Conflict Is Optional, Difference Is Not: Toward a Difference-Based Approach to Interpersonal Communication

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THESIS APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT


Title: Conflict is Optional, Difference is Not: Toward a Difference-Based Approach to Interpersonal Communication

An examination of the discussion of conflict in general, interpersonal and small group communication texts indicates that the conceptualization of conflict theory in the U.S. is increasingly dependent upon three theoretical pillars: the qualities of ubiquity, utility and necessity. A critical, deconstructive analysis of these operational characteristics in relation to the actual human experience of conflict reveals that they are more appropriately associated with the essential condition of difference, rather than conflict, and the concepts of conflict and difference are generally conflated in U.S. communication texts. The synergistic interaction of a variety of specific cultural constructs can be seen as contributing to this condition.

Positing that elemental quality of difference, rather than conflict, is essentially ubiquitous, useful and necessary, the concept of conflict can be usefully reframed as being a widespread, but often optional, structurated response to particular perceptions of a specific condition of difference. Employing the
purposeful, overt recognition of difference as a necessary foundation for self-aware
human existence and growth, a difference-based interpersonal communication model
for the development of mutual understanding through increased empathy is
described.
CONFLICT IS OPTIONAL, DIFFERENCE IS NOT:
TOWARD A DIFFERENCE-BASED APPROACH
TO INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

by
JAMES ARTHUR GIESEKING, JR.

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INTRODUCTION

Concerns regarding the issues of tolerance and diversity have been a recurring theme in the American cultural experience since the formation of this country. Most recently, this theme has been re-emphasized in response to the significant demo- and ethno-graphic changes underway in the composition of the American workforce, as well as a concomitant movement on the part of academia (through the establishment of university "diversity requirements") to expose American students to paradigms of experience other than that of the predominant, White, male, Western model--which is what I refer to in this paper as mainstream American culture. The heightened visibility of these issues can, to a certain extent, be viewed as a reflection of our increasing awareness of the limitations associated with our traditional process of "assimilation" in this culture, which has historically operated in ways that have served to blur distinctions and tended to promote homogeneity rather than overtly acknowledging difference and effectively realizing the positive values of diversity. Ultimately, the ability of our society to become a truly pluralistic polity depends in large measure upon the nature of our attitudes toward, and therefore, our relationship with, difference in the context of communication and interpersonal diversity.
Inasmuch as all of our communicative activity embodies both a content and a relational dimension (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967), the substance of our underlying cultural attitude toward difference is problematic in a "multiverse" constituted by individual "universes." Traditionally, American approaches to effective interpersonal and group communication have generally emphasized similarity (Hoopes, 1979). We have been encouraged to seek, identify, and build upon those aspects of our individual experience that are held "in common" with other people. This is represented in the widely used "overlapping circles" model of interpersonal communication, wherein this "common ground" is presumed to be pre-existing and merely needs to be uncovered through discursive exploration. In this process of "discovering," the notion of "difference" is minimized at best in American communication theory and practice, and at worst it is totally ignored. Unfortunately, however, relatively adverse reactions to the awareness of difference permeate the everyday operation of our society as a whole. Generally, the only discernable evidence of "difference" in our interpersonal, group and general communication literature and texts is found in its implicit role as an assumed, basic, constituent element of "conflict." As such, difference becomes something to be either "resolved," discarded or overcome in our attempt to regain a sense of "similarity." If we emphasize, and to a large extent expect, sameness in our interpersonal relationships, but instead encounter difference, our subsequent behavior will reflect that dissonance and

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disappointment—we will attempt to ignore, denigrate, assimilate or eliminate that which is perceived to be "different" from us.

My purpose in this thesis is to explicate the concepts (after Good, 1991) of difference and conflict as they are used in the contexts of interpersonal, group and general communication texts in this culture and to explore the possibilities of alternative communication theory and model-building based on the results of that explication. As a consequence of a deconstructive analysis of the dominant themes that emerged from that explication, my contention is that both of these concepts—difference as well as conflict—are undertheorized in American communication studies and practice, a condition which contributes relatively little to our increased understanding of the nature and underlying assumptions related to our experience of conflict, even less to increase our understanding of difference—and by extension—interpersonal diversity, and finally, may be counter-productive as the essential theoretical underpinnings of interpersonal communication. In fact, the concepts of conflict and difference are most often conflated in American communication studies. This is not exclusively a failure of communication studies, but instead represents a generalized perspective rooted in our underlying cultural values and attitudes. Furthermore, our cultural failure to adequately distinguish between conflict and difference as distinct conceptual entities—instead treating them as theoretical synonyms—has profound implications for our basic relationship to, and understanding of, communication as a social process. By proceeding from the assumption that, on
some level, effective communication is primarily a process of identifying and emphasizing similarity, we lose sight of the principal essence of communication as being the processing of diversity, per se.

A useful way to conduct an analysis of this problem in our society is to situate the discussion within the context of the paradigmatic framework comprising the unique values and assumptions of American mainstream culture. Since research in the areas of intercultural and critical social communication theory have concerned itself more directly with cultural frames of reference and the issues of diversity and conflict, I will draw heavily from those perspectives in this paper. In particular, I will use the notions of a "difference-based" perspective from intercultural communication theory (Hoopes, 1979; Bennett, 1979) as well as elements of the theory of structuration (Giddens, 1979; 1984) to provide a focus for my analysis.

UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT CONFLICT

The notion of difference, per se, is not explicitly addressed in American interpersonal, group, and general communication literature or texts. The incidence of the concept of difference only appears implicitly within the discussion of "conflict" or "conflict resolution," where it is assumed to be a constituent element. Our experience of conflict is defined in the literature mainly in terms of a perception of threat or "interference" with our directed, individual action toward intended goals.
Historically, interpersonal conflict in American culture has generally been viewed as a negative, adversarial experience, one to be avoided if at all possible (Grove, 1991; Myers & Myers, 1988; and others). It also has been traditionally associated in our experience with the emotion of anger and subsequent aggressive communicative responses, such as physical and verbal fighting and the elimination of the "opposition," either figuratively through superior argument, or literally through dint of physical force. In general, our enduring cultural notion of interpersonal conflict--and, by association, difference--has been characterized as the absence of "harmony" (reflecting our bi-polar paradigmatic framework and discussed later), and regarded as an uncomfortable and unpleasant physical and emotional aspect of our reality (Ellsworth, 1972; Satir, 1967).

