Alleviating Prejudicial Hate: The Strategies of Virginia Satir

Sandy Novak, MS, MA, LPC
Faculty, Banmen Satir China Management Center
Senior adjunct faculty member,
Naropa University, Boulder, Colorado

Abstract:

Satir saw that prejudice comes out of our erroneous hierarchical paradigm about human beings and their relationships. She saw that when we feel vulnerable and less in value than others, we may try to see ourselves as superior to escape the feelings of low esteem. She proposed an alternative paradigm, her "Growth Model" where people are seen as equal in value. *Her transformational strategy is compared to social psychology research on transforming prejudice.*

Satir's Description of the Mechanisms of Prejudice

Virginia Satir saw that the central source of prejudice in our times is our basic misunderstanding of the nature of human beings and their relationships. She called this old, misguided paradigm the "Hierarchical Model" or the "Threat and Reward" model. She looked at four areas of viewing the world that contributed to this paradigm: our definition of a relationship, our definition of a person, our explanation of an event, and our attitude toward change. (Satir, 1987, and Satir, Banmen, Gerber, and Gomori, 1991).

What she saw was that for eons of time we have believed that the fundamental human relationship is one of dominance and submission. In this inaccurate perception, "pairing always includes hierarchy." (Satir, 1987) One person is on the top; the other is on the bottom. One person has the role of deciding and dictating. The other is expected to obey. (Satir, 1987) Sometimes the one on top operated with benevolence. Others

operate with malevolence. Whether the one on top was malevolent or benevolent didn't remedy submission and suppression in the relationship.

She also saw that people believe that having a particular role in a relationship— parent, teacher, boss, president, (hierarchically superior in power or influence) was assumed to change the person's nature fundamentally to one of superiority. (Satir, 1987) In other words, the role determined the person's value. The one in the superior position is the valuable one. It's obvious what is true for the one on the bottom.

In the "Threat and Reward" model, a person is defined as someone who should conform and obey. People should make themselves into what the person in authority wants, not who they truly are. We distort ourselves to get love; we lie to insure our survival. The key becomes measuring up to someone else's standard and competing against everyone else to win acceptance. The outcome: I should be something I am not. (Satir, 1987) We end up defining ourselves in terms of what we are not, of what we are lacking. Then, when another group comes along and comparisons happen, we fear we can't compete and will be diminished by the other group.

In the "Threat and Reward" model, an event is explained by one cause and one right way the event should occur. The person with the superior position gets to say what that one right way is. There is one person to blame if something goes wrong: the scapegoat. A tragic example of this "one cause" thinking in history is Hitler's blaming of the Jews for the depression in global economics in the 1930s.

Within this dysfunctional paradigm, our attitude toward change is that it threatens our security, is always bad and should be resisted at all costs. We need to prevent it or stop it. We should maintain the status quo. We should never venture into the unknown

but stay with what is familiar. Of course, the person in the dominant position will
especially resist change so as to not lose the superior position. (Satir, 1987, and Satir, et
al, 1991, p. 14)

In all of these ways of viewing the world are the seeds of prejudice, the hatred and
fear of others because they belong to a different group. Satir proposed an alternative
paradigm we will explore later in this paper.

In the fifty years of carefully observing the people with whom she worked, Satir
came to disagree with Freud's drive theory. Freud's psychosexual theory of human
personality development focused on the primary biologically based drives of sex and
aggression. (Newman and Newman, 2003, p. 68) Satir saw that people's deepest
motivations are for survival and love (Satir, et al. 1991). She also saw that people feel
prejudice and hate because they feel vulnerable when these two goals are threatened.
Here is a dialog Satir had with a client at a workshop where the issue of prejudice and
hate becomes central for the client, and Satir addresses them from her belief system. The
client has shared her longing for living with feelings of love for all people and her
struggles with feeling hate at times instead.

