Social Affinity Flow Theory: A New Understanding of Both Human Interaction and the Power of the Bahá'í Training Institute Process

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Abstract

This article presents a new theoretical construct, Social Affinity Flow Theory (SAFT), which both describes and predicts flow phenomena across a diversity of human social systems and is founded upon constructal law. Constructal law and its associated s-curves describe many phenomena, both in nature and in human societies. Extrapolated from the work of Bejan and Zane and integrating social science research, it provides a foundational explanation of social rifts prevalent in many societies today as well as constructive efforts of social change, whether secular or religiously based. A primary example of constructive change explained by SAFT is the community-building work of the Bahá'í Faith, as reflected in both its teachings and its training institute process.

Résumé

Cet article présente une nouvelle construction théorique, la théorie des flux d'affinité sociale (Social Affinity Flow Theory, ou SAFT), qui décrit et prédit les phénomènes de flux dans une diversité de systèmes sociaux humains et qui est fondée sur la loi constructale. La loi constructale et les courbes en S qui y sont associées décrivent de nombreux phénomènes, tant dans la nature que dans les sociétés humaines. Extrapolé des travaux de Bejan et Zane et intégrant la recherche en sciences sociales, l'article fournit une explication fondamentale des fractures sociales qui prévalent aujourd'hui dans de nombreuses sociétés ainsi que des efforts constructifs de changement social, qu'ils soient fondés sur la laïcité ou la religion. Le travail de construction communautaire de la foi bahá'íe, tel qu'il se reflète dans ses enseignements et dans son processus d'institut de formation, est un bon exemple de changement constructif expliqué par la théorie des flux d'affinité sociale.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta una nueva construcción teórica, Social Affinity Flow Theory (SAFT), que describe y predice los fenómenos de flujo a través de una diversidad de sistemas sociales humanos y se basa en la ley de "constructal." La ley constructal y sus "s-curvas" asociadas describen muchos fenómenos, tanto en la naturaleza como en las sociedades humanas. Extrapolado del trabajo de Bejan y Zane e integrando la investigación en ciencias sociales, proporciona una explicación fundamental de las grietas sociales que prevalecen en muchas sociedades hoy en día, así como los esfuerzos constructivos de cambio social, ya sean laicos o religiosos. Un ejemplo principal de cambio construc-

tivo explicado por SAFT es el trabajo de construcción comunitaria de la Fe Bahá'í, como se refleja tanto en sus enseñanzas como en su proceso del programa del Instituto.

In January 2016, members of the Bahá'í Faith around the world were addressed by the international head of their religion with the words, "There is a growing appreciation among people in all parts of the world of the efficacy of Bahá'u'lláh's remedy for healing the maladies of society" (Universal House of Justice, 20 January 2016). Among the "maladies of society" is a fundamental disunity between peoples of various ethnicities, cultures, religions, political affiliations, genders, generations, and other identities. It is in this often contentious space that members of the Bahá'í Faith, a world-embracing religion founded on the concept of human unity, strive to bring about a more just and peaceful society for all humankind. Clearly, there is a stark contrast between the aims of this religious community and aspects of the world in which its members live and operate.

But its aims are even higher still. Not merely advocating the cause of peace, its members are in the midst of a grassroots reshaping, according to the principles of their Faith, of the societies in which they live. Chief among Bahá'í beliefs is the essential unity of humankind, and principal among the objectives of this religious community is to manifest this spiritual reality in social models that demonstrate an ever-widening circle of inclusion and influence. During that same year,

the Universal House of Justice stated, "The Divine Plan continues at the present time with the intensive effort to establish a pattern of community life that can embrace thousands upon thousands in clusters that cover the face of the planet" (26 March 2016). The current global plans of the Bahá'í Faith, meant to address the ills of human civilization, stem from the injunctions of its Prophet-Founder, Bahá'u'lláh, who stated in the late nineteenth century, "The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy" (*Gleanings* 106:1).

One of the key teachings of the Bahá'í Faith is the essential harmony between science and religion. Though there are many ways of describing this harmony and its implications, the one embraced for this paper is each being a source of truth and understanding. In other words, the methods of science and the intellectual clarity it can provide can reinforce religious understanding and, in some cases, even deepen appreciation for the tenets of one's religion. It is hoped that the reader, likely familiar with at least the fundamentals of the Bahá'í Faith, when introduced to a new scientific construct called Social Affinity Flow Theory (SAFT), will afterwards gain a deeper appreciation for the Faith's teachings and its Founder's claim of "prescribing the remedy" for an ailing humanity. Accordingly, we will explain SAFT's foundation in the physical sciences (specifically, in constructal law), its application in

explaining social phenomena, and its relevance to understanding the scientific basis of actions prescribed within the global plans now underway within the Bahá'í community.

Understanding Constructal Law from Physics

Bejan and Zane assert that the constructal law (CL) applies to the development of organisms, "inanimate nature and engineered systems." Their thought-provoking work defines constructal law thus: "flow systems should evolve over time, acquiring better and better configurations to provide more access for the currents that flow through them" (5). This law is used to predict and explain the movement of rivers, the patterns formed by tree branches and root systems, the growth patterns of microbes, and the pathways formed in the instant that a bolt of lightning arcs across the sky and touches the ground. Indeed, CL is remarkably consistent in the natural world, with example after example of its ubiquity, from snowflakes to networks in a leaf. In addition to following constructal law, these cases also obey the laws of thermodynamics as applied to natural systems. In particular, the Second Law of Thermodynamics posits that energy flows from locations of higher states to those of lower ones. This explains another source of "flow" seen in nature, from convection currents in the atmosphere, the heating of food as it bakes in an oven to the cooling provided by the radiator in a car engine. There is

even the expression "nature abhors a vacuum," which illustrates the tendency for flow to naturally occur to restore equilibrium.

