

The Creative Use of Memory Disadvantaged Groups And the Importance of Engaging Alternative Perspectives

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The more focused our perspective on immediate events, the stronger our emotional response is likely to be to these events. Shift to a more removed or distant perspective and the intensity of our emotional response usually weakens. Time is one distancer, and apart from traumatic experience, typically events recalled in memory over time do not have the same emotional charge as immediate experiences. Scale is another distancer since increasing the scope of our purview to include more in the frame we are considering – “wide angle” – typically weakens the importance of events seen or remembered “close up.”

Why is this common aspect of the human experience important?

Because we can override either of these natural distancers by continually replaying events in memory as if they are both focal and present and thereby allowing this replay to evoke the same strong original emotions.

Why is this use of human memory to retain the past as the present and to keep it emotionally charged important?

Because when we refuse to let the past fade and to allow a fresh perspective and alternative emotions to emerge, we paint the present as the past and limit the creativity of our ongoing responses and actions. We can be literally stuck – running in place, captured by the past, and caught in the vortex of playing the victim.

History can enlighten the present or it can paralyze the present depending in large part on whether as individuals, as groups, and as the storytellers for our groups we remain flexible and invoke alternative perspectives by making use of the appropriate distancers.

Forgetting the past, or denying the past is not productive. The challenge is to keep knowledge of the past with us but to engage and respond to these memories creatively. That is, we want to keep the distancers active and providing us with the ability to view the past from different perspectives so that we leave open the opportunity for alternative responses and different emotions. We want to avoid both denial and paralysis, both of which are inherently limiting.

We see the need for applying alternative perspectives on both past and present events virtually everywhere in the social world, but especially among abused and suppressed groups. These groups and the spokespersons [storytellers] for them usually have very legitimate reasons for their outrage. The abuse of their groups at the hands of their oppressors has frequently been flagrant, pervasive, and deep historically, especially from a current or “close up” point of view. Such is certainly the case for Native Americans and American Blacks over the last 300 years as America has developed as a young nation.

The problem for both of these groups is that in spite of significant improvements in their discriminatory condition - especially in the last 50 years, many members of both groups – together with their spokespersons [story tellers and group historians] continue to view the present from a past perspective and in terms of the anger appropriate to past circumstances. Of course, the current situation for both groups is still problematic and far from ideal, but improvement has been real, and failure to recognize it exemplifies the need to preserve perspective flexibility over time. Unfortunately, many in both groups are stuck in dependency, playing the victim role, largely unable to take advantage of their new opportunities. To his credit, Jesse Jackson, through his PUSH organization, is one example of a Black leader who made the transition from angry protest of persistent prejudice, to successful promoter of change, to motivator of Black youth taking charge of the new improved social circumstances to make significant advancements.

If both breadth of consideration and length of time are expanded, the resulting interpretive perspective reveals that all groups have been suppressed at some time in their history while at other times they have been dominant and often suppressed others. The Arabs, Germans, Spanish, English, Dutch, Chinese, Moors, French, Japanese, Blacks, Whites, Asians, India Indians, Christians, Huns, Muslims, Mayans, Turks, Vikings, Romans, Algonquin, Paiute, etc. have experienced periods of dominance as well as periods of subservience. Black cultures have flourished in Africa and been enslaved by their own as well as by whites in the slave trade at other times. There have been periods of great Islamic based empires when Christian groups were suppressed, and there have been periods of great Christian empires when Muslims have been suppressed. The Chinese and Mesoamericans have achieved greatness in their civilization and then been humiliated and oppressed by European colonials. Now the Chinese are emerging once more as a world power. So, from a more expansive perspective, no group is inherently superior or inferior throughout history. All have their ups and downs. The mistake that all tend to make is to hold absolute the justification for their superiority when they are up, and to decry the total

injustice of their inferiority when they are down. Both claims are accurate only when the focal time frame is limited and when only the singular group is in view for consideration. And neither claim is accurate when alternative, larger frame perspectives are invoked.

All is a matter of the perspective the group and its spokespersons [story tellers/historians] bring to the events being considered.

