

# ALBERTA CIVIL LIBERTIES RESEARCH CENTRE

## SELF-AWARENESS: A FIRST STEP TO INTERACTING EFFECTIVELY WITH CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

*You must be the change you wish to see in the world.*

Mahatma Gandhi

Living in the multicultural society that is Canada today means that people of diverse backgrounds must live and work together. Sometimes in spite of differences, people get along and sometimes they don't. Often the main reason that people do not get along is the "isms" between them. Racism is perhaps the most obvious and problematic "ism". It affects all of society. People who hate other people because of the colour of their skin cannot get along and cannot work well together. Many organizational policies state a zero tolerance for racism yet it continues to exist systemically. Like racism, - sexism, ageism, ableism, heterosexism, xenophobia and other forms of hatred can be subtle and difficult to recognize. We all face these "isms", in ourselves and from others. Therefore it becomes important to understand these "isms" and their potential impact on our work and other relationships.

The development of effective skills for working with cultural and racial differences begins with an understanding of what you as an individual bring to the working or other relationship. You need to be aware of those things in your own background which might help you to be successful and those things which might prevent your success. An effective intercultural communicator is self-aware and would capitalize on their strengths and find ways to minimize or eliminate their weaknesses.

In order to be self aware, you need to understand how you were socialized and what influences made you the person you are today. You need to know your cultural identity, your values and your beliefs, and you need to understand your assumptions and perceptions – how they are formed, how they influence who you are, and how and what you communicate.

### **Awareness of Socialization**

How were you socialized? What influenced you as you were growing up and what continues to influence you today? Typical influences include family, personal experiences, education, friends, the media, and critical incidents or events. The "Socialization and Ism Prism" will help you to better understand your socialization. We all have "isms" or biases in our belief systems. The Socialization and Ism Prism helps us to find out what they are and why we have them. It also helps us to isolate a bias, spread it out and look at its many facets. The SIP uses questions about how we have been socialized to show us the origins of our beliefs, attitudes and values.

If your life experiences include migration, immigration to another country with values, assumptions, worldviews, behaviours, languages, people of racial, cultural and religious backgrounds different to yours, another dimension of influence can be added.

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## THE SOCIALIZATION AND ISM PRISM

- **Family influences**
- **Personal experiences**
- **Educational experiences**
- **Peer influences**
- **Community influences**
- **Religion/Faith/Spiritual Influences**
- **Media influences**
- **Employment/Career**
- **Critical incidents**

The prism allows you to fully explore your biases, their sources, and to understand them. This is hard work, to look inside and to name what you find, especially when what you find may be ugly. However, it is critical to self-awareness to look inside deeply and honestly and to discover what attitudes you bring to your work.

Use the question: *How do I feel about .....*? to look at your life influences (this is the prism). What comes out the other side is how these influences have affected you.

**Question: *How do I feel about .....*?**

### **Family influences**

- What were my parents' attitudes towards.....?
- What about my other relatives' attitudes?
- What were my parents' or guardians' behaviours towards .....
- What were my other relatives' behaviours towards .....

### **Personal experiences**

- Did I know any ..... growing up?
- If so, when did I first encounter ..... growing up?
- Did I experience any negative views towards ..... growing up?
- Did I have any personal experiences + or - with ..... growing up?
- What rewards or disincentives did I receive for my behaviour towards.....?

### **Educational experiences**

- What did I learn in school about .....
- Did I experience teachers, materials, books with positive models of ..... ?
- What did our team names tell us about different groups?

### **Peer experiences**

- What were my friends' attitudes toward .....
- What did our play/games tell us about .....

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## Community experiences

- What diverse groups/individuals were in my community growing up?
- What jokes and stories were commonly told in my community? And about .....

## Religious/Faith/Spiritual Influences

- What did your own religion/faith/spirituality tell you about other religions/faiths?
- When in your life did you learn about or were you exposed to other faiths?
- What images did you see of major religious/faith/spiritual personages/icons?

## Media influences

- What roles/images did I see on TV or in books and magazines which influenced my perception of .....
- What books did I read growing up?
- What toys/costumes/music/advertising impacted me?
- What images did I see, and what did I hear/read about ..... on social media?

## Employment and Career

- What career models did I have growing up?
- How did my parents' or guardians' employment (or lack of employment) influence me?
- What jobs did I see ..... doing?

## Critical incidents

- What critical incidents happened during my life that might have affected or changed my perception of .....
- Might these incidents include experiences of relationships, travel, immigration, working overseas?

## Prism results

- And now, how do I view (what are my attitudes, opinions, beliefs, emotions) .....
- How do I behave towards .....
- What do I say about .....
- What do I **not** say about .....

## Prism Impact

- How does all of the above or how could all of the above impact my working effectively with colleagues, clients and others who are ...?
- What will I change/do differently in order to work effectively with colleagues, clients and others who are .....

Adapted with permission, by **P. Dos Ramos PhD**, from William Sonnenschein, *The Diversity Toolkit: How you can build and benefit from a diverse workforce*. Chicago, IL: Contemporary Books, 1999.