Beyond *physical* phenomena, can construcal law also explain *social* patterns? Bejan and Zane claim that it can, asserting that CL encompasses information flow and human organizations (46–47). However, a review of the literature reveals that human social structures sometimes defy CL. Though our engineered systems, such as traffic patterns and road distribution networks, are clear examples of CL's principles at work, other systems are not—or at least there are contradictory forces also at work that are unaddressed by CL alone. If flows tend to go from areas of high concentration to those of lower, then why do we commonly observe cities where a fairly affluent area is only a few blocks away from a subsidized housing project? Not only do these conditions exist, but they can persist in a steady state of gritty contrast for decades. According to CL, we would expect there to be some "flow" of information, best practices, educational opportunities, or financial resources occurring that would somehow work over time to minimize these stark differences. Yet, often the unequal conditions endure despite the best-intentioned efforts to create balance and flow.

Contradictions to CL's predictions also exist in the social uptake of innovations. It would be logical to assume that human innovation will be adopted where and when it is most needed. This

"flow" is particularly expected when innovation occurs among seemingly moral human beings who are suddenly given the capacity to alleviate the suffering of people for whom they are responsible. Though such flows may occur, they do not happen consistently. Innovations, Rogers repeatedly shows, can be ignored or undermined to the point that the cures to various diseases have been dismissed for generations in favor of maintaining social norms (7). So, when we seek to understand the process of social change, the claims of constructal law alone do not explain the process by which it occurs. Something more is needed.

Addressing Knowledge Gaps to Better Understand Human Flow Systems

Adding the influencing phenomena of human choice and thought to the framework of constructal law helps it more fully explain flow in human social systems. Choice and thought are inherent parts of the human flow model because they act as gateways to any flow that is to occur. Humans, acting as individuals, can (1) opt into a system of behavioral flow, (2) remain unmoved and therefore opt out, or (3) through clever policies that act upon psycho-social factors, be "nudged" into making choices (Thaler and Sunstein 6-8). One simple example of constructal law in action is sports fans performing "the wave" in a stadium. Each individual voluntarily opts into the action as they recognize the event on the other side of

the stadium. They voluntarily plan to give up their "separateness" to become part of a larger, coordinated action. Some authors have coined the aptly descriptive term "social organism" to describe the coordinated actions of individuals who make up a larger whole, in itself acting as a single organism (Levine 239; Elwick 35; Christens et al, 229; Strassman and Queller 605; Goodall 231). Further exploration of this phenomenon that exists all around us requires some fundamental constructs to be defined.

These constructs are psycho-social bonds, communication, empathy, and morality. For the individuals in the sports stadium, the psycho-social bond is the shared social identity of being fans enjoying a sporting event. The dominant contextual factors are not race, ethnicity, and language, but rather an affinity that makes people see themselves as extended members of teams engaged in an athletic competition. The term "psycho-social" is meant to describe the overall psychological and social factors that are a part of every human being's reality and to which they respond. These factors affect how a person perceives, cognitively processes, and responds to the combination of their inner thoughts and the outer world's events and people (Peterson 54; David and Hofmann 115; Toker and Avci 1157). Psycho-social factors include biases, predilections, preferences, self-identity (profession, gender, ethnicity, sexual preference, etc.), and any other factors that we all carry and that shape our attitudes and behaviors.

Communication is another factor that is essential when discussing social interactions. It is how we connect with one another, coordinate activities, and share ideas. Communication takes many forms: linguistic (spoken or written words), aural (e.g., tone of voice), gestural (e.g., body language, winks, nods, and hand signals), visual (e.g., drawn pictures), and more. If the existence of flow is the defining feature of any living system, then human social systems "live" by flow that depends upon communication. From this perspective, we can even redefine communication: its ultimate and perhaps its only purpose is to create and sustain flow within our social systems. Without it, we are no more than isolated individuals living in close proximity. Communication therefore makes human society.

In review, flow occurs in social systems along the pathways of information being shared and actions coordinated among groups of people. Unlike the flow of a substance such as water or oil, the flow of information and the coordination of actions among people are subject to psycho-social factors, which shape the interpretation and processing of information passed between people. The transfer of information and ideas is how people connect with one another. From this communication, we form connections and, as research has shown, subsequently extend the boundaries of concern and trust from our own selves to include others (Glanville et al. 545). This extension of concern to others is a fundamental basis of empathy

and the documented term "proximity" (Morris and McDonald 717). It is important to note that research also shows that the proximity between individuals and groups making moral decisions can be a factor, where "proximity" is measured in terms of physical and emotional nearness between people (friends, family, neighbors, etc.) (Jaffe and Pasternak 53–55).

Empathy may be defined as "the ability to see, feel, respond [to], and understand [another's situation] as if one were the other person" (Weinstein et al. 247). In lay terms, it is the ability to put oneself "in another's shoes." It is posited here that empathy is a key social "bonding agent" between people that causes them to give due consideration to the thoughts, feelings, and wellbeing of others. The absence of the ability to feel empathy means that a person does not respond according to expected norms and, consequently, does not fit the web of our society. These people interact with others, but without the concern or true connection that others may expect or wish for. In sum, empathy and forming empathetic connections are both common and expected features of human society.

It may also be pondered just why people seek out others—how is it that we as human beings create larger bodies that we call societies or social organisms? The term for this characteristic is synchrony, which is hard-wired into the human brain. Neuroscientists have ascertained that the human brain naturally seeks out and synchronizes with other brains (Wheatley et al.

594–96). This trait allows for large-scale coordination of masses of people (Wiltermuth and Heath 1), noted above in the behavior of sports fans in a stadium. Further, it makes possible the formation of armies, global corporations, and governments. The tendency to form a "social organism" is fundamental to being human and underpins the occurrence of flow between groups of people. We are literally designed to be part of larger flows, to be part of something larger than our own selves.

