

INVISIBILITY

Things may be too obvious to be seen or too unfamiliar to be seen. We may hide or others may hide us. Some ways this can work:

Something that hasn't been named yet can't be seen.

Histories are lost or stolen, languages silenced, and points of view unreported.

Adherence to cultural norms and values hides the unique individual.

A dominant culture can't see its own characteristics – they're just "normal."

People in a non-dominant culture must pretend to be like those in the dominant culture to succeed.

People must conceal their characteristics to escape persecution.

We can't see ourselves because we have no one different to compare ourselves to.

We're so sure we're right that anyone different is just assumed to be a defective version of *us*.

We're so sure who "they" are that we can't really see them.

The social or other penalties for thinking certain thoughts are so great that we close our minds to them (even if, deep down, they're what we believe.)

Or . . . ?

Examples below.

EXAMPLES OF INVISIBILITY

1. Unintended exclusion. The sign says, “Everyone Welcome!” but the building is not wheelchair accessible. Meeting moderators say, “Don’t get excited,” frustrating people for whom emotion is an integral part of communication.
2. Land use. Because Native Americans practiced hunting and gathering rather than farming and didn’t consider land something to be owned, European settlers thought the land was free for the taking. (Lakota Chief Crazy Horse commented, “One does not sell the earth on which the people walk!”)
3. The talents of autistic people. Because their emotional processing was similar to her own, autistic scientist Temple Grandin realized that cows in slaughterhouses were terrified of a certain type of cattle chute. Her widely adopted design innovations have reduced animal suffering and worker frustration, also saving time, energy, and money. How many other marginalized people have untapped potential?
4. Eye contact behavior. Two well-meaning people try to work together, but they don’t succeed. Person A objects to Person B “staring rudely,” while B reads A’s eye contact avoidance as cold and unfriendly.
5. The value of alternative thought styles. Intercultural communication pioneer Edward T. Hall writes, “Most people who have been indoctrinated by our schools have comprehensive thinking pretty much knocked out of them, to be replaced by highly compartmentalized thinking. (It gets worse in graduate school.) Yet what the world needs today is many more comprehensive thinkers.”¹
6. Who’s human? A textbook used to teach Kenyan children decades ago named a German explorer as “the first man to see Mount Kenya” and provided a date. Later the textbook was revised to read, “the first European man”. (People had been seeing Mount Kenya for thousands of years.)

¹The Silent Language (?)