Recently, however, the communication literature has begun to explicitly discuss conflict--but not difference--from the opposite end of the evaluative spectrum (Folger & Poole, 1984; Hocker and Wilmot, 1991; Ting-Toomey, 1985; and others). Three recurrent and related themes can be identified in these emerging characterizations of conflict: First, conflict is ubiquitous (omnipresent) in the human experience; Second, our experience of conflict is therefore natural and inevitable; and Third, conflict is both necessary and useful in our daily lives. These themes increasingly are being used in our effort to reframe our implicit cultural assumptions about the nature of interpersonal conflict and deserve further explanation.
Conflict as Ubiquitous

When defined in the context of perceived threat or a potential source of interference with the achievement of personal goals, the potential for conflict arises whenever we act in the world, especially in the presence of other people who have instrumental goals of their own. The possibility for conflict is therefore associated with any directed human activity, and the potential for conflict is particularly heightened in a cultural environment such as ours, which values and emphasizes the role of individual, intentional activity. Although the precise relationship between "effective" communication and the achievement of these intentional goals is still arguable (Spitzberg, 1983; McCrosky, 1982; and others), the notion that some relationship exists in our daily experience between our need to act socially in the world in order to survive and our subsequent need to communicate is probably not. In this framework, therefore, all of our communicative activity could be said to bear some relationship to the potential identification and processing of situational, interpersonal conflict.

Conflict as Natural and Inevitable

As a natural consequence of our need to act in a diverse world in order to survive, conflict becomes part of our everyday living experience (Folger & Poole, 1984). It "comes with the territory," so to speak, and is a fundamental aspect of our experiential reality. In this view, our experience of living, itself, can on some level
be characterized as a series of "conflicts," and our communication is inextricably connected to that process.

**Conflict as Necessary and Useful**

Contrary to the historical cultural perspective on conflict, most recent communication literature has adopted the perspective that conflict is both necessary and useful in our experience to: a) prevent "stagnation"; b) stimulate the exploration of new ideas; and c) promote healthy change through the spirited exchange of differing points of view (Myers & Myers, 1988; Grove, 1991; Jandt, 1985; Kelly, 1980; and others). This approach attempts to reframe conflict as a positive experience, the more beneficial when properly managed. Generally, appropriate management of conflict involves prescribed techniques for a reasoned process of either "resolution" or, in some cases, the agreement to "disagree" (Fisher & Ury, 1981; DeVito, 1982; and others).

**Other Aspects of Conflict**

Recent literature (Grove, 1991; Jandt, 1985; DeVito, 1982; and others) also attempts to remove some situations of cognitive disagreement involving "dialogue" from the historical cultural notion of the "conflict continuum," maintaining that discussion does not necessarily involve conflict. This perspective defines a continuum to comprise "disagreement" at the "cool" end and "hot" or adversarial conflict at the other. The relative position of a given experience on this scale is dependent upon the level of intensity associated with the interaction, the amount of "negativity" involved,
and the degree of emotional investment in a particular outcome, i.e. "winning," by the participants.

Consistent with the underlying assumption of threat or interference as component elements of our experience of conflict, the literature also generally refers to some notion of incompatible goals and/or values associated with the situation, as well as a perception of both a scarcity of resources and a competition for access to, and control of, those resources (Coser, 1956; Folger & Poole, 1984; Hocker & Wilmot, 1991; and others).

Finally, the literature maintains that human conflict, at some level, directly and necessarily involves communicative activity (Jandt, 1973; Grove, 1991; Folger & Poole, 1984; and others). Mutual awareness of the conflict as conflict is required by some authors (Myers & Myers, 1988), and others contend that when communication ceases, so too, does conflict (Gaw & Sayer, 1979; Klopf, 1989; and others).

THE PROBLEM

As illustrated by the preceding explication, the discussion of the concept of conflict in American interpersonal, group, and general communication literature and texts continues to suffer from a lack of a focused theoretical basis. Nearly thirty-five years ago, in an attempt to correlate and define the notions of conflict in general usage current at the time, Mack & Snyder (1957) found that American cultural notions of the nature of conflict and those situations that might be characterized as "conflicting"
were ill-defined to a point approaching irrelevance. "Conflict is, for the most part, a rubber concept, being stretched and molded for the purposes at hand. In its broadest sense, it (the concept of conflict) seems to cover everything from [wars] to choices between ice cream sodas and sundaes" (Ibid., p. 212). In general, it can be shown that not much has changed over the last three and one-half decades in terms of our precision regarding the definition and use of concept. For example, I can say, "I have a schedule conflict between a meeting of my Prevent Nuclear Conflict group and a panel discussion on Conflict of Interest in the Public Sector." Not surprisingly, this sentence makes "sense" in American usage, notwithstanding the fact that I am using the same word--and, at some level, a similar notion of the underlying theoretical concept--to encompass experiential referents ranging from Armageddon to the perceived violation of a "Law of Physics" related to occupying in two disparate physical spaces at the same time. Rather than a disciplined attempt to establish boundaries for our notions of conflict or to introduce increased precision in our discussion of the concept, however, we seem to be gravitating toward an even broader approach, characterizing conflict as ubiquitous. Unfortunately, this vision of conflict becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. That which is defined as ubiquitous, becomes ubiquitous.

The implications of this cultural tendency to over-generalize the occurrence of conflict and to blur distinctions between conflict and closely related concepts (such as contradiction, incompatibility, et cetera), contributes to confusion in our
communication research and furthers the obfuscation of the nature of our basic, implicit assumptions regarding difference. Furthermore, there is a connection between our language, both as langue and parole (de Suassure, 1960), and our experience of the world (Cassier, 1946). If conflict is everywhere, then we are everywhere in conflict. As a result, our implicit cultural relationship with the essential quality of difference is often problematic. Unfortunately, our traditional cultural response to our experience of conflict has all too often been one of resorting to some form of verbal, physical, emotional or economic violence (which can be viewed as some form of communicative behavior) in order to either "resolve," overcome or eliminate it.

What is needed, therefore, is a discussion of the concepts of difference and conflict that goes beyond the specification of prescriptive communication behaviors to "manage" it and, instead, attempts to delineate the explicit distinctions between the two concepts and explicate our implicit cultural assumptions regarding each. Furthermore, the essential role of difference in the process of communication needs to be identified and acknowledged.