So, if how we connect with one another depends upon psycho-social factors, and if empathy varies according to these factors and the degree to which we share flow (i.e., connection) with others, then what of morality? As profound a component as empathy may be, morality is just as important. Morality has been defined as "a considered opinion of what should be done . . . when confronted with an ethical dilemma" (Morris and McDonald 715). In the field of evolutionary psychology, human morality has been theorized as an adaptive response to living in social contact with others. Human interactions, envisioned as a system of flows, can be compared to the flow of cars that occurs smoothly and continuously because of organizing rules that define the movements. By following the "rules of the road" as a coordinating framework, a great volume of interactions, travel, and commerce can occur efficiently and economically. Likewise, observing rules of morality allows social transactions to occur continuously and in relative harmony. Morals (i.e.,

cognition, heuristics, norms, or culture, depending on the scholarly field), like rules of the road, not only are reciprocated but also allow humans to interact with one another on a sustainable basis (Gintis et al. 242). If we did not follow such rules—if morality were to break down among interacting people—the glue which sustains normal relations would be compromised and the web of society weakened.

Though much can be said about empathy and morality and how they relate to social flows, a few key points will be made briefly. First, under certain conditions, individuals sharing empathetic ties have been shown to communicate more efficiently than those who do not, especially when the communication is based on terms and concepts unique to their empathetic bond (Weinstein et al. 247). Studies have also shown that social connections create greater trust between individuals (Glanville et al. 545). We can therefore make a logical connection between the construct of proximity, empathetic bonds, and social connections. In support of this association, substantial research shows that empathy is related to moral consideration and decision-making (Shelton and McAdams 923; McDaniel et al. 37; Masto 74). Also, though empathy and proximity appear positively related to moral decision-making (Morris and McDonald 723; Oceja 176), they can lead to unjust outcomes when the decision-maker must choose between two parties but feels more connected and empathetic toward one of them (Oceja 176). So, empathy or proximity

can be essential to moral judgments, but interventions are sometimes necessary to counteract bias effects in the decision-making process when there is an imbalance of connection between parties (Oceja 176). Another complication occurs when significant power differentials exist between groups; this will be discussed later.

Relevant Constructs, Citations and Theoretical Implications

Construct	Citations	Implications for Theory
Synchrony – confirmed by neuroscience, the human brain seeks out & synchronizes itself with others allowing large-scale coordination of masses of people	(Wheatley et al. 589)	Society may be conceptualized as a flow system with individuals as its building blocks. Neuroscience shows the individual human brain is designed to link up with others in large-scale networks.
Morality is argued as an evolutionary trait integral to human beings as a social species	(Gintis 241)	Morality is a reciprocal feature naturally extended to members of the same network
Social organism – individuals merge into a larger entity itself that can be conceptualized as an organism	(Levine 239; Elwick 35; Christens et al. 229; Strassman & Queller 605; Goodall 231)	Because flow within organisms is a scientifically accepted phenomenon, the scholarly conceptualization of human society itself as an organism lays the groundwork for the assertion of society as a flow system
Social Connections create greater trust between individuals	(Glanville et al. 545)	Social connections can be seen as pathways that create flow networks. It is posited in our article that people sharing flow pathways enjoy greater trust, empathy and moral consideration towards one another.
Empathy and efficiency of communication – under certain circumstances, individuals sharing empathetic ties communicate more efficiently than those who do not	(Weinstein et al. 589)	Communication may occur more efficiently/readily along empathic pathways.

A relationship exists between empathy and morality/ moral consideration	(Shelton & McAdams 923) (McDaniel et al. 37) (Masto 74)	If people share greater empathy towards those in their networks or self-described group, then they likely extend to them greater moral consideration. This opens a dark possibility that there is less empathy and less moral consideration extended to those outside their networks or self-described group.
Facets of moral intensity (proximity/empathy and social consensus) have an empirically proven relationship to making moral judgments	(Morris & McDonald 717, 723)	If moral intensity is higher for people within the same flow network (or self-described group), then there is more likelihood to have morally-sound judgments. It is arguably more likely that immoral judgments will be permissible towards people outside our flow networks or self-described group.
Empathy can lead people to make immoral decisions because they do not empathize sufficiently with one side vs. the other. This is a tendency that can be counteracted with deliberate action	(Oceja 176)	There is a danger of decision-makers over-empathizing with one party to the detriment of others. It could be posited that social groups are defined where empathy and moral consideration drops off at group boundaries. This drop-off is explainable because of decreased moral intensity (Morris & McDonald, 1995, above citation).
Empathy can result in increased ethical decision-making	(Dietz & Kleinlogel 461)	
Moral exclusion – when individuals "otherize" another group-- they deem them unworthy of the same moral consideration as themselves	(Fernando & Jackson 24)	It can be posited that flow boundaries can harden over time so that networks deliberately exclude other groups (social "tectonic plates"). Hardening can occur due to long-standing disagreements that have developed organically (ethnic groups, religious factions, etc.) or externally-imposed social arrangements (apartheid, caste systems based on social status, gender, sexual orientation or for soldiers in war zones, etc.).

People placed in positions of power over others may be more likely to inappropriately use that power, demonstrating moral exclusion and lack of empathy	(Haney et al. 1)	Power can have a corrupting influence in human interactions, characterizing the flow between groups with both a lack of empathy and due moral consideration.
Though factual evidence presented in their landmark 1973 research showed the potential deleterious effects of conventional prisoner-guard arrangements, the results were generally not heeded. Criminal justice policy and enforcement has in some ways exacerbated unequal outcomes in the years since.	(Haney & Zimbardo 722)	It appears the psycho-social factors operant in our society's policy-making process show an empathetic disconnect between decision-makers and those most directly affected by policy outcomes, itself a societal-level demonstration of the lessons learned from Stanford's prisoner experiment.
Rituals affect cooperation among people	(Fischer et al. 115)	If society is about flow between people, it appears wherever rituals (esp. ones considered sacred) are performed, flow networks can be more easily created)
Social connection is increased through participating in synchronized/coordinated body movements	(Marsh et al. 320) (Wiltermuth & Heath 1)	Think of Japanese employees exercising together before work, military organizations globally exercising and drilling together, boys at St. Benedict school in Newark, NJ (60 Mins, Mar 20th episode)
Empathy-based partiality can be counteracted by drawing attention to norms of fairness	(Oceja 176)	The unequal outcomes of empathy differentials in society can be countered by first framing decisions within a framework of fairness

