

What Price Acceptance?

It seems to me I hear a lot of discussion in the GLBT community about striving for acceptance. Everything from, “We want our unions to be recognised and accepted” to “My partner was accepted at a family wedding, isn’t that great?” Well, yes and no. Of course being accepted is infinitely preferable to being rejected, but there are inherent dangers in asking to be accepted.

Acceptance from the dominant (heterosexual) culture is the stance that permits statements such as, “I don’t care what you do in bed, I still accept you” and, “You’re not gay to me you’re a person”. This serves to reduce our lived identities and experiences as GLBT people to sexual behaviour alone, or to completely ignore our truths by minimising our orientation/gender identity to an “add on”. Yet these statements are well-intentioned and may speak to a part of ourselves that is hungry for validation and approval. Do we then challenge these statements or express our gratitude?

Acceptance is a curious word – by definition it is a power-laden term. Those who can accept can also reject and in asking to be accepted I am giving up my personal power to another – seeking external validation for my being. As a community, if we settle for the “comfort” of being accepted, does it result in us going cap in hand to heterosexuals, and defining our own “acceptability” in their terms. Am I more acceptable to dominant culture if I am a white, educated middle-class homeowner? If I conform to Will and Gracian stereotypes am I then less different and easier to embrace? What then happens to my butch dyke sisters, my drag and leather brothers, my trans community friends? Are they less acceptable? Do I cease to claim them as queer family? (“Yes, bring your friends to the party but not the man who wears dresses”)

In providing anti-homophobia workshops over the years I have often used a tool called, “Levels of Homophobia”. This tool, developed by Dr. Dorothy Riddle of Tucson, Arizona is useful in helping people to recognise that homophobic attitudes exist across a continuum. I present it here in its original form, it was developed to speak to Lesbian and Gay realities.

Levels of Homophobia

Repulsion: Homosexuality is seen as a sickness, a sin or a crime. Anything is justified to change “those people”. Prison, hospitalisation, negative behaviours therapy, including electric shock are all justified.

Pity: Heterosexuality is assumed to be more mature and certainly to be preferred. Any possibility of becoming straight should be reinforced and those who seem to be born that way should be pitied, the poor dears.

Tolerance: Homosexuality is viewed as just a phase of adolescent development that many people go through and most people grow out of. Thus Lesbian and Gay people are seen as less mature than straights and treated with the protectiveness and indulgence one uses with a child. Lesbians and Gays should not be given positions of authority, because they are still working through adolescent behaviours.

Acceptance: Still implies that there is something to accept, characterized by such statements as, “That’s fine as long as you don’t flaunt it”. Ignores the pain of invisibility & stress of closet behaviours. Flaunt usually means say or do anything that makes people aware. Denies social and legal realities with which Lesbians & Gays live.

Positive Levels of Attitude

Support: Works to safeguard the rights of Lesbian and Gay people. Aware of the climate & the irrational unfairness of attitudes & realities.

Admiration: Acknowledges that being Lesbian or Gay in our society takes strength. People are willing to truly look at themselves and work on their own homophobic attitudes.

Appreciation: Values the diversity of people and sees Lesbian & Gay people as a valid part of that diversity. Willing to combat homophobia in themselves and in others.

Nurturance: Assumes that Lesbian & Gay people are indispensable in our society. Views Lesbian & Gay people with genuine affection and delight. Willing to be Lesbian/Gay advocates.

Notice that “Acceptance” falls within the negative half of this attitudinal scale. When I first started using this tool I considered it to be speaking to straight people and also to reflect popular social perspectives. I later came to recognise that I, like many of us, had internalised these different attitudes at different times in my growth as a gay man. In my therapy practice I see the damage that the internalisation of these negative values causes, and also the capacity for individuals to transcend and move forward. The personalization of these values looks something like this:

Internalised Homophobic Messages

Repulsion, (Self-hate) “I am disgusting, I hate myself, I shouldn’t exist”.

Self-Pity, “Poor me, Why do I have to be this way? It’s not fair”.

Self-Tolerance, “Maybe I’m just going through a phase. I can tolerate it now but really hope I’ll grow out of it.”

Self-Acceptance, “I know I really am this way but still wish it could be different – I’ll seek out approval from others to feel okay”.

Self-Support, “I know I’m great – and stronger for having suffered and grown from such intolerance – I will make a positive change in the world so others like me don’t have to go through what I did”.

Self-Admiration, “I have come a long way and have a bit further to go – some of my attitudes to community members not like me and different groups are not always positive”.

Self and Other Appreciation, “My struggle is the struggle of all marginalized people. I will speak out and ally myself with others – racism, sizism, ageism and all other injustices are also my issue”.

Self, Other and Planetary Nurturance, “I am whole and good and see that wholeness and goodness in the faces of others – even when they may not know it for themselves. I will work to take care of myself and others, allow myself to be taken care of and work individually and with others to heal this planet, our home.

How can our personal and collective journeys move us through these levels? What are the pitfalls we need to watch out for? What supports do we need to have in place?

