

Conflict and Oppression

“ ΔV . V for velocity, delta (Δ) for change. In space, this is the measure of the change in velocity required to get from one place to another – thus, a measure of the energy required to do it. Everything is moving already. But to get something from the (moving) surface of the Earth into orbit around it, requires a minimum Δv of ten kilometers per second; to leave Earth’s orbit and fly to Mars requires a minimum Δv of 3.6 kilometers per second; and to orbit Mars and land on it requires a Δv of about one kilometer per second. The hardest part is leaving Earth behind, for that is by far the deepest gravity well involved. Climbing up that steep curve of spacetime takes tremendous force, shifting the direction of an enormous inertia.

History too has an inertia. In the four dimensions of spacetime, particles (or events) have directionality; mathematicians, trying to show this, draw what they call “world lines” on graphs. In human affairs, individual world lines form a thick tangle, curling out of the darkness of prehistory and stretching through time: a cable the size of Earth itself, spiraling round the sun on a long curved course. That cable of tangled world lines is history. Seeing where it has been, it is clear where it is going – it is a matter of simple extrapolation. For what kind of Δv would it take to escape history, to escape an inertia that powerful, and carve a new course?”

- Kim Stanley Robinson, *Red Mars*

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Introduction

Conflict is a natural consequence of interacting with other people, and it plays an important role in building relationships, teams, and societies. Conflict doesn't occur in a vacuum, but in an interconnected network of systems that oppress the vast majority of people on the earth in complex ways. Examples of these oppressive systems include but are not limited to racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism. These oppressive systems intrinsically shape conflict and the people engaged in conflict. In order to better engage with conflict *and* to work toward dismantling systems of oppression, we must understand the ways they interact. This document will help you to develop language to describe this interaction as well as teach the tools and skills to better navigate conflict.

The Lay of the Land

The first step toward better conflict is understanding the lay of the land and societal paradigms that inform conflict and oppression.

The current dominant way of thinking regarding justice assumes that the person who has done harm must suffer punishment. In the legal frame of justice, this punishment usually takes the form of incarceration. As a society, we often put the offenders in a cage until they've "paid back society for what they've done". Even after someone has "served their time" they are still denied many of their rights and ostracized in many ways as they have been sorted into the box of "criminal". But, punishment doesn't balance the scales or clear a debt.

There are a couple of components of punishment or the carceral system that make this system compelling and difficult to resist or replace. When someone is harmed, has something taken from them, or has something done to them against their will, it damages their sense of safety and their feeling of control over life. They want to feel safe again and they want to regain that sense of control. And the simple logic is that if being hurt is what did this to us then hurting someone back will undo it. We want to lash out.

Additionally, and this is extremely important, the carceral system is simple. It is binary. Everyone is sorted into easy to grasp boxes - good and bad. Criminal and victim. While in reality it is deeply flawed and only ends up creating a vicious cycle of harm on its surface the carceral system seems like a final and clean distinction. Competitive 'us-versus-them' oppositional thinking is very easy. It takes no energy at all to hold it in the mind.

The alternative approach is nuanced. It takes time and work and rarely offers easy answers. There's a lot of different approaches to engaging with conflict and harm in a better way. What they have in common is that they're rooted in a different default assumption. Community, relationship, cooperation, healing.

The reason that this distinction between two wildly disparate paradigms is important to start with is that the approach you take to justice impacts what justice is going to look like. The already

established processes that are out there - nonviolent communication, restorative justice or restorative practices, transformative justice, just to name some of the big ones - offer tools and steps to follow. Following those steps and trying to use those tools while still thinking in the old way of punishment isn't going to get you a new outcome. It requires personal growth and growth of the surrounding community. When you're accustomed to having justice be clear cut and final it can end up feeling like justice hasn't been served when you hold all the complexity of the actual situation.

Frequently when tools are weaponized it comes from that old way of thinking bleeding through when using the new tools. You often won't even notice it when it's happening until you've already built the skills to do the work better. So the implementation ends up being messy and imperfect.

Concepts

There's a lot of concepts that are pertinent here and they tend to be a 'tangled hairball'. It's very difficult to deal with one topic without acknowledging or getting involved in another interrelated topic. They've been broken into separate topics but remember that they all impact each other.

