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“Being accepted” and “being accepted”?

Jan Fook

I am, by official nationality Australian, but born of Chinese heritage. Most of the time I call myself “later generation Australian-born Chinese”, although this is changing. I left Australia nearly ten years ago and I now live in the United Kingdom. I am also of lower middle class background, but happen to have spent over three decades working in academia, and in the last two decades, as a senior academic. The reason I am telling you this is so that you will get a sense of my complex mix of identities that I am still forging. Being socially different, and creating a meaningful place for myself professionally and personally, has been an ongoing task which will continue until the day I die. In this experience I will tell the story of when I came to one particular realization about my own difference. It was a breakthrough moment in understanding my own feelings about social acceptance, in the context of other people’s understandings.

The scene is this: I am leading a small group in a workshop on critical reflection for a group of team leaders in childrens’ services in a London borough. I often conduct these workshops in order to give people a practical experience of critical reflection, and to help them learn a structured but fluid process for reflecting. In a nutshell, the process involves helping people learn from their own experience (Dewey,1933) by reflecting on a piece of experience (an incident) which is important to them and which they would like to learn from. (Fook & Gardner, 2007) After an introduction to the theory of critical reflection and the process, I normally begin the practical part of the workshop by using an example of my own incident and asking them to help me undertake some reflection on it. I find this models the process, but even more importantly, establishes an egalitarian culture and one where it feels more acceptable to risk

vulnerability in order to learn (Fook & Askeland, 2007) These to me are vital components of being open to learning from a critical reflection process which may unearth unpredictable and sometimes threatening realisations and emotions.

I am modelling the critical reflection process by presenting an example of my own experience. The group will help me reflect the specific experience by asking me questions, and undertake dialogue with me, so that I can discover something more about the deeper assumptions which underlie my own thinking and behavior. The session starts in the usual way. I tell them (about 8 people, a mix of women and men, a mix of several different ethnicities, and a mix of ages) about a small incident which for me is significant to my learning. It happens a lot, I find it frustrating, and would like to try and understand more about what it means, so that I can change how I see it and how I might act in the future. Simple enough. The incident I tell is, at face value, very ordinary.

"I am in a new position, with a new university. I am in an all day meeting which involves some quite senior people in my university. The meeting is to plan the next year's strategic activities. Part way through the meeting I begin to realize that I don't think I understand what is happening. We do not seem to be following the agenda, people do not seem to be responding to what others have said, I cannot tell what (if any) decisions are being made, and slowly I become more silent, not wishing to speak up in case I expose my ignorance. I leave the meeting frustrated and annoyed, feeling that I have wasted my time and that my voice was not heard."

I tell the story succinctly and with some aplomb. I have presented it many times to many different groups, as part of the numerous critical reflection sessions I have provided. I feel pretty

self-assured. I believe I am happy to be open to new ideas, to questions which might shake my preconceived reflections, and I am conscious of trying to give this message, so that people will be encouraged to experiment with critical reflection, by experimenting on me, no less. At the same time I am aware that at heart I am pretty certain nothing the group can say will phase me. I feel in control, not necessarily vulnerable as the process suggests one needs to be, in order to be truly open to what might arise.

People start asking me questions. They are trying to help me discover what some of my deeper assumptions might be, as implied by the story of my experience. At the start, the questions are fairly predictable. There is a little apprehension, as people still seem a bit unsure of what they are supposed to be doing, but in general, there is not much tension in the air, as there sometimes is at the start of a new group, when people are unfamiliar with each other and no one wants to break the ice. I am happy about this since I have done my best (I think) to lighten the atmosphere and create a climate of collegiality, so that people will feel comfortable to participate, and to risk losing a little “face” by asking questions, whether or not they are sure they are properly critically reflective.

At first the questions seem fairly “factual”, focused on finding out more about the situation.....

“Were most meetings run like this?” (Mandy)

“Were you adequately prepared for the meeting?” (Raj)

“Did anyone else speak up about what was happening?” (Aniela)

I don’t answer any of these questions directly. Instead I ask why each person has asked what they did. In a sense I am asking them to reflect on what was behind their questioning. I wonder

(out loud) what it is about my own thinking or assumptions they thought they were trying to help me reflect on.

Their responses are fairly predictable.

"I was thinking that you can't have really understood what the meeting was supposed to be about, and that this must have been due to poor preparation", Raj volunteers a bit sheepishly.

