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Multiculturalism, Universalism, and the 21st Century Academy
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Keynote Address to the Future of Minority Studies (FMS) Colloquium
Stanford University
July 28, 2006

Preamble: What Keeps Chancellors Up at Night?

I am delighted to be here today and to join with colleagues in the Future of Minority Studies seminar. Before beginning, I want to frame my comments on Multiculturalism, Universalism, and the 21st Century Academy, from my position as a chancellor.

Two years ago I attended a conference of presidents and chancellors in which among the many panel discussions on American Competitiveness (“The World is Flat”²), Federal Science Funding, The Future of the Humanities, and the like, was one panel entitled: “What Keeps Presidents and Chancellors Up at Night?” This involved a discussion, rather free-form, of the pressing campus concerns that worry everyone. Expecting to hear a great deal about the arms race in intercollegiate athletics – absolutely a genuine concern – I was rather surprised to hear instead about multiculturalism and what might be called its associated “culture wars.”

Of course, I shouldn’t have been surprised, as there had been so many high profile examples, from the public’s reaction to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill assigning the Qur’an as its first year shared reading to the media coverage of strife in Middle East studies at Columbia University. Moreover, I had just spent six years defending affirmative action at Michigan and three years in the midst of debates at Illinois on the campus mascot, Chief Illiniwek. Anyone in these positions long enough knows well that universities are like sponges for society’s tensions and that one way or another something will erupt on every campus that reflects the fraying of multicultural community and the state of “civil” society.

Whether it is in athletics or the student media, in the classroom or in campus organizations, tensions over religion, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, are powder kegs on our multicultural campuses – as they are of course in our cities and towns. As one of my colleagues noted, conflicts, such as occurred at Duke recently, can happen on any one of our campuses in one form or another. At Syracuse, for example, we are overcoming the

¹ This speech was prepared as a keynote address for the *Future of Minority Studies Summer Institute Colloquium* at Stanford University, July 28, 2006. I wish to acknowledge the many contributions to the thinking in this piece from my colleagues in Women’s Studies at Syracuse University, particularly Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Linda Alcoff, and Leslie Bender, and colleagues in the FMS Project, particularly Satya Mohanty and Paula Moya. The social psychological argument in this analysis is strongly influenced by the work of Hazel Markus, Dorothy Steele, and Claude Steele.

² Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

impact on our campus of the production of an entertainment television show, by a student-run station, that used caricatures of various groups as “humor.” As at Duke, when we go beyond finger pointing, these incidents alert us to our communal responsibilities, and to the work still to be done on our campuses and in our connected communities.

For not being surprised doesn’t mean we can stop talking about it. There is a crying need to take these kinds of incidents – and they are indeed widespread – seriously as symptoms of a society that is not comfortable with pluralism. I suggest that we address this state of affairs with the same deep thinking that we give to understanding how to respond to our increasingly “flat world,” for it is as much in our national interest. In fact, I suggest that thoughtful analyses of group dynamics and communal responsibility in a diverse society may actually help us better face the “flat world.” Instead of competitively fighting between ourselves for a shrinking piece of the pie – whether in higher education or in our connected communities – shouldn’t we learn to live and work together and find innovations that enlarge the pie? Wouldn’t that get us closer to fulfilling the agenda of universal human rights that lies at the foundation of a just and effective society?

Taking Groups Seriously

Many people’s reaction to these “culture wars” is to suggest that we all just turn our backs on groups altogether – as when people call for a color-blind or culture-blind or gender-blind society. Not only do I see this as naïve (in the face of pervasive group dynamics and tensions), but also as missing the constructive role that groups must play in promoting a social justice agenda and building an effective multicultural community. Taking groups seriously can be constructive both for those who are on the “outside” trying to get in to a particular community and for those who are more securely established as insiders. This is especially true in a world full of insiders and outsiders – and we all occupy both positions – in which as outsiders we could benefit from seeing more personal possibilities (on the inside) and as insiders we could contribute by taking more social responsibility (for those outside). And, like it or not, we need to build effective multicultural communities to be competitive and just, so we better start taking groups seriously.

