

Did you mean what I thought you meant? Jean interviews Barry Regan (#63)

Jean 00:01

Hello everybody. Are you wondering why there are so many communication breakdowns among people from different cultures? You are about to hear Dr. Barry Regan explain one of the reasons. Barry is a communications expert. He is on the University Faculty-Professional Studies at the School of General Education, Purdue University Global. A couple of months ago, I had a conversation with Barry about his work. You can hear it in [blog post 49](#). He gave a fabulous interview. At the end of the conversation, he started talking about communication differences and I was so fascinated that I asked him to come back. Barry explained that there is a difference between what is called a high context culture and a low context culture. If two people are talking and one person is from a low context culture, and another from a high context culture, at best, they are prone to misunderstand each other. At worst, they can start misinterpreting the other's words, meanings, and intentions and blaming the other for it. So how does this play out? Let's talk with Barry and find out. Hello, everybody. And hello Barry.

Barry 01:40

Hi, Dr. Jean.

Jean 01:42

Dr. Barry Reagan, who is on the University Faculty-Professional Studies, School of General Education at Purdue University Global.

Barry 2:01

Yeah.

Jean 02:02

Okay, so I'm so excited about this conversation. I met Barry on a TEDx Red Cafe Panel, way back in another century, I think it was January. His specialty is intercultural communication. I was so fascinated by what he had to say that I invited him to this blog to have this conversation with me, and we did that in [blog 49](#). And then he started talking about high context, low context communication strategies and how that can mess up racial conversations across the races. And I got so excited and said, Barry, you got to come back. And so, here he is. Barry, my question to you is this, one of your

specializations is understanding high context, low context communication, and the impact of that on conversations across racial differences. Would you please explain what that means?

Barry 03:15

And thank you, Dr. Jean, for having me back. I'm glad, you know, I didn't put you to sleep enough to where you wanted me to come back. So, I appreciate that.

To understand low context and high context communication and cultural values, I think it's helpful to start off with what is a normal way in which someone would want to get across their message, right? That kind of is the basic way to understand the differences between the two. And so, context and cultural values and communication essentially are saying, what are the different ways to make sense of people from different cultures expressing their viewpoints, using different manners of persuasion or norms. The difference lies primarily in the methods in which people go about expressing what is a norm to communicate or how to persuade someone. In a high context culture, the focus is more on nonverbal messages and indirect messages. The goal of persuading someone who exists in a high context culture is to not be verbally direct or aggressive, to not maybe make the meaning of one's own words very explicitly clear. And instead, to use hand gestures, eye contact, body movement, the use of space, all these nonverbal factors to try and clarify the meaning as opposed to very direct verbal statements.

Jean 04:50

Okay. Hang on. Wait, wait, let me just make sure. What you're saying is that in a high context, and let's spell that word (C-O-N-T-E-X-T), in a high context culture, people use body language and non-verbal(s) to communicate. And the verbal communication is more indirect.

Barry 05:12

Correct. Generally speaking, correct. Yes.

Jean 05:15

Okay. So, a low context person then would think that they are being expected to read somebody's mind. Is that, do you take it there?

Barry 05:26

It could, that could be a way in which someone who is only really exposed to or only lived in low context cultures might evaluate it. A good way that I've kind of been able to conceptualize it for my students in the past is, take the example of handing your credit card to someone working, say, at like a restaurant, or a fast food establishment,

to taking your credit card, running it and giving it back to you. In a low context culture, you may instead, say, may have your card, please? Thank you. You use kind of verbal statements as a way to interact in a professional level, when taking someone's credit card, swiping and then giving it back.

In a high context culture, there may not be communication or verbal communication, that communicates that. It may be done through the use of a bowing of the head, or grabbing someone's credit card with two hands as opposed to one. You might find like here in the United States, if you've ever worked in the restaurant or fast food industry, you may not have paid a lot of attention to whether the person working the register uses one or two hands to grab your credit card. But in a high context culture that's a much more significant focus, because the message being communicated is, I want to add extra attention and to show care to something that is of great importance and value to you. As a result of that, I'm going to use two hands as a way to show that care and significance, as opposed to communicating that with you through my words. So that's something...

