

## **LIVING MULTI-CULTURALLY: IDENTIFYING THE OBSTACLES**

Report of an OPUS Workshop  
held on Saturday 24th September  
at  
Connaught Hall, Tavistock Square,  
London WC1H 9EX

### **CONVENOR**

Dr Lionel F Stapley, Director OPUS

Lionel Stapley is an organization consultant and has a particular interest in organizational and societal culture. He currently heads up the OPUS Listening Post Project which has strong links to societal culture. He has published five books two with Larry Gould and Mark Stein and a fifth, 'An Introduction to Individuals, Groups and Organisations: Beneath the Surface' was published at the end of 2005.

### **Introduction and Contributions from: Fakhry Davids.**

Fakhry Davids is a psychoanalyst in full-time private practice in London. He qualified as a clinical psychologist at the University of Cape Town, where he was subsequently lecturer in Psychology. He trained as an adult psychotherapist at the Tavistock Clinic, and as a psychoanalyst at the Institute of Psychoanalysis in London. Until recently he was Honorary Consultant Psychologist at the London Clinic of Psychoanalysis. He has a long-standing special interest in the psychology of racism, on which he consults and lectures widely.

### **INTRODUCTION**

*The Workshop was held at a time when fundamental changes were occurring in the dynamics and relationships of British Society. As OPUS Listening Posts have shown, especially in regard to references to 'death of a way of life'; this society and other societies throughout the world are going through a monumental change. Quite how or where this change will take us is impossible to say but it is suggested that these changes are having and will continue to have a considerable affect on multi-cultural living as a result of threats to individual and group identities. The aim of the Workshop was to identify the social and especially the psychological factors that are currently influencing societal dynamics that affect multi-cultural living. The overall aim was one of trying to identify obstacles to multi-cultural living. It is hoped that this Workshop will be the first event in a more extensive and deeper programme.*

### **OUTLINE OF WORKSHOP**

The Workshop started in Plenary with an Introduction and Setting of the Scene by Fakhry Davids.

It then continued in four small groups with OPUS Facilitators.

In Session 1 members were asked to work at the following with a focus on social issues:

- a. What do we understand by living multi-culturally
- b. What are the social factors that interfere with living multi-culturally?

In Session 2 the focus moved to a consideration of psychological issues:

- c. What are the psychological factors that interfere with living multi-culturally.

- d. Identification of obstacles to living multi-culturally.

Members then came together in Plenary for a total group Feedback and Review Session.

### **Membership**

This was a publicly advertised Workshop that was attended by thirty two paying members. Over half were female and about a quarter were black. About a third were OPUS members.

## **THE REPORT**

This Report is an Analytic Summary developed from the Notes of Facilitators in the four Small Groups.

In the opening Plenary members expressed concern about not knowing each other and wanting to know who they were working with. It would seem that the coming together of a multi-cultural group whose individual and group identities were not obvious was experienced as a disturbing and threatening situation. Coming into a Workshop of this nature without knowing who and what others represented caused considerable anxiety. Members appeared concerned to know who might be an enemy or friend, who they could rely upon for support of their views; and who might attack them. Not knowing placed them in a difficult position which they largely dealt with by proceeding with extreme caution.

On moving into small groups in Session 1 where they were asked to explore '*what they understood by living multi-culturally*' the members still continued with extreme caution and careful communication with others. Each group seemed to adopt a different approach but they all developed in much the same way. In short, they found it difficult to work in the groups and get to know their neighbour mainly because they did not know if it was safe to join in. One Facilitator noted there was a sense that there was an underlying unspoken dividing line between group members that was preventing them from engaging in a meaningful discussion about multi-culturalism. Another felt that the general feeling in the room was one of fear, anxiety, shame, threat and uncertainty. One group openly spoke of the fear of being identified as the "other" with the consequence of other people drawing conclusions about you. It seemed that the fear was that if you were identified as the other - as a minority - you would be treated as the other and be treated in a stereotypical manner and possibly scapegoated.

When the groups did engage in discussion they did so from the safety of non-personal disclosure and from speaking in a very general way. Some of the themes discussed included issues of black and white; reasons to support multi-cultural living as against reasons why not to do so; how historical factors have an affect on today. Running along side these themes issues such as the minority, responsibility, conflict of sameness, stranger, the guest, refugees, class and race tended to expose the alienation of minority groups. The other major theme was about how multi-cultural living is experienced differently in different geographical locations. For example, in one group the view was expressed that you can get away from the feeling of being the other in London. As one member commented, 'As an Estonian I feel secure in London, I know I can be what I want be. But London is unique as you will not be so easily picked up here as "the other". London is different from the rest of the UK. You become the real foreigner out of London.'

