

CO-CREATING LIVING SYSTEMS THAT THRIVE ON DIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

As we come to know ourselves as relational beings that are shaped by the other, we can embrace diversity in a way that fosters curiosity and overcomes our fear of difference. As we reduce the fear of difference, we can dismantle the structures that reinforce oppression and co-create inclusive systems that thrive on diversity.

An appreciation for diversity begins with a desire to encounter and engage with others. As we recognize and learn to value people from different walks of life, our ability to embrace diversity becomes integral to our lives and ways of being in the world. The core of diversity is our encounter with “the other,” that which is different from us. Diversity enriches and transforms our lives, yet often we become afraid when we encounter others with radically different ideas or perspectives. Fear creates and sustains the conditions for oppression—in families, schools, organizations, and society. To embrace diversity fully, it is helpful to understand how we participate in systems of oppression and how we can co-create systems of inclusion and freedom.

As human beings, we are diverse in many ways, including race, ethnicity, language, culture, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, abilities, perspectives, and ways of being in the world. To engage with the complexity of the diverse world we inhabit, we must fully appreciate the potential differences among us. Diversity begins with the recognition and appreciation of people with different backgrounds and from different lifestyles, and it is so much more. To understand diversity, we must be open to an encounter with “the other,” open and willing to learn and be transformed by someone who is different from us.

This encounter with “the other” is a gateway to transformation if we are willing to question our assumptions and those that are commonly held in our culture. Questioning these assumptions exposes us to very different realities, which can create what Mezirow (1990) described as disorienting dilemmas. As we call into question that which we thought we understood and from which we have based our relationships and actions, the very fabric of our sense of self in the world may be shaken. A disorienting dilemma can result in a major life transformation and may leave one situated at the threshold of a new understanding, but not able to integrate the experience and understanding. This place of

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unknowingness and vulnerability helps us respond to others to create openness and trust and to encourage deeper, more mutual relationships.

This paper explores a human systems view of transformative learning to support an understanding of who we are in relationship with others, our organizations, our communities, and our world. Our hope is that as we come to know ourselves as relational beings that are shaped by the other, we can embrace diversity in a way that fosters curiosity and overcomes our fear of difference. As we reduce the fear of difference, we can dismantle the structures that reinforce oppression and create new structures that are inclusive and collaborative. First we explore a shift in consciousness from individual to relational self, then we discuss how we can co-create new a world where diversity and difference become sources of creativity that strengthen our commitment to inclusion and equity.

We are born into a world of relationships, dependent on our relationships to thrive. Our world and our relationships are increasingly more complex and diverse. Maturana and Varela (1987) describe our existence as a living system. When we understand that we are part of natural, living systems, we begin to understand the systemic structures in which we participate. We discover that as we pursue our lives, we contribute to living systems that often reinforce oppression. This in itself is a disorienting dilemma. When we face our unconscious collusion with systemic oppression, this understanding compels us to make a conscious choice to co-create systems that support inclusion, learning from difference, and liberation of the human spirit.

Our early childhood experiences create perceptions and understandings that shape the meanings we create as we mature. Developmental psychologists have found that as children we begin to attach meaning to the people and events around us. We use this knowledge and/or these understandings of experience to create a lens through which we view new people and events. These lenses contain our assumptions and worldviews. We learn from those who surround us within our families, communities, and cultures. Our relationships provide us with information about appropriate ways of thinking, acting, and living. With this understanding we then make predictions and develop actions we think are appropriate based on our assumptions. There are both external and internal affects of these societal teachings.

When we think and act according to societal norms, often we are rewarded by praise, acceptance, and financial recompense. These are the external rewards of conformity. This affects us internally. We may feel pride and self-confidence if there is a close link between our actions and what is rewarded. However, if there is a gap between the expectations of others and our sense of self, then we may feel shame, guilt, anger, a sense of oppression, as well as fear. The more we encounter inner dissonance, the greater the internalization of oppression. We oppress ourselves and in turn oppress others when we perceive them to be different from us.

Inner oppression arises from fear, and our fears of diversity create systems of oppression. Oppressive societal and organizational systems attempt to control rather than to free

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human expression. Freire (1970) recognized that oppression was the result of systems of control, especially those within our educational system. Rather than teaching children how to learn, to think critically, or to make good judgments, educational systems often force meaningless information into children and do not foster learning environments where diversity thrives. Freire used the analogy of banking to express this type of oppressive education.

