

The New Johari Window #4: Three Perspectives on Human Relationships

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As we all know – and as both the Original and New Johari Window convey – the relationships between two people are inherently complex. Any dynamic human interaction requires great thought and reflection if it is to be adequately portrayed. Novelists and poets have labored in the interpersonal vineyard for many years, seeking to capture the essence of human relationships. No one seems to hold a monopoly on the truth regarding human interactions. It seems appropriate, therefore, that the New Johari Window embraces multiple perspectives on this complex phenomenon. I will specifically look at human interaction and the Johari Window from three perspectives – three ways in which to appreciate the deep nature of interpersonal relationships.

One set of perspectives is deeply embedded in American pragmatism and optimism. Most of the advocates of this school are trained in the American behavioral sciences and the birth of this American School is often attributed to the National Training Laboratories (now called the NTL Institute) and their programs in Bethel, Maine. Joe Luft's original Johari Window was forged on the anvil of Bethel training and the American school. A second school was founded at the Tavistock Institute in England. It embraces the psychoanalytic perspectives of Melanie Klein (a worthy successor, in some psychotherapists' opinions, to Sigmund Freud). The Tavistock Institute – and more broadly, the British School – embraces the systemic perspective on interpersonal relationships that was espoused by other Tavistockians (most notably Emory and Trist). From the British School perspective, interpersonal relationships are seen as multi-tiered, heavily-determined and tightly-interwoven phenomena.

I offer yet another set of perspective that tends to be associated with theorists and researchers who live on the other side of the English Channel – in France, Germany and other countries on the European Continent. These analysts of interpersonal relationships engage the perspectives of Karl Marx, Neo-Marxists and contemporary social theorists known as structuralists, post-structuralists and postmodernists. These loosely-coupled Continental critics of contemporary societies focus on the power dynamics in interpersonal relationships and on the socially-constructed realities that comprise our prevailing views about the origins and nature of human interactions. I will be turning to each of these three schools throughout this book. At this point, I will set the stage for these multiple perspectives on the New Johari Window by offering a preliminary description of each of these three insightful and influential ways of viewing and thinking about human interactions.

The American School

To understand the fundamental principles of this first school, I turn to a quite different discipline (architecture) and focus specifically on a very American architectural innovation: the Western Ranch house. In this type of home, everything has been built on one level. There is no basement and no attic. There are many windows in the home and divisions between rooms are often nonexistent or only suggestive. When you walk in the front door, you enter directly into the living room and at the same time can glance over your shoulder looking down the hallway to all the adjoining bedrooms.

This open architectural style is dramatically exemplified in the Eichler homes that were so popular in California during the 1950s. In these homes there is one central room from which every other room radiates. In these suburban homes, located in middle-class communities, everything of importance takes place in the den, in the TV room, or on the patio. If there is a formal living room, it is rarely used and is kept very tidy – for show and not for either living or informal entertaining. In essence this is a home of visibility (and superficiality): what you see is what you get and what you are intended to see!

There is a second important feature about the American-style ranch house. When replicated in the American suburb, each of these ranch houses closely resembles the house next door. Inexpensive tract houses are mass engineered, mass built and mass marketed. Families move in and move out of these tract houses, with no long-term commitments to building a lasting community. High walls are built between homes and all outdoor activities take place in the back yard, not on a front porch or sidewalk. Parents are likely to commute to work via freeways and return home exhausted. They focus on family life or escapist television. There is little time for building community in this middle class suburban society – or for getting to know neighbors beyond a superficial level.

When we turn to the upper class in American society, we find a similar pattern of architecture and community. A Richard Noitra designed home, for instance, features glass walls that enable one to grasp the whole in one sighting – all rooms, the outside environment, other people. Upper-class communities are gated and isolated from other elements of society. Even within these gated communities there is little interaction among neighbors – other than the often-litigious reinforcement of planned community regulations and restrictions. These are homes that integrate the external and internal world through glass and landscaping – but insure that the external world is devoid of people and is composed entirely of trees and gardens!

The American school is also represented in the American office. It is represented in the late 20th Century office space with modular furniture and no walls. Everyone can see everyone else and people can easily move their desks, their department, and their relationships. This is the “temporary society” that is described by Bennis and Slater – a society that is made up of temporary friendships, temporary reporting relationships – and temporary furniture.

What then is the essence of American society and how has it influenced construction of the American school of interpersonal relationships? As represented in American homes and communities, American society is about high visibility and accessibility (what you see is what

you get). Ironically, it is also about privacy and the desire to be seen only when we want to be seen. It is also about superficiality and image management (what you see is what I want you to see) and about attention to a few people (family) rather than a large community. These aspects of American society have profoundly influenced the goals and purposes of the American school – which represents both an acceptance and critique of American society. The superficiality and isolation are to be overcome with intentional interpersonal interactions that are replete with disclosure and feedback. Yet, the focus is still on the individual, not the community. Furthermore, there is still a somewhat uncritical embracing of the visibility and accessibility of the ranch house, Noitra home and modular office furniture. What you see is still what you get and what you get is still focused on the individual, not the collective.

There are specific challenges facing the American school as it addresses the emerging 21st Century version of American society. The suburbs are in retreat. New intentional communities are being formed – what Robert Bellah and his colleagues call “life style enclaves.”ⁱ Office space is now more user-friendly and built to encourage and sustain both the right of privacy and the joy of collegiality. Furthermore, I suggest in Chapter Two that the complexity of human interactions – which is large in the original Johari Window – is even greater in our emerging postmodern world. The American School provides two responses to the new challenges of the 21st Century and this emerging postmodern condition of human interaction.

