Freedom and Diversity: Feeling Safe from Fear of Discrimination

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Abstract: This paper provides personal reflections of an American Jewish social work faculty member, memories of growing up in the United States, reactions of some minority students to the changing policies of the present administration, and the role of the social work professional to intervene with clients related to experienced discrimination and fears of the changing environment around them.

Keywords: freedom, diversity, Jewish faculty, discrimination, traumatic event; anti-Semitism

Introduction

When a traumatic event occurs that is out of our control and through which we become the victims of other's harmful intentions, we may spend a tremendous amount of time trying to recover our balance and our sense of living while grieving and while buried within our losses. This is what fear and discrimination can do to us. Similarly, it is necessary to know how to get through such adversity and to come out on the other side. The present sharing of this author's past memories may aid professional helpers as we cope with and assist victims' fears and actual encounters with discrimination, at a time when the political and social landscape changes and impacts the positioning of affected groups in society.

Contextually, social systems theory speaks to the importance of the dynamics and function of interactions between the relationships of people to the social, physical, and political realities in which they live. In addition, cultural adaptation can be seen as forming the definitions and parameters of social functioning on micro, mezzo, and macro levels. As Cushman puts it, we must find a "way of conceiving of the self and of arranging ourselves socially and politically" (Cushman, 1995, p. 3). He goes on to explain that "the self is always a product of a specific cultural frame of reference, configured out of moral understandings and local politics" (p. 12). This is reinforced by an individual's experience of his or her self psychologically and of family, neighborhood, school, and community. Thus, through everyday living, people experience repetitively the contexts of their environment. Behavioral patterns are created and prescribed along with an understanding of social values expressed through beliefs and social ethics. They form the foundation for our conduct as we express our commitments to ourselves, to others, to our community, to our country, and to our place in history.

Certain shapes and characteristics of culture define the manner in which power is perceived and conveyed. Deviances from certain established moral truths are socially digested, and racial stereotypes and gender imperatives are constructed and operated on. Martin Heidegger and Hans-George Gadamer were cited as to the effect that"a particular culture is created by the components of its conceptual systems" that are translated inter-generationally between people through a "clearing." In addition, the "paradox of the clearing is thought to be caused by its horizontal nature: Horizons are created by the culture's particular way of perceiving. The placement of the horizon determines what there is 'room for' and what is precluded from view"

(Cushman, 1995, p. 20).

In an extreme form, the "clearing" can become one that conceives of, legitimizes, and rationalizes acts of war, acts of terrorism, and power manipulations that may lead to acts of discrimination. Sometimes things go in cycles. After a few years of acceptance and respect for diversity and feelings of unity relationally between peoples, we can swing back to the past. With the campaign and election of President Trump, the "clearing" seems to be in a shifting mode from what were accepted values of diversity and equality to an emphasis on security and further legitimization of social, economic and political inequalities between American citizens. This perceived "worldview" can form a return in the U.S. to a basis of harm, violence and destruction aimed at disempowered others.

Reflections on Personal Memories

Having worked in Israel for 15 years as a medical social worker in a general hospital, war was a common experience for everyone around me, along with the possibility of a terror attack. One night while serving as the social worker on call to the emergency room, the phone rang at 2:00 a.m. The nurse on the other end of the line told me that a wedding party on their way home was attacked by a terrorist group and that part of the severely wounded had been brought into our hospital. When I asked where it had happened, the response was "somewhere near the hospital" and that I was needed. Since I lived in another town, I drove that night peering cautiously all around me while at the same time wondering how to take cover should I run into the terrorists. Finally, arriving at the hospital, I found the lobby was full of family members and relatives crying, demanding answers, while others milled around not knowing what to do. Inside the emergency room, medical staff was triaging the wounded. Upset, some were wondering aloud if their loved ones were alright who lived and worked in the same vicinity. One lesson I learned was that no matter what, you just keep going. I tried to professionally address the needs of the family members in the lobby, facilitating communication with hospital personnel, providing support services and connections to outside resources while at the same time informally supporting the emotions expressed by emergency room staff.

