

MSc Conflict Resolution and Mediation Studies

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Essay Question D

Choose one of the books from the MSc reading list and summarise the main themes. How have the ideas in this book influenced your thinking about conflict and conflict interventions? Compare and contrast the ideas in this book with other reading you have done.

Book chosen:

Marshall Rosenberg, Nonviolent Communication, a language for life

This essay sets out to summarise the main themes of Marshall Rosenberg's book *Nonviolent Communication - a language for life*, to identify how the ideas in this book have influenced my thinking on conflict and conflict intervention and then compare and contrast these ideas with other theory.

What is nonviolent communication?

We have all been in situations where conflict has either escalated or been painfully unresolved. In these situations we have often felt anger, hurt or disappointment because we did not receive the understanding or compassion we expected or our point of view was not heard or respected. We leave these situations mystified and stuck, asking ourselves what went wrong? Or why the other person was so stubborn?

This summary of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) highlights the main ways humans get into trouble trying to communicate, and describes effective new ways to communicate which avoids these pitfalls and brings people into a closer understanding of one another.

There are three main areas of thinking and communicating which provoke unhealthy communication in conflict: 1) our tendency to add interpretations and judgments to what we observe, 2) our tendency to blame or try to make another responsible for how we are feeling, 3) our resistance to letting others know what we want, need or what's really important to us.

During Marshall Rosenberg's study of communication styles around the world, he discovered that when situations feel difficult, people in most cultures of the world use a critical and judgmental form of language. And even when we are polite in

difficult situations, we turn this kind of language in upon ourselves, with such statements as, "I'm so useless, I can't get anything right."

As an easy to understand metaphor he has called this language "Jackal." It doesn't matter what your native language is, Jackal has become part of every modern language. In Jackal, people say things like: "You should know better", "Why can't you follow the rules?" "You are an idiot and a troublemaker." Jackal language analyses, judges, blames and labels people. It's a very unfriendly language, and we've all been trained to use it.

But Marshall discovered that not every culture spoke Jackal; there are a few peaceful cultures that have no wars and little escalated conflict. They have a different way of looking at each other that is more compassionate, and the way they speak demonstrates a desire to connect and understand, rather than analyse, correct or label.

He called this type of language Giraffe, named for the animal with the biggest heart and the highest view. When we speak in Giraffe, we don't see any advantage in attacking, blaming or telling someone what he is with labels, we are much more interested in the other person's and our own feelings and needs. Giraffe is a language of the heart, a language that connects us; Jackal is a language that separates us.

So, one way of dealing with conflict effectively is to learn Giraffe in order to help us communicate compassionately and honestly. We learn it by looking at what happens when we communicate, and doing exercises that show us clearly how we have been communicating up to now and what other options we have for communicating in a way that is more likely to bring peace

Learning Giraffe

There are several skills involved in communicating compassionately and honestly:

-hearing the underlying needs of any person we are communicating with, even if they are not skilled at communicating these things, and staying connected to them in this process, even if they are attacking or blaming us. This is called "Listening with Giraffe Ears."

-identifying the deeper needs that are underneath our own upsets, confusions, complaints and blaming.

-noticing the subtle and often confusing differences between bodily or sensed feelings such as "I feel sad" and a feeling-interpretation mixture such as "I feel betrayed."

-noticing how we interpret and evaluate what we observe and then mistake that for the observation itself

-learning how to observe without interpretation.

-learning the difference between a Request and a Demand, and how demands alienate us and requests connect us.

-understanding that what is important to another person does not mean that we must DO what they want. Understanding them also does not mean that we have to agree with them. And understanding them does not mean that they are right and we are wrong. These erroneous beliefs are key reasons why we often won't let ourselves understand someone we are in conflict with.

Marshall also introduces us to the concept of Giraffe and Jackal ears.

If we are listening to others with our culturally trained "Jackal" ears, we hear complaints, criticisms and attacks everywhere. It's easy in that case to respond with similar attacks or to feel defensive or to leave feeling miserable and misunderstood.

When we wear Giraffe ears however, we have a powerful technology available to us. We can think of Giraffe ears as a sophisticated translating device. When we decide to put on Giraffe ears, all the criticisms, blames and attacks of others are translated into simply their feelings and unmet needs.

