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A New Definition of Tolerance

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In the book, *Deep River*, Shusaku Endo (1994), tells a story of Japanese tourists visiting the Ganges River in India. Each of the main characters has had significant experiences that brought them to India, either to find someone, find answers, or to find closure. The overarching theme of the novel revolves around both the clashes between Japanese and Indian cultural values, and the diversity of experiences, values, and interpersonal conflicts within this seemingly homogenous group of Japanese tourists. The story of one of these tourists, a man named Isobe, provides an interesting literary example of tolerance for human diversity.

The book details the experience of Isobe and his wife, who is dying from cancer. His wife's illness catches Isobe off-guard and he begins feeling a sense of regret as he looks back at his life and marriage. Specifically, he regrets not being able to meaningfully communicate with his wife until she was put in the hospital. On her deathbed, Isobe's wife whispered something to her husband that drove him to travel with the other tourists to India.

While in India, Isobe laments the relationship he had with his wife:

"Darling!" he cried out. "Where have you gone?" He had never called to his wife with such raw feeling while she had been alive. Like many men, he had been absorbed in his work, and had often ignored his household until the time of her death. It wasn't that he had not loved her. He had long felt that being alive meant first of all work, and working diligently, and

that women were happy to have such husbands. Not once had he wondered what depths of affection for him were buried in his wife's heart. And he had no notion of how strong were the bonds linking him to her in the midst of his complacency.

But after hearing the words his wife babbled at the moment of her death, Isobe came to understand the meaning of irreplaceable bonds in a human being's life." (Endo, 1994, pp.188)

In this passage, Isobe realizes he placed a tremendous amount of importance on acting how he thought a husband should act. He also expected his wife to appreciate it as an ideal wife should. Fulfilling these expectations came at the cost of both treating and connecting with his wife as a unique human being.

With this story in mind, we want to explore the act of valuing people more than ideas as a way to define tolerance. First, we'll explore the current understanding of the word tolerance, especially in the field of psychology. Then we will explore the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas to expand the definition of tolerance to include valuing a person as more important than any idea. We propose that this new definition will provide an alternative to mainstream psychology's definitions of tolerance.

Defining Tolerance

Overview

The Oxford English Dictionary defines tolerance as, "The action or practice of enduring or sustaining pain

or hardship; the power or capacity of enduring" (OED Online, 2015). The word occupies a fairly common place in our daily vernacular, and is a concept that most people claim to understand well. Finding a common definition of tolerance in the field of psychology and psychological research is more problematic. A search on the PsychINFO database with the terms "tolerance" and "human diversity" returned only one article that operationally defined tolerance. Witenberg (2007), in studying children's and adolescents' tolerance of human diversity, defined tolerance as:

"...the conscious affirmation of favourable judgments and beliefs involving principles of justice, equality, care and consideration for the plight of others or, more concisely, according respect and equality to others who are different through racial characteristics, ethnicity, and nationality." (pp. 435)

Several years earlier, Witenberg (Robinson, Witenberg, & Sanson, 2001) highlighted the lack of consensus about how to define tolerance within psychology. They suggested that most studies assume the reader understands the definition of tolerance without explicitly defining the term. They went on to identify four ways researchers have implicitly defined tolerance.

1. Forbearance or 'putting up with' others.
2. A fair and objective attitude towards others who are different from ourselves in any number of ways.
3. A conscious rejection of prejudice.
4. The full acceptance and valuing of others while recognizing the differences between others and oneself.

Robinson, Witenberg, & Sanson (2001) also pointed out that while each of these implicit definitions of tolerance can be useful in a specific context, any definition comes with its own underlying problems. Defining tolerance as forbearance can make oneself a perpetual victim of the diversity of others. Forbearance holds one's own experience and view of the world as most correct by default. Interactions with people who are different from us can quickly degrade into a series of passive-aggressive sighs, shrugs, and eye-rolls. Tolerance as a fair and objective attitude unquestioningly assumes that unbiased objectivity is actually attainable. It fails to recognize that human beings are sub-

jective and that our view of others and the world will always be affected by our personal experiences, beliefs, culture, and background (cf. Tjeltveit, 1999). Focusing on being objective also has the danger of blinding us to our own subjective biases. Defining tolerance as solely rejecting prejudice speaks only of eliminating what we perceive as negative in our relationships with those who are different than us. Nothing is said of how to cultivate the positive benefits that diversity can bring into interpersonal relationships—let alone defining what criteria needs to be met for something to be considered a prejudice. Finally, defining tolerance as the full acceptance of others can be problematic if we do not address what is meant by 'full acceptance.' These definitions beg the question, "Does valuing the diversity of another person mean that we must also value their behaviors, values, and ideas?"