What does it mean to take groups seriously, and how can we use groups as effective means of reducing the insider-outsider disparities and tapping all of our diverse talent more effectively? First, we need to stop pitting groups in a zero-sum, individual rights battle for access and a piece of the economic pie. Second, we need to form a more collective mindset and look outward to the issues of national interest on which we could and had better productively work together.

However, to do this, we first need to recognize some “facts” of social life and the pervasive disparities in our pluralistic, insider-outsider world, and find an avenue to constructively confront them. Here is where it helps to know something about the

psychology of multiculturalism (and of insiders and outsiders) and to work with it, rather than remain oblivious to its powerful impact.

For, in the midst of this fraying of community, and widening of the gap between those who belong and those who don't, it is easy to miss the fundamental interdependence of individuals and community. Easy to miss the truth in the oft repeated notion, to paraphrase in this case Cornel West, that if we don't all hang together we will all hang separately.³

So, in the hopes of starting this discussion, I turn now, as a social psychologist and educator, but also as a chancellor in charge of a multicultural campus community, to consider why and how we go wrong in our group dynamics, and what we might do differently to face our challenges head on.

The Social Embedding of Individuality

To see how the social embedding of individual human potential – which I will abbreviate from now on as “individuality” – works, it is important to start from the premise that self-construals – who we think we are and what we see as possible for our selves – matter. But, we do not think about our selves in a social vacuum, either.

Our self-construals are embedded within and shaped by critical cultural practices and social organizations that constitute a matrix of opportunities and constraints in our daily lives. Over the long course of history, for example, numerous different cultures and societies have expressed more concern about the educational and career paths of boys than girls.⁴

These self-construals are also embedded in a matrix of critical interpersonal relations through which we garner diagnostic input from other people about our selves. Other people serve as sources of social comparison, including those whom we take on as models or idols. Importantly, other people play a fundamental role in legitimating our selves – as we are now and might possibly become – especially those with some power over us, but also sometimes those peers who provide consensus information about similar experiences.

Social group memberships, particularly those organized around gender, race/ethnicity, religion, sexuality, disability, and nationality, constitute critical influences in most cultures on both the matrix of opportunities and constraints and the input received from others. Of course, individuals personalize their social identities (contrary to an

³ Cornel West, Epilogue to *Race Matters*, The Vintage Edition, NY: Vintage Books, 1994, p.159. (Interestingly, one of the earliest expressions of this sentiment was actually from Benjamin Franklin on the occasion of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776.)

⁴ And the recent near national obsession with the tipping scales of girls over boys in college entrance and performance suggests that not all has changed, either (see Tamar Lewin, At Colleges, Women are Leaving Men in the Dust, *New York Times*, July 9, 2006).

essentialist view of identity politics), by accepting or rejecting group-based constraints and feedback, but nevertheless, their impact is pervasive.

Claude Steele's elegant demonstrations of stereotype vulnerability document the pervasiveness of these group-based dynamics.⁵ For example, as he has shown in laboratory experiments right here at Stanford, the performance of high achieving women students, including those who consider themselves as analytically smart, can be undermined by simply and subtly invoking gender stereotypes with an off-hand comment about the test measuring analytic ability. There is nothing overt or "in your face" about these experimental manipulations, and certainly nothing that should over-ride a student's own acknowledged individual performance history. Yet, it is hard to act as an individual, when the "group" lurks in the background.

And beyond the laboratory, our groups often don't just lurk quietly in the background. This is a media culture in which there is relatively constant attention to and (perhaps inadvertent) promotion of group-based stereotypes of all sorts, in the sports and entertainment arenas, in politics, and, yes, even in the academy. Consider, for example, the flood of media coverage after Larry Summers questioned the capacity of women and girls to be stars in science and mathematics. Even, as in his case, when the marketing of group-based stereotypes comes unintentionally, those who are "marked" by highly visible and/or contested identities find them hard to ignore. Few women scientists had a choice of whether to be scrutinized under those conditions – their individuality was swept into a tidal pool of issues defined by their "group."⁶

"Insiders" and "Outsiders" and the Social Embedding of Individuality

However, the social embedding of individuality varies importantly as a function of the "location" of one's significant groups – with respect to status, security, and power – in a particular community. Those whose groups are less well-entrenched in a community – "outsiders" as I'll refer to them – will be more marked by and connected to their group(s) than will "insiders."⁷ By contrast "insiders" operate more easily as "individuals" and feel both less connection to and less identified by their groups.

