Awareness of Marginalization Can Support Connection

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Practicing Nonviolent Communication (NVC) generally helps us connect to people instead of alienating them. Yet, as valuable as the insights of NVC are, without additional awareness, it's still quite possible to inadvertently alienate, particularly when we speak to people who are less accepted by the mainstream than we are. The degree to which social stratification exists often seems insignificant to those in more favorable social positions, while often being painfully obvious to those who receive less favorable treatment. Becoming more aware of the dynamics by which social stratification is sustained, and the impacts of this, can support us in connecting in more satisfying ways across differing social experiences.

In any given social context, it is common for there to be a dominant group that sees itself as the "mainstream" whose characteristics define what is "normal." Those in the mainstream or "in-group" will often identify some people as being "not really one of us," or "not normal," and treat them differently (less favorably) than members of the in-group. This might be done consciously. And, it's often largely unconscious, something that people would deny they are doing, if asked.

This sort of in-group, out-group dynamic can happen on different scales. It might happen within a particular club, or office, or school. Or in a particular sub-culture. Or in a whole country.

Over time, the in-group is likely to develop stories about what "those people" in a particular out-group "are like," and these stories are likely to filter their perceptions in ways that contribute to their seeing evidence that their stories are true. An out-group may similarly develop stories about the in-group, which may also come to be believed through perceptual filtering and confirmation bias. However, the in-group by definition has more power. So, the stories that the in-group believe will tend to influence the ways that the group as a whole treats any particular out-group.

Any sort of difference that is noticed can be the stimulus for someone being classified as "not one of us." Well-known factors for dividing people include things like race, gender, sexual orientation, bodily abilities, ethnicity, age, education, politics and religion. People may also be divided on the basis of attractiveness, style of dress, or how their brains work — including whether and how they exhibit signs of trauma. There may be other distinctions made, which are specific to a particular context.

Some groups are treated as out-groups on a nation-wide level. To the extent that negative treatment of out-groups doesn't align with espoused mainstream values, this doesn't seem to eliminate the negative treatment, so much as it forces the negative treatment underground, which it's unacknowledged, and often unconscious. There is abundant evidence that most people have implicit (unconscious) bias against members of various categories of people, which may be at odds with their conscious values. (You might consider taking an .)

Those who are treated as members of an out-group by the larger society are systematically marginalized, sometimes in ways that are beyond the imaginations of those who do not personally experience such treatment. I remember attending an event where a well-educated black woman who was the daughter of a physician told me that she had been choked to unconsciousness by a police officer at a routine traffic stop. And a dark-skin woman from India told me that, that very day, at a beach in California, someone threw eggs at her. As a white man with a Ph.D., these are not the sort of things I am used to hearing about when other educated white people report their experiences to me. And, beyond anecdotes, there is extensive research documenting many (sometimes shocking) differences in the ways that people are treated in association with how they are categorized socially.

It's common that those associated with marginalized categories of people are simply not believed when they report to members of the mainstream about what they experience. Not only are individual events in their experience not believed, but the overall repetitive nature of their experience is likely to be denied. Those who study trauma learn that people can be traumatized in at least two distinct ways: by a single very intense event, or by a sequence of events that might seem individually like "no big deal" but which cumulatively have a devastating impact. Recall that there's a type of torture that involves periodically letting a single drop of water fall on someone's forehead. At first, it's easy to ignore. Eventually, with repetition, it's impossible to ignore, and utterly crazy-making. The experience of being marginalized is often like that. Yet, members of the mainstream seldom get that the marginalized are often treated in ways that may sometimes seem individually not so important, but which can be cumulatively like an unending nightmare in their effect.

So, how does all this relation to connection, and to NVC?

If you are someone who is included in the "mainstream" in at least some ways, there is a danger that, even with a knowledge of NVC, you might interact with someone who experiences systemic marginalization in a way that seems to simply reproduce some of the nightmarish patterns of what the marginalized all-too-often experience. To increase the chances of supporting connection:

1. When someone tells you about an experience of marginalization, **be rigorous about empathizing with them**, rather than expressing doubt about the experience they're reporting, or interrogating them, or trying to educate them about the error of the way they are expressing themselves. (This shouldn't be anything new, to those who know NVC; it's more a matter of recognizing that there may be sensitivities present that make it even more important than usual to follow the suggestions of NVC.)
2. When empathizing with someone about an experience of marginalization, **be willing to guess or reflect the existence of a painful prior history of this person (and/or others close to them) experiencing many similar things in the past, and the cumulative effect that this has had**. (People trained in NVC often learn to focus on specific observations in a way that can lead them to ignore or dismiss the historical context in a way that could be experienced as invalidating. What may be new to some here is the acknowledgement of a larger context in which a particular experience occurs.)
3. When someone tells you that they found something someone (you?) did to be painful, **be willing to acknowledge the impact that the action had on them, rather than immediately jumping to a defense of the positive intentions** of the person who did something. (Acknowledging impact is a way of empathizing, while focusing on the intentions of another person can be experienced as denying the impact and invalidating the speaker's experience. This acknowledging of impact is useful with anybody. But, it's particularly relevant in relating to those who've experienced marginalization, since those who are marginalized so often have others say things that question, deny, or invalidate their experience, that they are likely to find a shift to the actor's intentions extra painful. I've seen this happen when a young person expressed hurt in relation to something an adult did — all the attention went to adults talking about their intentions, with little attention being given to hearing or empathizing with the young person's experience.)
4. When someone associated with an out-group reports experiencing hurt or harm in relation to something a member of an in-group has done, there is a common pattern in which the in-group member then becomes distressed, and most of the attention gets focused on addressing the distress of the in-group member, leaving the distress and complaint of the out-group member unattended to. Be aware of this pattern. When this sort of situation arises, **do what you can to bring attention back to the original concerns expressed by the out-group member**.

These lessons are expressed in the context of people who experience systemic marginalization. You

might think, “Oh, when would I ever be in a situation like that?” You might be surprised — I found that when I started paying attention, these sort of situations seemed to come up surprisingly often. And, you may find that these sort of awarenesses will help you connect better with people in general.

I’ve found that thinking about these sort of topics has led to a lot of learning for me, and to hope for more reliably being able to connect. There is a lot more that could be said, both for people who identify more with the “mainstream” and for people who experience marginalization. (Many of us experience both of these, in different ways.)