Table 1: Social Theory Constructs and their Implications

The key takeaway is that these research findings, if placed within an inclusive theoretical framework, could help explain many commonly observed social behaviors. In summary, the research states that (1) the human brain is predisposed to seek out and synchronize with other human beings in networks, (2) various psychological and social factors influence how we interact with one another and interpret interpersonal communication, and (3) when people connect and form networks, certain of the psycho-social factors are reinforced and maintained as part of ongoing relationships (trust, empathy, moral consideration, moral inclusion, and proximity). These factors have been called pro-social tendencies (Cadenhead & Richman 170; Carlo et al., 675; Cuardrado & Tabernero 1). It appears that the gateway to forming connections is psycho-social factors: our perception of the world, desire to connect with others, expectations, motivations, ability to be influenced by others, desire to be liked, personal biases and predilections, and a host of other factors impacting the behavioral processes of connection, decision, and perception.

Understanding the Distorting Influence of Power

The famous Stanford prisoner research showed that powerful, distorting tendencies in human behavior can occur when otherwise normal, mentally balanced individuals are placed either in roles of clear power over others or in roles of abject subordination (Haney et al. 1). Thus, human behavior (or "flows") can be distorted by strong power differentials. The participants in the Stanford experiment were all university students who were pre-screened for mental health issues and who were aware they were involved in a social experiment. However, as the scholars stated in a follow-up article twenty-five years later, "Our planned two-week experiment had to be aborted after only six days because the experience dramatically and painfully transformed most of the participants in ways we did not anticipate, prepare for, or predict" (Haney and Zimbardo 709). If we combine these research insights about the distorting effects of power imbalances with those about empathy's influence on moral decision-making, we may be in a better position to understand events in our headlines, both domestic and international.

These collective research insights and the behaviors they appear to explain give rise to a new theoretical framework, Social Affinity Flow Theory (SAFT). According to SAFT, human society is a flow system formed by shared psycho-social connections; accompanying pro-social factors (e.g., empathy) are reinforced where flow occurs. Communication is how flow pathways are initiated, maintained, and modified. When pathways are curtailed between groups, empathy differentials may result and become reinforced, with inequality between groups becoming a cultural feature over time. In such unequal power relationships, flows can

have injurious effects. These power relationships can become even more injurious when codified into institutional policy. Further, those attempting to create new flow pathways (including behavior change) must encourage participants to identify and challenge existing psycho-social factors and flow patterns before new flow patterns can become lasting cultural features.

Because SAFT is a social theory, it applies to an array of human social fields, including communication. Importantly, we expect that SAFT will help identify ways for the communication of messages, regardless of medium, to generate discussion that best facilitates the flow of positive ideas and minimizes the negative flows that often dominate discussions between groups that may differ not only in opinion but also in ethnic, tribal, generational, and other affiliations. These convergent communication strategies—setting aside perceived incompatibilities and emphasizing areas of compatibility— have been shown to foster appreciation between groups that might otherwise focus on the differences between each other rather than on common interests (Gallois et al. 123–126). A form of communication crucial to increasing positive flow is mass media.

Multiple mass communication media have been shown to foster an agenda-setting effect, like the ability to focus the public's attention on a small number of issues (McCombs 544–545). Similarly, we can observe a cultivation effect, such as television's contribution to the conceptions of reality its viewers

form through the repeated presentation of ideas and issues (Gerbner 180). From newspapers and television to the Internet, mass media's influence over ideas in the public forum continues, shaping not only *what* large groups of people think about but also *how* they think (McCombs 546). Media portrayals of events and social groups can cultivate and exacerbate unrealistic perceptions of violence within certain populations, communities, or regions. For example, long-term reporting on violent events or social stereotypes in a particular region may lead to audience perceptions that the region or its inhabitants are more dangerous than statistical data actually show them to be (Gerbner 182–185).

An ethnographic approach to the broad landscape of communications may shed insights that help researchers better understand information flows in our diverse global social media environments. Communication can be considered the foundation for the existential framework of organizational and group identity, as social organisms, groups, and organizations are in a constant state of flux that must be accounted for (McPhee and Zaug 29). Policymakers should heed qualitative research about specific groups and the customs within their respective cultures before making attempts to alter existing social systems based on statistical analysis alone (Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo 115–130). For example, making the effort to objectively observe and document human cultures from corporate, organizational, regional, and migratory

human populations' perspectives can help identify situationally relevant customs and psycho-social factors that might not otherwise be apparent. Truly knowing the audience on the receiving end of attempts at persuasive communication can often increase the likelihood of desired long-term behavioral changes (Petty and Cacioppo 5–7). Below is a summary of communication constructs and their possible implications for SAFT.

Communication Constructs and Their Implications

Construct	Communication Citations	Implications for Theory
Coordinated Management of Meaning – Our social worlds are made up of selves, relationships, organizations, communities, and cultures that are constantly negotiating message meaning.	(Pearce 40-53)	Communicators must be mindful of all dialogue participants for the creation of a social world that reflects the communicator's intended norms.
Social Judgment Theory – Every new idea presented to an individual is immediately compared with their present point of view and will fall within latitudes of acceptance, rejection, or non-commitment.	(Sherif et al. 222-225)	Persuasion is a gradual, incremental process but influence can be maximized through message selection based on knowledge of the audience's attitudes toward new ideas and their likely latitude of acceptance, rejection, or non-commitment. See Model 1
Elaboration Likelihood Model – Persuasive messages are processed along a spectrum by a central route (audience actively considers issues presented), or a peripheral route (audience processes a message without active thought and relies on external cues such as likability of the message presenter).	(Petty and Cacioppo 5-7)	Message creation and delivery can be tailored according to the ability of an audience to elaborate on complex ideas based on known levels of intelligence/education, or distractions that might make central processing difficult (citizens in warzones will have little interest in processing persuasive messages that don't directly aid in survival)
Cognitive Dissonance Theory – A distressing mental state occurs when people find themselves doing things that contradict what they know, or developing opinions that contradict their current belief system.	(Festinger and Carlsmith 4)	Desired changes in human behavior and attitude can be achieved by providing only a minimum justification for behavioral change which will then affect attitude change. This substantiates psycho-social engagement as key to changing social flow patterns.

