Questions for Social Science & Humanities Courses

1. In *Demagoguery & Democracy*, Roberts-Miller writes:

   The central presumption behind demagoguery and the most attractive promise it makes -- is that our current ways of categorizing people (such as gender, race, nationality, religion) are woven into the fabric of the universe. Those categories are, and should be, a hierarchy; some people are entitled to more goods than others by virtue of being better - they are better by virtue of having a certain identity, regardless of their behavior. Hence, paradoxically, members of the in-group (by virtue of being inherently ‘better’ people) are held to lower standards, and can behave worse than members of out-groups (p. 49).”

We see this dynamic in the always-evolving national conversation about immigration. Whether from demagogue Denis Kearney’s anti-Chinese sentiment preceding the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 or President Trump’s characterization of Muslims as dangerous intruders into the U.S., anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States has a long history of scapegoating immigrants as the source of economic instability, job loss, housing shortages, or other issues happening in the country (Gochenour, 2018).

Even strategies to reform the explicitly discriminatory immigration policy of the past have still relied on identifying certain “desirable” and seemingly neutral qualities as the crux of regulation, often favoring immigrants who are wealthy, educated, or “skilled.” Immigrants who fit this bill are thus cast against all other people who may have less access to resources like education, higher-income jobs, have criminal records, or whose family structures do not conform to strictly dictated norms (Sharpless, 2015; Verkuyten, 2013; Sirriyeh, 2017).

This binary of “good” immigrants versus “bad” immigrants would be meaningless without the role of the “American citizen.” Depending on the speaker, how these roles are cast as members of the in- or out-group greatly determines what standards they are held to, how their character is defined, and what resources they are assumed to deserve.

First, think of a specific example where immigrant populations were rhetorically distinguished as either “good” or “bad” (or, desirable and undesirable citizens). Then, use the following reflection questions to unpack the impact of this rhetorical tool.

**Reflection Questions**

a. How does the speaker (explicitly or implicitly) communicate which characteristics that define either good/bad immigrants?
b. What is said (or unsaid) about the characteristics of the U.S. citizen?
c. Who falls in the “in-group” and “out-group” and what standards is each held to?
d. What resources or benefits are at stake for the in-group and out-group?
e. How does your example of “in-group” vs “out-group” rhetoric and immigration reflect the hierarchy that Roberts-Miller describes in the quote above? What does it imply about who is thought to be “entitled to more goods than others by virtue of being better?”

Resources:


2. In Demagoguery and Democracy, Roberts-Miller states that us v. them language is not always demagogic when she writes, “Arguments from identity, or from conviction, aren’t always demagogic—sometimes it’s necessary to say, ‘Just believe me on this one’” (p.49). This can be the case when we think about social movements that advocate for policy changes, like the Civil Rights Movement—a decades long struggle for constitutional and legal protections for Black Americans that white Americans already enjoyed—whose leaders regularly used us vs. them language in the form of those who have legal protections and those who do not. This is particularly true of one of the movement’s central figures, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Take a moment to read one of Dr. King’s addresses, Letter from a Birmingham Jail, written in response to criticisms about his use of nonviolent action. After reading, respond to the following questions:

Reflection Questions

a. Where do you see examples of “us v. them” language in this piece?
b. Who are the “us” and “them” that Dr. King refers to? Aside from race, what are their identities?
c. How do you see their identities and their status as an “in-group” member and an “out-group” member shaping their perspectives and views on the policy issue of civil rights for Black Americans?
d. What is your reaction to Dr. King’s use of “us v. them” language? What do you see as the purpose of this rhetorical tool?
e. Using Roberts-Miller’s definition of demagoguery, does this letter and Dr. King fit the definition? Why or why not?
f. How do you discern when us vs. them language is demagogic and when it is not?

Resources:
King, M.L (1963). Letter from a Birmingham Jail

3. In their essay, Empathy and Antiracist Feminist Coalitional Politics, scholars Maggie Caygill and Pavitra Sundar state:

We would like to briefly clarify the difference between empathy and sympathy, a term that is related to and often confused with the former. As we see it, sympathy is based on a vertical power relationship. The privileged individual, the person not experiencing the pain, feels sorry for the disadvantaged "other." Sympathy, thus, reeks of superiority and condescension. Empathy is slightly different (only slightly). Empathy says, "I understand your pain because it is like mine in these ways... Since I understand my own pain, I know what it must be like to be you." On the face of it, the relationship between individuals in the case of empathy seems more lateral, and thus, one would assume, more equitable. However, empathy is not just a simple case of putting oneself in another's shoes. The oppressed do not and cannot empathize with the lot of the privileged. It seems clear then that, like sympathy, empathy too relies on and reinforces a top-down power dynamic.

