

The Future of Psychology in a Flat World

The World is Flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century.

By Thomas J. Friedman.

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This is an unusual book to recommend to psychologists. It is not about psychology. It is not written by a psychologist. Yet, read through the lens of a professional psychology, it invites a major inquiry into the future of psychology. Written by Thomas J. Friedman, a noted *New York Times* columnist on foreign affairs, *The World Is Flat* addresses the impact of technological change on the world's economics and politics. Friedman's notion that the world has gone flat is his metaphor for discussing the implications of globalization for American labor, economics and politics. As his leading subtitle, *A Brief History of the 21st Century*, suggests, it is a book as much about the very recent past as it is about an imminent future. His argument very simply put is that the computer and the internet have so leveled the economic field that an individual anywhere can compete with large companies anywhere else. Fascinating. An example that he uses both to illustrate and to bolster his argument that globalization is having major impact on economics and politics is that no two nations that have MacDonald's restaurants have ever waged war against each other. So far, is the obvious rejoinder.

Friedman is a thoughtful man and a recognized expert on foreign affairs, as his three Pulitzer Prizes for his work at *The New York Times* and his National Book Award for *From Beirut to Jerusalem* attest. His reputation defends his book against easy dismissal as armchair musings. His ideas are large and his scope sweeping. Any author who observes broad trends, supports them with appealing examples, uses them to explain complex economic and political problems, and then extrapolates from them to challenge accepted, comfortable realities is an easy target for criticism. Nonetheless, I would argue his view is compelling and worth considering. And my purpose in recommending the

book is not to engage in a critique of Friedman's politics or economics. For, it is when one ponders the globalization he describes, its concatenated, relentless, geometric progress that his book becomes most provocative for the psychologist in us.

Why the world is flat.

Friedman uses the metaphor of a flat world to illustrate the effects of technological developments in making it possible for increasing numbers of individuals to communicate, collaborate, conduct business, and, importantly, to mobilize and market resources that were unimagined as few as fifteen years ago. In this flattened world we live in, Bangalore is a suburb of Boston and individuals in their homes bargain with mega-corporations while employing support staffs of one or many nearby or scattered around the world. Friedman attributes these changes to the convergence of three factors: new modalities of communicating, a new and level playing field, and new players on the field. What has flattened the world are 10 flatteners, e.g., outsourcing, offshoring, 9/11/01 (the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City), and 8/9/95 (the fall of the Berlin Wall).

While acknowledging the major upheaval to national economies, especially in the developed countries like the U.S., Friedman's view remains positive, almost utopian. The loss in business and employment for many in the U.S., for example, means significant economic growth and enrichment globally, principally in developing countries like China and India. These are but the birth pangs of a new and improved economic order, improved because of increased opportunity and capital. For instance, he suggests that "lifetime employability" replace lifetime employment, the latter being unsustainable

in a flattened world (p. 284). Some may consider this more like passing a kidney stone than giving birth.

Though sensitive to the costs to the contemporary American laborer in lost opportunity, Friedman sees American industry and ingenuity as the means to retaining global preeminence. He has great faith in these values and resources. Nonetheless, his is a cautionary tale. America could lose its preeminence and slip to a second-rate economic power if it fails to create new needs in the market that it alone can meet. America must outrun the Chinese lion, he muses, to survive in this new world. Perhaps, the most cautionary aspect of his thesis is that the world is not only flattened in the blink of an eye, it continues to flatten at accelerating paces. In a world of constant change finding solid ground is wasted effort and time. How does one survive persistent economic earthquakes? Friedman would argue that outpacing our challengers will keep the earthquakes on the lower end of the Richter scale.

Psychology in a flattened and flattening world.

The implications of these phenomena for psychology are many and challenging. The list of implications and challenges that follows is hardly comprehensive. Researchers will see challenges and opportunities that the psychologist in independent practice may not; the psychologist advocating in the public interest may see implications for change the educator may not. What is attempted here is the broadest of brush strokes. The list is the result of talks with other psychologists who have read the book and from questions culled from several professional listservs over a period of a month. But the science and profession as a whole must see and anticipate them all. That is our greatest

challenge. The list is a litany of questions that mean to prod and provoke debate. The challenge must be a mandate, Friedman would tell us.

Psychological Practice

In a flattened world the three billion more people Friedman tells us now have access to the global marketplace will also have access to psychological services via internet- and video-conferencing. Those numbers will grow as technology reaches more people and improved technology makes it easier to communicate. As the numbers grow, how will psychology meet the demand for service? Will we need more psychologists? Is the influx of new consumers a partial answer to the over-crowding of urban markets with new psychologists? What services not yet envisioned might these new consumers demand? Can they be met with current technology? For instance, some services, like certain assessment instruments, lend themselves effectively to these media; others do not.

