LOVE, CONFLICT AND MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

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The man who could finally see his mother

A few years ago, a man walked into my clinic and asked to discuss his relationship with his mother. The man was in his mid-fifties, his mother was in her early eighties, and for the better part of his past 30 years he has been struggling to resolve childhood issues that he had with her. By the time he reached me, he said, he managed to come to terms with most issues, basically by understanding that "she did the best she could", in his words. But there was one remaining issue that kept separating them and caused turmoil every time it came up between them. While he could somehow accept her actions during his early years, he still needed her to "admit to the events that actually happened" as he put it. He wanted her to acknowledge that she behaved towards him, his father and his siblings "in a horrific way, turning their lives into living hell". And every time that she would respond by saying that "it wasn't like that", "you were a child", or "you didn't understand what was going on", he got so furious that he would cut off from her for

months, mainly for fear of losing his composure altogether and possibly even hurting her. In contemporary terms it can be said that he felt gaslighted. And with that feeling came a level of fury that he found very difficult to control.

After a few sessions of joint work the man came - on his own - to a very interesting conclusion, which completely changed his reaction to his mother's 'denial policy' as he called it. He moved from a strong conviction that "she shouldn't deny what happened!", to a new realization: his mother should deny what happened, for the simple reason that this little family was all that she had ever done in her life, she never had a career or even a hobby or something else of that sort, and asking her to acknowledge at age 80+ that she may have ruined her family's lives altogether would equal, according to him, to "asking her to admit that her entire life was a sheer waste of time - a request too cruel to be asked of anybody."

What impressed me the most about this case was the huge turnaround in this man's reaction to his mother's behavior once he reached the above conclusion. He almost instantly moved from total alienation and resentment to great love, empathy and compassion towards her. Consequently, her reactions towards him also changed and became more empathic and inclusive, and their following years were almost totally clear of conflict.

If I try to label in one word the root of change that this man went through, that word would be perspective. By being able to genuinely perceive a wider perspective of the situation, one that included his mother's possible perspective, his anger and frustration were mitigated and replaced by empathy.

As a therapist and a personal consultant, I have viewed the magical power of broader perspectives numerous times. And yet, during my masters studies in Conflict Management and Resolution, I have rarely encountered a focused discussion on this topic. This article aims to analyze and highlight the importance of multiple-perspectives' capacity for conflict management and resolution, and how it can possibly be included in any conflict management expert's toolbox.

Perspectives – conflicts' volume knobs

Narrow perspective is certainly not the sole source of conflict in our society. As a matter of fact, one can argue that narrow perspective in itself is not a source of conflict at all. Many people live their entire lives holding to a single worldview, as narrow and rigid as it may be, yet do not find themselves involved in any conflict about it. Many other causes, such as aggression, deprivation, exploitation, miscommunication, inequality, physical and structural violence etc. are all known triggers of conflicts. Moreover, some conflicts are not rooted at all in human behaviors but rather in some difficult objective reality, such as, for example, a crucial shortage of essential resources (water, food, job opportunities, and so on).

And yet, my own personal experience as both a mediator and a personal consultant demonstrates that, for the most part, the ability - or lack of it - to see things from more than one perspective is a very reliable predictor of the magnitude, depth and length of conflicts. It can be said that the number of perspectives available to conflicting parties functions as the volume knob for that conflict. People with single-perspective capacity tend to be more emotional and passionate in their views, and consequently more extreme in their positions. Research shows that the magnitude and length of conflicts are largely affected by emotional and identity issues, and

my de-facto experience demonstrates that these issues appear to be inversely correlated with the multi-perspective capacity of the involved parties.

Why is that? For the very simple reason that the narrower our perspective is, the more convinced we are that we are 'right', that we own 'the truth'. And if we own the truth, and another party disputes us, then they must be either villains or idiots. Either way, they must be confronted and stopped. This generates fear, mistrust, anger, and hatred, and, as history often taught us, can easily lead to dehumanization of people and to the legitimization of harsh routes of actions against them.

It is for that reason that Khalil Gibran, an acclaimed Lebanese - American writer, poet and visual artist, coined the phrase "Say not, 'I have found the truth,' but rather, 'I have found a truth". He too realized the devastating effect of 'owning' the truth.

But what is 'truth', anyway?

Concepts of truths

Since a narrow or single perspective is closely related to the certainty of 'owning the truth', the question arises - how can it be that alleged truths are still so heavily debated? How come people have been arguing, almost from the dawn of history, about essentially one question – 'who is right'? One could have reasonably assume that at least in our day and age, given the immense scientific advances achieved by humanity, factual truth will no longer be debated. However, when reviewing the concept of truth throughout the ages, it seems like our society is heading in the opposite direction.

