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Being Different: A Theoretical Perspective

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"You're Jewish, aren't you?" asked the friendly secretary from the office next door. "Yes, at least culturally, though not very religiously," I replied, trying to explain that I definitely was Jewish, although I had not set foot into a synagogue to worship in the 20-plus years since I moved here. "Oh, good," she responded, "I need a Jewish minister to say grace at our interfaith banquet next month, and there aren't any Jewish churches here in town."

I told her that although I had not been in any of them, I was sure there were several synagogues in town. When I suggested she try the yellow pages, she said she had already looked: "That's how I knew there weren't any," she said smugly. I borrowed her telephone book and looked up "synagogues" and found a listing for five; I gently suggested that perhaps the spelling had proven difficult.

She complained that she had looked under "churches" ("where they all should be") and demanded to know why "Jewish churches" weren't in there among all the others.

When I tried to explain that churches were for Christians and that Jews were not Christians, at least not any more(!), she said it made no sense, and seeming dismayed, pouted, "Why couldn't they put their list in with all the others rather than confusing people by keeping apart?"

She, the friendly secretary from next door, who I truly like and who I am certain meant me no personal harm, had absolutely no idea what her words precipitated in me, based on my own childhood years of suffering and later adult anger in reaction to taunts, caution, fears, and, at times, physical pain based on living in Ku Klux Klan territory, where Jews were considered Blacks-with-white-faces, and treated just as horribly. She of prejudice-by-innocence, ignorance-by-default, and "attitude"-by-accident, had no idea how I had suddenly grown chilled inside and was quickly jolted back to early survival patterns of feeling that I had to be cautious and "on-guard" and other feelings that she, the nice Christian lady who really, honestly, means no harm to Jews, had un-

knowingly caused to surface in me. She who was trying to be liberal in the first place.

Our actual conversation continued without any break. All the above happened in the microsecond it took for me to feel pushed to the outside edge of her boundary of what was usual, normal, and expected, regardless of her not intending this, while she never knew it had happened. This exclusion-through-dominant-group-marginalization often happens without the "do-er" knowing they have done anything at all. They think they are just having a conversation, but if you, the reader, are "different" in any way (i.e., not part of the mainstream culture), you know exactly what I am talking about, and you know exactly how it feels.

Ordinary conversations, which can appear to one party to be a mutually shared communication (while the other party may be recoiling in horror), may sometimes result in just such consequences. For those of us who use verbal interactions as our means of helping others, it is crucial to understand what it means to be different in ways that we may not be sensitive to, as well as the kind of feelings that arise outside our awareness in response to our innocently delivered words. These reactive feelings are part of the therapeutic reality, whether or not we are aware of them.

Being "different" means simply that one is different from others, somehow. Sometimes both parties agree that actual difference is there and has differential meaning and thus consequence. Sometimes one person knows it and the other remains oblivious; and, even more difficult, sometimes significant difference is causing dissonance at unconscious levels without either party being aware that it is an activating part of a problem. Whether this difference automatically signals a "right-versus-wrong" bipolar forced choice, or whether this difference makes something better or worse, resides within each perceiver and his or her underlying values. These values are by no means universal or conscious.

But regardless, it is perception itself upon which reality is based. Reality is consensus of agreement about experiences and their meaning, shared understandings upon which further interactions occur. Basic existential theory teaches that as you perceive, you literally bring into existence that which you believe to be real. Differences you perceive will be those you notice and pay attention to (consciously or unconsciously), while those differences which do not make any difference to you will not be noticed, and thus are not accepted as existing in the first place. Very simply, those differences that don't matter, don't.

Differences which selectively make a difference can have a powerful impact on those forced to the margins of mainstream society (Hall, 1969, 1973; Henley, 1977; Mayo & Henley, 1981; Weitz, 1976). Many recent postmodernist theorists have addressed how the deconstruction of meaning from a stimulus event or person, or category of being, mandates consequences beyond mere behavior (Burgin, 1989; Carr-Harris, 1984; Watney, 1987).

