a crash course in plurality
for systems and singlets alike

Plural Respect #1
Establishing Foundations

Also available online at
pluralrespect.neocities.org

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Plurality is still relatively unknown to much of wider society, and many definitions are still being actively debated.

Here's the basic concepts again as a refresher - or if it's your first time, as an introduction.

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Purpose

Plural Respect is a multi-layered overview of plurality intended to provide a ground-up intuition for the nuances of plural experience. Through this intuition, it aims to provide not just a passing understanding, but a familiarity with plurality sufficient to befriend a system you know - or the one inside.

What this *isn't* is academia - every thought in these pages was acquired through observational understanding and lived experience, not by reviewing existing literature. This is a firsthand account, so reference it that way if used.

This resource is for everyone - systems and singlets, know-alls and know-nothings - read it, share it, surpass and disagree with it, adapt it, revise it - if you're working towards understanding and acceptance, it's all yours.

Plurality

Conventionally, we treat a human body and an identity as a one-to-one relationship. A body represents (or, contains) one person, and while they may change over time, they remain the same individual.

This "singlet" model of identity suits the majority of the population. However, there is a significant minority (roughly 1 in 50) that instead utilise a "plural" model. These *plural systems* identify multiple "selves" within their body - each with potentially differing attitudes, memories, or even (by exchanging control of their body) voices, skills, and relationships.

Terminology

Headmates - The individuals that comprise a plural system (aka its *members*) - used similarly to "roommates". May or may not be able to directly communicate with one another.

Fronting - A system member having control of the body they're in (i.e. being "in the front" of the body; at the wheel). Usually not black-and-white, with partial and shared fronting common.

Switching - Headmates exchanging control of the body (i.e. "switching in" to the front and "switching out" to the back). Not universal, but a common experience.

Relevance

As with non-conventional differences in gender or sexuality (or anything else perceived as "in the brain"), plurality is largely met with skepticism. While diagnoses like DID (previously Multiple Personality Disorder) can inspire dismissal of plurality as a disordered delusion that just needs "fixing", plural systems without a diagnosis (or those with plural experiences not classified under DID) can equally have their experiences dismissed as baseless attention-seeking.

Relevance (Continued)

As such, it's productive to understand that plurality is a new term, but one that seeks to describe widespread, pre-existing phenomena. Those that choose to use a plural identity model do so because it's the best way (or, indeed, the only way) to describe their life experiences. Knowing exactly what those experiences are is less important than allowing individuals to choose the model that works for them. This means someone with experiences others understand as plural might still choose a singlet model, and even those using a plural model may decide to keep it purely to themselves.

To this end, the intent of plural advocacy is not to have more people be openly plural, but to offer more options with which to understand ourselves and eachother. Plurality is an umbrella, attempting to provide support and community for those experiences - whether they're personally understood as spiritual, cultural, psychological, or incidental. And of course, Plurality is also a movement - advocating for plural systems' right to exist, be recognised and understood, and have the same autonomy, privacy, and participation in life as any singlet does.

The primer continues in...
Plural Respect #2
Shattering Expectations

Plurality encompasses a range of experiences poorly defined by any one conception.

Whether you're talking to a system, or considering what's inside yourself, here's what not to take for granted.

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Plural Respect #2
Shattering Expectations

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Numbers

A body and an individual is not necessarily a 1:1 relationship. Conversely, not everyone under the plural umbrella can be modelled as "multiple people in a body". Plurality is a queerness of cardinality, encompassing all the fuzzy lines where we can't state that 1:1 relationship in all senses. These *system configurations* are diverse, and represent a variety of lived experiences - whether it's a system of ~7, 31, 2, 1,000,000, or 1*.

Names

As pluralfolk, we always lay *between* the extremes of our bodies containing one person, and of being a multiple-bodied group of people. A system might have names for each of their members, an overall system name but no member names, a system name *and* member names, many names per member, two headmates that share a name, a few members without names, and more!

Gender

Like trans-ness necessitates understanding gender as distinct from sex, plurality necessitates understanding gender as distinct from the body. Owing to that "gut feeling" of gender, different parts of a system often have their own pronouns, gendered language, and relationships to words like "trans" and "cis".

Appearance

In most of our society, how you appear is a key part of your identity and individuality. Pluralfolk can rarely make exclusive claim to the appearance of the body, so self-perception often differs between headmates - whether different styles on a similar body, or a totally different body entirely, a shared understanding of how someone appears on this *meta-physical* level can be key to making social connections.

Plural Respect #3
Facing Challenges

System members that are described as instinctive animals, or as unintelligent, old, or young would all appear to present striking, complicating, sometimes dangerous issues in the outside world - but as with the above, this language refers to nuanced experiences that only the individual system themselves can convey the ins and outs of. It's only through this per-system interpretation of the language we use that others can gain a genuine understanding of our experiences.