Stories

We make sense of our lives, chaotic and disorganized series of events by turning them into stories that makes sense to us. This is as intrinsic to life as conflict is. Every string of moments throughout our day and over the course of our lives gets contextualized and incorporated (or just dropped and forgotten) into the story of our life and our story of the world. Events and other stimuli are all interpreted through the context of our beliefs, our experiences both remembered and forgotten, our trauma responses, and our emotional state at the time.

This is exacerbated by the way that memory works. We often believe that our memories are recordings that we are able to then play back to accurately recall details from. This is unfortunately wildly incorrect. The mind isn't a computer and your memories aren't stored on a hard drive. Your brain is much more similar to your heart or your liver than it ever will be to a computer. When you recall a memory you are in a way reconstructing the event in a way that is just as subject to your emotions and your beliefs as when it occurred. It's no secret that witnesses to crimes are able to be convinced through leading questions to "remember" things that they factually could not possibly have witnessed. There's a body of studies on memories of catastrophic events such as the World Trade Center attacks in 2001 that similarly show that people's memories of the event are essentially fiction.

Even more interesting it's being found that memory is also stored in connective tissues and muscle not just the nervous system. Returning to a memory is experienced by the entire body and it is possible for the body to conflate stimuli. The interpersonal conflict in front of you can feel identical to the trauma that has been living in your muscles for decades.

These concepts of narrative and memory are important for a couple of reasons. The first - when working a conflict people very frequently want to find a single “correct” account of the event. This is a red herring rooted in a desire to punish whoever the “wrongdoer” was. Two people’s accounts of the same event from the same angle will still be different because of all the myriad of ways they’ve interpreted it and how their memory of it has changed as they’ve recalled the event over time. The goal should be to work to grasp each person’s experience of the event and the way it impacted them. Even with a recording of an event, it is more productive/beneficial to focus on the internal landscape of each individual involved in the event, because their narratives are more complex than empirical data.

Related to the concept of narratives it’s important to regularly make a distinction between intention and effect. While you may never have intended for someone to be hurt by what you did you still need to recognize and acknowledge that they were.

Fundamental Attribution Error

When constructing the narrative of our own lives we are much more able to understand the impact that all kinds of outside factors have on the decisions we make and the actions we take. It is uncommon however for us to extend this same level of understanding to others. Partly we can’t know what factors are influencing someone’s actions but also it’s way too complicated and exhausting to think about. It takes much less energy to simply assume that a person’s actions are based largely in the kind of person that they are. This is the Fundamental Attribution Error - that we attribute someone’s actions to their character rather than their circumstances.

Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance is the discomfort we feel when we realize that our actions don’t necessarily line up with our beliefs about ourselves. This echoes the above concept that simplicity is appealing - our beliefs are usually simple and easy to hold in our minds. “I’m a kind person”, “I make good choices” - that kind of stuff. This butts up against the complexity of reality pretty frequently. What makes cognitive dissonance important for this work is how people respond to it, which is in one of these three ways:

1. Change the belief
2. Change the action
3. Change how they *perceive* the action

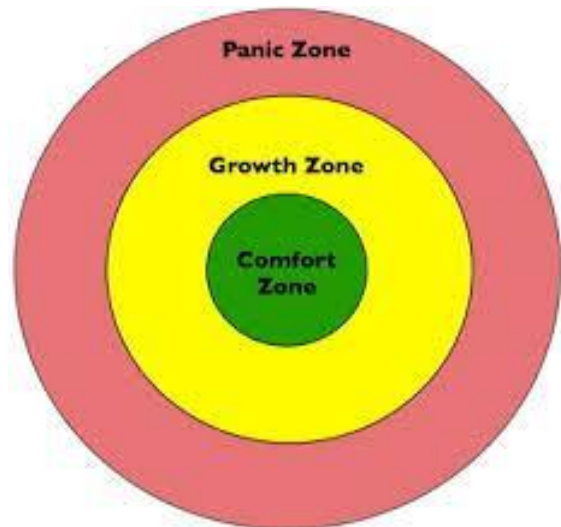
I’ll use myself as an example. If I believe that I’m a kind person and I’m told that something I said or did was harmful I could (1) stop believing that I’m kind. Alternatively I could (2) stop saying or doing whatever it was. Most likely however what I’ll do is (3) tweak the way I think about that action. “What I said wasn’t that harmful. It’s not that big a deal.” “It’s only because they were inconsiderate first.” “It’s not racism because racism is only when you shout slurs at people.”

