

# Overcoming the Golden Rule: Sympathy and Empathy

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*Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them....*

—Matthew 7:12

Many of the world's great religions include a dictum similar to the Golden Rule. So it is not surprising that the Rule embodies a basic truth: all of us are equally human, not just our family or compatriots. Yet we humans still flaunt the Rule in both the paroxysms of genocide and the everyday destructiveness of prejudice and bigotry. Why is the wisdom of the Golden Rule so elusive? One reason may be that we commonly apply the Rule in a way that actually obstructs our path toward intercultural understanding.

The Golden Rule is typically used as a kind of template for behavior. If I am unsure of how to treat you, I simply imagine how I myself would like to be treated, and then act in accordance. The positive value of this form of the Rule is virtually axiomatic in U.S. American culture, and so its underlying assumption frequently goes unstated: other people *want* to be treated as I do. And under this assumption lies another, more pernicious belief: all people are basically the same, and thus they really *should* want the same treatment (whether they admit it or not) as I would.

Simply stated, the Golden Rule in this form does not work

because people are actually different from one another. Not only are they individually different, but they are systematically different in terms of national culture, ethnic group, socioeconomic status, age, gender, sexual orientation, political allegiance, educational background, and profession, to name but a few possibilities. Associated with these differences in people are differences in values—values which cannot easily be generalized to all people from those of any given group.

That people are different may appear obvious to readers of this article, but it is simply not a widely held notion among people in general—including those who are well-educated. Many teachers and trainers of intercultural communication find that while most people acknowledge superficial behavioral differences in dress, custom, language, and so on, it takes but a scratch of this surface to encounter a basic belief in the essential similarity of all people. The statement indicative of this belief is, "Once you get used to their different (dress, manners, style), they're just like us!" Attempts to point out more fundamental value differences may even be met by hostility—an indication of how central the assumption of similarity is to our worldview.

In addition to denying difference, the Golden Rule is also a poor guide for effective communication. Assuming that others are like ourselves when we talk to them is tantamount to talking to ourselves. We fail to recognize the crucial differences to which our communication must be accommodated, and our efforts to understand and be understood are subverted by a facade of uniformity.

This effort to expose the bias of the Golden Rule will take us into some philosophical assumptions, some concepts of social organization, and some communication techniques, or strategies. On the philosophical level, we will consider first the *assumption of similarity* and its relationship to theories of *single-reality*. This philosophical orientation will be seen to manifest in the social concepts of the *melting pot* and *ethnocentrism*. The communication strategy associated with these ideas is *sympathy*. Contrasting on the philosophical level will be the *assumption of difference* and its relationship to theories of *multiple-reality*. Communication based on the assumption of difference is *empathy*. Finally, we will consider some ways in which empathy might be developed and implemented toward the goal of intercultural communication.

## Similarity and Single-Reality

The strongest statement of the assumption of similarity holds that all human beings are basically the same. In this view, physiological, personality, and even cultural differences which might be observed are mainly superficial. Underlying these permutations is a basic "human nature" that transcends time, cultural boundaries, and individual predilection. The assumption of similarity is not just a passive perspective—it also defines what will be actively sought. Thus, the observer notes and imputes importance to human similarities while ignoring or downgrading the importance of human differences.

The assumption of similarity is represented in philosophy by both *idealists* and *empiricists*.<sup>1</sup> Idealists hold that the universe (including human beings) has a permanent, ideal form. Human beings may discover their true nature by perceiving this form and adapting themselves to it. The current resurgence of mysticism and fundamentalist religion is, in many ways, a reawakening of this Platonic idealism. Most mystics and charismatics teach that there is a true, transcendent reality which, when it is perceived, illuminates the seeker with the knowledge that this single-reality exists within each individual. In this view, differences among people are ephemeral phenomena of the lower planes of existence, superficial in relation to the essential unity of higher planes.

Empiricists take a different route to the assumption of similarity. There is no transcendent reality; there is only the observable world of matter and energy. While this observable reality would seem to be inherently diverse, there is a catch. The catch is that only that which is observed is diverse. The observers (people) are necessarily similar in their ability to observe the same thing, given similar circumstances. This is the essence of scientific replicability. If a phenomenon cannot be observed by many people, it is simply assumed not to exist. Of course, this necessitates the belief that all people, properly trained, can and do see the same real phenomena.

Most other forms of the assumption of similarity can be seen to derive from these two philosophical positions. For instance, evangelical religions such as many forms of Christianity and Islam take the idealist stance that there is one truth, and that all people should have a similar knowledge of it. The growing field of ethnobiology argues from an empirical base that people are similar one to another in their adherence to some basic primate behavior. Transformational linguistics suggests that people are

essentially similar in basic language "competence"—an example of the Platonic ideal form. And, of course, social sciences such as psychology and sociology base their empirical observations on the statistical similarity of a normative population.

The theories mentioned above are only a few examples of a general category which can be called "single-reality" theory. The basic assumption inherent in this category is that there is *one* way that things really are. In this view, reality is not invented by our observational categories; it is *discovered* through either philosophical/religious (idealist) insight or through objective (empiricist) observation. An indicator of the idealist approach to single-reality is some form of the statement, "If only we develop sufficient (wisdom, faith, knowledge, discipline, insight), we will know the true nature of the universe." An indicator of the empiricist approach is the statement, "We don't know it all yet, but with sufficient (experiments, categorization, instrumentation, explanation) we will figure out how things really work."