Words

As pluralfolk, we model the language used to describe our internal experiences on that of the outside world. This language is not meant to be meaningless to an outsider, but it can't be taken at face value - as its meaning is being inscribed by the system conveying it.

A *Minotaur headmate* is not *The Bull of Minos*, but might resemble them. A "sexual relationship" between headmates can sound quite serious - but in sharing a body with a libido, many see this as largely unimpactful and obviously implied. System members with the names of fictional characters could be widely invested in displaying their attitudes and mannerisms, or they just might like the look! System members that call eachother *siblings* might refer to a resemblance, bond, or rivalry - but could easily be using *sibling* to mean *headmate!* ...

Causality

Each system has an individualised understanding of their own plurality. Most systems have reasoning for why a plural model is right for them, but some systems additionally believe that their plural experiences owe to a specific cause. These "causalities" - including spiritual and cultural truths, psychological mechanisms, and deliberate actions - aren't necessary to understand oneself as plural, but can help an individual system understand themselves - even if that understanding is "We are how we are - it doesn't matter why".

Humanity

Like furries, therians, otherkin, and other nonhuman subcultures, the metaphysical appearance of a system member need not be human. Without an obvious "human starting point" (the body) to dispel, pluralfolk often reach this conclusion intuitively and without fanfare. Anthropomorphic animals, robots and machines, spirits, monsters, or software - the *form* (metaphysical appearance) of a system member helps convey and express what makes them unique.

Relationships

A notable variance in system configuration is in what stays constant between headmates. The answer always lies between the extremes, but where exactly varies - memory might be totally contiguous, or almost completely individualised. Headmates may share beliefs, but differ in opinions - share interests, but differ in tastes - share gender, but differ in sexuality! ...

Plural Respect #4 - Gaining Familiarity

Seeing past this moral panic requires a nuance towards experiences, identities, and activities that resemble outside-world bad behaviour but have little capacity for actual harm. Notably, these conflicts resemble larger online debates around depictions of conventionally-unhealthy relationships in fan works (*proshipping discourse*) and those around reinterpretations of (young) characters for pornographic fan art (*aging-up discourse*). Through similarities to their own identity, systems may even be affected by these debates – caught in the crossfire by having similar experiences, or personally targeted if they resemble debated characters. Engaging with the stranger, more complex details of a system requires a level of trust - and systems are often forced to carefully navigate this to avoid unnecessary conflict.

Syscourse

On a finer level, all kinds of systems are ostracized for specific experiences - with most systems and purported allies having a "weird" or "problematic" line above which a system being visible becomes unacceptable. Most of this discourse relies on generic interpretations of plural internal experiences and language that describes them.

Taken this way, all our examples can be made objectionable. The Minotaur is cultural appropriation, intrasystem relationships are cheating, familial terms disrespect "real family", *fictives* are copyright infringement, and the cultural and moral expectations of family, children, and animals in the outside world can be enforced on headmates resembling them - inviting exclusion based on singlet definitions of irresponsible caretaking, immaturity, and inhumanness - along with the occasional accusation of incest, rape, and bestiality.

online discourse is twisted towards whether "endogenic" systems are acceptable - rather than whether these classifications are appropriate to use, or even possible to define.

Sysmedicalist beliefs and language are widely propagated online, especially exclusion focusing on whether a system exists "through trauma" ("traumagenic", which is deemed acceptable), or through some other mechanism ("endogenic", which is naturally not falsifiable - there's no way to validate that you possess an objective and correct understanding of the reason a system exists as it does, even in yourself. However, by propagating the two key terms as an objective categorization of all systems,

Sysmedicalism

Sysmedicalists are those that ostracize systems for lacking a medical diagnosis, or otherwise adhering poorly to medical models of plurality. Through these criteria, systems are excluded from communities and support, and experience targeted sysphobia (e.g. accusations of "faking" systemhood) from what should be their peers.

This targets a substantial population - DID and OSDD diagnoses exclude many systems by focusing primarily on individual traumatic history and self-reported criteria like personal distress. It also places pressure on systems who fit these criteria to *get* a diagnosis, whereupon a mix of limited recommendations and poor practice means they may invite medical discrimination (including a pressure to get "fixed") or even genuine danger to themselves in the form of rejected voluntary medical procedures or ward discharges.

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Systems are challenged in their self-acceptance, day in and day out, from without and from within.

Here's what to look out for in the wild, and what that one internal conflict might just boil down to.

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Plural Respect #3
Facing Challenges

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Normativity

Outside of basic non-acceptance or misunderstandings of the nature of plurality, the most widespread root of sysphobia is *singlet-normativity* - the idea that singlethood is a privileged default expected of everyone. Because wider society is not exposed to plurality, deviations from singlet behaviours and experiences can lead to rejection, distress, and danger.

Through a lens where singlethood is the only "normal", plurality is unacceptably complex and must be a fabricated delusion, the privacy of a system is irrelevant compared to keeping others aware of abnormalities, and the needs and desires of a system can be dismissed in pursuit of restoring normalcy via medical intervention.

