

The New Johari Window VI: The Postmodern Self

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When the original Johari Window became popular during the late 1960s, we were living and struggling through the last years of the Modern era. These were the years when “authority” couldn’t be trusted and authenticity was the new coin of the realm. We were trying to figure out “who we really are” and looked to sensitivity training and encounter groups as safe settings (sanctuaries) for disclosure and feedback regarding interpersonal relationships. The original Johari Window became an important guidebook for navigating this turbulent, transitional period between the Modern era and a newly emerging era. This new era has been called many things: post-industrial, post-Western, post-Viet Nam, post-Watergate, post-structural. For want of a better word, we will call it the Postmodern era.

Ironically – and poignantly – the Johari Window, as a guidebook for this transitional period – is still relevant today. By all accounts, it is still the most widely used and frequently cited model of interpersonal relations in the world. Is this because no one else has bothered to offer a comprehensive model or because, in some manner, the Johari Window continues to address the fundamental interpersonal challenges of the new, Postmodern era? I propose that the latter explanation is more viable.

There are, after all, other interpersonal models that offer profound insights. In fact, I have incorporated several of them in the new Johari Window – Will Schutz’ FIRO theory, Locus of Control model, and Fundamental Attribution theory. I propose that our emerging postmodern condition requires even greater attention to the dynamics of disclosure and feedback that reside at the heart of the Johari Window. The original Johari Window and (in particular) the New Johari Window can serve as a viable guidebook for our new era, just as it was for the

modern era.

We live in a world of complexity, uncertainty and turbulence that continues to call into question our sense of a coherent self and our sense of a consistent set of interpersonal relationships. The interplay between Quad 1 and Quad 2 is even more challenging, for we are likely to be interacting with an increasingly diverse set of people, hence are likely to receive increasingly diverse – even contradictory – feedback.

We are faced, furthermore, with the daunting task of repeatedly deciding each day what we want to reveal about ourselves to other people (Quad 3) whom we have just met and people whom we must work with in short-term relationships (what Bennis and Slater years ago prophetically described as the “temporary society”). This Q1/Q3 challenge is exacerbated by our inability to even know what is truly “us.” How can we share something about our self when we can’t decide what actually is our “self”?

What about Quad 4? I would suggest that our world of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence inevitably barrages us with multiple experiences, emotion-evoking images, and fleeting impressions that are never consciously processed. Rather they are stored in ways that are not easily accessed by our “executive brain” – yet have continuing impact on what is brought to consciousness by this sector of our brain. Recent neuro-science research suggests that our brain is involved in substantial activity about which we are not aware. Furthermore, this neural activity has profound impact on what we perceive, feel and think about. Our Q4 is very large, very influential and an increasingly important domain for research in all fields of psychology. The Johari Window is quite relevant as we begin to trace out the implications of these unknown parts of ourselves, especially as these parts influence human interactions.

There is much more to be said about the postmodern condition and its impact on our sense of self. The complexity, unpredictability and turbulence of our postmodern condition leads to the creation of four different senses of self (and a fifth sense – the appreciative self – to which we

turn in a later essay).

The Saturated Self

Kenneth Gergen writes of the postmodern “saturated self.” We are beset by many images of self via advertisement, film, TV, celebrity and life-style magazines, and even Internet chat rooms. We suffer, declares Gergen, from “multiphrenia” (a bewildering multiplicity of selves), hence put on many different masks-of-self when performing in Q1.ⁱ

. . . one detects amid the hurly-burly of contemporary life a new constellation of feelings and sensibilities, a new pattern of self-consciousness. This syndrome may be termed *multiphrenia*, generally referring to the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments. . . . As one’s potentials are expanded by the technologies [of contemporary life], so one increasingly employs the technologies for self-expression; yet, as the technologies are further utilized, so do they add to the repertoire of potentials.

Gergen also makes use of a very postmodern term, “pastiche,” to describe the predominant condition of contemporary personality. He suggests that the “pastiche personality”:ⁱⁱ

. . . is a social chameleon, constantly borrowing bits and pieces of identity from whatever sources are available and constructing them as useful or desirable in a given situation. . . . All [social goals] are possible if one avoids looking back to locate a true and enduring self, and simply acts to full potential in the moment at hand. Simultaneously, the somber hues of multiphrenia – the sense of superficiality, the guilt at not measuring up to multiple criteria – give way to an optimistic sense of enormous possibility. The world of friendship and social efficacy is constantly expanding, and the geographical world is simultaneously contracting. Life becomes a candy store for one’s developing appetites.

While these multiphrenic clusters of self-imagesⁱⁱⁱ convey a sense of expansion – and a Quad One that is large, complex and perhaps unruly – there are other postmodern senses of self that

seem to diminish the size of Quadrant One. Perhaps there are postmodern efforts to shrink the size of self and keep it contained because the multiphrenic, saturated self is so large. We turn to a second sense of self that clearly conveys this push toward diminution.