The Golden Rule depends on single-reality theory to fuel its underlying assumption of similarity. If there were not a single, discoverable reality, we could never be sure whether the similarity we observed was "really" the case, or whether it was merely a function of our point of view. If similarity were only a matter of perspective, then we might have to consider that other people had *different* points of view, which might lead them to observe entirely different kinds of similarity (or difference) between themselves and us. In this case, the Golden Rule wouldn't work at all, and we would be thrust into a much more complex, relativistic world. So we preserve the comfortable assumptions of the Golden Rule and the single reality it represents.

### The Melting Pot and Ethnocentrism

The ramifications of preserving the Golden Rule are not restricted to the abstractions of philosophy. There are several social consequences of single-reality theory and the assumption of similarity. Two of these consequences of interest to intercultural communication are: "the melting pot" and "ethnocentrism." The melting-pot concept is a source of major concern to minorities in this country who might wish to maintain an ethnic identity different to some extent from the mainstream culture. The term *melting pot* was coined by Israel Zangwill in a play by that title written in 1921.

America is God's Crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming—Here you stand good folk...with your fifty

languages and histories.... But you won't be long like that brothers, for these are the fires of God you come to—these are the fires of God.<sup>2</sup>

Unenlightened as it might sound today, the idea of the melting pot is actually a relatively liberal holdover from the colonial period of American history. In those days and up until World War I, many thought that the fusion of ethnic differences in America would lead to a great civilization of supermen.<sup>3</sup> But as a stronger mainstream culture developed, the original melting-pot idea transformed into the ideal of assimilation and Americanization.

Americanization is a specific case of cultural assimilation in general. The Americanizing melting pot did not merely amalgamate difference; it *molded* it into the prevailing American cultural pattern. So, although the end result of both kinds of melting was similarity, the original melting pot at least suggested a unique product. The more recent use of the concept seems clearly based on single-reality theory, where mainstream American culture is the one true frame of reference.

We hear today widespread disavowal of the melting pot in favor of some form of "cultural pluralism." A good part of this disavowal, when it comes from mainstreamers, may be insubstantially rhetorical. In most cases, it is simply not evident that there has occurred the philosophical shift away from a single-reality assumption that would necessarily underlie a strong commitment to pluralism. Such a commitment demands the kind of multiple-reality assumption discussed in a later section of this article. The best that can be hoped for under the single-reality theory is a kind of tolerance for "second-best" cultural patterns. This stance obviously does not address the severe negative value judgments that characterize so much interethnic and intercultural communication.

Related to the idea of an Americanizing melting pot is the concept of ethnocentrism. This tendency to see our own culture as the center of the universe—that is, as the true reality—affects all intercultural communication, including interethnic relations. In fact, ethnocentrism is the most appropriate label for the single-reality assumption of similarity in a cultural context. This can be seen clearly in Richard E. Porter and Larry A. Samovar's definition of the concept:

A major source of cultural variance in attitudes is *ethnocentrism*, which is a tendency to view people unconsciously by using our own group and our own customs as the standard for all judgments....

The greater their similarity to us, the nearer to us we place them; the greater the dissimilarity, [the] farther away they are.... We tend to see our own groups, our own country, our own culture as the best, as the most moral. This view also demands our first loyalty and produces a frame of reference that denies the existence of any other frame of reference. It is an absolute position that prohibits any other position from being appropriate for another culture.<sup>4</sup>

From the above description, it is understandable why Jon A. Blubaugh and Dorothy L. Pennington state that "ethnocentrism seems to be at the root of racism."<sup>5</sup>

In a parallel development to the rhetorical call for cultural pluralism, we hear today a cry for "intercultural understanding." Again, this cry is meaningless if it is not accompanied by a shift away from that essential ingredient of ethnocentrism, the assumption of similarity. Unless we can accept that other groups of people are truly different—that is, they are operating *successfully* according to different values and principles of reality—then we cannot exhibit the sensitivity nor accord the respect to those differences that will make intercultural communication and understanding possible.

The continued existence of melting-pot ideas and ethnocentrism is facilitated by their inherent connection to the Golden Rule. We really want to use our own values as the basis for our behavior toward others. It is easier (we don't need to imagine different values), and it somehow seems so moral. When we find, no matter how much we try to ignore it, that many other people don't respond to this treatment, we face a choice. Either we must alter our behavior (and underlying assumptions), or we must alter the unresponsive people. Supported by the ethnocentric conviction that those other people are somehow wrong or ignorant, we choose the latter course. Perhaps, we hope, after they are educationally melted into the proper configuration, they will respond as they should to our Golden Rule behavior.

Of course, some people seem impervious to the fires of God. For them, we have a different rule, which can be labeled the "Lead Rule." The Lead Rule dictates "Do unto others as they deserve having done unto them." If people are unresponsive to our well-motivated Golden Rule behavior, and if they will not be helped to become similar, then we may assume that they are "mad or bad."<sup>6</sup> If we assume they are mad, we may extend our educational ef-

forts into therapy. A prime indicator of the Lead Rule being employed therapeutically is the statement, "We're only doing this for your own good." If we assume they are bad, we may try to punish them. If they do not respond to punishment, then we may be compelled to employ the full force of the Lead Rule, which is to kill them.