Relating back to the carceral system that categorizes people as bad if they have done harm - people don’t like feeling like they themselves are bad and will do just about any mental gymnastics they can in order to avoid it. So the “change the perception” response to cognitive

dissonance becomes far and away the most common one. Only by divorcing from the binary of good people and bad people can you really start to convince people that they've done harm without them reflexively trying to refute it.

Discomfort and Shame

A model for visualizing a person's level of discomfort, such as that caused by cognitive dissonance, is a set of nested circles. The center circle is green and represents a comfortable state. Nothing is upsetting but there is also nothing to be learned here. For growth to happen a person must become uncomfortable. Outside the green circle is a yellow or orange circle, perhaps a gradient from yellow to orange - until it bumps up against the outermost circle which is red. Within the yellow-orange zone a person is uncomfortable but still able to function and grow, taking in information and using it. If a person goes beyond this zone into the red in terms of discomfort they are no longer able to grow. They will shut down and become reactive, defensive, insular, possibly dissociative. Growing as a person is a continuous cycle back and forth from green to yellow and back again hopefully without running into the red.



A big portion of working with a person who has done harm is helping them navigate this process of growth and learning, while making sure (as much as we are able) to avoid them going into the red. This is exhausting work and needs to be recognized as the labor that it is.

It's also unfortunately the case that the size of someone's growth zone is not universally the same size. Like developing a skill some folks have a very large amount of discomfort they are able to take on before they "red out" and can no longer engage productively.

Time for Tools

Here's some tools. Take them and make them your own. Familiarize yourself, tweak them as you need to, combine them together. Just try not to wield them as cudgels against each other.

Common Definition

One of the symptoms of privilege is the unawareness of how your actions could even have an emotional cost to another person. This ends up meaning that in addition to the focus of tending to the relationship and making sure each party feels understood and validated, there is the additional work of education. It can make the process even more complicated and bog down progress. You can try starting a session of mediation with establishing shared definitions of specific systems of oppression and how they are often expressed.

For example you can establish that Rape Culture is the normalization and justification of rape that uses mechanisms like victim blaming and placing the burden for prevention on the victims. You can even print off the wikipedia article or the equivalent if you like though you'll want to have a good concise synopsis that a novice can reasonably hold in their mind. Then as you work through the conflict you can refer back to the established definition. "Do you see how that is a form of victim blaming?"

Some useful definitions to talk precisely about emotional responses to hurt. It can feel prescriptive and hair-split-y but finding common definitions is foundational to effectively communicating and connecting.

Shame - "I am a *bad thing* because of what I've done." People do not like to feel like this so they generally end up doing all kinds of mental acrobatics to make sure that they don't. Cognitive dissonance and how people cope with it overlaps with this. Red or 'panic zone'.

Guilt - "I feel uncomfortable because of what I have done." It is possible to have done harm, own that fact, and still see oneself as a good person or a person that is trying to do good. Yellow or 'growth zone'.

Remorse - "I want to make amends, create healing, tend to relationship." Yellow or 'growth zone'.

Sympathy - "That sucks." Recognizing someone else's suffering even if you don't understand or identify with it.

Empathy - "I've been there too." An ability to identify with another person's suffering. (Careful not to insist that you know *exactly* what they're going through. This is an important distinction because it can be a really hard to notice way of shifting the focus off of them and onto yourself.)

False Equivalence

When you're accustomed to privilege, accountability can feel like oppression. It is entirely possible that a privileged person or someone who has done harm can have a trigger. Trauma happens to all of us in different ways. A common occurrence however is someone who has done harm saying that they are being hurt or harmed by being confronted with the impact of their actions. "You telling me I assaulted you is painful for me to hear so I'm the real victim here." This is a Weaponization. They are uncomfortable. They might be right up against the red circle in the comfort zone graph but they aren't being harmed even if they fear that is what is happening.