> Linda (the client): I would like to be in a place where I can go beyond
> people's personalities…and just love them for the connection we might have
> as human beings…I want to love them for being human beings…
> Virginia: …What I heard you say is, "I don't want to go around with hate
> feelings." Now what you didn't say, but maybe it's true, is that you know
> hate erodes you.
> Linda: Umhm
> Virginia: Because what hate does is it starts eating on you. How many of you
> know that (to the workshop audience)? It starts eating on you. And it eats
> and it eats, and the more you hate, the more you want to kill the object of the
> hate. See, this runs a very interesting thing. Once you do a categorization, or
> you stereotype something, or you make a prejudicial kind of thing, then that
> has to be the focus of hate. It has to be the focus of—especially the prejudice
> bit—has to be a focus of hate. Now hate comes because you feel vulnerable.

> Because if you weren't doing what you're doing (pointing at a participant who has a mustache)—wearing that mustache, for instance. (Turning back to Linda) You know, all mustached men have got very bad ideas in their minds. That's what a lot of people say. Anyway, so there comes the fear. And the hate is to cover up the impotence. And so when we put ourselves in the spot of where we have to feel impotent, we start to erode ourselves. We start to erode. All right. Now you don't want to do that. Now, let us, for a moment now—we'll give him some names later. Think about what you want to do is keep yourself in as much congruence as possible, which is that you are letting yourself know what you feel.
> Linda: Umhm.
> Virginia: Now, actually the way out of hate is to let yourself know you're vulnerable, and that you feel impotent. That's the way out of hate.
> [Satir then speaks of street construction workers she has worked with.] So what I do is I help them to develop and to discover their vulnerabilities—their fear of being loved, their fears—whatever they might be. And so the first step in dealing with the hate is to allow yourself to be in touch with your own vulnerability. (Satir, 1989 and Andreas, 1991)

What Satir is saying here is that when we meet a stranger with unfamiliar characteristics, fear arises and we feel vulnerable. Inside we may be worrying about some or all of these questions: "Is this stranger a threat?" "Will he hurt me or diminish me?" "Will I measure up against him?" "Can I protect myself with this stranger?" "Do I have the strengths and skills for this?"

We try to shore ourselves up and get away from the vulnerable feelings through seeing the other as less than us in some way. If we can feel "better than", then maybe we can feel "okay". This can lead us to hating the Other. To maintain our esteem through hierarchy, through "our superiority", we have to keep the other beneath us. Then we don't have to consciously feel our own fears of inferiority or impotence. We now have a false sense of power and superiority.

This strategy "erodes us", she says. Hate erodes us rather than bolstering us up, because we are using the hate to cover up our impotence (our feelings of low self worth). Hating others isn't a cure to low self worth. It's a cover up that actually breaks us down

in Satir's view. Hate increases until we want to "kill the object of the hate". She implies

that we have the power to not be in a state of low self worth when she says, "so when we

put ourselves in the spot of where we have to feel impotent…" This is a part of Satir's

belief that, whether we are in touch with it or not, we all have an ongoing choice about

how we see ourselves and what we do to maintain our own sense of value. In this choice

are the seeds of our own healing and transformation out of prejudice and hate.

Satir's Strategies for Alleviating Prejudice

What is the alternative to the Threat and Reward model? Satir proposed a whole

new paradigm that she called "The Seed Model" or the "Growth Model".   Why these

names? She looked at life through the lens of what we all have most fundamentally in

common: we all came from the same place, the union of an egg and a sperm, or our

"seed", our beginning. At that fundamental level, we are all manifestations of life, and

equal in value. We may not be equal in role or skill, age or wealth, education or

experience, power or intelligence, but if we can begin to see ourselves as equal in value,

we can shift our paradigm from hierarchical to equal. (Satir, 1987) She also saw that

every person has the same potential to grow, learn, heal, and change, hence the Growth

Model. She saw that when people make these fundamental shifts in seeing equality and

growth, they change their way of viewing the world and increase their self worth.