When we wear Giraffe ears we hear their pain but we don't take it personally. We can have empathy and feel connected to a person when we hear only their feelings and needs. It's as if they already spoke perfect Giraffe themselves.

As Marshall says, "Criticism, complaints, judgments and attacks are all just tragic expressions of difficult feelings and unmet needs".

An important facet of communication is that under stressful situations, we often can't hear much of what's going on for the other person until we feel they have heard and understood us.

But when we really feel that the other has heard and understands what we want or need, then we can relax and can hear what's important to them too.

In a conflict if one person is upset and the other isn't, then it's usually easy for the non-upset one to listen and let the other one be understood.

But if both people are very upset, both want to be understood and can't hear what the other is saying.

So how do we get around this need to be heard and understood before we can hear the other? The answer is to find our own inner source of understanding that is not dependant on the other, what Marshall calls "Empathy for Oneself" or "Compassion For Oneself."

Empathy For Oneself is simply a term for an inner calmness and centeredness, which allows us to see and hear the other clearly even when we have strong feelings inside.

There are four simple steps to achieving this.

Compassionate communication consists of four simple steps that can be used in different ways. The generic steps are to: 1) say what was observed without judgment, blame or interpretation (in a conflict it is usually what happened that upset us or the other. 2) say what the feelings are. 3) say what the underlying needs are. (This could be what you wanted to happen or were afraid wouldn't happen). 4) make a request.

These 4 steps can be used in two different ways depending on whether we are trying to tell another honestly about what is happening with us or we are trying to help another tell us what is happening with them.

Thus expressing *myself* with honesty

Step 1: OBSERVATION When I (saw, heard, etc).....

Step 2: FEELING I felt (in a simple non evaluative way)....

Step 3: NEED Because I was wanting.....

Step 4: REQUEST Would you be willing to (a request, not a demand)....

Or.....

hearing *another* with empathy.

In this instance when we are guessing another persons feelings or needs, we are not trying to tell them what they are feeling or needing, rather we are simply trying to hear them and make a first attempt to understand, and get them to tell us more correctly - and we expect them to correct our guesses. When they correct us we repeat what we have heard until they agree that we understand. This second side is about them and our own needs and desires are not part of it or talked about at this time.

When you (saw, heard, etc).....

Did you feel (a guess of what they might feel).....

Because you were wanting (guess their needs, hopes etc.).....

And would you now like (guess what they might request).....?

With these four steps Marshall Rosenberg has created a practical tool which will assist anyone who wants to transform a destructive cycle of communication into a tool for resolution. The spirituality behind this tool and the deeper learning is drawn from a variety of theories and philosophies on nonviolence which can be used as an attitude and a way of life for anyone who wants to make a real shift into nonviolence and contribute to social change through peaceful resolution of conflict.

How did this thinking influence my thinking and shape my practice in conflict intervention? And how does it stack up against other theory?

My first real learning about conflict came in counseling training. Analysing, interpreting, evaluating and offering 'professional opinion' was very much part of the treatment process. Diagnosing abnormal behaviour was key to fixing people. Alfred Adler described people as resorting to 'various forms of abnormal behaviour' and labeled people as having a 'neurotic disposition' or 'neurotic character'(1). In psychotherapy the therapist makes judgments and interpretations. The therapist judges on issues such as transference and counter-transference, rapport and the client's ability to take on new learning (2).

In his book *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct*, Thomas Szasz states that mental illness, madness and even many crimes are created or defined by cultural controls, morals and "real world" views of big science, religion and government, similar to heretics, pagans, and sinners before the industrial revolution (3). The importance of this work for me was in

the realisation that all my thoughts were interpretations, evaluations, diagnosis and analyses and so were everyone else's.

Questions arose for me around 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad', and my discomfort of other people's judgments in comparison to my own and how we come to agree or disagree based on our moralistic judgments of a situation. Separating and creating difference through the 'superior' knowledge of an expert held a lot of discomfort for me. This was at odds with my belief that at the moment of birth we begin our journey from birth to death with the same 'clean slate'. So how do some people become experts on others? This could only be through education and privilege. Then surely I would question an education system that promotes hierarchy.

