



Center for Social Development

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

Perspective on Diversity, Human Nature, and Social Innovation

From Closing Remarks
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Michael Sherraden
Youngdahl Professor of Social Development
Director, Center for Social Development

Campus Box 1196 One Brookings Drive St. Louis, MO 63130-9906 • (314) 935.7433 • csd.wustl.edu



Washington University in St. Louis

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Especially, I want to thank all of you for your open sharing of ideas and experiences, for your warm and engaging interactions, and for the insights you have given to me over the past two days.

Remarks

The symposium has addressed not only human diversity but also different ways of knowing. As an applied social scientist, I practice and teach how we can know through the scientific method of asking a clear question, setting up a study, collecting data, and analyzing results. Science as a productive way of knowing certainly has been present at this symposium, but so also were other ways of knowing from personal experiences, cultural practices, stories, songs, and poetry. In my own life, some of my most important learning has come from family, history, and literature. If I could write poetry as evocatively as Alice Azure, or sing prayers as peacefully as Joe Masters, I might very well do that. Given my limited abilities, I practice science. Everyone contributes in the ways that we have to offer. In any event, it is unusual for me – and a great pleasure – to be at a meeting where many ways of knowing come together to build greater understanding.

As Harvey Fields noted for us, both joy and humility are intertwined in this work. We each bring our ignorance, interest, knowledge, commitments, capacity, and humanity to this discussion. We are always learning. Each of us is an ongoing project. The journey is rich and rewarding and never completed.

For me, this presents a challenge. I am aware of my abundant shortcomings and have come to terms with most of them. In other words, I have gotten used to myself – maybe too much so. This might be called the risk of years, which creates the challenge of staying open to new information and potential for personal change. Each of us in our particular circumstances carries risks that can obscure our vision, distract our attention, or make us too lazy to take action. In the work of diversity, a major responsibility is to know our own personal risks and try to counteract them.

Allow me to put this discussion of diversity in the context of human evolution and what we call, for lack of a better term, “human nature.” I will frame the diversity discussion not just in terms of human diversity but diversity of all life on earth. Native peoples at this symposium will not find this an unusual way to think.

Humans have developed unprecedented cognitive abilities. Cognition has separated us from other species, and we are often quite impressed with ourselves. To put this simply, cognition has enabled us to create technologies that generate surplus calories, and with these extra calories, “civilization” has evolved. Humans tend to be confident – maybe overconfident – that our ability to learn makes it possible to solve nearly all problems.

Unfortunately, however, we are also carrying evolutionary baggage that gets in the way. In important respects, our evolution leaves us ill prepared to handle the world we have created by our brainpower.

One aspect of this is the relatively short-term sense of “the future” that humans consider in daily decisions. It goes against our nature to put resources and effort into things that may not have a payoff for several years, much less several decades or centuries. Recent insights from behavioral economics offer some strategies for addressing this short-term bias.

Another aspect of humans is our small-group nature. We lived for hundreds of thousands of years in small groups, contending with other small groups for territory and resources. As a result, the in-group vs. out-group mentality in humans is strong. We are wired for it. It is a foundation for modern-day racism. Of course, humans are today thrown together in large populations with many different kinds of people, and our basic nature is not really cut out for this.

How are we doing? Let us look honestly at our impact on diversity. In relation to other species, humans have been, up to the present, a predatory and environmental disaster. The loss of species began tens of thousands of years ago as humans invented spears and other weapons that wiped out many large mammals (for prehistoric peoples, large mammals were a treasure trove of calories), and technological advances continue today, leading to the extinction of many other species due to over-harvesting and loss of habitat. With the massive burning of fossil fuels (the mother lode of calories in our era) and increased global warming, humans threaten ecological disaster on an unprecedented scale.

In relation to people different from ourselves, humans have also been more or less a disaster. Differences of culture, color, race, and religion have led to massive thefts, subjugations, oppressions, and deaths of millions of people. In North America, European settlers have taken for themselves massive tracts of land and caused shocking declines – near elimination – of native populations; have lived off the labor of enslaved Africans for three hundred years; have appropriated a large chunk of Mexico; and have treated some immigrant groups, (e.g., the Chinese in the late 19th and early 20th centuries) extremely harshly. These are the real outcomes of racism. Other continents have similar histories. Accompanying these injustices, the inventive human mind, at its worst, has applied itself to every manner of exploitation and slaughter.