The threat to identity continued to strongly influence the groups. For example, one group expressed an envy of the Muslim community who through their religion and social institutions have a strong sense of togetherness and identity. It was also felt that seeing this 'other' a people who have such a strong identity leads to jealousy and fear. Another group spoke of the tremendous threats to their identity when they got away from the familiar. It was felt that the divided communities, or ghettos referred to by Trevor Phillips were real and existed as a defence against the threats to identity. However, it was also recognized that the creation of firm boundaries - the building of walls - did not allow for the development of learning and multi-cultural living. Building walls simply prevents any new understanding to develop. Understanding at a multi-cultural level required flexible boundaries that would enable working across boundaries between the different cultural groups. It was realized that multi-cultural living breaks down under stress and that the

greater degree of separation ultimately led to the possibility of a greater degree of misunderstanding between cultural groups.

At this stage the groups were beginning to work at the task which continued when they were asked to *'identify the social factors that interfere with living multi-culturally'*. This new task provided them with an opportunity to speak from the general and to express 'accepted' and in the main, non-controversial views. Factors that were identified as separating people included: class, religion, attitudes to alcohol, language, immigration, race, marriages, faiths, employment, economic power and poverty. Gender politics was especially identified as being very different between different cultural groups and seen as 'a fault line'. The issue of single sex schools; the study of religion as part of the school curriculum; and single faith schools were also identified as 'fault lines'. It was also felt that a further problem was that British identity as a Christian society could also be under threat.

Language was seen as a key element in harmonious multi-cultural living and was identified as one of the 'fault lines'. A view was expressed that if you live multi-culturally, everyone should speak English. A further problem was identified as the different views on physical control and punishment of children which was seen as another 'fault line', particularly with some families of African origin. An overview of the views expressed tends to suggest an unintegrated society. One where both the majority and minorities are not prepared to tolerate cultural difference or to change to a sufficient degree to enable multi-cultural living. This is perhaps well summarized by a member who stated 'where I live, we don't mix'. And this, of course, was the experience of the members in the workshop where being faced with the problem of difference was seen as a threat to personal and group identity.

At this stage the task shifted to one of *'identifying the psychological factors that interfere with living multi-culturally'*. This undoubtedly meant that members had to leave the safety of generalization and speak from their own experience. Perhaps not surprisingly given their previous experience the groups found it difficult to look at the psychological factors. For one group the initial reaction was one of silence. However, they displaced their anxiety by focusing on the venue and the location for the workshop - Tavistock Square - the scene of the recent bus bombing. As the facilitator commented, 'on reflection it was as if talking about the psychological factors was not safe. Another group facilitator reported that in this Session, there was a return to the flat tension of the first session. It seemed that there was a real fear of being attacked and a fear of explosive violence was voiced. With 30 minutes to go, the group had not been able to write a single comment about the work of the group. The fears of violence were then realized when a major row broke out between a white woman and a Jewish man which resulted in an accusation of anti-Semitism. This group seemed to represent the societal dynamic that violence is never far away and that it takes very little for the fears and threats to identity to manifest themselves in open violent confrontation.

Other groups represented other aspects of society. For example, the first group referred to above, identified and discussed the following issues to some extent after some while. Hate and denial of hate, fear, envy, identity, impoverished communities, self-challenge, new learning, attack, image, spiritual, scared to convert, accident of birth, housing, outsiders getting education at the expense of the host community. There was no meaningful dialogue, it was defensive and acknowledged to be so. There was great difficulty in being able to see other groups or hear the voices of others. They were stuck with the stereotypes, which are frequently portrayed by the negative images seen on television. All of which are seen to breed fear and hate. At one level it was realized that treating people the same and welcoming outsiders, was highly desirable. However at another level the fears and developed myths cause us to believe that immigrants will affect the economic welfare of people. As one member stated 'I cannot give up, I do not want to lose the familiar, as giving up means giving up a lot for the host'. Thus, while acknowledging obstacles this group seemed to represent the view that 'if we are to live multi-culturally minorities must become like the majority and adopt the majority culture'.