What would a psychological practice look like in a flattened world? If psychotherapy is sometimes conducted on the telephone today, in Friedman's world of accelerating change, next year the internet with webcam capabilities may be the vehicle of choice for consumers. In a few years even holographs could be available, creating a virtual meeting that mimics an office visit so closely as to be indistinguishable. If so, then where does the therapy take place, as one prominent psychologist asked? Current licensing laws restrict a psychologist's practice to those jurisdictions where he or she is so licensed. If much or even most of a psychologist's practice is with persons in another jurisdiction or even country, how will the psychologist be authorized? What then of mobility? The need for international mobility may outstrip the need for interstate mobility. Consulting psychologists already practice internationally. As more people gain

access to communication technologies, they also gain more choice of psychotherapists. They may as easily choose someone not in their state or country. Supply and demand may affect fee structures and services offered more than managed care does now.

Training

As psychologists treat patients in other parts of the globe through advanced communication technologies, will training in Boston translate to Bangalore? Understanding and treating a person living in India differs substantially from treating an Indian immigrant or descendant living in the United States. Access to psychologists will increase for rural Americans, too. Cultural sensitivities will be increasingly important to both the successful practice and the provision of ethical services.

What will constitute expertise in such a market? Certainly, psychologists with multi-lingual proficiencies will have a distinct advantage in Friedman's world. How well a psychologist understood the patient's culture will be critical to survival success as well as to effective and appropriate service.

What would a graduate training program look like to prepare a psychologist to work in a flattened world? Much of that training itself may take place on the internet. If so, a faculty may dispersed across the globe and the instructor educated and trained in other countries. Many training programs offer content-oriented courses in virtual classrooms today. Friedman talks of intercontinental business conferences being conducted on 40-foot screens that create the illusion of being in different parts of the same room. Will advances in communication make it plausible to offer clinical training and supervision in virtual environments? In short, what competencies will a flattening

world demand of the psychologist? For that matter, will offering services virtually itself become a specialty?

Public interest

Perhaps, one of the most important challenges psychology faces is applying its expertise to human welfare in a flattened, flattening world. All the economic and political changes Friedman argues have taken place, and will continue to take place at an ever-increasing rate, happen to individual and groups of real people. How will psychology apply the expertise of accumulated research and practice on the effects of macro- and micro-level change on the lives of many millions? Moreover, these are women and men and families from widely varying cultures, ethnicities, and classes, mostly from developing countries. How do psychologists address these emerging needs? Certainly, national psychological associations will have to develop their international expertise and relations exponentially. International engagement, of course, will bring psychology once again face to face with issues of race, culture, class, and religion.

The pressures on organized psychology, particularly those associations in the first world, to respond to the needs of these millions will be great. They are already surfacing. One example from first-hand experience arose at the first international meeting of psychologists on sexual orientation and mental health in San Francisco in 2001. Psychologists in developing countries looked for support and shared resources to psychological associations, most particularly the American Psychological Association (APA), they viewed as having more resources, having done the necessary research, and are better mobilized to press for public policies more favorable to lesbian, gay, and

bisexual people around the world. They also expected and encouraged these associations to continue to lead the rest of the world.

Conclusion

Friedman acknowledges that a flattened world eliminates opportunity for some but creates it for others. Painful losses in the marketplace for some are outweighed by the gains in new markets for many more. Friedman trusts that American ingenuity can still outpace or compensate for the encroachments of foreign entrepreneurs who underbid American labor. But ingenuity will need industriousness as well to succeed and to surpass competitors. Snooze, you lose, he cautions.

It will not be technological advancement alone that equips organized psychology to respond to the demands of a flattened world, though certainly organized psychology and individual psychologists will have to be tech-savvy and keep pace with technological advances to participate effectively in the marketplace. To that end, the APA is hiring its first Chief Information Officer this year. It will take resilience to adapt to lost opportunities, imagination to find and respond to new ones, and work to apply them successfully. Psychologists need not fear a flattened world. Psychology touches every aspect of human experience. It will continue to do so as long as there are human beings to study and treat. So opportunity will always be there. But, if Friedman is right, every aspect of psychology will be touched and tested by a flattened world.

Reviewer Biography

Armand R. Cerbone has been in independent practice full-time without the supports or restrictions of any managed-care, HMO, or PPO panels. Providing clinical services to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities of Chicago and advocating for LGBT-affirmative mental health policy, he created a viable niche in a competitive market. Most of his career has been spent applying psychological research to the elimination of the effects of stigma and discrimination against LGBT persons but also against persons of color. He is currently Past-President of the Illinois Psychological Association and Chair of the Board for the Advancement of Psychology in the Public Interest at the American Psychological Association. He has received several local and national awards for his work, most recently the Committee on Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Concerns Committee's 2006 award for Outstanding Achievement.