In the Seed or Growth Model paradigm, the fundamental human relationship is

one of equality of value. Value is not determined by role or status. "Equality is

manifested in: equality of persons, connection, interest and acceptance of sameness and

differences. People feel love, ownership of self, respect of others, freedom of expression, and validation." (Satir, et al., 1991, p. 14)

Each person is "unique and can define him- or herself from an inner source of strength and validation." (Satir, et al., 1991, p. 14) Instead of conforming to an outside standard, each person can discover his or her own unique self and enjoy discovering others' sameness and differences. Each person is a manifestation of a universal life force in a physical form and a spiritual sacredness. Each person gets to define their own identity and have and express their own feelings. (Satir, et al, 1991, p. 14)

In the Growth Model paradigm, an event is seen as the outcome of many variables and events, some of which may not be manifest. There are many ways to approach anything, and we can choose our own criteria for how to decide what route to take. People look beyond an event to the context and its many contributing factors and we utilize systemic thinking to understand the dynamics of an event. (Satir, et al., 1991, p. 15)

In this model, people welcome and expect change as inevitable and essential. Our security grows out of our confidence in the process of change and growth, even though change can require going into unfamiliar places. There may be stress but it is welcomed. There is freedom in change and our security is in that freedom. (Satir, 1987 & Satir, et al., 1991, p. 14)

How does the Seed Model transform prejudice? From the "Seed" prospective, when we meet a stranger with unfamiliar characteristics, we view this new person as *equal in value*, full of characteristics we will have in common and full of potential for interesting differences to be explored. Since there is no competition at the level of value,

our esteem is not threatened by these differences. We maintain our esteem from within, valuing our own uniqueness and being in charge of our own identity.   There is no need for superiority or keeping anyone beneath us to maintain our esteem. Fear, hate and impotence have no place in our experience. Curiosity, support and connection do. Respect and exploration of differences enriches everyone. Satir, et al., 1991, p. 16)

The old hierarchical strategies for maintaining self esteem are unnecessary. We all have the ongoing choice about how we see ourselves and what we do to maintain our sense of esteem. We can be free to maintain our value when we know it and our identity come from within. Satir's therapy contains a myriad of strategies for helping this internal transformation come about. (Satir, et al., 1991, Satir, 1989, & Andreas, 1991)

Social Psychology's Research on Alleviating Prejudice

Research in the field of social psychology has offered five main strategies for reducing prejudice: a) collective guilt, b) social learning, c) contact hypothesis, d) *recategorization* (Baron, et al., 2006, p. 242-9), and e) self affirmation (Fein and Spencer, 1997). However, these "attempts to reduce prejudice and discrimination have, at best, yielded mixed findings." (Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001, p. 800).

Collective guilt is an emotion that comes from a group with power being confronted for actions that have done harm to a less powerful group (Baron, et al., p. 242). Learning about acts of prejudice and discrimination on the part of one's own group can bring these feelings and the potential for a commitment to stop such acts. One can hope that when the dominant, European-American group has learned about the history of slavery of African-Americans and genocide of Native Americans in United States history

by their group, the guilt of such a history has reduced the tendency of prejudice toward

these two minorities.

Social learning suggests that prejudicial views are acquired by direct and

vicarious experiences, much like our other social attitudes. These views can be unlearned

by having prejudicial views confronted (Baron, et al., 2006, p. 244). Yet another way to

reduce prejudice is through contact. When different groups spend time together, it can

lead to knowledge and understanding of the groups' similarities (Pettigrew, 1997, in

Baron, et al., p. 244). Thich Nhat Hanh utilized contact to bring understanding and peace

between Israelis and Palestinians at Plum Village in France with remarkable results.