Communicative Constitution of Organizations – Communication is the foundation and framework for organizational existence (via membership negotiation, self-structuring, activity coordination, and institutional positioning), and organizations function like living organisms that must constantly process information to survive.	(McPhee and Zaug 29)	Communication flows in many forms throughout an organization like tributaries to a river and is thus always in flux. An organization comes into being at the intersection of different information flows.
Cultural Approach to Organizations – Culture is not something that an organization has, culture is something that an organization is. Organizations are a "web" of employees' performances and shared meanings.	(Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo 115-130)	An ethnographic approach to culture allows qualitative research to gain new understanding of a specific group of people and what is needed to best function within a culture.
Communication Accommodation Theory – When persons from different ethnic, age, or cultural groups engage each other, they will tend to accommodate each other through adjustments to their verbal and non-verbal communication to gain the other's approval. Divergent Communication results when speakers feel the need to maintain ties to a group identity.	(Gallois et al. 123-126)	By promoting convergent communication strategies, communication accommodation can be used to facilitate desired, positive outcomes between different cultural groups.
Cultivation Theory – Violence presented in the media can cultivate an unreasonably fearful population and distort perceptions of actual violence.	(Gerbner 175-194)	Quality and content of media communication shapes the psycho-social reality of viewing populations.
Agenda Setting Theory – Media has the power to influence both what audiences think about as well as how they think about it.	(McCombs 543-557)	By understanding the media messages that may have created negative, possibly false, perceptions between seemingly incompatible groups we may be able to more effectively form counter narratives that foster more positive interactions and social connections.

Table 2: Communication Constructs and their Implications for SAFT

Forces of Integration and Disintegration

To be clear, SAFT is a descriptive and predictive framework of human social behaviors, but it is not necessarily prescriptive. It is morally neutral, so it offers significant insights into understanding a wide variety of circumstances occurring within human societies, whether the behavior is negative (destructive, immoral or selfish) or positive (constructive, moral, or altruistic). Importantly, these negative and positive behaviors have been broadly categorized as forces of disintegration and integration, respectively, both of which SAFT explains. As suggested previously, disintegrative forces encompass destructive behaviors and events associated with decline such as violence, intergroup prejudices, racial bigotry, sectarian interests, prejudice, warfare, widespread corruption, overall social fragmentation, and moral decay. On the other hand, forces of integration are associated with efforts promoting peace, human wellbeing, public welfare, concern for individuals as well as the whole, collaboration between groups, holistic solutions, environmental sustainability, and an ethos of working together to solve problems affecting the whole of humankind. As described by the Universal House of Justice:

> The observable acceleration, during the past decade, of the two processes described by our beloved Guardian, the disintegration of the old order and the progress and consolidation of the new World Order of Bahá'u'lláh [forces of integration], may well come to be regarded by future historians as one of the most remarkable features of this period . . . Among the many evidences which reveal this process may be cited, on the one hand, the continual increase of lawlessness, terrorism, economic confusion, immorality and the growing danger from the proliferation of weapons of destruction, and on the other, the world-wide, divinely propelled expansion, consolidation and rapid emergence into the limelight of world affairs of the Cause itself . . . (*A Wider Horizon* 3)

It is within this framework of integration and disintegration that SAFT can be seen as a contribution to the field of social science as well as to others, including business disciplines such as management, marketing, and human resource management. Just as economic principles can be used to explain the material wealth or poverty of individuals and nations, Social Affinity Flow Theory helps us better understand forces underpinning the disintegration and integration observed in the world.

Explaining the World as It Is: Societal Behaviors Predicted by SAFT

There are eight principles of SAFT that can be used to explain and predict

commonly observed behaviors in human societies around the world:

1. Humans naturally cluster in subgroups based upon affiliations perceived as immediate and personally relevant to their members. The interests and actions of sub-groups tend to be more narrowly focused than the needs of larger organizations. Systemic efforts are needed to align sub-groups' efforts with larger strategic needs. In the absence of such strategic alignment, fragmented networks will exist whose actions may run counter to the optimal functioning of the whole.

2. In the absence of a unifying framework, boundaries between social sub-groups can ossify over time to create islands of mutual tension and even alienation. The potential danger is that these groups can have decreased moral consideration across boundaries, yet as members of the same society, they are bound to have interactions with one another. In their ossified state, sub-groups coexist within the same society over time like "social tectonic plates." Members of each "plate" maintain their empathic distance from members of other plates, creating a patchwork of enclave communities that can persist for generations while surrounded by members of the larger society (Salbi; Simon and Steichen).

3. A perceived moral transgression by a person from another social "tectonic plate" will often elicit a stronger emotional response from group members than the same transgression committed by a member of their own group. Such transgressions will typically be negatively interpreted and communicated as part of a reinforcing narrative about why the "other" group cannot be trusted. These tendencies can exist in both human societies at large and within organizations ("Pakistan"; Berman and Lowery; Salbi).

4. Because of decreased empathy for members of other "social plates" (empathy differentials), members of one group will tend to show decreased interest in negative events happening to members of groups other than their own. This empathy differential between groups will be manifested as decreased moral intensity. Moral intensity, quickly described, is the degree of perceieved "rightness" or "wrongness" of an action and to what degree some type of ethical remedy needs to be applied to address a perceived wrong. With groups having a decreased sense of empathic proximity to one another, a logical prediction is that moral intensity will be decreased, based on research (Jaffe and Pasternak 54). The first corrosive effect is that decreased moral intensity and empathy, when witnessed, is a wounding experience more widely experienced by one segment of the population while for those belonging to the other group, a form of ethical distancing and indifference can be reinforced as a norm.

