A Differentiationist Anarchism Manifesto

Towards a Resolution of the Conflicts of Individualism and Collectivism

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Many social, cultural, and political conflicts revolve around a friction that is inherent to the human psyche:

The desire to individuate and to belong to oneself, and attachment needs, or the desire to have closeness with others.

There is no way to reconcile individualism with collectivism because there is no answer to this conflict that doesn't give up the needs and demands of one for the other.

I'd like to discuss the work of the late psychotherapist David Schnarch in regards to what I believe to be a revolutionary answer to this problem: differentiation. And from here propose a new school of anarchist thought I'm calling differentiationist anarchism.

David Schnarch (1946-2020) was a therapist who rooted his work in the Bowenian theory of differentiation. Bowen took observations about emotional fusion as an animalian process and developed a theory that described human family systems (family systems theory).

Take for instance a herd of animals. Should there be a disturbance that disrupts the calm of the herd, anxiety spreads quickly among all of the animals in that herd. This is a very basic capacity that serves an important evolutionary role in survival and resilience. If a predator poses a risk to the herd, the ability of other individuals within the herd to pick up on the danger and respond could very well determine whether or not that individual survives. So it is of evolutionary benefit that social animals should be able to quickly notice a change in the emotional status of their group and respond to it.

This may be fine, and important, for non-human animals who do not have a highly developed prefrontal cortex to create social and cultural meaning from this, but for humans for whom our emotional relationship to one another carries significant meaning, this can cause large problems in relationships, communities, and even societies.

The function is called emotional fusion. You may have heard it referred to as codepedency or any other number of things, but essentially it is our inability to determine the source of anxiety, to know one's personal bounds, and to respond appropriately.

Schnarch took the work of Bowen and applied it to his practice of sex and marital therapy and developed over several decades an intricate body of work that built upon Bowen's theory and created a practical application of it that he called the Crucible Four Points of Balance. Bowen himself was quite pessimistic about the future of humanity and believed that to raise people's

levels of differentiation enough to create major societal change was a difficult if not impossible task. Schnarch was not so pessimistic, and the work he left the world shows his hope in humanity tackling seemingly insurmountable, unresolvable conflicts.

Differentiation, in essence, is the inverse of emotional fusion. It is the ability to discern sources of anxiety, appropriately assign responsibility where it belongs, and respond centering one's personal integrity.

Emotional fusion is a source of major conflict in relationships as it pits two fundamental needs against each other: the need to self-define and be an individual, and our need to be close to others. Schnarch's observation of his clients showed him that this fusion lead couples to something he called "emotional gridlock." Emotional gridlock occurs when a relationship has reached a point where mutual compulsory validation has begun to encroach on the realm of what is authentic for oneself.

At the beginning of many relationships, there is a strong desire to please your partner. You share similarities, have deep compassion for one another, and mutual validation flows with ease. However, the natural diversity of human beings means that at one point or another, you are going to hit something that you cannot give true, authentic validation to them over. To maintain harmony and avoid conflict, validation is often compulsory.

When validation ceases, this is often framed as lack of communication or misunderstandings. Schnarch disputes this framing and poignantly observes that miscommunication is fairly rare. We actually understand each other quite well, it's that we do not like what we are hearing and so refuse to accept it. We struggle to see ourselves in a light that we feel is unfavorable, so rather than accepting that you and your partner are separate beings with unique thoughts, feelings, and opinions, it is easier to assume you are simply being "misunderstood." This leads us on a circular chase for validation that can create ever-heightening conflict, rather than simply accepting the reality of a situation, learning to soothe one's own anxiety around difference, and respond with integrity.

Schnarch in his infectious optimism posits this as a human developmental challenge in relationality and individuation he calls a "crucible." It is a moment that all relationships reach, and the way it is handled determines the growth of the individuals.

Crucibles are moments for raising one's level of differentiation. It is a moment where we look honestly at ourselves and others, do careful self-inventory, determine what is within our integrity and take ownership of our choices and behaviors.

