Belonging Amidst Bias: Embracing Difference on the Path to Common Humanity

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Belonging Amidst Bias:

Embracing Difference on the Path to Common Humanity

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Abstract

The mindfulness community prioritizes self-awareness and common humanity, but is often entrapped by the idea that oneness is equivalent to sameness. This inclination for objectivity is rooted in the same neural propensities that facilitate bias; the brain is a subjective organ, however, and so neurologically speaking, bias is inevitable. This paper asks: Is striving for sameness separating us from interconnectedness? A human experience is a subjective, diverse, and variable one. The path to shared humanity and social justice co-occurs with increasing cultural humility through mindful awareness and acknowledging our subjective nature. Exploring our neurological tendency to make assumptions, we can discover that only by embracing difference can we cultivate a sense of interconnectedness. We find that variation (viewed through the lens of intersectionality and substantiated by biology) is not only normal but meaningful, with evidence tracing back to misconstrued Darwinian concepts. Such difference is not always visible, however, and this is authenticated in the text by personal positionality as it relates to difference (particularly of race, ability, and emotional experiences). This examination is anchored through an original contribution of a proposed “Paradoxical Path” to common humanity, involving an exploration of explicit and implicit biases. Due to our subjective neurobiology and inclination toward biases, mindful acceptance of difference within ourselves and others is paramount in cultivating collective consciousness and expanding our quintessential worldview of what it means to be human.
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Embracing Difference on the Path to Common Humanity

The “lizard brain” roams amidst self-help books, news stories, psychology textbooks, and beyond. Headlines like “Master your reptile brain” or “Why can’t we stop scrolling? Blame the lizard brain” offer an appealing and accessible approach to neuroscience, but most who reference the outdated and oversimplified model aren’t aware that it is discredited by evolutionary biologists and neuroscientists (Barrett, 2017b; Cesario et al., 2020; McKay, 2020). This reductionist framework ripples out to affect widespread popular (mis)understandings of contemporary neuroscience (and research itself), leading to misinterpretations about the brain—and what it means to be human. This mechanistic approach to neuroscience implies that objectivity is a possible human experience, but this opposes the very nature of the brain, which, as will be discussed, is an inherently subjective organ. Approaching science through such positivist epistemology not only limits our understanding of neuroscience and the human experience, but also keeps us dualistic and entrapped by our inevitable biases, preventing the cultivation of equality and common humanity.

In an effort to understand my personal experience of difference as it relates to race, ability, and emotional experiences, I came upon a debate of epistemological paradigms; this battle between positivists and constructionists has been ongoing for centuries, but the reductionist positivist framework continues to reign supreme amidst Western science and society (Darlaston-Jones, 2007; Gergen, 2015). Positivists (often referred to in slightly different forms as empiricists, essentialists, or post-positivists) believe science can and should be approached objectively, without the influence of personal biases. Constructionists, however, posit that all experience is influenced (and constructed) by culture and context, and so all experiences
(including science) exist through an inevitable personal lens, which must be acknowledged to see as clearly as possible. This is especially apparent regarding the science of emotion, whereby positivist universal perspectives are assumed and perpetuated, despite a lack of support from contemporary neuroscience. In this exploration, I’ll journey into the subjective nature of being human, existing within a constructionist approach, substantiated by personal positionality and reflexivity as it relates to difference, emotional experiences, and bias.

Neurologically speaking, bias is inevitable. Instead of unattainably striving for an objective understanding of ontology, the path to social justice and “enlightenment” at individual and collective levels accompanies increasing cultural competency and humility through mindful awareness. Mindfulness approaches and practices, tracing back to Buddhist roots, can help us to expand our worldviews, and dismantle the boundaries between self and other. We must transcend the belief that oneness equates to sameness. Intimately exploring our neurological tendency to make assumptions through mindfulness, we can, somewhat paradoxically, discover that oneness is realized by embracing difference; we find that variation, neurobiologically and spiritually speaking, is not only normal but meaningful, with evidence trailing back to misinterpreted Darwinian roots whereby two of his most powerful offerings have been conflated and misapplied. Yet, such difference is not always visible, so this path to collective consciousness must involve both an implicit and explicit exploration—with those who are similar to us and those who are different. Due to our subjective neurobiology and inclination toward biases, mindful acceptance of difference within ourselves and others is crucial to cultivating equality and oneness, and to expanding our quintessential worldview of what it means to be human.
This investigation culminates with my original contribution, a “Paradoxical Path” to shared humanity, with practical and theoretical applications demonstrated along the way. In support, I offer an overview of the sequence with Figure 1. The Path may seem counterintuitive with the proposal that embracing difference (as opposed to sameness) leads to oneness (hence the name “paradoxical”), but this is a mindful journey toward cultural responsiveness and inclusivity through acceptance of variation. The path involves six successive steps: (1) acknowledgment, (2) curiosity, (3) validation, (4) inclusion, (5) belonging, and (6) oneness.

Figure 1

The Paradoxical Path to Interconnectedness

Note. My personal model of the Paradoxical Path demonstrates the progression towards interconnectedness through mindful awareness. The bottom half of the figure demonstrates the reductionist positivist path alternative (to which we are neurologically inclined), which perpetuates othering and disconnection.
Personal Positionality

What are you feeling right now? If you’re unsure, consider referencing a feelings list, such as Figure 2.

Figure 2
Feelings List

Note. This graphic is used as a handout at The Hoffman Quadrinity Process (The Hoffman Institute Foundation, 2013).
You might find this helpful in clarifying and naming your feelings—or, if you’re like me, you might not. Feelings lists of all sorts are a standard tool used in emotional healing contexts and therapies. When I was first presented with a list like this at around 25 years old, I was blown away—are there really so many feelings? I knew what the words meant, but it was hard for me to understand that there could be a difference between “frustrated” and “irritated” or “disgruntled.” I couldn’t conceive of “happy” being a separate experience from “delight” or “joy.” Most of the time, I felt “fine.” I was told this meant I was “numb” and that I had suppressed my feelings due to untended emotional pain and trauma. Perhaps there’s still some truth to this, but from my perspective, my emotional experience could largely be narrowed down to three states: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Therapists, coaches, and retreat leaders insisted this wasn’t the case, so I went on a mission to increase my emotional intelligence. I wanted to be a whole human, after all. But regardless of how many feeling words I memorized, or how much therapy or retreats with which I engaged, new “feelings” did not seem to emerge.

This illustrates one of the many ways I spent so much of my life feeling “different” from everyone else. And it wasn’t just an internal experience of difference, because it was reinforced externally in the ways I was interacted with and perceived. Throughout my life, I’ve often been identified as “quirky,” a bit odd with my directness and interpersonal relations, and having a “unique” way of seeing things. I’d always attributed my sense of feeling different to my identity as a person of mixed-race and heritage—my mother is White, and my father is a first-generation immigrant from Pakistan. Growing up, I most often did not feel “White enough” to be accepted by White people nor “Brown enough” for Brown people. Differences in our internal experience are nuanced and challenging to articulate or discern. After all, we each go through life with
our own experience as our baseline lens. We expect other experiences to align with ours (practically and neurologically speaking)—unless we intentionally acknowledge that they might not. For instance, it’s intuitively challenging to fathom that one’s own internal experience of feeling happy or sad (or melancholy or ecstatic) could be that different from someone else’s.

I spent the first few decades of my life suffering from feeling othered, and from othering myself. Mindfulness and the Dharma have been some of the greatest gifts I’ve received in this life, as they’ve helped me take an honest look at myself, explore my suffering, and rest in more moments of relief. One piece of mindfulness that never resonated with me until recent years, though, was “common humanity.” Indeed, most Western mindfulness communities and traditional Buddhist contexts prioritize “oneness” and an understanding of interdependence amidst practice and life. In letting go of the self, allegedly, we can allow the dualistic boundary between you and me to dissolve amidst the porousness, leading to a sense of interconnectedness. Again and again, in mindfulness contexts, I witnessed people expressing a feeling of safety and connection with one another—a sense that “I am not alone.” But I always felt alone—isolated, different, and disconnected from the rest of the world—and these well-intentioned communities perpetuated my own othering.

When I was 31 years old, I was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a developmental disorder impacting the nervous system that impairs social communication and interactions and often leads to sensory sensitivities, repetitive behaviors, and obsessive interests. This diagnosis of neurotype was terrifying and challenged everything I thought I knew about myself as an educated, regulated, “mindfulness person”—and yet, I finally felt validated in my confusing life experience. Indeed, it began to make sense why so much of the world seemed to experience me as different—and, contrary to what I spent my life believing, it was less about
race than I thought. My diagnosis paved a rocky journey to self-acceptance and an exploration of what it means to be human. I now see that what prevented a diagnosis earlier in my adult life was my own implicit and internalized ableism. Bias against disabled people is one of many isms (oppressive beliefs) baked into Western society.

I now recognize that I’ve spent almost my entire life “hiding” as an othered person. I exist with the privilege of having less melanin in my skin and being “White passing.” I was late-diagnosed with ASD particularly because of my privileges of being able to camouflage and compensate with interpersonal norms and expectations—something not all autistics can do (Pearson & Rose, 2021). Likely, my ability to hide interpersonally was compounded by my lighter skin. But why did I feel the compulsive need to hide? Because of my own internalized oppression and subconscious fears of being part of an openly marginalized group (or potentially many intersecting minority identities). On September 12th, 2001, the day after the 9/11 attacks, I walked into middle school and was called a “terrorist.” That was the day I realized it was safer to pretend I was White. What I didn’t realize, at 12 years old, was how this privilege of hiding reinforces systemic oppression. All I ever wanted was to feel I was an acceptable human being.

But due to my own internalized biases, I was seeking acceptance and alignment with societal structures (Manuel, 2015) rooted in the ethos and praxis of white supremacy and human exceptionalism.