We propose a definition of tolerance that functions at the interpersonal level of our relationships and interactions with others. We define tolerance to mean respecting and considering the humanity of a person as more important than any idea or ideal we or they may hold. To support this definition, we will explain how the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas can be used to counteract the problems associated with the typical understandings of tolerance in psychological research.

The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

Overview

Levinas (1998) states that our existence is primarily ethical. He proposes that the face-to-face encounter with another human being (the other), and the responsibility associated with that encounter, is the foundation of our primarily ethical existence. In coming face-to-face with the other, we also come in contact with the Other—to be understood as God or the Divine (cf. Levinas, 1998, pp. 149-152). The Other leaves traces that we can see in the faces of the other. Coming in contact with the Other in the face of another begins a type of non-verbal dialogue. This exchange consists of the other's humanity calling to us, appealing for us to do no harm, but to serve them. In response, the self has a moral obligation to answer "here I am" (Levinas, 1998, p. 149). In this encounter, there is a foundation for a new definition for tolerance. To understand this responsibility for the other, it is

helpful to first introduce Levinas' concepts of *Totality* and *Infinity* (Levinas, 1969).

Totality and Infinity

Totality is the quality of being finite and comprehensible. Objects found in the real world are finite and completely comprehensible and we are able to use or consume these objects to satisfy our needs and wants. For example, we can fully comprehend what constitutes a chair. We can know what it is made of, how it was made, and that it will still be a chair in the future—in essence we can understand the totality of the chair's existence. Once we comprehend the chair in its totality, we are easily able to use the chair to fulfill our need or want to sit. The act of using an object or attempting to fully comprehend the totality of an object is called *totalizing*.

In contrast to totality, infinity is the quality of not being completely comprehensible or reducible. It is beyond our abilities to fully comprehend what is infinite or reduce what is infinite to fit into the finite categories and concepts that are comprehensible to us. Attempting to do so commits totalizing violence against what is infinite—meaning we are treating what is infinite no different than a finite object that exists to fulfill our needs or wants.

The Other, whose traces we find in the face of the other, is infinite—making any person we come in contact with infinite as well. When we come face-to-face with another person, we use the categories, ideals, and stereotypes we have inherited from our culture and personal background in order to understand them. Doing this is an act of totalization, which turns an infinite being into something finite that is used to satisfy our need for sure knowledge or certainty. For Levinas, we are not able to have a complete and sure knowledge about another person. Levinas compared the stereotypes and categories that we use to a “plastic image” when he said: “the face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me” (Levinas, 1988, p. 51). This is not meant to convey the idea that we can never relate to or obtain some level of knowledge about a person, or that meaningful and deep interpersonal relationships are impossible. What we do not and cannot know is the entirety of that person's experience with the world. Because their experience has no finite borders to grasp and make

sense of, the Other—and by extension the other—is always infinitely beyond our total comprehension. In Levinas' own words, “[the Other] is not unknown but unknowable” (Levinas, 1987, p. 75).

Responsibility to the Other

Once we understand the concepts of totality and infinity, we can better understand our responsibility to the others we meet. For Levinas, we are first and foremost ethical beings. We feel a call to be responsible for the other *before* cognitively or rationally deeming the other as worthy or unworthy of our efforts. In the face-to-face encounter, we are presented with a choice to either ignore or accept the call to be responsible for the other. Levinas tells us that there is no escape from this choice:

“irreplaceable in responsibility, I cannot, without defaulting, incurring fault or being caught up in some complex, escape the face of a neighbor...” (Hand, 1989, p. 181)

In trying to escape or ignoring our responsibility, totalizing violence is committed against the other. This totalization goes against the infinite qualities of the other by categorizing them as not being worth our time and efforts. Such a label eliminates the distinction between the other and any object and can lead to the false assumption that we have the ability to define and to pass judgment upon the value or worthiness of a person based upon our limited knowledge of them.

Instead, Levinas argues, we are obligated to be responsible for the other for two important reasons. First, the ‘alterity’, or otherness, of the other awakens us to a sense of our own existence. The experience of coming face-to-face with the other not only proves that the other exists; it also proves that we exist. Second, seeing the Other in the face of the other makes our obligation to the other the same as our obligation to the Other (God). We are to honor and be responsible for the other because the Other considers the other worthy of Its essence and presence.

