

A MATTER OF DIFFERENCE

Here and There: A Conversation about Identity

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There comes a point at which the only medium of communication is that which occurs in relationship. It no longer makes sense to speak to a disembodied audience because the message requires connection. For our penultimate column, we sought to move to uncommon territory in the dialogue on diversity and inclusion. All too often, the roles that we play (willingly or not) are disturbingly predetermined. The woman, the person of color, or the gay person bears the brunt of prejudice and discrimination, gains a certain set of insights about the experience of being marginal, and is sometimes able to educate those who perpetuate the discrimination. The man, the White person, and/or the straight person unconsciously inflict or perpetuate prejudice and discrimination, feel guilty at the emerging awareness of the impact of their behavior, and do penance by doing whatever the respective marginalized person with whom they have managed to have a conversation on the subject tells them to do.

This approach to ubiquitous but stereotyped roles is not satisfying to us. We believe there is a more textured and complex view, one that can better reflect the fluidity, multiplicity, vibrancy, and multilayered nature of our identities and of our interactions within and outside of our identity groups. A principal goal for our columns has been to develop and articulate that more multifaceted view, together with its implications for creating more inclusive organizations.

In this column, we set out to have a conversation about our identities as men of color and how the boundaries of those identities are remarkably fluid and emergent. Specifically, we wanted to delve into what happens to our sense of identity and membership when we are outside of the United States. It is an exchange and exploration of the sort that is not all that common in our experience, particularly at work, but we believe it is the kind of dialogue that must be an integral part of truly inclusive organizations. Please listen, and if you wish, join us...

BF: We had planned to ask each other questions regarding some of our experiences and perspectives, particularly regarding inclusion and international experiences....

MD: I am especially interested in the flexibility of identity as we move to different national contexts.

BF: That's a great theme. Perhaps I could expand the theme a bit to include both flexibility and stability?

MD: Sounds good to me. In particular, I was struck by how when I was in China, I was no longer able to be "Black." I was walking down a street in Shanghai on my first foray into the city on foot. As I passed several groups of Chinese workers (I was near one of the many construction projects underway all over the city), I was acutely aware of being watched. And in an epiphany, it hit me that my ethnic and racial script no longer applied.

BF: Can you say more about (a) what an ethnic script is, (b) what made the script salient in China, and (c) how it was different from the script in the U.S.?

MD: I think about the script as a kind of "roadmap for race." It's a kind of cognitive and behavioral script that creates a set of expectancies on how I am supposed to react vis-à-vis race. In the U.S., I think the script is about how I experience non-Black people's reactions to my being Black. I feel that they have many negative images of Black people because that is sufficiently salient in the U.S. for all the reasons we know. For me, this reality leads to my predispositions toward being ready to educate non-Black people about race because they will usually be ignorant. It leads toward my predisposition to being vigilant about instances in which I or others like me will probably be offended by the behaviors of non-Black people. Finally, it leads to an expectation that once race becomes salient in an interaction, that as a Black person, I will command center stage. The conversation is not about ethnicity or cultural diversity. Rather it becomes about Black and White and since I'm Black, I'm central to that conversation.

It's interesting that as I describe this to you a couple of patterns seem evident about this script. First, it seems like a map about dealing with prejudice/ignorance/racism, and not just about dealing with race. Second, I use the term "non-Black," but I think for me, I'm really talking about White Euro-Americans. I am used to experiencing my race as a place in which I will be constantly misunderstood and, as a result, deprived of resources that I deserve...I would call it a script of "subordinance" to echo some of my thinking from one of our previous columns.

BF: When you say that regarding the images, I think of Claude Steele's notion of stereotype threat. But could you give me a more vivid sense of the experience for you? What is actually going through your mind?

MD: Well, as I am walking down that Shanghai street, I realize the script no longer applies. I knew I was being watched and that I was an oddity, but I did not feel that I was being reviled, feared, or ridiculed. I just felt truly weird! And it was refreshing! I was aware that as I was in a new land, and it felt like "all bets were off" and it was almost as though I had to redefine my ethnicity in this new context.

BF: And what cued you into your being an “oddity?” How did the Chinese people around you communicate that, or what cues did you use to reach that impression?

MD: Now, I know images and stereotypes of Blacks have spread all over the world to some extent. I know that when I turned on the Chinese TV, I could get NBA basketball games from the U.S. and most of the people on the basketball court were Black. I know that when I went to an ATM in a Chinese bank and the helpful guard who was trying to tell me the machine didn’t work used a sports “timeout” hand motion to communicate with me, assuming, I suppose, that as a Black, I would get sports gestures.

I was really fascinated by how the context changed me. I saw myself differently.

BF: Do you have any other examples of how that works?

