

Empathy, economic growth and redistribution key to overcoming racial tensions

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The most obvious factor stoking racial tension in South Africa is structural socio-economic inequality, which is heavily, though not exclusively, influenced by race. This is according to Dr Gavin Andersson, a prominent scholar in the field of race relations.

Andersson, a former trade unionist and Managing Director of local NGO the Seriti Institute, was responding to written questions from Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) students at the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB) recently.

The group of students had submitted the questions as part of their EMBA coursework assignment, which focused on addressing the issue of racial tensions within and outside of the classroom.

It has been more than 20 years since the end of apartheid, but there are no signs of racial tensions cooling in South Africa. Racist rants on social media occur all too frequently.

“As the majority of people become aware of how inequality has been perpetuated and reproduced through the period of democracy, it brings anger at white thinking, white behaviour and white dominance in various milieus,” explained Andersson.

“When white people deny this, or by instinct defend a period in history - [Western Cape Premier and former DA leader Helen] Zille on colonialism is a good example - or claim that they have not personally been privileged, or deny that institutions like banks and shops manifest subtle bias towards lighter-skinned people and against darker-skinned people, you have a recipe for racial tension, which can explode into anger very easily.”

To reduce racial tensions, Andersson suggested, the country should tackle the issue head-on. This would include talking openly about objective realities as well as the ideologies of superiority around race, gender and others. The conversation should not be about denying history, but about seeking to overcome its consequences, he said.

This is precisely what the students at the GSB are seeking to do. Associate Professor Kosheek Sewchurran, the director of the EMBA programme at the GSB, acknowledged that debates around race have inevitably permeated classrooms and campuses, some of which have become a hot-bed of racial tension. He said that racial tensions can be quite explosive in the early stages of the programme leading the business school to consider ways of tackling the complex problem more proactively.

Of course, the issue cannot be entirely solved by applying theories, said Sewchurran. Instead, the business school decided to encourage students to respond to the issues from the “authentic insightful self”. Self-mastery is at the heart of what it seeks to inculcate in all students.

“You cannot give someone a theory about racial conflict, nor can you give a theory about transformation. These are the things we are struggling with and we cannot get it right through legislation... you need better empathy and people who are more benevolent in their outlook,” said Sewchurran.

To get the students to think more constructively about the issues, they were divided into groups, with each group producing a paper on the issue of racial tensions based on the members’ lived experiences in and out of the classroom. Many of the students acknowledged that racial tensions were at an all-time high and cited the negative energy it generated in both the

perceived perpetrators and the victims.

“Race has become a scapegoat for everything, and the historical injustices become trivialised,” one group pointed out. “The occasional ‘volcanic eruptions’ are dividing the class across racial lines, and transferring these tensions into our external environments.”

Another group highlighted the importance of empathising: “Racial tension is really in its simplest form, grievances from people, groups and societies crying for others to see things through their lenses. This means that if we exercise empathy and metacognition we have a better chance of managing or addressing the issues of racism.

“If we decrease the amount of fear in each one of us about the perceived threats of one race over the other, we will soon begin to see progressive collaboration and engagement that will decrease racial tension.”

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