Both postmodernist and phenomenological theory deal with how meaning is constructed into that which we think we are seeing "as it already is." We encounter something, and what we "get" is not just there on its own; rather, we contribute a great deal to the meaning which we think we are getting from that stimulus object or person; we actually "construct" its meaning. As we discover something new we try to make

sense of it; we mentally take it apart, "deconstructing" it to see how it makes sense to us. This is a human trait embedded in all of us.

One particular application of these theories has appeared in numerous writings about the construction of gender, the meaning of what it is to be a woman or man, and expectations about what males or females can or should do. From the moment of birth, boys and girls are enculturated into roles that society defines as appropriate for them, based on their genital configuration. It only gets worse as they grow older. Several current feminist-based theorists discuss the construction of gender and sex-based roles (Benjamin, 1984; Frieze & Ramsey, 1976; Gilligan, 1982; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988). They consider women and homosexuals from the contexts of power and family dynamics that have grown out of cultural, religious, and societal assumptions, which themselves may have evolved from basic fear or threat of that which is unfamiliar or uncommon. *Being* and *acting* are not the same thing. Holding beliefs and attitudes based on underlying values can mandate behaviors which may not be acceptable in mainstream society simply because they are uncommon ones rather than right or wrong ones.

We often notice difference and do not quite know how to evaluate it. If we already have a preestablished framework within which to examine it for meaning and value, we use that framework. But if there is something new encountered with which we have no previous experience, human instinct warns us to be careful, to be suspicious, and to find out if this new thing is some sort of threat or danger. Anthropologists say this is a primal instinct for protection or survival. The same theorists also discuss how primal habits, such as urinating on others' territory or fighting to the death over mating rights, have evolved into more civilized and socialized habits which mask those earlier drives into more socially acceptable behaviors (Hall, 1969, 1973; Morris, 1967).

Those whose values are in the majority usually dominate the rules by which society is run; those who write the rules usually win the arguments. If something new or unexpected appears, it is always examined from the viewpoint of what already exists. What already exists serves as the current standard for evaluation. If it is different, and therefore thought to be a threat, it is usually ostracized, disempowered, excluded, deemed wrong/bad/immoral, or even worse.

An excellent example of this in North America is the routine murder by Christian explorers of those "two-spirited" native peoples whose identities did not fit with what they knew about how people "ought to be" (Tafuya, 1993; Williams, 1986). It is interesting to note that today some of those same cultures still include the possibility of seven separate genders instead of what most of us have been raised to believe. It is just that they have learned not to discuss this with outsiders who would not understand—for example, that "two-spirited" is *not* the same as the non-Native convenient label of "bisexual." Rather, it is something completely different, a lot more complex, and worthy of understanding for its own value (especially by those individuals who find themselves not quite fitting the current triumvirate of being either "gay," "straight," or "bisexual," as the *only* choices available).

Who one is inside (identify, self-concept) is also partially defined externally by social guidelines that assign values to that identity based on surrounding societal and cultural

norms. Whether or not we fit into these norms, our identity is also partially formed in response to these externalized attitudes. Some of the earliest writings about stigma (Goffman, 1963) suggest that people who are "invisibly different" may be able to "pass" without being known to be different. However, they nevertheless encounter stereotyping and prejudicial reactions much the same as those who are visibly different minorities, such as racially or physically challenged people.

Growing up Jewish in Texas was a quick lesson in being different, knowing I was definitely different, yet not necessarily looking or acting different from those around me. I had a privileged difference, one which could be kept invisible unless I trusted enough to let it out to those who I knew would judge me for myself, rather than preconceived prejudices. This "passing" made life easier in many ways, but left me baffled about consequent complications such as how I then should react when hearing others' anti-Semitic remarks.

Inner beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions form the definition of who we are inside. If these are different from those held by the surrounding society, the "norm," they are seen as not normal. But being different from the majority does not automatically equal abnormal, whether we are talking about homosexuals being hated by others or whether we are referring to those others being judged by their own victims via reverse stigmatization.