As an adult post-diagnosis, in an effort to understand my seemingly divergent emotional experience, I came upon a debate in the science of emotion as to whether emotions were universal “circuits” in the brain and body, or constructed experiences. The former positivist structure (the “classical view”) insists emotions are universal experiences that can be studied objectively. This view implies that I am not human—or at least, not the acceptable kind, as there
is no space for my experience in this framework. However, the Theory of Constructed Emotion (Barrett, 2017b, 2017c) is inclusive, arguing that emotions are merely translations of body sensations combined with subjective past experience and context; my experience might be different, but it was still acceptable—I am human—and normal—in this paradigm.

Onward and upward, I found myself down a trail of the positivist vs. constructionist debates that have existed beyond emotion science and throughout history, with the former arguing for objective epistemology and the latter for subjective (Darlaston-Jones, 2007; Gergen, 2015). While I don’t have a proposed reconciliation for the debate, I have begun to unravel how the varying worldviews and associated epistemological paradigms impact our experiences and actions at intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. This is not a matter of opinion about which side is “right” or “wrong.” The historical battle between “nature” and “nurture” isn’t resolved by submitting to either one side or the other. Instead, progress toward shared humanity is found amidst both/and explorations. Embracing this diunital thinking, as opposed to dichotomous, can only exist within the constructionist paradigm. The positivist paradigm is a reductionist one, concretizing a narrow worldview, driven by a “trigger-react” dualistic mentality and need for certainty. This side poses significant consequences prohibiting the establishment of equality and inclusivity (both of which are prerequisites for interconnectedness) and, albeit unintentionally, perpetuates isms and oppression. The constructionist paradigm, however, embodies a broader and more spacious worldview that is responsive, curious, and open to a path to oneness.

**On Being Human: The Nature of the Brain**

What does it mean to be human? Or perhaps better, what sets humans apart from other beings? Some suspect it is our morality or emotional experience, and others believe it relates to our ability to be aware of thinking, or to contemplate past and future. It is unlikely we’ll resolve
this existential ontological query anytime soon, but there’s a general inclination for humans to see ourselves as “special” in some way—conceivably due to our brains. Indeed, our brains may be different from the brains of other beings—but all brains in all species are different. To investigate if our difference makes us special (or exceptional), it is helpful to explore and develop a basic understanding of how the brain works as recognized by contemporary neurobiology, as well as the circulated colloquial misunderstandings.

**The Fallacy of the Triune Brain Theory**

In the 1960’s, Paul MacLean developed the neural organization concept of the “Triune Brain Theory.” This reductionist model postulates that the human brain evolved linearly, from the instinctive “reptilian” hindbrain, followed by the “lower mammalian” or emotional midbrain (known as the “limbic system”), and finally added on by the newest cognitive tier, the neocortex or “late mammalian” forebrain (Cesario et al., 2020; Thomas, 2012). According to Maclean, each of these layers represent distinct stages of neural evolution, interacting with each other but remaining semi-independent, each with its “own special intelligence” and “subjectivity” (Thomas, 2012). Maclean (1973) believed that emotions were produced by imbalances in these three areas of the brain. In the 1960s, when MacLean proposed the framework, perhaps it was necessary to start with a concrete model to give Western science a touchpoint for exploration; indeed, this organization makes “intuitive sense” (Thomas, 2012). However, contemporary neuroscience now acknowledges the theory to be mistaken and severely oversimplified, which is problematic given its perpetuation by modern authors, educators, and academia (Cesario et al., 2020; Farley, 2008; Thomas, 2012).

**Nervous-System Evolution**
Neuroscientists and evolutionary biologists have discredited the Triune Brain Theory for decades, despite its persistence and widespread endorsement (Cesario et al., 2020; Farley, 2008). Cesario et al. (2020) explain that this incorrect developmental approach is founded on the belief that earlier species lacked the “more recent” neural structures; however, neurobiologists agree that neither species nor neural structures evolved linearly. For instance, lizards did not evolve to become mice, monkeys, and then humans. Mammals did not evolve from reptiles, and in fact, both share a common fish-like ancestor. Also, all vertebrates contain the same primary neural regions (forebrain, midbrain, and hindbrain), organized in different structural and functional manners, but “large divisions have not been added” over time (p. 256). Despite popular belief, the prefrontal cortex is not uniquely human. The triune brain model is not supported by contemporary neuroscience, even though the framework continues to be popularized by the media and academia. Foundations of these associated neurobiological fallacies are found in virtually every introductory college textbook on psychology (Cesario et al., 2020; Barrett, 2017b). Contemporary neurobiology posits that all animals evolved from common ancestors, with “complex nervous systems and sophisticated cognitive abilities [evolving] independently many times” (Cesario et al., 2020, p. 257).

Cesario et al. (2020) urge us to “abandon this mistaken view of human brains” (p. 255). The Triune Brain Theory continues to be perpetuated in psychological contexts because it maps Freud’s personality theory (id, ego, and superego) onto these three brain structures, and correlates with the widely used “fight or flight” responses, signifying activation of the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) (McKay, 2020). Neuroscientist McKay (2020) offers that the SNS “did not evolve to save ancient cave-dwelling humans from sabre-tooth tigers,” but rather “to meet the body’s energy demands to all matter of threats and challenges and
opportunities” (para. 3). Continued use of the severely oversimplified and out-of-date model may seem innocuous, but I offer that there are unintended consequences with serious implications; this inaccurate model exists in the reductionist positivist paradigm, and is rooted in human exceptionalism. The next time you are exposed to (or feel inclined to utilize) terms like “lizard brain” or “going limbic,” consider unyoking any clinging grip to their inferences. If we truly intend to aspire for a sense of interconnectedness (“oneness” on the path), it is logically impossible to believe humans are the exceptional species—an inherent dualism.

**Speciesism: Human Exceptionalism**

Merriam-Webster (2022) defines -ism as an “oppressive and especially discriminatory attitude or belief.” Isms such as racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, classism, speciesism, and others are not biological but socially constructed and rooted in dualism, as they imply an inherent “separateness” between groups. Human exceptionalism falls within speciesism, which is defined as “the assignment of different moral worth based on species membership” (Caviola et al., 2018, p. 1). Caviola et al. (2018) demonstrated through a series of studies that speciesism shares “psychological properties with other phenomena we refer to as prejudice” (p. 25). Anthropocentric ideology, then (and hence any ism), sustains on separateness and disconnection.

**The Brain & Neuroconstructivism**

How do you make sense of Figure 3? Neurons in your brain are likely arduously attempting to process this novel input.

**Figure 3**

*Ambiguous Blobs*
Note. This image is used in Lisa Feldman Barrett’s TED Talk “You aren't at the mercy of your emotions -- your brain creates them” (Barrett, 2017d).

Turn to the Appendix and find a more comprehensible image (Figure A); then return to this one and notice your perceptual experience. Is it easier to make sense of the ambiguous contents of this image? With the ingredients of sensory input, past experience, and greater context, your brain can now construct a more familiar object. Before the reference image was revealed, you were what neuroscientists call experientially blind (Barrett, 2017a). Now, you are able to look at the same blobs and simulate the missing pieces; in the most accurate sense of the word, you are hallucinating (Barrett, 2017b; Seth & Friston, 2016). Consider that you and another person may have had a very different experience of the mysterious blobs prior to seeing the completed image, and how now it is impossible to ever “unsee” and revisit the image again as novel. This process of your brain constructing your perception and experience through simulation is happening subconsciously. We tend to take our visual experience of the external world as truth, but contemporary neuroscience posits that most of our experience occurs through predictive processing rather than reactionary perception (Barrett, 2017a; Seth & Friston, 2016).
This approach to human experience is a *constructionist* one. I personally subscribe to the constructionism paradigm, which is epistemologically rooted in subjectivism; as sensical as the illustration above may seem, in many ways, it opposes the positivist and objectivist worldview that has driven Western science for the last century. Indeed, much of social, psychological, and behavioral research finds itself unresolved and at a stalemate due to science being approached from these two conflicting paradigms.

Consider the purpose of the brain. If you believe in natural selection, it is imperative to recognize that your brain’s core task is to balance physiological systems for survival (known as “allostasis”) (Barrett, 2017c). Through what neuroscientists call “prediction,” the brain makes inferences about incoming sensory data, informed by prior knowledge and experience (Barrett, 2017a; Seth & Friston, 2016). Counterintuitively, it is these inferred hypotheses, and not the sensory inputs, that create our perceptions. This predictive processing which simulates our experience is metabolically advantageous, but it challenges the “stimulus-response” concept of the brain, which has been deeply rooted in Western culture and psychology and created a historical-philosophical debate around what it means to be human (Barrett & Simmons, 2015). Unlike the past intuitive “bottom-up” model of perception, suggesting that neurons are lying dormant until information arrives (triggering a “circuit”), the generative “top-down” model of predictive coding offers that the brain is simulating our present experience based on our past; we are living in a “hallucination” of sorts (Barrett, 2017b; Seth, 2017).

Dated reductionist perspectives assumed the brain to be a single organ that was organized by structure alone. Modern neuroscientific evidence has progressed to confirm the brain as a massive functional and integrated network, and so it has become understood that neurons are *multipurpose*. The highly complex system of brain circuitry can engage many different neural
patterns that can generate the same outcome; simply put, there’s more than one way the brain can achieve a similar event or state (Barrett, 2017b, 2017c). In biology, this concept is called “degeneracy,” which is the capacity for “elements that are structurally different to perform the same function or yield the same output” (Edelman & Gally, 2001, p. 13763). What is important at this point is to recognize that, as far as neurological activity is concerned, there is little standardized replication amidst neural firing, and “variation is the norm” (Barrett, 2017b, p. 11).