In turn, this different psychology of insiders and outsiders is readily apparent in different attitudes toward communal responsibility in a diverse and multicultural community. That is, as insiders, we take a great deal, cognitively and socially, for granted in daily life. We engage in cognitive egocentrism, using, for example, our own experience and assumptions as a road-map for making judgments about others, rarely taking into account that they may be operating with a different matrix of opportunities and constraints, and with less of a sense of individuality.

⁵ Claude M. Steele, lecture at: *Future of Minority Studies*, Cornell University, July 30, 2005.

⁶ Jo Handelsman, Nancy Cantor, Molly Carnes, Denice Denton, Eve Fine, Barbara Grosz, Virginia Hinshaw, Cora Marrett, Sue Rosser, Donna Shalala, and Jennifer Sheridan, "More Women in Science," *Science*, v. 309, 1190-1191, August, 2005.

⁷ Throughout this discussion, I will use the general label of insider and outsider groups to refer to the degree of belongingness or embeddedness of a group or person in the community, especially as this is influenced by status, power, and longevity.

Most specifically, we underplay the level of scrutiny and constraint that is felt by an outsider when his or her group is even subtly or minimally invoked, not to mention derided. The degree to which an outsider's identity is wrapped up in their group(s) seems almost irrational to an insider, prompting them to question the authenticity of outsider reactions. Frequently, for example, an outsider will be described as "over-reacting," or being too "pc." It is extremely difficult for an insider to imagine their individuality so intertwined with their group(s). They simply don't live a life of "guilt by group association," and so they are skeptical of and not particularly empathetic to those who do. In turn, by failing to recognize these constraints on individuality and on the freedom to dissociate from the group, insiders miss a lot about the social life of outsiders, and this is a critical impediment to interpersonal trust.

By contrast, the psychology of the insider at least with respect to his or her "visible" groups – such as race or ethnicity or gender – is much less explicit or "marked." Instead, for the insider, groups are more about voluntary association, such that they can be held at an "arms length," especially if something goes wrong. Since, as insiders, we each view ourselves largely as individual actors, it is relatively easy, in good conscience, to distance from the group's mistakes or the culture of an organization. There is little or no "guilt by group association." Others may have made a mistake, but "if I didn't touch it, I didn't do anything." Moreover, the insider remains ever on guard against any ill-informed accusations that would implicate him or her in some unfair guilt by association with the (mistakes of others in the) group.

This psychology is, of course, perfectly rational and fair from an individualistic perspective, but not terribly good for building a community in which only some people feel disproportionately "marked" by their groups, unable to just walk away. Surely, we all want to avoid unfair individual blame, but at the same time we should feel some communal responsibility when an organization or group to which we belong ends up hurting others. This should be the case even when no harm was intended and you can't imagine why they are hurt. This "arms length" relationship to group behavior is another critical impediment to facilitating a broad sense of fairness and interdependence in a diverse community.

"Epistemic Privilege" of the Outsider

While the insider's gaze is generally away from the group, the outsider instead looks right at it with, what Satya Mohanty and others refer to as the "epistemic privilege of the oppressed."⁸ Outsiders typically see how their group marks them, and how therefore social location matters for what they can do and how they can expect to be treated. Largely, this clarity of vision comes from being in a perpetual state of guardedness and uncertainty, examining the social landscape, always prepared for some group-based challenge.

⁸ Satya Mohanty, *Universalism and Multicultural Politics*, panel presentation, Future of Minority Studies Symposium, Syracuse University, April, 2006, see also, Satya Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, and Multicultural Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.

By contrast, the challenges faced as an insider come less routinely, and relate more to individual comparisons or interactions, one on one, with peers, competitors, idols, and the like. What insiders rarely face head on is some group-based challenge – direct or subtle – that they see as constraining who they are or what they (as individuals) can do.