5. Empathy differentials over time can become embedded cultural norms as

this trait is taught to new members as a way of being (shared learning). Thus, decreased moral consideration for "the other" is a form of shared learning that is requisite for group membership. In other words, what makes us "us" is that "we" reject affiliation with "them." Intergroup differences, real and/or perceived, are highlighted as the rationale for the alienation between groups. When this occurs, a corrosive effect pervades society with sub-groups living out different social realities and are subjected to different standards of justice, especially when levers of power are also applied (Haney, et al., 1; Haney and Zimbardo 709; Salbi; Simon and Steichen). Even more significantly, these empathy differentials and other negative effects can create a poisonous cycle of repeated woundings as a norm for one group, and for the other, ever more entrenched efforts at distancing that avoids the pain that would come with proximity. One can only imagine the broader societal impact as this culture becomes reflected in institutional policy as individuals from one segment in positions of authority enact government policies reflective of such thinking (DNAInfo; Simon and Steichen; Berman and Lowery).

6. Consistent with constructal law, human society itself acts as a living flow system and will adapt to accommodate flows. Within a human social system, flow emanates from unmet psychological needs and is an attempt to alleviate dissonance. New flows to accommodate these welling psycho-social forces are created through connections with like-minded individuals sharing common cause (tapping into the human capacity for large-scale action through synchrony).

7. At the systemic level, either the existing system has embedded features allowing it to engage and accommodate new flows or third-party actors will arise to create them. A crucial "litmus test" for distinguishing harmful versus beneficial flows (or third-party actors) is asking whether they alleviate or exacerbate empathy differentials between sub-groups, as illustrated by the non-violent civil rights movement under the aegis of Martin Luther King, Jr., versus the hostile and antagonistic Black Power movement that emerged thereafter. The role of decision-makers is to find ways to help the current system adapt to include new flow patterns that widen circles of inclusion and therefore ameliorate "otherness."

8. Divisions and antagonisms within societies can be partially reduced through the initiation of pro-social behaviors among social groups. Such actions, when occurring between otherwise antagonistic groups, can begin a process of unraveling long-held suspicions and mistrust. This unraveling of old norms is a slow process fueled by introspection and by examining old flow patterns and comparing them to suggested new ones and their implications. This process is the core challenge at the heart of fields such as adaptive leadership (Heifetz 22;

Heifetz and Linsky 51; Williams 31-55). However, there may be a price to be paid for those desiring to create such social change. The change agents must risk ostracism from the social group they belong to (see principle five above), whether religious, ethnic, professional, etc. To change or challenge prevailing norms is to risk nullifying the implicit social contract of group support and belonging, as exemplified by the assassinations of Mahatma Gandhi, Anwar Sadat, and Yitzhak Rabin by hardline members of their own groups. As attested both by these examples and by scholars of adaptive leadership, authentic leadership can be a risky and dangerous proposition (Heifetz 235–249; Heifetz and Linsky 9-30; and Williams 64–65).

Connection to Bahá'í Teachings

All depends fundamentally on the training or education which man receives. Human nature is made up of possibilities for both good and evil. True religion can enable it to soar in the highest realm of the spirit, while its absence can, as we already witness around us, cause it to fall to the lowest depth of degradation and misery.
(on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in Schaefer 691)

The above quote synopsizes one aspect of our human reality: our ability to engage in altruistic, noble behaviors is largely dependent on the education of character. The Bahá'í teachings assert

that good character is brought about by the influence of "true religion." To be clear, the phrase "true religion" does not imply that one religion is superior to another, at least in terms of the doctrinal forms that are identified as separate religions today. The Bahá'í teachings explain that these various forms are really the unfolding of one common faith from the same Divine Source. The definition of "true religion" is embedded within the above statement from Shoghi Effendi and affirmed in passages by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: the truth of a religion is found in its ability to transform characters, to uplift the behaviors and thoughts of a people. It is a practical definition that assesses the value of religion according to its observable effects on a people. It is these positive, outer effects brought about by true religion that the Bahá'í Faith claims the world is deeply in need of.

By observing many group behaviors today that can be predicted and explained by SAFT (many of which are unfortunately negative), we can also begin to see other possibilities in human interactions. We can trace the outcome of behavior to the mindset (attitudes, beliefs, etc.) held by individuals and groups. The principle of the harmony of science and religion is validated and vindicated by SAFT and, even more prominently and explicitly, in the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith.

For example, SAFT asserts that human beings participate in flow patterns that begin with psycho-social factors that eventually become behavioral flows within society. The Bahá'í Faith

states, "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom" (*Gleanings* 122:1), and "True learning is that which is conducive to the well-being of the world, not to pride and self-conceit, or to tyranny, violence and pillage" (*Education* 17). The second quote implies that lack of true learning can lead to negative outcomes such as pride, self-conceit, tyranny, violence, and pillage, while the presence of true learning is "conducive to the well-being of the world," or in other words, to altruistic behaviors. The above passages also state that "education" and "true learning," which have an impact on a human being's psycho-social reality, produce "treasures" (i.e., flows, behaviors) that will result in "the well-being of the world" and benefit mankind. In other words, the Bahá'í teachings trace the types of flow patterns, both positive and negative, that can arise from the human psycho-social reality, and the outcomes they predict are, thus, descriptions of the forces of integration and disintegration that logically follow. Many skeptics, though acknowledging the forces of disintegration at work in the world, may have difficulty seeing how "true religion" or an educational program infused with "spiritual content" can create different outcomes. The ultimate proof will have to be borne out in results, but in the interim we should examine our perspective on the world around us. While the earlier pages established the theoretical basis

for SAFT and its predictions, many of these predictions were about negative behaviors that are quite evident in societies around the world. But the positive side is that—SAFT asserts—under the right conditions, human behavior can take on more altruistic, holistic patterns with socially unifying, positive effects.