Schnarch believes this is an evolutionary mechanism for raising our human cognitive capacity.

Differentiation solves emotional gridlock, and it solves the dilemma posed by conflicting needs of individuation and attachment.

The problem with collectivism and individualism both are that they are modes of being that are defined in relationship to other people. Paradoxically, neither create the conditions for true autonomy nor true communal harmony and healthy interdependence.

The challenge of individualism is that often it becomes a power struggle to self-define in opposition to others. However, self-definition in opposition to others is still allowing others to control you.

Take for instance the phenomenon of anti-maskers who objected to mask mandates. This was presumably not a stance taken out of careful self-analysis and integrity to one's values. It was

"you can't tell me what to do" at the expense of their personal health, and the health even of the people around them who they cared about.

A differentiated response may notice the feelings of resistance to being told what to do, but carefully examine the situation to decide if there was a higher good that could, in good conscience, have them adopt masking as a practice.

The struggle of collectivism is the inverse: it places high emphasis on group harmony at the expense of individual autonomy, integrity, and self-hood. To presuppose a society built on values of collectivism requires one downplay or ignore the potential struggle between the individual and the group.

This is where differentiationism comes in.

Differentiationism resolves the conflicts of individualism and collectivism by centering the self-actualization of the individual, and at the same time places the individual within a collective context rather than in inherent conflict with the collective. Where individualism states that the rights of the individual has precendence over that of the collective, differentiationism maximizes the power of the individual without sacrificing the requirements of the collective. The collective is viewed as a flexible and resilient body that can withstand pressure and change through the cultivation of what Schnarch would call meaningful endurance within individuals.

Meaningful endurance is the ability to withstand emotional pain for the purpose of growth. For example, the ability to tolerate the discomfort of confronting one's own tendencies to be cruel or avoidant, to confront others in a manner that is calm, grounded and respectful, while also tolerating the anxiety that comes with the possibility of displeasing someone by opposing them in some way.

Holding onto oneself, as Schnarch would call it, creates a natural pressure that asks individuals to take responsibility for themselves. It acknowledges conflicts and foundational values and desires and seeks to grow oneself and put pressure on systems to grow to accommodate these visions.

To give an interpersonal example, imagine there are two friends who have come into conflict. Friend 1 doesn't like going over to friend 2's house because friend 2's sister always makes rude comments to her. To present, they have dealt with this conflict primarily through avoidance and subtle, passive gestures. Friend 1 has made excuses for not coming over, but friend 2 has started to notice a pattern. Rather than ask friend 1 directly, friend 2 has made comments disguised as jokes about how friend 1 never comes to her anymore. This conflict simmers and begins to tear at the fabric of the relationship as they grow more and more distant.

Friend 2, valuing the relationship highly decides to confront friend 1. She asks her why she has been avoiding coming over for so long. At first friend 1 denies it, so friend 2 is faced with the choice of pushing the matter and risking upsetting friend 1, or dropping it and allowing the friendship to fizzle away. Schnarch calls this a two-choice dillema, and people often avoid confronting them because they are choosing between two difficult things- continue on as things are which are already untenable, or confront them which could potentially upset the other and sever the relationship.

Friend 2 decides to push the matter, recognizing that either path could see the end of the friendship. She calms herself, pushing away her impulse to blame and make teasing comments as she has been, and looks her in the eye. She tells friend 1 that she is important to her and that she values their friendship, but that this has become a difficult challenge for her and feeling distant from her friend worries her about the future of the friendship. She asks friend 1 again

why she has been avoiding her house for so long, and friend 1 seeing friend 2's seriousness sighs, drops her pretense, and admits that every time she comes over her sister makes rude comments that hurt her and friend 2 ignores it or laughs along.

Friend 2 is taken aback, and takes quick mental inventory. Having centered differentiation as a goal of growth, friend 2 knows that she must soothe her desire to get defensive and respond from what feels true and authentic to her. She doesn't like what she finds, but she realizes that friend 1 is correct, and understands why this would drive friend 1 away. After a long pause, she responds telling friend 1 she is right, and that that must have felt awful to endure. She asks friend 1 if she would try coming back over and give her an opportunity to choose differently and confront her sister around this behavior. Friend 1 agrees.

