



Transcript

Episode 02, Part 1: I Am Canadian, with Dr. Rehman Abdulrehman

Intro

[Intro music plays]

Rosie: Welcome to Changing Lenses! I'm on a personal journey to explore how we can make our world more inclusive and compassionate, and our lives more fulfilling and sustainable. Along the way, I'm meeting some amazing Canadians doing amazing things! By listening to their stories and experiences, I hope we will change our lens to see from a more inclusive perspective, and be inspired to build a better world.

I'm your host, Rosie Yeung, and I invite you to join me as we change our lenses together. Because changing our lens, changes what we see. And when we see differently, we can live differently.

[Intro music ends]

Welcome and Introduction [00:00:47]

Rosie: Hi, and thanks for joining us on this episode of Changing Lenses! Today is part one of our talk with Dr. Rehman Abdulrehman, a consulting and clinical psychologist and public speaker, with a special focus on diversity and inclusion. He combines his significant clinical skills with his lived experience as both a person of color and an immigrant, to help people better understand microaggressions, privilege, representation, and culture.

Dr. Abdulrehman has consulted with such organizations as the CBC, the Mastercard Foundation, and the RCMP, and was a speaker at the Winnipeg TedX Talks, which you can watch on YouTube. Dr. Abdulrehman currently lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where he runs a psychology clinic, is an Assistant Professor at the University of Manitoba, as well as a visiting professor at two universities in Tanzania.

He is also a subject matter expert on unconscious bias for Google and YouTube. And if all that wasn't enough, in his "spare time" he co-hosts a podcast about diversity and inclusion called Different People. Phew! With such a busy schedule, I'm so honoured that he made time to join us today.

Dr. Abdulrehman, welcome and thank you so much for being here!

Rehman: Thanks for having me.

Rosie: Awesome. So today, and actually, just to clarify for our audience because I don't want to sound disrespectful, but is it all right if I drop the doctor and just call you Rehman?



Rehman: Oh please, yeah, absolutely.

Rosie: OK. Just so everybody knows he's a very highly respected doctor, but we're going to be, you know, speaking in very friendly terms today.

Rehman: Absolutely.

Safe Space Commitment [00:02:20]

Rosie: So I will be talking with Rehman about his professional and personal experiences with inclusion and discrimination. And if you've listened to his podcast at all, which we'll link to in the show notes, you'll know that discussing this topic can be uncomfortable and difficult and requires courage and vulnerability.

So before we really dive in, there's something that I want to share with our guests and our listeners on every episode.

Some of what we discuss might be sensitive or challenging for us to say, and for our listeners to hear. But I really want us to have an open and genuine conversation. One goal of Changing Lenses is to be a safe space for these conversations and for us to be our real selves.

So Rehman, I welcome you and our listeners into this safe and brave space. And I invite you to call me out if I say anything inappropriate or use the wrong terms.

Rehman: Thank you.

Rosie: OK. So it's just laying that groundwork because I want to make sure people feel comfortable. And maybe you could start us off, Rehman. I have so many questions that I want to ask you. I think this will be a really interesting discussion.

Perhaps you could just ease us into this, by giving us a little bit more about your really interesting background. A practicing clinical psychologist who is also a consultant and specializes in diversity and inclusion. How did you end up going down this path, and what part of your personal journey led you here?

Rehman's motivation for his work [00:03:38]

Rehman: Yeah, that's a good question. It's been one thing unfolding after the next, that happened to fortuitously kind of work together. So, my training is as a clinical psychologist, with a predominant expertise on anxiety, trauma. But with a particular lens on how to work on those things is what we call cognitive behavior therapy, which is a very evidence-based practice in helping people shift cognitive emotional and behavioural perspectives. So ultimately psychologists are meant to help create change.



So as I did that work, I ended up working a lot more with leadership and with larger organizations, particularly started with health. I did a lot of program development in Tanzania, in low resource settings. So I ended up consulting to organizations there.

And then I moved into leadership, both as the President of our local Psychological Society, and then into leadership with the American Psychological Association, with the Council of International Relations and Psychology. So that all started to get me into working with organizations. So my work was starting to shift from addressing mental health individually, to working with large groups and program development, when it came to mental health.