After spending a month together utilizing Thich Nhat Hanh's "deep listening" group

process, the participants reported feeling like "brothers and sisters" and were committed

to sharing their acceptance of the other group and working for peace in Israel. (lecture,

Hanh, Boulder, CO. Sept. 2003)

Social psychologists have studied recategorization as a means to reducing

prejudice. Recategorization is a shifting of the boundaries between one's own group and

a group of "others" or an out-group. When the boundaries are shifted to be more

inclusive so that people belong to a larger single entity, their attitudes towards others

becomes more positive. (Baron, et al., p. 245)

Lastly, Fein and Spencer (1997) did three studies to investigate the role of self-

affirmation in stereotyping and prejudice. Their confirmed thesis was that

> many manifestations of prejudice stem, in part, from the motivation to maintain a
> feeling of self-worth and self-integrity. That is, self-image threat may lead people
> to engage in prejudiced evaluation of others. These negative evaluations can, and
> often do, make people feel better about themselves. Prejudice, therefore, can be
> self-affirming. By using available stereotypes to justify and act on prejudices,
> individuals may be able to reclaim for themselves a feeling of mastery and self-

worth, often saving themselves from having to confront the real sources of self-image threat. (p. 31)

What they found was that groups of subjects who had their self image affirmed before being asked to evaluate a person from a negatively stereotyped group tended to give a much more positive assessment than did those who were given negative personal feedback right before the evaluation. They concluded that, "providing people with other means of self-affirmation should reduce their desire to make prejudicial evaluations." (Fein and Spencer, 1997, p. 32)

Satir's Contribution to Social Psychology's Quest to Alleviate Prejudice

Satir promoted *recategorization* as a means of reducing prejudice through her Growth Model, seeing all people as "equal in value" and therefore a member of one group, the Human Race. One of the primary ways she advocated this transformation in every individual was through helping them raise their internal sense of their own value. She did this in her workshops through her meditations and transformational processes, including "parts parties" and "family reconstructions." (Satir, et al., 1991)

She was a proponent of using "social learning" to help her clients and workshop participants unlearn family of origin and childhood prejudicial views. She felt that if she could help an individual get in touch with their own fears and vulnerability around their self worth and then help them come to a place of higher esteem, feelings of prejudice and hate would naturally dissolve and be replaced with feelings of high self worth and open connection to others. (Satir, 1989)

Perhaps her largest contribution to the reduction of prejudice was to help her clients learn internal, ongoing self-affirmation. She taught people about their intrinsic

value for being the unique person that they are, not because they were better than someone else.

References

Andreas, S., (1991) *Virginia Satir, The Patterns of Her Magic*, Palo Alto: Science and Behavior Books.

Baron, R.A., Byrne, D., & Branscombe, N.R. (2006). *Social Psychology, 11th ed.* Boston: Pearson.

Behavior Matters: How Research Improves Our Lives booklet/Behaviormattersbooklet.pdf. access at www.decadeofbehavior.org

Dasgusta, D. & Greenwald, A.G. (2001) On the Malleability of Automatic Attitudes: Combating Automatic Prejudice With Images of Admired and Disliked Individuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 81, 800-814.*

Fein, S. and Spencer, S.J. (1997) Prejudice as Self-Image Maintenance: Affirming the Self Through Derogating Others. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73, 31-44*

Fishbein, H.D. (2004, March) *The Genetic/Evolutionary Basis of Prejudice and Hatred*. Paper presented at The Conference to Establish the Field of Hate Studies, Spokane, WA.

Newman, B. M., & Newman, P.R. (2003) *Development Through Life, A Psychosocial Approach, 8th ed.* Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth/Thompson Learning.

Satir, V. (1987) *Seed Model Lecture at Process Community, July 30, 1987* [Motion

Picture]. (Available from Avanta, the Satir Network, 2104 SW 152nd St. #2,

Burien, WA.   98166)

Satir, V. (1989) *Forgiving Parents* [Motion Picture]. (Available from NLP

Comprehensive, 2897 Valmont Rd., Boulder, CO. 80301)

Satir, V., Banmen, J., Gerber, J., Gomori, M. (1991). *The Satir Model, Family Therapy

and Beyond.* Palo Alto: Science and Behavior Books.