

“Wishing Upon A Star” - The Problems and Solutions of Relying On an "Inclusive Society" To Foster and Provide A Better Life for People

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Ghandi once said that *we* should live the change we want to see in the world. Such a potent philosophy. But what would my ideal world look like, and how could that determine my behaviour if I was – as Ghandi suggests – to actually live that change?

As Shakespeare wrote¹ “The wish is the father to the thought.” What is it we would wish for? And what would such wishes for a better world be based on?

We know that behaviour is deeply affected by our physical and social environment. Even one’s own outlook and values in life have deep roots in the culture one lives within. Cultures provide order and meaning to our lives, give us reasons to live and make life worth living. When cultures do this poorly problems arise. For example our present culture has created false realities constructed around marketing and consumerism which aren’t at all in touch with what is most important for human beings. As such, many of our most essential needs for meaning, fulfilment and identity are left languishing in a slough of superficiality – as many parents of young people will attest.

When society is peaceful, citizens are free to adopt many individual roles like partner, lover and parent, whereas in times of strife group membership and pride become uppermost. To add further distinction, each group has to claim a special and unique identity, which Freud and others refer to as “the narcissism of minor difference”.² Such needs for identity give rise (according to Michael Ignatieff) to “the systematic overvaluation of the self [which] results in systematic devaluation of strangers and outsiders. In this way narcissistic self-regard depends upon and in turn exacerbates intolerance.”²

Of course these dynamics strike at the heart of devaluation that SRV seeks to counteract, yet inclusion merely rails against. But in a modernistic society how much can we expect? Could our expectations for an “inclusive society” be too exaggerated? Could our “expectations be extravagant in the precise dictionary sense of the word – ‘going beyond the limits of reason or moderation’?”³

For example, while there is discussion of tolerance, modernism invites us to acquire high self esteem and lessen personal restraint — a recipe for the violence that is evident everywhere. Self absorption brings a heightened

¹ Henry IV, ii.iv.4

² Ignatieff, M., *The Warrior’s Honor*, Metropolitan Books, 1997.

³ Boorstin, Daniel, J., *The Image*, Penguin, 1961.

capacity for aggression. To be a less violent society, we need reduced self esteem and significantly increased self restraint, something the diversity specialists may not want to hear.

When one's collective identity is challenged (such as one's ethnic or national identity) then minor – even artificial – distinctions become transformed into major differences as markers of power and status. Power is the vector that turns minor distinctions into major differences.²

Stanley Cohen (Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics) writes:

“People highly endowed with positive illusions – notably about their own omnipotence – commit the most appalling atrocities. The admired qualities of high self esteem, a sense of mastery, faith in their capacity to bring about desired events and unrealistic optimism were possessed in abundance by Mussolini, Pol Pot, Ceausescu, Idi Amin and Mobutu.”⁴

Inclusion too, plays into high self esteem celebrating freedom from restraint under the rubric of diversity – where artistic expression is a common and frequently played-out metaphor. Rather than empowerment and esteem being critical ingredients for an improved life, it may be just the adoption of what is popular within a culture that is already struggling to bring meaning to people's lives.

Social context plays a massive role in mediating human behaviour, yet as observers we tend to under-estimate its importance. Observers are likely to exaggerate the importance of a personal disposition to explain why people do the things they do rather, than to appreciate the part social context plays in influencing behaviour. This has been referred to as the Fundamental Attribution Error.⁵

It's the “Tendency of people to over-emphasize dispositional or personality based explanations for behaviours observed in others while under-emphasizing the nature and power of situational influences on the same behaviour.”

For example, if I stub my toe on a chair leg, I am likely to read the situational context as “Who left that chair out?” But if I see you stub your toe, I am likely to think and maybe say, “It's because you are careless and should pay more attention to where you are going”. That is, we excuse our own behaviour because of the context we are in, but tend to blame other people *themselves* for the behaviour they exhibit.



⁴ Cohen, S., *States of Denial. Knowing about atrocities and suffering*, Polity Press MA, 2001, p.58

⁵ Nisbett, R.E., and Ross, L., *The person and the situation*, 1991.

No wonder it is so easy to ascribe deviancy roles to *people* but miss the point that the cues for these roles (diag 2) have been set up by the physical and social environment, much of *which people like us have created*. It's also these factors that will influence how *we* behave toward other people: are they sick, are they dangerous, should we love them, should we get rid of them?



The Fundamental Attribution Error might suggest we attribute too much emphasis to people's own capacities to devalue others, and insufficient emphasis to the contextual conditions that mediate devaluation – such as the information we are given about the roles people are in.

