

Emotional Intelligence and Racial Conflict

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The hardest victory is over self.
Aristotle.

The learning of emotional capacity begins at birth.¹

Racism is a negative value that still persists in the mindset of a large number of Cubans. While it is not officially institutionalized, as it was at one time in the United States or South Africa, racism in Cuba is somewhat institutionalized via cultural practices and, indirectly, through certain laws. A comparison of Articles 72 and 74 of the Cuban Penal Code, and an analysis of the cultural connotations of the Constitution's Article 5, reveals some surprises, when seen in a racialized context. My focus, however, is more on mindsets. As Gustavo Urrutia used to say, the problem of racism has more to do with what people think and not on what they feel. My goal is to combat racism by discussing it within the context of emotional intelligence, a relative-

ly new and underdeveloped field for Cubans or among Cuban psychologists around the island. Nonetheless, I feel it can be crucial for a promising struggle against racism. I have even suggested to the Cuban Citizens' Committee that it adopt just such a program in its dealing with different Cuban communities.

Actually, if my reader is one of those people who has allowed him or herself to be moved by first impulses, then it is time for you to begin to rethink what you are doing, and use your emotional intelligence, so this does not happen. This is important for all of us, but much more so for black men and women who encounter racism.

All first impulses stem from one's self esteem. To put it plainly, first impulses come

from the heart, not from the head. A rational mind invests more time than an emotional mind to register and respond to a particular situation. Thus, even if we do not know the specific emotion a particular thought will trigger, we can indeed decide what it is we think will about it.

If we are able to choose what to think about, we alone are also responsible for nurturing, starving, or even destroying our own thoughts. This is why it is important for black men and women to consider challenging racism with positive thoughts: optimism, perseverance and, significantly, self-assurance. As a response to an attack, this requires distance and silence as manifestations of dignity, as well as appropriate metalinguistic behavior before one's adversary.

Naturally, self-assurance begins in the cradle, with a child being able to identify with him or herself, and be happy, which are crucial for everyone's self-confidence. We must understand that "a child who is unhappy with him or herself has little chance of being able to take advantage of what the world offers him or her."²

The keystone to emotional intelligence is contained in the teachings of an ancient philosopher, Socrates, who said: "Know thyself." Psychologically, this means that one must know one's own feelings the moment they occur.

The following is a review of emotional intelligence's characteristics contrasted with the real or assumed repertory of attitudes that are attributed to Cuban blacks. First, we must be capable of motivating ourselves, which is to say that blacks cannot allow themselves to accept the supposed and assumed superiority of whites in certain kinds of work. Second, we must persevere in our efforts, despite possible frustrations.

How many times does a black person quit doing something just because someone else makes him see he is not sufficiently prepared for the task? Third, we must control our impulses. The violence with which black men and women react to humiliation only serves to fuel the centuries stereotypical view that they are good only for brute physical and mental work. Fourth, we must carefully choose the activities in which we engage, because the idea that blacks cannot advance economically because they are incapable of saving money stems from the false image of blacks as solely being into parties, erotic behavior, and lust. Fifth, we must control our behavior in public, because it is difficult to remain emotionally reposed when we go from laughter, on the one hand; to ire, when facing humiliation. We must face obstacles to our coexistence, or acceptance, or non-acceptance by others, in a poised manner. Sixth, and not too distant from the previous point, we must not let anguish interfere with our ability to rationalize. We should not let an accumulation of prejudices cause us to make unreasoned decisions. To conclude that all whites are the same when it comes to racism stems from anguish that is interfering in our rational judgment. Seventh, and last, we must empathize with and trust others. This may be the most difficult thing to achieve, but it is essential if we are to destroy reproduceable racist frameworks.

All of the above is much easier to theorize than it is to put into practice. This speaks to the importance of beginning to work with communities and schools, from the earliest age on. Notwithstanding, even a change in attitude at a mature age will it make possible for people to recover their emotional intelligence and combat racism with dignity and self-esteem. We must consider that emotional intelligence can be as if

not more decisive than intellectual intelligence itself.