Jean 07:10

Oh, my word. Hang on a minute Barry.

Barry 07:13

That's okay.

Jean 07:15

Oh, that's incredible. Okay, because I've seen some waiters take my credit card with two hands. I never knew the significance of that.

Barry 07:26

Not always, but that's often an indication that that person may have spent time living in countries that are more high context by nature. Or maybe who have had parents who instilled that as a value, or maybe had a boss or manager that said, this is how you show the greatest respect for someone's credit card or debit card, something that's important to them, is showing the care through two hands as opposed to one. So yeah, it's an interesting... it's a small difference, but it's very significant in what it embodies about larger cultural differences between high and low context cultures.

Jean 08:08

How does this play out racially?

Barry 08:11

That's a big question. And, really, to me, it goes back to the ways in which nonverbal behaviors are interpreted versus verbal behaviors, and which has the greater significance in denoting whether someone is acting racist or not.

And I'll give you one that I'm sure that, Dr. Jean, I know that you will have far more experience with this one than me. But one that I've talked with a lot of, especially Black women about this, and read up on this and talked with different folks about this as well. There are several Black women in my life who have said that growing up, they had a lot of White folks say, Oh, your hair looks so cool. Can I grab your hair and touch it? And the act of saying that and making that kind of verbal statement, I think for especially a lot of White folks who are not cognizant of what message that could send from a high context perspective, the argument often is made is like, look, that person who's often White is seeing something that's different and therefore using their verbal messages to say this is different, I hadn't experienced that, can I touch your hair so I can now have that experience and that understanding?

So, if viewed through a specific low context cultural lens, often the case is made that's not racist, that's non-otherizing to that Black woman because I'm just asking about your hair, right? Whereas to, you know, the Black women in particular this happens to, what that nonverbal or that high context message is: you are weird. You are different. How you look and how your hair is styled and how it naturally is, is different. I'm going to make those differences really highlighted in a really awkward way. And I'm going to essentially out myself as not understanding and respecting your own bodily autonomy, I'm instead going to use it just as a way to fulfill my curiosity.

And those are the types of examples that I think play out far too commonly-- unfortunately--in our society. And unfortunately, I think oftentimes, White folks are not willing to look at the deeper high context meaning, if they feel that it's okay or acceptable to say, Hey, can I touch your hair? Because, if you're taught to ignore or not be aware of kind of the more indirect interpretations of your words, then it allows you to get away with saying or acting in ways that may be very demeaning to that other person, based off what their experiences are, based off culturally and historically, what they and others who look like them have gone through. So, I don't know if that example communicates that clearly.

But I think that is a big example of how there are certain folks who would say, no, that's not a racist action, because I'm just asking about your hair. But I think viewed through a high context cultural lens, it is by nature a racist action, because you are otherizing that person by using their body and their hair as something to experience

and as something to take control of, as opposed to respecting it on an autonomous equal level.

Jean 11:49

Okay, so I am still struggling with the high context-low context meaning, and here's why. That example is, to me, an example of White imperialism, you know, I dominate the earth, I dominate... I have the right to your body, I have the right to the planet, I have the right to do what I want. Now, for those who are offended by that term, I have to say to people listening that imperialism is something that I have often cautioned my students about when they go into Black communities to act entitled as though they inhabit, they own it. Okay, so I don't see how low and high context words fit into that. And it's because I have a different lens, a different filter to put on that example.

Barry 12:48

Your filter, I think, actually aligns with the high and low context definitions here. Because, if I were to say that to you, that to me I am communicating a low context, I would say, I think of myself as only communicating a low context need to have a new experience, right? So, in this sense, me saying your hair looks so different or weird, but can I touch it? In a low context society with low context values, the directness of that language would be the only thing that's really interpreted, right? So, we would focus on just the language of me saying, I want to have this new experience, can you help me in obtaining this new experience by touching your hair?

