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Working Together Across Differences*

Uma Narayan

TAKING EMOTIONS SERIOUSLY

Communication and working relationships are often hard to initiate or sustain between people who differ in class, race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, despite the presence of common interests and shared goals. I think it would be helpful for individuals with different backgrounds and groups with heterogeneous components to reflect on the difficulties of communication between people who share, and people who do not share, the experience of oppression. The emotions—and hence the sense of self—of members of the oppressed group are unintentionally violated by nonmembers who participate in the dialogue.

I have tried to analyze a number of ways in which this can happen. I hope that the cases considered, though by no means exhaustive, will provide a starting point for people to talk together about, and work through, problems in dialogue. Working across differences is a morally and socially important enterprise in

every context—in political groups, in relationships between social workers (and other professionals) and their clients, and in friendships. Such differences in background and identity can be enriching resources, epistemologically, socially, and personally. Learning to understand and respect these differences can make more complex our understanding of ourselves and our societies, can broaden the range of our politics, and enrich the variety of connections we have as persons. But such efforts are not without costs; I shall focus on these costs.

For the sake of convenience, I shall use the term *insider* to refer to a member of an oppressed group and the term *outsider* to refer to nonmembers. These terms have a disadvantage in that they lack an explicit sense of hierarchy but have the advantage of reversing conventional ideas of what is central and what is marginal. People are insiders or outsiders only with respect to specific forms of oppressive social structures—racism, sexism, compulsory heterosexuality, and so forth. An individual who is an insider with respect to one form of oppression (say, by being a woman) may be an outsider with respect to another form of oppression (say, by being white).

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These problems in communication may have different implications in the context of political and professional relationships than when they occur between friends. Friends may more easily be able to articulate such problems, and insiders may be more willing to make allowances for outsiders who are friends. Moreover, outsiders may be more concerned about having caused offense to insiders who are friends and, hence, more willing to understand the nature of the problems that arise. However, working across differences is an unavoidable project in all of these contexts. We need to understand the costs of communicating across differences and try to minimize those costs.

My focus on emotions in problems of communication follows the injunction of several strands of feminist theory that the emotions must be taken seriously and not regarded as mere epiphenomenal baggage. Thus, although I shall be addressing problems that have to do with communicating across all sorts of difference, and not gender differences alone, my project is still primarily inspired by the feminist commitment to take emotions seriously.

Much feminist writing about the importance of emotions has focused on the positive contributions that emotions make to knowledge and communication. This is both understandable and appropriate, since feminist theory is a response to perspectives where the emotions have been regarded as antithetical to reason and as impediments to knowledge.

A strength of feminist thinking is its commitment to contextualizing its statements. Skeptical of claims that emotions are always a hindrance to knowledge, it would prefer to examine the specific roles of emotions in particular contexts. In keeping with this commitment, feminist theory would fail to live up to its own standards if it adopted another absolutist perspective on the emotions—that emotions always had a positive contribution to make in the domain of knowledge and communication.

Differences of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on often correlate with significantly different opportunities, values, and social experiences for insiders and outsiders. Factors like race, class, and gender have historically been part of deep and divisive social structures, which have engendered conflict, tension, hostility, and mistrust between insiders and outsiders. Communication between insiders and outsiders is in

constant danger of breaking down unless people learn to trust one another across divisive social differences and to sustain working relationships in contexts of distrust and disagreement. Even when people are working together for common social, political, professional, or personal goals, communication cannot be sustained unless the problems that arise between insiders and outsiders are addressed.

So, working together across our differences seems to be unavoidable. We are condemned to either ignoring differences at the cost of conflict and mistrust or working tenuously across them to form always risky bonds of understanding.

EPISTEMIC PRIVILEGE AND THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

My starting premise is that goodwill is not enough. A simple resolution by individuals or groups to try and understand the experiences of more disadvantaged persons or groups, whose oppression they do not share, and to try and empathize with their interests is not going to resolve the thousands of problems that crop up in communication. Too often, even the most resolute possessors of goodwill will find themselves baffled and angered by failures of communication.

Such resolute goodwill toward members of more disadvantaged groups may be an important foundation for trust-building experiences. But this will not be sufficient to cause strong, historically constituted networks of distrust to simply evaporate into thin air.

Annette Baier (1986) says that trust “is accepted vulnerability to another’s possible but not expected ill will (or lack of good will) toward one” (p. 235). Members of disadvantaged groups may be willing to set aside their mistrust of members of advantaged groups with whom they work, to the extent of accepting the existence of goodwill on the part of these advantaged outsiders. But they *cannot* fail to be aware that the outsiders’ goodwill is not enough to overcome assumptions and attitudes born out of centuries of power and privilege.