THE CONFLATION OF THE CONCEPTS OF CONFLICT AND DIFFERENCE

There is an inherent, implicit theme evident in the way we regard and speak about conflict in this culture. By substituting the word "difference" for the word "conflict" in the three major themes identified in American interpersonal, group and general communication discussions of conflict theory, we can illuminate a definite
pattern of conflating the concept of conflict—which is essentially only one of the possible experiential gestalts related to difference—with the notion of difference itself. As a result of this conflation, it can be seen that, in large measure, the notion of conflict has become synonymous in American usage with the concept of difference in those instances where difference as difference is worth attending to. A prime example of this phenomenon is the phrase, "I know we've had our differences in the past...," wherein there is no doubt that the intended reference is not to the differences, but to the manifest behavioral choices related to those differences, which in most cases were experienced as "conflict." In this situation, it is not the differences which are being acknowledged, but the probably contentious processing of those differences which is being remembered. Generally, the phrase is an attempt to "head off" contentious behavior based on past practice, not a confirmation of the value of diversity.

Difference is Ubiquitous--Not Conflict

The ability to attend to difference—to construct figure/ground distinctions—makes our aware experience possible; that which we cannot differentiate, we cannot perceive. What remains undifferentiated remains unknowable. This notion of difference is central to the theory and practice of interpersonal communication. The fact that we each, as unique individuals, differentially perceive, interpret, evaluate and respond/react to the figure/ground distinctions that we construe makes essential the process of communication in the creation of our "common sense," which in turn informs our experiential social "reality." Social forms of communication can be
fundamentally viewed as the processing of this interpersonal diversity, per se. In a theoretical sense, difference is the ubiquitous element, not conflict. Conflict, even in its broadest sense, is merely one way of relating to difference. The fact that we do not experience ourselves as being in conflict with the majority of figure/ground distinctions we make illustrates this distinction, and belies the claim that conflict is truly ubiquitous, although it may well indeed be widespread.

**Difference is Natural and Inevitable—Not Conflict**

The literature naturalizes the notion of conflict in American culture by regarding it as ubiquitous. Coincidentally, our "common sense" regarding conflict characterizes it as "the way it is," "part of the territory" of living, "unavoidable" in human interaction and so on. Again, it is difference, and particularly not adversarial forms of conflict, which is both natural and inevitable in our lives. It is the fundamental, enabling given for our awareness of our own existence and all of our conscious experience. To regard the acknowledgement and processing of the natural and inevitable differences we experience as some form of conflict renders the concepts synonymous, redundant and indistinguishable. This conflation negates the useful potential associated with our ability to discern particular situations and to discriminate among optional responses. By reducing our potential ability to differentiate, we reduce the breadth of possible experience, and limit the scope of our ability to act in the world.
Difference is Necessary and Useful--Not Conflict

In the claim that conflict is necessary for change, adaptation and growth, the literature seems to be developing some notion of conflict as an essential ingredient in human development--akin to a "communication Darwinism" that replaces the biological necessity of diversity in the gene pool with the personal experience of conflict as the essential requirement for species survival. Maintaining the metaphor, it can be argued that it is the essential differences in our personal experiences of the world and our varied interpretations of it that are actually necessary for individual growth and species development, not conflict in relation to those differences, although our processing of particular conflicts may indeed lead to growth in specific cases. In this regard, exploring differences through discussion (which is generally not regarded as conflict in the recent literature), and being willing to accept the potential value of a synergistic interaction of those differences, is much more likely to prove useful to our continued development as a species than is conflict. If anything, our continued reliance on traditional, generally aggressive, conflict response behaviors actually threatens to cut short species potential.

The Reframing of Conflict as a Positive Experience

Based on the three unfortunately conflated pillars of conflict theory of ubiquity, inevitability and necessity/utility described above, much of the communication literature attempts to reframe conflict as a positive experience. This approach is problematic because it fails to account for the nature of our personal experience of
conflict as an unique, individual gestalt (multidimensional, interdependent whole) consisting of the interrelated processes of perception, interpretation, and behavior. Each element of this process, although it can be conceptualized independently, informs, and is informed by, the others. Our perceptions of our experience influence, and are influenced by, the sum of our interpretive processes--cognitive structure, language, our "reality paradigm", and the remembered consequences of our previous behaviors. Our choices of response behavior, in turn, generate affect in the "other," which again occasions new perceptions on our part. Conflict, therefore, can be viewed as a particular, structurated--it is produced and reproduced simultaneously within the interaction itself--experiential gestalt, comprising a recurring process of perception, interpretation, and patterns of social behavior.

Our cultural experience of this particular gestalt has certain characteristic elements, which, taken as a whole, are not generally positive. Our psychological and physiological experiences tend to be unpleasant, such as feeling threatened, embattled and frustrated (Ellsworth, 1972; Satir, 1967). We tend to construct a cause-and-effect scenario that blames the "other" (Delia, 1974; Ellsworth, 1972; Jones & Davis, 1965; and others). We generally respond in "defensive" ways that create a poor climate for communication (Gibb, 1961). The attempt to reframe this experience as positive and useful by merely altering our attitude toward conflict, rather than restructuring our cultural awareness of, and attitude toward, difference, is given to failure because we do not generally experience conflict as an enjoyable gestalt and will likely resist being
told that "it is good for us." In my personal experience, not many people look forward to adversarial forms of conflict as a means of self-enrichment, and I doubt that we are likely to begin to do so any time soon. "I can hardly wait to get home today, because my partner and I are in the midst of a very enlightening conflict about our financial situation," is not likely to be a widespread sentiment. If, however, we experience the gestalt regarding our interpersonal differences as being one of respectful dialogue or discussion based on exploration and potential synergy rather than "winning" or the annihilation of the other point of view, it is more probable that we would view it as a positive and valuable aspect of our lives. As such, a more effective approach would be to separate the notions of conflict and difference from each other at the outset, because our relationship to the experiential gestalts involved in this process are radically different. Our experience of difference, properly acknowledged and distinguished from conflict, has the potential to be much more valuable and less pervasively negative than our experience of adversarial conflict.

THE AMERICAN CULTURAL RELATIONSHIP WITH DIFFERENCE

There are several factors in the American cultural paradigm that can be useful in contextualizing our conflation of conflict and difference in this society. My primary interest here is in the subjective aspects (Stewart & Bennett, 1991) of the dominant, mainstream American culture--its psychological and sociological features, its underlying values and assumptions, and its patterns of interpretation that
characterize our "common sense." The objective features of our culture--our institutions and artifacts--both inform, and are formed by, the subjective elements. Although we have a strong tendency in America to reify the objective features (regard them as external structures with a "life of their own" and quite beyond our creation of them), it is the structurated interaction of the objective and subjective aspects of our culture which serves as the underlying template for our individual sense-making activities in the world. Each of these cultural elements contributes to the particular notion of conflict that is embedded in both our communication literature and our communicative activity.

