



e-quilibrium

- *"electronic briefs on behavior and health"*

Volume 4, Number 12
December 2008

Similarities

Group identity is largely about how one group is different than other groups. This frequently results in an unwarranted emphasis on how the other group is different, and under-appreciation of how the other group is similar.

Gender is a good example. Books such as "Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus" highlight differences between men and women, implying that the distinctions are vast.

What gets lost in all of this is that differences among people within a given group tend to be greater than are the average differences between groups. That is, people in the "other group" are just as varied on many dimensions as are those in one's own group. This tends to be true with males and females, in that there are relatively few psychological variables on which there are substantial gender differences. Perhaps there should be a book titled "People Are From Earth" - but I doubt if a book about how men and women are similar would create the same interest as do books about differences!

Although descriptions of group differences aren't inherently bad, the tendency to give disproportionate attention to these differences can impede mutual understanding and respect. This pattern can be seen between circles of friends, work groups, schools, organizations, political parties, religious groups, and countries, among numerous other examples.

Getting along well with others isn't just a virtue to be learned in kindergarten. Good relationships are health-enhancing. Recognizing and appreciating the similarities we

have with others is an important contributor to effective working relationships. Since we easily get focused on differences, it can be challenging to identify the similarities. However, because there are so many ways in which human beings are alike, identifying commonalities is actually not a difficult task. Most people want to be liked, respected, and happy. Most people want to effectively solve problems in life, experience a sense of achievement, and find life to be meaningful. The list of similarities could go on and on. A slight alteration in perspective may be all that is required to discover characteristics that are shared with others.

While we will continue to describe groups of people based upon differences, the challenge is to avoid overemphasizing and exaggerating the differences. Whereas narrow focus on differences can breed misunderstanding, distrust, and conflict, the appreciation of similarities can foster empathy, appreciation, and mutuality. With respect to another group where your current focus is on differences, try modifying perspective by identifying commonalities. You may discover that instead of seeing lots of differences and few similarities, there are actually relatively few differences and many similarities.

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