

Creating Communities and Cultures of Emotional and Relational Safety

BrianJames McMahon, LMFT

www.brianjamesconsulting.com

www.brianjamestherapy.com

Introduction: Safety

Safety in the context of communities and organizations does not simply refer to the absence of physical violence, aggression or conflict. The development of safety as a *culture* must take into account physical safety as well as emotional, relational, and sexual safety. Each expression of safety has its own components essential to its development. I will be exploring specifically the components that are required to develop emotional safety. As such, when I use the singular language of “safety here, it will be specifically in reference to emotional and relational safety.

All areas of safety (physical, sexual, emotional, and relational) are each in need of further articulation to help us deepen our understanding of what it means to create safe cultures and communities. The focus here on emotional and relational safety is not intended to diminish the validity or need of that. However, I believe the elements of emotional and relational safety lay the foundation for building communities that are also physically and sexually safe. Communities that are not sexually or physically safe will also be communities that are not emotionally and relationally safe. It will be difficult, I would argue impossible, to develop cultures that are physically and sexually safe if emotional and relational safety has not been established. It is emotional and relational safety that creates environments in which hard conversations are able to be had honestly and openly, and in which genuine changes are able to be made that protect the vulnerable and honor each participant in the community.

As we explore the development of cultures of safety, let us hold together this working definition of relational and emotional safety:

Emotional and relational safety has to do with the experience of trustworthiness within the community context in which there is openness, predictability, and justice.

Before I expound upon the experience of trustworthiness and the elements of openness, predictability, and justice, it is important that we understand the developmental nature of safety. If we fail to hold clearly and intentionally safety as developmentally nurtured, we will undermine the very culture we are attempting to create.

The Starting Point

Safety is not something that is simply present or absent. Safety is *developmental* in that it is created over time, together. Safety is built through the collaboration of those at all levels of real or perceived power and powerlessness within the context or community they are involved in and impacted by. Safety cannot be determined by the leadership, but must be developed through collaborative experiences between leadership and those they are leading. Furthermore, safety cannot be determined by those in power, but will be most clearly identified as present or absent by those who do not hold power in the community.

As such, ***safety must not be declared***. The starting point for developing communities and cultures of safety cannot be the proclamation or determination of the safety of the relationship, context, person, or

community. We must begin with the acknowledgement of our hope to be and become safe, *paired with* the acknowledgement that we are most likely less safe than we would want to be and have not yet earned the trust and privilege necessary to build safety together.

This part is critical, so I will write it again: ***the starting point of building safety is the acknowledgement that it has not yet been built, that it likely does not yet fully exist, and giving permission for the lack of safety to be the starting point.*** We begin by giving permission to acknowledge where, when, and with whom we *do not* feel safe. *By giving permission to openly talk about not feeling safe, we open space in the relationship and community to begin to create safety together.*

When we declare safety, we run the risk of undermining its development and its very existence. We often have no idea what makes the person in front of us safe or unsafe. Phrases such as, “this is a safe place” or “you are safe with me,” do not determine safety. While they are often used in a well-meaning manner, they ultimately undermine the development of safety. Once something has been declared as true to the community, it disallows the expression of other experiences that may not be congruent with the proclaimed experience. When we declare safety to already exist, we take away the voice of others to have any experience other than our pre-determination of safety. This tends to amplify already existing power dynamics, experiences of powerlessness, and victimization, and destabilizes any safety that has been in the process of being developed, all in the name of being safe.

Safety is not the starting point. Building safety is the journey. Acknowledging that we, our communities, and our organizations *are not* safe gives permission for safety to be co-created over time.

Building Cultures of Safety: The Framework, The Experience, and the Components

In recognition that safety is developed over time through collaborative experiences that include both those inside and outside of leadership structures, let us turn our attention to the experiences and components that are necessary for the development of safety in the context of our communities.

The Framework: Attachment Theory

A great amount of the research done around relationships and relational dynamics that form the underpinning to this conversation regarding emotional and relational safety comes out of Attachment Theory developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. Attachment Theory examines the components that are present and necessary in the development of children who form secure attachment to their caregivers¹. Secure attachment and earned attachment (for those who had to overcome disruptions in early attachment), are significant predictors of emotional maturity and health in adulthood as well as the capacity to engage in healthy, successful relationships.²

Building upon the foundation of Attachment Theory, we have come to recognize that the components that are necessary in the development of healthy attachment in children to their caregiver are the same components that are necessary in fostering healthy, connected, vibrant relationships in community: ***experiences of love and experiences of safety.*** Experiences of love facilitate the development of a sense of identity, while experiences of safety facilitate the development of a sense of empowerment. While the primary focus of this article will be deepening our understanding of the components that contribute to experiences of safety, it will be helpful to briefly explore experiences of love. It is important that we are conscious of what is being held alongside experiences of safety in the context of healthy relationships and community as they are undeniably interdependent, even as we explicitly examine experiences of safety.