A problematic feature of any cultural paradigm is its ability to "mask" itself to its members by appearing to be naturalized as simply "the way things are"--and often, in our case, "the way things ought to be"--rather than as one viable option among many. Our awareness of our own cultural paradigm operating in our patterns of thinking and behaving is particularly problematic for Americans because of our perception of our own cultural factors as merely manifestations of some essential underlying pattern of "correct" social organization. This disregard of the social origins of internalized cultural patterns is characteristic of American culture (Stewart & Bennett, 1991), and is evident in the fact that it has been only recently that most of my White, American students have begun to respond affirmatively to the question, "Do you have an identifiable culture?" Furthermore, our individual "reality paradigms" actually comprise a series of interrelated paradigmatic overlays, which are
heavily influenced by our culture, sub-cultures, peer groups, families, and personal orientations. All of these subjective paradigms operate out of our awareness to a large extent--not only do we act in the world without necessarily considering why we perceive, interpret and behave the way we do, we also don’t often realize that it is only one of a variety of viable options in the first place (Singer, 1976). Therefore, the underlying assumptions and values that characterize American culture are much like "zero-order beliefs"

so taken for granted that we are apt not to notice that we hold them at all; we remain unaware of them until they are called to our attention or are brought into question by some bizarre circumstance in which they appear to be violated (Bem, 1970 p.5).

In order to more fully understand the conflation of the concepts of conflict and difference in American interpersonal, group and general communication literature and texts, it is useful to examine that conflation in light of specific American cultural assumptions and values.

The Assumption of Sameness

One of the dominant traits of the American cultural paradigm is a basic assumption of essential sameness and inherent similarity among people (Hoopes, 1979; Bennett, 1979). Dig deep enough, and "everybody is just like me," is not an unfamiliar tenet of our American "common sense." This notion forms the basis of the
historical approach to "effective" interpersonal and group communication as being one of discovering, identifying and building on expected areas of sameness. In this process, differences are specifically avoided and--if encountered, diminished, discarded and/or ignored--in the quest for "common ground." In terms of interpersonal communication, this notion is manifest in the "overlapping circles" model, wherein some measure of coincidence (sameness) is presumed to pre-exist, and forms the basis for understanding. Once we establish a relationship on this basis, we come to emphasize and expect this sameness. When difference, as embodied in the "other," becomes severe enough to violate our expectations (see Bem, above), it is both surprising and disappointing. As a result, we most often respond to the recognition of difference not from curiosity, but from anxiety. This produces a continued structuration of our relationship with difference as an uncomfortable one--hence, the associated presence of conflict--and totally obscures the valuable role of difference in both communication theory and practice. Difference is simultaneously the information to be gained in our social interaction as well as the foundation for the means by which we attain it--communication.

The Value of "Individualism" and the Notion of Freedom

The narcissistic notion of "individualism," defined as "my right to do whatever I want, whenever I want, without interference," is arguably the premier value in American culture. That which is "private" is considered to be very nearly sacrosanct in our society. Consequently, "freedom," another dominant value in our culture, is
most often described (within relatively minimal socially proscribed limits) in terms of our ability to "be left alone," to "do what I want to do, when I want to do it," and the right of "non-interference" (or "non-abridgement" in legal contexts) in the pursuit of our own individual goals. As individuals, we consider ourselves as having a personal responsibility to be highly instrumental in effecting those goals--our culture generally rewards (via "success" and the trappings thereof) individual stature much more than community service. In this context, perceived interference with the achievement of our goals is unacceptable to us and a source of implicit threat to our right to "succeed." This perception of interference, and therefore, threat, is one of the central defining characteristics of conflict in communication literature and texts. Therefore, identifiable difference related to either the nature of the particular goals themselves, or to the perceived ability to pursue instrumental activity to attain those goals, is regarded as an occasion for necessary (by definition) conflict. There is a problematic internal contradiction in the simultaneous notions of personal freedom and the attractiveness of homogeneity (the "assumption of sameness") in this culture. This tension can be alleviated somewhat by a relatively self-centered view of the complicated relationship of these two aspects of our paradigm: my exercise of personal freedom (and yours, when it looks like mine) operates within acceptable limits and reasonable intentions; yours, however, particularly when it is different from mine, may not. Given this personal locus of the value of personal freedom, it is problematic whether our individual perceptions of interference might not often be
overextended to the point of engendering our experience of conflict when none is, or need be, actually present.

The Naturalization of Competition

American culture has traditionally embodied particular notions of competition among its members as healthy and necessary. In both our logical exercise and our economic organization, we have tended to operate closer to the Hobbesian end of the "competition-cooperation continuum" of social interaction, which characterizes social activity as the "war of all against all." This attitude is best illustrated by our generic cultural misinterpretation of Darwin's theory regarding "the survival of the fittest" that has underlain much of our historical interaction in relation to gender, other cultures, and particular sub-cultures within our own society. Rather than the intended interpretation of adaptation ("fit") within an overall climate of cooperation and interdependence, our particular cultural translation has, until relatively recently, been relatively closer to one of "might makes right." At the very least, this distortion has served as an underlying justification for our naturalization of competition as necessary and useful in our cultural "common sense." This is often apparent in our attitudes toward argument and economic structure.

Although probably somewhat of an overstatement, the predominant metaphor for argument in this culture is that "argument is war" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Our intellectual process regarding intellectual differences is therefore not often one of discovery, but rather, one of elimination--we "attack" the other position and we
"destroy" the opposing argument. This attitude, formalized in our legal and discursive debate systems, does not foster the empathetic listening behaviors necessary for the exploration and realization of the potential synergistic aspects of difference, but instead engenders a polarized climate structured within the framework of "winning" and "losing." In addition, the American system of oligarchical capitalism is a structurated way of organizing our economic relationships that emphasizes the relationship of individual effort and subsequent reward within the context of a finite universe of resources. This "fixed-pie" notion of human interaction carries with it a necessary relationship between the relative sizes of the pie. The size of my slice is inherently a function of the size of yours. As a consequence, my energy is focused not only on increasing my portion, but also on limiting yours. This view of our relationship with each other is based, by necessity, on the notion of our existential difference as two separate people as constituting conflict. We are, by definition, assumed to be competing for the same, limited stock of resources. Although our cultural notion of the inherent value of competition over cooperation has been successfully challenged (Kohn, 1986), the application of this re-valuation to the communication literature has, unfortunately, been somewhat limited (Fisher & Ury, 1981). In any event, to be truly effective, the "invention of options" clause in conflict resolution strategies requires a conscious acknowledgement and identification of the differences between the parties as being potentially synergistic, contrary to the prevailing notion of difference representing inherent limitation and interference. This
The Bipolar Nature of the American Cultural Paradigm

