

The Absurdity of Multiculturalism

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(Bolstered by Soren Kierkegaard's lament that "ours is a paltry age because it lacks passion," Dr. Alan Karbelnig writes this regular column to provoke thoughtful reaction from his SGVPA colleagues. He practices psychoanalytic psychotherapy and forensic psychology in South Pasadena.)

Reaching nearly the proportions of Soviet psychiatrists, professional psychology has indoctrinated psychologists into a wrongful vision of multiculturalism. It is worse than simply wrong; it violates human subjectivity. Going back some 30 years, I remember being taught that, for example, Asians tend to under-utilize the services of mental health professionals because they "save face." I learned that, because most African-American's ancestors immigrated to the United States by force rather than by choice, they behave differently. I came to understand that Native Americans had high rates of alcoholism. Numerous books and articles advised readers that Latinos tended to be emotionally expressive and warm.

These outdated ideas bring to mind an oft-quoted Kurt Vonnegut phrase:

All generalizations are untrue, even this one.

If you practice any form of psychotherapy that involves listening to the uniqueness of the individuals who consult you, as opposed to being an agent of social control like most who practice cognitive-behavioral psychology, then you'll likely understand why these cultural generalizations precisely oppose the psychotherapy process. Mari Ruti, a contemporary philosopher, uses the word "singularity" to define the unique qualities of any person's being. Humans enter a spell cast by the social establishment, by language, and by history, rendering them prone to conventionality. She suggests that psychoanalysis, and by implication any of the psychodynamic approaches, protect the "sliver of singularity against the hegemonic dictates of the social establishment" (Ruti, 2012, p. 8). Ruti describes singularity as: what renders each of us irreplaceable and unexchangeable. It is what makes it impossible to substitute one subject for another, or to mistake one person for another... [it is] an inscrutable intensity of being that urges the subject to persist in its unending task of fashioning or reiterating a self that feels viscerally 'real.' (pp. 8-9).

In order to help your patients find their individuality, their singularity, you must *carefully* listen to them. One hour you may greet a 45 year-old African-American patient who's grandparents willfully immigrated to the US, earns \$500,000 per year, enjoys watching sado-masochistic pornography, and cannot to love anyone but himself. The next hour you may meet a Chinese-American who's great grandparents grew up in Long Island, is gregarious, received 15 years of therapy before she met you, lives on AFDC payments in low income housing, and has enjoyed a long-distance romance with a Latino man in Argentina for a decade. The hour after that you might encounter a Navajo who's earning \$1 million per year because of his interest in a reservation-based casino, abuses cocaine, neglects his children, and gets sick if he even sips a beer. Perhaps you'll next encounter a Caucasian of northern

German descent who's the most emotionally warm person you've ever met, who hugs you after each session, and with who you must set boundaries to prevent him from loving you more than you love him.

As you listen carefully to your patients, please also feel humbled by your own constricted vision. In an article entitled "Cannibal Metaphysics," appearing in *Radical Philosophy*, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2013) offers the startling idea that the entire discipline of anthropology rests on false philosophical foundations. He writes that "favoring one's own humanity to the detriment of the other's causes one to resemble the contemptible other in an essential way" (p. 21). He emphasizes perspectivism – the idea that we cannot help but view others from our own viewpoint. You get the point. We should all try, of course, to be as open as possible while chastened, at the same time, by the utter impossibility of doing so.

Generalizations, even if they contain some element of truth, violate the sanctity of singularity. Therefore, please forget every single word you've ever read about multiculturalism. Throw out those books. Then next time you see a television program describing the "people of New Guinea," or "the people of the Bronx," change the channel. Better yet, fling the television set out the window. These documentaries constitute propaganda. They promote singularity-destroying lies. Practicing psychotherapy effectively requires that you listen carefully while, paradoxically, surrendering to the substantial limits in your hearing.

References

Ruti, M. (2012). *The Singularity of Being: Lacan and the Immortal Within*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Viveiros de Castro, E. (2013). Cannibal metaphysics. *Radical philosophy*, **182**: 17-28.