Author and theologian Walter Wink has some ideas about this (4). His concept is that we are living under structures in which the few dominate the many. He looks at how families are structured: the parents claim always to know what's right and set the rules for everybody else's benefit. And this is replicated in our schools, workplaces, governments and religions. At all levels, you have authorities that impose their will on other people, claiming that it's for everybody's well-being. They use punishment and reward as the basic strategy for getting what they want. Marshall Rosenberg calls this domination culture.

Drawing from Riane Eisler's work, Wink points out that about eight thousand years ago a new story came into being about how the world began: It began when a very heroic, virtuous male god crushed to smithereens a nasty female goddess, and out of that crushing of the evil force by the virtuous force, the energy created the earth. The story gradually evolved and became a history in people's minds about how were we meant to live. That we were meant to live by crushing out evil forces. The good life is the virtuous forces crushing out the evil forces.

To maintain domination structures, you need to give people a language of moralistic judgments. So, you have psychologists and psychiatrists to say there is such a thing as mentally ill and healthy people. You have to have authorities to

say what's good and evil. You also need to educate people in a language of moralistic judgments. Why? Because, Walter Wink says, one of the key characteristics of domination structures is to make violence enjoyable. And this is a very good language for doing that. It reduces people to objects. When you think of *what* somebody is, you really don't see the life in that person. You're reducing them to an abstraction, to a static phenomenon. And then along with moralistic judgments, you need a language that obscures choice. Words that imply we have no choice except to do what the authority says is right. Words like *have to, should, ought to, must, can't, supposed to*. Then you need this very important concept, if you want to maintain a domination structure, such as our judicial system and economic systems, the concept of deserve, or worth. It's very important in maintaining domination structures to get people to believe that certain actions deserve reward, certain actions deserve punishment.

The concept of "deserve" is at the basis of retributive justice. For thousands of years, we've been operating under a system that says that people who do bad deeds are evil and that human beings are basically evil. According to this way of thinking, a few good people have evolved, and it's up to them to be the authorities and control the rest of us. And the way you control people, given that we are conditioned to believe our nature is evil and selfish, is through a system of justice in which people who behave in a good manner get rewarded, while those who are evil are made to suffer. In order to see such a system as fair, one has to believe that both sides deserve what they get.

Marshall Rosenberg recounts "I used to live in Texas, and when they would execute somebody there, the good Baptist students from the local college would gather outside the prison and have a party. When the word came over the loudspeaker that the convict had been killed, there was loud cheering and so forth—the same kind of cheering that went on in some parts of Palestine when they found out about the September 11 terrorist attacks". When there is a concept of justice based on good and evil, (in a Peckham murder case in 2005, Robert Malasi was described by Mr Justice Gross at the Old Bailey yesterday as 'evil' (5)) in which people deserve to suffer for what they've done, it makes

violence enjoyable. And making violence enjoyable is a primary feature of domination culture.

To reinforce the concept of good and evil and making violence enjoyable we simply have to look at modern culture where in most mainstream movies the climax of the story is when the good person finds and punishes the bad person sometimes with death. We see this as totally acceptable. In the film Superman Returns, one of the “baddies” strikes a woman he is holding hostage. Later, her seven year old son kills him. This is treated as perfectly acceptable because he deserved it.

Marshall Rosenberg’s concept of making observation instead of evaluation is compelling as a first step in disengaging from domination culture structures and becoming truly nonviolent.

“The ability to keep observation and evaluation separate is the highest form of human intelligence” wrote Jiddu Krishnamurti (6). Making this realisation is the first step in reducing the harmful effects of badly managed conflict. Common types of evaluations include Judgments, Analysis, Interpretations, Labels and Projections.