Insiders realize that being hurt by the insensitivity of outsiders they endeavor to work with is often more difficult emotionally than being hurt by the deliberate malice of outsiders they expect no better of. Here, insiders render themselves more vulnerable by acknowledging the outsiders’ goodwill.

In considering the difficulties in communicating across differences, I start by examining the claim that members of oppressed groups have epistemic privilege (Harding & Hintikka, 1983; Hartsock, 1983). Epistemic privilege means that members of an oppressed group have a more immediate, subtle, and critical knowledge of their oppression than do nonmembers. The claim of epistemic privilege need not imply that the insiders have a clearer or better knowledge of the *causes* of their oppression. Since oppression often includes the denial of access to education and hence to the means of theory production (detailed knowledge of the history of their oppression, conceptual tools with which to analyze its mechanisms, and so on), the oppressed may not have a detailed analysis of how their oppression originated and has been maintained and of all the systemic purposes it serves. Explanatory theories and conceptual tools—such as class structure and patriarchy—that help us understand the specificities of oppression are often developed by people who, as nonmembers of the oppressed group, have greater access to the means of theoretical production.

However, the oppressed have epistemic privilege when it comes to immediate knowledge of everyday life under oppression—all the ways in which the oppression affects their social and psychic lives. The emotions play an important role in this knowledge.

Second, the claim to epistemic privilege for the oppressed does not mean that nonmembers of the oppressed group can never come to understand the experiences of the oppressed. Such a claim would have very undesirable political consequences; it could excuse those who are not members of an oppressed group from any concern with that oppression. After all, if outsiders can never understand most significant aspects of a form of oppression, how could they meaningfully take an interest in it or help fight against it? Taken this way, the claim to epistemic privilege would make communication between insiders and even sympathetic outsiders close to useless. Besides, this interpretation is not supported by experience. Many of us know a few men who understand a good deal about feminist concerns, for instance, or white people who understand a good deal about issues of race.

But I think that the claim to epistemic privilege does imply that nonmembers of the oppressed group will have to make a great effort to apprehend the details of

lived oppression. Having insiders as friends and colleagues, sharing in aspects of their lifestyle, fighting alongside them on issues that concern them, and sustaining a continuous dialogue with them can all help outsiders develop a more sophisticated understanding of what oppression involves. But outsiders who simply have an abstract sort of goodwill toward insiders are unlikely to have a clear awareness of the forms in which an oppression is experienced.

Outsiders should not deceive themselves that they can learn nothing about oppression unless educated about it by insiders. True, if insiders have epistemic privilege about their oppression, outsiders cannot educate themselves about insiders' situation except by listening to, or reading about, their experience of their situation. But concerned outsiders must recognize a responsibility to actively seek out and acquire such knowledge.

Third, the claim that the oppressed have epistemic privilege does not mean that the knowledge they have of their oppression is in any way incorrigible. Members of an oppressed group, like human subjects in general, can always be mistaken about the nature of their experience. Insiders may differ in the way they perceive or interpret certain incidents; not all of them can be right. At times, it may even be that all of them are wrong.

However, epistemic privilege does have some implications for outsiders who want to argue that the understanding of an insider is wrong. Such outsiders must proceed with methodological humility and methodological caution. By methodological humility, I mean that the outsiders must always be aware that, as outsiders, they may be missing something, and that what appears to be a mistake on the part of an insider may make more sense if they had a fuller understanding of the context. By methodological caution, I mean that outsiders should be careful to present their attempted criticism in such a way that it does not—nor even seem to—denigrate or dismiss the validity of the insider's point of view.

Fourth, the claim to epistemic privilege for the oppressed should not be identified with the claim that the oppressed should speak for themselves and represent their own interests. Even if insiders had no epistemic privilege whatsoever, there are several other good and important reasons why they should speak for themselves. Historically, those in power have always spoken as if their point of view is universal and

represents the values, interests, and experiences of everyone. Many critiques of political, moral and social theory have been directed at showing how these allegedly universal points of view represent the viewpoints of the powerful and the privileged (Young, 1986).

Besides, the right to speak for oneself is closely tied to the oppressed group's sense of autonomy, identity, and self-respect. For that reason alone, the oppressed should speak for themselves.

EPISTEMIC PRIVILEGE AND THE EMOTIONS

In my view, an important aspect of epistemic privilege is that the oppressed have knowledge conferred by their emotional responses to oppression. Whereas concerned outsiders' knowledge of oppression is always more or less abstract and theoretical, the knowledge of insiders is enriched by their lived experience. Insiders' emotional responses to oppression enrich their knowledge of that oppression in at least three ways.