MD: Again, the Chinese people stared, so that cued me into being an oddity, and I was pretty tall, relative to most of the people I encountered (though I learned that many Chinese people are quite tall, bucking my stereotype of Asians being uniformly short).

BF: So they were looking up at you—that’s an interesting image, relative to your earlier point about subordination (which we often think of as being in the “down” position).

MD: Yes, that makes sense—I was talking about the experience or perception in the U.S.

BF: But in China, was there something going on in people’s behavior, or was it your mental maps that led to your interpretations?

MD: Indeed! What I realized is that for good or ill, I have a certain privilege as a Black person in the U.S. and that most people in the U.S. must have me on their radar screen in some capacity.

BF: You realized this in China?

MD: Whether it is as the object of disdain or respect, I matter. Yes, and it was in China that I saw this...

BF: OK, let me see if I understand.... In China, you felt that you were an unknown, “strange” person. People looked at you as an “oddity,” someone they didn’t know and didn’t understand. In contrast, in the U.S., people “know” something about you, even if it is stereotyped (i.e., they think they know something, even if wrong) and they HAVE to deal with you and your “type” whether they want to or not. In China, there are one billion-plus people who are going on about their lives without taking you into account in the least. Am I getting some of it?

MD: Exactly! And I don’t know if I could have realized it here in the U.S. because my experience of mattering is so ubiquitous.

BF: Can you say more about this “experience of mattering,” especially as it relates to inclusion? When I think of the African-American experience of mattering, much of it, at least the shared portion, is full of painful and oppres-

sive episodes. In China, you didn't "matter" the same way, but did that make you feel more or less included, or more or less free? (Whatever "free" means?)

MD: Interesting question. I would say that it was the Chinese experience of a kind of freedom from expectation or freedom from projection that was new and liberating. You're right. Here, for me and for many Blacks, the "mattering" or centrality is associated with pain. Even though centrality is associated with pain, there is also a kind of upside with being the center of attention. Shelby Steele wrote about this centrality several years ago, albeit from a politically conservative viewpoint I don't share.

BF: Can you describe the feeling/experience a bit more, and then say something about how it affected your behavior (particularly professionally, since you were there on a work trip)?

MD: I would say that the new insight about lack of centrality was associated with a sense of surprise, relief, and fear or trepidation.

Surprise—I simply could not fathom that there was a dimension to my sense of racial identity that I did not have a handle on! It was like a blind spot that became apparent just as I introspected on my experience of walking down the street...

Relief—there was a brief moment of relief (as an introvert) that in a profound way, I didn't have to be the center of attention. The other piece of the experience was that after people gawked a bit, they then lost interest. So I didn't feel so exposed.

BF: That sounds paradoxical (given the sense of being a "stranger" in China).

MD: Yes, indeed. Finally fear/trepidation—so if I am not the center of attention, if I cannot will people to pay attention to me by virtue of my race, then who am I?

BF: I see!

MD: How do I engage or become a part of the whole. It's like my ticket to inclusion had been my race.

BF: It kind of exposes the sick nature of our race relations (and attempts at superficial inclusion) in the U.S.

MD: Right. You can't do diversity without dealing with the Blacks! But all of that was potentially blown away in China, because I would have to find another way in.

BF: Yet, at the same time, in China you are even more "different" than in the U.S., no? Just not on the same racial terms (though there is still probably a racial dimension).

It sounds like part of what you experienced may be the way that, even with all of our diversity dialogue and work, you are still somewhat "flattened" here in the U.S. By that I mean not permitted to be fully complete, because you are bound by the racial schemas and expectations that prevail here.

MD: Yes, flattened is the right word. I never engaged the Chinese in dialogue about diversity, but it is conceivable to me that I was more American to them than I was Black.

So I have a question for you. In your travel in South America, do you have any similar kind of identity-shifting experience? Or even a dissimilar one?

BF: I was reflecting earlier on my recent experience in Galicia, Spain (not quite South America)....

It is a somewhat international group with which I have been working. In addition to Galician folks, there are Brazilians, Australians, Spanish folks from Madrid, and so forth...and it's an American company...(or at least a company with a U.S. headquarters).

In the work, there is a constant shifting of languages (among English, Spanish, Portuguese, Gallego), sometimes even in the same sentence. There's also a mixing of HR approaches, leadership philosophies, work cultures (though all embedded in the corporate culture and imperatives driven by HQ).

In terms of my own identity in that context, I found myself shifting (in part with the languages, with my behavior, with social graces) among American, Latin American, Latino. I also was dealing with the identities of consultant, academic, organizational psychologist, expert (in my field)/novice (in the company and its particular production process), and so forth. What was more obscured (and not mentioned to the folks there, really) is my Jewish identity. Also interesting, perhaps, is that even though I live in San Diego and I am certainly open about that, I don't think I was ever perceived (nor did I usually think of myself) as a "typical American."

