

Grand Challenges of the 21st Century -- Your Ideas Welcomed

You want to know a grand idea. Well I have one. It is one that I've challenged my students to think about and so now I am asking why not on a national or international level. I know the chances of science and technological grant money being spent on the following are next to nothing, but I hope you will read this with the seriousness with which it is intended because if you want to think grand, this is the grandest idea I think we could tackle as a nation and an idea whose time has come and passed.

I propose a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary program to end stigmatization.

Yes, I mean stigmatization. The definition of stigmatization has varied somewhat, but simply put, I mean *end the practicing of people marking others as less than human and then treating them as such. I mean end the bullying, the discrimination, the prejudice, the stereotyping, the oppression and the hatred of people by others.*

Beginning Leap

Okay, so I know the first reaction. It is put equally simply, "But isn't that just human nature?"

My answer is absolutely not. And that is the premise from which such a program must begin. I believe I could spend some time and substantiate my assertion that stigmatizing others is not necessarily "human" but let us take this for granted as a starting point. Other fantastic human adventures in science and technology have begun with a leap of faith, like the earth is round and space travel operates under the same laws of physics as we have on earth. **Let's consider the question, what if stigmatization is a learned trait and not human nature. What then could be done about it?**

Is this a scientific and technological question?

A more enlightened question to be debated is whether or not this can be addressed scientifically using technology. I argue that indeed much has been learned in the social sciences to suggest that indeed it could be changed using science and technology.

1. There are patterns in the way people interact with each other than have been studied for over 100 years by sociologists and anthropologists.

This includes understanding how people develop the attitudes and practices of stigmatization. People can be observed and they respond to the actions of others in ways that change their behavior. Everyone in marketing counts on this. Human communication changes human beings. Currently, in the United States, much of that interaction occurs between human beings via technology. We watch television, listen to the radio, read newspapers, books, and magazines, socially network and email online and so forth. At the heart of media encounters is the marriage of human interaction to technology. If we can use these technological advances to sell the idea of consumption, why do we balk at the idea of using the same advances to sell people the idea of tolerance and diversity.

2. Human communication has never been faster or more expansive than it is now.

While tolerance should be encouraged in any point in history, we now have the technology to create an effective program that would reach millions if not billions of people. At the very least, we could provide persuasive information in our own country. Our technology provides better learning tools than ever before as we engage more than one or two senses in those who interact technologically.

3. If one thinks beyond the social sciences, one sees that architecture, interior design, civil engineering, biology, medicine, and a host of other technologies and sciences could be brought to bear on ending stigma.

Communities have been designed to encourage members to get to know their neighbors. Universal design has built the idea of tolerance into the architecture and fixtures of spaces. Understandings about illnesses, physical conditions and our shared biology teach us that we are all human and all the "same" underneath our exteriors. There is hardly a science that could not be used to teach tolerance and diversity.

4. If we continue on the path of systematically limiting the life chances of people on the basis of how they look or what their group affiliation or heritage is, we will continue to systematically exclude potential creative leadership that can create or solve other technological and scientific endeavors.

Put simply, we may have already discouraged someone who could have cured cancer or figured out nuclear fusion. We are not developing the best of ourselves if we allow intolerance, xenophobia and stigmatization. That is why I suggest this is the grandest scientific endeavor we could address. ***This is a grand idea because it has implications for all other grand ideas.***

Yes, but can this be done?

I believe the answer is the same one as Jim Lovell said regarding going to the moon in the movie, *Apollo 13*: "From now on, we live in a world where man has walked on the moon. And it's not a miracle, we just decided to go." We have the tools to accomplish this. We know how people interact. We have telecommunications that would enhance that interaction. We know that if we create environments that encourage tolerance, people respond to it. We have the tools to learn more.

This is not an impossible dream. It is a comprehensive dream. It would require the encouragement of a multiple disciplines to address the issue comprehensively. It is more than a matter of "education" or "campaigns." We would need to ask the question of every policy made by every agency that makes public policy (whether government or private): "Is there an unintended consequence of your policy?" Far too many of our public policies have the unintended effect of stigmatizing the populations they propose to help. Money would be needed to study such policies and make suggestions to eliminate the unintended effects.

Publically funded infrastructure projects would also need to be scrutinized to determine if they have unintended effects. Our history is not good in this area either. We have divided neighborhoods and broke up families with some of our roads and housing endeavors.