To understand prediction in action, I will borrow and adapt an example of visual stimulus from neuroscientist Hasenkamp (2014), combined and applied with concepts by Barrett (2017c). Consider a child learning the alphabet. They assimilate the shape of the letter A for the first time, and some neurons within the visual system are activated. The next few times they encounter an A in various contexts, different neurons will be activated (likely with some overlap of previous instances). With each exposure, common elements are discerned; while learning to read, differences between instances of exposure (perhaps, through different fonts) are corrected through prediction error. Eventually, common elements (such as two slanted lines with a horizontal line in the middle) develop the concept of the letter A. Concepts are how the brain learns and remembers, conditioned based on past experiences and exposures, made sense of with context. With more exposures, a larger pool is made accessible from which the brain can pull. Eventually, the brain can quickly predict and simulate the letter A based on the concept, whereby the child does not perceive the unique components of the letter (the individual composite line elements) with each encounter. As it relates to degeneracy, many different neural patterns can lead to the perception of the concept A. In this way, the brain is very much a conditioned organ; everything we are exposed to impacts our pool of experiences to simulate future perceptions.
And so, each of our neurological experiences of the world is entirely *personalized*—or *subjective*.

**The Great Debate of Emotion Science**

Similar to the previous example of constructing the letter “A,” if you consider an emotion—perhaps sadness, anger, happiness, or otherwise—it can feel as though these instances are *triggered* (something happens, and the emotion results automatically). When we see emotions in others, too, it can feel as though we read such sadness, anger, or happiness in their face and that we can determine their state based on our perception or experience. Emotion, too, however, is another illustration that the experience we feel is not necessarily reflective of what is actually happening neurophysiologically—at least, that’s the claim made by the “constructionist” side of what I have named “The Great Debate of Emotion Science.” Emotions, this side argues, are constructed experiences; they are interoceptive cues, combined with cultural context and past experience, translated together to make meaning and provide behavioral direction and maintain allostasis for survival (Barrett, 2017b, 2017c).

However, the other side of The Great Debate believes emotions are innate, with each “basic emotion” ostensibly containing a specific physiological “fingerprint” that’s identifiable across the human race. This positivist approach is also known as the “essentialist” view of emotions. It is fascinating that this debate has continued for a century and remains strongly embedded in our Western society, science, and academia (in-part driven by the triune brain fallacy) considering no such emotion signature has ever been recorded, and substantial evidentiary support exists for the constructionist stance (including attention brought to flaws of the universal emotion recognition paradigm) (Barrett, 2017b; Gendron et al., 2014). The Great
Debate is a cardinal example of the historical epistemological battle, and the real-life, nuanced consequences of a reductionist worldview.

**Basic Emotion Theory**

If you believe you can “read” someone’s emotions through their facial expressions, you may be an essentialist. It is understandable why people tend to regard emotions as innate; the experience of an emotion *feels* as though emotions are triggered automatically within us; reading emotions in others, too, *feels* effortless and intuitive (Barrett, 2017b).

Basic Emotion Theory postulates that emotions have been biologically programmed into humans through natural selection as adaptive reactions for survival (Siegel et al., 2018; TenHouten, 2021). As such, emotions are said to be universally recognized across human cultures (Mayr, 2004), and this is often referred to as the “universality hypothesis” (Gendron et al., 2014). In this view, emotions are considered “natural kinds,” reflecting structures of the natural world with an inherent “essence” (Barrett, 2017b; Lindquist et al., 2013), or a metaphorical autonomic nervous system (ANS) “fingerprint” (Berent et al., 2020).

Since the times of Plato and Aristotle, there have been numerous efforts to identify basic “primary” emotions and their “essences.” Darwin’s *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* continues to inspire this view significantly, having theorized the existence of emotion essences as adaptive survival responses (Barrett, 2011; Barrett & Satpute, 2019). Various models propose differing candidate emotions, but the inventories typically list four to ten total primary emotions (TenHouten, 2021), with the most common consensus being six, comprising anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise (Barrett, 2017b; Mayr, 2004; Sauter et al., 2010). Following this classical view, each primary emotion contains an associated physiological and neurological pattern, distinguishable from other emotion categories (Berent et al., 2020). That is,
the pattern of “anger,” for instance, should be discernable and consistent across all contexts; whether you “cry in anger, shout in anger, smile in anger, freeze in anger, or laugh in the face of anger” (Siegel et al., 2018, p. 4), the characteristic diagnostic pattern supposedly persists. There should be one pattern per emotion category; that is, one signature pattern “fires” in the body and brain as a causal mechanism for one emotion, and substantial ANS variation should not exist within distinct categories.

A critical supposition of this essentialist view is that neural “fingerprints” of an emotion category must be specific enough to be “perceiver-independent” (Siegel et al., 2018, p. 5), which inherently presumes that objectivity within emotion science is possible at all—there is an assumed universal perspective. It is important to acknowledge that Basic Emotion Theory founds itself on Maclean’s reductionist Triune Brain Theory, speculating a universal “trigger-react” emotional experience; without this misconception as a basis, the classical view of emotion cannot sustain.

The Theory of Constructed Emotion

The Theory of Constructed Emotion (also known as social-constructionist theory, or neuroconstructive and rational constructionist perspective, at times) suggests that instances of emotions are constructed using the “ingredients” of interoceptive sensations, context (social and cultural), and the brain’s ability to make predictions based on past experience (Barrett, 2017b; Siegel et al., 2018). Interestingly, this hypothesis, too, argues for Darwinian roots, citing more specifically On the Origin of Species. Darwin’s view suggests that biological “categories” (such as “species”) are conceptual and that variable instances within a category are adaptive. The brain (which is locked in the black box that is our skull) uses our raw physiological sensations to navigate the world, and so emotions are said to be meaningful translations to provide behavioral
direction and action in order to regulate and meet the body’s metabolic demands (Barrett, 2017b, 2017c). With this view, it is not possible to reduce the emotional landscape to a handful of “basic” or “primary” emotions; these translations can be achieved through various ingredient combinations and neural patterns.

In the constructionist framework, emotions are not natural kinds; there is no neural signature or specific causal mechanism or pattern for emotions in the brain or body. ANS variation (which shunts the classical view’s argument) is not only expected with this theory, but it is also actually meaningful as it relates to the nature of emotion (Siegel et al., 2018). Throughout her work, Lisa Feldman-Barrett reiterates an important concept relevant to this discussion: “variation is the norm” (Barrett, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). With this approach, ANS activity during any instance of emotion will be “tailored to the specific demands of that situation” (Siegel et al., 2018, p. 2); the context will impact how “anger,” for instance, is experienced, as well as constructed in and by the mind-body. Degeneracy makes it possible to experience this outcome of “anger” through many different neural patterns. Emotion categories are conceptual categories, which are perceiver-dependent; and so, emotion categories are “populations of context-dependent, variable instances” (Siegel et al., 2018, p. 3).

Constructionist approaches are also predicated in part using language, which varies by culture. Indeed, our concepts are shaped by language, and emotion concepts are no different. There are many examples of emotion concepts that the Western world is not familiar with, such as “Forelsket,” a Norwegian concept for intense joy of falling in love, or the Russian “Tocka,” which is a spiritual anguish, or the Portuguese “Saudade,” which is a strong, spiritual longing (Barrett, 2017b; McKay, 2020). This does not mean that people of those cultures are not experiencing those emotions; it only means that we, in the West, are not. In the constructionist
framework, without an emotion concept, we cannot experience that emotion (keep in mind that language is not the only way to learn a concept, and so it is possible to understand concepts without language) (Barrett, 2017b). In this way, we can see the both/and reconciliation that the constructionist framework offers: emotion is both constructed biologically, and made meaningful by social and cultural concepts, while mediated by linguistic factors.

Subjectivity is an inherent constituent of psychological constructionism, and emotion is a subjective experience. If one person describes their emotional experience, they are expressing just that: their emotional experience. It may overlap with the experience of others as we learn similar concepts through a shared social reality, but it is still dependent on a first-person subjective perspective. Similarly, cross-cultural researchers Sue et al. (2019) discuss that all theories of human development arise within cultural context, and using “EuroAmerican values of normality and abnormality may be culture-bound and biased” (p. 29). Ultimately, it is imperative that we recognize the importance of culture and cultural conditioning with interactions at intrapersonal, interpersonal, collective, and systemic levels.

**Reflexivity: Divergent Emotional Experiences**

In exploring my personal internal experience, the Theory of Constructed Emotion resonated deeply, because it is contingent on body sensations; the theory quite simply offers that emotions are translations of interoceptive sensations. The sensory sensitivities that autistic people experience are often related to divergent interoceptive experiences, due to hyper and/or hypo neurological connectivity. Indeed, I, like many people on the spectrum, often forget to eat in not receiving interoceptive cues for “hunger,” for instance. Or while a neurotypical person may habituate to the sound of a ticking clock in a room, at some point forgetting it’s there, some
neurodivergents, like myself, *sensitize* to it, wherein the sound comes to the forefront of my attention, making it challenging (and at times tormenting) to shift concentration away from it.

Regarding expressive experiences, amidst distress (physical or psychological), I tend to get a headache or stomachache, rather than being presented with an “emotion.” As I’ve investigated my direct emotional experience more deeply over the past few years, it seems I have become quite aware of my interoceptive sensations (I believe this is due to mindfulness training through meditation), but any “translation” into an emotion word becomes a manual (and somewhat arbitrary) one, whereby I am intellectually combining the bodily cue with current and past context/experience to discern what the emotion might be (with increased interoceptive awareness, I have become able to more organically connect to feeling words that also have a sensory element, such as *grounded, drained, jittery, or relaxed*). This divergent experience is more likely due to a commonly co-occurring trait with ASD called “alexithymia,” rather than the autism itself (Barrett, 2017b; Kinnaird et al., 2018). Indeed, people with alexithymia struggle to identify and name emotions, which is not necessarily due to a lack of vocabulary, but often related to a diminished experience of interoceptive awareness. People with alexithymia are more likely to experience “affect,” a base element of emotion including the components of “valence” (whether something is *pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral*) and “arousal” (*high* or *low*) (Barrett, 2017b; Gendron et al., 2014). It is important to bring attention to the fact that, while it’s estimated that around 1% of the population has autism (Zeidan, et al., 2022), it is expected that the prevalence of alexithymia ranges from 10% to 15% (Barrett, 2017b, Salminen et al., 1999) with some studies reporting upwards of 30% in certain populations (Ng & Chan, 2020), and higher rates (ranging from 15% to 75%) when co-occurring with mental health or anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, eating disorders, addictive disorders, and obsessive compulsive
disorder (Ricciardi et al., 2015). In subscribing to Basic Emotion Theory and the belief that emotions are universal experiences, a drastic (minimum) 10% of the population is then seen as defunct or flawed in their experience. This assumed universal perspective does nothing to further humanity or connection; instead, it contributes to isolation, dualistic mentalities, and prevents curiosity—an essential step on the Paradoxical Path.

