

# Similarity or Diversity?

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## Vladimir S. Ageev

Doctor of Psychological Sciences, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Moscow State University. Dr. Ageev is the author of the book *Psychology of Intergroup Relations* and a member of the Znanie (Knowledge) Society.

What arouses our interest and draws our attention – that which is new and unusual or that which is known, habitual to us? Who awakens our sympathy – those who are near and similar to us or those who are unlike us, different from us? I am afraid that to these two questions we must give diametrically opposing answers.

When it comes to material objects, what attracts us is novelty. When it comes to the social sphere, that is to say people or cultures, our sympathy is totally on the side of those who are the most like ourselves. These innocent observations have a direct bearing upon the problem of the survival of humankind in the nuclear era and upon the task of developing a new way of thinking “beyond war.”

### *Diversity of Cultures*

Our world is infinitely diverse, not only in climate, geography, and nature, but in human cultures. The variety in nature is fully parallel to that in culture, society, and history. Scientists have long debated the causes of such endless variety. Among the explanations that have been advanced, there are some rather curious ones. For example, according to one theory,

culture is a mechanism of adaptation with the help of which humankind adapts to external conditions which are changing, often for the worse. When it comes to natural adaptation among animals, there is a tendency for the changes to be physical. But in the case of humankind, which remains physically unchanged, the changes are cultural – methods of economic activity, traditions, customs, beliefs, values, and modes of interpersonal relations. Thus an extraordinary variety of cultures exists on our planet. Now the question is, how do we relate to this diversity?

The history of human civilization is darkened by endless wars, conflicts, confrontation, and enmity of one country or people for another. Prejudice against those who are considered strange or simply different is an extremely widespread phenomena. And there is nothing simpler than to arouse mass enmity and hatred toward the real or imagined enemy. But even in quieter times, mistrust and rejection of anything “foreign” are typical phenomena. Parallel to this there is a prevalent belief in the superiority of one’s own culture, way of life, ideas, and values.

To respect the values, to acknowledge and to sympathize with things “foreign” in general (according to some) is against human nature. Perhaps this is put too strongly, but we cannot avoid the fact that such attitudes are indeed widespread. And representatives of technologically well-developed countries are particularly prone to them. There are, of course, good reasons for all this. By dividing the world into “us” and “them,” with all the consequences that derive from such a division, we simplify our lives to a considerable extent. We economize our efforts and are able to react without thought in many social situations which would otherwise require judgment, evaluation, and decision making.

Possibly the source of this fundamental division into “us” and “them” lies in the very distant past, when the first humans became aware of themselves as separate from their near but still animal-like ancestors, who became the first “them,” the first “foreigners.” Perhaps from those earliest times there has existed a faint connotation that “they” are not quite people, not entirely human. Evidence for this is that many peoples’ and tribes’ names (for example, Navajo) means nothing more than just “people.” To overcome this tendency, this powerful psychological barrier, would be to accomplish a true revolution in consciousness. But is such a revolution possible in principle?

#### *A Revolution in Consciousness*

Cause for optimism in this respect lies in the fact that there are some such revolutions which have recently or are now occurring right before our eyes. In particular, one took place very recently in the Soviet Union and today we are witnessing the second one.

The first was ecological. Recently in the Soviet Union there has been a truly massive shift in the ecological consciousness of the people. Anthropocentrism in the relations between man and nature has been changed, if I may be permitted to create a new name, to “biocentrism.” This change is not unlike that which took place much more slowly from geocentrism to heliocentrism. In recent years, people have become aware of the fact that the world, living nature, the planet Earth were not created merely to answer their own needs. Rather that the biological environment has its own independent value, humankind is part of that environment, and that we depend on nature entirely. We have finally reached the understanding that an approach which seeks to carelessly “use” the environment can be equally lethal for both – for environment and for humanity.

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This of course does not mean that we are entirely rid of indiscriminate hunters or that there are no longer cases of environmental pollution. What I am stressing is the change in consciousness. The main thing which has been learned by massive numbers of people is the (absolute) value of everything living, of our environment. And this has become immediately obvious in the conduct of people, the atmosphere of our cities, our economic activity. A good example is the refusal to go on with the project for the reversal of the course of the Siberian rivers from north to south. It is also interesting that in television and cinema cartoons for children, wild animals are no longer killed right and left. Even the Big Bad Wolf does not eat Little Red Riding Hood or the Seven Dwarfs, but only holds them for ransom.