Everyone laughs, slightly nervous, because the implied judgment may be perceived as a bit harsh, but also because they possibly recognize that this was exactly what they were thinking.

"So was your question about my thinking, or yours Raj?"

Poor Raj – I feel a bit sorry to have put him on the spot but the learning moment seems too opportune. He doesn't need to answer this but does grin and nod. *"I think I get it."*

"So do you want to have a go at asking your question in a different way, which might help me reflect on my thinking about my preparation for the meeting?"

He looks thoughtful and a little pained. I ask the group to try and help him.

"How about.....'Did you feel adequately prepared for the meeting?'" (Tim)

"Better", I said. "You will notice that the way Tim worded that question invited me to focus more on my own thinking (feeling). Perhaps you could also have said, "Do you think you were adequately prepared for the meeting...and if not, what would 'adequate preparation' be for you?"

Nods all round. "Why do you think those questions might help me reflect?" I pause, quickly realizing it might be better to demonstrate a real response, and let them work out what it is about the question which helps to elicit reflective responses. "No, better still, I will answer Tim's question for you and you can judge for yourself."

I respond with exaggerated thoughtfulness to Tim's question.

"You ask if I felt adequately prepared? Actually, yes, I did think I was adequately prepared. I had the agenda a week beforehand and had been briefed on my role (I had been asked to do a short presentation of ideas for going forward). So for me it was not a matter of preparation at all, but that *my expectations about how a meeting should be run were not met.*" I put significant emphasis on these last words, hoping someone will pick up on the hint regarding my assumptions about how meetings should be run.

"Is that why you think you didn't speak up?" (Julie)

"Because my expectations were not met?" I query.

"Yes, were you feeling there was no place for your voice because you thought the meeting was not being run in the way you wanted"? (Julie)

"Sort of.....I think it's more that I was really thrown because the meeting was not run according to my expectations, so I didn't know where I stood." Still reflecting further I go on....." It sounds like it must be important to me to know where I stand before I can participate meaningfully.....so there's an assumption here about needing to understand before acting I guess." This sounds all a bit wordy and my fear is confirmed when Aniela asks another question which seems to completely disregard the path I am trying to lead the group down.

"Were you the only woman in the room?"

Oh no! (I think to myself). Have we learnt nothing about not asking factual questions?

Nevertheless I answer...

"No, about half the meeting members were women...but why do you ask?"

"Did you think gender was an element in why you felt you couldn't speak up?"

Now that's more like it! "Good question!" I enthuse, and I step out of role slightly to draw out some more learning about the critical reflection process. "It's good to frame it the latter way,

because you are trying to get me to think about whether gender is an important issue for me – you are trying to get me to focus on my own assumptions, so framing it this way goes directly to my thinking.”

There is an almost audible murmur in the room as people try and take in the learning I am outlining here.

Back to the process...

“I would answer this by saying that I don’t think I was so aware of my gender but I was certainly aware of other social differences.” I look around, almost anticipating their anticipation, wondering what they will make of this. There is silence as they wait for me to continue. It’s as if they all think they know what I am going to say, but everyone wants me to say it, not volunteer it themselves.

“Clearly I am not of white or of British background. I am Chinese by background, and what’s more I am an Australian (in a British context) and I was also, in this instance, new to the job. There were plenty of markers to identify me as different. Being a woman was fairly far down the list.”

This is now getting interesting. People are pausing, looking thoughtful. How will they tackle this next issue? I am used to people from more mainstream backgrounds feeling uncomfortable when issues of race raise their heads. They often avoid even using the term, or wait for the racialised person to initiate the conversation.

“These things made you feel different. Do you think you were wanting to feel accepted?” Julie seems to be getting the gist of these questions and is being more direct about getting to the

heart of the matter. I have to pause for a while in thinking about this question. I am aware that many of the group are nodding almost imperceptibly, but I am getting a clear message that people feel they have “hit the nail on the head.” There is almost a sense of smugness, as if they as a group, have gotten “the answer.” Perversely this makes me want to not agree, but more than that I detect a small, but nevertheless definite, whirl of anger, in my own response.

“No, actually I am not at all worried about being accepted.” This sounds a bit stark, and I’m not sure if I can risk being too direct in this setting, so I soften it.

“I mean I don’t think wanting to be accepted was what was motivating me here.”