Experiences of Love

When we talk about “experiences of love” in relationship, we mean relationships where we feel we belong and have value. We are told, or we experience deeply, that we are worthy, unique, and desirable, and that we have something to offer to others. The transformative power of experiences of love resides in the way that these experiences form our sense of identity. We as humans are wired to come to know ourselves formatively through the eyes, words, and actions of those around us. For example, a child who is looked upon with disdain by a parental figure comes to believe themselves to be undesirable as a core component of their identity; a child who is looked upon with delight by a parent develops an identity of value and worth. A child or adult who is secure in an identity that has been shaped through experiences of love are able to engage freely in actions that both value themselves and nurture others³.

Love is something that many churches frequently get right. When people encounter the love of God, it transforms how they see themselves. Additionally, the role of the pastor and the way the community loves one another further participates creating experiences of love that shape, heal, and transform identity.

Experiences of Safety

Emotional and relational safety has to do with the experience of being *secure in the relationship itself*. Another word that many people use is “trust”. The significance in having environments that are safe is the way that it fosters a sense of empowerment. Attachment Theory describes the idea of a “safe base” from which children can explore and learn to be brave in the world⁴. When a child grows up in a family that is relationally and emotionally safe, or when an individual is disciplined in a community that is safe, that individual is able to develop a sense of empowerment to move through the world learning, growing, and being brave. They are able to engage in reciprocating relationships of giving and receiving, and are able to learn to connect reliably with others.

When there is not somewhere safe to return to when pain is present, it becomes very difficult to learn to take risks and be brave in the world, to give generously while trusting that needs will be met, and to be open to connection with others. When we do not have safety, empowerment is arrested, trust is shattered, and thriving stalls in pursuit of survival. We become hesitant consumers or powerless victims, not empowered participants in community.

The Components: Openness, Predictability, Justice

Of primary focus for us is understanding not simply the need to become safe communities, but the experiences and components that go into developing safe communities. The overarching experience that describes safe communities is trustworthiness⁵. This does not simply reflect a feeling of trust toward the leader or leadership team, but toward the community at large. It means an experience of trustworthiness that participants have toward leaders, leaders toward participants, and participants toward each other. ***The experience of trustworthiness in a community context that establishes a culture of safety is comprised of three primary components: openness, predictability, and justice.***

Openness

Openness means we are safe to talk about things. Everything. Beauty and tragedy. Hope and despair. Gratitude and grief. Safety and violations. It is not simply openness in the passive sense that things are *permitted* to be discussed, but openness in the active sense that things *are* discussed. The practice of openness is begun and embodied from the top, by those with power. Just like in a family system, where the rules of engagement are established by the parents, so too in communities the rules of engagement are established by the leadership. Children come to understand what is welcome to be discussed when parents bring it up. If parents do not talk about a topic, an experience, or a family dynamic, children come

to learn that those things are off limits in the family system. So too in our communities: when leadership does *not* open conversations, the community will come to the conclusion that *we don't talk about that here*, whether that is true or not.

One of the primary purposes of a safe community is to empower exploration and growth. Openness both gives permission and paves the way for exploration. When there are limitations to what is allowed to be explored (in this case discussed), it creates an atmosphere where *some things* can be talked about, but others cannot. When *some things* are disallowed, it causes uncertainty among participants about *which things* are allowed and which are not. Wherever there is a risk of minimization, punishment, retribution, or dismissal for talking about something, it creates inhibitions in community members to talk about many other things as well. If there is not openness in relationship in the community, curiosity is undermined, empowerment stalled, and the focus of participants becomes surviving landmines of taboos instead of exploring and learning.

Of specific importance is the openness to talk about things that are uncomfortable, ugly, and unwanted. Is there openness for the community to acknowledge ways they are hurt or feel misunderstood? Is there room for suffering? In a community that values belonging, is there freedom to talk about the ways that some people might feel that they do not belong? In an organization that prioritizes safety, can people discuss ways the community fails them and in which they do not feel safe? Is the conversation opened, even *invited* by leadership? Or is it frowned upon, even in unspoken ways, as if someone feeling unsafe or the lack of belonging only reflects something about that person?