But we would also need to be proactive with our policies. We could develop standards and practices that encourage diversity, encourage tolerance and bring people together into communities. The budget of the federal government together with its tax incentives and grants have multiple ways to encourage the development and adoption of these standards and practices.

Of course, we would also need to revamp education and provide family support, in order to establish socialization into a stigma-free society. The most pressing issue among children has to be bullying (though the practice of bullying can be seen in almost any adult organizational situation as well). Bullying can only exist in a social world that allows stigmatization. We need not only to consider the actions of the bully but also the tolerance of bullying through apathy by those around. For example, a number of schools have found that teaching students to surround a bully in action and simply witness with disdain what the bully is about to do will stop the bullying. Bullying can only occur where it is allowed socially.

This would be a large, expensive and pervasive endeavor. It would require all the elements that such endeavors require such as committed funding, public-private partnerships and a will to proceed in spite of opposition.

Is it something that government should be doing?

The short answer is: not alone. I am not advocating a propaganda campaign to change people into mindless political correctness. I am suggesting that when education, policies, standards, practices, designs and spaces encourage tolerance and discourage stigmatization, people will change. I am suggesting that much of what we do in this country today actually encourages stereotyping, discrimination and bigotry that leads to stigmatization. If we change those practices, people will change.

But I do think this is an appropriate government project because it requires funding and leadership, both of which can be provided when government fulfills its proper role. Specifically, I think that if the government doesn't do something to break the current atmosphere of intolerance in this society, it will never be able to do anything.

This program would encourage innovation and provide economic support on two levels. First, directly because it would encourage those with high level skills in multiple industries to address the issues. Then indirectly, because as people are allowed to fulfill their potentials, they will contribute to the collective economic well-being.

We have lost our sense of civility in the United States. I don't mean politeness. I mean the idea that we do better together than apart. The rhetoric of the market – competition, greed, superiority – doesn't really work for the market and really doesn't work for citizenship. In all human endeavors, even in competitive ones such as a market, cooperation and collaboration are part of the mix. Our political rhetoric has mimicked our market rhetoric in the past 30 years or so and we are paying dearly for this mindset.

In a civil society, there is competition and there is disagreement, but such things are friendly and there is underneath an understanding of the commonality of our collective fates. We pay a price for everything we believe that is not true. Currently, our government's inability to move forward on any issue without being divided is the price we are paying for the belief that we do not need each other. Name almost any big issues facing us – global warming, nuclear proliferation, healthcare, war – and at the heart of those issues is our interconnectedness. We are on this planet together.

So I guess the bottom line is that government has a self-interest in promoting the end of stigma because stigma only ends when people understand their connection with others.

What would such a program look like?

Money would be needed to support scholars who study stigma and ways to end stigma. Think tanks should be supported to share what is already known and to form research agendas and policy recommendations.

Money should be allocated to public works projects that promote tolerant spaces, including universal design and pedestrian neighborhoods that encourage neighbors to meet and know each other. Money should also be available to encourage retrofitting, including money to establish standards and practices that would encourage social environments so that people could get to know each other and understand each other.

Money should be allocated to educate and encourage local interaction among groups that have traditionally been intolerant to each other. Local governments should be encouraged through federal funding to adopt such exchanges.

Local governments should also be encouraged to adopt the standards and practices for public works and policies established on a public level. This includes providing them with adequate funding to accomplish these changes.

Money should be allocated to telecommunication campaigns that encourage understanding, tolerance and diversity through the production of media.

All government practices should be scrutinized, analyzed and restructured to find and eliminate practices that result in the unintended consequence of stigmatizing people.

These are the things that I, as a sociologist, can imagine. I'm sure that a multi-disciplinary group of thinkers could create a more comprehensive approach than the one I've outlined.

The bottom line is, however, that whatever is created, it would need to eventually touch people at a local level. Communities of tolerance from the group up will create the lasting changes. Therefore any program that intends to install rather than encourage would be doomed to failure. What works in one part of the country might not work in another part and therefore, some local variation would be necessary. But such approaches have been accomplished by government in the past. The school lunch program and Headstart are excellent examples of such local programs that come from federal funding.

Is this too grand an idea?

I hope you will not think so. I hope you will consider it. I am serious that in my belief that if we simply decided to do this, we could. I also believe that if we do not find a way to do this at some level, all the other grand ideas are doomed. Think of what we could accomplish if we had encouraged the best of us to be all that we can be. Stigmatization limits the life chances of people with potential, people who could have made life better for all of us. It is not a matter of morality alone. It is a practical matter of developing the assets that all humans offer when given a chance to be their best.