The Minimal/Obsessive Self

Christopher Lasch suggests that the postmodern self is reduced in size. He speaks of a “minimal self” and of a preoccupation with the authentic self.^{iv} Lasch describes this as: “the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self.”^v Self is further minimized in our contemporary society by what I described about as the Q1/Q3 challenge. We don’t seem to know what is truly “us” and as a result can’t readily share much about our self (given that we can’t really be certain about what is (and is not) our authentic “self”). While Gergen suggests that we are confronted with multiple images of self, we also, from Lasch’s analysis, come to the conclusion that the true or authentic self is minimalized. We consider so many alternative images of self to be viable, that we are left with nothing or little that is always a part of us and that is consistently attractive to us and aligned with some core belief we hold about who we truly are.

We are like the proverbial donkey that is caught between two haystacks – starving to death because we can’t decide which is the more attractive pile of hay. We are starving for an authentic sense of self, in part because there are so many competing options. We are obsessed with finding our authentic self – so that we can share this self with other people about whom we care. Yet, we find it difficult to make the decision. In premodern times, our sense of self was defined by our social system (particularly class and role). Modern times led us to be defined by the work we did (our occupation, vocation, work-based success). We don’t know how to define ourselves in postmodern society, given the strong emphasis not only on job, but also on family, advocacy, recreational activities, and, uniquely, the lifestyle enclaves with which we might be affiliated.

In a society that requires many temporary relationships, we are not certain either about our

own authenticity or the authenticity of the other people with whom we relate for a short period of time. A very successful television series before this set of essays was being prepared (called "Lost") concerns a "tribe" of airline passengers who survive a plane crash and must live together and solve problems together on an isolated island. Unlike other typical "Robinson Crusoe"-type movies and novels, the dramatic moments in "Lost" often center on the survivors' concerns about the true identities of their fellow passengers and about the discovery by these men and women of one another's often hidden "secrets" about self. This television program might be successful in part because it captures something important about contemporary society. Our authentic self is minimalized, to use Lasch's term, and we minimalize the self of other people with whom we relate – because we don't know which part of them is "true" and "authentic" and which part is "false" and "inauthentic."

This minimalization and inability to discern one's authentic self and the authentic self of another person with whom we interact arises at least partially from the complexity, unpredictability and turbulence of our postmodern relationships. We must change our way of interacting with other people, depending on the setting in which we find ourselves. We can't survive in a postmodern world exhibiting the same pattern of interpersonal behavior in all settings. It is not only our ethics that have become situational and contextual, our behavior and perhaps even our sense of self have become situational and contextual. We have the opportunity (and the challenge) to become a different self in varying settings.

As one of the "Lost" survivors indicated to another survivor, we (the survivors) don't care what people have done or what role they have played in other settings. We only want to know what they are thinking and feeling right now and what they intend to do in this specific setting (though the survivors continue to be curious about one another's background). Our behavior is determined increasingly by the context within which we are operating (external locus of control). This context is constantly shifting, leading us to diffuse, situational and often ambiguous patterns of interpersonal behavior. Furthermore, if we are situational and contextual, then so are the other people with whom we relate. Hence, we minimalize our

authentic self (that which doesn't change from moment to moment) and the authentic self of other people (what we can predict and rely-on with regard to their behavior, regardless of setting).

On the positive side, we find that we can be forgiven for past failures – and there are a lot of failures in facing complex, unpredictable and turbulent postmodern relationships. We also find that people whom we have reason to believe are “unredeemable” can rise to heroic actions in specific settings and at specific times. I am reminded of the San Francisco Bay earthquake and, in particular, the collapse of the Cypress Freeway structure in the East Bay (Oakland). We can all recall graphic pictures on television and in newspapers and magazines of brave men climbing the collapsed structure to rescue those who were trapped in their car.

What is rarely told is that many of these remarkable men came out of the saloons that litter the landscape of the urban blight over which the Cypress Freeway crossed. These were “drunks” and “bums” who found exceptional courage (and meaning) in their efforts to save other people. For a few minutes and in a specific context (physical catastrophe) they were heroes and engaged in worthwhile actions. They were situational warriors, fighting a good cause. We forgave them for (or ignored) their past transgressions and honored them for a brief period of time as the best kind of people. Soon they would return to a different situation (the bars and a meaningless existence) and resume their old behavior.

Unfortunately, there is also a negative side – as Lasch notes. We are confused about our authentic self and, as a result, obsess about finding what is authentic. Lasch describes this as a culture of narcissism in which we devote considerable time and energy to the task of finding our self. This means that we have less time for other people and live with a fiction that is centered in an internal locus of control: we assume that there is a self that we can determine and control and that we are not products of our time, our situation, our context. Like the Cypress Freeway heroes, we can be great men and women in some settings – but this does not make us always a great person. We must live with our own fall from heroism, our own

confusing sense of multiple selves, and our focus on a smaller authentic self that is unchanging and always dependably present to guide us in our confusing postmodern life.