The idea of learning as “banking” continues within most of our educational systems, developing children who fit our cultural norms rather than human beings with the capacity for evaluating the need for change and for creating the change we need in the world. Although we have had other models of education, such as the liberating approaches of Montessori or Waldorf education that have been around for over 100 years, they have had little influence on the U.S. public education system.

As adults, the students who have been oppressed through our educational system create livelihoods, contribute to, and participate in organizational systems. Many of the organizations we work for foster oppression through systems of control where people’s voices and spirits are marginalized. To some extent, we all have been oppressed by these systems, yet few of us are aware of how that oppression has been internalized and thus how we unconsciously collude with systems that perpetuate the cycle of oppression.

As we become aware of the systems in which we participate, both those that include and those that oppress, we often experience disorienting dilemmas that help us to see the larger forces at work and the many opportunities that we have been given to understand things more deeply. The disorienting dilemma opens our awareness and we experience unknowingness and vulnerability. Openness and vulnerability help us to see more clearly, to understand, and to acknowledge how privileged we are and have been. Those of us who are privileged to have had opportunities for education that have enabled us to develop an understanding of the affects of our participation in human systems have the responsibility to use our understanding to foster freedom and inclusion in our world. We have developed the critical ability to evaluate those systems and to make choices that support our own transformation and that of others.

How do we break cycles of oppression and create greater opportunities to develop the consciousness and capacity for transforming oppressive systems into joyful, freeing systems? Our belief is that this transformative learning process begins with our ability to fully embrace diversity, learn from difference, question assumptions, and recognize and change patterns of action in collaboration with others. As we engage with others with different perspectives and life experiences, we create the ability to enlarge our individual horizon through understanding and embracing the horizon of another.

Gadamer (1993) posited that this ability to reach a *fusion of horizons* occurs when people with different perspectives and experiences come together with an orientation to learn and reach new understanding through conversation, sharing their thoughts, experiences, questions, and learnings. Through this dialogic, generative process, we create the possibility for authentic relationships and collaborative action to co-create what

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Habermas (1985) referred to as *our world*. Habermas' concept of the three worlds within which we live is important to this discussion. Our ability to understand the cultural context (*the world*) in which we live, and how it shapes who we are (*my world*) is a necessary orientation for understanding how to come together to co-create *our world*.

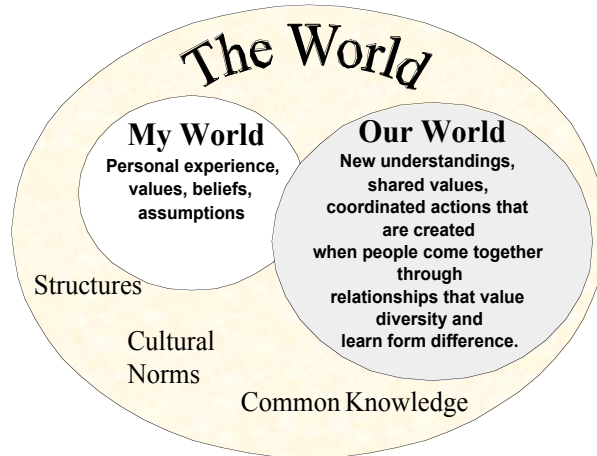


Figure One. A model of the relationship between my world and our world that depicts the relational nature of human experience. Adapted from the work of Jürgen Habermas.

When we make the choice to embrace “the other” and to participate in “our world,” we create opportunities for learning and liberation. To develop the capacity to co-create systems that thrive on diversity requires the willingness to embrace “the other” and to understand our existence as participating in living systems. (Maturana and Varela, 1987) Discovering that we need others with different perspectives, experiences, and abilities to co-create our desired future, is essential to embracing diversity as the fabric of our lives.

Daloz (in Mezirow, 2000) sees one’s ability to embrace “the other” as needed to understand our interdependence. A significant question is to what extent we are separate selves standing apart needing to embrace “the other” versus relational beings that are formed by and through the other. Heidegger (1962) posited that we are always, already in relationship, recognizing that we are born through relationship and birthed into a world of relationships. This movement from understanding ourselves as separate selves to understanding our relational being may help us focus our energy on strengthening our relationships, enabling those relationships to continually shape who we are becoming throughout our lives.