## Sympathy

So far, we have been considering general behavior and its underlying philosophical assumptions. In situations of actual face-to-face interaction, these general behavioral tendencies take the form of specific communication techniques, or strategies. The strategy which is most closely allied with the Golden Rule and its attendant assumptions is *sympathy*.

Although the term *sympathy* is used variably, it will be used here to mean "the imaginative placing of ourselves in another person's position."<sup>7</sup> It should be understood by this definition that we are not taking the role of another person or imagining how the other person thinks or feels, but rather we are referencing how we ourselves might think or feel in similar circumstances. For instance, if I tell you that my aunt has recently died, you might sympathize by imagining how you would feel (or have felt) about your aunt dying. This definition is not restricted to cases of socially defined sorrow, however. It would also be sympathy if I tell you that I just inherited a million dollars, and you respond by imagining how you would feel as a millionaire.

In a following section, this definition of *sympathy* will be contrasted to the notion of *empathy*. For the time being, suffice it to say that empathy concerns how we might imagine the thoughts and feelings of other people from their own perspectives. This distinction is fairly consistent with Lauren G. Wispé in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*: "In *empathy*, one attends to the feelings of another; in *sympathy* one attends to the suffering of another, but the feelings are one's own."<sup>8</sup> Note, however, that here sympathy is not restricted to cases of suffering. The difference between sympathy and empathy is not defined by either the degree or the subject of concern; it is defined by whose perspective is being assumed.

Probably the easiest way to think of sympathy is as projection. Following the assumption of similarity, we merely assume that the other person is like ourselves and therefore impute to him or her our own thoughts and feelings. In its least sophisticated form, sympathy projects both the self and the circumstances

of the sympathizer onto the perceived situation. Imagine, for example, that a middle-class suburbanite is interacting with a poor person living in the inner city. Pure projection might lead the suburbanite to suggest that the poor person get a job and shop carefully for inexpensive groceries—an assumption that the suburban circumstances of job opportunity, competitive prices, and transportation are all available to the inner-city dweller, as well as the motivation assumed by the suburbanite herself. Projecting only self, the suburbanite might imagine how she herself would feel in the poor person's circumstances—perhaps frustrated, and certainly anxious to take the first opportunity to escape into a "better" environment. (Note that this might not be at all how the poor person feels.)

It is apparently possible to increase the sophistication of sympathy quickly. I once asked a group of (assumedly) upper-middle-class white high school students what they would do for recreation if they had grown up in a ghetto. Quickly, several students replied with such projective responses as "go bowling," or "go swimming," or "drive around." I suggested that they might have neither the facilities nor the money to do those things. There was a silence, and then one boy spoke up with a clearly more sophisticated sympathetic suggestion: "jog!"

The general category of projective sympathy can be divided into two major ways of responding sympathetically to another person: referencing our own memory, here referred to as *reminiscent sympathy*; and referencing our own imagination of self in different circumstances, here termed *imaginative sympathy*. Of these two, reminiscent sympathy is probably the most common.

With the technique of reminiscent sympathy, we search our past experience for circumstances that seem similar to those observed as connected to the other person's experience. For instance, if you report to me that you have a drinking problem, I might try to remember some time when I felt compelled to drink. Assuming that I find such a circumstance in my own life, I would then try to reconstruct my feelings at that time and attempt to use them as a guide for further conversation or counsel. An indicator of the reminiscent sympathy technique is the statement, "I know just how you feel—I was there myself." Note that my feelings about drinking may be totally dissimilar to yours, but the desire to assume similarity is strong.

The apparent unassailability of the reminiscent sympathy technique is part of the reason why reformed alcoholics, former prisoners, cured schizophrenics, and other "experienced" people

are so frequently considered credible counselors in their respective areas of experience. A parallel to this belief in minority relations is the assumption that only a Latino American, Native American, or African American can speak credibly to the problems encountered by his or her respective ethnic group. This credibility is frequently not undeserved and many such "survivors" are apparently extremely effective in their work.<sup>9</sup> However, caution should be exercised in assuming that exposure to certain circumstances is a sufficient qualification for political, educational, or counseling expertise in the area. Having experienced a toothache does not make one a dentist.

There is also a danger that a strong experience, although potentially a valuable tool, can limit our consideration of different reactions to the same circumstances. For instance, some feminists seem to assume that all women do (or should) have the same reaction to being female in this culture. The failure to recognize different reactions is most likely when reminiscent sympathy is the only technique of understanding employed. When it is, the Golden Rule takes a kind of retroactive form, reading, "Do unto others as you would have liked to have had done unto you in similar circumstances."

Imaginative sympathy involves the referencing of our imagination of ourselves in different circumstances. This is probably a more sophisticated process than is the use of memory, but it involves a similar referencing of self rather than the other person. An example of imaginative sympathy might involve your informing me of your recent miraculous escape from an automobile accident. Having never had a serious automobile accident to remember, I might search for an appropriate response by imagining how I would feel in that circumstance. But no matter how I imagine I might feel, my response bears no necessary relationship to how you actually do feel. Nevertheless, as usual, it is likely that the Golden Rule will permit me the assumption of similarity necessary to think I understand your feelings. In these cases, the Rule reads "Do unto others as you imagine you would like to have done unto you in similar circumstances."