Sides of the Coin

Relating back to the concept of how we construct the story or narrative of our lives, every conflict that we get into is a similarly constructed narrative. The shape of that narrative is influenced by systems of oppression from both sides.

The narrative of how a marginalized person has contributed to the conflict will be informed by the stereotypes surrounding their identity; such as women's actions being perceived as "bitchy", while black folks actions will be seen as "lazy" or "angry and violent". It is important to point out how pieces of information are being subconsciously cherry picked and twisted to fit into this simplified and vindicating narrative. Similarly to acknowledge how a marginalized person's part in a specific conflict ends up reflecting on their entire demographic.

For marginalized folks in conflict with those that have privilege over them, it can feel as if they are in conflict not simply with an old white man or similar individual, but in fact fighting the entire patriarchy or white supremacy or the like. This heightens the stakes and makes the encounter all that much more exhausting and stressful.

Marginalized folks become tokens of their stereotypes while privileged folks become a symbol of all the systems they benefit from.

Conversation Cultures and Triggers

There are different styles of communication across genders and especially cultures that impact what a person believes is appropriate to engage in discussion. Some upbringings involve calm, even toned, orderly conversation where only one person is talking at a time and likely only one thread is being discussed. Others involve raised voices, talking over each other and weaving conversations as perfectly normal. These two styles presented as a binary are a gross oversimplification. Neither of them are inherently more or less correct or valid. They simply are.

The dominant culture of the Western World that is maintained through schooling and the workplace does however treat the even-toned and single-speaker communication styles as inherently correct and the others as disrespectful. This is worth noting as conflicts arise across folks from different cultures or upbringings. There isn't a quick and clean answer here, but more something that the participants and the facilitator will need to continue to keep in mind and negotiate throughout the work.

Additionally, this same concept can also clash up against trauma and triggers. As stated above, it can be very normal for some cultures to discuss things loudly and assertively. By contrast however most women are conditioned to be very wary of when a man begins to raise his voice. It can be a warning sign of impending violence that for many women will trigger trauma responses such as fear, avoidance, freezing or submitting. Watch for it, name it when you see it, try to hold space for learning and translating the what each person is trying to communicate.

Definitions of Respect

Respect could be defined as treating someone like a human being that is imperfect and deserving of love, patience, and understanding, or as treating someone as an authority figure. The conflation of these two definitions becomes especially dangerous when someone talks about needing to receive respect in order to give respect, when what they are actually saying is they need to be treated as an authority in order to treat people like human beings.

A common pattern when running up against privilege is the false equivalence of being understood and being agreed with. Most especially masculinity, but also whiteness are both associated with a kind of emotional ineptitude that is conflated with objective reasoning. This can lead to white folks or men believing that their thought process is flawless reason devoid of confusing or misleading emotion. Thus when they have had the opportunity to explain their point of view they expect that people automatically agree with them.

This tendency absolutely needs to be interrupted and dismantled as it prevents the privileged person from ever being able to understand what the marginalized person is experiencing and trying to convey. Naming the pattern is a first step - just acknowledge that this is a thing that often happens.

Bandwidth, Reception, and Speed of Change vs Damage

Considering how much emotional labor and teaching is involved in conflict work it is imperative that the responsibility falls on the privileged to do it. White folks need to be holding space for other white folks to struggle through the learning process. Men need to be educating other men. Marginalized folks are the experts on their experience and you need to prioritize their voices but that doesn't mean marginalized folks in your community need to be doing all the teaching. There's a whole host of books, blogs, vlogs and documentaries that you can buy, subscribe to, read and watch in order to listen to and learn from marginalized folks who have willingly put that work in to help you be a more informed advocate.

Additionally, while there is room for every single person to grow and we don't want to write off an entire person's ability to change, there are at least two instances where another course of action may be necessary. The first is when someone is committed to not hearing you. Some people are simply not willing to listen and are not capable of acknowledging that they could ever be in the wrong. We can understand that this response is coming from their own fears and imperfections as a human being, but that doesn't mean we need to keep ourselves open to be hurt by them. Stop extending them community and put your energy where it can actually create some change.