This essay is far too short to cover the many concepts of truth that appeared through history. I'll just briefly mention here correspondence theories that date all the way back to ancient Greece (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle..), and relate to truth as 'that which corresponds with reality'. Obviously, this definition raises multiple philosophical questions concerning reality and the way we conceive it. Still, if we open a current dictionary, the most common definition of truth would typically be quite similar to "that which is true or in accordance with fact or reality". This definition also applies to coherence theories (Spinoza, Leibniz, Bradley..) that define truth as coherent fit of elements or a set of propositions within a system of rules corresponding with each other, as is the case with mathematics (hence 2+2=4 is a true statement) or, for example, state laws (hence "it's illegal to drive in red light" is also true). What is common to the above theories is that they allow us to 'fact-check' a statement vis-à-vis an 'objective' measurement stick, be it physical reality or any set of coherent man-made rules.

However, during centuries of human thought evolution, many other theories appeared, such as constructivist theories, consensus theories, pragmatic theories and others, that tend to apply the term 'truth' to socially acceptable beliefs of certain other characteristics. And, indeed, current dictionaries' definition for truth also conveniently include such definitions as "a fact or belief that is accepted as true".

But, as history teaches us, socially acceptable beliefs can turn out to be very distant from factual truth. Just ask Galileo Galilei about it. And presenting beliefs, that are subjective by nature, as equal to the concept of truth, which is supposed to be objective by definition, creates a challenging environment for the term 'truth', in which anybody may claim to own it or doubt it. Postmodernist philosophers, who argued that truth is always contingent on historical and social context rather than being absolute and universal, handed yet another blow to the concept of truth as we would have liked to view it.

And then came the internet....

In today's day and age, people often use the term 'truth' or 'justice' to describe their own beliefs, opinions or values. Subjective opinions are often presented as objective facts, not only when presenting to others but also within our internal dialogue. The internet and social media enable us to share our views with millions of others with relative ease, making such phenomena as conspiracy theories far more popular than they ever were. Fact-check mechanisms appeared - only to be doubted and rejected as subjective and biased as well. The concept of truth and the conclusion about 'who is right' can be heavily influenced by such factors as who is telling the story, in which context it is told, from which point in time does it start, do the shared facts constitute the whole truth or only some of it, and so on. With social media becoming increasingly popular, its automated engines, for their own marketing purposes, push in our direction information which they conclude we are already inclined to consume. And so we get to process more and more information of the same nature that validates and enforces our beliefs, values and perceived knowledge of the world. Then, when faced with other social groups who are fed by other sources, we cannot conceive how those opposing groups can deny such clear 'facts' as we have grown to know them.

Indeed, the internet has gradually become a single-perspective facilitating machine. And yet, it wouldn't have been so successful in doing so, if we hadn't already had the inclination to adopt narrow perspectives to begin with. Let's discuss a few factors that drive us in that direction.

The appeal of limited perspectives

Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist known for his work on child development, discussed a stage in child cognitive development which he named the preoperational stage. In that stage, typically ages 2-7, our memory, imagination and symbolic thinking evolve. Two of the most typical characteristics of this stage are egocentrism and centration. Egocentrism according to Piaget is the child's lack of ability to see things from any different perspective than his own perspective. Centration is about the child's inclination to focus all his attention on one characteristic or dimension of a situation. When combined, it is easy to see how our personality's starting point is comprised of one, very limited perspective – our own.

By the time we reach our formal operational stage according to Piaget, typically from age 12 onwards, we supposedly already gain the ability to view things from other people's perspectives. Good news. Only that there are those who claim that we are never truly able to do that. Robin DiAngelo, the renowned author who published the best seller White Fragility, basically argues that any white person who lives in America is a racist by definition, whether they are aware of it or not, based on the fact that no matter how "Woke" or "progressive" they may define themselves, they can never truly experience the viewpoint of black people in America. As much as this claim may be debated, it is clear that although we may be able to imagine ourselves in someone else's skin, it is virtually impossible for us to totally put ourselves in their shoes, as we can never experience their DNA, their backgrounds, their life experiences, and their subjective emotional and cognitive reactions to those experiences.

So, as we can see, a narrow perspective is something we are practically born with, and some argue that we inevitably stay with. And it also needs to be noted that it can be quite beneficial for us. Limiting ourselves to narrow perspectives, including but not limited to prejudice and categorical opinions about topics or various social groups, has been known to save on cognitive resources and make life simpler. Why bother evaluating every member of a social group when we can disqualify (or worship) the entire group? Why take it upon ourselves to analyze any politician, for example, when we can just form an opinion about the entire party and move on from there? More often than not, people tend to set their opinions based on group affiliation rather than on the specific personalities involved, just so that they can save on cognitive resources.

And that's not all the good news. Once we align ourselves with a single-perspective group-like thinking, our own group affiliation will be strengthened, and we will gain positive encouragement from our group's

leaders and peers. Isn't that a treat? You get to think less and gain more. Who said narrow perspective isn't worth adopting?