Being marginalized (pushed out of the mainstream) usually means also being disempowered from rightful participation in society. Becoming the "other" who has been sectioned off into a category of difference also forces a generalization syndrome whereby all in that category are reduced to stereotypes and simplistic reductionistic characterization. In the case of racial minorities or physically challenged people, such differences are visible. But, for those who can pass if they choose (such as Texan Jews, especially my red-haired, blue-eyed cousin, who always confounded the Klan), there is a complicating factor of self-hate, which is internalized from outsiders, that can also result in shame and disguise.

I have explained above my viewpoint that all facts exist only in cultural and situational contexts; all truth is relative to the reality filters used by each person perceiving it. This becomes significant when trying to figure out how it is that people do happen to voluntarily change their minds. It is even more relevant for those of us whose work occasionally involves trying to get them to do so, assuming we have the right to decide they should! The following example illustrates such a situation.

To this day, my father thinks that African Americans are a separate race halfway between humans and apes. No amount of logical reasoning, scientific fact-producing, or first-hand introductions to my Black friends, who obviously do not fit his stereotype, has managed to change his mind one bit, though he has learned not to express those views out loud when I am around. What do I do with him? Do I try to force him to change his mind, to overpower his will by greater force? As a psychotherapist, I do not believe in trying to force mind-changes. I learned long ago that this does not work. Instead, it only produces resistance equal to the force being externally inflicted.

Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) repositions personal change from behavioral to cognitive and value-based contexts. It suggests that in order to change internally, people

must come to that change through natural process. This can happen by encountering internal, and usually initially unconscious, dissonance between two simultaneously held conflicting views. More often, it happens by encountering new behaviors which then produce new perceptions that alter inner beliefs and the deeply unconscious, nonverbal values which underlie them.

People often react to others who are significantly different by feeling threatened by something which is simply new and out of the ordinary to them. But this does not automatically mean that the person who appears to be different actually intends to signal any threat by their presence (Moustakas, 1972).

Phenomenological theory suggests that meaning is created within each perceiver in response to a sensory catalyst and that different people can have radically different interpretations of an identical stimulus. For example, the value of a photograph lies not in the visual "facts" inside its borders, but rather in what these mean in the mind of each viewer. Its value lies more in what it is a photograph *about* than what it is a photograph *of* (Weiser, 1993). Similarly, what a word signals (for example: "suitcase," "AIDS," "bald," "dog," "menopause") is much more than its specific physical parameters. Regarding a phenomenological perspective about any kind of difference, including, and especially, homosexuality, it is not *being* and *acting* physically or culturally different that seems to be the issue, but rather what this difference *means* in the minds of both that person and those others encountering her or him.

From this it is simple to grasp that, objectively, being different does not automatically mean being wrong or being bad. *Being* different is not the issue, but rather how that difference affects others. Far too often we forget that the responsibility for our reactions lies in ourselves, not the person to whom we are reacting. There is a difference between significant and insignificant differences (i.e., differences that matter and those that do not). Therein lie the roots of stigma, phobia, prejudice, marginalization, and, ultimately, disempowerment and hatred. For example, does it matter to you that "homophobia" does not appear as a legitimate word in the dictionary of Microsoft Word's spelling-checker? Should it? Why or why not?

It is sometimes easier and more acceptable for those in the mainstream of society to be liberal about demanding full human rights for those who are visibly handicapped or racially different from themselves. This is because their view of "those people" is from an outside, privileged, and "safe" perspective. Not coincidentally, this position is also one from which they can clearly be seen as *not* belonging to that group of marginalized/excluded "others" (outsiders) because they do not look like those people.

However, if there are "invisible" groups who are perceived as possibly threatening (Jews, gays, lesbians, Nazi sympathizers, Mennonites, non-Caucasian people who happen to look Caucasian, Northern Irish, whatever—i.e., those people who are different in personally significant, yet nonvisible, ways), then the mainstream may not be quite so strident in its willingness to publicly support these "others." Why? Simply because there is less clear distinction between themselves and those others, and, heaven forbid, someone hearing about it might think the new supporter has just self-declared as *being* one of "those."

