

Engaging Our Humanity

Diversity is about acknowledging and honouring the difference in people and groups. By necessity that is the difference between ourselves and others in terms of what we value, how we view the world, what we each consider makes the world work best, physical and cultural characteristics, and any other form of difference that may be recognised. Over the past few months I have become increasingly aware of examples where difference is feared and of behaviours used to distance self from those who are different. The key word to summarise these behaviours is 'Objectification', a process of dehumanising others so what we think, feel or do has less personal/moral significance.

There are many forms of objectification. Some historic and current examples I am aware of include:

- A common complaint by women is that men objectify them. A woman, for instance, is seen for sexual utility, and not for the person she is. I grew up with the proverbial Playboys under my bed, and I spent a lot of time noticing 'attractive qualities' and disregarding those I deemed unattractive. As unpleasant as this demeaning process is, it is very common. Now with the availability of pornography, objectification of those meeting a person's sexual preferences is even more prevalent and pronounced. They become sexual objects to be used, whether in



At what stage do we differentiate ourselves from others based on difference?

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Abstract

Objectification introduces distance between us and others, and highlights difference and utility. The remedy is to engage our humanity with respect to those people, and seek to understand their uniqueness and value.

Keywords

Beliefs, bias, Compassion, Diversity, Fear, Inclusion, relationship with others, Values

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reality or fantasy, rather than people who hold intrinsic value as themselves.

- In 1974, Marina Abramović, a performance artist, stood for six hours with the audience invited to use any of 72 objects on her as they desired, Marina taking full responsibility for the consequences. Some were objects of pleasure. Others were destructive. Initially little happened, other than photographers taking pictures. Then people started to touch her, move her. She was then touch intimately. Items were attached to her. A man cut her neck with a razor blade. Her clothes were cut off. A loaded gun was put in her hand and aimed at her head. By the end of six hours Marina's body was a canvas of how others had objectified her and taken licence because she was "an object" and they faced "no consequences". When the six hours was finished, the gallery announced the exhibition had concluded, and Marina then moved and walked among the audience. No one would engage with her, experience the confrontation of what was done by them to a real person. (See [article about](#)

[the exhibition](#) and [an interview with Marina Abramović about the exhibition](#))

- Hitler's regime is well recognised for concentration camps and the heinous treatment of those sent to the camps. Jews are well known as targets of the cruel and barbaric treatment. Other groups singled out for specific attention included blacks, homosexuals, gypsies, those with disabilities, among others. Growing evidence highlights North Korea's atrocious treatment of their own people, where three generations of a family may be sent to "work" camps for life for supposed crimes of one of the family. Starvation, torture and other acts of cruelty are alleged to abound. Recently allegations have been made that Chechnya has set up internment and torture camps for anyone who is, or is thought to be, part of the LGBTQ community, with abductions and murders apparently becoming more prevalent.
- In the early 1970's Ford fast-tracked its design and production of the Pinto, getting it to market with a design flaw it knew about. A low speed, rear-end impact caused the fuel tank to rupture. Deaths occurred. It took the tragic deaths of three teenagers in a fire ball, as they were going to church, to initiate a recall. Part of the decision to release the car with a known severe fault was a cost-benefit analysis. A dollar value was placed on a person's life, and the fix (about \$10 per car) applied to all cars cost more than the likely number of deaths multiplied by the value of a human life. In this case a human life became a financial object and an unethical decision was made.
- A common approach within organisations is to consider and treat people as resources. This allows the utility of a person to be assessed, valued and applied (or discarded) based on operational merit. The approach allows decisions to be made that impact people with the decision maker holding a sense of distance from the human consequences. The same is true of a general choosing to send military forces against an enemy. While such analysis and decision making is needed for the machinery of civilisation to grind on, they are example of objectification.
- People with Autism (and Asperger's Syndrome, which has now been merged into Autism) tend to view other people as objects in their world, without much or any of the usual sense of human connection. Their objects can be interfaced and interacted with. There are objects

that hold more meaning than others, such as parents, who are familiar and serve a more significant function than others. Those with Autism rely on objectification to define their world.

- Stereotyping, whether by age, religion, gender, education, culture, colour, or any other attribute, is used to define difference and distance self from the group based on difference. That 'difference' may be perceived similarity when speaking as 'we believe...', 'we want...', 'we hate...' etc.
- Gossiping is a marvellous way to objectify. The target of such stories, whether those stories are fact-based or not, becomes isolated and excluded from the group, the object of bullying, without necessarily knowing it is going on, by whom or why.

The antidote for objectification is engaging your humanity, which enables us to see and recognise the intrinsic uniqueness and value of each person, and feel compassion. If we hold a question open around who they are it is more difficult to objectify and dehumanise them. Their "differences" become a matter for inquiry and inquisitiveness, a chance to meet someone new and perhaps gain an alternative perspective on life. Often our fears of 'the other' are rooted in ignorance, and insecurity about our own sense of self, and whether we will survive meaningful connection.

How many wars, crimes and aggressions would happen if both sides truly sought to understand the views and perspectives of the other, allowed themselves to see the humanity (including vulnerabilities and frailties) of the other, without wishing to crush and exercise power over them.

In what ways would the assessment of a person's value shift in a business environment if more humanity was applied? How would it impact culture and values of the workplace?

How do you recognise, acknowledge and value difference? In what ways do you objectify others? What would happen to those relationships if you were to connect with them with genuine interest to know them as people of value? Would decisions and actions you take in work and other settings be different if you recognised the humanity of those your decisions impact? Have you ever tried to reverse roles with others to gain insight into different views and beliefs?

If you choose to engage with this area of exploration, it can open a rich wealth of learning and meaningful human connection.