Several years later on September 11th, I was teaching a social work class in the Midwest. The Pentagon, and the two World Trade Towers were attacked by al-Qaida terrorists. The students, through their cell phone messages, began to receive news of the attacks. Looking bewildered, they wanted to leave the classroom immediately, which they eventually did. Students and faculty seemed stunned and voiced incredulousness in reaction to what had happened. Knowing of my having worked in Israel, a student asked me, "Did you ever get used to this?" My first thought was that no one ever gets used to terror, to the perpetration of physical and emotional violence.

The Past

Coming from an immigrant background, my maternal grandmother and my paternal grandparents left Europe to be free from anti-Semitic harassment, political oppression, and violent attacks particularly in Eastern Europe towards Jewish populations. My family settled in the Pacific Northwest and strove for acceptance to be recognized as "American first." In the

1950s, however, during the McCarthy years, I remembered as a child being ostracized by neighbors who stopped speaking to us and losing some friends to play with because the view was if someone was Jewish then that person must be a communist. My mother claimed that this went on for seven years. Becoming a columnist for the local newspaper reporting local news events, people in the community finally started to make contact with her. When I got older, being one of maybe three Jews in high school, we were constantly fending off a string of people—although perhaps with good intentions—whose mission was to turn us into Christians. When they were not successful, they became verbally rude and threatening.

It was during this time that I went to wait for a friend outside of her church. She was teaching Sunday school. Having gotten tired of waiting for her outside of the building, I went in when I heard voices of little children and their teachers repeating in mantra style, "Who killed Jesus? The Jews killed Jesus. Who killed Jesus? The Jews killed Jesus." I walked into the classroom seeing what seemed to be a large group of 4 year olds sitting on the floor looking up to four young teachers, including my friend. "What are you saying?" I asked. "The Jews didn't kill Jesus. The Romans killed Jesus." The teachers looked embarrassed and the children looked confused. "Oh yes," one of the teachers said, and they changed the mantra to "Who killed Jesus? The Romans killed Jesus." I stood in the back of the room. It took a few repeats before the children got it right. I couldn't stay in the room forever and left the classroom feeling that perhaps with my leaving, the mantra would change back to what it was: sowing the seeds of difference and anti-Semitism in those tiny minds against Jews.

In college, another episode took place in the dorm one morning when I was running late. I dumped my laundry on my bed and I ran to class. Coming back for lunch, as I walked down the hallway, I saw my clothes tied in knots from end to end, strung from the doorknob of my room into the public shower/toilet room. On each knot was pinned a religious saying. I was stunned and angry, and after untying each piece of clothing, I put them back in my room and went downstairs to the student dining room. The group I thought was my best friends huddled together at a table giggling. I approached and slammed my lunch tray down on the table, asking what they thought they were doing. Looking up at me smiling their response was that all the biblical sayings were from the Old Testament, so I had nothing to be upset about. I walked away.

I was raised during a time when being Jewish was considered a racial identity rather than that of just another religious group. As such, it was a minority that, during the 60s, fell outside the "mainstream" known as part of the White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) group.

As mentioned previously, part of my family had fled anti-Semitism in Europe to experience freedom as a people and freedom of worship. Until World War II, the story was that one family member came to America, worked, and then brought over another family member to the U.S. who then brought another family member. But all the remaining relatives went silent, not being able to escape the Nazis. Later, after the war, while in college during the 60s, I visited my elderly Polish aunt: I found her sitting in her wheelchair in the living room with tears running down her face while viewing a group picture of about twelve people dressed in old time European dress. My aunt, who spoke in heavily-accented English, turned to me saying, "Look, do you see these people?" Feeling sad for her, I responded, "Yes, this is a nice picture." More

tears spilled from her eyes. "No, no! You do not understand. They are all gone!" They had all died in a concentration death camp. With sudden clarity I finally understood why every time I saw my aunt, and then at the end of each visit, she would cry, hugging me to her chest. We were her generation of survivors.