Associating with those deemed less desirable, or supporting their rights as invisible minorities, can "taint" the helper-with-good-intentions. It can be an interesting shift for them to suddenly be perceived by their own dominant culture as being one of those outsiders they are trying to help. When the difference matters and they are suddenly shifted in perceived identity, liberal intentions are quickly tested for their strength.

If we are suddenly perceived to be a part of the very group we have been trying to help from the outside, things can become much different from the inside looking back out. For gay men and lesbians, for example, this is another type of homophobia, albeit of the liberal kind ("I think they are okay, but I don't want to be perceived as one; it's fine to be that way, but, oh god, don't let my kid turn out that way"). It is a different situation to be tolerant when people of your own kind suddenly move you into the "invisible outsider" group, thinking that you must be one and it just does not show, that you must just be covering it up by "passing."

It is extremely important for all therapists, of any sexual orientation and any culture, to work from operational perspectives based on understanding of complexities such as those mentioned above. It is particularly interesting to add these concepts to our already-complicated travels through issues of transference and countertransference, particularly when it is the therapist who is part of the minority group.

At some time all of us will be involved in multicultural therapy situations. Therefore, it becomes imperative to have a basic grounding in humanistic, phenomenological, and existential theories which regard the perception of difference from a model of perceiver-based construction of reality (Moustakas, 1992). Similarly, it is equally essential to have a thorough grasp of the basic concepts of systems/cybernetics theory. Particularly important are those components of it which provide a framework for difference and differentness to be regarded as enriching and empowering rather than threatening or destructive, and thus necessary to the healthy balance of human interaction (Bowen, 1966, 1972; Jackson, 1957; McGoldrick, Anderson, & Walsh, 1989; Weiser, 1990).

A better understanding of these concepts can help us become more sensitive to nuances which previously might have passed unnoticed and to become more tolerant of other colleagues and clients who are different from ourselves. I think the therapeutic goal is not necessarily one of changing the inner beliefs of people, but rather to arrive at a position from which they can permit others to be different without that difference automatically signaling threat. I do not think any of us would take away others' rights to hold personal beliefs; that is itself unethical. Rather, this paper attempts to re-position personal opinion, and even personal prejudice, into a state of having-a-right-to-exist-inside-a-person (if for some reason necessary) but clearly acknowledged as being just one of many alternate attitudes possible—and definitely disempowered from any right to inflict pain and injustice on others who may not share that belief.

I want to close by way of a personal anecdote which I think encompasses all the above into a real-life situation that can be reconsidered from the conceptual framework just described:

Two years ago I joined a local community choir with a friend of mine. He and I had sung Christmas carols together

for several years, and I really enjoyed how I felt after an evening of singing. So, when he said he had decided to join this choir, and that I was welcome to join with him (the choir took anyone interested who was willing to be a part of their group), I gladly agreed, knowing we would have fun. Perhaps I should clarify here that it is the Vancouver Lesbian and Gay Choir we joined. That did not matter to me; most of my friends are gay and lesbian (it just evolved that way, much the same as you have friends whose hobby or work interests parallel your own). I went with him to the first rehearsal and had a great time.

Now, I have been careful thus far in this paper to not give readers any clues about my sexual orientation (a lot of people live this way all the time). Obviously with the first name of Judy, I am female, but was I always? Yes, I am happily married, but have I said yet to ~~what~~ a partner of which gender? I have a husband, so "of course" I am not lesbian (or am I? Is this a marriage of convenience?). If I tell you I am not lesbian, is it then a simple, "Well then, she is straight (heterosexual)"? But what if I am "bi" (bisexual), or "two-spirited"? By this point *do readers care* about what I am in my private life? Is it at all relevant to authoring this paper? To doing art therapy? Does the sexual orientation of the professional matter to their nonbed life? This is one of those yes-and-no kinds of answers.