As do all cultures, Americans have particular notions regarding difference. The nature of our generally bi-polar ("either/or") cultural paradigm structures both the existence of, and our relationship with, that which we perceive as "different." This process accounts, to some degree, for the level of comfort we take in the previously discussed "assumption of sameness" in American culture, and also explains why violations of that assumption--embodied in acknowledged difference--are regarded somewhat negatively in this society. Our language reinforces these perceptions and responses. To a certain extent, we define something in terms of what it is not--the "absent present" (Derrida, 1974). The word we use to identify something carries within it the notion of characteristics which are not included in the reference, as well as a broad range of theoretical options for what it could be, but isn't. With language we define and share the boundaries of our figure/ground distinctions and institutionalize them as part of our cultural "common sense." This process tends to be especially problematic in a view of the world that leans toward a framework of polarized and absolute options: either good or bad, right or wrong, sane or crazy, and so on. That which is recognized and acknowledged as different is attributed qualities, often negative, that are unlike those we attribute to ourselves. The quality
of bipolar self-centeredness (in its descriptive sense) fuels several aspects of our interpersonal communicative activity. For example, attribution theory maintains that we regard our own shortcomings as circumstantial in this culture. Other people's shortcomings are characterized as being inherent in their "disposition" (Jones & Davis, 1965; Jones & Nesbitt, 1972). In essence, "my" shortcomings are transitory and can be explained by circumstances, and "yours" are intrinsic and immutable.

This tendency towards bipolarity also influences our basic notion of what constitutes conflict: "not-harmony." That which is perceived as not harmonious, i.e., remarkably different, is regarded as conflicting. Harmony, in this sense, is often misinterpreted as homogeneity or "agreement" in this culture, not as differences complementing each other within a framework of cooperation. Hence, our historical cultural attraction to the "melting pot" notion--making us all relatively the "same" through the process of assimilation--rather than embracing a pluralism of inherent diversity. In order for difference to begin to be truly appreciated in this culture, we must begin to expand our perceptions of reality, and our communication about that reality, to reflect continua, rather than absolute polar opposites.

Dem Eyes of Curiosity

Pardon the pun, but it does serve to illustrate a difficulty we often have in this culture when we attempt to employ questions as a means to gather information related to the experience of the other. Not too surprisingly, this difficulty also arises in a similar fashion in the process of our own self-awareness and understanding. All too
often, what could be constituted as curiosity is perceived as criticism or a personal attack. Notice how the following phrases can be construed, depending upon circumstance, context and/or tone as well-intentioned curiosity or as a prelude to an angry response: "What did you mean by that?" "What do you think you are doing?" "Who do you think you are?" Combined with assumptions, our purportive attempts at inquisitiveness often constitute a dynamic of filling in the verbal blanks, as in: "Don’t you feel _______?" (hungry, tired, hurt, etc.) The suspicion of the listener is, of course, that the speaker is really making a statement about what the speaker feels the listener should be feeling, rather than expressing a non-judgmental curiosity about what the listener is actually feeling. A slight improvement may be "Do you feel _______?" which still expresses a specific assumption about the listener, but at least leaves some expectation of theoretical adjustment for the reconstruction of that initial assumption on the part of the speaker based on the listener’s response.

Admittedly, true curiosity, as in "How do you feel about that?" (as opposed to, "How does that MAKE you feel?" as if there is some direct, necessary cause and effect between stimulus and receiver that inherently strips the feeler of status as "other" with both options and responsibility) can be perceived by both speaker and listener as cumbersome, almost to the point of tediousness. But this approach is exceedingly useful on two levels in our interpersonal relationships. This curiosity is essential in providing the informational and experiential tools we need to gain insight into--and ultimately, empathy for and with--the other person. As important, this
curiosity, as an accepted portion of the interactive process, and based on the assumption--and expectation--of interpersonal difference, can contribute to the development of a mutual sense of understanding, trust and respect for the other as an overtly acknowledged individual.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

I have attempted to explicate the concepts of conflict and difference in American interpersonal, group and general communication literature and texts. Both concepts are undertheorized in this context. The concept of difference is generally all but ignored, and is only implicitly present as an assumed constituent element of conflict and conflict resolution strategies. Conflict, in its generic usage in this culture, is poorly conceptualized to the point of theoretical and operational irrelevance. Furthermore, I have described the incidence of the conflation of the concepts of conflict and difference in American usage and some of the underlying cultural assumptions and values that likely contribute to that conceptual conflation.

Basically, our cultural relationship to difference often operates as one of potential conflict. This relationship is embodied in our perceptions, our interpretations, our language, and our behaviors. This condition holds profound implications for our communication theory and practice. Rather than the approaches to interpersonal communication which are based on our cultural "assumption of sameness" and emphasize and highlight a presumption of that pre-existing quality as
the basic building block necessary to be "effective," I maintain that we can usefully
develop a "difference-based" approach to communication that acknowledges the
essential role of difference in both our experience and our interaction. In this regard,
I am reconceptualizing communication in both theory and practice as being the
processing of interpersonal diversity, per se.

Beyond that essential reconceptualization, I also believe that we can introduce
a greater degree of precision and specificity into our communication theory, research
and practice regarding "conflict" in order to develop a more useful understanding of
conflict as: a) essentially an experiential gestalt rather than merely an intellectual
construct; and b) representing only one particular gestalt possible in our experience
of, and relationship with, difference.

In particular, theoretical reapproachments toward conflict and difference in our
culture could be extremely useful in the grounding of new research in areas of current
interest. Areas of opportunity for further research and study suggested by the
preceding analysis and discussion include the following:

- Can a schema be developed that organizes the experiences of, and
  responses/reactions to, difference in such a way that conflict represents
  only a particular portion of the spectrum, rather than its entirety? Could
  applications derived from this theoretical organization lead to the
development of more useful processes to improve synergistic responses to
difference and reduce destructive conflicts?
Can a model of interpersonal communication that acknowledges essential difference be developed that avoids the problems inherent in the "overlapping circles" model and serves to increase empathy as a tool for mutual understanding?

Might a more overt separation of the concepts of difference and conflict prove useful in the development of communication training techniques designed to improve our interpersonal interactions within an increasingly "diverse" workforce and the development and implementation of policies and curricula designed to achieve academic "diversity" requirements?

TOWARD A DIFFERENCE-BASED COMMUNICATION THEORY AND DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL

The notion of difference is central to the theory and practice of communication. The ability to construct figure/ground distinctions makes experience possible; that which we cannot differentiate, we cannot perceive--including, of course, ourselves. The fact that we each, as unique individuals, differentially perceive, construct, interpret, are affected by, and respond to these figure/ground distinctions makes essential the process of communication in both the creation and mutual understanding of our "common sense," which, in turn, defines both our notion of our shared social "reality," as well as the ways in which we experience it.