Another group sought to explain the psychological factors that interfered with multi-cultural living as racism. The ensuing discussion centered on passion stating the view that there was no passion today. There is isolation with people not asking questions. And, there is anger at people who exploit their differences. There was a reference to a discomfort at exploring difference and of

accepting where we are at and not persecuting ourselves all the time. And an acknowledgement that getting to the point of some meaning or understanding is difficult and painful. The discussion continued by stating that there is a Global us and 'them'. And then posed the question; 'when do you stop becoming 'them' and become 'us'? This was answered by a further question, 'is that the answer, to live multi-culturally means to have the ability not to split? In spite of their references to passion, this group seems to be representing the societal view that there must be a logical explanation for living multi-culturally. If only we can find this logical and rational explanation everything will be fine.

Another group also referred to racism and latent racism as an explanation for the psychological factors that interfered with multi-cultural living. There was an acknowledgment and sense of realism that to bring people together was hard work; that it takes a long time; and that it's both scary and exciting. The realist approach continued with an understanding that seeing multi-culturalism purely in 'positive' terms, without engaging with difficulties was likely to be doomed to failure. To ignore our own fallibility and ignore how we perceive others as stereotypes; to not feel able to challenge the perceptions others have about our own cultural group; as well as not allowing others to challenge us, and our perceptions; not making efforts to initiate or become part of other dialogues; not being able to 'cope', process powerful feelings and psychological processes that may be provoked through acknowledging different cultural groups. And on the contrary being open to knowing and seeing the individual beyond their membership of a particular cultural group are all necessary elements in removing the obstacles to multi-cultural living.

This group represented that part of society that is aware that obstacles to living multi-culturally start and continue with the self. Understanding develops out of overcoming ones own anxieties and fears which then enables an understanding of the 'other' as the 'other' and not some artificial creation of the self.

## Conclusions

The experience in the Workshop showed just how difficult and complicated the issue of multi-cultural living is. From the outset the Workshop reflected the experience in the societal environment being regarded as disturbing and seen as a threat to individual and group identities. The members took up many of the roles and employed many of the defences that are used as a means of avoiding the anxiety that results from multi-cultural living. Even talking about multi-cultural living seemed a difficult process that needed to be treated with extreme caution.

Social obstacles were well known - at least at an espoused level. All members were able to 'parrot' a list of those matters which come under a general heading of 'inequality'. As in society, this is a reasonably safe area and to 'parrot' these words and phrases is politically correct and unlikely to lead to disagreement and hostility. However, as in society, there seemed a great reluctance to go further and explore the underlying emotions and meanings behind this parroted list. As one group commented, 'Political correctness is all about preventing talking, making the thinking people feel guilty for thinking.' Above all it provides a means of defence against the exploration across boundaries between multi-cultural groups and individuals. It leaves each group viewing the same situation from a monocular perspective that does not lead to multi-cultural living.

When it comes to psychological obstacles escape from emotion and deeper exploration is not so easy. Although as we have seen three of the four groups found well trodden paths for doing so. As one facilitator commented, 'identifying the psychological factors appeared to be painful for all of us'. A comment greeted by the group members with nods, giggles and laughter. Simply identifying social factors without also exploring the underlying psychological and emotional issues is like exploring the ice cap of a mountain and ignoring the fact that the mountain exists. To get to the level of understanding that is necessary to even expose the obstacles to multi-cultural living requires difficult and at times painful work at a personal and group level. As one member recognized, (it involves) 'Firstly recognising my own hatred and others hatred of me and then finding a place to think, talk and face it'. This sort of work is likely to challenge people's identity - their consistency, confirmation and continuity - and as in the Workshop, will be avoided where possible. However, as the Workshop also shows, within a relatively short period of time it is possible to begin to explore these difficult issues.

From the Workshop experience it seems clear that we need to feel safe to explore these issues deeply. The psychological obstacles evoke such a high degree of suspicion, fear and hostility that our very identity is threatened. To do this work, therefore, we need to have a secure identity attachment to fall back on. Our ability to reach out to others is dependent on the level of secure attachment to 'self' or 'us'. A conclusion we might reasonably draw from this experience is that exploration of psychological and emotional issues would best be conducted in single culture groups initially. This would enable a freedom to speak of the 'other' without fear of having to face hatred, anger and any associated guilt. From that point it will be possible to begin to work in multi-cultural groups starting with those that are not regarded as natural enemies. It will then be possible to work towards a position where even those regarded as natural enemies may be able to work together probably using a three culture meeting.

***Thanks and appreciation to Fakhry Davids for his help in organising this event.  
And thanks to Facilitators: Jeffrey Brathwaite, Halina Brunning,  
Andrew Collie and Augustine Sagoe for their skillful work on the day.***

Lionel Stapley December 2005.