We all tend to habitually and automatically evaluate and interpret whatever we observe. This probably had survival benefits in the jungle by helping us predict what might be running after us on the trail. But in non-threatening situations this "skill" of evaluating, interpreting and imagining often doesn't serve us at all - instead it adds unfortunate and potentially damaging meanings to what we observe . We often add information that is not actually there, usually by reaching into our past for similar situations, and then we imagine that someone is saying something or meaning something that they are not. This is also the process that causes worry - our uncontrollable imagining that undesirable things will occur. These imaginings and projections are one of the main causes of conflicts. In the ‘Society of Mind’ theory, Minsky sees the mind as an immense collection of 'agents' that perform a wide range of functions, such as expecting, predicting,

repairing, remembering, revising, debugging, acting, comparing, generalizing, exemplifying, analogizing, simplifying, and many other cognitive tasks. This works well for learning how to make a wheel or for designing a new computer. This has potentially disastrous results when we think like this in relation to people.

Most humans are not conscious of this process within themselves. When we see or hear something, instead of just noticing it for what it is, we often react - we worry about the implications of it by creating dire scenarios in our mind and then getting upset with them; we project out what we think the other person is "really" doing or meaning and then we get angry about what we think; we go into our past to look for similar bad situations and, deciding that "we've seen this before", we then judge what we are observing as bad. There are endless ways we use our mind to add more than what is really there - and then get upset about it. We hold on dearly to what we imagine too, as though this creation of our mind is absolutely true, and we rarely verify it before we pronounce our judgment. We are very skilled at finding ways to get upset and many of these ways are based on morality.

Marc D. Hauser, a Harvard University psychologist, wants to do for morality what Massachusetts Institute of Technology linguist Noam Chomsky did for language—he sets out to discover the universal "moral grammar." Chomsky suggested that humans are born with a "universal grammar," a cognitive capacity that helps us acquire language and shapes the way we apply language rules. Hauser thinks our moral grammar works the same way, helping us isolate moral lessons from our culture and make judgments about right and wrong. (7)

But the sub-title 'How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong' has an implied assumption in it, i.e., that nature has designed a universal sense of right and wrong. It may be possible or likely but it is definitely not a fact.

Chomsky is working with a given, that language is universal and we know what people talking sounds like, even when we do not understand what they are talking about. We even know that animals communicate via audible channels. We know nothing like this about 'the moral sense'.

The first skill in Nonviolent Communication is to develop a more advanced awareness of what we are observing and how we are adding our own extra content: our imaginings, worries, projections and interpretation, analysis or labeling. We bring this process into consciousness so that we can check to see if our thoughts about what we are observing are what is actually happening

The simplest way to experience this is to imagine that you are a video camera. If there was an argument going on between two people, a video camera would report exactly what they said, how they said it and with what facial expressions and body language. But it would not interpret it and say, "These two people are fighting, and they are fighting because one of them is an idiot and the other is acting like a victim." Only humans would add that extra content, and interpret it that way - and then start an argument about whether it is true or not.

Being a video camera in words I might say "These two people are exchanging words in tones louder than they usually use. They are interrupting each other. One has a clenched fist and the other is shifting from foot to foot. One has used words we label as swearing".

Making clear non-judgmental observations helps;

- identify what we are reacting to and what triggered our feelings

- establish some common ground by having something we can all be aware of

- leave room for discussion if we have different memories of the situation

- sift out interpretations from what actually happened

- assist the healing power of truth by acknowledging, without blame, who did what

- keep the spoken communication clear and concise by having reflected on things before speaking.

Narrative mediation views this differently (8). In narrative mediation the stories that people tell in order to shape their worlds are important. By telling stories of events and by giving meaning to these events people construct their own reality. A different story leads to a different reality. In this way people also give meaning to their social relations.

A basic assumption is that for every dominant conflict story there is an alternative story of trust and cooperation available and possible. Space needs to be opened up to develop these alternative stories and the mediator's task is help people explore this space and find the building stones of a story of trust and cooperation.

The roots of narrative mediation can be found in social constructionism, a philosophical movement founded on the premise that, by reflecting on our experiences, we construct our own understanding of the world we live in. Each of us generates our own "rules" and "mental models," which we use to make sense of our experiences.

This model, while useful for recognising that we carry stories, does not sit well in terms of making a move out of domination culture thinking into nonviolence. In generating our own "rules" and "mental models" we are not removing the shackles of domination culture conditioning into a newer awareness of abundance and contribution.

In Marshall's model we are open to hearing how everyone feels about the incident we have observed and we see this incident as the stimulus or trigger for feelings we hold.