Now in the background, I've always had an interest in, uh, had some experience and training in cross-cultural psychology. Being a Person of Colour, having been an immigrant at one point in time, being a religious minority – I mean this was really a strong point of interest for me.

So that's always there, but it's all always been something I did kicking and screaming. Because I kind of resented the fact that, these issues fell in the laps or the hands of People of Colour. You know, why does the Brown guy have to be the one who has to do this when this should be an issue that affects all of us? So I did it, but I tended to turn down work.

But things started to shift in, you know, once society, you know, 9-11 happened. There were shootings left, right, and centre. Racism and discrimination was being called out more. And all that was still really important for me to talk about, but what changed for me that led me to do this work more formally, was that I had a child.

And I noticed my son saying things that as a Person of Colour, I had gotten used to. Like his awareness of racism, or the impact of systemic racism on his identity, was something I began to notice. And so, I recognized also that there was something that I could bring to the table, and that was the lived experience.

And so yes, I have the training as a psychologist, but that lived experience was critical to the discussion of D&I work. And so it was probably as important, if not more important, than the clinical training that I had.

Discrimination is having to explain to a White person why you want more privilege for your kid [00:06:34]

And so I decided to take a venture into this work to try to help shift things as quick as I could to move the needle as much as I could. To help make – I mean it sounds cliché, but I mean, to make the world a better place for my kid.

Rehman: I remember speaking with one of my colleagues at a consulting psychology conference, and they asked me to join a committee. And I made a comment about, you know, it was tiring to do some of that work, but my focus right now was on increasing the privilege for my kid. And I think that



colleague took it a wrong way, like I was just looking to kind of advance myself. And I think that colleague missed the point; it was a white woman.

And my point being, is that my focus wasn't – I didn't want it to just have no purpose anymore. I wanted to literally improve the privilege of my child, because as People of Colour, when we're born into, I'd say globally, but more particularly the Western world, where we're minorities, we lose a lot of privileges. We don't have the benefits. And so my focus is to try to remove some of those barriers so that we have equal levels of privilege.

So that, that's me.

Rosie: Wow. OK, uh, just digesting that right now. And I really want to thank you for being so open and personal with us and sharing your story.

Rehman: It's no problem.

Rosie: And what a, you know, what a sad but true, that it takes a child to point out things that we've just maybe become numb to, or just sadly become resigned to.

Because, you know, when we were children, when it probably, it was probably just as prominent and notable to us.

Rehman: Right.

Rosie: And when you told that story about, you know, telling your White female colleague that you wanted more privilege for your child, I did have to think about it as well, but I did get it.

Cause you're talking about starting from not having very much privilege, or no privilege, to giving your child some privilege. And to a White person who frankly, already has privilege, that might come off as like, well, you're just, you know, you're trying to get too much, or you're like being a bit selfish, or self-centered about that.

Rehman: Selfish. Yeah.

Rosie: But actually you're just trying to get to zero, let alone, you know, plus 10 on the scale, where other people might already be at.

Rehman: Yeah.

Rosie: I don't know, is that – am I just – I don't want to put words in your mouth, but –

Rehman: No, that's absolutely true. And like this colleague was actually – like I really like this colleague. I think this colleague is a very kind person, generally speaking. And I would see somebody who, I think, she considers herself an ally. But I think she missed that concept of White privilege, and White privilege is something that I think is so foreign to people who even experience it. It's more visible to people who don't have it. You know, when you live with it your entire life, it's – it's invisible to you.



And, you know, the look I got was kind of disgust, like I was so self-centered. And it occurred to me, you know, cause we were at the airport, we were leaving a conference, that she misunderstood. I assumed that because she was an ally and was interested in issues of D&I that that would've made sense to her, but it didn't.

And you know, it underlines or underscores the necessity, or the sadness, that as People of Colour, we have to always explain ourselves, you know? I was like, oh geez, now I have to explain why I want to focus on my kid. Which is a natural thing, I would say. But more so because I've witnessed the removal of his identity, the erasure of opportunities for him as a little boy, simply because he is a Person of Colour and a religious minority.