The other instance is (a) how quickly someone is able to change their actions and (b) how much damage they are able to do. There is a dynamic relationship between these two factors and there isn't an easy arithmetic for where a cut off line of acceptable is. An abused person never needs to welcome their abuser back into their life. A person struggling through the messy learning process of how to stop harming others should not be in a position of power. Some

people are absolutely working on growing and doing better, but it's happening at such a slow rate that the person(s) they are harming will likely be dead before their actions have gotten to a point that is acceptable. Like so much of this work there isn't a crisp and clean math on where to draw the line but sometimes the line does need to be drawn.

Facilitators Pre-Circle

Part of the struggle of conflict work is that it can be really difficult to have the patience for the person who is still in the fits and starts of growing. As people who have already worked at unlearning our oppressive behaviors, we can see our former selves in them, and it's hard to remember just how difficult it was to grow. Does a caterpillar always look at the chrysalis as a herculean task while the butterfly is able to look back as if it was always effortless? It's not just tiring to be patient with someone who is doing this work; it can be downright infuriating. It can help to mentally prepare oneself ahead of time, and deliberately try to plan out ways to bridge to them and see their need for help. Let yourself feel the feelings instead of trying to shove them away.

Dyads

The most important component of any conflict process is that it works for the group. There are a number of pre-established processes a group could adopt but it's less important which one you use and more important how you use and grow into it (see Fine Tuning below). If you don't have a process for your group and you need to start *somewhere* the following is a simple process you can use.

Try, most especially when initially learning to engage with conflict constructively and with new nervous participants, to reduce the conflict down to its simplest unit - two people. It will almost always be a reduction that ignores the complexity of the situation but it is much more manageable and you can do additional dyads later, hopefully with forward momentum.

1. What's Alive?

One person (A) shares what's going on for them in this conflict. The other person (B) tries best to reflect the most crucial components of what they heard. Attempt to pattern as active listening. The original speaker (A) might want to reword parts to clarify. That's fine.

Repeat this process of reflection until (A) feels like (B) understands what's going on. A nod.

"They get it." "I feel heard and/or held." Don't allow any retorts or explanations from (B) until after (A) feels satisfied.

(B) then gets a chance to share what's going on for them, which is then reflected by (A). All the same rules apply. No response. Just listen and reflect. (Try intentionally looking for agreement or connection, it'll be a lot easier to find it.)

2. What's at Stake?

Same format as above but each person talks about 'what's at stake in this'. Why is this conflict important? The reasons may vary depending on the group or type of organization but the scale

is less important. “I just want to have a healthy relationship to this place” and “If we can’t make this work then what hope does society have” are equally valid. Both sides get a chance. Both sides reflect what they’ve heard until both feel they are understood.

3. Action

Now it is time to talk about action steps. Try to hold off on finding ‘solutions’ until you get here as folks won’t understand as well what’s going on so their proposed solutions won’t be as effective. People will often feel a lot better just having talked about it, but it’s a good idea to outline a few measurable action steps for both sides if possible. These are especially helpful for countering the narratives that we build in our mind with something concrete.

Fine Tuning

For the communities that created existing systems for engaging with conflict like Non-Violent Communication or Restorative Justice the work of creating that system is the real reason they’re able to do it differently. Likely the First Nation communities that created Restorative Justice could take any step 1, step 2, step 3 mechanism for justice and use it in a way that’s nuanced and patient, and more actually just. They’ve already developed understanding of the ways that conflict takes shape and how it impacts the community. They’ve got specialized vocabulary and skills for seeing, naming, and handling the patterns that arise.

You’ll need some kind of process to start engaging with conflict productively. The most important part is to fine tune that process to your specific group or community. This encourages thinking about the process at a meta level that develops those skills, vocabularies and understandings.

A good way to do this is on a regular interval, say every three or six months, have discussion about the conflict process you use with these three questions.

1. What works well about our conflict process?
2. What could be improved or what is lacking in our conflict process?
3. In an ideal world what would our conflict process look or work like?

Going through these questions over time your process might change a little or a lot but much more importantly *you’ll get better at using it.*