In other words, the outsider lives with the discomfort of epistemic privilege and the insider lives with the comfort of cognitive egocentrism, often oblivious to the effects of social location on others. And, the epistemic privilege of the outsider does not raise the probability of being heard by the insider.

In this respect, the outsider always has a “theory” about social location in need of some validation. Like any theory, there are multiple avenues for validation. The outsider can spend time with other group members, sharing experiences and insights that provide some validation by consensus. Many of us remember the “consciousness raising” groups of the women’s movement as just such experiences. And we see powerful examples of the importance of consensus information in group affirmation all the time, including, for example, the social support that junior faculty give each other, the importance of professional identity group organizations (such as Black Journalists or Women Engineers), and the theme houses on college campuses.

These consensus-building experiences are very important and should never be under-estimated as part of the constructive role that groups can play when we take them seriously. However, precisely because the insiders in the community will likely remain blind to or skeptical of the conclusions of such discussions, other avenues of validation need to be facilitated. The outsider needs to be heard beyond the group, and the insider needs to listen to other groups.

How do we create a context for such inter-group dialogue in which the guardedness of the outsider can lessen and the insider can go beyond the egocentrism of individuality. As insiders, we each can listen – and move toward communal responsibility – when we get past an individualized framework to see the powerful role of groups in social life. When insiders begin to acknowledge that outsiders have little or no choice but to be seen through their groups then suspicion often evaporates, and the potential for collaboration and community grows. This is when multicultural education is at its best, and when college and universities can play a very constructive role in turning the tables of epistemic privilege.

In this regard, it is worth repeating that contrary to an essentialist version of identity-politics, we are all both insiders and outsiders in our lives. That is, the experiences of group-based vulnerability, on one hand, and individuality, on the other, are shared, even if they are distributed differently for different groups or individuals. This is not to say that some dimensions of social organization, such as race/ethnicity or gender in our society, don’t powerfully tip the scale toward constraint over opportunity, group over individual. It is simply to say that the ground is ripe, even for those

frequently on the inside, to engage attention to social inequality, in part by turning the tables on whose insights matter and who is listening.

Giving Voice to Outsiders and Asking Insiders to Listen

But, how do we do this in the midst of inter-group competition and suspicion? How do we do it when our campuses and our communities more broadly are quite divided, with many insiders and outsiders, and two strikingly different psychologies about group life?

I would point to two types of multicultural “projects” that can help bridge these two psychologies, while also creating more educational opportunity and more scholarly innovations that matter to the world. One project is internally-focused on constructing opportunities for intra- and inter-group dialogue that capitalize on the relevance of group-based vulnerabilities for virtually everyone. The other project is outwardly focused on connecting the campus – and its diverse group of scholars and students – to our broader communities, capitalizing in that case on faculty’s interest in public scholarship and students’ interests in volunteerism. In each project, however, the central ingredient to success will be to take multicultural groups seriously, unpacking rather than covering up disparities in voice and opportunity and building communal responsibility.

As to the “internal” project of facilitating intra- and inter-group dialogue that address social inequalities head on, this work is, of course, at the core of the expertise of those gathered here and central to the agenda of the Future of Minorities Studies, and therefore I will not cover it in any detail. In this work, and I would point to the curriculum developed at the University of Michigan by Patricia Gurin and her colleagues as a prototype,⁹ there is a commitment to exposing inter-group inequality through group-based experiences that individuals can share. So, for example, women in a dialogue on gender might find consensus support for their experience of not always being listened to by men. At the same time, the men in the group might begin to listen to these observations and take them seriously, even if they believe there was no “intent” to discriminate. Sometimes, the tables turn in a dialogue, so that the experience of being “marked” by one’s group can be felt even by those who more often than not operate with more individuality in their lives. These moments of “epistemic privilege” for the insider – when our own group-based vulnerability intersects with the consensually-expressed views of the outsiders – can make us more receptive to seeing the situation of outsiders in a new and more empathic light. When the tables turn, common ground, respect and shared responsibility emerge.