Contrary to the general historical thrust of traditional approaches to interpersonal, small group and general communication theory and practice in
American culture—which seeks to identify and emphasize similarities ("find the common ground") as a means of pursuing "effective" communication—*the fundamental epistemic relationship in communication between theory and practice can more accurately be characterized as constituting the processing of human experiential diversity, per se.*

As previously discussed, a majority of the interpersonal, small group, and general communication texts do not specifically address the notion of difference (beyond a perceived relationship to personal attraction) except as an assumed component part of "conflict." As a consequence, we undertheorize and, to a large extent, conflate, the concepts of difference and conflict in the development of our communication skills.

Our failure to adequately distinguish these concepts from each other stems in large measure from our inability to explicate the underlying cultural assumptions inherent in our discussion of conflict and essential difference. These assumptions simultaneously arise from, and carry specific implications in, our largely bi-polar cultural framework. In particular, this difficulty has significant consequences for our communication behavior in the face of identified difference: rather than proceeding from a state of curiosity, we tend to proceed from a state of anxiety.

As do all cultures, Americans have particular notions regarding difference. The nature of our generally dichotomous ("either/or") dominant cultural paradigm structures both the existence of, and our relationship with, that which is perceived as "different." This out-of-awareness assumption of expected sameness gives rise to a
generic negative evaluation of difference when it is actually experienced and acknowledged; hence, in this culture, the concepts of difference and conflict tend to be implicitly associated.

Inasmuch as all of our communication possesses both a content and a relational dimension (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967), the substance of our cultural attitude about our relationship with essential difference is problematic. We generally expect similarity in our experience of other people (without being truly conscious of that expectation), but instead, at some point, encounter inescapable difference. This unexamined disappointment has much to do with our subsequent behavior, which, depending on how important or "close" it is to use, is often to deny, ignore, denigrate, minimize, assimilate or eliminate that which is perceived as different.

Our language reinforces these responses. To a certain extent, we define something in terms of what it is not (Derrida, 1974). This can also be problematic, especially if we have a culturally ingrained tendency to perceive ourselves and that which is explicitly identified as different only in terms of two polarized and absolute options: either good or bad, right or wrong, sane or crazy, and so on. Inasmuch as we tend to prefer to associate positive valuations and connotations with ourselves and our own behavior, that which is acknowledged as different, particularly when dealing with core attitudes and beliefs, tends to be characterized negatively—the obvious choice in an dichotomous system.
This underlying expectation of sameness inherent in the American cultural paradigm and its attendant problems also permeate the interpersonal, small group and survey texts in the field of communication studies, which similarly fail to either acknowledge or adequately account for difference as the basic element in the theory and practice of communication. Generally, difference is not explicitly mentioned at all, but is assumed as the basic constituent element of "conflict." As a result, it is not surprising that our efforts in communication skills training encounter both difficulty in the understanding of empathy and resistance in its acceptance. True empathy requires the ability to suspend the reality of "self" to some degree in order to imaginatively experience the reality of "other," which is inherently different from our own. If it weren't, we would be "talking" to ourselves.

Conditioned by the particular notion of ideal sensitivity to others embodied in our cultural "common sense," most of my students initially equate empathy with sympathy—they "put themselves in the other's shoes" rather than engaging the "other" in the other's shoes (Bennett, 1979)—and resist the notion of accepting that another person has a different, viable, and possibly valuable point of view (workable for the other and consistent with the other's own experiential "reality"). In part, this appears to be a consequence of the operation of the "assumption of similarity" in reverse: the belief that in order to truly understand a different paradigmatic reality, you must at some level agree with it.
A DIFFERENCE-BASED APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION THEORY

Some fields of communication research and literature, however, have arguably done a better job than the interpersonal in explicating the concept of difference in relation to communication. In particular, the studies of intercultural communication have generated a much broader and more explicit treatment of difference in relation to the social processes of communication, although the tendency remains to regard difference as a characteristic of "large-group" diversity rather than an inherent interpersonal (even among large groups) condition. Central to effective intercultural communication skills training are: 1) our recognition of our own cultural "reality;" 2) that viable, different experiential realities do indeed exist among cultures; 3) our acceptance of these "realities" as merely different (not better- or worse- than); and 4) our understanding of them as workable and reasonable for members of the other culture. Specifically, a "difference-based approach" (Barna, 1982; Hoopes, 1979; Bennett, 1979) can be useful in our attempt to appreciate the unique nature of our experiential gestalts. In this context, difference embodies both the knowledge to be gained as well as the means by which we acquire it.

My contention is that the notion of difference could usefully serve as the central building block of all our communication theory and practice, not just in the areas of intercultural and large-group social communication which have come to dominate our current conceptualizations of "diversity." The essential, ubiquitous, and useful role of difference in the communication process should be acknowledged and

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explicitly incorporated, rather than ignored--or worse, conflated with "conflict"--in our skills training.

In order for empathic communication skills to be internalized to the point that they actually affect day-to-day experience, we must encourage the development of paradigmatic self-awareness and ego-relativity in our students. Our individual experiential reality is a unique gestalt of the interdependent processes of perception, interpretation, affect and response behavior--which involves consequences and therefore generates new perceptions--engaging the cycle once again. Our experience is situated within the context of an overarching "reality paradigm"--a way of seeing, thinking about, and acting in the world--that operationally informs and is formed simultaneously by, our experience. Our individual reality paradigms comprise, in effect, a series of related paradigmatic overlays, which are significantly influenced by our cultures, sub-cultures, peer groups, families, religious orientations and individual orientations. A major difficulty with this process is that our paradigmatic framework operates, to a large extent, out of our awareness--not only do we act and react without necessarily considering why we perceive, interpret, and behave the way we do, but we also do not often realize that this mode of operating in the world is optional (Singer, 1976). This notion of paradigmatic "masking" is also an important component in the processes of reification (we forget that we create it), naturalization ("That's just the way it is"), and disempowerment (denial of human agency) inherent in the structuration of our social organizing and organization (Giddens, 1979). Other
aspects of critical social theory (Mumby, 1988; Lukes, 1974; Gramsci, 1971; et. al.) can also be very useful in providing a framework for the examination of how these paradigmatic, deep-structure frameworks intersect in recurrent, situated patterns of power and domination that operate to produce discriminatory effects on the experience of various populations identified as "different."