In his book, *Frames of Mind*, psychologist Howard Gardner (School of Education, Harvard University) discusses different kinds of intelligence, among them two forms of “personal intelligence.” One is interpersonal intelligence (as in great therapist Carl Rogers or of world leader Martin Luther King, Jr.); the other is “interpsychic intelligence,” which ranges in manifestation from the brilliant intuition of Sigmund Freud to the inner satisfaction we feel when our lives are in harmony with our feelings.³ We should note that the ability to resolve conflicts, which is essential in responding to racist attitudes without provoking or fueling inappropriate violence, is among the most important of the skills found under the rubric of interpersonal intelligence (others include leadership, being able to make and keep friends, and an ability to analyze social situations). Gardner offers us a brief definition of interpersonal intelligence: “[It is] a correlative ability (turned inward). It is a capacity to form an accurate, veridical model of oneself and to be able to use that model to operate effectively in life.”⁴

Another crucial topic for the total comprehension and application of emotional intelligence is the need to have an “accurate and veridical image” [of oneself], which takes us directly to the basic issue of identity.

There are various terms, all of them with one, common Latin root (*identitas*, from *idem*, the same, identical, identification, identify, identity) that means two basic things: absolute equality or sameness: “this

is identical to that”; and a distinctiveness that presupposes consistence and continuity through time: “this is different from that.” Thus, the notion of identity establishes two possible comparative relationships between people or things: similarity and difference.⁵

In psychological terms, to have an identity is to be conscious of one’s self, and of the difference between one and others. This leads us to understand that one’s identity, that is, knowledge of oneself, has a powerful effect on intense negative feelings, and keeps them from holding us under their influence and allows one to free oneself from them.

People who are self-aware are those whose emotional clarity pervades every facet of his or her personality: autonomous people are sure of their own limits; psychologically sound people who tend to have a positive view of life; people who don’t obsess about things when they get to feeling depressed, which means they can snap out of it quickly. These are people who control their emotions.

Despite the obvious difference there is between knowing one’s feelings and attempting to transform them, what has become clear is that for all practical purposes both things go hand in hand, and that “becoming aware of a negative state of mind implies also attempting to get rid of it.”⁶

Blacks in Cuba’s neighborhoods need to develop their ability to once again face the emotional upheaval of their lives. In classical Greece, the term employed to describe this virtue was *sofrosyne*, which translates as “care and intelligence in governing one’s own life.” For their part, the Romans, as well as the early Christian church, called it temperance (restraint), which is nothing more than a control of excessive emotion.

The goal of temperance is not to repress emotions but to establish equilibri-

um, because every feeling has validity and its own value and meaning.⁷ Aristotle insisted that the purpose of this goal is to feel the proper emotion, a feeling in concert with the circumstances at hand. If we repress our emotions, this leads to weakening and apathy; an unbridled expression of our emotions could become pathological and manifest itself in serious depression, acute anxiety, uncontrolled anger, or manic behavior.

The key to maintaining our emotional wellbeing lies in checking troubling emotions. This does not mean that we will always be happy, but rather that we will always find a way to solve the problem, despite our sorrows, sufferings, hardships, obstacles, frustrations and other challenges. Thus, when a black man or woman feels rejected, unappreciated, discriminated against or of low self-esteem (the last of these manifests itself through violence), the best strategy is to learn how to calm one's self. Psychologists believe this to be essential.⁸

My psychological focus here should not be taken for a strictly psychological approach. Fundamentally, there are powerful sociological, cultural, and political factors at play in racism, so much so, that they may shape it even more than psychological ones. Notwithstanding, the goal of breaking down these factors requires a psychological effort to be able to easily undermine racism. Even if a smile can ameliorate many a difficult situation, emotional intelligence can dissipate more than prejudice, by demonstrating our maturity.

This approach is valid for anyone having to deal with highly complex social situations like the ones found in multicultural societies, in which the existence of racism is a given. The empowerment of citizens demands not only that black men and women be given political and legal power, but also

the kind that one gains over others if one exercises control over the most justified passions: this defines the nature of emotional intelligence.

Notes:

1- Goleman, Daniel. *Inteligencia Emocional*. (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 1999): 302.

2- Ibid, 113.

3- Ibid, 71.

4- Gardner, Howard. *Multiple Intelligences*. (New York: Basic Books, 2001): 9.

5- De la Torre Molina, Carolina. *Las identidades: una mirada desde la Psicología*. (La Habana: Editorial Ruth Casa-Instituto de Investigacion Cultural Juan Marinello, 2003): 53.

6- Goleman, Daniel. Op. Cit., 87.

7- Ibid, 100.

8- Ibid, 102.