Finally, there is also the appearance effect. When our perspective is limited, we naturally have more conviction in our views. In the words of W.B. Yeats: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." That intensity is often conceived as charisma and authenticity. And so, it is the extremists who typically become popular heroes, having their posters hung on youth's walls. And the voices of calm reason, often engaged with cautious doubts due to their ability to view multiple perspectives, never seem to be as attractive as the passionate speakers claiming monopoly over some kind of one sided 'truth'.

As we can see, limited perspective has its own appeal, both biologically and socially. Before we get into the healing effects of multiple-perspectives and their influence on conflicts' resolution, it is important to point out one more type of limited-perspective phenomena, which is the reverse single perspective. By that term I refer to those of us who can only see their opponents' viewpoint, neglecting to represent their or their social group's interests. As inclusive and containing as it may sound, this phenomena, popular mainly among liberal societies where empathy is a leading value, is yet another expression of narrow perspective capacity.

Being able to contain other social group's needs and concerns without being able to acknowledge and defend our own group's needs and concerns is still a single-perspective approach which contributes to conflicts' intensity just as any other limited perspective does.

The healing effects of multiple perspectives

While narrow perspective may be appealing as well as natural to some of us, when it comes to love, empathy and conflict resolution it is one of our worst enemies. As described above, the passion and intensity that typically accompany narrow perspectives drive people in conflict situations into extreme thinking and behaviors, demonizing conflicting parties, and making it practically impossible to reach any fruitful discussion, which is the most essential pre-requisite for any conflict resolution process.

In the opening section to this article I shared the story of a man who, through obtaining broader perspective about his mother's perceived viewpoint, managed to heal wounds that he carried with him for over five decades. This case is not unique. In the past 20 years I have come across several scenarios where people who could not resolve their internal and external conflicts through other avenues of counseling and therapy were able to do so primarily through broadening their perspectives. I can personally attest that the

ability to have multiple-perspectives reduces stressful emotions such as anger, frustration and hatred; facilitates greater tolerance and inclusion of opposing views and estranged social groups; promotes improved communication and listening skills; increases trust and empathy; and shifts the focus of discussion from positions-based to interests-related, thereby creating the necessary space for increased creativity in problem solving, and ultimately for reaching long-term, sustainable, two-way conflict resolutions.

And yet, multiple perspective capacity training is not an inherent part of conflict management studies, at least not as a standalone topic in itself. And the question naturally arises – is this a teachable topic at all, or are we discussing a personality trait that one either has or does not have?

Multiple perspectives capacity - an art or a craft?

Undeniably, the capacity to contain more than one perspective at one point in time is first and foremost a personality trait. We all know people who naturally tend to do it, and probably many more who cannot.

It is equally true that this capacity has to do with personal development, as pointed out earlier when discussing Jean Piaget's child evolution theory.

And, as a matter of common sense, it is natural to assume that social factors such as upbringing and education, and life events such as, for example, world travelling, would also influence that capacity. It is reasonable to assume, for instance, that people who were more exposed to social diversity would more easily develop multiple perspectives capacity, although this is not always the case.

Having said that, I can personally attest to the fact that multiple perspectives capacity is definitely an attainable and teachable craft. I was fortunate enough to guide many people in multiple techniques, derived from both education and consciousness fields, in that craft. Mutual learning approach, active listening, therapeutic techniques such as Voice Dialogue and The Work, all represent practical and proven routes for perspectives' broadening.

I would like to end this article by briefly presenting the latter two therapeutic techniques, which many clients I have consulted described as life changing. Voice Dialogue therapy, created in the 1970's by Dr. Hal Stone and Dr. Sidra Stone, enables people to acknowledge and contain their multiple inner parts, which typically represent different perspectives and viewpoints that they consciously or unconsciously carry within. It is one of several multiple-selves theories, identifying sub-parts of our personality which trigger some of our behaviors and internal

conflicts. Voice Dialogue essentially prevents us from either over-identifying or, alternatively, suppressing voices within us. Within the process of inner dialogue we learn that there is no need for us to choose, convince or even prioritize any part over the others. By merely listening and acknowledging the different voices within ourselves we bring relaxation, harmony and healing to our entire system. And, within that process, we acquire the ability to contain multiple perspectives, a skill that becomes useful for us not only internally but also externally, as mentioned above.

"The Work", created and published by Byron Katie in 2003, is a structured intellectual process aimed at broadening our perspective by questioning and analyzing our stressful thoughts. Similar to what happens with external conflicts, Katie recognized that by gaining new perspectives we can divert our focus from emotional judgements to practical action routes, defuse stressful emotions, and reveal new ways of getting out of our emotional boxes. Same as with Voice Dialogue, this technique has been proven to be very helpful when analyzing external conflicts, and specifically in facilitating acceptance of other views and behaviors in face of perceived conflicts.

These techniques and others, especially if implemented within a conflict resolution context, can become powerful tools for gaining multiple-perspectives capacity, with all its immense advantages as described above.