It should be the obligation of the historian and of the social scientist to consider and include multiple perspectives in their accumulation and interpretation of the facts of human events. We fail when we become emotionally absorbed in some one perspective and when we offer as the singular “truth” the view from that perspective. And we fail existentially when we influence the actions of others by offering these singular interpretations that either celebrate our superiority or protest our inferiority. Both the joy and the anger that emanate from these kinds of interpretations are nearly always mistaken, and those that are the audience for such “stories” of the present and the past are falsely victimized [stuck in place] – thinking themselves to be either inherently superior or inferior. History from the perspective of the winner is as phony as that from the loser. Responsible history that we can really learn from is historical interpretation that first explores the dynamic of these two competing close up perspectives and that second is informed by alternative wide angle and time depth views - utilizing the distancers.

Let’s have a look at one disadvantaged group that has managed its “story” most creatively and for the most part avoided the pitfalls of becoming stuck. Few would argue that no human group has been more abused for less cause for so long a time period and to such extremes as the Jews. Certainly no group carries a greater burden of prejudice and abuse through most of its 2,000 year history. Yet, with the exception of the limited views of some Jewish religious extremists, the Jews as a world-wide group are the model for dealing successfully with long term persecution. In this regard they do at least a dozen things right: 1) they refuse to be victims or to have their story told exclusively from this perspective, 2) they refuse to dwell in celebrating their superiority when they are victors, 3) they do not allow the history of their abuse to be forgotten or denied, 4) they are not stuck in their abusive past, 5) they do not dwell in self-pity, dependency and playing the victim, 6) they get up when they are repeatedly beaten down, 7) they keep history with them while they actively pursue their opportunities for a more productive future, 8) they live in the present while they keep the deep and wide perspective of time in the interpretive frame, 9) in spite of the abuse they have suffered, they have sustained a community that is committed to intellectual, social, commercial,

financial, and artistic excellence, 10) when an opportunity opens up, they are immediately prepared to take it, if not lead it, 11) they are not dependent upon some other group for help just to get ready to move, and 12) they need no special subsidies.

Yes, we do need to look at Israel, which is a Jewish state. As a nation Israel has made significant progress, but it has also made and continues to make serious mistakes. And some of these mistakes follow exactly from its tendency to employ a limited and presentistic perspective. From this narrow point of view, Israel is inclined to see itself as the superior victor with the “correct” [even God given] view of the past which is held to justify territorial expansion and which allows it to subjugate and abuse Palestinians. The privilege of nationhood has been a blessing for the Jews, but it has also revealed Israel to be subject to the same perspective failures that arise for so many other “successful” nations. But, in spite of Israel's limitations as a nation, we must remember that Israel is not the Jews. Many more Jews live in America alone as live in all of Israel, and many American Jews are not happy with Israel's behavior regarding the Palestinians.

Modern disadvantaged groups, their leaders and their spokespersons [story tellers and historians] can take a lesson from the Jews – at least the Jews at large in the world. In the context of extreme abuse, the Jews model a worldview and life style that other disadvantaged groups can emulate.

To summarize: currently suppressed groups and their leaders and story tellers should start with the broadest of observations – that regardless of where a group may be at the present time, all groups have been both subjugated and dominant at one time or another in their history. Each group has had its golden age, and leaders can point to the capabilities demonstrated in these times of great accomplishment. Armed with this positive awareness, the group can understand that its current depleted position does not mean it is necessary to accept that situation and remain there. Change is always an option. Indeed, history demonstrates it is inevitable. If a group is open to change, they can both seek the changes they want and call attention to the opportunities that arise when conditions do change for the better. To take advantage of the new opportunities, leaders of these groups can encourage their members to release self-pity, stop playing the victim, and liberate themselves from the paralyzing effects of remaining stuck in anger over the past and dwelling in present dependency. Without being Pollyanna or ignoring the past, the leaders of these groups can point to the positive direction for taking advantage of new opportunities and motivate their members to pursue them.

Stewing in dependency and anger is no recipe for success in any group, and storytellers who focus on retelling the narratives of the abusive past transmit their own anger to others of their group and both perpetuate the negative status quo and fail to motivate the way out and up for their groups.

The leaders and storytellers for these disadvantaged groups need to revisit their goals and edit their “stories” if they want to really assist their groups to transition from being caught in subserviency to emerging into successful self-sufficiency. Editing their worldviews and stories will require employing the alternative perspective options that the “distancers” of time depth and wide angle scale legitimately provide.