and one that is easily recognized; the more visible the "difference" the more intense and long-lasting the prejudice is likely to be. Since *difference* is a fundamental reality in human life, the likelihood of prejudicial thinking is manifest.

A Negative Judgment about that difference, usually defining the difference as indicative of an inferior person or group, attributing less value or negative traits to the group or person.

The Power to impose an inferior social, economic, or political status on those who are different and therefore inferior, less valuable or hold negative traits.

The Stereotype is the primary vehicle for developing and sustaining prejudicial thinking. Negative characteristics are applied to members of the "different" group; any behavior by a group member that can be perceived as negative becomes

an attributable characteristic of the group.

The Power of the

Subconscious – the fact (well established in psychology) that approximately 70% of our thought processes operate outside of our consciousness means that prejudicial beliefs operate functions in unconscious or subconscious areas. Under normal circumstances, without significant interventions, we simply cannot be aware of our prejudices. This implies a need for training and other processes capable of exploring, revealing and discovering deeply subconscious processes.

Most African Americans are "different" of course from their work colleagues of European descent. African Americans have different skin color, facial features, and – yes – hair texture. Most African American women straighten their hair; most African American men wear styles acceptable in a culture dominated by European values and aesthetics. It is difficult of course to change one's skin color, even though some African Americans still use skin lighteners or have laser treatments (Michael Jackson is an example). Changing facial features through plastic surgery has become a more available option but it is expensive, painful, and risky. But hair, that is something entirely different.



Assimilation and difference

In fact, in the last 150 years or so as they have moved out of slavery and accepted the challenge of assimilation, African Americans have gone to extremes to manage this obvious source of difference. They have had their hair “processed,” “conked,” straightened, pressed and “jerry-curled.” They have worn it in a “do” with a “do rag,” worn it in a mushroom, in corn rows, in braids, as a silhouette, an Afro, and in dreadlocks. Or they have shaved it off entirely. This is more than an issue of style or even of culture. Ultimately all issues which affect numbers of people are translatable into political issues.

The whites who were surprised at the intensity of their black colleagues during the diversity seminar described at the beginning of this article are typical. American life has become so balkanized across racial lines that most whites know very little of the lives of African Americans at the personal, family, and cultural levels. But without an awareness of such basic information, stemming from superficial relationships, most whites are left with three possible responses: 1) a dangerously innocent ignorance that allows whites to pretend cultural differences do not exist; 2) a naïve denial about the depth or importance of the cultural

differences that exist in the American workplace that allows whites to deny differences; 3) a set of unbounded, dangerous stereotypes sustained through a kind of conscious malevolence. Blacks, on the other hand, frequently collude by contributing to the superficiality, holding onto cultural secrets, poorly managing anger when questions are asked and comments are made, or establishing forms of self-isolation by eating together in the lunchroom and declining invitations for social interaction.

A National Challenge

Our country has become increasingly diverse, yet the racial/cultural segregation of our contemporary culture leaves people, primarily whites, unaware of the human details of other people’s lives. Only deep and authentic contact across cultural and racial lines can heal the gaping hole of ignorance that exists in our workplaces and our communities. We are speaking of contact that reinforces the richness of cultural contributions across the spectrum, acknowledges human diversity and human oneness, and allows people to communicate openly along racial and gender lines.

The good hair/bad hair phenomenon is a classic example of American racism in which blacks and whites innocently collude in its continuance. Any process that does not begin with a deep understanding of issues like the



what, the how, and the why – is doomed to fail.

At the community level, we need a Master Plan for human renewal. This would be a major collaboration involving all segments of a city's life as people come together to begin slow and difficult communication and understanding. Facile short term fixes that focus strictly on political or economic solutions have not worked and will not work because the problems are not strictly economic or political; they are first cultural and racial. They are ultimately spiritual. The most effective diversity work takes the dialogue to the level of the human spirit, where we all can meet in safety and in love. Many private sector companies are moving forward with this work. Wachovia, Verizon, Shell Oil, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Florida are but a few who are creating models for cross-cultural communication and

understanding where MountainTop Institute has worked.

Extending those models to other companies and to local governments and non-profits is simply a question of vision and commitment. Local governments, particularly those that sustain a diverse population or whose economic development efforts will result in a diverse workforce, will want to pursue a plan for cultural and racial healing and mutual understanding. We argue that only communication along our deep divisions can truly bring us together. The Jacksonville Regional Chamber of Commerce has developed a cutting-edge model in the area of economic development / entrepreneurship.

Creating New Models

In our work with the nonprofit community, especially in Jacksonville, FL, we are creating new models for effective work on diversity and inclusion.

MountainTop Institute

is a clinic for the engagement of human differences. We conduct training, consulting and other activities designed to transform individuals, teams and groups, organizations, and communities.

Our Mission is to build a national center for human interactions that will be a safe space for people and institutions to successfully engage human difference through research, development, teaching, training and direct consulting services.

Research into human attitudes, prejudices and behaviors arising from human difference.

Development of best practices to engage human difference.

Teaching of academic researchers and professional practitioners of the art and science of human conciliation.

Training through experiential methods that reduce or eliminate cultural barriers and promote synergies leading to greater trust, communication, productivity and efficiency.



The Authors

Shirley Stetson is Vice President of OD with MountainTop Institute. She has worked in consulting and training on issues of workforce diversity and inclusion for 22 years. She is a former manager and internal consultant with a Fortune 500 company. She specializes on issues of women's leadership and management development.

Bryant Rollins is President/CEO of MountainTop Institute. He has worked in consulting and training on issues of workforce diversity and inclusion for 35 years. He is a former Editor with The New York Times, and former columnist with The Boston Globe.

MountainTop Institute
100 Festival Park Ave.
Jacksonville, FL 32202
Phone: 904-598-0062
Fax: 904-598-0052
E-mail: [transformation@
Mountaintopinstitute.org](mailto:transformation@Mountaintopinstitute.org)