The greatest privilege for your child [00:10:21]

Rosie: Mm-hm. So when you say that you want to – you want your son to have more privilege, what would that look like? Like if the world was fair, and he was able to have that better life that you're hoping for him.

Rehman: Yeah. Well, one of the greatest privileges I want for him is for him to have an education, but also have a head start in leadership, and the ability to speak out for himself.

I think the greatest privilege I could offer him – yeah I may not be able to change the world, but I can try to make some movement – but the greatest privilege I think I could offer him as a father, would be the ability to speak out for himself.

And I grew up a fairly shy kid. Actually quite shy, perhaps I might even say socially anxious. Who had a lot of ideas, but never felt comfortable saying them. And because I always saw myself as different, I never saw my – like if I were to be honest, I never really saw myself as having a place at the table. Like nobody wanted to hear my voice. And I think that's true, because I think when I did exercise moments of that, they weren't necessarily encouraged, you know. Whereas if White kids spoke up, those are very much encouraged.

Rosie: Mm-hm.

Rehman: I don't mean to go off, I'll give you an example.

Discriminating against a child [00:11:39]

Rehman: I remember when I first moved to Canada, I was in this class for Grade 3. And there was a kid, a girl who had some flowers in the class, and she kept sniffing them. And now she also has a very bad runny nose, and this is an ongoing thing with this poor kid. Now that I think back about it, I feel kind of bad for the kid, I don't think she was well cared for.



But nonetheless she was sniffing these flowers, and as she was sniffing them was like – sniffing the mucus up. And I couldn't focus on my work. So I asked the teacher, I said, could you please tell so-and-so to stop smelling those flowers.

Now I was a kid. So of course, I said whatever kid-like statement. And instead of redirecting me or saying, you know – the statement, cause I was clearly an immigrant kid, from the teacher was:

[in a pompous-sounding voice] "How dare you say that! Those are –" (and they were actually, she was sniffing lilacs) – those are the provincial flower of Manitoba! How dare you say that!"

Rosie: [Laughs]

The (real) provincial flower of Manitoba [00:12:44]

Rehman: So it wasn't about behaviour, or allowing room for people to be who they are, or anything like that. It was that I had, as a foreigner, had insulted the – in her perception, the provincial flower. But here's the thing – lilacs are not the provincial flower of Manitoba, crocuses are.

Rosie: Oh!

Rehman: So...

Rosie: [Laughs] Wow, so...a pretty bad teacher in so many ways.

Rehman: Right, and so it's an example where, you know, we're not given that space at a very young age. And so, for me, the privilege that I think I would want for my son is the ability to speak up.

And to be heard. Not just to use his voice, but to be heard.

Rosie: Thank you for sharing that. And feel free to bring up as many stories about your experience as are relevant, because this is also what I really want people to be able to hear, is the Canadian perspective.

Rehman: Mm-hm.

Rosie: And I was actually, I was like, all excited. I was like – oh, I learned something, I learned what the provincial flower of Manitoba is. But I was like, oh, yes, now I have to remember that it's the crocus, it's not the lilac.

Rehman: Yeah.

Rosie: But the sad thing for me is that when you talk about this, what privilege for your son would be like, or you wish that you had this privilege as a child yourself. And then thinking about again, your White colleague, not to pick on her, but anybody. That's – to people who already have that, that's not even privilege. In my mind, that's not a privilege, to be able to raise your hand and say, "Hey, I'm being troubled by another person's behavior in class", you know, very innocently.



And then, basically being turned around and have that being you being anti-Canadian or whatever it is. I think that's also where – this is why it's important to talk about racism in Canada and what that looks like. Like this - I get that. And these things are in some ways subtle, like they're not subtle to you, because you really felt it and it impacted you. But I – Do you have a lot more of these examples?

Rehman: Oh yeah, I mean –

Rosie: You don't have to tell them all, but I think this is what I want to get across to anyone who doesn't understand what is meant by racism in Canada, and systemic racism.