The second revolution which also started recently in the Soviet Union is a mass change in attitudes toward alcoholic beverages. This is a very difficult change but one which is already showing hopeful results. I believe that life “beyond alcohol” just as life “beyond smoking,” “beyond narcotics,” beyond all other dangerous habits is fully possible. But for this as well as for life beyond war, a true revolution in consciousness is necessary.

It is easy to claim the new thinking is possible but much more difficult to formulate, and it is even more complicated to take concrete steps in order to

bring about a revolution in mass political thinking. And still it is the role of scientists, it seems to me – taking into account all real circumstances and the nature of man and society – to point out realistic, feasible, and effective means to keep humankind away from a dead end.

*The Search for Similarity and the Value of Diversity*

In the United States, there is a widely accepted theory which says group conflicts result from incompatible goals, and competition for material, social, and other ends. Competing groups might then be united only by the highest and most general goals which represent extremely desirable outcomes for both sides, but which may be attained only through joint efforts. The following example is often used: Suppose that suddenly there appeared on Earth hostile beings from another planet - then Russians and Americans for sure would very quickly join together in order to fight off the common danger. The existing differences between them would immediately lose their meaning before the new and terrible threat, before which both Russians and Americans as inhabitants of planet Earth would find themselves in an equally difficult position and therefore would recognize each other as near and similar.

And so we return to the beginning of our discussion - in which we stated that mutual understanding, sympathy, and cooperation are possible only when existing conditions permit or enforce feelings of similarity.

It is of course essential to seek a common platform from which various people and states might identify themselves as closer and similar to each other. To acknowledge similarity indeed enhances a climate of trust and sympathy for each other. But it would be utopian to rely only on this path. Such examples (as in the case of people from another planet) are rather artificial. It is not simple to think up concrete, effective “higher goals.” By the way, such higher goals as détente, disarmament, and abolition of war have not for some reason brought peoples closer together and eased confrontations between political and military blocks.

An alternative path is not to look for similarities but on the contrary to acknowledge and accept differences. And this is the revolution to which we referred earlier. The essence of this revolution is very simple - we must learn to respect those who are totally different from us, we must value that which is completely different from our ideas and culture.

Moreover, to learn to be proud of the cultural variety of our planet as a common attainment, let us imagine that a certain type of climate or landscape covered the entire world, that there remained only one or two types of animals. In my opinion, we would all lose by this. The losses would be great. The loss of variety would be irreparable. But whereas this loss of ecological variety is commonly recognized to be disastrous, there is

a very different situation when we come to the cultural, social, and spiritual variety. Let me once again underline the new way. It consists of respect and recognition of other tribes and peoples not only those like us in some way, but those not like us, because they are different. And this consciousness should not fill us with fear, indignation, and dissatisfaction, but to the contrary, with interest, sympathy, and pride. This is totally atypical of the way things are today. This is why we need a radical change, a thorough restructuring of our consciousness.

One might object, saying that such a way seems to be utopian and unrealistic. But today's ecological ideas, and our understanding of the healthy way of life, are radically different and contradict that which was considered the one and only true way in the very recent past.

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But even more important, the first way, the way of looking for similarities at any cost is not without serious dangers. The desire to be alike is very great and this feeling of likeness begins to be exaggerated and even inventive. We begin to take that which we desire for real. And then there is also a danger that we begin to try to create likeness by force, or try to change others so that they would be more like ourselves. But this is against the entire trend of progressive political thought nowadays. So this attractive-at-first-sight path becomes less and less simple and its extreme force potentially dangerous.

To the contrary, the second path is more desirable because at least it takes for granted the most important cultural and political reality, that is to say the fundamental differences in human society. In the first instance, the attainment of agreement always presupposes some similarity and the removal of some differences. In the ideal there is total similarity and total absence of differences. It is hardly necessary to prove that such a goal is completely unrealistic - not only unrealizable but undesirable, for political and moral reasons.