Now we see how what we tell ourselves about feelings are often not our real feelings at all. There is a big difference between someone saying "I feel rejected" and "I feel sad".

When I say "I feel rejected," I am really making two statements, one is a statement that I have an undesirable or uncomfortable feeling, and the other is an

accusation that someone else did something bad to me, in this case I am saying that they also rejected me. It's the same as saying "I feel miserable because you rejected me." The other person's truth may really be that they were worried about and concentrating on other tasks in their life.

The difference between "I feel rejected" and "I feel sad" is that the first one contains an interpretation which another might not agree with.

But now the phrase "I feel sad" says something that no one can disagree with, because it's all about my inner experience, how I feel inside.

This is often the first source of conflicts and upsets - a disagreement about the interpretation of the facts.

Here's another example. If I say to another "I feel betrayed," they would probably feel like I just hit them with a brick. Even if they want to understand and empathise with my pain, they will have a hard time doing it because it sounds like an attack. To say "I feel betrayed" is the same as saying "I feel terrible because you betrayed me." It's true that I have a terrible feeling inside, but the other could easily disagree with how I've interpreted it.

This is another example of Observations vs. Interpretations. We need to take a closer look at how we really feel and then notice how we are attaching an interpretation to it. To talk about how we are feeling using real feeling words is to come alive because being able to feel is the difference between being alive and dead. Allowing ourselves the entire spectrum of feelings instead of reducing all negative feelings to anger is to give ourselves a real opportunity for healing.

We often say we are "speaking our truth" when we directly and bluntly tell someone the way we feel and the way we see things - especially when we have strong feelings. Doing that can be an important step in our growth, especially for those of us who have been too polite and have hidden what we think and feel. Brad Blanton in his book "Radical Honesty" describes very well how we get into fear, shame and politeness traps, and how to break out of them (9). Breaking

out means taking responsibility for how we are interpreting the world and the lens through which we choose to see things. Blanton notes "Responsibility means that whatever you are doing, you are willing to experience yourself as the cause. You are the source of your troubles as well as your successes." "As long as you are blaming, explaining, apologizing, trying, resolving to be good, hoping or feeling guilty, you are not being responsible."

Freely letting out our initial thoughts and feelings is not taking responsibility. Usually these first expressions are just our reactions, not the real honest truth about what is going on inside of us. These first reactions usually contain our judgments and projections and are mostly talking about the other person. They don't contain much insight into what the real disturbance inside of us is about. Paul Lowe talks about this when he says:

"The only way to go beyond the restrictions of how we have lived as human beings is to be responsible for ourselves, at every level. That includes the willingness to go to the source of our disturbance instead of blaming someone else. In fact, it might just be the opposite - when we are disturbed, instead of blaming others, we would thank them for helping us to find that place in ourselves that was not in balance." (10)

If we speak the full and honest truth about what has just happened within ourselves we are often amazed at how interested the other person is - rather than the usual defensiveness which comes when we try to talk about them or how they affected us.

Marshall's work was heavily influenced by Carl Rogers (11)

Rogers said: 'suppose I say with some feeling, "I think the Republicans are behaving in ways that show a lot of good sound sense these days," what is the response that arises in your mind as you listen? The overwhelming likelihood is that it will be evaluative. You will find yourself agreeing, or disagreeing, or making some judgment about me such as "He must be a conservative," or "He seems solid in his thinking." Or let us take an illustration from the international scene.

Russia says vehemently, "The treaty with Japan is a war plot on the part of the United States." As a reaction, we rise as one person to say "That's a lie!" ‘

This last illustration brings in another element connected with Roger's hypothesis. Although the tendency to make evaluations is common in almost all interchange of language, it is very much heightened in those situations where feelings and emotions are deeply involved. So the stronger our feelings, the more likely it is that there will be no mutual element in the communication. There will be just two ideas, two feelings and two judgments missing each other in psychological space.

When we listen to a heated discussion that we have not been emotionally involved in, we can often see that the parties were not even talking about the same thing. Each was making a judgment, an evaluation, from his own frame of reference. There was really nothing which could be called communication in any genuine sense. The stronger our feelings, the more likely it is that there will be no mutual element in the communication. There will be just two ideas, two feelings, two judgments, missing each other

This tendency to react to any emotionally meaningful statement by forming an evaluation of it from our own point of view is the major barrier to interpersonal communication.