Fund appeals for humanitarian causes commonly attempt to elicit an imaginative sympathy reaction from readers. For instance, a recent issue of the *New Yorker* magazine displayed a fund appeal topped by a picture of a young Asian girl dressed in a dirty but frilly dress, her hair disheveled but beribboned, and her face set in a plaintive but cute expression. The large-type caption under the picture reads "Tina has never had a Teddy Bear."

I suspect that the creators of this appeal are assuming that most readers of the *New Yorker* had teddy bears in their childhood. Further assuming that these teddy bears are remembered fondly by the readers, the fund appealers ask the readers to imagine what it would be like not to have had a teddy bear. The discomfort occasioned by this imagining of a deprived self will then, it is hoped, motivate some check-writing behavior.

I don't really think there is anything wrong with this kind of sympathetic altruism. It is certainly well-motivated, and it probably doesn't do much harm. However, sympathetic altruism may not be addressing the real needs of those whom we want to help. We should at least ask, "But does Tina want a teddy bear?"

While a Peace Corps volunteer in Truk (Chuuk), Micronesia, I happened to be near the receiving end of several gestures of sympathetic altruism. One particularly amusing example was the annual Navy airdrop of Christmas presents. It was a great show: a giant airplane swooping low over the island and disgorging a bombardment of cosmetics, candy, and plastic toys. While the Navy's image was undoubtedly a factor in this action, it still was a pleasant enough thing to do. How much better it would have been, however, if the plane had dropped cloth, ballpoint pens, and perfume—the really valuable gifts from the Trukese point of view.

I'm afraid I was a part of another sympathetic gesture toward the Trukese. My training group decided that creating a water system for the island would be a great help to our hosts. Our hosts themselves seemed more inclined toward a school building, but since the island already had one school building and since we incidentally already had the plastic pipe, we pushed the water project. The island leaders finally gave a reluctant go-ahead and we began work, secure in the knowledge that the project's great sanitation and convenience benefits would soon become apparent. The Trukese men helped us with what I only later could recognize as a bemused and tolerant attitude.

The following events occurred in the next year: even after warnings, several plastic pipes were melted shut during field burning; the island children took to swimming and urinating in the water tanks; inter-village quarrels were punctuated by late-night machete raids on the pipes; the island women continued to lug their wash up the mountain to a stream, where they could socialize as before; and arguments occurred over who had the right to turn the water on and off. Finally, the water system died a merciful death and a school building project was begun. It was a wonderful lesson in the unplanned consequences of sympathetic altruism.

## Advantages and Disadvantages of Sympathy

So far, we have seen a rather bleak picture of the sympathetic strategy. In this final consideration of sympathy, I will suggest some possible advantages of sympathy as well as summarize its disadvantages.

Advantages of using a sympathetic communication strategy include the following:

1. *Sympathy is easy.* Most of us are distressed to some extent by unfamiliarity, and we prefer to identify phenomena with pre-existing categories. With people, the most familiar frame of reference is ourselves, and so we prefer to generalize from ourselves to others—the basic process of assuming similarity. Depending on the situation, we may use reminiscent or imaginative sympathy techniques to enable this kind of generalization.
2. *Sympathy is credible.* Credibility is a major factor in the success of reminiscent sympathy. Because the assumption of similarity is widespread, many people really believe that similar circumstances yield similar experience. We are then likely to give credence to those who have "been through it." While experience may indeed give a person many valuable insights, much of the effectiveness of an experienced person may derive from the attribution of credibility itself. Given this credibility, we may even modify our own feelings to correspond with those of the experienced person.
3. *Sympathy is often accurate.* The accuracy of sympathetic understanding is not a function of its process. Rather, it derives from our tendency to surround ourselves with truly similar people. Attraction to similarity is a pervasive phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> Insofar as we interact mainly with truly similar people, our sympathetic generalizations yield relatively accurate assumptions about those carefully selected others. In these situations of similarity, accuracy should be greatest for imaginative sympathy because it can take into account minor differences in circumstance. Reminiscent sympathy should give second-best results because of its greater rigidity, but its greater credibility may equalize its effectiveness. As sympathy becomes increasingly less sophisticated, it yields accurate assumptions only in nearly identical situations with extremely similar people.
4. *Sympathy may be comforting.* Sometimes people are comforted by knowing that another person has encountered similar cir-

cumstances, even if his or her experience of the circumstances was different. This advantage of reminiscent sympathy seems most apparent in the case of illness, where the unique experience of a particular illness may be perceived as secondary in importance to the mere fact of the sympathizer having had the same disease. In addition, a sympathetic approach may be comfortable for people who would prefer not to disclose their actual, possibly different, feelings or thoughts about certain circumstances.