Predictability

Predictability means that what is communicated happens, reliably. It means that what leadership of a community say they will do, they do, and what they say they won't do, they don't. It means that promises are followed through on and the way leadership says they will respond to situations is how consistent with how they actually respond. It means the way that people are treated is consistent over time. There are times when well-meaning leaders attempt to protect their people from unnecessary harm by withholding difficult details or painful realities. While there are appropriate places for this, it must be done thoughtfully as it runs the risk of creating a dynamic where the experienced reality is different than what is being communicated and where the *described (public)* reasons things are happening differ from the *real (private)* reasons they are happening. Even if the dissonance between what is communicated and what is real never becomes explicit, it is almost always *felt* in the community.

The significance of predictability at home, or in an organization, is in the way that it frees people up to be brave and explore the unpredictable world beyond. Predictability decreases anxiety in a community and allows there to be trust in the "home base." When there is trust of the reliability of home, there is freedom to take risks, to try new things, to grow in uncomfortable ways, because they can reliably trust "home" to be there for them regardless of the outcome. When what is communicated can be relied upon as true, reliable, and predictable, members of the community can spend their energy learning to navigate much of the world and many relationships that are unpredictable.

When home – literal home, organizational home, or church home – is unpredictable, it requires a vigilance and attentiveness to those dynamics to insure survival that undermine risk taking, discourage bravery, and inhibit people from extending themselves toward others. It is human instinct to prioritize survival at home over thriving in the world beyond. Unpredictability disempowers development and growth.

Justice

Justice refers to the balance of the system, the consistency of rules, and the fairness with which people are treated. It doesn't mean everyone is treated exactly the same, but justice speaks to the equality of value in the system itself. It means that rules apply to everyone and not just to some. That ramifications for violations of safety are enforced consistently and that those with more power do not get off the hook or have their behaviors excused. Justice does not eliminate the use of appropriate accommodations or alternative methodologies for moments and individuals that need them. Instead, it means that when accommodations or alternatives are engaged that it is clear and understood *why* they were made and how the decision is congruent with the understanding the community has of maintaining balance and consistency in the system as a whole.

A community and culture in which justice is an established component frees members of the community from the need for self-serving vigilance. Community members can trust that there is room for them, that their needs will be met in a fair and balanced way, and that they will be looked after and protected. This empowers members of the community to engage in generosity toward others and open themselves up toward connection. A community where justice is not practiced creates a context where everyone must look out for themselves and take what they need to make sure their needs are met. It fuels divisiveness and competition, eroding trust, and undermining safety.

Conclusion

As with most elements of a greater whole that are examined individually, openness, predictability, and justice are interwoven and interrelated. It will be difficult for a community without openness to truly embody justice or predictability, and without justice, predictability and openness will be rare. It is at the intersection of openness, predictability, and justice that the development of safety is able to begin to be nurtured.

Just as safety as a whole is established developmentally, so are openness, predictability, and justice. The developmental process for each is the same: we begin with the acknowledgement that things are not what we wish they were. In doing so, we create space for conversation, wrestling, exploration, and collaborative discovery.

The developmental nature of safety allows communities to *become* safer. We hold a longing for our communities to exist in the absence of pain, suffering, violations, and harm. Yet the development of safety is not based upon the immediate eradication of these things. In fact, due to the human dynamic in all families, organizations, and communities, it would be wise to assume that violations of safety will continue to occur. While we must do our due diligence to limit these violations, protect the vulnerable, and establish practices and policies that reduce harm, the *primary* determining factor to trustworthiness in a community is not the absence of violations and harm, but how those experiences are responded to. Safety, at its core, is developed through the freedom of people to voice when violations have occurred and boundaries have been crossed, and to trust that the community and leadership will respond to the vocalization of those violations in reparative ways that embody openness, predictability, and justice.

¹ Bowlby, J. (1983). *Attachment: attachment and Loss, Volume One*. New York: Basic Books.

² Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. New York: Basic Books.

³ Rogers, C. (1995). *On becoming a person: A therapists view of psychotherapy*. Boston: Mariner Books.

⁴ Ainsworth, M. & Bowlby, J. (1965). *Child care and the growth of love*. London: Penguin Books.

⁵ Hargrave, T.D. & Pfitzer, F. (2011). *Restoration therapy: understanding and guiding healing in marriage and family therapy*. New York: Routledge.