This experience came alive for one of the authors, Mary Lewis, through her time of living and working in various cultures as a social worker with people whose “differences from me were influenced by culture, class, race, ethnicity, faith, and important life experiences”. She discovered that the first and the most important step is the development of a personal desire to truly understand the “other” and how his/her experiences impact his/her perceptions and behavior. Figure 2 shows how this sense of curiosity generates the willingness to enter a “relationship of care”, which is a deep understanding and

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acceptance that we are all connected; it is the desire to form a relationship where we are subjects to each other, not objects. Once the movement into a “relationship of care” occurs there is a reason or impetus to engage the needed practices of reflection and dialogue as we explore our assumptions and beliefs which influence our thinking and actions. The desire produces the energy and commitment that is needed to do the hard work of transformation.



Figure Two. A model of the path to create inclusive systems that thrive on diversity.

Mary found that the energy which flows from the desire to form “relationships of care” moved her forward to explore, question and engage the difference between ‘us’. She discovered that “in this process I become aware of the differences of power and privilege that I, as a white, protestant, middle class, able bodied, heterosexual, middle aged, American woman from New England carry. I become aware of how the fear of difference created personal and systemic oppression, and how that has influenced my thinking, beliefs and actions. I also become more aware of the affects of internalized oppression that are active within me as a member of the dominate culture and within those who are members of a marginalized culture”. Those effects and experiences act to separate us even when ‘we’ are in a connected caring relationship. The pain of the separation becomes clear and presents yet another barrier that must be explored and understood within its context. Again, it is the desire to form and sustain “relationships of care” that empowers the persistence to continue. A commitment to the process of exploration of self and other is necessary. It is important to remember that if we are already and always in relationship, that the process of understanding that relationship only enhances and broadens our horizons.

Kegan (1982) writes about the ability to recognize our existence as interrelated in his work on levels of consciousness or being in the world. Kegan views transformation as a change that takes us beyond or outside of the previous form, enlarging our horizons. Kegan’s model has five such transformational phases, and within each of the phases there

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is continuous movement or evolution. These phases are described by Kegan as levels of consciousness since each holds a framework through which the person views and relates to the world and people around him/her. The ability to sustain and be in relationships of care requires the fifth order of consciousness; the interindividual stage, which signals a new balance of self and other that enables the ability to “hear, and to seek out information which might cause the self to alter its behavior” (p. 105). For most of us this is a level of consciousness to reach towards as we expand our relationships of care. Milton Bennett (1993), the co-founder of the Intercultural Communication Institute confirms that expanding our understanding and relationships with difference is a process of “changing our ‘natural behavior’... We [are asked to] transcend the traditional ethnocentrism and to explore new relationships across boundaries” (p. 21). Each step is a process of transformative learning.

Yongming Tang (2006) describes one’s ability to develop the consciousness to learn from difference as a process of synergy cycles of differentiating and integrating. Differentiating involves processes of self-knowing and other-knowing. Integrating involves processes of the differences-holding and differences transcending. His synergic inquiry process, a collaborative action methodology, can be used by individuals, dyads, or in larger groups of people, in organizations and communities to develop the capacity to engage in relationships of care where inquiry and discovery create new understanding and foster inclusive systems where people can work together to create the future they desire.

To create systems that thrive on diversity, qualities of openness, truthfulness, and vulnerability enable us to speak truthfully to one another. Our commitment to bring these qualities into encounters with “the other” helps us understand one another and create mutual relationships of care and inclusion, leading to joy in our lives. As we seek to encounter “the other”, to engage with others who are different from ourselves, we become aware of the impact of privilege both personally and as a force that permeates our society and affects our ability to have “relationships of care”. With openness, truthfulness, and a commitment to question assumptions, our ability to learn from difference expands. When we understand one another, we remain open to the differences, to be transformed by the encounter with “the other”. This cycle sparks joy in our relationships, a sense of being in care and included in a world we share with others as interrelated and interconnected beings in the natural systems of life.

Moving from systems of oppression to co-creating systems that thrive on diversity happens through an invitation to participate with others in sharing disorienting dilemmas, and inquiring into the beliefs, assumptions, and systemic patterns that keep us stuck. As we participate in dialogue, we become conscious of the cognitive shifts and collective actions that are needed to co-create systems that thrive on diversity and inclusion. This consciousness gives us the opportunity to create relationships with others to bring forth a new world where diversity is the joyous fabric of life in which we come to know ourselves and draw forth our collective experience as mutual participants in a natural, living system.

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