The first response concerns task-focus. Some members of the American school want to forget about complexity of interpersonal relationships and focus on the task. They have bought in the focus on individual achievement. Effective interpersonal relationships are geared exclusively to “bottom-line” results. We all become members of a Survivor cast who are getting along with other people only so that we can be the last ones on the island and can claim the million bucks. The alternative response is to be very sensitive to human interactions and to focus on the group process rather than the task. Primary attention is being directed to one-on-one relationships. The division between task-achievement and human interaction becomes common in the American school. Thus, there are two branches of the American

school – each focusing on one-on-one relationships. In the first branch, this focus is directed toward achievement of specific goals, whereas in the second branch it is directed toward improvement of one-on-one interpersonal relationships. A group is generally viewed as a series of interwoven interactions – that is why the Johari Window can be seen as both a model of interpersonal dynamics (Luft’s first book) and a model of group dynamics (Luft’s second book). In a workshop (t-group, sensitivity training) that is run by American school facilitators, it is inappropriate to “speak for the group.” One should always speak for herself and let other people speak for themselves.

The British School

If American society can be represented by a Ranch house, British society might be represented comparably by a Victorian mansion. This building is multi-storied, with cellars, attics and (by the sea) “Widow’s Walks.” There are many rooms in the Victorian mansion – including rooms that are hidden away. These remote rooms are located down at the end of a very dark hallway. The hallway is lit by no more than the natural light that streams in (only during daylight) through beautiful, intricately designed and multi-colored stained glass windows. In this mansion there are many stairways – some of which seem to lead nowhere. I am reminded of the Remington House in San Jose California, where the purpose and orientation of many rooms and stairwells remain mysterious – even after more than a century of research.

The walls of a Victorian mansion are thick. Muted conversations from other rooms are not easily heard through the walls. If they are heard (in faint manner) the conversations are readily misinterpreted. This mansion is not easily remodeled nor is the furniture supposed to be rearranged. There are many cherished antiques that have been in this Victorian home for many years. They are valuable and irreplaceable. All of the objects in this home are old and can easily break if handled in an insensitive manner. Each piece of furniture, each rug, each ornament, each object on display has a rich history and symbolizes something important in the life of those many generations of a specific family who have owned and occupied this home.

The Victorian mansion holds another important property. It is designed for visiting people. There is a parlor where people come to visit and where extended conversations are expected. Though Victorian mansions are large and expensive, they are built next to one another, often with very little intervening space. Neighbors interact and an enduring community is present – in part because people don't move around very much, thus providing both the motivation and continuity for building a strong community. Unlike the “life style enclaves” that Bellah identifies with the new American community, the old British communities are based not on shared interest, but rather on shared social-economic class. People live in communities made up of other people from the same class – hence, the assumption of shared values and perspectives (the third ingredient of trust). Thus, while the British society is community-based, this base is very conservative in nature and not very conducive to movement across class structures. As in the case of many other traditional class-based societies in our world, British community comes at the expense of social mobility and equity of treatment and opportunity – and at the expense of individual initiative and achievement.

The British school picks up the motifs of the Victorian mansion and British society. This school focuses on the complexity and many tiered dynamics of interpersonal relationships. What you see is not necessarily (and usually isn't) what you get. Interpersonal relationships are filled with attics, cellars, hidden rooms and dimly lit hallways. There are many relics from old (no longer remembered) times, and there is a prevailing sense that one has not really gotten to know the relationship or mansion even after spending some time in the parlor. Ample opportunity is provided, however, for getting to know the other person more fully. Time is always available, and an eternity is waiting for rich and complex mutual understanding to take place.

The British school also embraces the British society's emphasis on collective identity – as well as its conservative predilections and hesitancy about embracing change. The British school focuses on the group and community, rather than the individual. Groups have a reality. Each group has its own purposes and dynamic; furthermore, these purposes and dynamics are

something more than the composite of interwoven interpersonal interactions and co-dependencies. One can speak about group behavior in a workshop conducted by a British school facilitator. In fact, the notion that one acts independently of group dynamics is considered to be naïve, at best, and often is considered to be a clear indication that one is acting out the myth of autonomous action for the group. This assignment of an autonomy role is intended by the group to help its members collectively to achieve some tacitly held or unconscious goal—such as the avoidance of collective responsibility.

The Continental School

This third school has little patience with architectural analogies and is highly critical of both the superficiality of American society and inherent conservatism of British society. Members of the Continental school could care less about the architectural design of a home. They want to know: who owns the house? Who is invited in? Who can come in (invited or not)? Who gets to redecorate or remodel the house? Who gets to comment on what the house really looks like?

The Continental school is all about the architect, builder, owner, tenant and architectural critic—not the building itself. Proponents of this school wish to “pierce the veil.” They want to go back to the fundamental assumptions underlying the design of the building and even more importantly they want to go back to the reasons for constructing this building in the first place. Why a ranch house? Why a Victorian mansion? Proponents of the Continental school also want to know about the people who enter the building. Who is allowed in? Who wants to enter? Who wants to leave? Furthermore, the agenda of the Continental school is to find out how the design and layout of the building influences (even determines) the nature of interactions among people who live (or work) in this building. What stories do people in the building chose to tell (or are allowed to tell) about this building and about the human interactions that occur inside (and outside) the building? The Continental school always encourages us to move somewhere else in our analysis. We move from the building to the builder (de-construction), and from the building to its inhabitants and ways in which the inhabitants interact with one another and the building.

¹Bellah, Robert and Others, *Habits of the Heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.