The Overwhelmed Self

The third sense of self relates closely to the first (saturated self), but certainly can be a reason to retreat to a minimal self (second self). In his book, *In Over Our Heads*, Robert Kegan describes the exceptional challenges associated with living every day in our contemporary world. He identifies the demands for very high-level cognitive processing among our leaders, our managers, and our parents:^{vi}

. . . the expectations upon us . . . demand something more than mere behavior, the acquisition of specific skills, or the mastery of particular knowledge. They make demands on our minds, on *how* we know, on the complexity of our consciousness. The “information highway” . . . may geometrically increase the amount of information, the ways it can be sent, and the number of its recipients. But our experience on this highway may be one of exhaustion (a new kind of “rat race” or “gridlock”) rather than admiration for the ease and speed of a new kind of transport if we are unable to assert our authority [internal locus of control] over the information. No additional amount of information coming into our minds will enable us to assume this authority; only a qualitative change in the complexity of our minds will.

Other authors – most notably Daniel Goleman – write about the equally-as-demanding task of gaining access to and making use in the world of our emotions. We need an emotional intelligence that is just as demanding as the cognitive intelligence described by Kegan. In identifying the challenging elements of being emotionally intelligent in our complex, postmodern world, Goleman suggests that one must be able: “. . . to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations, to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one’s moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope.”^{vii}

All of this suggests that we are vulnerable to a sense of being overwhelmed. Our self must be always engaged if we are to be cognitively and emotionally successful in our life. We don't have the givens of stable traditions; we must process a deluge of information; we must interact with and work alongside people with very different backgrounds, perspectives and values. How do we address this sense of being overwhelmed? Do we shrink or at least suspect the authenticity of our Quad One, as Lasch seems to suggest, or do we somehow hold together a self that is large, complex, saturated and challenged from every side as Gergen suggests? Alternatively, can we be selective and find ways in which to focus on specific aspects of ourselves, leaving other aspects temporarily undeveloped (Quad Four) or at least out of public view (Quad Three)?

The Selective Self

Developmental studies of men and women, suggest that we move toward fewer relationships as we mature; however, the relationships we keep tend to be deeper than those we had earlier in our life.^{viii} Similarly, we tend to care about fewer things in our life as we grow older and care more intently about fewer things. Erik Erikson identifies this process of selectivity as *generativity*.^{ix} We embrace a more selective self and choose to do fewer things in a more intense and caring manner as we become generative.

A colleague of mine, Bob Schukraft, was preparing a manuscript prior to his very tragic death as a young man that suggested a shift in the notion of development from the first half of our lives to the second half. During the first half, according to Schukraft, development refers primarily to expansion in our capacity to do things. We gain new competencies. This is what "development" means in our youth. During the second half of life, "development" means something quite different. It concerns the choices we make with regard to the use of competencies we already have. We still learn new things, but our developmental challenges are primarily concerned in the second half of life with making choices among several priorities, and with identifying the enduring values and purposes that provide guidance for these choices.

To the extent that our postmodern society is “graying” (older average age), this selective self may become more prevalent. It may be appropriate not only for people who are growing older (all of us), but also for people who are faced with the challenges of postmodern life (most of us). I would suggest that the selective self is particularly appropriate when coupled with the notion of an appreciative self – the fifth type of postmodern self – to which I turn later in a later essay.

Conclusions

So how does the Johari Window help us as a guidebook in these postmodern circumstances? In what ways does the New Johari Window serve even more effectively in our new Century as a human interaction tool of analysis and understanding? How do these emerging senses of self play out in the Johari Window and in our new century? To answer these three questions, I turn in the coming essays first to a brief description of the three fundamental challenges of our postmodern condition to which I have already frequently alluded: (1) complexity, (2) unpredictability and (3) turbulence. I suggest, in a preliminary way, how the Johari Window helps us address these three challenges – especially in an interpersonal context – and how each challenge relates to one or more of the five senses of self. What, then, is the nature of these three challenges that create these five different senses of self – and how does each relate to our New Johari Window?

ⁱ Gergen, Kenneth. *The Saturated Self*. New York: Basic Books, (rev ed) 2000, pp. 73-74.

ⁱⁱ Gergen, Kenneth. *The Saturated Self*. New York: Basic Books, (rev ed) 2000, p. 150.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gergen, Kenneth. *The Saturated Self*. New York: Basic Books. (rev ed) 2000, p. 32.

^{iv} Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: Norton, 1979, p. 34.

^v Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: Norton, 1979, p. 21.

^{vi} Kegan, Robert. *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 5.

^{vii} Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam, 1995, p. 34.

^{viii} Bergquist, William, Greenberg, Elinor and Klaum, Alan. *In Our Fifties: Voice of Men and Women Reinventing Their Lives*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993, p.43.

^{ix} Erikson, Erik. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton, 1968, pp. 138-139; Erikson, Erik. *Identity and the Life Cycle*. New York: Norton, 1980, pp. 103-104.