At that point, it is also critical to relate these personal experiences to the pervasive social inequalities that attach to some groups – and therefore to their members – in particularly powerful ways in our society, and therefore also on our campuses. Through this mixture of the personal and the general, in narratives and in empirical work, it is

⁹ See D. Schoem and S. Hurtado, eds., *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community, and Workplace*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

possible to begin to unpack how for some people, there is often “guilt by group association,” whereas for others, communal responsibility is easy to keep at “arm’s length.”

To make a real difference, however, these dialogues on the power of groups and the effects of social location – the different psychologies of outsiders and insiders – must reach far across a campus. While there is little doubt that some group-based vulnerabilities are more pernicious and pervasive than others – and certainly race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and disability fall in this category – the framework here can be applied broadly and in helpful ways. Many campuses, for example, worry about the kinds of mentoring given to their junior faculty – in whom they have a substantial investment for the future. I would suggest that this same analysis can be applied constructively to the experiences of untenured versus tenured faculty, and especially if at the same time one considers the issues confronting women and junior faculty of color. Taking this approach one step further, I believe that academic leaders – including chancellors, deans and department chairs – can profit from a better understanding of the outsider experiences of particular groups of faculty, staff, and students, and particular disciplines, such as minority studies, for example. It is not at all uncommon on campuses to see the tell-tale signs of insiders and outsiders, each with “good intentions,” talking past each other – operating with different expectations from different psychologies. We can do something about this if we take on this multicultural campus project.

Connecting to Communities and Turning the Epistemic Table

The complementary project that I see for universities is an external one, in which we forge outward-looking connections to diverse communities, working on the pressing issues of our times – from failing schools to environmental degradation to inter-religious conflict. This work is, of course, valuable in itself as a transfer of intellectual capital from campuses to communities. But, in the context of this discussion of multiculturalism, it is reasonable to question how such engagement would contribute to turning the epistemic table and building communal responsibility?

When universities start collaborating with their connected communities (at home and abroad) on the most pressing issues of the day, I have seen the tables turn in ways that do benefit both our innovations and the quality of our multicultural community.¹⁰ Why does this happen? I believe the answer lies first in the nature of the problems to be solved now and the connected question of who becomes the expert. It is hard, for example, to make progress on environmental sustainability in an urban ecosystem without addressing questions of environmental justice, and whose voice do we need to listen to in that case? How do we tackle the urban epidemic of diabetes, even if we

¹⁰ Nancy Cantor, *Universities and Their Connected Communities: Creating Capital for the Future*, Presidential Lecture Series, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute/University, March 6, 2006. And, Lois Romano, “Urban Colleges Learn to Be Good Neighbors; Universities Also Reap Benefits from Investing in Their Communities,” *The Washington Post*, January 9, 2006, late ed.: A1. And, David J. Maurrasse, *Beyond the Campus; How Colleges and Universities Form Partnerships with Their Communities*, New York and London: Routledge, 2001.

develop a better understanding through genomics of the disease itself, without contextualizing its spread within the broader questions of race disparities in health? Wouldn't we understand the genesis of inter-religious conflict better if we engaged with refugee communities in our own cities and towns? It is virtually impossible to find a problem of major importance to our society in which the insights of a diverse, multicultural community would not be very valuable to the solutions.

Additionally, there is a growing cadre of faculty – including many women and faculty of color – extending well beyond the social sciences into the arts, humanities, sciences and professions – who are increasingly doing scholarly work that matters to communities. This engagement can also capitalize on the robust presence of service-learning curriculum and volunteerism on campuses. For oddly, interest in service-learning and volunteerism is very high, despite the individualism and detachment, even communal “irresponsibility,” that I described earlier. This engagement of students and faculty in community-based work, and work around the world, can provide a launching pad for sustained attention to questions of social inequality and multicultural community.

It also does something else dramatic. It turns the tables on who has voice, and who can benefit by listening. It reverses roles and the epistemic privilege – perhaps even its enlightening discomfort – spreads to a different set of actors. As George Sanchez has suggested, those who often feel relegated to the outside of our campus communities, such as faculty and students of color, emerge with more expertise and authentic voice in this agenda, as they often begin with more “standing” in the surrounding community and on the issues at hand.¹¹ The social/academic landscape begins to change when the insights of outsiders – either from the community outside or on the academic margins – begin to be heard.

