

Dealing With Worldviews In Interpersonal Conflict

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Understanding worldviews is as elusive as understanding human nature. It is a reality based on unseen dimensions, unimagined proportions, and rooted in unacknowledged patterns of thought. Dealing with worldviews at the interpersonal level calls for two things up front: 1) a conscious awareness of the components of our personal worldviews and 2) a conscious awareness of how our worldviews work when we interact with others. HOW do we relate to others? How we think about this demonstrates our personal framework for thinking. So, what IS our personal framework? What thoughts, concepts, and ideas do we entertain? What beliefs and values underlie and support these thoughts, concepts, and ideas? What does relating to others look like when it is broken down into worldview components? How does a collective worldview impact a personal worldview? How does this information get translated into interpersonal conflicts? Bringing these questions to ground zero - the intrapersonal level - is where our exploration begins.

Personal Worldview Components

At the individual level, a worldview encompasses a person's ontology, epistemology, axiology, ethics (Nudler, 1993), cosmology, and theology (Sire, 1997). Every aspect of the individual's subjective world is brought together on the inner plane in order to create meaning. I use the metaphoric phrase, inner plane, to denote that place in each of us where the intricately connected aspects of our personalities interactively engage in the meaning making process. All of our accumulated learning - innate, intuitive knowledge and learned, environmental knowledge, becomes the material for building our worldview framework. From this framework, we see, interpret, and engage the world. Every person is positioned from a unique vantage point created specifically and personally to agree with personal early-life experiences. Perhaps, I can make this more clear by offering a few real life scenarios.

While playing outside, Jaime, a four-year-old, runs across a busy street to play with another neighborhood child. Observing this action, Jaime's parents experience a feeling of panic and with it a barrage of thoughts flood their minds. One parent quickly runs to the street and calls Jaime home. Once in the house, they reprimand their child for lack of caution in crossing the street. They describe the horrors of what could happen - the possibility of danger. Jaime, confused, hurt, and disappointed is punished. The child's worldview contrasts the parent's. Differing values modify behavior -- fun and companionship versus health and safety.

Pat and Jean drop by for an unexpected visit. They have just received great news and can't wait to share it in person with their best friend, Terri. Terri, on the other hand, is in the middle of a challenging project that is shadowed by a weighty deadline. Time is of the essence. Terri finds this visit imposing and assuming. Anxiety and frustration are mixed with guilt, as Terri wonders why they didn't call first. In this situation, different values are manifesting and creating an uncomfortable situation for Terri whether or not the emotions are expressed.

Alex suggests that the Community Human Relations Committee consider initiating ongoing dialogue at monthly meetings so that the group has an opportunity to explore bias and prejudice within the group as an exercise for dealing with bias and prejudice in the community. Although slow to react, all members ultimately respond with many voicing personal concerns. There is a sense of rising tension in the room as individuals express emotion-laden statements. Some see the idea as positive and necessary action -- an opportunity. Some see the same idea as negative with a destructive quality. It is seen as threatening. Others see the idea as having questionable possibilities. They are not ready to agree but not ready to discount the idea either. Portions of differing worldviews are exposed during this session.

These scenarios represent common occurrences in our lives. Whether or not you relate to the actions and reactions of the characters, these scenarios demonstrate how worldviews supported by personal values are a framework for interacting with others. Just as the child and parent have obviously different frameworks for understanding, adults, too, have similar problems. The biggest difference is that we have expectations of how adults should relate. When our expectations do not coincide with our experiences, we often feel conflicted.

Collective Worldview

Interactions with others whether family, friends, or colleagues challenge us to deal with the differences in how we perceive the world. As members of a collective, we share a worldview when individuals place value on the same objects and communicate their value. Collective worldviews create the general environment or larger picture in which individual worldviews evolve. For example, every human group develops value concepts such as justice, fairness, compassion, virtue, freedom, and rights and draws these concepts into the framework of morality (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

Collectively, we think of this framework as fundamental guidelines for human concern and how we should live. As members of a group, individuals function inside a collective framework in accordance with the general group concept of morality.

Individual Worldviews

This is part of the complexity of our situation: within an individual's framework, the collective worldview and its values are translated into uniquely individual personal meanings. As a result, individuals may create very different meaning constructs under the umbrella concept of collective morality. Individual and group identity fuse with moral values and this, then, becomes fertile ground for conflict at all levels: between individuals in the same group; between individuals from different groups; between different groups.

Internal Worldview Mechanisms Patterns of Thought

Relationships call us to be aware of our patterns of thought. What are the thoughts, images, and emotions running through you as you reprimand your child for some infraction of a rule? As you are unexpectedly interrupted by friends while at work? As you are faced with exploring biases

and prejudices in a group setting? What are you recalling that informs you of how you need to behave? What beliefs and values do you reflect in your interactions? How does your script read? Unless consciously aware of the "whys" of our actions in adulthood, we act from a prescribed script. This script was written from learning acquired as a child. It evolved as an understanding of how to be from the child's point of view within the framework at the time.

The Script

The rationale for the script came from the child's need to create meaning. If a punishment model was dominant, the child wrote a script that dealt with protection. If a nurturing model was dominant, the child's script dealt with self-expression. Whatever your early experiences, you continue to play the same patterns of thought into adulthood until you consciously look at them. The patterns of thought that make up a child's script are grounded in assumptions based on and directly related to personal experiences. When we become adults, these same assumptions are at work creating meaning in our adult experiences. Yes, you may be in conflict with the neighbor according to childhood memories of similar events.

Worldmaking

The scripts we use daily embody the truths in our world. We remake the world to our specifications. The world we see is The World According to (Your Name Here). When we experience conflict in relationship, we are experiencing conflict between two worldviews. Our personal interpretation is in conflict with another's personal interpretation. ". . . not only do truths differ for different worlds but the nature of agreement between a version and a world apart from it is notoriously nebulous" (Goodman, 1988, p. 17). This leads me to the following questions: Does one ultimate interpretation of the world exist? Is there one truth above all other truths? My research indicates that the answers to these questions are the primary motivators for our interactions.

Dealing with Conflict

So how does this information help us when we find ourselves in conflict with others? In lengthy dialogue with others, I find that two vitally important elements are missing: 1) a deep understanding of our own worldviews and 2) a deep understanding of how our worldviews interact. Dealing with conflict includes having a personal awareness of the assumptions that underlie our beliefs and values and recognizing that different assumptions inevitably underlie the worldviews of others.

All of this leads us to the practical importance of gaining self-knowledge. Self-reflective techniques are a priority if we truly want to understand the deep-rootedness of any conflict. Numerous books and tapes are available for learning various reflective activities. In my own practice, we use a number of tools including free writing, daily periodic checking of thoughts for self-analysis, recognition of self-limiting thoughts and conscious reframing, self-monitoring of emotional responses while interacting, group work using dialogue and inquiry to enhance personal awareness, and specific daily reflection time. Such practices have resulted in major

breakthroughs for individuals seeking to resolve conflict in their lives. Personal discovery gets translated into acknowledged and altered attitudes that impact interpersonal relationships.

References:

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