Jean 13:46

So, it's only focused on the intended meaning, and you should take my words literally?

Barry 13:54

Sure. A low context culture would say, look, don't "read into it" more than it is, right? All I'm literally saying is, let me touch your hair for this new experience.

Jean 14:05

I got it.

Barry 14:07

So, in a very low context cultural sense, people would say, "Look, don't read too much into it," referring to the nonverbals, the metaphorical aspect, just focus on me wanting to touch your hair. Whereas, you as a Black woman who understands the history and the nuance, and the kind of symbolic elements that that type of statement infers, you look at it understandably very differently and be like, Hey, I'm not something, I'm not an object for you to control and manipulate. I'm a human being who has the autonomy

to not let my body be something to be experimented with or to be touched, just so that way you can feel like you've got “exotic experience.” Does that make sense?

Jean 14:55

Now I got it.

Barry 14:57

Just to make sure. I know it's a tough subject, I wanted to make sure I was explaining that clearly. And to say that, to me is part of the root cause of why it is as White folks, there has to be a recognition beyond the intent of the literal words you're saying. And I think that to me goes back to your original question, which is, we have to broaden our understanding of what is a racist action to include more high context behaviors, if we are to understand why it is so common for actions of racism to be perpetuated against especially Black, Latinx, Asian American folks in this current day and time.

Jean 15:47

I'm all excited. Here's how I take it. In my world--social work world--we always talk about contextualizing. And by contextualizing, I guess that means put the context in it, the high context request to contextualize it, place it in context, don't place it as a single isolated incident. So, a low context would be, I'm looking just at the single isolated incident, independent of history, nonverbals, anything.

Barry 16:58

You're right, that is a way to understand it. I think, by definition, what it's getting at is low context, the meaning is hyper specific to the nonverbal or verbal messages being used. So, when you think about just something like the requests, like, Hey, I'm hungry, that is, by nature, more of a low context, verbal request, because the meaning is explicit and clear. Whereas someone in a high context culture may communicate that message differently, because they don't want to offend someone or be too direct or cause conflict. So, they might say, gosh, I haven't eaten since 8 AM this morning, you know? So, they might make a statement that is implying that they're hungry, but not directly stating it, because they don't want, say maybe in this case, the direct verbal message to come across as aggressive or misinterpreted.

Jean 17:56

It's an imposition. Yeah.

Barry 17:59

Exactly. Exactly.

Jean 18:06

Okay. I can tend towards directness, I was raised that way. And so, it took me the longest time to hear an indirect message without getting irritated. So, to take your example, if someone says, Oh, I haven't eaten since 8, I'm rolling my eyes thinking, well, if you're hungry, why don't you just say you're hungry?

Barry 18:28

Yeah.

Jean 18:29

Right. And so, what you're saying is, that's just a different way of communicating, it should be respected as such?

Barry 18:38

Yes. Yes. That is. And, if you were to try and bridge cultural gaps, if that's the goal in your communication, then yes, then looking at a statement like that would be to say, okay, I understand the person is probably not trying to make me feel bad, or to feel like I'm at fault for not having helped me eat within the past eight hours. So instead of directly engaging in back and forth conflict of, well, then just say you're hungry, you know? You might say, hey, you know what, in that case, let's go have lunch right now. And, we can focus on whatever we're discussing at lunch. And so, in a high context culture, the perception of that conversation would be okay, we avoided direct verbal conflict. We didn't raise tensions, but the messages were still clearly communicated and understood to the point where the problem was resolved. And like you said, you and similar to me, came from maybe more low-context, family behaviors where you got to speak up and be direct if you want an issue to get resolved.

And again, I want to be careful in this whole conversation, not to paint with too broad of a brush, because even within the United States, you have pretty big differences, as we've talked about between some cultures in the United States being more high versus low context. But generally speaking, the United States is a more low context culture where being direct is considered a more acceptable, and even, I would say, a beneficial way to communicate as opposed to being indirect. Which isn't the case, in countries that are known to be more high context, especially East Asian countries like China, Japan, South Korea, different countries in the Middle East, several different countries even in South America. So that would be, I think the best way to explain and make sense of those differences.