This reversal of perspective (or social location) not only prepares everyone for doing the work of the nation, but as importantly it shines some light on inequality. It shows both the strength of diverse groups and cultures and constraints on them. In turn, this is a lesson with powerful ramifications back on campus. As we engage with our communities, we also recognize the stresses of the broader world as they are “brought to” the campus, and then feel some fundamental responsibility to address them as part of building a productive campus community.

Rewarding Scholarship in Action

And when we take that responsibility seriously, then new scholarly and educational vistas open too. At Syracuse, for example, our academic vision is based on the notion of *Scholarship in Action* where interdisciplinary teams of faculty and students engage with communities of experts on issues that matter, such as disabilities, shrinking cities, failing schools, neighborhood entrepreneurship, religious pluralism, or environmental sustainability and the urban ecosystem.

¹¹ George Sanchez, *Crossing Figueroa: The Tangled Web of Diversity and Democracy*, Paper presented at *The John Dewey Lecture*, University of Michigan, October, 2004.

These collaborations, like our Partnership for Better Education with the Syracuse City Schools, create a shared mission that breaks down barriers, between campus and community, business and university, scientists and artists, students and faculty, and – perhaps most important to our future – between groups, racial, ethnic, religious, on campus and in our connected community.¹² Step by step, this work builds the coalition committed to a diverse multicultural community. It embeds the traditional diversity agenda within the academic work of the institution and in turn embeds that work in the public good.

To make the Scholarship in Action agenda work, however, we must change our reward structure for faculty who do this collaborative work. We must, for example, support faculty members who want to do public scholarship, with results that may be published in academic, peer-reviewed journals, but may also result in network news specials, digital modules for public libraries, or museum exhibitions. We must find the right incentives for a diverse faculty to engage with communities of experts on innovation that matters, and to that end, many institutions, including Syracuse, are re-evaluating their tenure and promotion criteria. A tenure-team initiative, organized by Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life, a 70-institution consortium, is gathering best practices on how to promote standards of excellence in public scholarship.¹³ Momentum is growing to take public scholarship seriously.¹⁴

In my view, investing in excellence in public scholarship in our multicultural communities is a pathway toward bringing questions of diversity and diverse students and faculty from the margins of our institution to the center. As we work on innovation that matters – from the science needed to remediate environmental pollution in our cities and waterways to the art that gives voice to refugees resettling in America – we learn to value diversity and the insights of diverse others. We also learn to listen harder to each other, dropping a bit of the egocentric covering of our own positions. We see the observations of our peers and colleagues within the broader social landscape in which they are shaped, and we take more responsibility for changing that landscape. We come to see that multicultural progress will be shared, but only if we also take groups seriously.

Multiculturalism, Universalism, and the Lessons of Citizenship

At the end of the day, the hope of these two kinds of projects – internal multicultural dialogue and external multicultural collaboration – is that we all come to value diverse groups, not just diverse individuals. We will do this by expanding the lesson of citizenship from one purely about individual rights to one about connectivity and responsibility – and the social embedding of individuality. We'll learn that we are all

¹² For more on Scholarship in Action and these collaborations, see Nancy Cantor, *Building Intellectual and Social Capital through Diversity and Innovation*, address delivered to 2006 KeyBank Diversity Thought Leadership Series, The City Club of Cleveland, Cleveland, Ohio, June 9, 2006.

¹³ Julie Ellison, Director's Column, *Imagining America Newsletter, Summer, 2004*. Also, Cantor, N., "Valuing Public Scholarship," *The Presidency: The American Council on Education Magazine for Higher Education Leaders*, Spring, 2005, 35-37.

¹⁴ Nancy Cantor and Steven D. Lavine, *Taking Public Scholarship Seriously*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 9, 2006, B20.

in this together, and we can't just make creating opportunity someone else's project. If this works, then I believe that, at least in this regard, presidents will sleep at night, and, more importantly, universities will make a difference in promoting social justice and universal human rights.