Dismantling Essentialism: Variation is the Norm

Charles Darwin is best known for his theory of natural selection, but most philosophers and biologists rejected the theory for decades because it so radically challenged the thinking of the time, which was typological. Darwinism marked the transition of a worldview based on religious ideology to one of biology and modern secular science. Pre-Darwin, species were assumed to “have an ideal form, created by God, with defining properties” differentiating them from all others (Barrett, 2017b, p. 159); essentialism prevailed with great influence.

Barrett (2017b) uses the handy example of a dog show; the objective of this event is to determine the “best” dog, where individual dogs are rated against a hypothetical ideal specimen of that breed, rather than competing with one another. Assessing characteristics such as limb symmetry, coat texture, stride length, etc., judges determine which contestants offer the least amount of error, or difference, from this hypothetical ideal dog. It was Darwin who proposed that “variations within a species” (such as the stride length) are not errors but rather “are meaningfully related to the species’ environment” (p. 159). Remember that this “ideal dog”—one without error—does not exist and is merely a calculated statistical mean of many different dogs. This is what evolutionary biologist Mayr (2004) calls “population thinking,” and it is central to natural selection.
This is basically Darwin’s theory of evolution that was proposed in *Origin*—each species (category) is “a population of unique individuals who vary from one another, with no essence at their core” (Barrett, 2017b, p. 159). *Variation is the norm*, and it is the basis of Darwin’s paramount work; essentialism, on the other hand, is based on *sameness*—in the essentialist view, variation is considered *error*. How, then, can proponents of the classical view of emotion be contingent on Darwin?

**Charles Darwin & Historical Hypocrisy**

Basic Emotion Theory frequently turns to Darwin for support, most often referencing *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, published in 1872 (over a decade after *Origin*). In this piece, Darwin (1965) asserts that emotions in man have been passed down from animal ancestors as a part of our nervous system and ultimately suggests that each emotion has a fingerprint or essence (Barrett, 2017b; Gendron & Barrett, 2009). Logically, a conviction in essences is *essentialism*. Essentialism reasons that members of a class, or category, have a natural underlying property (an essence) sourcing them as similar; it is typological reasoning (Barrett, 2017b; Mayr, 2004).

So how does one synthesize this fundamental shift within Darwin’s own work? Barrett (2017b) suggests it is not a matter of reconciliation:

It is equally baffling, not to mention ironic, that the classical view of emotion is based on the very essentialism that Darwin is famous for vanquishing in biology. The classical view explicitly labels itself as ‘evolutionary’ and assumes that emotions and their expressions are products of natural selection, yet natural selection is completely absent from Darwin’s thinking on emotion. Any essentialist view that wraps itself in the cloak of
Darwin is demonstrating a profound misunderstanding of Darwin’s central ideas about evolution. (p. 160)

*Expression* contradicted Darwin’s own foundational and anti-essentialist realization put forth in *Origin*. Indeed, Mayr (2004) has discussed the fact that Darwin authored various evolutionary theories, big and small, and that these models are “logically independent” of each other. The reception of some coexists with a rejection of others, and Mayr (2004) notes that “Darwin himself sometimes slipped back into typological thinking” (p. 88-89). Essentialists have distorted Darwin’s work, conflating two independent theories as one. Ultimately, as inspiring as he may have been, Darwin was still human—inhomrently subjective and susceptible to such vacillations.

**The Brain & Bias**

The tendency to separate and categorize (based on actual or perceived difference) is neurologically intuitive—and so, it is normal. Modern neuroscience can help us to integrate this important but challenging truth: *bias is unavoidable and a part of being an inherently subjective human*. Recall the previous example regarding learning to read and the importance of the brain having a concept of the letter *A*. These concepts serve as psychological shortcuts, or “schemas” (Magee, 2019). We need these shortcut associations to exist in the world, and not all schemas are harmful. However, because “schemas shadow our conscious thought processing in ways that we cannot fully control,” (p. 99) if we do not explicitly and intentionally work to be aware of and respond to them—especially as they relate to human beings—prejudice ensues. Humans are subject to unconscious, or implicit bias; even if we are aware of our explicit beliefs and intentions, they do not necessarily reflect our neurological subjectivities or actions that ripple out into the world. We need concepts and schemas to exist; and yet, attaching to our perceptions (made possible by shared concepts) as objective reality leads to bias. It is human to believe
objectivity is possible because that’s how it feels. It is essential that we remember that, no matter what, we are only capable of experiencing and interpreting the world through our own lens.

Bias, Isms, & Privilege

In order to experience a felt-sense of being one, we need to feel safe and accepted, both within ourselves, and by other people. Diversity and social justice educator Goodman (2015) offers that “a socially just world” is necessary to “be able to fulfill [our] potential” (p. 2). Equality is a foundation for oneness, and the crusade toward social justice is a “gateway” to an enlightened collective consciousness (Manuel, 2015, p. 6). Before we can experience a deep-rooted sense of interconnectedness, we must accept one another for our differences. Logically, systems reinforcing dualism of any kind—whether it be through isms of social reality, supremacy, or exceptionalism in any manner—inhibit this path.

Deconstructing (Rac)ism

In this context, the intention is for racism to be a representation of isms and difference in general (given that there’s more commentary and discussion in the literature surrounding racism than other isms, including ableism, or any form of invisible disability or difference in particular). Magee (2019) explains that “race is a matter of social imagination and construction, of perceptions shaped by a given context” (p. 13). Isms are a type of social reality; they are real because we as humans share and perpetuate the concepts and schemas (Barrett, 2017b, 2017c). Race, gender and other perceived categories are “created and re-created” through social habits at individual, collective, and systemic levels—most often so subtle that they elude our conscious awareness. Optimistically (although long-drawn-out), “if race is constructed, it can just as certainly be deconstructed” (Magee, 2019, p. 216). Still, there is a biological component at play—Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams (2016) states that “we are programmed toward being
tribal as a means of survival;” they offer that, to address racism, “we literally have to transcend an aspect of our own biology” (p. 204). It is worth reiterating that this does not mean that we are neurologically or biologically inclined to be racist, but biased—we go toward what is familiar and similar to our past experience. Implicit biases are a part of being human, and because they exist subconsciously, we cannot think them away. Instead, we must address them at a deeper level in the mind, brain, and body; and, as will be discussed, one of the few methodologies that have demonstrated an ability to reduce implicit bias is mindfulness practice (Kang et al., 2014).

Bias is an inevitable (and unavoidable) part of being human, but it is also workable. Subjectivity is merely an obstacle to be addressed at an individual and collective level. The problem is not our inclination toward bias, but rather leaving those biases unchecked, as well as clinging to the idea that objectivity is possible. We must acknowledge our own lens in order to be free of dualistic grips and implicit (as well as explicit) bias. Neurologically speaking, we will assume a universal perspective automatically. We can only achieve cultural competency—and more importantly cultural humility—through intentional choice and mindful exploration of ourselves, as well as curiosity about other peoples’ experiences.

**Oneness = Sameness vs. Difference**

Recall the example of the “dog show,” when I mentioned there is actually no “ideal dog” that exists for comparison. These socially constructed isms imply, however, that there is an ideal person, gender, sex, age, ability, neurotype, species and more. It’s either/or. How do we embrace both/and? The tendency to classify is not only society’s doing, after all, but a neurological inclination. The brain is designed to use concepts as shortcuts to navigate the complicated world in which we live. The answer is not necessarily to dismantle these schemas, but rather, to be mindful of how we relate to them.
We need concepts, such as identities, to exist in the world. We have a tendency to swing from overidentifying with these identities to resisting them, both of which lead to an assumed universal perspective and narrow worldview. Overidentifying acts as a barrier to oneness and prevents clear-seeing awareness. Resisting (which could include resisting identities in others or under-identifying with ourselves, perhaps, as I did in “hiding” for most of my life), leads to judgment, othering, isolation, and an inability to feel one belongs due to internalized oppression (Goodman p. 5). This fear of being judged for our identities demonstrates how societal norms dictate what’s appropriate and accepted, or not. Both of these extremes attempt to bypass difference, driven by a flawed understanding that *oneness = sameness* (i.e., “once we are all the same, we can belong and be one”).

I have experienced microinvalidations (preventing “inclusion” on the Paradoxical Path) multiple times due to this intellectual understanding that “we’re all human.” Again, isms are socially constructed, and we can use racism as a representative example. The attempt to circumvent difference can lead to maladaptive “racially neutral” approaches such as “color-blindness;” Magee (2019) explains that when we “turn a blind eye to racism,” we “unconsciously contribute to racist systems and the harm that they do” (p. 192). She explains that cognitive psychology submits that color-blindness “is a fiction,” as it does not align with contemporary neuroscience (p. 192). Instead of pretending we do not see race (or any difference—*visible or not*), we must *acknowledge* our neurological inclination toward subjectivity and bias, which must involve validating and honoring experiences different from our own.