They are still listening, waiting for me to go on. I can see that they don’t seem to understand “not wanting to be accepted,” and I’m also starting to feel that they don’t believe me. I feel them thinking, *“but everyone wants to be accepted”* (“especially people who are different”) is the latter bit I imagine which I add for myself. I have to choose my words carefully as it dawns on me, that perhaps “being accepted” is what every mainstream person thinks every marginal person wants! I think this is what this tiny knot of anger is about for me. I might have been completely off the beam here, but it starts a train of thought of private conversation which runs at the back of my head even whilst I participate outwardly in the group.

I start to realize that there is “being accepted” and “being accepted.” The former implies being accepted in the terms of the group doing the accepting. In other words, it is being accepted as being like the people in the mainstream group. It feels like (to someone from a marginal group) that this is like conferring an honorary “mainstream” status on the marginal person. I have in fact had this kind of thing said to me on many occasions. *“Oh, we don’t see you as different, because it’s your accent we hear, and you sound just like us.”* (Said to me by Australian students in Australia, in a class on cross-cultural social work when we were discussing our own

cultural/ethnic identities). To me this is a form of denying (and perhaps devaluing?) difference, rather than accepting it. This is a similar phenomenon to that noted by Amy Rossiter (1995) when speaking about a women's group in which it was assumed that women of non-anglo backgrounds were happy to be accorded "equal" status, whether they wanted it or not! It is another version of white women saying "you're just like us," thinking that a great privilege is being conferred. It is, I guess a form of positive prejudice, which implies that whatever the non-white person is, it must be inferior, to whatever is being conferred by honorary white status.

The other type of "being accepted," which I forcefully realized is what I really wanted, is to be accepted for who and what I thought I was or wanted to be. In this case I think I was saying that I wanted to be accepted as just being me, i.e. a person who might happen to have a racialised appearance, and for whom this provided a partial identity, but also someone who was new to the job, comes from another country, but who also had substantial experience, lots of ideas to offer, and for whom admitting confusion about the meeting would not be seen as a sign of incompetence, but an understandable and sensible issue to raise. I felt like being accepted in these terms would be about being accepted in my terms.

I struggled to communicate this to the group, and found my voice sounding a bit shaky whilst doing so. This made me realize how important the issue was to me, and as I spoke about it, I had memory flashes of many times in my own life when I had not felt accepted or valued for who or what I thought I was or wanted to be. Incidentally, many of these instances had nothing to do with racial differences, but did have a lot to do with being out of kilter socially and ideologically with the mainstream groups in which I found myself at the time. I think I started to realize that the "difference" I felt due to my racialised appearance constituted only a small portion of the

concern about non-acceptance I often experience in both my personal and professional life. Awareness of my own complex identity of multiple differences made me also aware of the difficulty of feeling accepted for who and what I was. I started to appreciate that it might therefore be very difficult for people, who saw themselves as having more straightforward identities, to appreciate this odd mixture of backgrounds and ideologies which made up who and what I was now.

And yet I didn't really want them to appreciate it all, but just to accept that what I said about myself. I just wanted my own perspective on myself to be heard and accepted as mine. I did not want to be seen as someone striving to be like others, as wanting the same status derived from being socially similar. They did not have to share the same view of me, but they did have to accept that I had a view of myself which might be different from theirs and that this was legitimate. How hard was that?

The workshop continued and ended, focusing on how group processes could be used to facilitate reflection. The irony for me, was I guess, that my own reflection was facilitated in a way which I hadn't anticipated, and which had lasting repercussions for my own sense of self. Being open and true to the process had actually yielded a deeper form of reflection.

Had the group process itself helped me in arriving at this realization about the two forms of acceptance? Yes I do think that somehow reflecting on my own experience in the context of dialogue with other people actually helped foreground my own perspective in contrast to how I perceived theirs. Interestingly this view is reinforced, when I revisit an autoethnographic piece I wrote in which I used a critical self-reflection process to try and understand my own sense of

social difference and how I had made meaning of this (Fook, 2014). My learning about social difference and its role in my life takes quite a different tack – not incompatible of course, but goes in quite a different direction and does in fact incorporate the idea of wanting to “fit in” much more than my reflective experience above illustrates. So it is the group experience, and my impression of their collective understanding, which I believe, demonstrated to me the more hidden assumptions of other people about acceptance, and how I make myself in that context.

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