Jean 20:46

Is there a gender difference, broadly speaking, in high and low context?

Barry 20:52

What do you mean by gender?

Jean 20:56

Gender; in heterosexual relationships, are men or women more likely to read into the other person's statements a context that's not intended?

Barry 21:13

I'm trying to make sense of your question. So, is your question that, will people in high context cultures have a different purpose in communicating or will they filter through it differently?

Jean 21:25

Filter. I'm talking about filters.

Barry 21:27

Oh, filter. Yes. So, in terms of filter, yes, then that I think informs a lot, makes sense of a lot of the conflict between cultures. I'll give you another example here. And feel free to stop me if I'm just throwing too many examples over the place. But there was a famous incident, I don't think I brought this up in our in our last interview. But there was a famous incident in the mid-2000s, where an Iraqi journalist threw a shoe at President Bush, and President Bush dodged it. And it made, you know, relatively big world news.

Jean 22:08

I remember that.

Barry 22:09

Do you remember that? So, it made relatively big world news, but it was very, very big and hotly discussed within Iraq and different Middle Eastern cultures. And that's in large part because the act of showing someone the bottom or sole of your shoe, in high context cultures in the Middle East, like Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, or Iran, places like that, is in many ways the ultimate sign of disrespect. By throwing a shoe at President Bush, the cultural context of the journalist doing that was to say, this is in essence, the most, most direct way in my culture, I can show you disrespect by throwing a shoe at you because it implies that you're essentially worth nothing and I can step on you.

In the United States, there's not that level of like nuance that's debated with showing someone the sole of your shoe. So, if I were putting my feet up, and I were showing the sole of my shoe to someone sitting in my office here in the United States, that probably comes across as unprofessional, and a bit too lax. But if I were to do that, say to a

colleague born and raised in Iraq, that is a horrific sign of disrespect that carries large, large implications. To go back to your question of filter, you're right, high-low context definitely changes how we filter in information, because we here in the United States may have laughed at that and thought, oh, that's kind of ridiculous. Someone would throw their shoe at President Bush. But to people who knew the nuances of different Middle Eastern high context cultural values, they knew that, Wow, that was a really serious thing to do.

Jean 24:05

Okay, so with Simone Biles, the gymnast who, I can't say that fancy word, proprioception, whatever it is. Her ability to know where parts of her body are.

Barry 24:18

Oh yeah. Gosh, it'll come to me. I know what you're saying like self-awareness but in terms of self-awareness as it relates to like body positioning. Are you talking about the "twisties"?

Jean 24:32

Yes.

Barry 24:33

She said it's called, that's right, the twisties.

Jean 24:34

She dropped out because if that proprioception left, and if you're spinning in the air, you have to know where all parts of your body are. So, people were saying, there was a debate, was the reaction to what happened, was it a racial incident? And all the Black people I knew said of course, it is racial because of what she symbolizes racially in this country in the world. And I heard some Whites say, why are you putting race into this? This has nothing to do with race, right? So, that's another example of what you're talking about.

Barry 25:20

You know, unfortunately, I would agree with the sentiment that the White folks who were objecting to race being thrown in as a means of understanding how people were talking about Simone Biles and choosing not to participate, I think there is a racial element. And I think high and low context culture can explain some of it because, and this goes into deeper realm, but I know you have far more experience with it than I do. But one of the arguments made, what a lot of folks who are critiquing Simone Biles said, is that she "quit" on her team by not participating.

And that term “quit,” I think they used as a very low context direct way of saying, you abandoned your team in a time of need, and therefore didn't do your proper duty. And, there are different ways to look at it, but I would just in my understanding of the terms and read of the situation, what I think that fails to understand is the act of saying I am not okay mentally, and I cannot perform this nonverbal action is not an admission of weakness or an admission that I cannot literally do something, but that I have a larger duty and obligation to the collective, that being my team, I have a larger obligation and duty to my community to represent my community the best way I can. And if I'm not at that Olympic standard, then it is a degree of selfishness, right? It's like seeking individual attention just to pretend everything's fine and going out and doing that.