Deviancy Roles

- Sub-human; Object, Animal, Vegetable
- Menace, Object of Fear
- Object of Ridicule
- Object of Pity
- Burden: Of Charity, On others
- Child: Eternally, Once again
- Sick
- Garbage, Discard
- Already dead

But if we are to *live* the changes we want to see in the world (rather than only make other people change), what would be needed from *us*? For one thing, we would have to see problems clearly.

Yet the capacity to see and simultaneously *not* see may be a unique human characteristic, so much so that we have a whole language to describe how easy it is to ignore and deny reality:

- Turning a blind eye
- Burying your head in the sand
- She saw what she wanted to see
- He heard only what he wanted to hear
- Ignorance is bliss
- 'No choice'
- Living a lie
- Compulsion
- Just obeying orders
- 'I didn't know what was happening'
- Conspiracy of silence
- Economical with the truth
- Its got nothing to do with me
- Don't make waves
- They were typical passive bystanders
- There's nothing I can do about it
- Being like an ostrich
- I can't believe that this is happening
- I don't want to know/hear/see anymore
- It can't happen to people like us
- The plan called for maximum deniability
- Averting you gaze
- Wearing blinkers
- He couldn't take in the news

- Wilful ignorance
- She looked the other way
- He didn't admit it, even to himself
- Don't wash your dirty linen in public
- It didn't happen on my watch
- I must have known all along
- Surely it can't be that bad

This helps explain why most people are clearly not conscious of or concerned by their own capacity to devalue others.

The difference comes whenever we place the problem uniquely within the actions of *other* people, when in fact the problem is in all of us. While context sets the scene for our behaviour, including devaluation, we also know that we all come with some inbuilt capacities to respond. We know for instance that certain orientations to our environment are virtually hard-wired. Very young children universally distinguish who is beautiful from who is average and exhibit anxiety when confronted with strangers, even though children can be taught to defeat this tendency. We naturally favour our own race, colour, ethnicity, nationality, language and religion. Inbuilt capacities like unconscious devaluation are hard enough to defeat under ideal conditions, let alone when living in cultures that invite and support numerous daily expressions of it.

For example, many studies and anecdotal experience show how reluctant people are to intervene in helping other people. Whether it is the infamous examples of Jamie Bulger (the 5 year old pulled away from his mother in a crowded shopping centre, seen being kicked, pushed and thrown into the air, before being killed on a railway track), or Kitty Genovese (who was assaulted and raped within hearing of 38 people who didn't get help, as she screamed trying to reach her apartment), too many people are standing aside as unresponsive and passive witnesses. Even in human services, it is too common to discover that people have not responded to observed neglect and even direct harm, even over extensive periods – and we wonder how this can be.

Ervin Staub⁶ notes

“Remaining passive bystanders in the face of others’ suffering can create callousness. It is nearly impossible to see great suffering, to do nothing, and continue to feel caring and empathy. To protect themselves from guilt and empathic suffering, individuals and groups that remain passive need to distance themselves from victims. As a result, their passivity may reduce the likelihood of later action by them.”

⁶ Staub, E. *The psychology of good and evil. Why children, adults and groups help and harm others*, Cambridge University Press, UK 2003.

For some here, the attraction to SRV was the discovery of these possibilities in *us*. We may have been transformed by a PASSING experience that brought us face to face with our own devaluations for the very first time. Yet so quickly we can take the heat off ourselves and start talking about creating an “inclusive society,” and never realise the profound contradiction in these two positions. How is that?

Humans have a curious proclivity for believing in delusions. Truth is strangely unattractive, yet to believe what is improbable is almost reflexive. For



example, bottled water can now be purchased that has miraculous effects. Serac Glacial Milk claims its pristine glacial run-off is rich in “organic colloidal minerals that allow centenarians to reach their genetic potential of 120-140 years of age.” The New York company Vava even “charges” its water with “low-level electromagnetic frequencies that change the crystallisation of the water, bringing about a physiological response starting at the cellular level”.

Even now people are being taken in by the Nigerian Internet Hoax; it seems they want *so much* to believe that all that money for nothing could still be true!

