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*Every month **Attractors** shares tips and tools from human systems dynamics. In this month's edition, Glenda Eoyang reflects on*

RACISM

It would be more politically correct to talk about “diversity” or “bias” or some such, but I’m not going to pussy-foot around today. We’re talking about racism. Unfortunately, racism is an undeniable pattern in human systems. We might call it xenophobia or parochialism or prejudice or a hundred other names, but “racism” is the name that lays the pattern bare and makes us—of all genotypes—wince.

I am white. I am not frequently a victim of racism. Why do I wince? It is about fear. It is about patterns that were laid down in my psyche so long ago that I can’t distinguish them from reality. It is about playing a game with somebody else’s rules. It is about me and you meeting in a place that is dangerous and unpredictable. It is about an ever-present risk of hurting someone else or being hurt myself. It is about identity. It is about fundamental worldview and assumptions—assumptions rooted in patterns.

HSD provides theory and practice to see and influence patterns in human systems. We like to tackle the most wicked of issues because HSD opens opportunities for action where other approaches have failed. What does HSD have to say about racism and its effects on human systems?

In March I had a chance to explore the intersections between racism and HSD when I gave a keynote address for *Transforming Race: Crisis and Opportunity in the Age of Obama* at The Kirwan Institute of The Ohio State University. You can watch the video and leave comments at http://transforming-race.org/media/312_8amPlenary.mov, but here is the gist of the talk.

Human beings do three things really well. We perceive patterns; we replicate patterns; and we disrupt patterns. That’s what makes us poets, parents, leaders, lovers, politicians, engineers, and racists.

A pattern, in the world of HSD, consists of similarities, differences and relationships that have meaning across space and time. For example, my lover’s face is a pattern of expressions of subtle similarities, significant differences, and complex relationships that can hold enormous emotional meaning for me. I engage with a team as a pattern of people with similar goals, different areas of expertise, and ritualized relationships that lead to success or failure. My family, my organization, my community, my nation all embody patterns in their characteristic similarities, differences, relationships, and habitual meanings.

The particular patterns that influence my thoughts and actions emerge from my own history and the ways that I have learned to see and name my own reality. The patterns you see are different because your history and ways of seeing and knowing are shaped by your unique experiences in your unique community.

Because I am not always attentive, I may or may not be aware of patterns when I encounter them. If my friends accept a pattern as an undeniable reality, it may become invisible to me. If so, I can become an unconscious racist. I may also distort a pattern if I focus on imagined or irrelevant similarities, differences, or relationships. I may silently disagree with others about the primary pattern that emerges from a situation, or I may stubbornly proclaim a pattern unchanged, even when time and circumstance have transformed it into something entirely different. Unfortunately institutions frequently embed policies and processes that reinforce destructive patterns based on race and culture. As I reflect on my life experiences, I acknowledge times when I have ignored, distorted, or perpetuated patterns of bias and disrespect.

Whether or not we perceive patterns “truly,” we have the power to change them. No matter how locked-in a pattern may seem, it can be changed (for better or worse) in one of three ways:

1. Focus on more productive similarities.
2. Amplify more generative differences.
3. Establish new (or change old) relationships.

It really **is** that simple to transform a pattern and to reshape how we understand reality. But what can patterns teach us about racism?

I experience racism (as a perpetrator or a victim) as a pattern, in which the similarities, differences, and relationships carry a meaning of “other.” If I can *perceive* the pattern and my discomfort, I become free to make a choice. I can choose to *replicate* that pattern by reinforcing the similarities, differences, and relationships that characterize the “other” for me. Or I can make another choice. I can *disrupt* the pattern by shifting my attention to similarities that bind me to the other, differences that enrich my world, and relationships that feed our shared humanity.

I gave many examples and stories in the Kirwan talk, but I would like to share one with you here. In the presentation I used pictures of two women. One had dark skin, and the other had light skin. In the patterns I saw, the dark skinned woman was strong, forthright, brave, and self-possessed, while the light skinned one was weak, lost, frightened, and dependent. In the question period, I was asked why I had selected images that focused on the sexuality of the black and the contemplation of the white. I was surprised and embarrassed. I had moved into that dangerous place, broken another’s rules, stepped on a landmine, and hurt someone else. I immediately apologized for being insensitive to the ways the audience might perceive the patterns of those two pictures. Frankly, I had been so convinced of the pattern I saw that I had not even imagined another one until it was shown to me.

This story might spark some totally irrelevant questions: Who was right? Who was wrong? Who was the perpetrator of racism? Who was the victim of racism? Did I set this trap for myself, and if so, how?

These questions are irrelevant because they will not inform action. They will not help us increase our capacity to engage across the chasm between self and other. On the other hand, if we stay engaged and curious, we can ask questions that transform what we see and how we see.

The person who wondered about the pictures could have remained anonymous, but she chose not to. She approached me after my talk with another insightful question, “How could I have phrased my question in a different way, so that I could avoid causing you discomfort?” Now, that is a great question! I assured her that her courage in asking and generosity in listening to my response were much more important than the words she chose to frame her inquiry. **That** she asked and listened intently was more significant than **how** she asked.

Like this wonderful woman, we can challenge obvious patterns and ask questions that will make a difference:

- How can I reinforce similarities that bridge to the other?
- How can I see differences as another might see them?
- How can I be sure to establish a relationship with another that will allow her to ask the transforming question, even if it might embarrass her or me?
- How can I choose to break patterns that hurt and distort?

- How can I replicate patterns that empower and enlighten?

These are the questions that human systems dynamics brings to racism. These are the options for action that increase the potential for productive engagement. These are the questions that bring us both crisis and opportunity in the age of Obama. In these dangerous times it is possible to transform our racist fears of unfamiliar patterns when we engage with curiosity, courage, and empathy.

We invite you to join a dialogue about patterns of racism. Does the capacity to perceive, replicate, and disrupt patterns capture your experience? What are the methods you use to transform racism? What are the barriers and bridges to seeing patterns differently and helping others do the same? What are your questions and emerging insights? You can join our public conversation on this and other HSD-related topics at <http://patternsatwork.blogspot.com/>. You will find on-going conversations about diversity and human systems dynamics at <http://patternsandpossibilities.squarespace.com/>. Welcome to these conversations as we get better at doing the things people do so well—perceive, replicate, and disrupt patterns.

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