And so, I think to me, it intertwines with another element of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, which is individualism- collectivism. So, that's another kind of component to this. I think too often, especially the White folks who wanted to critique Simone Biles for “quitting,” viewed it through this very low context individualistic lens like, “you suck it up,” to obtain the individual glory to prove your greatness. And I think that is a really stigmatizing value to place on someone to have to uphold, especially when I think Simone Biles communicated pretty clearly. Look, if I'm not in the right headspace to be part of, to represent my collective team well, and if I cannot, it may seem ridiculous that, oh, why can't she do all these twists the way she normally does?

Well, those twists represent the manifestation of your own mental health and preparation. So, if you are not in the right mental state to perform that, then I think it's totally understandable in my look at it. And I think others, like you said, pointed to saying, no, that's a really selfless act on her part, to recognize that other people may be able to better nonverbally represent her community -- that being the Olympic team -- more than she could at this moment. And so, I think in a roundabout way, it is a reflection of folks who want to criticize her, not understanding. They're coming from a very specific cultural value system perspective, that individual glory of competition is the ultimate. When I think...

Jean 29:00

You froze for a minute. Okay. So, you said, begin that sentence again. You froze when you said “when I think.”

Barry 29:11

The White folks who are using essentially the value system -- and my apologies if I repeated this -- are using the value system rooted in individual achievement and performance in a very direct and clear way is the ultimate goal. Whereas Simone Biles's statements indicate more of a collectivistic high context value system which is, the

act of twisting in all these ways in gymnastics has such immense meaning in my gymnastics community for the Olympics. I have an obligation to empower others who are better able to perform it at the moment because of maybe one's own mental health than I as Simone Biles do. And I think that's where it's totally understandable. But I would agree with the Black folks that you were talking about which is this is rooted in I think an unfair characterization that Black women especially all too often have to deal with.

Jean 30:19

Say more about that last sentence.

Barry 30:22

About Black women all too often have to deal with it?

Jean 30:25

All too often, Black women have to deal with it. I'm thinking of the person who said, why in the world are you still talking race? I don't get it. So, what do you mean, all too often Black women have to deal with?

Barry 30:36

So, there's a lot of other examples I could point to on this. One is, I'm not sure if you heard, the United Kingdom they enforced -- initially before the backlash kind of put pressure on them to stop it -- they were going to have a swim cap for female swimmers to wear that essentially, not so subtly, was meant to alienate and otherize the Black women who competed for them, because the manner in which the swim caps operated just did not go with their hair.

Jean 31:14

They were too tight.

Barry 31:15

Exactly, they were too tight. And so, in that instance, it was then incumbent upon especially Black women to have to say, hey, this rule you're making about this swim cap is rooted in a very biased and discriminatory understanding of what is proper hair for competition. So that that being one example there. The second, another kind of set of examples I could point to, is the manner in which I had a student actually give a great speech on this. And she made it to pretty far in the national championship for speech and debate in 2014. And it really impacted me because when I listened to her

give the speech and hear argument, it really resonated. So, she talked about how, for the cover, I believe it was Ebony Magazine, that Beyonce had her hair that was very straightened, blonde, it wasn't at all her natural hair. And the student gave this great speech talking about how on covers of both mainstream "White magazines" as well as magazines geared towards African Americans, there's this pressure put on Black women to have hair that is straightened, have hair that is maybe blonde or lighter, and to not go with "natural hair."

And so, each of those examples, even though they're specific to hair in different contexts, what they indicate is a long litany of cases in which Black women's bodies and appearance and look is picked apart on a public stage in a public way that many other races or just even specific women are not. And unfortunately, I think that speaks to the other set of concerns related to mental health that I think not maybe not Simone Biles was intending to say, but the conversation is raised up, too often Black women based off how they look or how they act or what they say, have to endure greater scrutiny and a greater degree of, maybe, I guess scrutiny would be the best way to put it. So, I think that's an elaboration on the comment that Black women too often have to bear the brunt end of it, in part because of the long legacy of their words and their actions and how they look being picked apart to such an enormous degree.

