

# Reflections

## Using Reflective Practice To Understand Our Differences

By Cathleen T. Love

Examining our practice has been an ongoing part of our professional journey as family and consumer science (FCS) professionals. Examining the latest research, demographics, and trends in and outside the profession keeps us up-to-date and provides insights into how to utilize that information to serve individuals and families, who now exhibit diversity in race, ethnicity, income levels, sexual orientations, structural make ups, disability, or in other areas. Staying current is an investment in ourselves that requires vigilance and dedication. It also allows us to understand the unique needs of those we serve.

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The current unrest in our country about diversity also requires us to examine our personal beliefs and how they influence our practice. The ongoing tensions and hate crimes we are witnessing around race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious differences, income inequality, immigration, and other diversity-related issues are painful, and they are particularly important to professionals who serve individuals and families. The shootings in

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Charleston, SC, the Supreme Court rulings on marriage equality, the struggles regarding immigration reform, the police shootings that aroused protests and chants of "Black Lives Matter," and the record numbers of sexual assaults on campuses are a few examples. As a further illustration of this phenomenon, a recent New York Times/CBS poll found that six in ten Americans, including heavy majorities of both Blacks and Whites, think race relations are bad and nearly four out of ten think they are getting worse (Sack & Thee-Brenan, 2015).

As FCS professionals, it is essential that we reflect on our own mental models about diversity. Most of us hold stereotypical thoughts. Stopping to ask ourselves why we believe something, and how that stereotype might hurt others, is an essential and ongoing part of our personal and professional journey. Talking about what we are feeling and thinking helps us to more accurately see ourselves and understand where those thoughts and feelings are coming from. For example, if we have a fear of people of a different race or ethnicity, or see a negative image when we envision a transgender person, or feel discomfort with marriage equality, then examining those mental models and reflecting upon them can influence what, if anything, we want to do about those feelings and how they may influence our practice when we work with diverse populations.

Our images of the world are shaped through the culture in which we were born, and they influence the way we think, the way we interact, the way we communicate, and the way we educate the next generation. These images shape our behavior

and our attitudes because they *are* images, assumptions, and stories that we carry in our heads. Senge (1990) calls them untested and unexamined mental models that require work to bring to the surface for the purpose of exploring and talking about our differences and misunderstandings. This idea has been with us for a long time. In 1878, Helmholtz recognized the need to examine the basis of our thoughts, even though they lack critical certainty of scientific inference, because it helps us to recognize our unconscious bias and reflect on how that bias may influence our professional practice (Gigerenzer, 2007). Even when President Thomas Jefferson (1784) asked researchers to determine why the Negro was inferior, he built an unconscious bias into the research question.

The untested mental models that we carry around in our heads often come from people we love the most—parents, teachers, religious leaders, friends, mentors. It is up to us to examine our own assumptions and decide if we want to keep or change our mental models. The difficult part is remembering that our meanings, assumptions, conclusions, and beliefs are first formulated in our heads and that we create much of our experience in the world by the way we *think* about it. When mental models are not examined, they can become part of the architecture of ongoing oppression. In reporting on the racial profiling by police, for example, the director of the FBI concluded that unconscious racial bias influences policing and allows for cynicism and lazy mental shortcuts (Comey, 2015).

As FCS professionals, we need to be mindful of best practices in our field. That same mindfulness also must be applied to raise our awareness and our actions to what we know is just and right for the diverse people we serve. It is critical to our professional and personal journey that we let go of preconceived notions, be willing to discover, explore, and appreciate differences, and then take action that ensures everyone is treated fairly. That journey may require us to go places where we may not be comfortable because our mental models and unconscious biases are challenged, but it can lead to personal transformation and more authentic practice.

When we face our discomforts, we are reflecting on what causes those thoughts and feelings and where those thoughts and feelings are coming from. If we do not want to contribute to the “isms” that hurt individuals and families (e.g., racism, sexism), we must work to dismantle them. How might our language, our practice, our environment, our preconceived notions and our perceptions of the world be harmful or helpful to others? Is that what we want to be doing and if not, how do we make a change? Personal and professional reflection is one such way.

An honest discussion about difference requires using our hearts as well as our brains. As FCS professionals, we are supposed to learn the tools for success in our field. Reflection on our own cultural beliefs, and their influence on our practice, requires examining our deep and often hidden culture—our values, thoughts, and feelings—that may remain outside our conscious awareness. Valuing diversity means we must reflectively stretch ourselves by crossing boundaries that separate us from those we serve, to practice in authentic and sustained ways, and to explore differing realities of all. Using reflective practice to understand our differences allows us to begin a thought process that demands courage to face our contentious reality, the humility to admit that we do not have all the answers, and a commitment to make a change.

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