But is there any way of solving this problem, of avoiding this barrier? Real communication occurs, and this evaluative tendency is avoided, when we listen with understanding.

What does this mean? It means to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about.

Many of us believe that we can and do listen but we still get into trouble with our communication. The chances are very great indeed that our listening has not cleansed itself of evaluation. Rogers suggests an experiment: ‘ The next time you get into an argument with your wife, or your friend, or with a small group of

friends, just stop the discussion for a moment and for an experiment, institute this rule: Each person can speak up for himself only after he has first restated the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately, and to that speaker's satisfaction.'

To do this would mean that before presenting your own point of view, it would be necessary for you to really achieve the other speaker's frame of reference - to understand his thoughts and feelings so well that you could summarize them for him. Sounds simple but if you try it you will discover it is one of the most difficult things you have ever tried to do.

However, once you have been able to see the other's point of view, your own comments will have to be drastically revised. You will also find the emotion going out of the discussion, the differences being reduced, and those differences which remain being of a rational and understandable sort.

Says Rogers, 'Can you imagine what this kind of an approach would mean if it were projected into larger areas? What would happen to a labor-management dispute if it was conducted in such a way that labor, *without necessarily agreeing*, could accurately state management's point of view in a way that management could accept; and management, *without approving labor's stand*, could state labor's case in a way that labor agreed was accurate? It would mean that real communication was established, and one could practically guarantee that some reasonable solution would be reached.'

So what stops us from using this simple but effective approach?

To listen in this fashion is to take a very real risk for which courage is required. If you really understand another person in this way, if you are willing to enter his private world and see the way life appears to him, without any attempt to make evaluative judgments, you run the risk of being changed yourself. You might see it his way, you might find yourself influenced in your attitudes or your personality.

This risk of being changed is one of the most frightening prospects most of us can face. If we had the opportunity to listen to Saddam Hussein, how many of us would dare to try to see the world from his point of view? The great majority of us could not listen; we would find ourselves compelled to evaluate, because listening would seem too dangerous.

The systemic polarity model backs up Rogers experiment by suggesting that every statement could be viewed as a position and that we choose positions based on relationships to other peoples positions. In this model a connection between disagreeing parties could be made by getting the parties interested in how one position influences the other. Dialogical conversations build further on this by creating the conditions in which disagreeing parties might be interested in another's position.

There is another obstacle. It is just when emotions are strongest that it is most difficult to achieve the frame of reference of the other person or group. Yet this is the time the attitude is most needed, if communication is to be established. A third party, who is able to set aside his own feelings and evaluations, can assist greatly by listening with understanding to each person or group and clarifying the views and attitudes each holds.

When the parties to a dispute realise that they are being understood; that someone sees how the situation seems to them, the statements grow less exaggerated and less defensive, and it is no longer necessary to maintain the attitude, "I am 100 per cent right and you are 100 per cent wrong." The influence of such an understanding catalyst in the group permits the members to come closer and closer to the objective truth involved in the relationship. In this way mutual communication is established and some type of agreement becomes much more possible.

In *Mediating Dangerously*, Kenneth Cloke describes conflict as a spiritual path. 'At a deep level, the issue of every dispute is ourselves, and our relationship not only with our adversaries but with life itself. Every conflict provides us with

unique opportunities to deepen our spiritual energy and our connection with life.’
(12)

Marshall Rosenberg has provided us with the ‘How to’ in his brilliant but simple tool for connecting with life. His work reaches far beyond systemic approaches by working on a heart level. Practicing NVC takes conflict out of the head and moves it into the heart. New research shows that the heart responds to messages sent to it from the emotional brain (13).

It is my belief that to really change the way we handle conflict we need a new type of education that begins with the removal of attachment to domination culture structures. Without recognition of an individual internal shift into nonviolence, conflict resolution in modern western culture is simply fire fighting and covering up. This essay has set out to demonstrate that Marshall Rosenberg has provided a practical tool for making such a shift.

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