As opposed to the depressing reality we often see, the underlying capacity for this much more positive reality is already here: much in our societies works because of a general sense of belonging, of feelings of connection to one another. Common signs of consideration amongst strangers are the frequently encountered norm. For example, in the case of a bad car accident, it is common for bystanders to offer assistance; or we do small things like holding doors open for those coming behind us, though they are strangers. On a collective scale, millions of cars successfully drive the streets of our major cities without the on-site presence of police officers because a basic level of cooperation exists. There are relatively few accidents, people stop at stop signs, often (but not always) use turn signals, and *usually* give way when they should. So, it is not that the high-minded aims of the Bahá'í Faith are impossible to achieve, because in every society around the world we already demonstrate at least some capacity for living in peace and cooperation. It is that we often take this cooperation and unity for granted and do not embrace social actions that intentionally nurture it. We are presently vulnerable in every society because of what we do

not consciously value with our actions.

This newest world religion strikes at the heart of our common social disease by asserting we can live at an even higher level of cooperation and connectedness via a process of moral and spiritual education, where action is an integral part of the learning process. SAFT is the science that explains how this is possible. The next step is to understand how this science explains aspects of the Bahá'í community-building process.

THE ROLE OF THE BAHÁ'Í TRAINING INSTITUTE PROCESS

Though the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith have remained whole and un-altered since its inception, the Bahá'í community is ever-evolving in its methods of community building. Its most powerful tool currently used to transform society at the local level is the training institute process, which not only teaches the aims of the Bahá'í Faith to participants, whether Bahá'í or not, but explores and gradually cre-ates new patterns of life. The institute's purpose is stated in the first paragraph of the very first book used in the cur-riculum: "to use the courses as means of serving the Cause [of God] and promoting the well-being of human-ity" (Ruhi Institute1). The creation of new patterns of life begins with form-ing new conceptual understandings. Participants in each course study the Bahá'í Writings on various aspects of life and are encouraged to develop, in a group study process, three levels of

comprehension of the concepts and themes. Most of the books in the training series include some practi-cal application exercises that are the basis of a new, more spiritualized life with behaviors such as praying and re-flecting upon words of inspiration and guidance, studying passages from the Bahá'í Writings closely with a friend during a home visit, and teaching chil-dren's classes. Later books include more complementary processes, such as accompaniment, which the Bahá'í community has identified as a way to help foster newly learned behaviors.

Each of these capacities creates or contributes to a new flow process. For example, accompaniment is two or more souls participating in an activi-ty (such as teaching children's classes or working with youth groups) during which each assumes a "humble posture of learning," studies guidance, devel-ops plans, puts them into action in the field, and afterwards reflects on what was learned. The intent is to promote a "culture of learning" within the com-munity where participants are always seeking to improve the methods and effectiveness of their work. Learning among groups is itself a form of flow, the transmission of new ideas and concepts from one person to another, a process described by SAFT and con-structal law.

One of the strengths of the train-ing institute process is that it provides the means for communities, of any socio-economic level, to transform their own patterns of life through the re-creation of the individual and her/

his social surroundings. This Bahá'í approach to community building is being adopted with equal success in rural villages in the developing world and in modern Western cities and surrounding suburbs. It is the unshackling of human potential, free of the dichotomy of haves and have-nots, offering access to the tools of positive cultural change and community improvement without the usual prerequisite of material wealth. Indeed, the Universal House of Justice has stated the training institute is "an instrument of limitless potentialities" (28 December 2010). The House of Justice underscores the importance of the training institute further:

> One of the most effective instruments at your disposal in this respect is the training institute. It strives to engage the individual in an educational process in which virtuous conduct and self-discipline are developed in the context of service, fostering a coherent and joyful pattern of life that weaves together study, worship, teaching, community building and, in general, involvement in other processes that seek to transform society. (23 April 2013)

ROLE OF CONVERSATIONS

SAFT places a focus on communication between people as the means by which flow is created. Though the theory is value neutral and can describe any type of social movement, its most constructive application is to assist members of the Bahá'í community to better understand the work of social transformation they so sacrificially undertake. The beginning of that social transformation begins with the flow of conversation, as stated by the central Bahá'í institution in the latest global plan for social transformation:

> Central to the pattern of action evolving in a cluster is the individual and collective transformation effected through the agency of the Word of God. . . . [T]his process of transformation reveals itself in an ability to express one's understanding of profound concepts and to explore spiritual reality in conversations of significance. . . . Through exchanges of this kind, consciousness of spiritual forces is raised, apparent dichotomies yield to unexpected insights, a sense of unity and common calling is fortified, confidence that a better world can be created is strengthened, and a commitment to action becomes manifest. Such distinctive conversations gradually attract ever-larger numbers to take part in a range of community activities. Themes of faith and certitude surface naturally, prompted by the receptivity and experiences of those involved. (Universal House of Justice, 29 Dec 2015)

The description above outlines a process of social flow that begins with an individual who engages in the work of outreach, finding like-minded

individuals (with compatible psycho-social realities) and engaging in dialogue to create connection. The sharing of ideas is a flow that, at some point and under the right conditions, is translated into action in the form of community building activities (devotionals, home visits, children's classes, junior youth groups, etc.). The psycho-social bonds between people intensify, the substance of this emerging reality becomes confirmed among the participants, and their commitment to it deepens. They in turn reach out to their respective networks of family members and acquaintances to engage in another round of conversations of significance.

The ebb and flow of this activity are described in Bahá'í plans under the framework of expansion and consolidation: typically, conversations and outreach are part of an expansion phase, and the deepening of the newfound friends' understanding and commitment to sustained action is the phase of consolidation. Like a pulsing organism that grows and simultaneously sustains itself from within, this emerging process gradually engages larger and larger segments of the surrounding population. As the emerging community grows, it also continuously adapts to new circumstances, with internal flows occurring within the context of a "culture of learning." Such a culture is essential and the mechanism that creates it is consultation, deemed so fundamental a skill for the emerging community that it warrants its own book in the Bahá'í training institute.