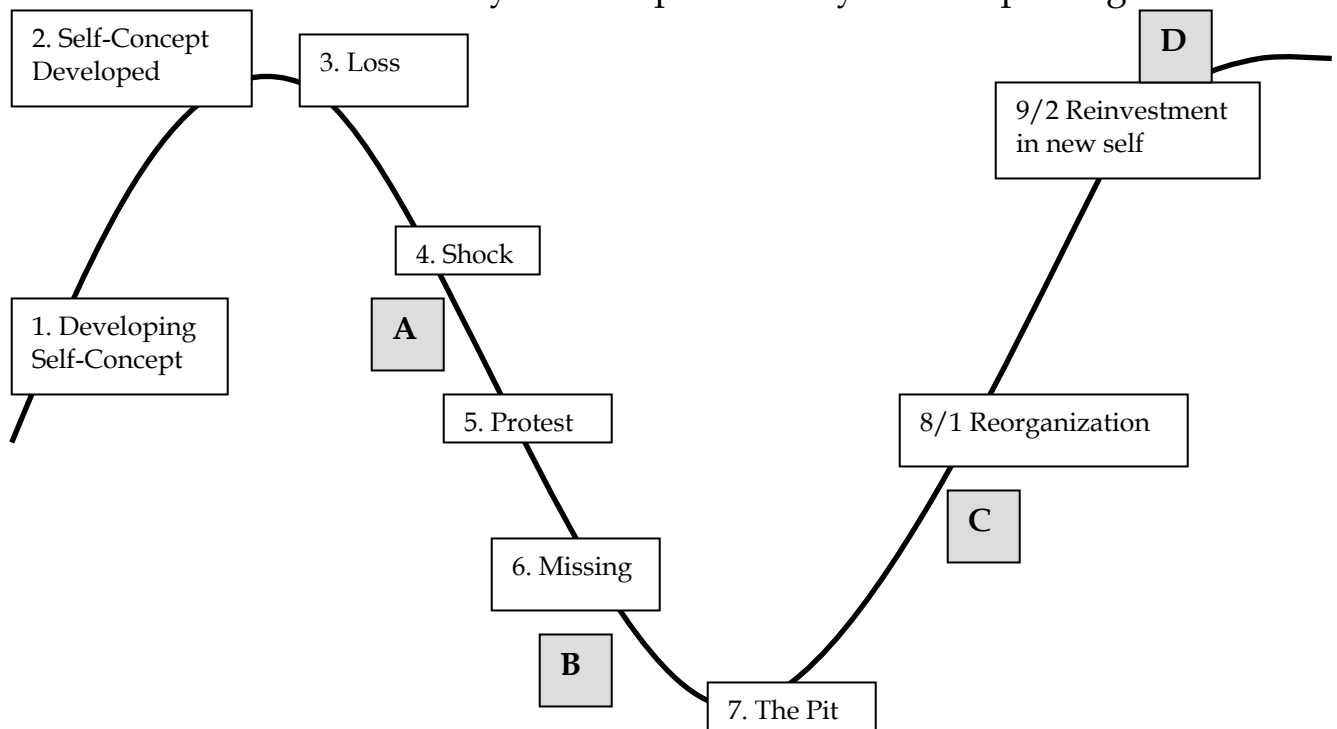
Internalised Message	Challenge to Moving forward
Self-Hate	Feeling Overwhelmed and Isolated. At risk for Suicide
Self-Pity	Getting stuck in the myth of Victimhood
Self-Tolerance	Safety experienced in terms of the “rightness” of cultural norms. Operating from the place of (presumed) heterosexual privilege is threatened
Self-Acceptance	Need to re-evaluate belief systems, revisit the past. Recognising the role of family of origin behaviour in supporting the development of the voice of the internalised oppressor is painful
Self-Support	Awareness of places of privilege in the world (white/able-bodied/educated etc.) can lead to difficulty in accepting and owning past/present abuses of power. Challenge is to not become immobilized by guilt.
Self-Admiration	Narcissism and the comfort of staying stuck in a sense of “specialness”.
Self and Other Appreciation	Self-doubt, internalised messages of ‘craziness’, lack of external support
Self, Other and Planetary Nurturance	Maintenance

Internalised Message	Challenge	The Way Through
Self-Hate	Suicide	Recognise feelings of being ‘orphaned’ in the world. Validate losses – what is lost in the world, what is lost from the self. Support blamelessness
Self-Pity	Victimhood	Acknowledge feelings of victimhood/unfairness. Support protest (anger) expression as well as sadness
Self-Tolerance	Loss of Privilege	Understand the reality of the continuum of sexuality/gender identity. Recognise bias and inherent wrongness of broader oppressive systems and ideologies
Self-Acceptance	Painful re-evaluation	Begin to recognise the internalised oppressor – value systems and critical voices not one’s own. Seek support from others through personal therapeutic work and engagement in community through involvement with social/political groups
Self-Support	Guilt	Continue internal work of recognition of bias/privilege. Seek information/experience to counter stereotypes. Work to claim entitlement
Self-Admiration	Narcissism	Take time for self-care. Recognise the personal is political. Build bridges with allies. Confront the status quo
Self and Other Appreciation	Self-doubt	Develop and strengthen awareness of connection to Spirit. Integrate understanding of interconnectedness of all life. Claim the identity of healer/teacher. Recognise self-care as inseparable from other-care
Self, Other and Planetary Nurturance	Maintenance	Develop strategies to maintain authentic self. Cultivate generosity of spirit with regard to personal struggles and the struggles of others.