But, back to me. For the record, I am straight (or, as my friends prefer to label me, "slightly bent"). I do not often go out banner-waving or shouting forceful demands, but neither will I silently witness injustices without making public statement when I encounter something I believe to be wrong. I will not hide, though I may not flaunt; and thus, we return to me and my choir. I joined the Vancouver Lesbian and Gay Choir because I wanted to sing and because my friend Terry, who is gay, wanted to, and because we wanted to sing together. I joined this group whose motto is "For people who like to sing: gay, lesbian, and straight friends or relatives thereof who are gay-supportive." This seemed fine to me. I saw no reason to need to label my sexual identity in order to prove I could sing well. Since there was no question on the membership application asking who I had sex with, I saw no reason to offer comments that were unnecessary. I was there; I wanted to sing; obviously, I was gay-supportive. So, I sang, and it gave me great enjoyment.

During the first few months I realized that although who I "really" was did not need to be kept a big secret, neither was it relevant to what we were doing. I was a bit concerned that those who found out my secret heterosexuality might pre-judge me as an outsider who could never really truly fit in and belong, and so I thought it best not to mention it unless asked directly. (I will not lie.) I was asked out by a couple of the women, who I turned down because I was "married"; but since this is a term also used among the group for commitment of two same-sex partners, this gave nothing away. I occasionally went out socially with the group, and went on retreats where the dorm housing was quite rowdy and playful. During all of this, I was just myself, me, my own way of being, without hiding or faking, but just being me, at ease with the jokes and banter. This was not new to me and my medium-radical feminist values.

As our first concert approached and formal evaluations drew near, I checked the constitution to make sure I was still

legally "okay" for membership. Reassured, I auditioned. I passed. Then, I asked the director if it was true that straight people were welcome. He nodded agreement and asked me, "Why? Do you know of any who want to join? They're quite welcome, you know!" I giggled and waved a "hello" to him. His reaction was one of total shock, "But you can't be—you don't look it and certainly don't act it!" followed immediately by, "Oh my god. Look what I've just said—generalized just like those people who stereotype us. Sorry. . . ."

I asked him to keep it a secret, to let me stay in the closet until my identity became known naturally. Slowly, as one event or another came to pass, my "passing" came out. I was not "outed" (which would not have mattered, except, it might have). I simply was a person who was slightly different from the others and I noticed that, yes, I had been watching my gender pronouns, neutering them or turning them plural. I was being careful to not give things away unless I was certain the person would not think I had some other agenda for being in the choir.

For me, all this was rather lighthearted, and there would have been no terrible consequence had I been discovered and "outed" at the very first rehearsal. It would have either mattered or not. I could have easily gone on with my life without this choir had they decided there was something perverse about me. *But, there is no way I ever would want to have to live all my life with these safeguards and protections and worries and "what-ifs."*

There is absolutely no way I would ever want to be part of a society that makes anyone who is different, in whatever way, have to live their lives under those nonnatural conditions. I support homosexuals not because I am a "wannabe," (in this case, if I wanted to be, I easily could be!) but because I cannot conceive of living a life where they, or any other people, do not have an equal right to exist even while being different from my way.

Standing by in silence while injustices are done to others not like me is not part of my reality. As systems theory so clearly explains, an advanced system or society is one where differentness and differences are seen as enriching and adding complexity rather than threatening or to be denied.

An old Doonesbury cartoon shows an African American man telling a gay Caucasian colleague that he is not sure he can continue working with him because he heard the colleague is gay. The colleague replies, "Yeah, and I hear you're black." When the man responds, "Yeah, but that's different," the colleague reminds him, "Yeah, but it didn't used to be. . . ."

Writing this paper as both a woman and a Jew, both of which seem to be acceptable because you are still reading this, I want to close by reminding you that these may be okay today, *but they sure didn't used to be!* Let us consider a future where other invisibly different people find such previous prejudices equally outdated.

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