1. **UNDERSTANDING THE EMOTIONAL COSTS OF OPPRESSION.** Sympathetic outsiders can react emotionally to incidents of racism, sexism, and so forth, even though they are not the targets of such oppression. But outsiders often fail to realize that insiders' emotional responses to the oppression may be much more complex than their own. Consequently, their understanding of the emotional costs of the oppression will be more sketchy than that of insiders. Sympathetic outsiders, when encountering a racist or sexist incident often feel anger at the perpetrator and sympathy with the victim. The insider victim, however, may feel a jumbled array of emotions: anger at the perpetrator, a deep sense of humiliation, a sense of being soiled by the incident, momentary hatred for the whole group of which the perpetrator is a part, rage at the history that sustains such attitudes, anger and shame at one's powerlessness to retaliate, a sense of solidarity with those who face the same problems, and maybe even pity for the stupidity of the perpetrator. Outsiders may fail to wholly grasp the effects of the oppression on its victims, and the full emotional costs.

2. **APPRECIATING THE SUBTLER MANIFESTATIONS OF OPPRESSION.** Outsiders who have not experienced an oppression firsthand are likely to understand only the *general* and *commonplace* ways in which it is manifested. For instance, if a professor uses openly sexist examples or is openly hostile to female students, sympathetic male students may notice his attitudes. But if those attitudes

are expressed more covertly—through dismissing women's queries, not taking their contributions seriously, undervaluing their work, or lack of cordiality—outsiders may fail to see what is happening.

Insiders will often pick up cues ranging from facial expressions to body language that outsiders may fail to spot and will often also be alerted by their own feelings of unease about the person or situation. As a consequence, insiders are far more likely than outsiders to know the extent to which a form of oppression permeates a society and the very subtle forms in which it can operate.

3. **MAKING CONNECTIONS OR SEEING OPPRESSION IN NEW CONTEXTS.** Outsiders usually know about the more widespread and commonplace contexts in which an oppression is manifested but may fail to recognize the same sort of phenomena in new or unusual contexts. Or, they may fail to make the connection between what they know in theory and what is taking place in a given situation. For instance, men who have been sensitized to the silencing of women in public forums may fail to see the same phenomenon in informal gatherings or between friends. Insiders are more likely to make these connections and to carry over what they have learned to new contexts, because exposure to the oppression makes them more vigilant.

EMOTIONAL COSTS OF WORKING ACROSS DIFFERENCE

Although oppression may confer epistemic privilege, it certainly constitutes a burden. Insiders are burdened by all the forms an oppression takes, from everyday and trivial manifestations to violent and life-threatening ones. Insiders pay a heavy social and psychological price that no outsider pays. Collaboration between insiders and outsiders is often fraught with difficulty, for, in any communication, the two groups are not equally vulnerable, as Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman (1983) explain:

We have had to be in your world and learn its ways. We have to participate in it, make a living in it, live in it, be mistreated in it, be ignored in it, and rarely, be appreciated in it. But there is nothing that necessitates that you understand our world; understand, that is, not as an observer understands things, but as a participant, as someone who has a stake in them understands them. So your being ill at ease in our world lacks the features of our being ill at ease in yours precisely because you can leave and you can always tell yourselves that you will soon be

out of there and because the wholeness of yourselves is never touched by us, we have no tendency to remake you in our image. (p. 576)

The insider pays the price of oppression. Even sympathetic outsiders, prone to blind spots and clumsiness, can hurt the insider more often than they imagine. Insiders cannot simply walk away from the problems and issues that permeate their lives, as the outsider always can, nor can they ever inadvertently hurt outsiders in quite the same way that outsiders can hurt them. Thus, since the brunt of possible hurt is most often on the insider, the burden of taking care not to cause offense can fairly be laid on the outsider. Outsiders often assume, wrongly, that goodwill on their part is a guarantee against causing offense to insiders; when insiders are offended and express their anger, the outsiders often react with honest bafflement and anger, since they cannot understand how someone as sympathetic to an oppressed group could conceivably be seen as having offensive views or attitudes.

I shall try to analyze a number of ways in which outsiders may cause affront and grief to insiders; the list is in no way exhaustive. These failures have in common the inability of outsiders to fully understand and respect the emotional responses of insiders. In some cases, the responses of outsiders violates insiders' sense of self-identity, self-worth, or self-respect. In others, the outsiders' responses violate insiders' sense of group identity, respect, and solidarity.