Instead of compulsively overidentifying or resisting (*reacting*), however, we could practice allowing the pendulum to settle amidst acceptance of different identities, with nonjudgment (*responding*). *Curiosity* (the second step in the Paradoxical Path) about identities
and experiences involves a willingness to not know (to not need to personally relate to an experience or identity), which makes space for a broader worldview that is open to discovery. This path of possibility to accept such differences (in self and others) is unfamiliar and challenges the very nature of the brain and what feels intuitive, but it also embodies the more accurate idea that oneness equals difference, or “multiplicity in oneness,” as Manuel (2016) has coined. I am not solely proposing this from direct experience; rather, this is what Darwin was getting at with population thinking, and what Barrett (2017a) discusses relative to degeneracy: whether at a micro level neurobiologically, or at a macro level amidst species and society, variation is the norm—and that variation is also meaningful and adaptive. Oneness is “inclusive of everything in our lives” (Manuel, 2015, p. 40).

Acknowledging “Truth”

It is interesting to consider what is “true” from a constructionist perspective. What is reality? One certainty is that humans share two objective experiences: we are born, and we die. Everything in between is filled with subjective, variable moments. Perhaps, what it means to be human, is to be subjective. Acknowledging difference in experience, including our own biases, identities, and privileges, is the fundamental first step on the Paradoxical Path to Interconnectedness.

Acknowledging Biases

Being a subjective human, if I want to cultivate a sense of connection with myself and others, it is imperative that I take a look at myself, including my subjectivities and biases. Sue et al. (2019) offer that a path to cultural competency requires that we “become aware of [our] own worldviews” (p. 65) assumptions, misinformation, and prejudices. Each of us must sit down and discover, not if, but how biases live in me. Often, our biases are very nuanced; after all, we only
have our past experience from which to draw. If we have not been informed or exposed to a particular life experience, we are likely to have unintentional biases expressed through assumptions. Figure 4 offers an excerpt of my original contribution of nuanced microinvalidation statements and themes focusing on invisible and less visible differences (taken from a larger sample available for viewing here). Microinvalidations are a subcategory of microaggressions that are often well-intentioned statements, or statements made below conscious awareness. These invalidations carry great nuance, and so this is not a black-and-white guide offering “what not to say.” Instead, the intention is to increase awareness around our assumptions, and recognize that, while concepts are necessary to navigate the world, there are many subtle ways that we can invalidate a person’s experience, and unintentionally send a message that can potentially cause harm. The first statement is a prime example of this; it is common to say “yes ma’am” or “yes sir” on the phone, but it is important to note that this is making an assumption about a person’s gender, as well as assuming that gender is binary. This is not a call to abandon these schemas, but to be aware that, when we use them, they are simply concepts of social. In this way, we can be mindful of how and why we communicate, as well as how it may impact the receiver. The examples are context-dependent and may affect people of similar and varying identities differently, based on past-experience, self-acceptance, and other factors. The statements also may or may not be received as invalidating to different people and at different times, and it is likely we will use some of these in future interactions, without necessarily causing harm. The call to action is to expand awareness and mindfulness.

Figure 4

*Nuanced Microinvalidations*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATEMENT/THEME</th>
<th>POSSIBLE MESSAGE/Meaning (TO RECEIVER)</th>
<th>WHY THIS COULD BE INVALIDATING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>gender/sex/orientation</td>
<td>Gender is determined based on appearance. How I sound/appear is more important than who I am.</td>
<td>This can potentially misgender people, and reinforces the gender binary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Men can’t get pregnant.”</td>
<td>Trans men don’t exist.</td>
<td>This is an inaccurate statement, as some transgender men can be pregnant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning that someone is a part of the queer community, and saying “I’m an ally—my best friend’s son is gay/my nephew is trans.”</td>
<td>“I know what it’s like to be you even though I’ve never experienced your oppression.” I’m invisible and my struggles are appropriated.</td>
<td>In an effort to validate, this statement invalidates and appropriates this person’s struggles; knowing another person with a related experience is not the same as understanding this person’s lived experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neurodiversity/mental health</td>
<td>ADHD isn’t a big deal and is transient. My experience with ADHD is trivialized and discredited.</td>
<td>This delegitimizes ADHD as a diagnosis and as a pervasive lifelong experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I was so awkward at the event, I’m sure they all thought I was autistic.” (expressed jokingly or with judgment)</td>
<td>Autism equates to social awkwardness. “Your autism is unacceptable and shameful.”</td>
<td>This delegitimizes the spectrum of autistic experience and reasserts a stereotyped view of autism being social awkwardness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’d rather kill myself than do this task.” (expressed sarcastically)</td>
<td>Suicide is a joke. My suicidal ideation/loss of a loved one is discredited.</td>
<td>This minimizes the experience of suicidal ideation and losing someone to suicide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>race/ethnicity/immigration</td>
<td>“I don’t recognize your difference.”</td>
<td>This reinforces Whiteness as the norm, and invisibilizes a person’s race or ethnicity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You’re so light skinned for a _____” (insert ethnicity or place of origin)</td>
<td>If I don’t succeed, it’s my fault because I didn’t work hard enough; the barriers I face in society are not legitimate.</td>
<td>This reinforces the myth of the “American dream” (success is based on hard work alone) and ignores the integral role of privilege in success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>class/status/education</td>
<td>“Something is wrong with you.” I am inferior. I am not good enough.</td>
<td>This attitude reinforces Western cultural norms that are not universal. In many other cultures, a lack of eye contact indicates reverence. The expectation for eye contact also treats the experiences of many neurodivergent people as inferior, as eye contact can be challenging or physically distressing for some.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>religion/culture</td>
<td>My culture and/or my devotion to God is judged by my appearance, rather than my behavior and intention.</td>
<td>These assumptions reinforce a stereotyped and limiting view of Islam, dehumanizing people who wear hijab as well as Muslims who choose not to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age/body/health</td>
<td>“Your worth and health are in your weight. How you appear is more important than how you feel.”</td>
<td>This reinforces the dominant beauty standard based on skinny bodies, and perpetuates the misguided reliance on BMI as an indicator of health.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note. An excerpt of nuanced microinvalidations from a non-exhaustive list, with the full resource and commentary available for viewing online. This chart lists potentially invalidating statements or attitudes in the left column, a translation or possible meaning to the receiver in the middle column, and a brief explanation of why the statement could be invalidating to various social identities in the right column. I created this asset, consulting around a dozen other people with various intersecting social identities (all of whom have experienced othering) as to not be limited to my own subjective lens. Of course, that does not make this a representative sample, but rather it serves as a seed for increasing awareness through acknowledgment of our assumptions and subjectivities.

Reflexivity: Internalized Racism. I have two primary illustrations of bias that I can share from personal exploration, the first of which is my internalized racism. Being mixed-race while also White passing made for a confusing upbringing. Why were my parents two different colors, and I not like either of them? Why was my sister darker than me? Why did I experience both White and Brown people as being averse to me? Where did I belong? When required to indicate race on a form, my only option is to choose “other”—literally othering myself. While I present as White with the privilege of my lighter skin, I have not had the typical internal experience of being “White.” I have also not had the typical internal experience of being “Brown.” Investigating my own subjectivities, I’ve found myself to have an aversion to both White and Brown people. Due to in-group favoritism and our human tendency to categorize as an unconscious protective mechanism, we are inclined to develop biases against people who are different from ourselves (“ABA Commission,” 2019; Fu et al., 2012; Nalty, 2016). I was different from everyone, so no one felt “safe.” I have experienced White people denying my
experience, resisting looking beyond the color of my skin. I experience Brown people, particularly South-East Asians, being suspicious that I’m “not White,” most often due to facial features or my Middle Eastern last name. I grew up confused as I’d experience my dad alter his voice and inflections around Brown and White people, or the way he’d talk to TSA agents while traveling, making extra efforts to perform “whiteness” (and feel safe) even when the TSA agents themselves were people of color. His internalized schemas around being Brown permeated and informed my need to pass as White. And so, both Brown and White people became a threat to me early on, and I often avoided them. This took time to investigate internally, compounded by interpersonal struggles.

This exploration was not primarily a cognitive one. It required an attunement and curiosity (the second step in the Path) about my direct internal experience; what happened in my body (Menakem, 2017) when I was around White or Brown people was the most significant indicator that something was happening. What’s interesting is that, in feeling rejected by people who carry both of my racial identities, I rejected myself and them, which made for a painful, isolated experience of difference and othering. Each of us has neurologically developed biases in some way; Sue et al. (2019) offer that, while no one was born racist, due to cultural conditioning in America, “no person or group is free from inheriting the biases of U.S. society” (p. 22).

**Reflexivity: Internalized Ableism.** Most recently, I’ve uncovered my internalized ableism. Children diagnosed with ASD present with some typical traits, but boys are more likely to be diagnosed, and girls are overlooked because female socialization leads to autistic camouflaging and compensation (Hendrickx, 2015; Pearson & Rose, 2021). I recall being in first grade when my teacher suggested to my parents that I be held back since I was “fidgety” and had poor “verbal and physical control.” She proposed I might have ADHD (a commonly co-
occurring trait with ASD), to which I experienced my parents as not being receptive in that the idea was dismissed. Although I was overall unaware of the contents of the discussion at the time, I could glean an implication that my way of being wasn’t acceptable. This contributed to my social conditioning to be a “good girl,” daughter, and student. I subconsciously and compulsively learned to camouflage my autistic traits in order to exist amidst the demands of what was acceptable by society.

In the end, I feel it was a gift in many ways not to be diagnosed as a child, as there is currently little constructive help available for autistic children. The standard therapy covered by insurances, “Applied Behavioral Analysis” (ABA), is often criticized for conditioning neurodivergent kids to behave in neurotypical ways through “positive reinforcement.” Advocates of the social model of disability delineate ABA as unethical and psychologically damaging, being frequently compared to (and, interestingly, founded by a pioneer of) LGBTQ+ conversion therapy (Conine et al., 2021; Gibson & Douglas, 2018; Pyne, 2020). Ultimately, “White, male, straight EuroAmericans continue to control and hold power” in the mental health reality for marginalized groups (Sue et al., 2019, p. 48). The DSM-V, the historical study of autism, and ABA therapy (all of which are rooted in the medical model of disability) are entrenched in white supremacy (Czech, 2018; Medlock et al., 2016; Riquino et al., 2021); ableism is systemic and permeates society.