The disadvantages of a sympathetic communication strategy can be summarized as follows:

1. *Sympathy is insensitive to difference.* Despite our best efforts to interact only with truly similar people, we are frequently thrown into communication situations where others probably think and feel differently. These situations include at least communication with people from different national cultures, ethnic groups, socioeconomic status, age groups, genders, sexual orientation, political persuasion, educational background, and profession. In these and other situations, sympathetic understanding is likely to be inaccurate at best, and probably will impede effective communication.
2. *In the face of difference, sympathy is patronizing.* Generalizing exclusively from our own frame of reference carries with it all the connotations of ethnocentrism. One of these connotations is that our own experience is the best standard with which to measure the world. People with different views of the world may feel that their thoughts and feelings are being devalued. It is not unusual for both persons in a sympathetic communication to feel patronized, each by the other.
3. *In the face of difference, sympathy breeds defensiveness.* When we feel our different views of the world are ignored or devalued by others, we may take on a defensive posture to protect what we think is a successful organization of phenomena. Sympathetic strategies cannot help but ignore or devalue difference, since they are based on a strong assumption of similarity. Communication is hindered by defensiveness,<sup>11</sup> and sympathy appears to be a major factor contributing to that defensiveness.
4. *Sympathy helps perpetuate the assumption of similarity.* Sympathy not only implements the Golden Rule; it also perpetuates it. Our choice of communication strategy and our assumptions about the nature of people are interactive. While

sometimes we may choose a strategy that is adapted to a given reality, we may more often manipulate our assumptions about reality so that a given strategy continues to work. Insofar as we choose sympathy and the Golden Rule, we will tend to ignore difference in favor of seeing the similarity necessary to our strategy.

We have now seen how the everyday use of the Golden Rule derives from an assumption of essential similarity among human beings—an assumption that is consistent with single-reality theory. The communication strategy that implements the Golden Rule is sympathy, which involves some form of generalizing thoughts and feelings from our own frame of reference. Although sympathy may yield acceptable understanding of others in situations of actual similarity, it appears to have many disadvantages in situations where human difference is encountered.

The point which might best be derived from the preceding discussion is not that the Golden Rule and its attendant assumptions and strategies never work. In its most abstract form, the Rule might limit some of the cruelties of dehumanization. But the effectiveness of similarity-based approaches is severely limited by the existence of human diversity. Specific Golden Rule strategies don't work outside of an environment carefully controlled for actual similarity, and the world is decreasingly favorable to that circumstance.

### The Assumption of Difference and Multiple-Reality

In contrast to the assumption that all people are basically similar, we could assume that each human being is essentially unique. A closer look at the apparent homogeneity of human beings reveals an underlying heterogeneity of almost unimaginable scope. It becomes clear that the categories we use for assuming universal similarity are broad generalizations that can only be made at a distance—a distance preserved by abstractions such as the Golden Rule.

If we reject the Golden Rule in favor of seeking difference, an astonishing diversity of human characteristics rapidly becomes apparent. Not only are these differences obvious in language and culture, but they are also observable on the physiological level. People differ in their fingerprints, brain-wave patterns, voice patterns, blood composition, and genetic codes. While the need to eat might appear absolute from a distance, a closer look reveals some people who do not eat for long periods without ill effect. We also find people who can exist in a normally fatal oxygen-defi-

cient atmosphere,<sup>12</sup> and others who are able to start and stop their heartbeat at will.<sup>13</sup> Even those basic categories of similarity—male and female—are only generalizations. Physiological sexual characteristics are actually distributed along a continuum ranging from completely male to completely female.<sup>14</sup> Medical doctors, who are aware of these differences, know better than to treat one person's dysfunction in exactly the same way as another's.

Bracketed by language and cultural differences on one side and physiological differences on the other, people also differ individually in their psychological patterns. The process whereby individuals create unique views of the world has been explored by the psychologist George A. Kelly. In his personal-construct theory, he states the fundamental postulate that "A person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events."<sup>15</sup> By this, he means that each of us is, by definition, an organizer of events, and that the particular organization which we develop constitutes our experience. This organization is considered by Kelly to be a process of construing, defined as "placing an interpretation." Events are anticipated by "construing their replications."<sup>16</sup> Thus, in Kelly's view, our experience is created by the way in which we construe events.

Kelly goes on to state that "persons differ from each other in their construction of events."<sup>17</sup> By this he means simply that we can and do construe precisely the same events in different ways. Since experience is a function of this construing, it follows that experience is not inextricably connected to events.

Experience is made up of the successive construing of events. It is not constituted merely by the succession of events themselves. A person can be a witness to a tremendous parade of episodes and yet, if he fails to keep making something out of them... he gains little in the way of experience from having been around when they happened. It is not what happens around him that makes a man experienced; it is the successive construing and reconstruing of what happens... that enriches the experience of his life.<sup>18</sup>

Obviously, Kelly's view of events and experience is directly opposed to that supposed by the assumption of similarity. It follows from his assumption of difference that the encountering of similar circumstances does not in any way guarantee that two people's experience of those circumstances will be similar. And, of course, without the essential connection of circumstances and

experience, the communication strategy of sympathy becomes worthless as a general technique for understanding others.

We have seen, however, that sympathy does seem to work in some situations of actual similarity. If we are as different as has been implied so far, how can these situations ever come about? Kelly addresses this question: "To the extent that one person employs a construction of experience which is similar to that employed by another, his psychological processes are similar to those of the other person."<sup>19</sup> So, if constructions of experience can somehow be guided into similar paths, some level of actual similarity might occur.

The major guide for constructions of reality is culture. In Kelly's view, we create culture by assuming similarity. When we observe that other people have encountered similar circumstances, we assume that they are similar to ourselves. In interaction, this assumption takes the form of expectations. Other people perceive these expectations and tend to behave in accordance with them. Thus, according to Kelly, "Cultural similarity between persons [is] essentially a similarity in what they perceive is expected of them."<sup>20</sup> It is, then, the *assumption* of similarity which creates the actual similarity.