Like all stage theories, the above model is intended only as a guide with broad brush strokes. Not all people will move sequentially through each stage. I may find myself in different places at different times. Strategies such as self-care may be adopted throughout my journey.

What I believe is true in this model is that embracing a new sense of self, a new orientation to the world entails a loss of the previous identity. Shifting identity is scary as I step into the ‘new’ with little self-confidence as my new sense of self is emerging. Yet this journey seems to be demanded of many of us as we move from operating within the framework of a learned ‘acceptable’ self-concept to our authentic selves – the path from fear-based self-management to glorious self-expression.

Transitions entail losses and the following model can serve as a guide for working through loss.



1. **Developing self-concept.** As we grow we are rewarded for certain behaviours, attitudes, beliefs and forms of self-expression and not others. We want to believe we are “good” and parts of self deemed unacceptable we banish from our psyche into the shadow part of self through repression and denial. This is how we develop our personas (from the Latin for ‘mask’) and this becomes our identity (self-concept). “Acceptability” is defined by family members, peers and broader societal ideologies which are based on white heterosexist capitalist patriarchal norms.
2. **Self-concept developed.** I have a sense of who I am in the world. I develop confidence in my self-understanding and identify wholly with my self-concept. I have internalised with little questioning the beliefs about right and wrong, good and bad learned through my socialisation. There is a firmly established critical voice, or committee of voices in my head which approve or disapprove of my thoughts, fantasies, feelings and behaviours.
3. **Loss.** Emerging from my authentic self is a core part of my truth. My self-concept is threatened, what I believe to be true about myself is challenged.
4. **Shock.** New truths about myself profoundly disturb my equilibrium. I may look for ways to distort or deny the awareness seeking to enter my consciousness. This may continue for years.
5. **Protest.** I recognise the reality of my new self-awareness and protest the truth. Once acknowledged I can never go back to ‘How I was’. I do not want to deal with the new reality and am angry as I protest the unfairness of it. If anger or protest energy itself is part of my shadow (i.e., unacceptable) self, this protest may be turned inwards as depression.

6. **Missing.** As the reality of the changes in self continue to emerge I recognise what is or may be lost in the world. If I am realising my trans identity or sexual orientation I move into missing my sense of “normalness”. If my political awareness of social injustice is emerging I may be missing participation in established friendship networks with humour based on oppression.
7. **The Pit.** I fully realise what has been lost and can never be reclaimed. Despair, depression, shame, hopelessness and helplessness may be present. When my self-concept is shattered I do not have my customary coping skills and strategies. Depending on the severity of the felt loss this may also be the place for risk of suicide. Something has to die here – a self-concept with which I have erroneously wholly identified.
8. **Reorganizing.** If I have been able to be fully present to the misery of the pit, I will slowly shift into reorganizing. Beginning to recognise that I need new coping strategies, I must seek support in new places and begin to reorganize my life. This feels like a slippery slope as some days I have energy for this, others not. This part of the journey is characterized by intermittent apathy and fatigue. Other secondary losses may become apparent.
Reorganization of identity is part of the process of developing a new self-concept.
9. **Reinvesting in New Self.** I recognise I have been through a difficult process and am integrating the “new” into a new self-concept. Less energy is focussed on what is lost as I move into the future. My sense of self feels more whole as I continue on my path. I feel proud of my ability to have weathered the storm and acknowledge the gains from moving through a time of struggle.

Getting Through It

- A. In order to accept the reality of what is lost the story has to be shared. A trusted friend, family member, counsellor or therapist can help with this task. It is important to select someone who will listen supportively without judgement and who will not minimise the experience.
- B. Sharing the story will lead to emotional pain or distress as the reality of what is lost is made real. This will be to a greater or lesser extent depending on the felt severity of the loss. This is a necessary response as the self-concept moves toward greater alignment with the authentic self. To not experience this pain will lead to increased physical or psychological problems.
- C. Be open to more losses emerging into consciousness and the need to respond to them. Recognise that the climb from “The Pit” often feels like two steps forward, one step back.
- D. Moving forward takes intent, effort and energy. This journey is a continuing process in moving toward wholeness. Without harnessing the will to move forward it is possible to get stuck in the past. The work here is to withdraw emotional energy from the past and invest it in the new relationship with the emerging self.

As mainstream culture shifts slowly towards acceptance we must recognise the inherent dangers to our queer individual and cultural identities. If we allow ourselves to be completely assimilated into dominant culture on that culture's terms we will lose what our individual and collective struggles have taught us: the celebration of the uniqueness of the individual and the recognition of the inherent wrongness of oppressive social structures. My hope is that the above model may be helpful in charting a course for our continued growth. We have a lot to be proud of... and work to do.