1. **DENIAL OF THE VALIDITY OF AN INSIDER'S RESPONSE.** Given the way differences work, it is hardly surprising that insiders and outsiders may often have very different understandings of what is involved in a situation. For instance, men and women often have very different understandings concerning where responsibility lies in cases of sexual harassment. Men often think women are responsible for attracting unwanted attention, because of the way they dress or conduct themselves. Women often see this as an attempt to absolve men of their real responsibility. When men blame women for the sexual harassment from which they suffer, they wholly deny the validity of the insiders' understanding of such harassment as something inflicted on them. Insiders will most often respond emotionally to such attempts to negate their understanding—with anger, tears, and so on. To insiders, the issue is not purely theoretical, and their anger and pain at what they have to endure is exacerbated

by the seeming inability of even well-intentioned outsiders to see their point of view.

The situation is complicated in that most outsiders and insiders have been socialized differently and understand and display emotions in very different ways. For instance, public (or even private) displays of emotion by women, which are experienced as natural and authentic by the women, often seem excessive and artificial to men.

Outsiders often react to insiders' emotional responses over a disagreement in two ways: by dismissing the emotional response as just one of those silly and irrational responses to which insiders are prone; by accusing the insider of using the emotional response as a manipulative measure. Insiders may be told that, since they could not muster arguments that were cogent enough to convince the outsider, they are now resorting to emotional tactics to win the argument.

When outsiders take both tacks, insiders are in a strange double-bind over their emotions. If the response is authentic and natural, it is also pathetic and a symptom of weakness, irrationality, and lack of self-control. If the response is not a symptom of weakness and irrationality, it is a calculated, manipulative, and inauthentic strategic move. To insiders, who already feel that displaying their emotions has made them vulnerable, such dismissals or accusations of manipulation add insult to injury. Outsiders must realize that denial of the validity of the insiders' responses will almost certainly cause a serious breach in the dialogue, since they deeply violate insiders' self-respect.

2. **ACCUSATIONS OF PARANOIA.** Outsiders often consider the reactions of insiders to be paranoid. They think that the insiders are imagining the existence of racist or sexist attitudes, say, in cases where outsiders fail to see such attitudes. (This is another way in which outsiders deny the validity of the insider's response.) Accusations of paranoia are usually incorrect, since even sympathetic outsiders may fail to pick up on subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination. They also undermine insiders' confidence that their judgments are accurate. Insiders are often aware that subtle instances of racism and sexism are open to interpretation and consequently are anxious and uncertain about their own perceptions.

But insiders are mostly correct in their suspicions. Sometimes less subtle manifestations follow, or else the insider meets other insiders who have the same feelings of unease about the same outsider. For instance, women

students and students of color seem to largely agree in their individual judgments as to which of their professors are sexist or racist, often in the subtlest of ways.

Outsiders should refrain as far as possible from such accusations of paranoia, since they are likely to be wrong, and since such accusations undermine insiders' trust in their own perceptions. This may reduce their capacity for vigilance, something that those who are on the receiving end of oppression can ill afford.

3. **INSENSITIVE REACTIONS TO AN INSIDER'S RESPONSE.** Outsiders can be offensively insensitive to insiders' reactions without necessarily dismissing them as irrational, manipulative, or paranoid. Here's an example. A group of people were discussing whether it was important that women (rather than men) taught courses in feminist theory and that African American professors (rather than white ones) taught courses in African American literature, philosophy, and history. An African American talked about his experience with a white teacher who taught Richard Wright with little sensitivity to the context of African American culture and who constantly dismissed what his African American students had to say. A white participant responded by saying that it was better to include such works on syllabi, regardless of who taught them, than to exclude them because there were no teachers from appropriate backgrounds to teach them. This was an insensitive reaction because the insider's account of his unhappy experience was brushed aside. The same basic point could have been made by saying, for instance, "I can understand what you are talking about. Such experiences must be awful. But don't you think that it may be a good thing to push for African American writings to be included on syllabi, regardless of who is there to teach them?"

In this case, the outsider was white, a woman, and a feminist, and her response may be seen as an insensitive failure to analogize. If a woman had talked about how awful it was to do Virginia Woolf with a sexist male teacher, and a man had commented similarly, any feminist would have perceived it as a sexist response.

If working together across difference is to be possible, we must all learn to analogize from situations of oppression in which we have been insiders to those in which we are outsiders. It seems that understanding of one form of oppression does not necessarily sensitize one to other forms. But, if we make the effort to analogize, it may give us some clues as to how to avoid insensitive responses when we are outsiders.