This circular process of culture would seem to result in widespread actual similarity if it were not for one important factor: different people and groups assume different kinds of similarity. Japanese people, for instance, may assume a significant level of similarity among themselves, but the nature of that similarity is radically different from that assumed by mainstream Americans among themselves. Specifically, Japanese may accurately assume that they are similar among themselves in "family loyalty," and Americans may accurately assume that they are similar among themselves in "desire for individual freedom," but neither assumption applies accurately to the other group. As noted earlier, this difference in the nature of intragroup similarity also appears to characterize ethnic groups, socioeconomic strata, professions, and so on. Each group, no matter how small, has its unique set of expectations (values) which maintains the group identity. And even within groups, each individual differs from every other individual in precise expectations about how events will be construed.

The assumption of difference is consistent with theories of multiple-reality. These theories contend, as does personal-construct theory, that reality is not a given, discoverable quantity. Rather, it is a variable, created quality. In philosophy, this view is

represented by phenomenology and various neophenomenological systems which are presently exploring the philosophical implications of modern physics. The idea of primary importance in these theories is the relativity of frame of reference.

Relative frame of reference, although it has a rather precise meaning in physics, can be considered generally as the change in apparent reality that accompanies a change in observational perspective. This idea is fundamental to the assumption of difference as it affects human interaction. When we communicate, we are operating on the pragmatic level of apparent reality. The pitfall of sympathy is the assumption that reality appears the same to both participants in the situation. The alternative to this stance is to assume a relative frame of reference, where our view of reality may be apparent only to ourselves. As we will see, the placing of ourselves in a relative frame of reference is conducive to empathy.

Another philosophy that contributes to the assumption of difference is systems theory. Of particular interest is the quality of a system called *equifinality*. This principle states that in any given system, we may achieve the same goal by starting at different points and by using different processes within the system.<sup>21</sup> Kelly states the same idea for people: "Two people can act alike even if they have been exposed to quite different phenomenal stimuli."<sup>22</sup> Both these equifinality ideas contrast with the similarity assumption that particular experience is necessarily connected to particular circumstances. If we consider society as a system and apply the principle of equifinality, we see that people exposed to different circumstances may have very similar experiences. Reversing this, people encountering similar circumstances may have different experiences.

The practical implication of equifinality is that there are many ways of skinning a cat. Although such aphorisms normally state the obvious, it is surprising how often we seem to neglect this simple statement of relativity. When we encourage others to take a particular trip because it is exciting or to see a certain movie because it is meaningful, we have failed to recognize that those activities may not elicit the same feelings at all in other people. Further, we may also ignore the fact that feelings of excitement and meaningfulness may be engendered in others by quite different activities. Apparently, it is one thing to quote the aphorism and quite another to really believe that bowling and yachting may be experienced similarly.

In the social sciences, proponents of multiple-reality theories include Gregory Bateson,<sup>23</sup> Paul Watzlawick,<sup>24</sup> and Ronald

David Laing.<sup>25</sup> These and other theorists agree that the reality we experience is a variable matter of perception and communication.<sup>26</sup> Perception itself is highly variable, particularly in cross-cultural situations,<sup>27</sup> and the rules of communication seem even more mutable.<sup>28</sup> Considering these changing factors, we might wonder that anyone ever understands anyone else at all. That we *do* sometimes understand each other seems to be largely a function of overcoming the Golden Rule, which denies these differences in perception and communication altogether.

### Empathy

The communication strategy most appropriate to multiple-reality and the assumption of difference is *empathy*. Like *sympathy*, this term is also used variably. In everyday usage, it is often defined as standing in another person's shoes, as intense sympathy, as sensitivity to happiness rather than to sadness, and as a direct synonym for sympathy. In the literature, empathy has been defined as objective motor mimicry; as the understanding of people who have no emotional significance to us;<sup>29</sup> and as "a state in which an observer reacts emotionally because he perceives another experiencing or about to experience an emotion."<sup>30</sup> Here I will use the definition "the imaginative intellectual and emotional participation in another person's experience."<sup>31</sup> This definition is most consistent with the treatments of empathy by Carl R. Rogers<sup>32</sup> and by Robert L. Katz.<sup>33</sup>

As sympathy was defined as "the imaginative placing of ourselves in another person's position," empathy can be defined in terms of two important contrasts in focus. In empathy, we "participate" rather than "place," and we are concerned with "experience" and "perspective" rather than "position." Placing ourselves in another person's position assumes, as we have seen, essential similarity of experience with the other, making it sufficient to merely change places with him or her. In contrast, participation in another's experience does not assume essential similarity. The other's experience might be quite alien, even if his or her position is similar. Thus, we need to do more than merely change places or stand in the other person's shoes. We need to get inside the head and heart of the other, to participate in his or her experience as if we were really the other person. This process may be referred to as "perspective taking."

My wife and I have discovered some differences between sympathy and empathy in our own cross-gender communication. One minor example is our experience dealing with each other during

slight illnesses. When I am sick, I like to be left absolutely alone (in autonomous suffering). When my wife is sick, she likes to be grandly attended to (in relational nurturance). When we were first married, I would express my sympathy for her being sick by leaving her absolutely alone. And she, of course, would sympathize by asking me how I felt every ten minutes or so. After some years of wonderment at how cantankerous we both were when sick, we found that we had different expectations about how sick people should be treated. Now we try to empathize rather than sympathize. By imagining the other person's experience of being sick, we treat each other differently than we would like to be treated ourselves. We have, at least in this area, overcome the Golden Rule.

