

W. Kamau Bell's Thoughts on Awkward Relationships and Bridging Differences Podcast (17:18)

[Episode 27: W. Kamau Bell's Thoughts on Awkward... \(berkeley.edu\)](#)

DACHER KELTNER: Each episode we have we put people in the position of guinea pig be the master experimenter, I guess. And you've chosen this **shared identity Exercise** and I was just thinking about doing this myself last night. And it's tough. It's got a few different steps. You know in the social scientific literature you know and this is obvious, but one of the barriers to all the good things about human beings is when you feel like you're a different tribe you know and there are literally studies that show like if I see somebody suffer, compassion regions of the brain light up. If that person's different than me, not so you know. The you know a lot of the work, other kinds of studies are really interested in how you know various kinds of things like mixed classrooms make kids have more sort of shared identities and promote prosocial behavior so it's a good thing to be thinking about. So let's walk through this together.

DACHER KELTNER: All right. So **the first thing is for you to think of a person in your life who seems really different from you** and this is like your whole show and your whole life. And they might have different interests or religious or political beliefs or life experiences. And it may even be somebody you have a conflict with and or who belongs to a group you have a conflict with and obviously you know, when you think about all the experiences you've had. African-American identity. There's a lot to bring forth here. Who comes to mind?

W. KAMAU BELL: The first to answer is my wife's grandfather although he passed away very not that long ago so and also by the time he passed away we had resolved a lot of it and a lot of it had been resolved.

DACHER KELTNER: So **next stop make a list of all the things and this may be a historical exercise for you, where you share in common with this person.** And then you know is it same work, same company, same school, you have children, maybe you both had heart your heartbroken at one time, we're all part of the human species. So things that you share. So what would those be?

W. KAMAU BELL: We were both really committed family men. I think he recognized that in me the more the way that he knew me like when Melissa, when we started having kids. Like he could tell that I was like out there working hard to be, to provide for my family. So both fathers obviously. Both funny. He was like the funny grandfather.

DACHER KELTNER: What else? How else do you resemble this grandfather?

W. KAMAU BELL: Strong willed certainly. I mean he was strong willed in a Fox News way and I'm strong willed and in a, "Why can't we be friends," way. It is sort of like, can't we hug it out? Can't we make more space for more people? But certainly I think we both had strong wills and also really care a lot about my wife, Melissa. So that was another thing that like our issues came from both of us probably caring, not too much, but just caring so much about her. And finally what happened is that Thanksgiving was coming up one year. And I was like, "Well, I won't be going because I don't go to those." And she was just like, "Enough!" And she, I think she sent him a letter or called him. And it really laid it out like, "You have to stop doing this." Like basically, "You will not see me and Kamau at Thanksgiving or whatever events again." And that really struck him. And I think he called her like totally broke down and was just like, "I've been foolish." And it was so simple, like we went

to Thanksgiving. We walked into this house and he just sort of like said to Melissa, “Hey, hi, good to see you,” and give her a kiss and said, “Happy Thanksgiving,” to me. We shook hands. It was like, that’s it. And it didn’t all immediately change, but it was very, that was when things changed. But then by the time he passed away it was like I was one of the pallbearers at his funeral, because I was one of the grandsons at that point.

DACHER KELTNER: Wow. So you went from avoiding each other to being a pallbearer at his funeral. That’s very humbling. So **the final step in the Shared Identity practice is this: reflect on the commonalities you’ve identified with this person. How do they make you see him in a new light?**

W. KAMAU BELL: He was really always pride to find himself as a family man first over everything else. And and and really wanted the best. Even if he didn’t know how to get there. You know what I mean? Knowing the impact he had on Melissa, knowing the impact it had on my two youngest, my two older kids. And also like having had moments with him. Towards the end it was like we’re like in the last few years where he would call me his grandson. It sort of showed me the power that people can be, you can redeem a bad relationship.

KAREEM JOHNSON: What we did was try to manipulate people’s moods, we put people in a positive mood or a fearful mood or a more neutral mood and then give them a classic facial memory task, but have them memorize a set of or learn and try to learn a set of faces that would be of the same race as them and face they’ll would be of a different race than themselves. And typically when given this task people are terrible terrible is too strong a term. People are much worse at recognizing other races than members of their own race which is why we have this saying they all look the same to me. And remarkably in our research we show that if you can get people in a positive mood. Importantly if you can make good laugh that they no longer seem to pay attention to race so much. What has happened? Because they haven’t changed anything other than their mood. And so there must be something about emotions, and how they make us label and categorize that maybe kind of underlying why we get this difference in recognition. Facial recognition in general is something that we do, you could call holistically. The downside to this holistic perception of faces is that we don’t do it for faces of a different race as much as we do it for faces of our own race.

When we’re in a more positive mood we seem to not care so much about boundaries that divide groups. We start to see similarities across categories as opposed to focusing on differences. So maybe that good moods let us see people as people as opposed to black people and white people. If I see you as, “Oh you’re one of those.” And then I react on the basis of “Oh you’re one of those,” then that’s who you are. One of those. You’re not Kamau, you’re not Kareem. And so I think what positive emotions are doing, I think with this shared identity exercise is doing this is letting us see people for their full humanity not as a representation of a label that that we’re giving them. And I think one reason why positive motions can do this is that in essence what positive results are telling us that everything’s OK. You’re safe. There’s something about sharing a laugh with someone that makes you, you know, like them

Moral Reframing

If you're trying to appeal to people with a different ideology, try to discover what values resonate with them—then present your argument in terms of how it supports those values, not in terms of your own values.

How to Do It

First, it's important to make sure the values or morals you believe others have aren't based on your own assumptions or stereotypes. You can do this by asking questions like, "What are important values that you try to uphold in your life?" and "Who taught you those values, or what experiences formed those values for you?"

Next, think about how those values might be the same or different from your own; you might discover that you have more in common than you initially thought. If they seem very different, then consider how those values might shape the issues you care about. You don't need to agree with those values. The point of this exercise is to understand them.

Once you understand their values, you might even find yourself better able to make yourself and your opinions understood by the other person. Even if you fail to persuade them to your position, you'll have gained something from arguing from a position of empathy rather than hostility.

Why Try It

Typically, when we discuss the issues we care about, we tend to give our own reasons, based on our own morals or values. However, we sometimes forget that the people we're talking to might not share these same morals or values. The purpose of this practice (sometimes referred to as "[moral reframing](#)") isn't to simply persuade another person to agree with you; rather, it's to help them understand where you're coming from and to understand where they're coming from. Ultimately, this practice enables you to have more civil and less polarizing political conversations, even if you don't ultimately agree on the issue.

Keep in Mind

"Moral reframing" can be used to win someone over to your position, but try to remember that understanding, not persuasion, is the goal here.