Rehman: Yeah, I mean racism – There's a great sense of entitlement in people who have privilege and they don't even recognize it, you know? And I was just a kid then.

Real-life discrimination today (in Canada, in 2020) [00:14:58]

Rehman: I'll give you an example of me as a grownup doctor, just two days ago.

I had a technician from a hospital contact me directly instead of the main office, asking for me in a – not a very polite way. Clearly stumbling all over my name. And I understand, my name is not the easiest to pronounce for people, but you know, wasn't apologetic about it. And it was like, well, whatever, I just want to speak to this person.

And so I said, "OK well that's me, but it's pronounced Abdulrehman."

And he's like, "Yeah, well, whatever. Are you that doctor."

And I said, "Yes, that's me, but I might –" (and then I got frustrated and said), "I might encourage you to actually try to practice pronouncing a name before you call somebody instead of doing it."

And he's like, "Look, am I talking to the right person or not, just I need to get through the thing. Why are you not with the College of Physicians and Surgeons?" And proceeded to berate me.

And I said, "I'm not in the list of the college of physicians and surgeons because I'm a psychologist."

"Well, that explains the conversation I'm having with you right now."

Rosie: Oh. My. Goodness.

Rehman: You know? Now –

Rosie: No. Oh. Oh, if people could see me, my head is in my hands! Like, no, I can't – two days ago, this happened two days ago?!

Rehman: Two days ago, yeah. And this is a person calling me. This is a professional conversation, you know, from one professional to another –

Rosie: Supposedly professional, yeah.



Rehman: Supposedly – so these things do exist. And so, you know, my day is disrupted. But the thing is that – we have to get used to – we get used to this. People of Colour get used to this. You carry on, you move forward. And it just becomes a part of your day. And I'd say privilege is not even having that experience.

So privilege is also about educating people. And that's the reason why I do this work is – so this awareness, so – it's not just about also speaking up for my kid, but for somebody to be aware of that issue.

And what it says to me, psychologically speaking, is that individual did not see a value in my point of view. There was no apology. There was like no, "Oh my God, I'm sorry. I mispronounced your name."

Actually, he did say I'm sorry. He's like, "OK, I'm sorry, all right? Can we just move forward?"

And I was like, Oh, OK, well, yeah.

Rosie: [Laughs] Oh, so sincere...

Rehman: So privilege is also about, you know, this idea of being recognized. And you talked about earlier, you talked about this sense of the Canadian experience.

And I am Canadian, you know, I am Canadian through and through, I identify as Canadian. But who we see as Canadian, what we see as Canadian is not typically people like you and me, Rosie, you know.

We are allowed into the experience of being Canadian when we quote unquote "adopt" Canadian values, as if Canadian values are somehow that different than the values of people, anywhere in the world or any, or within any community in Canada. Um, yeah. Anyhow.

Rosie: And I mean, experiences like that, like what just happened to you and – you know, just to clarify, we're still in 2020. This is two days ago, but it's still in 2020.

After George Floyd, after we just had another – in the U.S., but another police attack on a Black man, on Jacob Blake. And within the outcry and all the public awareness, supposedly, going on. About how we need to be more welcoming, and inclusive, and you know, take some time to care, just – at least show sensitivity and kindness towards each other – and this happens!

Like, it makes you kind of think, well, what does it take to be accepted, and be Canadian? And like you, on paper – so, so fine, you're not a medical doctor. But we went through all the other things that you did at the beginning of this podcast. That practically took up the whole podcast already because you do so many things! You speak with a quote unquote "Canadian accent". It's like – what else do you have to do?

What else do People of Colour have to do to finally be considered Canadian?

Rehman: Yeah, I don't think there's ever a point that we would be, at least not at the present time. I think there are certain things that afford us increased privilege. And sometimes that's about changing our names, adopting a different set of values or practices, but it never fully pulls us into the circle. It



just allows us a closer view of the warm fire everybody is sitting around. But never quite in the inner circle.

And you know, Rosie, you and I have had a conversation about this in the past. I think even in Asian culture, you know, that there's a putting aside of the Chinese name and you have your English name.