By adopting a difference-based experiential learning approach in our general communication skills training, we can explicitly acknowledge the concept of difference and specifically promote the qualities necessary for empathy--paradigmatic self-awareness and ego-relativity--without causing our consumers to become defensive and reactionary in the process. Theoretically, this approach is based on the developmental model of "committed relativity" designed by Perry (1970) for use in general education, and the "cultural sensitivity" model adapted from the Perry scheme specifically for use in intercultural communication training (Bennett, 1986). These models account for a continuum of experiential gestalts on the part of the student in their relationship to a multiplicity of paradigms, with absolutism (in educational theory) and ethnocentrism (in intercultural communication theory) on one end and paradigmatic and cultural relativity on the other. Adapting these schemes for general use in communication skills training, a similar developmental model can be constructed to describe a continuum with ego-centrism on one end and conscious ego-relativity (directed empathy) on the other. Movement by the student along this continuum can be facilitated by employing a difference-based experiential learning
approach which consists of both a theoretical discussion of the essential role of
difference in our communication, as well as exercises that provide a guided,
contextualized, and conscious experience of it in our everyday communicative activity.

It is important to note here that the need to feel validated as a person and the
need to feel interconnected with other people in our lives are often seen as important
fundamental goals related to our use of communication. In the American cultural
experience, however, both of these interests tend to be conceptualized and "real-ized"
predominantly within the paradigm of similarity. Essential personal validation is often
construed through the manifestation of perceived uniformity rather than experienced
as a given. We tend to seek people who think, act and look as we do in order to
validate our own selfhood. This particular cultural construct of the experience of self-
validation (and, to a related degree, self-valuation) can be a powerful motivator to
both conform and seek conformity. As a consequence, our experience of difference--
in both ourselves (as different from the other) and others (as different from ourselves)
becomes problematic and anxiety producing insofar as it calls into question our own
self-validity.

In a social context, our need for interconnectedness therefore is also effected
by our paradigm. Our experience of positive relatedness becomes synonymous with
our experience of "agreement." While our "sense" that another person can "relate
to," or share our experience (and vice versa), is necessary for our completeness as
social beings, we tend to experience that connectedness most often, and most
profoundly, in the context of a feeling of agreeing with the other or being agreed with by the other. This paradigm contributes to our difficulty in internalizing the concept and the process of respecting and accepting difference in that our ability to do so is paradigmatically and actually constrained by the degree to which we feel we need to "agree" with the difference.

What I am attempting to do in this context is to bring to heightened awareness the essential role of difference in our relationships, which I believe has been ignored, or worse, confused with conflict. Our difficulties in relating to one another are almost always associated with our relationship to difference, not with our inability to appreciate similarity. In this light, the nature of our experience of, and responses to, difference are regarded as central to the developmental continuum portrayed in the model. After all, it is the very uniqueness of our own being that makes us "special" and important and the very "otherness" of someone else's validation and valuation of us that brings us joy—otherwise, we could do it just as well for ourselves.

A DIFFERENCE-BASED DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL

Ego-Centric Stages

This end of the continuum represents an emphasis on the self in communication behaviors. It comprises three sub-stages: Denial, Defense and Minimalization.

Denial represents the failure to acknowledge the possibility that another's reality may differ from one's own. It is the most absolute and rigid of the stages
relative to difference. It is characterized by communicative responses that literally deny the speaker’s experience, even when presented with insistent testimony to the contrary. S: "I’m angry!" R: "No, you’re not." S: "That’s not what I meant." R: "Yes, you did." This stage does not necessarily entail physical isolation or separation—the denial is enforced paradigmatically through the insistence that difference is the result of prevarication or delusion. "There is only one truth (mine) and anyone who says otherwise is lying or sick (crazy)." This response relegates difference to the state of being literally "un-real."

**Defense** represents the stage where difference is acknowledged, but it is seen as somehow threatening, and is defended against. One phase of this defense is active and conscious persecution of those seen as different. It can be characterized by the conception of the different as "enemy," dehumanized and "evil."

Another phase of this stage is separation, enforced geographically or through the notion of competitive hierarchy. This phase tends to involve the devaluation of identified difference—either by negatively evaluating or denigrating the difference in the other or by exalting the complementary quality in the self. This stage is characterized by communicative behavior that engages in negative stereotypes and "put-downs" in response to difference, or "one-up" statements overtly enforcing the superiority of the speaker, and can be characterized by a concern for relative status positions, as in "knowing one’s place."
Minimalization represents the stage that often passes for interpersonal sensitivity in our culture, bound as it is by the assumption of, and investment in, similarity. This stage may actually represent an intellectual state of the positive acknowledgement of difference, but in actuality, produces behaviors that assume that everyone either is, or should be, basically the same as we are, and tends to devalue difference. This is the stage that characterizes our historical approach to communication skills training--seek the "common ground" in order to communicate effectively. If difference is encountered, it is ignored or minimalized in our quest for commonality. In addition, the representation of the communication model as overlapping circles implies some area of absolute congruence in the experiential reality of the communicators.

"Tolerance," in its common "put up with" connotation, can be viewed as one phase of minimalization. Difference is regarded as a difficult, but required, condition of our cultural notion of "freedom" from the abridgement of individual "rights." While no overt action to suppress difference is allowable, the sense remains that the difference is devalued as "lesser-than." In addition, the context surrounding the "tolerance" is temporal--it may be revoked at the discretion of the one doing the "tolerating," implying a condition of perceived superiority in terms of both power and valuation and a lack of true acceptance and respect for the difference.

This stage also tends to entail the "marginalization" of the "different"--relegating them to de facto lower status, visibility and access. This notion is inherent
in the conceptualization and symbolic framing of groups of people as "minorities" in the context of a paradigm of "majority rules." First, we tend to ignore the mathematical reality that the so called "majority" is quite often merely the largest temporally coherent numerical "minority" with access to the decision-making process. Second, given our investment in the notion that power is embodied in the actual process of "voting," rather than in the deep-structure paradigm of the formation of the choices available and the desirability of "majority rules" compared, for example, to other structures, i.e., informed acceptance or "consensus," we tend to elevate the similarity assumed in the "majority" above the difference inherent in the "minority." Finally, since most of our overt decisions tend to be based in an "either-or" or "yes-no" framework, the value of "minority" in a "majority" decision-making paradigm is relatively irrelevant beyond the ability of the "minority" to affect the will of the "majority." How many dissenting Supreme Court opinions are we familiar with? Notice the connection of the symbolic framing and our actual experience related to the distinction made between a Supreme Court "decision" (majority) and a dissenting "opinion" (minority): one becomes the Law of the Land, the other is relegated to relative unimportance and practical obscurity. This operating structure de-values the potential breadth offered by the synergistic potential of differences.