#### *Interaction of Cultures and the Problem of Preserving Ethnocultural Autonomy*

We have now arrived at one of the most difficult problems of modern times. How is it possible to preserve one's ethnocultural autonomy and uniqueness? In our times, which have created conditions of growing interdependence and ever-broadening international contacts, this problem is becoming even more acute, particularly for small and economically backward countries and peoples.

The new thinking cannot ignore this problem as well. The experience of the Soviet Union in nation building may well appear to be useful here. I will touch upon a very small aspect of this problem. In the Soviet Union we have many foreign students among whom there are a number from the developing countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It is a well-known fact that people moving to different cultures face difficulties of adaptation and the necessity to give up many elements of their own background. But where is the optimal dividing line in this psychological restructuring? To what extent will the modification of behavior remain painless and not present a danger to the preservation of the person's ethnocultural identity? Too fast a rate of change and too radical a rejection of traditional cultural values signifies a loss of something very valuable and that is certainly not desirable. Furthermore this might create problems for the young specialists graduating from Soviet universities, as they return to their country of origin and are once more immersed in traditions which they have now rejected. So where is the optimal dividing line between the new and the old? That which is "ours" and that which is "foreign"? And how do direct contacts between people of different nationalities affect this line?

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As a member of the faculty of the University of Moscow, I often have to deal with such problems. Recently we carried out a number of investigations of this question: we tried to show the influence on traditional ethnocultural values caused by direct contacts by foreign students with their Soviet counterparts. We compared groups of Vietnamese students with groups of Vietnamese workers of the same age living in our country. The students know the Russian language and can freely communicate with the Soviet people; the workers do not know the Russian language and therefore their contacts with the local population are limited.

We discovered that the students to a considerably greater extent than the workers depart from the traditional norms and standards of behavior. Their personal manners seem to be freer, less constrained, and their behavior seems to be more modern, closer to that of the inhabitants of a large Soviet city. However, at the same time and in spite of our expectations, it was precisely these students and not the workers who turned out to be more oriented toward traditions and their own ethnocultural standards, thinking, and values. Also it is the students more than the workers who feel to a

greater degree the differences between the Vietnamese and Soviet culture and who understand their own culture more fully and exactly.

The results of this research give us hope. They show that direct ethnic contacts on one hand modify the behavior of the minority and bring it closer to the behavior of the majority, but on the other hand such contacts help the minority to understand better and to become more conscious of, and to value more, the specifics of their own culture. That is to say we can state that normal, equal, and mutually profitable contacts between two cultures not only are safe from the point of view of destroying the autonomy of the weaker culture but, to the contrary, they permit them both to understand the “foreign” culture, and to become more aware of their own.

I would like to stress the last conclusion with as much emphasis as possible. For an individual or nation, a “foreign” person, nation, or culture becomes a special mirror, looking into which we understand ourselves better. Different cultures may interact among themselves quite successfully without any danger to the autonomy of each. Furthermore, for the purpose of attaining full consciousness of one’s uniqueness, intercultural contact appears to be simply indispensable.

So in conclusion, it is all for the better to look for diversity. Whatever is similar between the US and the USSR dilutes tension and creates a good psychological base for détente and a climate of trust. However, from the point of view of a psychologist, this way does not seem to be the only one, and its possibilities are rather limited. Another, more radical way, could be more effective. This is the way of recognizing and accepting differences, that is to say, the acceptance of “them as they are.” But, this way demands a full restructuring of our thinking, a true revolution in our consciousness. From a few examples of such revolutions occurring at the present time (although we might also give examples from the past), I have tried to show that in spite of complexities, the inertia of thinking, and conscious and unconscious opposition, such revolutions are in principle possible.

But they of course do not happen by themselves. What can one do in this connection, what practical steps can and must be taken? A major role in this connection could be played by all those who can influence public opinion - politicians, journalists, scientists, and personalities in the arts and culture. We must admit that until very recent times, if something needed changing, it was not our side but the opposing side which should change. Psychologists, however, who are involved in the resolution of interpersonal conflicts are well aware of the fact that this resolution can only begin from oneself. I would like to address this useful advice to all those who have it in their power to exercise influence on the consciousness of broad masses of our planet’s population. When it comes to the restructuring in the spirit of peace, of life beyond war, we must start, of course, from ourselves.