During the 60s, I participated on my college campus in Vietnam protest marches and watched on TV the civil rights marches organized by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Many Jews joined with them. One well-known friend who marched arm-in-arm with the Civil Rights leader was renowned Rabbi Abraham Heschel, who walked next to Dr. King on the march to Selma (Jewish Women's Archive, 1965). The Civil Rights Movement raised consciousness for a wide array of minority groups including many young American Jews and raised hope that anti-Semitism and discrimination would end not only for this population but for all marginalized groups in the U.S. Unfortunately, to date, this fight has not ended.

The Effects of Fear

Since the Trump election, attacks have increased on Jewish sites. These have included mass attacks on Jewish grave sites in Philadelphia (BBC News, 2017) and bomb threats on Jewish Community Centers (Green, 2017). But the attitudes that brought about such attacks on Jewish population centers in the U.S. seem to have also impacted other populations, even reaching into the classroom.

Whether because of a backlash to the election of former Black President Obama, the rhetoric of the Trump campaign, or an executive order still being examined as to its constitutionality in the courts as a possible Muslim ban (McCarthy, 2017), these events, among others have been felt in the classroom. In social work classes, discussion on topics of social justice aligned with the Social Work Code of Ethics have taken on an even more serious tone when speaking to possible dilemmas that may arise in meeting the needs of clients who, for example, may be undocumented, and of the role of advocacy within social service agencies and in the organizing and facilitation of community action programs. Some Hispanic social work students have at times narrated stories of divided family members—some with immigration documents and some not—and of the difficulties in remaining connected and visiting relatives living outside of the U.S. Additionally, they have commented on their perceptions of a rise in prejudicial statements and discriminatory incidences that they have experienced since the election. Also, during a course on diversity, young African American speakers addressed their feelings of discomfort with what they perceived as sanction in the public arena to repeat echoes of past historical racial sentiments and acts of discrimination. They voiced fears of becoming victims potentially marked for physical attack.

The Psychology of Political and Social Harassment and Discrimination

How does the sanctioning of potential acts of disenfranchisement and of discriminatory incidents impact its victims? What does it feel like to cope with being targeted as a stereotyped labeled population, like the lady who offered to "Jew [me] down" to a price for her house cleaning services, or the tall lanky student who after an interfaith educational session blocked my way out

of the room and in a tone of hysteria leaned over me claiming that he knew I had killed Jesus, or a former colleague who attempted to tear down a mezuzah from my office door.

Psychologically, it can be numbing to be the focus of a verbal or nonverbal attack. Often from ignorance, these acts ring of echoes of historical persecution from the past. This can cause feelings of "confusion, fear, anger, guilt, lack of insight and feelings of powerlessness" (Rackley, 1999, p. 94) for those who have been targeted.

These types of actions may derive from what Albert Bandura calls "mechanisms of moral disengagement" (Bandura, 1998). Institutions of political and social power may be enabled to manipulate widespread public division, fear and anxiety. Perceiving social sanction, others may become emboldened to perpetrate incidents while at the same time remaining disengaged to their victims. Fear of being emotionally and physically harmed can constitute feelings of loss of control, a lack of self-efficacy, and post traumatic stress symptoms for survivors. For primary and secondary victims, worry about the safety of family, friends and associates takes precedence, contributing to acute stress reactions producing feelings of overwhelming anxiety. Consequently, minority client populations in particular and student communities in general need an overall response plan that will be able to deal with these primary and secondary victims. There is a need for instructional teaching to bring forward discussion of these issues, including training for professionals who are emergency responders and who may similarly be experiencing these feelings while working with affected populations.

We Have a Mission: Respect and Acceptance for Diversity in Intervention

I once had contact with a campus diversity affairs coordinator. He presented two principles:
1)   Everyone wants to be accepted and respected (even people who do bad, harmful things)
2)   Everyone wants his/her own way.

A third concept related to human behavior is, "People do what they do because they think they can." And… they usually can. The question is, "Why do they think they can?"

From one federal administration to the next, whole social welfare policies have been constructed to rule the health and welfare of American citizens, what they are entitled to and what they are not. Finding a meeting ground between the first two principles can explain the rationalization of seemingly conflicting values. Social workers deal with these issues all the time. Our practice, our livelihood and our professional purpose are based on all the inequities seen in our society and seem to be an inherent part of it.