Though it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into consultation, within the theoretical framework of SAFT, consultation is the means to smoothly create flow among small groups of people, so that the pace and effectiveness of learning can be maintained with minimal impediment. It may be surmised that the successful emergence of the Bahá'í enterprise partly depends on the collective ability of its members to adapt to changing conditions, and adaptability depends on a culture of learning. In turn, this culture's hallmark is having an environment where ideas can be readily shared and new insights identified and then implemented by its members.

Using SAFT to Understand Elements of the Bahá'í Global Plan

The preceding sections discussed the science behind human connection and flow. They also established a theoretical framework for understanding many of the social issues plaguing humankind around the globe. SAFT can explain the spread of mass unrest in Pakistan following a military strike by a foreign power while a bombing by domestic terrorists that kills multiples many more people does not elicit the same intensity of response (Masood and Ihsanullah; "Pakistan"). It can explain why, over a particular German holiday weekend, roving bands of North African refugee men allegedly assaulted a large number of European women (Huggler) when they arguably

would not have behaved this way in their country of origin. It can predict the resulting backlash of intensified rhetoric from right-wing political parties that rally others with anti-immigration slogans. It can explain how, in a U.S. Midwestern city, the municipal court system and law enforcement was found to have for years systematically raised revenue by disproportionately charging minority and poor citizens with crimes and assessing court fees and fines (Berman and Lowery).

In contrast to these examples of social dysfunction and conflict, the Bahá'í community—both globally and locally—is slowly learning collaborative practices to offset antipathy and implement, by degrees, the Bahá'í vision of an ever-advancing civilization. This is a tremendous undertaking, one that will take many generations to achieve. Yet, we can look at this religious community as being at the forefront of global initiatives to create communities where diversity is celebrated and connections are fostered between peoples of various age, ethnic, gender, and other backgrounds. The process is one that will require the raising of human consciousness and the connecting of hearts and minds. Further, it entails ongoing societal transformation with lessons identified and shared on a a global scale, a supreme degree of perseverance, and a continuity of effort spanning centuries in order to be consummated. Yet, we see in the very beginnings of this audacious effort the seeds of such transformation.

The genesis can be seen in its early days in the nineteenth century when its Founder, Bahá'u'lláh, His son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Their families and close friends were banished to the prison city of Akka (now in Israel). Surrounded by criminals and a hostile populace who had been ordered to strictly shun them, in the beginning conditions were so harsh that several members of their band died from disease and the poor quality of food. As recounted by Shoghi Effendi, the authoritative chronicler of this history, "Three loaves of black and salty bread were assigned to each, which they were later permitted to exchange, when escorted by guards to the market, for two of better quality. . . . All fell sick, except two, shortly after their arrival. Malaria, dysentery, combined with the sultry heat, added to their miseries. Three succumbed, among them two brothers, who died the same night, 'locked,' as testified by Bahá'u'lláh, 'in each other's arms'" (Shoghi Effendi 187).

Yet a few decades later, the inhabitants of the city and even international officials were so transformed that at the funeral of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, thousands were in attendance and paid tribute:

The British Secretary of State for the Colonies, Mr. Winston Churchill, telegraphed immediately to the High Commissioner for Palestine, Sir Herbert Samuel, instructing him to "convey to the Bahá'í Community, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, their sympathy and condolence.". . . Many

and divers newspapers, such as the London "Times," the "Morning Post," the "Daily Mail," . . . and others, in different languages and countries, paid their tribute to One Who had rendered the Cause of human brotherhood and peace such signal and imperishable services. (Shoghi Effendi 312)

And of the funeral service for this eminent Bahá'í Figure, it was

> a funeral the like of which Palestine had never seen—no less than ten thousand people participated representing every class, religion and race in that country. . . . The long train of mourners, amid the sobs and moans of many a grief-stricken heart, wended its slow way up the slopes of Mt. Carmel to the Mausoleum of the Báb [where 'Abdu'l-Bahá was to be interred]. (Shoghi Effendi 312–313)

Despite reversals and difficulties, this small band of Bahá'ís had overcome their initial mistreatment, largely because of the consistent acts of selflessness, charity, and nobility of character demonstrated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá over the years, as attested repeatedly and widely by His contemporaries.

Thus, from this example, it appears that over time, overt acts of charity, selfless service, and loving kindness can have a role in breaking down barriers of suspicion and the social disease of "otherness" between peoples. This does not mean that these acts alone

are the entire prescription or that there will not be setbacks. However, they are an indispensable component of social transformation. We could even observe that Bahá'u'lláh's encouragement to His followers to associate with the "followers of all religions" in a spirit of "loving kindness" is the express, direct antidote to some of the social separations of our age.

Within the Bahá'í religion, efforts to serve and unify humanity are now overseen by the institutions of its Administrative Order, under the lead of its Universal House of Justice. In the latest global plan of the Bahá'í Faith, unfolding from 2016 to 2021, it states:

> A broader cross section of the population is being engaged in conversations, and activities are being opened up to whole groups at once—bands of friends and neighbours, troops of youth, entire families—enabling them to realize how society around them can be refashioned. The practice of gathering for collective worship, sometimes for dawn prayers, nurtures within all a much deeper connection with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Prevailing habits, customs, and modes of expression all become susceptible to change—outward manifestations of an even more profound inner transformation, affecting many souls. The ties that bind them together grow more affectionate. Qualities of mutual support, reciprocity, and service to one another

begin to stand out as features of an emerging, vibrant culture among those involved in activities. (29 December 2015)

Given the apparent divisions and disunity in the world, we cannot take for granted peaceful coexistence among diverse populations. Because injustice often occurs because of the social distance between groups of people as seen in many historical examples (and now explained by SAFT), we should make

it an explicit aim to reach out to one another *because* we are different. The Bahá'í admonition to engage in warm fellowship with all people, to overlook flaws, to share with them a spirit of love and kindliness, is not just a warm sentiment standing in contrast to the reality of every society around the world. It is a powerful prescription for our social ills.

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