This capacity to deny the nature of things around us involves ^(Cohen 2001)

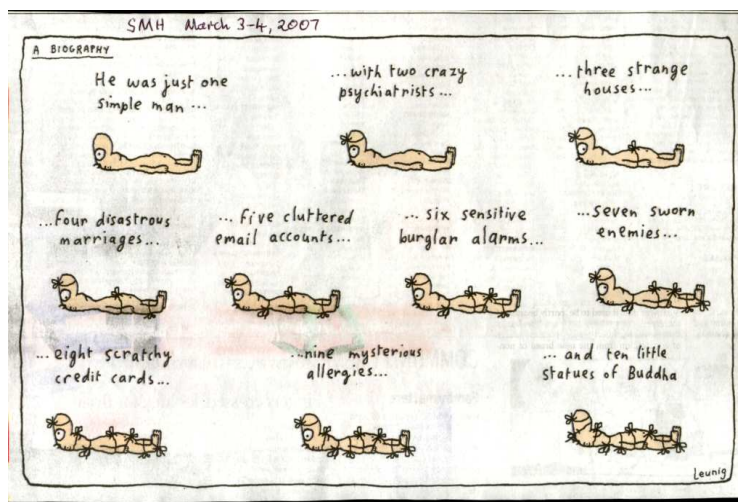
- *Cognition* (as in not acknowledging the facts)
- *Emotion* (as in not feeling, not being disturbed)
- *Morality* (as in not recognizing wrongness or responsibility)
- *Action* (as in not taking active steps in response to knowledge)

Denials are of course disguised, often by well-known and commonly used narratives and discourses. (“We didn’t understand the big picture,” “each act was harmless in itself.”) It appears that the more pluralistic the culture, the wider the array of potential discourses. Western culture has available to it an almost inexhaustible supply of legal, religious, cultural and political euphemisms for doing things and disguising the truth, so much so that those who use them come to believe they actually reflect reality. (Some of you in government deal with this on a daily basis.)

The capacity for delusion is not solely an individual proclivity. Delusion is alive and well in many collective contexts from government departments and human service organisations to community organisations, churches and even the family. When delusion is collective, it is though everyone is part of a pact to render information in certain prescribed and agreed ways. It disables the need to discern truth and supports the maintenance of the collective albeit false framework. For example, organisations can carry ideals of justice but will easily compromise themselves immediately because of self interest. Contradictions abound, but if you are in there it is so enticing to join in, and

possibly dangerous for your future if you don't. A recent example is the Bush administration's elaborate contrivances of Jessica Lynch and Pat Tillman as national heroes when their circumstances were *known* to be quite different. There are the cover-ups exposed in numerous inquiries, such as the Scott "Arms to Iraq" inquiry in the UK, or the Australian Wheat Board bribery scandal, or the "Children Overboard Affair", that reveal the extent to which officials will go to distort, deny and lie about what has clearly taken place.

Denials can meet immediate needs to sustain a belief system in spite of how untrue those beliefs may be. In other words, just as the Bush administration distorts the truth to satisfy its own needs, so might we? As soon as we enlarge and amplify the importance of anything, we suffer a distortion of perception that entraps and blinds us.



– Leunig cartoon

A Biography. Notice that with each idol, the little man becomes more pinned down, until finally he is totally incapacitated and incapable of seeing.

We can form idols out of so many things. They constitute religious inventions: our own places of worship where we can remain “safe” from threatening perspectives. We can lose sight of ourselves because we become possessed by our gods. We can lose the ability to think about ourselves realistically as we form ideologies that “maintain themselves by *denial of other realities*”.⁷ my emphasis

There is much emotionality associated with inclusion. There was with Jiminy Cricket as well. When he sang ‘When You Wish upon a Star’ – as a child I thought it sounded lovely. I discovered it was true only in Fantasyland. If we are to imagine a Good Life for devalued people we must be entirely realistic and engage what has been referred to as the moral imagination.

⁷ (Cohen 2001)

The moral imagination holds up an ideal that is attainable – but only through hard work; the idyllic imagination holds up an ideal that can never be attained in reality, but can easily be attained in fantasy and feeling. It follows mood, rather than conscience and rejects conventional morality in favour of a natural morality that will it believes, emerge spontaneously in the absence of cultural restraints.”⁸

Some people say, “But, you have to have a hope.” Yes, but what type of hope can it be if it can never come true? Otherwise, seeking an inclusive society is like hoping the Nigerian Internet Hoax will answer all our problems.

The last thing leaders in the lives of devalued people need is delusion. Devalued people live in exceedingly heightened vulnerability and exceeding marginality – and it is extremely likely to grow worse, not better. Mandating that *everyone else* become “inclusive” will not change this.