Jean 33:50

Okay. Thank you for that. There was a great poem that was sent around Facebook and I might post it if get the permission underneath this interview. So, let's just switch gears. We just have a few minutes, but I'd love to hear you talk about this article you sent me. *Why I Do Not Apologize. Why I'll Never Apologize for My White Male Privilege*. What struck you about that article that you sent it to me? It was published in Time magazine.

Barry 34:28

It's a little on the older side now, it is from May 2014. But then I remember when it was posted. It was a big deal amongst people who were into reading and talking about discussions of White privilege. And even all these years later, it caught my eye because it was written by at the time a freshman student at Princeton, and I noticed amongst especially a lot of my more conservative friends, it being used as like, this is the Opus that irrefutably defeats discussions of White male privilege.

And in it, he makes pretty conventional arguments that I think, on the surface may sound pretty persuasive. His general argument is, I'm on campus at Princeton, people tell me as a White man, I have all this White male privilege. And what he does is he says, he goes back, researches his family history and finds out more in his family history that some were from Poland and had to escape Nazi Germany. He looked up, and he

found the history of poverty within his family. And he makes this case, and he makes the assertion that because my family faced persecution in and around the time of Nazi Germany in Poland, and because, there was not great wealth in my family throughout its entire history, that this notion of me having White privilege doesn't exist. And there are a lot of folks who lifted it up and saying, this is the definitive case against White privilege.

And I wanted to send it to you as a point of discussion, because I think it speaks to this very different understanding of what it means to have privilege and whose privilege are we talking about? And so, I talked about this article, and I sent it to my students in class before and gotten their thoughts. And when it comes time, there'll be a good amount of students, especially White students, like, Yeah, he's right. This makes a lot of sense. His family grew up poor. Of course, he doesn't really have privilege.

And I would say, well, let's look at a couple worldviews embedded in what he is saying. One is, he's looking only at his family, he's not looking at the heritage of his larger racial group that he belongs to. So, he's talking about specific folks within Poland, in this specific timeframe, that are his family and using that as the evidence to say, because my family 80 to 100 years ago went through this, this definitively says that I and others like me, who are White men, don't have privilege.

But as we were talking about in our last interview, privilege is not the degree to which you individually and your family had hardship. It's the larger structural components that explain why throughout the history of, say, a country like the United States, why is it that consistently African Americans have higher poverty rates, lower education rates, higher incarceration rates, increased rates of being killed by police officers, and being victims of police violence, higher incidences, especially Black trans women having much higher incidences of sexual assault, domestic violence than are experienced by White trans men. And the reason I bring those types of examples up, is that, it forces this discussion into a twofold component. To explain all those disparities, you would either have to prove that there are cultural deficiencies at play that explain why African Americans continue to be at a disadvantaged element in society.

Jean 38:21

I think that was the point.

Barry 38:23

And that's the thing, right? And that's where he's trying to make what we might call, he's trying to make the silent part come out loud, which is to say there are cultural deficiencies that explain this. The problem though, I mean, as you know this even better than I do, and people who study this issue know, that is rooted in this kind of eugenics,

early 20th century assumption that Black people have lower cognitive abilities, had decreased learning capacity, were essentially inferior beings.

And as we know, and we talked about this last time too, race is not primarily a biological construct, it's a sociological one. So, you can't make biological claims about someone essentially having cultural deficiencies if we know that race is not primarily biological. And so, the larger point that I bring up in regards to articles like this is, you may think you're making this really smart, nuanced point, looking to your specific family's history. But essentially, you're grounding your argument in a type of ideology, we know to be empirically false. And so, because that element of biological inferiority and cultural inferiority are rooted in these not just racist but incorrect assumptions, you then have to look at structural issues that come into play that explain these disparities. And so, I had a student, if you give me this quick story to tell, because I think this distills much more.

