

Constructing the Other

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“Us” and “Them” / Stigmatizing Difference (Stereotyping)

Otherness is the result of a process by which a dominant in-group (“Us”) constructs one or many marginalized out-groups (“Them” or “Other”) by stigmatizing a difference – real or imagined – around what makes them dissimilar from or opposite of another, and thus a motive for potential discrimination. To be clear, difference belongs to the realm of fact and otherness belongs to the realm of social construction. Thus, for example, biological sex is difference, whereas gender is otherness.

The creation of otherness (also called othering) consists of applying a principle that allows individuals to be classified into hierarchical groups: Them and Us. The out-group only exists as a group as a result of its difference from the in-group and its lack of authentic identity. This lack is based upon stereotypes that are largely stigmatizing and obviously simplistic. The in-group constructs one or more Others, setting itself apart and giving itself an identity. Otherness and identity are two inseparable sides of the same coin. The Other only exists relative to the Self, and vice versa.

The asymmetry in power relationships is central to the construction of otherness. Only the dominant group is in a position to impose the value of its identity and to devalue the identity of others (that which defines their otherness) while imposing corresponding discriminatory measures. Therefore, if the Other of Man is Woman, and if the Other of the White Man is the Black Man, the opposite is not true (Beauvoir, 1952; Fanon 1963). Dominated out-groups are Others precisely because they are subject to the labels and practices of the dominant in-group and because they are unable to suggest their own norms. Out-groups cease to be Others when they manage to escape the oppression forced upon them by in-groups; in other words, when they succeed in reclaiming for themselves a positive autonomous identity (“black is beautiful”), and in calling for legitimacy, discourse, and policy to establish their own norms.

Dehumanization of “The Other”

For the most part, relationships between groups in society have involved assertions of supremacy, specifically the belief that one group is superior to another group or civilization. Viewing outsiders as “Others” has historically been used to justify the mistreatment and oppression of an out-group by an in-group. For instance, the notion of Manifest Destiny in the middle 1800s was dependent on the view that the United States, as the “more civilized” nation, had a right to expand westward and assimilate or eliminate other “less civilized” or racially inferior groups in the process. Similarly, slavery and the systematic theft of resources and oppressive treatment of indigenous populations under colonialism were deemed to be justifiable based on the idea that the oppressed group represented a “less civilized” or “subhuman” group of people.

Dominant Normativity

Normativity is defined by a set of socially defined norms and values that determine what is “normal” for a given society. The dominant in-group becomes what is “normal”. In the West, our understanding of normal is centered around the normativity of the middle-class or elite, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, (predominantly) Christian male. This organization of the social structure places the prototypical white man at the top of the social hierarchy, and any deviation from this construction of normativity is labeled “Other,” and therefore, undesirable or deviant, perpetually placed in an inferior position.

Assimilation

Assimilation refers to the process by which people or groups voluntarily adopt or are forced to adopt the language and cultural norms and values of another group. In most cases, the out-group is expected to conform to normative practices and ideals associated with the in-group. Those who refuse to assimilate to the larger culture, such as immigrants who choose to retain their cultural practices and language, are typically viewed as “anti-Us” or somehow different from the “typical Us.”

Whether people are allowed to assimilate into the dominant culture largely depends on whether they will fit into the political, social, and economic desires of the dominant group. In the United States, for example, Native Americans, African Americans, and Mexican Americans have lived in the United States much longer than most European American groups. However, instead of being viewed as the normative culture (or part of the normative culture), these groups continue to be viewed as “Others” who have cultures different from that of “Americans” or “White” culture.

Every day, in professional work and in our personal lives, we reproduce by words and behaviors, particular understandings of life and how it works. This includes understandings about what is “normal” and “not normal” and who is “normal” and “not normal”. Being marginalized or othered from the norm is rarely a free choice. Assimilating is more often the choice presented. The language that constructs normal and abnormal is not innocent and does not simply arrive in our minds with no reflection of our education and experience. In turn, our language, behavior, and cultural consumption reinforce and reproduce the dominant norms, thus solidifying the power and dominance of the in-group.

Summary

The phrase “Us and Them” refers to the tendency of marginalized groups to be viewed as “different from” the dominant group, becoming “Others.” Once marginalized “Others,” they are often seen as less human than one’s Self, justifying their marginalization and oppression. Establishing a set of values based on the dominant group as the norm ensures that the unequal and unfair system of power and privilege reproduces itself through the language, behavior, and culture of all those in the society.