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IES Dialogues on Differences

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**After observing day-to-day interactions in Cape Town, what conclusions would you draw regarding use and abuse of power?**

It’s important to note that the powerful are not the only one’s who hold power nor abuse it. Our readings, especially *Rewriting WESSA Identity* by Tess Salusbury and Don Foster, portray the powerful in South Africa as being WESSA’s or White English Speaking South Africans. But someone does not need to be white and English speaking to hold power. Such notions that the helpless are truly powerless is in part a façade. Appearing feeble or weak can also be used as an act to accomplish some sort of goal. During my stay in Cape Town thus far, I’ve noticed members of targeted communities appealing to my pathos and by doing so, semi-abusing the power of ‘guilt-tripping’. I have two experiences with individuals of targeted communities.

The first experience is a conversation with a poor individual outside a storefront in Rondebosch. One man stopped me and asked for money. He was in torn clothes, carrying many trash bags which I assumed were his belongings and he appeared unshowered for days, maybe even weeks. I untruthfully replied that I didn’t have any change, but then he begged me because he couldn’t afford food and made sure to tell me that I had enough for both of us. I ended up giving him the money because I felt ashamed by his words. He was using his unfortunate circumstances to put me in a position where I felt belittled and like I owed him kindness, thus giving him power over me.

The second experience is a conversation with a taxi-driver outside of Cape Town’s International Airport. Having just returned from our mid-semester break to Zimbabwe, a group of IES students (including myself) were looking for transportation home from the airport. Every student agreed Uber would be the best option because their service is more convenient and reliable than the city’s taxis. When we arrived to our pickup destination a well dressed taxi driver approached our group and asked if we needed a taxi. The one thing you should never say to a Cape Town taxi driver: “We have an Uber coming to pick us up”. The man proceeded to complain that he could offer us a better rate if we went with him, and that we should be supporting him because Uber has been taking away HIS business. The taxi driver attempted to manipulate us through use of a ‘victimized’ persona which appealed to our pathos. He put us in an uncomfortable situation and made it feel like we owed him our business, thus putting him in a positon of power.

Is it ok for these people to abuse their power? I think it depends. In the first situation I would say yes because the man was using what little power he actually had as means to afford basic needs. In the second situation, it is more complex. I’m not sure how desperate the taxi-driver’s situation was, but because he was well dressed, I thought it unfair that he try to guilt me into his taxi.

**Think about your own life here in Cape Town, and how do we operate within systems of power and privilege, both locally and globally?**

My entire study broad experience revolves around the privilege to travel and to a good education. For the time being, I could be viewed in similar ways to Salusbury and Don Foster’s WESSA. As a traveler, I am “conscious of justifying [my] belonging to South Africa and consequently South Africa’s belonging to [me]” (Salusbury & Foster 104). I belong here for an education and I’ve been collecting souvenirs like their little pieces of Africa. I’m essentially taking bits of African culture home with me because I find it odd and fascinating. And I’ll be assimilating into my own personal identity.

In South Africa, would it be strange to say that it seems like a majority of people tend to act like their roles in society are ‘normal’ or they are at least accepting of their roles? It seems like change is slow to happen in a country where a vast majority were negatively affected so much by apartheid. One would think the majority holds power. Maybe there is some underlying reason like those who were and still are affected by the apartheid regime tend to be part of the underserved community, and therefore view themselves as powerless and unable to incite change?

**Are there ways you could propose to foster dialogue and bridge the gap between privileged and underserved communities in South Africa?  What may or may not apply to your U.S. context?**

I’m not sure about the extent of social welfare programs in South Africa as compared to the United States, but I hope there is some governmental program who campaigns to close the cultural and social divide that still hasn’t been healed post-apartheid. “A lack of collective persecution has lead to weak social bonding” (Salusbury & Foster 95). Lack of restitution for apartheid-era injustices on the targeted communities has stopped the cultural divide from closing. The need to close the divide between the privileged and the underserved has seen increasing demand to be addressed.

One such issue that must be solved is “’white’ people are constructed as ‘just normal’. While ‘white’ ideology and culture thus becomes normative, those others who are constructed as ‘ethnic’ become increasingly marginalized” (Salusbury & Foster 96). Such catalysts of the cultural divide are very prevalent in the US because whites are the majority. What the majority does/is is indeed ‘normal’. Though, it’s interesting to think that this is happening in South Africa where whites are not the majority. It may be instead that whites in South Africa have so much latent post-apartheid power over other ethnicities that whites still define the norm. It seems reasonable that that the idea of normativity is invented by a power gap between privileged and underserved communities. What do you think?

I would propose similar social welfare programs in the United States because the United States has its own cultural divide albeit different. “’Whiteness’ in South Africa differs from Western contexts in that it is more obvious in its potency: self-conscious rather than deliberately obscured, and accepted rather than as a site of privilege” (Salusbury & Foster 93). The US still experiences cultural divide, but the ways in which we perceive our own identities, not just referring to ‘whiteness’, changes the ways in which these cultural divides present themselves. The dialogue would then have to address solutions to past and present injustices to heal the larger community.