In interethnic communication, an empathy strategy might solve many misunderstandings that derive exclusively from a misplaced assumption of similarity. Perhaps addressing these face-to-face misunderstandings will eventually influence the larger social manifestations of the Golden Rule. One such everyday case noted by Thomas Kochman concerns black/white male fighting patterns. He observes that, contrary to some stereotypes, whites usually throw the first punch in schoolyard-type fights between blacks and whites. Apparently, when certain words are used by the black, the white imagines how he himself would feel using those words. He discovers through this sympathy that he would be about ready to strike physically. So, with this assumption of imminent violence, the white strikes first. The black may be surprised at this attack, since he was "just talking"—still a long verbal development away from an actual fight. If both people in this situation empathized rather than sympathized, they might realize that they had different experiences of the same verbal circumstances.<sup>34</sup>

A favorite example of intercultural empathy is the news picture of Henry Kissinger, then U.S. secretary of state, holding hands side by side with the then-president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat. Kissinger was obviously behaving in a way appropriate to Sadat's experience of male hand holding, rather than reacting to what probably is his own, culturally conditioned experience of that event.

In the above cases, empathy describes a shift in perspective away from our own to an acknowledgment of the other person's different experience. This shift in perspective is often accompanied by a willingness to participate in the other person's experience, at least to the extent of behaving in ways appropriate to

that experience. And, in all cases, the empathic strategy is the opposite of that called for by the Golden Rule. If people really are different, and if we want to understand, respect, and enjoy those differences, then clearly we must begin by overcoming the Golden Rule.

## Developing Empathy

So pervasive is the Golden Rule that only a concerted effort can topple its influence on our communication. The following model for the development of empathy represents a coordinated attack on the assumption of similarity and a procedure for replacing sympathy with empathy. The six steps of this procedure are a guide to the sequential development of empathic skills. The order in which the steps are undertaken is important. Each step is a necessary condition to the next; there are possible pitfalls of neglecting the prior step or of failing to move on properly. Taken completely and in order, however, this procedure reflects a workable approach to understanding difference.

### Step One: Assuming Difference

This assumption is the one that has already been discussed—the assumption of difference and its attendant theory of multiple-reality. When this assumption is lacking, there simply is no motivation to empathize. As we have seen, sympathy serves the similarity and one-reality assumptions very well. Without the assumption of difference, empathy is considered unnecessary, and it may even be disvalued as "insincere." In these cases, it appears that "sincerity" is defined as "being true to yourself." This stance precludes imagining being different from our usual selves—a necessary condition for empathy to occur.

The imagination of the self as potentially alien is one of the most difficult aspects of multiple-reality thinking. But this approach is necessary to bridge the otherwise impossible separation of individuals implied by the assumption of difference. If we accept that we might be different, given different constructions and circumstances, then we are free to imagine our thoughts and feelings from that different perspective. Insofar as we can then align the imagined self-perspective with that of an actual other person, we are able to empathize.

### Step Two: Knowing Self

Many of us, although eager to develop empathy, are afraid of "losing ourselves." This is, indeed, a danger in empathy if we are

not properly prepared. The preparation called for is to know ourselves sufficiently well so that an easy reestablishment of individual identity is possible. If we are aware of our own cultural and individual values, assumptions, and beliefs—that is, how we define our identities—then we need not fear losing those selves. We cannot lose something that can be re-created at will. The prerequisite of self-knowledge does not eliminate the possibility of change in ourselves as a result of empathizing. It merely makes such change a chosen option rather than an uncontrollable loss.

This step may also be applied effectively to "natural empathizers" who sometimes report being uncomfortable with their inability to *not* empathize. These people are sometimes assailed by the unsought experience of feelings apparently belonging to other people. A common example of this kind of natural empathy is the experience of extreme nervousness when confronted by a nervous person. Natural empathizers cannot help "picking up" the emotional states of others in their vicinity. The key to avoiding this uncontrolled empathy is self-knowledge, because it allows us to restrict our experience to a well-defined self when necessary.

An emphasis on self-knowledge should not, however, degenerate into self-celebration. The elevation of self to reverential status is not only humorless, it also impedes the suspension of self necessary for the next step.

### Step Three: Suspending Self

In this step, the identity that was clarified in Step Two is temporarily set aside. This is, of course, easier said than done. One way of thinking about this procedure is to imagine that the self, or identity, is an arbitrary boundary that we draw between ourselves and the rest of the world, including other people. The suspension of self is the temporary expansion of this boundary—the elimination of separation between self and environment.

It is possible here to see the necessary sequence of the steps. Suspension of the self-boundary is facilitated by knowing where the boundary is (self-knowledge), but *only* if one first has a self-referenced assumption of multiple-reality (assuming difference). If, for instance, the multiple-reality assumption is missing, then self-knowledge tends to impede suspension of boundaries, becoming instead egocentrism.