In this rejection of diversity, limited definitions of plurality emerge. When utilized, these may leave one system objectified as "fun costumes", ...

… and another deprived of systemhood in being seen a "purely individuals" – and without a widespread diverse definition, questioning systems are left wondering if they can call themselves plural at all.

This creates a pressure to be "normal enough" that affects systems far beyond self-acceptance. Whenever a system *un-represses* (or "gains") a new headmate, they're challenged with the question - how many headmates can a system have without becoming unacceptable? Faced with normative pressure, "a System of 4" feels more believable/acceptable than "a System of 40" - even when both systems are comfortable. Whenever a plural experience doesn't line up with the simplest, most common analogies, it can feel like a risk.

Impostor syndrome, and the feeling that you might be being plural *wrong*, is pervasive - though some turn this fear on others instead.

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Becoming familiar with plurality is a strange, intuitive, and counter-intuitive process that rewires the brain.

Here's what some of those oft-alluded *plural experiences* tend to be, to a system or to an observer.

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Switching

At first, switches can feel strange. The sensations are unfamiliar, be it like "waking up", a new pair of glasses, or a sliding-into-place sensation inside your head. They can look strange, too - daydreamy eye-glazing, sudden adjustments in posture, wincing, and so on. It's not necessarily accidental, mind - stretching, yawning, scrunching your nose, and clearing your throat can all help deliberately settle in a new front. This works because different headmates tend to utilize the body differently: posture, gait, voice, expression, or even "resting" face.

Over time, you become accustomed to these differences between fronts. As a system, this may help fronts settle, foster acceptance for your own differences, and possibly help you learn to switch deliberately. As an observer, recognising fronts by sight and sound becomes easier – which while not infallible, may help you understand a system more.

Of course, a system may instead choose to signal a change of front explicitly. The obvious "hi, it's [name]" is functional, but can feel objectifying. Instead, swapping name tags or accessories, signatures in chat messages, or even just polling for guesses can help keep friends in the loop.

Switching and fronts also help to inform a system's internal configuration model. Rapid switching, co-fronts, blurred/empty-feeling fronts, and front 'variations' can all challenge a "system of residents" model – but another model (e.g. a system of *aspects* combining into fronts) might accommodate this easily.

Through acceptance of strange experiences and new interpretations, systems are able to stay familiar to others and themselves. Models change, systems mature, and plurality surprises us with unexpected experiences – but by keeping eyes and minds open, it's recognisable all the same.

Discovery

Encountering your own systemhood and choosing to accept it can make interacting with world feel suddenly clumsy, messy, and distressing. Over time, you learn to navigate each experience, resolve early-system internal conflicts, and develop functional masking and unmasking skills to face challenges and form connections.

Feeling new to an already settled system can be scary too. You naturally worry over the existing expectations of the system and its friends – and the ways you might push the boundaries of what's acceptably normal. *Being* new feels uniquely strange, too - like tasting something you've never imagined before. For some, that's a nice feeling - freeing, a new experience that the system is capable of. But it's intimidating, and isolating, too. You rely on others, within and outside the system, to accept your place in it.

Settling as a system or headmate is a unique process of connecting the old with the new. This begins with a period of exploration, where you can find - or as a friend, can provide - sufficient space to feel out what feels right: in identity, language, self-expression, tastes, and so on.

In the process of discovering the new, you often begin to recognize the old - from outside and in, parts of that 'new taste' start to seem familiar. You might remember points in your past that felt just like it, or a friend might recall a mannerism or interest from long ago that's returned somehow. Through this process, we (and others) re-*meet* new parts of ourselves like old friends, and only occasionally encounter entirely new aspects to express and embrace.

Intimacy

Within a system, the ability to communicate between headmates varies wildly. Some systems can converse in their head, others leave notes, and others still can't do either! Without direct communication, one assumes there's no way to foster positive bonds. However, by observing how others interact with the world, system members still develop opinions of eachother – the foundation of non-verbal *intra-system* relationships.

Without a word, system members can still do things their headmates struggle with, speak to friends about how they feel about eachother, or even bubble up their feelings and thoughts without being in the front - like ears burning when someone says your name. Intrasystem relationships are quite unlike a relationship between two bodies, but as you've likely realised, they simply do not need to be.

Of course, plurality adds layers to forming *extra-system* relationships, too. Over time, friends can come to understand the workings of a system, and recognize its inhabitants fondly. Through this process, friends outside the system can provide better support - shifting unhappy fronts, perceiving subtle differences, and even helping to mediate conflict/feelings between system members.

The tolerance of a friend towards the strangeness of plural existence can provide a system with a rare moment to relax and let their guard down - front less popular headmates, be less cautious over speech patterns and body language, and talk openly about their own experiences and feelings.

As systems, to be known is often a source of terror - but it can also be a source of peace.

That's it! Thanks for reading <3
Informal bonus chapters are available at
pluralrespect.neocities.org