4. **FAILURE TO AVOID STEREOTYPIC GENERALIZATIONS.** Sometimes, even the best-intentioned outsiders utter clichés and stereotypic generalizations about insiders. For instance, outsiders may see culturally mediated attitudes to birth control, family size, or work as the result of simple ignorance or backwardness on the part of insiders. Outsiders should carefully scrutinize their explanations of insiders' behavior for such insulting clichés.

5. **FAILURE TO SEE WHY STATEMENTS ARE IMPLICITLY INSULTING.** Outsiders are often taken aback by insiders' sharp reactions to certain statements. For instance, women in a group may react sharply to a man's statements that are insulting to *particular* women, who may not be present or even members of the group. The women present may suspect, with some justification, that the man's statements reflect his attitudes to women in general. To avoid that sort of reaction, outsiders must be very careful to specify what their criticism of a particular insider is and try to show why it is not an expression of a general negative attitude to insiders in general.

Outsiders often fail to understand why, for instance, a Latino may react negatively to implicitly derogatory remarks about, say, Chinese or African cultures. Outsiders fail to see that insiders may quite legitimately suspect that these remarks reflect negative attitudes toward all other cultures. It may be very difficult, but outsiders will have to focus on the more general implications of their statements for insiders, in order to avoid unintentional insult.

6. **INAPPROPRIATE JUDGMENTS.** Outsiders often think that their relationship with insiders entitles them to make judgments about what insiders ought to do or feel. These judgments, almost inevitably, turn out to be insulting to the insider. For instance, women philosophers and philosophers of color who are interested in areas like mathematical logic are offended by implications that they should be devoting themselves to political philosophy and/or feminist theory. Outsiders who imply this fail to see why it may be a matter of pride for members of oppressed groups to excel in a difficult field like mathematical logic. Similarly, many Western feminists imply that some non-Western feminists are too critical about their own cultures. They fail to see that women who have fought against some of the most oppressive aspects of those cultures cannot afford outsiders' more rose-tinted view. Good advice to outsiders is that they should learn from the perceptions of insiders, rather than telling insiders what they ought to do or feel.

There are, no doubt, several other ways in which communicating across difference can create problems. For instance, outsiders who desire to be praised for their interest in an issue that does not directly affect them may fail to understand insiders' resentment of that desire. Or outsiders may fail to understand why, at moments of crisis, even insiders whom they are close to may prefer to discuss their problems with other insiders.

These problems of communicating across difference will be easier to handle if both insiders and outsiders take seriously the idea of the epistemic privilege of the oppressed. Outsiders must try to understand that goodwill on their part is not sufficient to guarantee that their perceptions and comments are inoffensive to insiders. They must realize that insiders may have a more subtle and complex understanding of the ways in which oppression operates and that insiders are especially vulnerable to insensitivities from outsiders whom they have begun to trust. Outsiders have good reason to proceed with methodological humility and methodological caution and to focus more careful attention on the implications of what they say.

While the exercise of methodological humility and methodological caution may cramp the spontaneity of outsiders' reactions and the ease with which they communicate, this seems a small price to pay in order to avoid offense to insiders and serious breaches in communication.

Is there anything insiders can do to help in working across differences? Perhaps the idea of epistemic privilege can make a difference to insiders as well. If they realize that outsiders have difficulty in understanding the subtlety of oppression, insiders may be able to deal with outsiders' insensitive perceptions or comments with greater charity. This is not to say

that such insensitivities must be simply overlooked or forgiven, but the manner of confrontation may be different. For instance, instead of reacting with anger, which inevitably makes the outsider defensive, the insider could try instead to point out why the outsider's remarks were experienced as hurtful or offensive.

Even with the best intentions, it is very hard for insiders not to react to insensitivity with anger, for each insensitivity evokes memories of countless others. Besides, anger is a necessary emotion for those who must constantly exercise vigilance in the face of systematic social prejudice and discrimination. Insensitivities from trusted outsiders make insiders especially bitter and pessimistic about hopes for change, and anger is often an inevitable corollary.

Besides, revealing anger makes one less vulnerable than revealing hurt. In revealing anger, one seems to react from a position of strength, while revealing hurt may invite outsiders' pity or guilt, neither of which the insider can find very palatable. Moreover, insiders often resent the burden of constantly explaining themselves to outsiders and feel bitter that, while they must unavoidably live and function in the outsider's world, the outsider has no such imperative to understand their world and their experience. However, perhaps insiders must try, whenever possible, to raise issues of insensitivity with some rein on their anger. And outsiders, for their part, must try to understand the insiders' anger.

Certainly, continuing examination of communication across differences will reveal other kinds of problems. What is important is that these problems are seriously analyzed and addressed, to permit more sensitive perceptions on the part of outsiders and easier interaction between insiders and outsiders.