The focus of this step is not on suspending the "content" of identity (assumptions, values, behavior sets, and so on). Rather, it is on the ability to modify and expand boundaries. The empha-

sis on content in Step Two was merely a device to clarify the boundary. Once clarified, suspension of self is a matter of expanding that boundary so as to "lose" the self defined by it.

### Step Four: Allowing Guided Imagination

When the self-boundary is extended, the normal distinction between internal and external (subjective and objective) is obliterated. Our awareness is free to wander among "outside" phenomena, including other people, much as we normally wander within our "inside" experience. In the extended state, we can move our attention *into* the experience of normally external events rather than turning our attention *onto* those events, as we usually do. This shifting of awareness into phenomena not normally associated with self can be called "imagination."

For accurate interpersonal empathy to occur, we must allow our imagination to be guided into the experience of a specific other person. If we try to actively guide imagination, the process becomes more like thinking. Thinking is a self-activity, and thus it is inappropriate at this stage of empathy, where self is suspended. If we are successful in *allowing* our imagination to be captured by the other person, we are in the position to imaginatively participate in that person's experience. The feeling of this shift in awareness is very similar to the imaginative participation in a play or a novel.<sup>35</sup> It is the same kind of surrender to the drama before us—in this case, the human drama represented by the other person.

Another parallel to guided imagination is the operation of intuition in creative problem solving. Allowing intuition specific to a problem is a very similar process to that of allowing imagination specific to another person. In both cases, we are often struck with a sudden "sense of the whole," as if we were first outside the problem or person and then suddenly inside, looking out.

### Step Five: Allowing Empathic Experience

When we have allowed our imagination to be guided inside the other person, we are in the position to experience that person as if that person were ourselves. While this experience is imaginative, its intensity and "reality" are not necessarily less than that of our own normal experience. The intensity of empathic experience may even be greater, in a parallel to the sometimes larger-than-life intensity of drama.

The feeling of empathic experience is both familiar and alien. It is as if we were doing a normal activity like washing dishes,

only on another planet. The familiar activity is that of experiencing, which we do constantly. The unfamiliar aspect is that the experience itself is not our own. We perceive a different set of feelings and thoughts about the world—a different construing—which seems to describe a place we have never seen. And indeed, this is true. With empathy, and only with empathy, we are privileged to live briefly in the least accessible land of all—another person's experience.

### Step Six: Reestablishing Self

Although finding our way into other people's experience is important, it is equally necessary to remember the way back to our selves. In this culture, at least, the reestablishment of self is a necessary component of empathic communication. The failure to do so eventuates in a diffusion of identity, or ego-loss, that is not appropriate for much of our everyday interaction. The purpose of empathy is not life everlasting as one with the universe. Rather, interpersonal empathy allows the controlled and temporary suspension of identity for a particular purpose—the understanding of another person. When this purpose is achieved, the boundaries of self are best reinstated. One exception to this, however, might be the maintenance of an intimate relationship in which we have committed to "being one with" another person.

Identity is reestablished by first re-creating the sense of separateness between self and other that is the normal state in this culture. When this separation is regained, the content of our own worldview automatically reemerges, and a determination of which thoughts and feelings belong to whom can be made. It may even be useful to contrast our sympathetic reaction to the other person with our empathic understanding. From this contrast can emerge a clear recognition of the difference between ourselves and the other—a recognition that reinforces the necessity for empathy.

### Toward the Platinum Rule

Although empathy can be used in any communication situation, we have been concerned in this article with its utility to the understanding of difference. As suggested by the ethnocentric connotations of sympathy mentioned earlier, the use of empathy might serve to create a more sensitive and respectful climate for interracial and intercultural communication.

Approaching people as if they are different from us allows us to generate an addition to the Golden Rule. It is the Platinum

Rule, which could state, "Do unto others as they themselves would have done unto them." Through empathy, we at least can be aware of how others would like to be treated from their own perspectives. We may not want or be able to provide that treatment, but the very act of acknowledging the difference and attempting empathy is profoundly respectful and affirming of others. Of course, it is that respect for the equal (but different) humanity of others that was probably the original intent of the Golden Rule.

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- <sup>5</sup> Jon A. Blubaugh and Dorothy L. Pennington, *Crossing Differences...Interracial Communication* (Columbus, OH: Merrill, 1976), 92.
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- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.
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# Transition Shock: Putting Culture Shock in Perspective

Janet M. Bennett

One of the difficulties in considering culture shock is the tendency to treat it as an exotic ailment with origins rooted in far-away places. In fact, culture shock bears a remarkable resemblance to the tensions and anxieties we face whenever change threatens the stability of our lives. Alvin Toffler has described the phenomenon of disruptive change within a culture as "future shock."<sup>1</sup> Gail Sheehy has focused on the painful crises in individual life cycles, what we might term "passage shock."<sup>2</sup> These and other forms of "shock" (including culture shock) might be subsumed under the general category *transition shock*. This article will relate various concepts of culture shock to the general category of transition shock and will suggest how this frame of reference is useful in understanding the causes, effects, and coping mechanisms of culture shock.

The expression *culture shock* was popularized by Kalvero Oberg to refer to the "anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse."<sup>3</sup> Edward T. Hall suggested the added dimension of replacement of familiar cues with new, strange elements.<sup>4</sup> According to Peter S. Adler, "Culture shock is primarily a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one's own culture, to new cultural stimuli which have little or no meaning, and to the misun-