Most people in my life today don’t know I’m autistic. Being late-diagnosed and labeled “high functioning” (which, it is more socially appropriate to say I have low support needs), however, does not mean that autism is not a hindrance to me. It is an invisible disability because my differences are not always or obviously perceived. Indeed, in many ways, it is my autism that has supported me through life. My “unique” way of seeing things is most often related to my
neurological inclination toward bottom-up processing as opposed to the neurotypical top-down; I keenly notice details and patterns (often to a debilitating fault). My directness is at times appreciated and appeals to people, and at others, it’s deemed inappropriate. My tendency for repetitive rituals and hyperfocus makes it possible for me to maintain commitments that others would struggle with, such as a long-term meditation practice, or building a YouTube channel with over 1 million subscribers (I believe this is also related to the resilience developed through interpersonal struggles, which have ultimately left me less prone to self-judgment).

While autism has offered me some advantages, I am still subject to executive dysfunction and sensitivities that are not socially accepted by our society. I don’t publicize, for instance, that I often forget to eat due to hyperfocus and lack of interoception, that I can’t wear certain clothing because of sensory distress, or that I severely struggle with interpersonal dynamics when I cannot gauge body language (such as on phone calls). I can appear competent, confident, and together (and it’s not inauthentic), but most people aren’t aware that, while work tasks I enjoy can inspire a dopamine release and be rejuvenating, something “simple” like using a rideshare app can cause severe anguish, or that putting laundry away or unpacking a suitcase depletes my reserves for the entire day. Societal assumptions and expectations would label much of this as being “lazy,” “stupid,” or perpetuating unnecessary “anxiety;” I resisted autism and applied these judgmental labels to myself for most of my life. Ironically, some of my struggles relate to the protective mechanism of masking itself, which causes autistic people (especially women) to be diagnosed later in life, and the perpetual pressure to uphold neurotypical standards often leads to increased stress, anxiety, depression, exhaustion, and burnout (Hendrickx, 2015; Pearson & Rose, 2021).
Adding the identity of being “disabled” does not make it easier to exist in society today. But avoiding the truth of that identity out of fear of being marginalized reinforces the systemic oppression disabled people face. It is a result of my *internalized ableism* that I have avoided and been unable to see myself clearly for decades. I am still finding my way to living authentically as myself with this identity and being able to advocate for my needs through accommodations, but the truth is it is challenging and unwelcome by society. Many autistics regret disclosing a diagnosis to their workplace, for instance, finding that it leads to a lack of support and increased bullying (Romualdez et al., 2021). As much as I can do the work to look at myself, there is a collective piece at play.

**Acknowledging Identities**

Acknowledging what’s true involves recognizing and accepting our identities, which at times may be many. *Intersectionality* is a concept that discusses how social identities and forms of oppression converge and interact (Crenshaw, 1991; Goodman, 2015). The ethos of supremacy and exceptionalism in our society doesn’t prioritize a valuing of difference in identities. In understanding that *variation is the norm—and meaningful*, I have come to find that each of my own identities has offered a new lens through which I can view the world and thereby expand my worldview. In accepting my own intersecting identities (some of which include being a woman, a mixed-race White and Brown person, and an autistic person), I have come to find each of these various identities meaningful, informative, and a contributing factor in my ability to be more open and accepting of others (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*Intersectionality for Interconnectedness*
Note. A visual model I developed demonstrating how the acknowledgment of intersectionality can support oneness. (A.) The first diagram demonstrates a non-exhaustive example of intersecting identities, with each identity expanding one’s lens and worldview. (B.) Each individual (represented by separate colors) can recognize the variation between their experience, and the experiences of others. Each person, with all their variation, becomes a meaningful contribution to society and humanity. On a micro-scale (A. & B.), the difference and complexity within each individual are more apparent and significant, but on a macro scale (C.), accounting for all individuals, the boundary of “difference” is no longer discernible, offering a sense of oneness.

It is important to note that everyone is diverse and has multiple identities, but not everyone has suffered from exclusion, discrimination, or oppression due to their intersecting identities. This doesn’t mean that those with privileged identities should not explore and accept themselves or find meaning in their variation, but it does require that each of us also acknowledge our privilege. It also is not to imply that inherent marginalization equates to cultural competency. This work of social justice rests on each of us, internally and externally.

Acknowledging Privileges
Privilege is generally invisible to those who have it; Goodman (2015) says it’s like “being a fish in water—it’s all around you but you do not see it” (p. 10). Privilege does not often “feel” like an advantage because we have almost always taken it for granted. Neurologically speaking, each of us only has our personal pool of past experiences to draw from, and we take this to be the norm—it is our normal because it is our experience. But we must be careful to remember that other people have their own personal pool of past experiences which are very different from our own; we must not assume that all others are treated the same way as we are or that they have access to opportunities. It is essential to understand that we will make such assumptions—neurologically—unless we intentionally do not.

For example, someone with the privilege of having White skin will not automatically recognize that many people of color in Western society walk the streets carrying some level of fear for their safety. Non-disabled people don’t have to think about how they will use the restroom or enter a building. Heterosexual people do not have to consider how they will refer to a romantic partner (Sue et al., 2019, p. 10). Neurotypical people do not have to contemplate or experience distress from eye contact or be mindful of painful lighting or sounds that are often prevalent in public settings. These assumptions are rooted in assumed universal perspectives.

The dominant Western narrative is the idea that “equal opportunity” exists (Sue et al., 2019, p. 10). Understanding that this is not reality challenges people’s worldview and their assumptions. When contested, there are a few options. The compulsive, neurologically natural and reactionary option is to resist the internal conflict or cognitive dissonance by denying there is a problem and potentially blaming the disadvantaged groups. The more challenging choice is to take a look at ourselves and how we might be complicit in the oppression.
**Reflexivity: Privilege.** My experience as a mixed-race person made me aware of my privilege from a young age. Some of this was subconscious, but some of it was overt; for instance, I intentionally decided to lean into being White-passing at 12 years old. This all makes intuitive sense, and most people would not judge a child for seeking safety, and yet, this both demonstrates and reinforces internalized and overt oppression. Privilege and oppression are “two sides of the same coin” (Goodman, 2015), and so if “oppression is a distortion of our true nature,” then so is privilege (Manuel, 2015, p. 4). Accepting my various identities allows me to stand amidst the privileges that I did not ask for but maintain in order to be present on the path toward a socially just and equal society.

**Confronting Yourself: An Effort to See Clearly**

As someone who values self-awareness, you may believe you are willing to confront yourself in these ways; but it’s important to remember these biases happen at an implicit, neurological level. Sue et al. (2019) explain that “understanding differences in worldviews” is an important first step to becoming culturally competent (p. 8). This can help us become aware of our explicit biases, whereby we make intentional decisions based on these beliefs. Implicit biases, however, are unconsciously influenced by pre-existing beliefs (“ABA Commission,” 2019). Research has demonstrated it to be very challenging to renounce implicit biases and, in fact, cognitive reflection alone has not proven successful (Kang et al., 2014). It requires exploration at a deeper felt sense of direct embodied experience and most often involves a willingness to be uncomfortable to develop such awareness and cultural responsiveness (Kang et al., 2014; Menakem, 2017). Sue et al. (2019) remark becoming “multiculturally competent” requires change (p. 21) and ask both privileged and marginalized groups:
are you willing to look at yourself, to examine your assumptions, your attitudes, your conscious and unconscious behaviors, the privileges you enjoy as a dominant group member, and how you may have unintentionally treated others in less than a respectful manner? (p. 21)

This is not a call for self-recrimination or criticism, although it may be a natural reaction to such investigations. It is essential to respond with compassion and mindfulness in order to meet ourselves and others without judgment.

**Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is rooted in ancient Buddhism but has become popular secularly in Western culture over the last few decades. As it relates to contemplative science, mindfulness is most often defined as intentionally paying attention to the present moment with acceptance and without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Conceptually, mindfulness is both a practice and a way of being. Mindfulness is awareness of the present moment that is nonjudgmental; mindfulness practices, such as meditation, cultivate the ability to be mindful in a moment and sustain that mindfulness across multiple moments. Mindfulness supports us in acknowledging and suspending assumptions, and meeting a given moment with curiosity, while deepening the capacity to find peace and equanimity amidst the unknown—all of which are essential to following the Paradoxical Path. Typically, mindfulness practitioners recognize a collective objective of aspiring for interconnectedness via nonduality—allowing the boundary that is separating you and me to dissolve into oneness.

**Constructionist Buddhist Psychology**

In Buddhist thought, liberating insight awakens an individual to a deep understanding of the three marks (or characteristics) of existence. The truth of impermanence reminds us that all
phenomena arise and pass away and that change itself is the nature of conditioned existence. The characteristic of suffering refers to the inherently unsatisfying nature of reality, as clinging to any piece of experience will leave us unfulfilled. When we contemplate these first two characteristics, we are opened to the final mark of non-self (also often translated as not-self or no-self), suggesting that claiming ownership over our experiences, which are constantly changing and thereby ultimately unsatisfying, inevitably leads to suffering (Armstrong, 2018; Goldstein, 2016). The Buddha suggested the self to be a “mistaken interpretation of experience” (Olendzki, 2016, p. 41) and a “flawed assumption” (Armstrong, 2018, p 22). Buddhist psychology parses the self into five categories (aggregates) which are the basis of the constructed sense of self, consisting of material form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness (Armstrong, 2018; Olendzki, 2016). While meditating, we can “deconstruct the deeply held concept of self” by exploring each of the aggregates (Goldstein, 2013, p. 171). Buddhist teachings offer that clinging to this false sense of self creates suffering, and that one cannot attain the freedom of enlightenment until this sense of “I” is deeply—through direct experience—understood to be a delusion.