Recently an experiment involving the world famous musician, Joshua Bell was conducted in the Washington Metro’s L’Enfant Plaza. On Friday morning, January 12th in the middle of morning peak hour, one of the world’s greatest players played one of the world’s most perfect instruments and some of the world’s most beautiful music – but was completely ignored by 1,097 people. In his 43 minutes of continuous playing, 27 people stopped to give him a total of \$32. He normally makes a \$1,000 a minute and people don’t ignore him then! (He has just won the Avery Fisher prize). Dressed in jeans, a long sleeved T-shirt and a baseball cap, he was responded to as a busker, and even his virtuosity was not enough to defeat the expectations of harried passers by. *Maybe, had he been referred to as “a man, who is a busker” it would have made a difference?*

He had in fact been negatively role-cast (relative to his role as a virtuoso) and had therefore received the appropriate response. Yet the hundreds of emails this article provoked to the Washington Post were mainly concerned with how to change the commuters – the Fundamental Attribution Error again, the same mistake “inclusionists” regularly make in blaming the behaviour on the people rather than on the context they are in. (Notice how the language of much inclusion training talks about “making communities inclusive”. Again, it is everyone else who has to change. You rarely see a workshop entitled “helping people to be more acceptable to others”, although really, that is what SRV addresses).

In this example a person who might typically be devalued

⁸ Kirkpatrick, W., *Why Johnny can’t tell right from wrong and what we can do about it*, Touchstone NY 1992.



occupies a very valued role to the extent that his devalued qualities are no longer seen as deviant. This man is Thomas Quasthoff, (Kvust-hoff) who has been recognised as having an amazingly beautiful voice and one of the widest known vocal ranges as a baritone. We know he is in a valued role because it is reciprocated; no threats or use of enact other in”, or “together that he be of what role he is wholly compelling and it is this that regulates the behaviour of observers. Even then, and knowing his risk factors, there is special attention to present him in the most image-enhancing ways, consistent with his role.



SRV uses what we know about how devalued people are perceived, and thoughtfully and meticulously influences those variables to attract observers to see and treat people better; even to the extent that people may experience a better life. But it takes hard work and an unrelenting determination to discard anything in our vision of human nature (including our own nature) that is not true.

Thus, we know that SRV has limits; let’s not overextend its possibilities either. Even very valued social roles won’t protect you at present in Iraq; quite the contrary, as Prince Harry and the UK government well know.

Of course we have to strive to know ourselves very well and to deeply understand our capacity for ignoble thoughts and actions. If we don’t know our own capacity, how can we know what others are capable of – given the right conditions? If we don’t know these *basic things*, we can’t predict what it will take to make things better. To know ourselves is to become completely integrated within our thoughts and deeds. If not, our thoughts can become repressed, disassociated and compartmentalised; our ignoble schemes can be locked into separate storage areas away from the prospect of self censure and the potential for the most avoided emotions of all – guilt and shame. Compartmentalisation was one strategy seemingly used by some high ranking Nazis (like Albert Speer), who could perform or witness atrocities by day, and be loving husbands and fathers by night. Moral indifference; no authenticity; just denials: knowing, but not knowing, at the same time; and a badly damaged capacity to discern what is good from what is evil.

Navaho Indian:

An old Navaho Indian tells his grandson about the fight that is going on inside him.

He says it is between two wolves:

one that is evil (anger, greed, arrogance, superiority and bitterness)

and the other which is good (joy, peace, serenity, humility, kindness, ease and empathy).

The grandson asks: "Grandpa, which wolf wins?"

The old man replies: "The one I feed."

You would have to know what is good from what is evil to know what to feed, and what constitutes good food. Today, so many people supply utter rubbish to what *feels* good rather than nourishment to what *is* good.

M. Scott Peck⁹ writes in *The Road Less Travelled*:

"What does a life of total dedication to the truth mean? It means first of all, a life of continuous and never-ending stringent self-examination."

Is that too much hard work? Modernism and the weaknesses of human nature conspire against self examination. The ease and comfort of denial seem so much better.

Inclusion allows us to focus on the dismissive actions of other parties while painting a utopian picture of the world as *we* might wish it. We can assume the noble high ground (as most groups do) railing against the recalcitrant actions of others. When will *they* get it right? What an attractive and persuasive line of reasoning. Much easier than self examination!

Finally, devalued people need supporters who strive to be deeply grounded in *reality*:

no pretence,
no denial,
no false imagination,
no belief in hoaxes,
no special detoxifying language,
no well rehearsed rhetoric,
no false hopes,
no self deception,
no wishing upon a star,

but rather

a well grounded commitment to seek what is *true*.

⁹ M Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled*, Arrow Books, 1978, p.53.