MD: Why not?

BF: In fact, one person there mentioned how comfortable some of his subordinates seemed around me in that they opened up and acted "normal"—that is, talking as they usually would and not shutting down. The implicit contrast was with American visitors (either from HQ or other consultants). The ability to communicate in Spanish, and to engage in some of the social graces, I think supported the sense that I didn't fit into a stereotyped "American" mold.

MD: Got it. What is that mold?

BF: It's a stereotype of someone who has the world revolve around him, for whom others have to speak English, who doesn't really understand the multiplicity that is Europe (or the world, for that matter).

But knowing all that, I never felt totally at home either and if I let myself go in that direction, I was more likely to run into problems. In other words, to be effective, I had/have to maintain some of that externality (both as a consultant and culturally).

Does this connect to inclusion, shifting identities, or what? I'm not sure if we're going in the direction we want to....

MD: I think we have a lot of good stuff here....

I wanted to ask you to clarify the previous statement about maintaining externality. What do you mean?

BF: I meant that in the sense that if I allowed myself to get too embedded in their company and to have them assume that I could understand things (whether cultural in the organizational sense or the national/regional sense) without explanation, then I would lose a lot of my power as a consultant. Part of my power (and utility) derives from being able to ask questions and to be “stupid,” from bringing a new and different perspective, and helping them to see things differently.

P.S. I should mention that I was also in constant contact with my own “home” office...explaining what was happening and getting input from my own American consulting colleague.

MD: Out of curiosity, so what happened around your Jewish identity in all of this? You said that was not so emergent?

BF: I am used to being openly and not so openly Jewish. I don’t necessarily mention it directly. In that context I had other connections to Spain that I consciously didn’t mention to people, even when I found myself wanting to a couple of times.

When it was Friday or Saturday, I didn’t ask anyone about synagogues or the like (though I don’t really do that while traveling in the U.S. either), and I know that there aren’t any in the region I was visiting. My uncle was a high-ranking Israeli diplomat in Spain recently, and I didn’t mention that to anyone during my consulting visit.

It’s probably easier to describe the degree to which my Jewish identity is in the foreground (i.e., open) or not in the U.S. context. I identify in a summary way as a Latino Jew, or as a Latin American Jew (or as a Jewish Latino or Jewish Latin American). In the U.S., in Latino (non-Jewish) circles, internally I am often MORE conscious of being Jewish, but depending on the circumstances don’t necessarily highlight it (yet don’t hide it either).

It was very interesting getting involved recently with the San Diego Latino-Jewish Coalition. I went to a meeting earlier this year, designed to get the two groups to know each other better. When we divided into two groups, the organizers from the American Jewish Committee (American Jews), asked me to go with the Latino group. It was a strange experience, not so much being with the Latino group, as being asked to go there by the American Jews.

MD: You got categorized. The American Jews “told” you were a Latino—a choice was thrust upon you, it sounds like.

BF: You’re right at one level—because there were only two groups. But the AJC folks never stopped thinking about me as Jewish. In some ways, I think they liked the idea of having an “insider” who understood the goals, perhaps, placed with the “other” group. They were fascinated with the idea of me (and the Mexican Jewish woman there) as bridges and connectors. Once I was with the Latinos, I felt both connected and different at the same time.

The wonderful part was that the others in the Latino group didn't have any issue with my being there.

A big part of the problem is our either/or categories and our inability to create processes and structures that transcend them. It occurs to me that being able to do that requires more people to experience some of that complexity and multiplicity (to go to China as it were)!

MD: I'm just struck by how, as we explore this fluidity of identity and what can elicit it, we are still defined (and define ourselves) as a way of figuring out how to be. Your examples touch on the same things my China story touch on. We are so complex and multifaceted and there are such structures, customs, wills that exert force to make us something that is understandable, something that fits. And I wonder what would happen if we could somehow cultivate the capacity to live with the true ambiguity of our identities. What impact would that have on our capacity to be inclusive?

BF: That's what I was trying to get at in some way.

Concluding note: We had our conversation as an online "chat" (i.e., in writing), as a way to best track our thoughts and to provide a mechanism for quiet introspection/reflection combined with dialogue and interaction. This was born, in part, from Bernardo observing rich dialogues and learning about diversity among his students as they participate in online forums during his graduate diversity course. What you've read here is an edited and abridged version of the longer conversation that we had. Even in the longer version, we felt that we wanted/needed to go a lot deeper and spend a lot more time, and we look forward to doing that soon, even if not for our readers, then for ourselves. We find it fascinating—and challenging—that even though we've been working and talking with each other in depth about related topics for so long, that we could gain so much additional perspective on each other and on issues of mutual interest by structuring our dialogue in this way.