In this sense, Western mindfulness movements, rooted in Buddhist teachings, stem from some of the most nascent constructionist philosophy in recorded history. All people (regardless of worldview) cling to ego, or self. This clinging is deeply rooted in the brain’s natural proclivity toward survival; but no one survives death, and so, clinging to this false sense of objective reality is, in the end, an illusion that perpetuates dualism and suffering.

**Western Mindfulness: Subconscious Oppression**

In the context of this exploration, one must acknowledge the privilege existing in mindfulness communities. Indeed, most practitioners in Western sangha’s are White people with
an ability to dedicate resources such as time and money to Dharma practice and explorations, whether through individual or community meditations, retreats, or education. Many people of color have openly discussed not feeling welcome in sanghas that are predominantly White (Manuel, 2015; Yetunde & Giles, 2021), and there have been efforts to increase diversity in recent years (Magee, 2019). There has historically been an expectation by Dharma teachers and communities that a spiritual person on the path to awakening must transcend all labels because they create suffering due to identification with the self and the body (Manuel, 2015). However, this inability to hold the pain of lived experience in today’s world compounds separation and prevents awakening. Manuel (2015) discusses embodiment as it relates to mindfulness practice and enlightenment, insisting that we need to transcend the “belief that spirituality does not include the body” (p. 32), because the body, including all our identities (race, gender, sexuality, neurotype, etc.), are forms of nature, and “we are not capable of being ‘unembodied’” (p. 41).

In recent years, “mindfulness” has become a bit of a trend and buzzword. Indeed, contemplative neuroscience has made the Dharma more accessible. Leading mindfulness-oriented psychology and neuroscience experts in the field, such as Dan Siegel M.D. and Rick Hanson Ph.D., share distilled neuroscience concepts and findings to make them digestible. Frequently referenced (explicitly or implicitly) by most mindfulness experts is the Triune Brain Theory. While I understand the compassionate impulse to circulate the practices, in order to ultimately relieve suffering we must become aware of the consequences of disseminating such oversimplified and inaccurate science. The reductionistic nature of Maclean’s model directly conflicts with the interconnectedness that is the root initiative of mindfulness, subconsciously perpetuating human exceptionalism. This unintentionally ripples out in mindfulness communities, eternalizing isms, and oppression. We must approach these dualistic concepts with
great care, for as long as they are infused with the teachings of mindfulness and Buddhism without an acknowledgment of their reductionist nature, equality and a deep sense of common humanity amidst all beings are unattainable.

**Reflexivity with Mindfulness Meditation: Cracking My Neurotypical Lens**

With the practice of mindfulness meditation, one is asked to bring their attention to an “anchor” to the present moment (most often the breath, body sensations, or sounds), and rest attention with this object. When the mind wanders away, the instruction is, without any judgment, to redirect attention to the chosen object. Most often with this practice, the mind wanders away very quickly; indeed, it has been shown that the mind is wandering more often than not (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010), making meditation a challenging practice. But what if someone didn’t often experience the mind wandering while meditating? I didn’t share this truth of my experience for years because it doesn’t align with most people’s experience—it’s different. This disparity created an internal conflict in myself and others because it challenges a typical meditation experience (or perhaps, it challenges a neurotypical experience). I personally believe mind-wandering is an entirely human phenomenon, regardless of neurotype, but since my ASD diagnosis, I’ve come to suspect that my neurodivergence has likely offered me something of an unusual experience with meditation. I suggest this is probable and not certain, of course, because no one can truly experience anyone else’s inner world; we are all different. And yet, this diagnosis has demonstrated that, amidst my fears of being different, I’ve inadvertently and compulsively resisted seeing myself clearly, rather than embracing the truth of my experience. This newfound information may add another distinction to my self, but instead of compounding suffering through identification, it has offered relief from the suffering that was obscuring my view (Sheikh, 2021).
Acknowledging the truth of my diagnosis has brought much of my self-imposed suffering to light. While, indeed, no one else’s experience is exactly like our own, I felt trapped by expectations around mindfulness and what an “appropriate” meditation experience was. What was expressed as “typical” did not align with my firsthand investigation, and instead of trusting my experience, I submitted to judgment (rooted in a desire to belong), concluding that my experience must be wrong. When meditation teachers and practitioners made comments about the mind wandering so frequently, I assumed that my apparent lack of mind wandering must actually be due to my own delusion, for instance. Recognizing that I am autistic has helped me to, perhaps, re-cognize (or at least recontextualize) this experience with greater clarity, as I now understand that a common trait of some individuals on the spectrum is an ability to hyperfocus without distraction. And so, when I would go on retreat and find myself in a concentrated state particularly quickly (relative to other meditators), other people found it challenging to believe this could be true. I would sit and notice that the common hindrances were not present, or that I had access to the meditative states of absorption, and yet, because these were not typical experiences, I submitted that I must be misinterpreting my own investigation. I also have always preferred to wear a mask over my eyes while meditating and never knew why; I judged myself, feeling it must be an insufficiency on my part. My meditation teacher at my first retreat insisted my preference for wearing a mask was an aversion, which reinforced my self-judgment and denial of my experience. Understanding my diagnosis, I can now recognize that a mask simply offers a sense of ease amidst autistic sensory vulnerabilities and can now view it as a tool for support (like someone who chooses to sit in a chair rather than on a cushion) (Sheikh, 2021).

I am forever grateful to mindfulness and the Dharma. Undoubtedly, it has assisted me in regulating my sensations, emotions, and cognitions, and significantly helped me navigate myself
internally and the world externally before I even knew I was autistic. I am better able to regulate and translate my affect and interoceptive sensations, to manage my attention, meet my own needs, and be mindful of others. Since receiving the diagnosis, mindfulness has helped me explore authentically to see myself more clearly—not the version of myself that I became through subconscious camouflaging and compensation out of fear for society’s demands, but to see who I actually am—perhaps, my true nature.

I attribute this personal growth (and interest) to mindfulness meditation and the teachings of the Dharma—however, not specifically to Western mindfulness communities. I have personally not found these groups particularly welcoming or accepting of my experience, despite most practitioners prioritizing awareness, emotional intelligence, lovingkindness, and even diversity (which currently tends to be limited to identities of race, gender, and sexuality). When I suggested creating a mindfulness program for autistic people, seeing how much meditation has helped me with regulation, one teacher with decades of experience offered that it wouldn’t be helpful for the “hand-flapping” kind of autistics. This microaggression was unintentional (as they most often are) and due to a lack of information, predicated on assumptions; but it is and was painful, nonetheless. Out of fear (and internalized oppression), I did not tell her that I flap my hands or rock my body at times as a self-stimulatory and regulating behavior. This teacher also suggested that since I was so “high-functioning,” that taking on the label of “autistic” was only going to compound my suffering by identification with the self. This is a common misconceived perspective in Western mindfulness and Dharma communities. Zenju Earthlyn Manuel (2015) speaks words that feel to be from my own heart:

I have subscribed to these labels [related to race, sexuality and gender] over time, to acknowledge my particular lived experience shaped by its particular suffering. Yes, my
bones know the absolute life, unencumbered by labels, fixed perceptions, and appearances. But the absolute life has never been the problem I have to face in the world.

(p. 7)
The intellectual processing around labels *invalidates* lived experience (preventing the third step in the Paradoxical Path); understanding oppression is rooted in constructs doesn’t change the hatred that exists in the world. It’s worth acknowledging that I do suspect my teacher would not have made such a comment to me about identifying with labels as a “mixed-person;” most mindfulness communities in recent years are making efforts to dismantle racism and increase diversity. Still, we have a journey ahead with investigating our assumptions, particularly related to invisible difference.

When I first received my diagnosis and began to reexamine my life as a person on the spectrum, I initially felt the new information provided a new lens through which I could understand my experience. But what I came to find was that awareness of such an intimate element of my experience actually *reveals* truth; rather than an autistic lens being *added*, it was more like the neurotypical lens (through which I thought I was living authentically) was *cracked*. In fact, it has helped me *shed* the need to identify as “other,” through *accepting myself* as I am, rather than resisting and making efforts to be who I am not. Manuel (2015) explains that “identity should not be dismissed in our efforts toward spiritual awakening,” and in fact is an important part of the journey (p. 8).

**Mindful Acceptance of Difference**

It is taught in Buddhist contexts that, in dismantling the “self,” we let go of the need for a boundary to separate *you* from *me*; we find that the border that appeared to be true and solid is more accurately porous, with no objective dividing lines. Without rigid boundaries, it is possible
to sense interconnectedness and shared humanity. We can experience compassion for one another because we have a genuine and deep sense that we are all interdependent and similar in our human experience—in both being and suffering. It is this sense of “oneness” that I believe humans are hungry for, perhaps implicitly in relational connections and explicitly in mindfulness communities and contexts.

Rather than intellectually bypassing to oneness and assuming it equates to *sameness*, mindfulness can help us develop the skills and ability to turn toward difference with a *curious* mind (integral to the Paradoxical Path). Magee (2019) suggests, for instance, that we develop “ColorInsight,” which, through mindfulness, offers us the skills, ability, and courage to turn toward racism rather than away. Counterbalancing our human impulse to categorize, we also tend to minimize differences. In mindfulness contexts, there is sometimes an impulse to “transcend relative individual realities” and jump right into the absolute of common humanity (Yetunde & Giles, 2021). Yetunde (2021) explains that “to be invisibilized was painful” within her sangha—“to be met with indifference in a community that preaches compassion? Unconscionable” (p. 103).