As you can see from this example, differentiation is distinct from individualism and collectivism both in that it takes the integrity of the individual in concert with a higher shared vision to create natural pressure that grows both the individuals and the relationship system at the same time.

Friend 2 was pushed to confront several difficult things and soothe herself enough to approach with integrity: starting the difficult conversation to begin with, then again confronting her own behavior with her sister. She offered a kind of vulnerability that is difficult and rare- being openly honest about her love and value of her friend at the risk that she could be rejected. She had to soothe her anxiety and get honest with herself to achieve this. Her bravery, honesty, vulnerability, and integrity created an environment with a natural pressure to call upon friend 1 to do the same.

The higher vision that held together the confrontation was the friendship, but the driving pressures were multiple conflicts on the individual level: the desire of friend 2 to have friend 1 come to her as much as she went to her, the desire to avoid difficult interperosnal interactions and avoid anxiety, the desire to be correct, or to be seen in a certain light.

Not all interactions will go this way, some people will choose not to step into discomfort, however this is why setting differentiation as a shared goal has far more potential than collectivism or individualism alone to solve challenging questions of interpersonal power struggles. Even without differentiation being a goal that all can agree to, if a large enough number of people in a community can begin to center their own differentiation in how they show up for communal engagement, this can be enough to shift cultures and put pressure on others to develop their own differentiation.

In one-on-one interpersonal relationships, all it takes is one person to shift the entire dynamic. Sometimes this can lead to relationships ending naturally as one person grows and another chooses not to. But often, the act of growing and confronting oneself, and stating clearly one's standards and expectations for a relationship will be enough to make the other realize that things cannot continue as they are, and for the relationship to survive, growth will be necessary.

Ultimately, Schnarch's work on differentiation revolved around married, monogamous couples. However, the principles stand as at the very least, an experiment that could yield fruitful data, or at the very best, a revolutionary resolution to the longstanding conflict between individualism and collectivism in how we organize at the community level.

Differentiationism asks of communities and individuals to balance collective and individual needs by centering personal integrity.

Personal integrity is not just the whims and desires of the individual. Personal integrity is taking honest inventory of oneself to determine where one is not living up to their own values and standards. It is identifying a value of autonomy and being honest that one is using tools such

as passive or direct aggression and distancing oneself from valued relationships to handle the anxiety that comes from difference, and deciding to soothe oneself and choose closeness with difference anyway. It is identifying ways one is being controlled by fear of upsetting others and choosing to be true to oneself anyway, and choosing to stay close rather than distance oneself for fear of rejection.

Differentiationism asks us to balance pressure on oneself with pressure on a system to grow and create growth. It does not ask us to sacrifice ourselves but to be honest about the ways we are refusing to be influenced by others because we are afraid of losing who we are. It asks us to hold onto what is solid in ourselves to be flexible enough to make the changes necessary to live up to our personal values and contribute to collective visions.

It does not seek perfection, but it does seek struggle for the sake of transformation.

Differentiationism does not dissolve or cleave at the slightest pressure, in fact it values this pressure as a crucial environment for growth. It is for this reason I believe differentiationist anarchsim has the potential to be a revolutionary and highly necessary framework for the creation of strong and resilient communities, for prefiguring a world that can manage the difficulties that lie ahead, and weathering attempts that the state will make to create and exploit vulnerabilities to hamper our movements.

It is far too easy to manipulate natural fears and anxieties. When we manage our anxiety by learning to soothe ourselves and connect deeply to our own agency and integrity, we become our very own heroes in the fight against domination. We become relational beings with a solid grasp on ourselves. We learn to be together and separate at the same time.

This, I believe, is the very foundation of a horizontal distribution of power. This is the foundation of societies that are cooperative and directly democratic.

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