The problematic aspect of the "tolerance" (as I define it in this context) and "marginalization" phases (in terms of our relationship with both difference and "minorities") is that difference is relatively devalued and the threat--both actual and
perceived--of regressing to the defense stage (persecution and/or separation) is inherent.

A third phase of minimalization is "sympathy." Our "common sense" relative to interpersonal sensitivity is a revealing illustration of this condition. In our culture, we tend to idealize sensitivity to different people with the adages "put yourself in their shoes," and the application of the "Golden Rule"--Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. These statements describe sympathy, not empathy (Bennett, 1979), and while the intent may not be ego-centric, the practice is. Both of these attitudes embody a specific assumption that my experience is the same as your experience in similar circumstances and that we both interpret and value responses to us in the same way. "Dig deeply enough, and everyone is all alike." While not attempting to devalue some aspects of the utility of the notion of our common "humanity," and acknowledging that there may be some utility in the notion that we are all capable of certain feelings such as joy, sorrow, etc. related to our individual experience, this attitude tends to ignore the highly contextual nature of that experience. While many things could bring us similar emotions--a happy baby, reuniting with loved ones, etc.--what brings me joy might not be the same thing that brings you joy, and our actual experiences of "joy" may be personally distinctive. Furthermore, the "sympathetic" phase can be problematic in that misunderstandings at this stage of development can produce regression back toward the less empathetic end of the continuum. By insisting, for example, that I know how you feel, I may offend you. In response to
your being offended, I may be shocked and angry, and decide not to bother anymore, reverting back to defensive behaviors. You may also decide not to share your feelings with me anymore, reverting to self-defense by not self-disclosing. Likewise, if I tell you that you must be feeling "terrible," for example (because I would if I were in your situation), you may also resent being told how you "must" feel--especially if you don't feel that way, again producing a reversion back to the defensive state on both our parts. This idealization and confusion in our cultural "common sense" of a relatively ego-centric state (sympathy) where I am still self-referent with an ego-relative one (true empathy) where I would be "other-referent" functions as a paradigmatic "anchor" to prevent our transcendence of the assumption of sameness, since we incorrectly assume we have already achieved it. As a result, this is one of the most difficult stages to go beyond, because it entails recognition of our paradigmatic "reality" as just that--a paradigmatically influenced, rather than absolute, state of being. The further stages of the model require the ability and commitment to engage in the process of paradigmatic shifting.

Paradigmatic Shift

Movement from minimalization and sympathy to truly empathetic stages requires a paradigmatic shift. It relies on the development of a conceptual ability to acknowledge the existence of a non-self defined experiential "reality paradigm" in others that is more different from our own than similar to it. In addition, these acknowledged differences must be regarded as viable and important in the
communication process. This transition may produce confusion, anxiety, or both in those who derive security from relatively rigid ego-boundaries, and should be explicitly acknowledged.

Ego-Relative States

Our individual experiential realities can only be understood relative to one another. There is no absolute standard that is applicable to the human experiential gestalt of perception, interpretation, evaluation, affect and response behavior. The shift away from the rigidity of absolute paradigms, however, does not imply ethical ambivalence. I do not have to agree with your paradigmatic reality in order to accept that it exists as part of your experience, and its viability for you. In fact, I may struggle mightily to prevent your world view from achieving predominance over mine. To co-create meaning about our experiential realities, however, I need to attempt to participate, at least imaginatively, in yours. As a consequence, in the context of this process, difference must be regarded as non-threatening, and in fact, as possibly useful and enjoyable.

Ego-relative stages comprise the sub-stages of Acceptance, Adaptation and Integration.

Acceptance comprises the stage in which difference is both explicitly acknowledged and respected. As the means whereby we are capable of self-awareness and experience, difference is regarded as ubiquitous, inevitable and necessary. In addition, it is respected in its existence. That which is different is not regarded
negatively merely because it is different. Regarding other people, this stage includes an acceptance of the existence of difference in both values and behaviors, and does not evaluate these differences on a mutually exclusive basis—transcending the "either/or" dichotomy. This stage allows for the possibility of synergistic interaction, wherein our differences can be employed collaboratively to our mutual benefit.

Adaptation involves the ability to communicate in an environment of difference—the co-creation of meaning. It consists of an intentional empathetic attitude, and, as it develops, may also include the ability to imaginatively participate in the experience of the other in context, or at the least, to imaginatively experience the world from the other’s point of view (their paradigmatic reality). Empathy may be differentiated from sympathy in its situated emphasis on the other—not the self—and as an assumption of difference. Empathy, in fact, requires difference, not similarity. Having had similar experiences may actually impede our ability to be empathetic in that we will likely start to concentrate on our own experience as opposed to attempting to imaginatively participate in that of the other. Empathetic revisions of our "common sense" sympathetic adages produce the "Platinum Rule" (Bennett, 1979)—Do unto others as they would have done unto them—and relating to the other (not the self) in the other’s shoes.

Integration is the stage that allows us to actually extend our ego-boundaries to embrace the contextual experiential reality of the other. A key notion here is that this process be self-directed and conscious. It does not describe the state where one

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experiences an uncontrollable loss of ego-boundary to the extent where one does not
know where one stops and the other begins. On an intellectual level, this stage is
marked by the ability to consciously choose among various personal experiential
realities. In this ability we see the development of a personal identity that is
difference-based, involving the conscious consideration of multiple paradigmatic
possibilities for the purposes of developing options for the entire experiential gestalt
of perception, interpretation, affect, and response behavior. In this stage, there is a
certain paradigmatic marginality engendered by the conscious employment of a
multiplicity of ways of constructing "reality" and of being in the world. It does not,
however, imply either a lack of commitment or responsibility in relation to the
contextual choice. Quite the contrary, it affirms it, in the sense that it represents a
choice for which viable alternatives were available and possible.

CONCLUSION

By emphasizing the basic nature of communication as the processing of
contextual human experiential difference, we can reduce the incidence of the
perception of difference as "conflict" in American culture and begin to relate to
difference in a more productive and meaningful way in our social interaction. This
can be especially important in light of the recent emphasis on diversity as an issue in
both academic and workplace settings. In academic institutions, the incorporation of
difference-based approaches to standard curricula could be integrated in courses in
such a way as to meet university "diversity requirements." In the workplace, similar training in communication skills can do much to alleviate the difficulties associated with significant changes in the demographics of the workforce, as well as improve the quality of interpersonal interaction between all the members of an organization.
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