

THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE: PRACTICAL ETHICS AND EMPATHIC INVOLVEMENT WITH “THE OTHER”

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What is the political significance of difference? Why are ethnic, racial, or religious differences frequently politically significant while differences in height, hair color, or weight are not? Why are linguistic differences sometimes relevant politically, and other times are not salient? What about age? Gender, or sexual preferences? What fosters tolerance of differences judged ethically and politically salient? What encourages respect for these differences, leading some of us to reach out across divides that isolate others? These questions take on a poignant immediacy with reports of continuing prejudice, discrimination, on-going ethnic, religious and sectarian violence -- even genocidal activities and war -- and increasing polarization over issues of race, religion, and ethnicity, at home and abroad. They are questions students need to consider as they go out into a world where they will meet new people, from diverse cultures, religions, and ethnicities. How can we best prepare them for this?

Under the direction of Kristen Monroe, the Ethics Center developed an experimental program designed to use empathic involvement with “the other” to help students think deeply about their own attitudes toward people judged “different,” whether these differences are associated with race, ethnicity, and religion or with age, disability, sexual preference, etc. Funded by the Ford Foundation Program on Difficult Dialogues, in cooperation with Manuel Gomez’s Office, the course has been taught every year since 2007 at the University of California at Irvine. A full description of the course is available in the Vaughn Archives and has been published as “Empathy, Prejudice and Tolerance” Chapter in *On Behalf of Others: The Morality of Care in a Global World*. Edited volume with C. Kinnvall and Sarah Scuzzarello. Oxford U Press. Chapter written with Maria Luisa Martinez. And in *PS: Political Science and Politics*. (October 2009)

Analysis found shifts in attitude from participants and non-participants in a program that utilizes empathic involvement with “the other” to effect changes in attitudes toward members of groups frequently discriminated against in American society.

Students were asked to begin by measuring their own self-awareness of prejudice toward different groups, using both quantitative and qualitative measures. In addition to writing essays about their attitudes, participants took a series of implicit association tests (IAT) designed to measure the difference between conscious and sub-conscious attitudes toward prejudice. We tested for prejudice against the elderly, various ethnic and religious groups, and women in science. For all of these assessments, students were asked to choose a pseudonym and to track the shifts in attitudes of this pseudonymous person over the

course of the class. Students then were required to participate in field work designed to heighten empathic involvement with at least one member of a group judged different and frequently discriminated against in contemporary American society. The shifts over time in attitude (before and after the course) measured (1) attitudes toward members of the group with which students have extensive empathic involvement and (2) attitudes toward members of “different” groups which are discussed in class. A control group of analogous students who have no participation in the program at all comes from a respondent-driven/nominee sample, which took the same pre-and post-tests but minus the intervention.

Underlying premises. The underlying premise to the experiment is that the key to understanding the ethics and politics of difference is not to think of cultural differences as intrinsic and immutable but rather as the result of how those interests based on these differences are shaped and perceived – by one’s self and by others -- through a cognitive classification of one’s self and of one’s self in relation to others (Monroe 1996, 2004). Our treatment of others thus results not from rational calculus of interests that flow naturally from innately derived and immutable differences – such as race, gender, ethnicity, or religion—but rather from our perceptions of others as derived from the moral salience accorded these differences via a cognitive categorization and classification of others in relation to ourselves.

The pedagogical premise of the course experiment was two-fold: (1) Students learn best not by listening to lectures but by being forced to examine their own preconceptions in the light of empirical evidence. (2) Emotions play an important part in permanent shifts in attitudes, hence, the emphasis on extensive interviews. Participants were asked to examine their own attitudes toward members of groups often underrepresented or discriminated against in contemporary American society. They did so through a series of written essays culminating in a term paper.

Since a major concern of the experiment is to understand how best to teach ethics, all students were asked to participate in testing to determine whether their own attitudes shift as a result of the course work and the fieldwork. Students then are asked about these measurements and about the ethics of trying to change someone’s attitudes, even when these attitudes involve prejudice. Results for participants in the course are contrasted with comparable students whose names were secured through a nominee sample.

Use of age as a wedge issue. We designed the experiment to combine readings about differences with a “hands on” experience that combines cognitive analytical skill with the emotional impact psychologists now tell us influences cognition (McGaugh 2003). We do so by examining a group often omitted in discussions of the politics of difference, a group into which none of us is born, that each of us frantically tries to avoid, that most of us – if we are very lucky -- eventually move into and out of, depending on chance, situation and the kindness of strangers, and a group that all of us – if we are fortunate – desperately hopes to join: the elderly.

Elders are treated differently by various cultures. Our study of these cultural differences, and our attempt to disentangle what is “intrinsic” and immutable about becoming old (e.g., the loss of physical vigor), will force students to think about other differences in a new light by focusing on a simple question: While some differences exist independently of social construction, many of them are culturally-imposed and hence are neither intrinsic nor immutable. What part of this identity is related to the individual’s calculus of self-interest and what part to identity perceptions, including the perceptions of others? This key question was one students had to answer for themselves in the experimental course, one that is designed to help both scholars and students understand the importance of categorization and the according of moral salience to other groups in our society.