Reflection Questions
a. What, if any, might be limitations to relying on empathy as a tool for undoing demagoguery?

4. Roberts-Miller writes a lot about the role that media plays in perpetuating the spread of demagoguery. She also names that deliberation and critical reflection are essential tools that help individuals think critically about the arguments and media one consumes. Share an example of when you saw a media outlet participating in “us v. them” rhetoric around a particular issue. Using the attached Cheatsheet for Critical Thinking from the Global Digital Citizen Foundation, answer some of the questions provided to critically analyze the content and rhetoric of that news story.

Note: Instructors can also make this a take home assignment, giving students ample time to find a particular news story (article or video clip) and use the questions on the cheatsheet to interrogate the source.

Resource:
The Ultimate Cheatsheet for Critical Thinking
5. Roberts-Miller writes, “Demagoguery about them is undone by empathy” (p. 99). Empathy, as described by the psychologist Carl Rogers, involves perceiving or sensing another person’s experience as if it were your own and being able to communicate an accurate understanding of that experience to the other person.

In describing Earl Warren’s regrets about his contributions to the internment of Japanese Americans, Roberts-Miller offers the following thoughts that are synonymous with empathy:

In his memoirs, he expressed deep regret for having supported internment, and he said, “Whenever I thought of the innocent little children who were torn from home, school friends, and congenial surroundings, I was conscience-stricken.” The question is, why didn’t he think about those children in 1942? Had he imagined the situation from the perspective of the Japanese in 1942, he would have had to think about that—about the children, about what it would mean to them...Getting past the demagoguery would have necessitated not just thinking more, or trying to be less emotional, or looking for data, but looking at things differently, and thinking about being wrong, and listening. (pp. 75-76; italics added)

She concludes the case study of Earl Warren by suggesting that the best way to address “us vs. them” thinking is “practicing compassion for those whom demagoguery says we should treat as Other. It’s by imagining things from their perspective” (p. 77).

Reflection Questions
a. Considering the descriptions of empathy offered by Rogers, how might empathy be used to undo an “us vs. them” mentality?

b. Describe a time when you, as an in-group member, have regretted a decision that you made, because the decision contributed to “us vs. them” thinking. If you had a “do over,” how might an empathic approach change your decision?

Questions for Engineering Courses
6. Tim Rettig, an engineer and CEO, has identified the following aspects of empathy:

Cognitive empathy: the ability to put ourselves into the perspective of the other person and imagine how he or she perceives a particular situation

Emotional empathy: the ability to imagine the feelings that the other is feeling in a particular situation while also being able to “feel” these emotions ourselves

Behavioral empathy: the ability to act in a way that shows our understanding of the other person and give him or her the feeling that we care

Reflection Questions
a. Which aspects of empathy (i.e., cognitive, emotional, behavioral) are easiest for you? Which aspects of empathy are more challenging for you? Why might this be?

b. Describe a modern-day situation where an empathic perspective might assist an in-group (with social power) with understanding the experiences of a marginalized out-group.
Questions for Psychology Courses

7. Researchers at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research reported that college students now are 40 percent less empathetic than they were in 1979, with the steepest drop coming in the last 10 years. Students today are generally less likely to describe themselves as "soft-hearted" or have "tender concerned feelings for others" and more likely to admit that "other people's misfortunes" usually don't bother them (Boston Globe, Oct 17, 2010).

According to Carl Rogers, a psychologist who wrote extensively about empathy, being aware of our positive and negative thoughts and feelings and accepting those is important, because this will increase the ability to accept others. Furthermore, Kristin Neff, a psychologist who studies self-compassion, has indicated that kindness towards ourselves is important because this allows us to help others and show compassion towards their shortcomings.

Reflection Questions

a. When you were growing up, what messages, sayings, or behaviors were you taught about empathizing with others?

b. Are their social “out-groups” that you would have difficulty empathizing with? Why might that be?

c. What are the stories that you have heard about those social out-groups?

d. If you empathized with those groups, how would the story change?