Jean 40:04

Let me just comment on something and then to your story. When I hear that, what he had to say, I think, number one, there's a difference between economic privilege and racial privilege, gender privilege. So, he's using the word "privilege" in a full sense without narrowing down, what kind of privileges did he have and did he not have, right? His family suffered religious persecution, so he was not privileged there. But he was privileged in all the other places. So that's one. But second, to the eugenics point you just made, in trying to establish he's not racist, he uses a racist argument. Whenever I hear people say, but I'm not privileged, I had to suffer all these things, that's a racist argument and they don't see that. Yes. Now to your story.

Barry 41:06

I had a student say, well, I knew someone who I'm going to get the exact country wrong, but essentially, it was, I knew someone who was also like White American by cultural heritage but lived in a specific South American country and I can't remember which one it was. But she made the case, look, I know that person experienced White prejudice by being White in a predominantly non-white region in that country. And so therefore, this doesn't just happen to Black folks in the United States, it can happen to White folks in other countries. And I said to her, I'm like, Okay, let's say that person wants to leave, okay? And they want to go to a country that has high levels of, say economic security, a lot of jobs, there's high degree of maybe economic opportunities. That person, by virtue of being White, can go to the United States, not experience any of those issues, go to the UK, go to France, go to these other developed Western countries.

A person who is Black in the United States, for example, has to face similar levels of bias, discrimination, and racism, if they were to flee from the United States and go to other countries. And I bring up that point to that student, because too often we have to stop talking about this approach of privilege in this very hyper specific, individualized terms. And we have to look at the broader understanding of the intersection of culture and inclusivity around the world, that that Black person who wanted to escape the United States will still unfortunately have experienced that in so many other countries, based in part because of history of colonialism, imperialism, this built in assumption that help to justify, oh, we're going to go to these countries help save these non-White folks from their ways and give them Christianity in the 1800s, right? So, that person who is African American can go to all those countries and still have to experience that.

If you were White, you have so many other countries that you can go to where no one will bat an eye. No one's going to make discriminatory statements, no one's going to judge you in such a crazy, prejudicial way grounded in the history of colonialism or imperialism, you'll be able to assimilate and fit right in so much more easily. And I think until we start talking about privilege on those larger terms, then folks like this guy here who wrote this article are going to keep making this point, without recognizing, hey, let's broaden this out beyond your family. Look at these larger structural issues as it relates to relations of cultures on a worldwide level. And that will show you that you're being very, very, very shortsighted in how you approach this.

Jean 44:22

Yes. That's beautiful. And I had not thought of it that way. Exactly. But you're right. Let's look at it, not just individual, not just family, not even just country, let's look at it on a global context. Okay. Well, is there anything else you'd like to add?

Barry 44:44

I guess the last thing I wanted to say to maybe tie a bow on my comments here. I've been thinking a lot about recently, how do you communicate in a way to get these points across to someone who has spent so much time reading articles from writers or getting a singular perspective that says (not to go into the debate over critical race theory, which is a whole other thing, I know we can probably talk about), but I've been dismayed a lot recently reading about some of the folks who are taking very hyper specific definitions of critical race theory and applying it to work being done to combat racism as a whole, with the explicit purpose of saying, invalidate this line of thinking. So that way, you don't have to be open to learning about the broader history, say of slavery or race in America.

Jean 45:45

Okay. Explain that, I'm not following that.

Barry 45:48

Oh, yeah. So, I'm sure, you've been following the debate over critical race theory that's been hotly contested about, should it be taught in high school or should it not be taught? Things like that. And, I've been seeing a lot of commenters, and again, I try not to pay too much attention to it, but Ted Cruz made the comment that people who believe in critical race theory are essentially no better than Klansmen who go around wearing white hoods. And I've been thinking a lot about, how do we get people to look beyond those types of beliefs about something like critical race theory. And this will, I think, hopefully tie back to your point about high and low context cultural values.