Is it possible to have acceptance and respect for all peoples when we may need protections of our own freedoms and security at the same time? To what degree do we submit our personal values in submission to a higher authority's world view, particularly if that world view contains methods and processes that may further discriminate and divide Americans socio-economically, racially, and politically?

A major goal of social work is to aid clients to gain a sense of personal empowerment. In one

example, Shalev& Ursano (2008) have stated oftentimes that people face "a mismatch between situational demands, personal resources and survival mechanisms for failure…when scarce resources are wasted in fighting against uncontrollable dimensions of stress" (p. 1) to carry on with their lives.

Clients need a rebuilding of their sense of hope in order to be motivated to make change, thus increasing the quality of their experiences in life. A societal environment that negates these efforts can drain away personal and community energy that tries to make positive change and to look forward: "That tomorrow will be a better day."

In light of the multitude of individual and personal contexts, practitioners' goals are to restore and strengthen the resiliency and well-being of their clients. These professionals will need to learn about and concentrate on individual coping styles to deal with the ongoing side effects of adversity that clients are facing in their lives, including encounters with deprivation and discriminatory events. Consequently, during the initial assessment and intervention phases, using a strengths perspective by social workers carries with it an acknowledgment that clients bring the personal into the story of what happens to them.

When times get rough, clients can often remember in detail modes of coping with past crises. Consequently, one question that the social worker may ask is, "Is this the first time you've had to overcome a hard time?" For the author, the answer has never been a yes. When I ask a client to tell about what happened and how they overcame that event, it is the telling that signifies non-verbally through body language and eye contact, and verbally through tone of voice, that the client may show signs of experiencing a sense of internal empowerment that can then aid them to cope with the difficulties and possible trauma that is currently facing them. In order to identify clients' strengths, social workers must be able to delineate between the behaviors they are viewing as to whether they are a direct result of the discriminatory incident they experienced or a blend from prior events of harm that they have faced. The National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress (2001) has recommended extended long-term intervention for those who may experience prolonged post-traumatic symptoms, which can include fear, anxiety, episodes of re-experiencing, and hyper arousal.

The social work encounter is a setting that, according to its core values, promises freedom of self-determination and interventions that must provide an environment of safety. This will minimize the sense of threat, attending to the unusual degree of the victim's "disrupted state" and inability to activate effectively their "normal coping methods to reduce stress" (National Center for PTSD, 2001, December 16, p. 94). An additional goal of intervention is to help the victim "to adapt to the stress of the crisis" and to gain some feeling of control over what is happening to him or her. We must understand our clients' and students' "sense of coherence" (Antonovsky, 1987); their estimation of and belief in their ability to manage what has happened to them and their understanding of what has happened to them. Finally, this also includes particular attention being paid to the meanings they have assigned to the consequences of the acts that have been committed against them in light of the spiritual and cultural contexts from which they have come.

Signs of rehabilitation and recovery in communities, families, and individuals are also social constructions of interpersonal structures that need to be placed within the cultural contexts of "socially-determined systems" (Durst, 1994, p. 32). The provision of uniquely adapted support interventions by professional practitioners can demonstrate understanding that cultural expression has formed "the nature of these relationships (of clients) and the lifetime of socialization our clients have experienced which shape these relationships" (Durst, 1994, p. 30) within their communities.

Conclusion: The Right to Freedom and Safety

I am writing this paper from Israel where, as a Jew, I am part of the majority and not subject to a minority status. Israeli society isn't perfect either, and needless to say there exists a different composite of social, political and economic systemic equities and inequities. Upon my return to the U.S. as an American Jew, and as social work faculty, I've made a commitment to further the areas of social work that deal with social injustice and discriminatory actions cloaked within potential social policy decisions that may be at odds with our constitutional values of equality and the social work professional code of ethics to guarantee dignity, integrity, and self-determination without fear in a free society.

A student expressed the day after September 11th that "They (the terrorists) are going to kill us." Her professor tried to reassure her, "I don't think so. Not in the middle of Kansas." But where everyone can become a possible target, whether it be from discriminatory acts, inequitable policies, or emotional and physical terror, an appropriate professional intervention becomes even more critical.

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