Levinas and Tolerance

The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas can provide a solid foundation from which to redefine tolerance. Levinas teaches us that trying to reduce the experiences, knowledge, character, and humanity of others in order to fit them into labels that make sense in our

view of the world is not ethical. Instead, we are reminded that the other's true identity and experience is always more than we can be completely comprehended. Sayre and Kunz (2005) pointed out that the other continually, and many times unexpectedly, overflows and exceeds any previously ascribed categories and stereotypes. Even though we can never see the complete picture of a person, we still can answer the call to be responsible for them. By actively attending to humanity of someone who is different from us, we respect and honor them as human beings before we even begin to conceptualize the type of person that we believe them to be. In short, the philosophy of Levinas helps us to separate the humanity of a person from the abstract ideas that we hold about them.

In this way, we are able to escape the problems associated with defining tolerance as merely forbearance. The idea that we are putting up with or we are victims of the diversity of others denies the humanity of the other because it implies that we can know, and judge their view of the world as less important than, or threatening to, our own—thus committing totalizing violence against them. The alternative is to recognize that we acutely engaged in taking care of and being responsible for their needs because of their diverse and infinite nature. In fact, it is the alterity of the other that awakens our sense of responsibility. In a Levinasian view of tolerance, we would not suffer through or be a victim to the diverse nature of another person; rather, we would heed the call to respond morally to their humanity while simultaneously condemning the use of stereotypes.

We can also avoid the problems associated with defining tolerance as having an objective view of others. Pure objective knowledge of another is impossible because defining others as infinite, irreducible, and uncategorizable makes our point of view perpetually subjective and dynamic—matching the dynamic and ever-changing nature of the person we have come in contact with. The other's alterity will always make our conceptualization about them subjective. Accepting our own subjectivity will also help us become more cognizant of our own biases, and better able to recognize when we are placing totalizing stereotypes upon an other.

While Levinas' philosophical framework matches up well with the definition of tolerance as rejecting prej-

udices, there are some important differences. Levinas indeed proposed that the stereotypes and conceptualizations we form about others can be harmful, but he also provided the criteria for what constitutes a harmful prejudice. Totalizing violence is committed when the infinite nature of the other is reduced to being no different than an object. Therefore, any prejudices, stereotypes, or categories that objectify and degrade the humanity of another person are to be considered harmful. Levinas' philosophy also provides an alternative to using prejudice to fill the gaps in our view of the world. Using the concept of responsibility, we can find a positive practice or belief to fill the gaps in our worldview or replace discarded negative ones. Instead of reacting to the diversity of others with prejudice, we can respond to their diversity with the moral obligation to care for and do no harm.

Finally, we come to one of the most difficult questions about tolerance: does defining tolerance as the full acceptance and valuing of others mean accepting and valuing the ideas, behaviors, and values of others? Levinas' philosophy of the other makes one important distinction that can help answer this question. This distinction is between the humanity of a person—their most basic alterity—and the abstract ideas and concepts that we hold about them. We believe this distinction can also be applied to our obligation towards the other by saying we are responsible for the other *despite* what they may believe or how they may behave. It does not matter how we conceptualize the other's worthiness of help—based in their attitudes, actions, or cultural beliefs. Rather, we are first and foremost responsible to respond to their humanity. Most rational adults, if asked, would agree that it is wrong to devalue a person based on the fact they are politically liberal, believe in reincarnation, or use illicit drugs. A more telling question would be to ask if it is right to value a person based on the fact that they are politically conservative, believe in Jesus Christ as the Savior, or are law-abiding citizens. Levinas would say both questions are missing the point. Tolerance, in Levinasian terms, would focus on accepting and respecting the person, and being responsible to them without being concerned about the beliefs they hold or the activities in which they are engaged.

Conclusion

While we believe that the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas provides a solid foundation for understanding tolerance—a foundation that remedies the current definitional problems in psychological research—the proposed definition is not without its challenges. First, Levinas' view of the world seems to be in stark contrast with most of western civilization. The idea that at our core we are responsible for someone other than our self would be difficult, to say the least, for a person from an individualistic culture to understand. Many aspects of the dominant White culture of the United States reinforce the idea that the individual, in their pursuit of happiness, only has responsibility for one's self. Trying to reverse course on such a firmly planted individualistic ideal may prove to be an unrealistic goal.

Another challenge to the proposed definition of tolerance deals with the inevitable abuses and manipulations that will occur when our primary responsibility is to answer to the needs of the other. What is the line between respecting the humanity of another, and capitulating to their values out of obligation? How do we prevent the other from taking advantage of our responsibility to care for them?

Although the prospect of defining tolerance as respecting the humanity of a person more than any ideal we or they may hold is challenging, it contains enough potential benefit for the field of psychology that further consideration and research is merited. We look forward to thoughtful dialogue about both the philosophical and practical challenges this notion poses.

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