My hope is, if we can continue to raise awareness about more normal, everyday human interactions, and then be willing to have discussions of connecting that to larger social issues, the more people's defenses will not be up. And we instead can come to a broader level of understanding. So, my hope is, for anyone who listens to this, don't give up the fight on explaining smaller scale concepts, like high or low context cultural beliefs and values. Because if you can find areas of agreement on just the definition of those terms, and understanding how they function, that's an important first step to getting people to see, hey, something like critical race theory is not this ideology that's meant to demonize White people and make White people feel like they're the devils of the earth. But it's instead to say, let's apply smaller scale cultural differences and explain why is there this difference leading to this inequality on a social level. And if we agree that this inequality exists, shouldn't we do something to minimize it? And that's my hope is that we can take high and low cultural context values, like we've been discussing, and get people to agree on what it is. So that way, we can start being more on the same page and applying it to broader social issues.

Jean 48:05

Barry, that's why you're here.

Barry 48:08

You're right. And maybe that's the point we've been making. But that's my hope, because I myself have felt a lot of times like, Man, this is so exhausting, just to get people to understand basic things about pretty noncontroversial concepts. But, I've had good people around me. And you know, and I've had just conversations with myself, it's like, you can't give up the fight in having these conversations in a civil way. Because the more there is an agreement on smaller scale issues, the more that hopefully can pave the way for being on the same page in bigger ones. So, thank you for giving me the chance to even talk about that. I appreciate it.

Jean 48:49

Well, I share that hope. And what I want to add is, I think what you bring to the table with the high-low context discussion is an explanation. People who object to critical race theory don't have a concept of why there's even a difference in perception. Right? You're saying, here's a filter that helps explain a difference and breakdowns in communication. You've given an explanation. So, my hope is, that the more people understand why the difference even exists in perception, the better chance we have of creating the world we want to have.

Barry 49:38

Yep, I totally agree. I'm with you. Thank you again, Dr. Jean, for just giving me a chance to talk about it. Because you know, it's hard to have these type of really honest frank conversations in different arenas where we normally discuss these things. So, I appreciate that.

Jean 49:54

Well, I am so glad you're willing, and that's what we count on: courageous people all over. In my mind, I meditate daily. And one of the things I meditate on are the courageous people of all colors all around the world, who are stepping up. Who are willing to risk, take the risk of speaking their truth. So, I thank you for that.

Barry 50:23

No, thank you. And I hope you keep this up and have more people come on and talk about it, because I've listened to a few others that you've done, and it's really cool. It really is awesome to see this type of forum exist.

Jean 50:36

Okay, thank you. And thank you for that. The concept of low and high context cultures was initially hard for me to get, but I got there. In social work, we talk about contextualizing situations. It's never just two individuals talking, it is people with their different backgrounds and cultures and histories trying to communicate.

All of that is part of the conversation, whether acknowledged or not. If one person is focused just on the words and actions in this specific situation, they are using a low context frame. But if the other person from the vantage point of their histories and what is happening nonverbally, or in the background, they are using a high context frame.

What he said about Simone Biles is a great example. A low context person probably viewed her as dropping out of the Olympics, as quitting the team, they focused on that one action by her as an individual in a single timeframe. This point of view failed to take into account her broader view of how to best serve her team. She wasn't able to

give her best; if she injured herself, she would have served no one. In that broader view, staying in the contest would have meant letting the team down. She was looking at it from a broader, holistic point of view, rather than making it just about her.

Barry also talked about how a lot of White people who grew up in hardship think they don't have White privilege. As he explained, they are not viewing their lives in a broader context. They are looking just at their immediate family and their mini situation in a specific time period, rather than looking at it in a broader context. He points out that no matter how poor a White person is, they will be able to fit in and have privileges in a global context, just because they're White.

Given these differences, how do we foster racial and social justice? Barry's approach is to teach about high and low context culture. His hope is that people who view interactions through a narrow lens will come to consider the broader context. His approach has a lot of appeal to me. I hope he's right. Thank you for being here. I hope you gained as much from this conversation as I did.

Please check out Pathfinders, our membership program. You can find it on our website. Also, we would love it if you were subscribed to our blog. Thank you.