

Splitting and Identity Politics

Why are evidence and reason largely absent from political discourse? Why do well-supported facts seem to be no match for emotion? As confusing as this all seems, much of it can be explained by a process called “splitting.” Though little known by the public, the term is widely used by mental health professionals.

I first noticed splitting a few years ago when I provided psychotherapy to a depressed White female college student¹. At first, our sessions focused on her depression, but she took frequent detours toward racial politics. She “loved” Malcolm X and railed against White privilege. Then, she told me that she “identified” as Black.

She said she felt “Black on the inside” because she “got it” and wasn’t ignorant or hateful. Everything she said about Black people was idealizing and positive. They were always blameless, strong victims, smart and good. In contrast, everything she said about White people was aggressively critical and shaming. They were always ignorant oppressors, fragile, selfish, and guilty. One had 100% of the power; the other had 0%, etc. This led me to believe that she felt Black because Whiteness for her was intolerably negative, whereas Blackness was appealing because it was idealized as perfect.

At first, I was unsure how to respond. If I asked her ‘Do you feel anything positive about your White identity,’ the question itself could have provoked her. Besides, I couldn’t think of anything positive about White people that didn’t sound racist, even to my own ears. Nor could I think of a single shortcoming in another ethnic group that didn’t similarly sound racist. Even exploring the topic in my own thoughts felt wrong somehow.

As her therapist, I wanted to help, but what exactly did that mean here? I could have avoided her comments about race. But was it racist to ignore these themes or was it racist to explore them? And what would most help her? How *should* she understand her identity? Should she be free to see herself as Black if she wanted? Or should she embrace her White identity? Or should I encourage colorblindness?

The case was riddled with pitfalls. I think this is largely what people mean by ‘political correctness.’ It’s not necessarily that people are frustrated that they can’t say racist things. It’s that often virtually any comment about race can be framed as racist. It’s a maze without escape. But eventually I found a framework for understanding this patient—splitting.

“Splitting” is a defense mechanism in which people unconsciously frame ideas, individuals, or groups of people in all-or-nothing terms (e.g., all-good vs. all-bad). It’s called “splitting” because presumably intolerable thoughts and feelings are “split off” from one’s awareness, leading to a partial view of the world. To see our opponents as pure evil, we have to split off the parts of them that are admirable. To see ourselves as purely righteous, we have to split off our shortcomings.

At the root of this process is the distress we often feel about contradictions. It can be painful to think that the people we idealize are flawed and the people we loathe have virtues. By pushing these conflicts out of awareness, splitting reduces anxiety and makes the world appear more coherent—at least in the

¹ Identifying information was altered to protect patient confidentiality.

short term. Splitting also severely distorts reality, making it hard to develop effective solutions to problems. It makes dialogue virtually impossible, impairs relationships, and can even lead to mental illness. Splitting can impact our identity, morality, memories, and desires.

Splitting is theorized to be an entirely unconscious process, so people don't realize they're doing it, or why. They're unaware of the uncomfortable mix of emotions that arose, the anxiety that drove them to split, or their inability to tolerate nuance.

How can we overcome splitting? In psychoanalysis, they say "interpret the defense before the content." This means it's more effective to first talk about the defense of splitting itself (how it works and its costs). Then, we can shift the dialogue toward the pros and cons of an issue. Before we address the defense, contrary evidence rarely penetrates.

After I found this framework for this patient, my views on identity politics changed dramatically. I saw splitting throughout our culture, and not just on race, but on gender and other categories. It's quite common for non-split comments to sound racist to people. Naturally, this impacts most discussions of free speech, workplace discrimination, and many other issues.

Splitting can even shape how we reason about ideas. Take a hypothetical gender disparity in mental health. If women were to have more depression than men, suggested causes would likely be sexism, male privilege, etc. But if men were to have more depression, the causes would likely include high female emotional intelligence, toxic masculinity, etc. In other words, it doesn't matter which group is over- or under-represented, the causes are the same: male badness and female goodness—at least in much popular discourse. All non-split explanations end up sounding false and immoral—especially if coming from a White male.

These splits are often rationalized. Some might argue that distorting the truth to frame entire groups as all-good or all-bad is "justice." Others could say that White privilege, a concept often used to disparage White people, is somehow a compliment. Non-split comments could be dismissed as "social constructs" while many split comments are important "lived realities." None of these arguments change the fact that splitting distorts reality, is hurtful, and fosters division and hatred.

Sadly, by the time I had developed this formulation, the patient had left treatment for unrelated reasons. It's heartbreaking. I think this approach could've helped.

A great Islamic mystic said that one of the greatest sins is to divide people into groups and say only good things about some and only bad things about others. This process can turn peaceful societies into ones filled with hatred and chaos.

Now, we desperately need to encourage non-split dialogue. It could make the world a more just, loving, and enlightened place. It might even cure our disorder.

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