Though we humans are sometimes enthralled with the superiority of our species, this sad record of relationships with other living beings and often troubled relationships among ourselves is not something we can be proud of. We should acknowledge who we are and what we are doing.

What can be done? Thankfully, all is not hopeless. It is very possible, for example, that humans can create new technologies that will lead to sustainable energy and a more stable environment. Indeed this is a major emphasis at Washington University in St. Louis, where the McDonnell International Academy leads a major program on Energy and the Environment with many partner universities around the globe. Almost everyone agrees that alternative sustainable energy is within reach, requiring only the collective will and resources to get the job done. In order to accomplish this, the short-term nature of “the future” in human cognition will have to be overcome. Institutionalizing a major initiative in long-standing organizations (as Washington University is doing with partner universities) can overcome short-term human psychology with long-term sustained commitment. Note that such organizations and partnerships are purposeful social innovations, making solutions to large challenges possible.

Turning to the in-group vs. out-group challenge, I find this the most hopeful of all. For one thing, humans have a remarkable ability to create larger and more inclusive social structures that build mutual commitment across population groups. Nation states, at their best, serve this function. Within nation states, universal public education and universal military service have, at their best, built inclusion across groups. It is important to note again that these did not “just happen.” They are purposeful social innovations. Going forward, we can anticipate that inclusive innovations will become more regional and global in scope, which will better enable us to address cross-national challenges such as global warming, biological extinctions, and war.

In the struggle for greater inclusion, maintaining distinctive cultures and identities is vital. As stated succinctly at this symposium, the goal is not a “melting pot” but a “stir fry.” Inclusion does not mean that we are all alike – heaven forbid the tedium in that! – but that we appreciate and celebrate our differences constructively.

As social workers and applied social scientists, we have important roles to play in creating, testing, and putting in place social innovations that build bridges across population groups to generate greater inclusion. To take one example, at the Center for Social Development (CSD) we create and test innovations designed for inclusion in asset building. We have proposed that every newborn on the planet should have a birth registration (legal identity) and savings account at birth. This is ambitious, but not far-fetched. Margaret Clancy at CSD leads a team testing universal Child Development Accounts (CDAs) in a large experiment in Oklahoma. Christy Finsel at this meeting is working with Kansas on a statewide CDA policy. And a project called YouthSave, led by Li Zou and a team at CSD, is testing youth savings accounts in Colombia, Ghana, Kenya, and Nepal. CSD has studied and advised on universal CDA policy in U.S. cities and states and several other countries. At first glance, this might not be thought of as a strategy for improved inter-group relations, but every social initiative that reduces inequality and gives everyone the same experience will have inclusive effects.

Perhaps even more hopeful, it turns out that the in-group vs. out-group nature of humans is flexible – we might even say plastic. People easily put this mental template onto all sorts of groupings, and they add or subtract groups to which they feel attached. In-groups can be built around any theme – schools, clubs, professional associations, civic organizations, online interest groups, and political parties, to name only a few. In a fundamental sense, sports teams are the modern day expression of small human bands fighting amongst one another.

Why is this hopeful? Because the template is so adaptable, and many of the groupings are harmless, e.g., sports teams contending for the championship. And some groupings are actively beneficial, e.g., service organizations promoting nutrition, financial access, or some other aspect of social and economic development. In short, the in-group vs. out-group nature of humans can be channeled and contained, and even directed to positive purposes. The potential for ongoing social innovation is great.

Finally and most rewardingly, humans have the interpersonal ability to address in-group vs. out-group differences constructively, as evidenced so warmly and effectively at this symposium. We take heart in knowing – and seeing in real experience – that we are not fully determined by our evolution. We can listen and learn from one another, and in so doing, break down in-group vs. out-group differences to identify overarching connections and bond for common purpose. These impressive interactions are also the result of social innovation. Note the thoughtful structure of this symposium, the trained and experienced facilitator, and the respectful guidelines that enable effective interaction.

In conclusion, allow me to emphasize three points. First, humans have not evolved with an evolutionary psychology that promotes diversity – in fact, just the opposite. Second, despite our basic nature, social innovations for appreciation and celebration of diversity are possible to achieve. We see many effective examples. Third, such innovations are not in any respect innate or automatic. They are human creations that must be designed and tested with hard work, empirical results, and ongoing improvement.

Thank you very much for the past two days. I have greatly enjoyed being with all of you.