I mean myself included, I grew up – I was named Abdulrehman, which is the same as my last name. I grew up in a British colonized country. And my great-grandfather suggested to shorten the name on paper because it was too quote unquote "old fashioned", to just Rehman. But I went to British schools and they could never say that. So they called me Rehman [sounds like "Ray-Man"]. And so I kind of grew up with that.

And although I generally prefer Abdulrehman, I also prefer a lack of conflict [chuckles]. And so, how many times do I have to normalize my name so people can pronounce it? And is that burden just on me, or is it on everybody?

And so, when I say my name "Ray-Man", or I speak with a quote unquote "Canadian" accent, those are elements of privilege that can be afforded to me. That people assume that I am, you know, more Canadian, less Muslim, less a Person of Colour, less of an immigrant. And somehow I've accommodated myself to become more Canadian.

When really, for me, being Canadian is being very proudly Muslim, being a person of Zanzibari descent, being a Person of Colour. And having the name Abdulrehman, that is for me, a very proudly Canadian thing. I can't separate the experience of being Muslim and a Person of Colour and being Canadian. To me, there is no other experience.

And yet people have this egocentric point of view where to them, being Canadian is being like them.

Rosie: Mm. Yeah and it's funny, cause to me, being Canadian...A typical Canadian to me is someone who immigrated from another country. Or maybe their parents immigrated from another country. And they perhaps grew up here and they went to school here. But that is actually part of the Canadian identity now, is that none of us, other than Indigenous people, came from Canada, strictly speaking.

Rehman: Yeah. Well, Stats Canada will confirm that. That really truly, Canada is a nation of immigrants. And like most of us, not beyond the second or third generation, right? Like we're all relatively recent immigrants of one form of the other. The majority of us are, according to Stats Canada.

The false truth of a multicultural Canada [00:21:48]

Rehman: But yet people will afford one culture as a prevalent culture for Canadian culture, one set of practices over another, including over Indigenous people. If you look at holidays celebrated alone, if you look at the holidays we celebrate in our annual calendar, they reflect a Eurocentric tradition, or a White tradition.



National Indigenous People's Day is not even a public holiday. I think they're working on trying to get it, but they've had to go through so much. Why are people – Why is the Indigenous community having to work so hard to get a day to acknowledge the First People as a national civic holiday? And yet you have to go through these – this shouldn't be a process, this should be an automatic. And they shouldn't be the ones advocating for it, everybody else should be.

And again, it speaks to that – that normality, or what we consider normal. What we consider normal is what belongs to the culture, the religions, the practices, a way of life, and the world view of one group of people.

In Canada, we claim to be multicultural, and we are not. We are multi-ethnic; we've always had that diversity, but we are certainly not multicultural. We are unicultural. We will look down our noses at the Americans and say, "Oh, they're a melting pot, we are a mosaic." We are not a mosaic, I assure you that.

You speak to any Person of Colour, who's had to put aside their needs and their wants and their interests, of the clothing they wear, the holidays they try to get taken off at work, or at schools. And they will tell you, this is not a multicultural country.

That is rhetoric we are fed. That is a false truth.

Interlude [00:23:36]

[interlude music plays]

[interlude music fades out]

Rosie: Thanks for tuning in to part 1 of this episode with Dr. Rehman Abdulrehman. Please listen in next week for part 2, when we'll talk about religious discrimination, Rehman's radical ideas for paid holidays, and a surprising difference he's experienced between Americans and Canadians. So stay tuned!

Outro

[outro music plays]

Rosie: Thanks for joining us! I hope today's episode helped to change your lens, and expand your worldview. If you enjoyed listening, please rate and subscribe to Changing Lenses, available wherever you get your favourite podcasts.

For more about how I'm changing my lens, please check out my website at changinglenses.ca. You'll also find the shownotes and transcripts for each episode, and you can leave comments or questions, or send me a message – I would love to hear from you!

I'm Rosie Yeung, inviting you to join me for the next episode of Changing Lenses. Until then, take care!

[outro music ends]