Drawing the Line: Are Some Differences Too Different? (Or: Who's In, Who's Out, and What Difference Does it Make?)

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The events of September and October, including the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the subsequent U.S. attacks on Afghanistan, have focused us profoundly on differences. We are inundated with information about the subtleties and nuances of the Arab world and of Islam and Muslims abroad and in the United States. We are paying attention to cultural and religious differences in ways we have not previously. At the same time, we voraciously seek to understand how the hijackers emerged in the United States and blended in relatively unnoticed. Published editorials advocate stricter controls and background checks on foreign visitors to the United States. And we are once again engaged in debates about the appropriateness and utility of ethnic- or other group-based profiling. The events of the day are shifting our consciousness about difference: How different are we from one another, really? Are differences good or bad? How much difference can we embrace and still be the same society? When does a difference represent danger?

Essentially, these are all questions about limits and boundaries. In our last column, we wrote that inclusion in large part is "about the container into which we all fit." Today, this perspective is being tested in dramatic and new ways in communities around the United States, in the country as a whole, and perhaps throughout the world.

Unfortunately, we are prone, especially under conditions of threat, to become simplistic and rigid in our thinking about difference. Specifically, we resort to dichotomous reasoning: If you are Arab, you may be a terrorist; if you are not Arab, there is no threat (was the bombing in Oklahoma City that long ago?). "Either you're a true American and support *us* in this war or you are anti-American and are against *us*." Categorical information about group memberships is often used as a quick way to answer such questions. What we do not typically think about when engaging in this type of reaction are

some of our underlying assumptions, based on answers to questions such as: What or who is "us"? Who defines it? What signifies whether you're in or out of the boundaries? In the current situation, for example, does putting a flag on your house or business make you one of "us"? (If it does, then why was the shopkeeper who happened to wear a turban murdered just a few feet from the flag he had placed on his shop window?) What do we mean by "American," and who determines whether someone "truly" fits the category?

This either-or thinking about difference poses a serious challenge to the society and community that strives to value its diversity and be inclusive. Full inclusion requires implementing processes that involve all members of the community in setting and giving meaning to the boundary. Paradoxically, participation in this process requires an *a priori* commitment to the larger community—in a sense assuming a predefined boundary—yet at the same time a willingness on the part of members to relax that definition of the collective—a willingness to be wholly part of something that is yet without a clear boundary or limits. What this means is that none of us alone, and no subgroups alone, can own or set the boundary. That boundary, those limits, must be marked together; and once they are marked, we must be willing to constantly reexamine them, in light of changes in ourselves and in others.

Granted, since September 11th, we have seen our nation make its boundaries more rigid. For example, legislation allows individuals to be detained for longer periods of time without due process, and it will be more difficult for visitors to the United States to get visas. The result is that many Arabs and Americans of Arab descent have had their individual freedoms eroded. But we have also seen many people, including high officials, work to make sure members of the Arab and Islamic communities continue to be included as part of the larger U.S. community. President Bush has rarely made a statement about the attack and the U.S. response without also differentiating between those who practice the Islamic faith peacefully from the very small minority who resort to violence in its name. Many in the Arab and Islamic communities in the United States stepped up their efforts to let others know who they are and what they stand for (including all of the diversity within the Arab and Islamic communities). In San Diego, for example, the Islamic Center and a number of mosques have held open houses and lectures to which the public was invited. What is notable to us about these events—and sets them apart from historical reactions to differences during times of war, such as the Japanese internment camps during World War II—is the collaborative way in which they have taken place. Recognizing and embracing the differences that exist among its people—in a sense, broadening our boundaries—has strengthened unity in the United States. The paradox is that as people in the United States have in many ways closed ranks, we have also recognized and allowed for our differences more than ever before, in a sense expanding our sense of who "we" are and who is included in that larger com-

munity. So the closing of the ranks has actually made us bigger, and making ourselves bigger has helped us close ranks. By being willing to live with this paradox and refusing to make it an "either-or," the country has become stronger. This to us is one of the lessons of inclusion: Noting and embracing differences can be a source of strength and unity, rather than division, if we do it in a way where no subgroup claims exclusive rights to defining the boundary. When we let go of our claim on the whole boundary, and therefore on being the sole arbiter of who is in and who is out, that boundary can become, paradoxically, stronger and clearer.

Our attention to differences these days can, on the one hand, lead to exclusion, to designating certain people and groups as so different that they are "beyond the pale," totally unacceptable and alien. Alternatively, attending to and allowing for differences can also make us stronger by providing us more resources and perspectives. There is strength in the differences, but only if we're willing both to change and be changed, particularly in terms of our hold on the boundaries. We cannot hold on to old notions of who "we" are and still benefit from the strengths that the differences can bring. Yet, paradoxically, to the extent that those "old" notions incorporate basic ideas that appeal to a broad set of people, they are more likely to be kept alive as they are changed than had we held on to them in their prior versions. It is in this way that a concept such as "freedom," a basic ingredient of the fabric holding the United States together, is more likely to be magnified if we can reexamine it and implement it in ways that make sense for the time.

As we attend to differences, we typically focus on the "other" and rarely on ourselves. Our analysis here suggests the importance of focusing not on "them," but rather on us. An exclusive focus on the other, on the outsider, rarely allows for the required type of understanding and development. For example, who is included in "us"? What defines the boundaries of the collective? What makes us who we are? What basic values hold us together? In the case of the United States, it may be values such as democracy, civil liberties, appreciation of dissent and difference, and the like. As the two of us have struggled to make sense of current events, and have also wondered whether sometimes some differences are just "too different," we have become more aware of the importance of the processes used to define and redefine the container within which such judgments are made. Dialogue, mutual adaptation, and engagement are key practices in this regard. So, for example, in the current dilemmas over the appropriate breadth of the container we call the "United States of America," we believe that the price of admission should not be a particular skin color, ancestry, or religion, but rather a willingness to engage in a two-way process of mutual adaptation. This may very well result in a container that is different than it was at other times in the past, but one that, by its ability to adapt, remains truer to its original intent.

As the United States engages in such conversations in the midst of challenging times, it is also timely for those of us in SIOP to examine and re-examine our own boundaries and the assumptions that underlie them. What defines the boundaries of our organization? How permeable are those boundaries? What benefits and costs do we accrue because of that level of permeability? To what extent do our definitions of who is "in" and who is "out" fit current times and reflect all of our members' perspectives, contributions, and strengths? Are there some members with more or less voice than others in the process of defining the container we call "SIOP"? Is there such a thing as "too different" in the context of SIOP? And how are we to determine that? Please let us know your views and reactions. Send e-mail to bferdman@alliant.edu and DavidsonM@Darden.virginia.edu.