Lama Dawa Tarchin Phillips, who is of mixed African descent, explains that as spiritual beings, “we must realize that we are beyond color”—we are “colorless” at our core (Yetunde & Giles, 2021, p. 92). But he also acknowledges the importance of people of color (and I’d also add *difference*) experiencing themselves in “both dimensions: the dimension of the fully integrated person who connects completely to all colors and cultures while recognizing that none of the colors and cultures truly do us justice in our true essence” (p. 92). Speaking to people of color, he explains the importance of “allowing yourself” to release identification with race (p. 93). To cultivate interconnection and act in allyship against racism (and isms in general),
mindfulness communities and advocates must allow each individual to release their identification on their own. We nurture this by accepting each person fully as they are—including where they are on their path as they relate to the pain of their own difference. Magee (2019) explains that she tries to meet people with “awareness of both their particular situation and our common humanity in a world of great increasing distress” (p. 193).

The Paradoxical Path to Interconnectedness

Reviewing my personal journey toward self-acceptance, I’ve come to find a sequence of events depending on the approach one takes in their interactions (with self and other) that progressively lead to either interconnectedness or othering. The path flows organically, requiring choice and intention. Remaining on autopilot and without awareness, the brain will default to invalidation and assumed universal perspectives. This Paradoxical Path is one of mindfulness, curiosity, and the development of cultural humility. It is not necessarily intuitive intellectually, as constructed distinctions oppose the wisdom of universality; after all, “if we are ‘one,’ how can we be ‘different?’” (Manuel, 2015, p 63). But “multiplicity in oneness” (approaching oneness through the lens of difference), “allows us to experience the whole landscape of oneness. By not acknowledging difference, we unwittingly exaggerate the difference until it screams to be acknowledged” (Manuel, 2015, p. 39). Perhaps, this is a Middle Way.

It is important to acknowledge that the steps along this path apply to both self and other. In fact, the work of others (Magee, 2019; Manuel, 2015; Yetunde & Giles, 2021) and my direct experience support the idea that this nonlinear journey must include acceptance of ourselves first. In her TED Talk “From the Inside Out: Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging,” Wendy Knight Agard (2020) suggests: “if we can’t accept all of ourselves, then our ability to truly embrace others is compromised” (2:35).
In Support of the Path: The DMIS

Intercultural researcher Bennett (1986) created the “Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity” (DMIS) over 30 years ago and has continued to expand and refine it since. This grounded theory rooted in constructivism is predicated on the assumption “that we are constructing boundaries of ‘self’ and ‘other’ in ways that guide our experiences of intercultural events” (Bennett, 2017, p. 1). The DMIS offers a continuum (Figure 6), whereby on one side, there’s ethnocentrism and denial of identity, and on the other, there is an ethnorelative construction of Integration. At this latter end, the “complex self/other categories are incorporated into one’s personal identity and into decision-making ethicality in multicultural relations” (Bennett, 2017, p.1). Essentially, this model is a diagnostic frame measuring how people experience and engage with cultural difference to tailor educational interventions to an organization’s level of development and progress toward cross-cultural sensitivity.

Figure 6

DMIS Continuum

Note. Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (IDR Institute, 2018).
Interestingly, the path I identified before encountering the DMIS aligns almost perfectly with the continuum. While Bennett’s model is a diagnostic tool, the offering I’ve included here (review Figure 1) is a path of organic cultivation through mindfulness, with progression underpinned by the DMIS positions.

**Step 1: Acknowledgement**

The first step toward achieving cultural responsiveness for a sense of oneness is **acknowledging**; this includes acknowledging ourselves, others, and all associated identities. Within ourselves, we must acknowledge our biases and privileges, as well as any pain of difference. We hold all of this exploration with acceptance and mindful awareness—without judgment or denial of difference or experience. Without the intentional ability to acknowledge difference, we are inclined to strive for **sameness**.

**Step 2: Curiosity**

If we can acknowledge ourselves, others, our identities, and the various aspects of our being with nonjudgment, we are able to approach the exploration with **curiosity**—a cornerstone of mindfulness. Curiosity is necessary to develop cultural humility and responsiveness because it involves being willing to “not know” someone else’s experience, or have it figured out. We recognize that we can only know our own experience, and while this “not knowing” can be uncomfortable, it need not be a problem. Manuel (2015) normalizes the fact that there is a “natural state of confusion that comes with holding ideas of shared humanity alongside ideas of intrinsic differences [which] shakes up our sense of certainty about who we are” (p. 64). Is this not the epitome of letting go of the **self**?

Curiosity involves an open desire to learn, as opposed to being incurious or closed-minded in assuming a universal perspective. The latter approach subscribes to the idea that “my
experience applies to everyone,” and such defense perpetuates dualism. It is important to recall that this is a neurological default, and so while there is no need for judgment, it does require intention and action.

**Step 3: Validation**

We must **validate** our own experience, as well as the experience of others; this is not our perception of their experience, filtered through our lens, but trusting another’s direct experience as it is presented to us and allowing it to be. Invalidation, or denying experience (of yourself or others) is minimizing. We typically invalidate because we do not have the personal lens to understand; invalidation indicates a lack of willingness to be uncomfortable, as well as a reinforcing of the self. Microinvalidations are often happening in subtle, nuanced ways unconsciously (as discussed with Figure 4); for instance, believing you can identify someone as “happy” or “angry” by their facial expression, or supposing a chuckle indicates “amusement” (Gendron et al., 2014). The invitation is not to discard social reality and concepts that help you navigate the world by deciding you either can read someone’s emotions in their face or you cannot; instead, it is about maintaining openness. If we sense an emotion in someone’s presence, before we take any action, we may choose to ask curious questions to clarify another person’s experience, speaking through the lens of our own experience without any agenda or need to be certain. What is most important is to **remember** to be curious, and to notice our innate tendency to make assumptions.

We need not identify with someone else’s experience to accept and honor it, nor shall we necessarily fall back onto our common ground of being human as evidence for a lack of difference; this invalidation of lived experience negates unique differences and increases tension and dualism (Manuel, 2015). Validation, founded on curiosity, can involve a desire to
Mindful communication expert Sofer (2018) explains that understanding another’s experience involves a willingness to *stand beneath* them regarding our need to be right or know what is happening for them. Setting our own experience and *self* aside for the sake of this other person is a gift to the person, and to the world—supporting a collective goal of nondualism.

**Step 4: Inclusion**

Cultivating *inclusion* of experiences within ourselves and others creates safety and acceptance. Allowing and honoring someone’s experience, even if it challenges you or conflicts with your worldview or experience, sends a message of care and lovingkindness. Such acceptance is an active step, not a passive one, that makes space to include the complexity of difference and being human.

“Diversity” is often paired with “inclusion,” and so the two terms are often conflated, but they are not the same. While diversity within a system focuses on *quantitative* representation, inclusion focuses on the *qualitative* experience. Cultivating inclusion therefore requires diversity; but prioritizing diversity does not inherently mean a system is inclusive. The path to oneness involves equality and justice for all diverse beings, and so we must prioritize inclusivity.

**Step 5: Belonging**

Once we feel included, we may feel safe enough to believe we *belong*—despite potential differences. We feel secure and accepted for who we are, and we are accepting of others. We find difference in ourselves and others as adaptive and meaningful. *Variation is the norm.* We cannot feel we belong without inclusion; in fact, Sue et al. (2019) submit that acknowledging cultural identities promotes a sense of belonging. In a study looking at social exclusion and inclusion in people with intellectual disabilities, Hall (2010) explains that the concept of
*belonging* was found to be more useful than inclusion. They explain that discrimination and a sense of *exclusion* tends to be driven by a “powerful sense of *difference*” (p. 52).

**Step 6: Oneness**

If we do not feel we belong, then we are “different,” and therefore *alone*. If we feel we do belong, it is possible, perhaps instead, to feel we are *all one*. Indeed, over time “alone” became a contraction of the Old English “all one,” which Clarissa Pinkola Estés (1992) explains meant “to be wholly one, to be in oneness, either essentially or temporarily” (p. 215). In order to feel *at one* with others, we must cultivate this oneness within ourselves. In solitude, perhaps while meditating, we have the great opportunity to explore ourselves honestly and without judgment, connecting to our authentic being-ness independently. From this space, we can offer this gift of mindful attention and curiosity to those with whom we come in contact. Through direct experience, we can find that difference and variation is not only the norm, but meaningful; we can feel supported by the difference we and others bring, and also support difference in others and ourselves, ultimately dismantling our dividing lines and cultivating integration.

**Conclusion**

Buddhist activist and monk Thích Nhất Hạnh shared a phrase: “no mud, no lotus.” The lotus flower, a symbol of rebirth and renewal in many cultures, only blooms when rooted in mud beneath the water. The mud is off-putting and unpleasant, but the flower that blossoms above the surface of the water is beautiful. Without the mud, the lotus could not exist. Sitting in the “mud” of looking at ourselves can be uncomfortable, but this path helps us bloom into the compassionate “lotus” we aspire to be. Shifting from the reductionist paradigm of *either/or*, in favor of embracing the holistic *both/and* allows the barriers to dissolve, and for a whole range of experiences to exist meaningfully.
Positivist epistemological approaches to science have reinforced dualistic and dichotomous thinking. This expands beyond research and ventures into direct interpersonal relations at micro and macro levels. While it is within the very nature of our neurobiology to make assumptions, it is within our potential to be aware of and suspend them in order to prevent the perpetuation of isms. This not only supports the cultivation of equality but also encourages greater meaning through acknowledging the power and beauty of variation—whether such difference is visible or not.

The path to the very goal of mindfulness is mindfulness itself. This path to interconnectedness may be paradoxical and counterintuitive, but it is possible. With the privilege of mindfulness comes considerable responsibility; as we progress, each of us has a greater ability to respond in each moment—in service of all beings.

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Appendix

Figure A

*Original Image for Experiential Blindness Exercise*

![Original Image for Experiential Blindness Exercise]

*Note.* Original image for experiential blindness exercise, associated with Figure 3. This image is used in Lisa Feldman Barrett’s TED Talk “You aren't at the mercy of your emotions -- your brain creates them” (Barrett, 2017d).