CHAPTER 8

SELF-AWARENESS AND
EXPLORATORY SELF-QUESTIONING (DIMENSION 5)

8.1. Communication training makes self-awareness demands

In the last chapter I explored the way that adverbs can imply and encourage a beginning sort of self-observation. Using adverbs appears to be one of the ways that we articulate the desired directions in which we would like to steer our behavior. In this chapter I am going to explore more explicit means of focusing on the qualities of one's action and interaction.

To assist a person in talking or listening differently is to engage that person in an intense process of self-observation. (A process for which all persons are not equally prepared.) That is, in order to improve one's performance of any activity, one must make the effort to observe oneself performing that activity, to conceive of a direction of development and to measure the gap between current performance and desired performance.[177] When practicing basketball it is easy to see that one's shots are consistently going to the left side of the hoop, because the ball is an external object and one's visual perception of the ball in flight is largely unmediated by language. But we are in the middle of our communication, and our perception of complex social situations and

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[177]Failure to reach one's goal plays a crucial role in learning. For a discussion of this point, see Roger C. Schank and John B. Cleave, "Natural Learning, Natural Teaching: Changing Human Memory," in *The Mind, the Brain, and Complex Adaptive Systems*, eds. Harold J. Morowitz and Jerome L. Singer, Santa Fe Institute Studies in the Science of Complexity, Vol. XXII (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 179.

our behavior in those situations <u>is</u> mediated by our descriptive vocabularies and cultural thought tools. Thus, observing one's own communication style is a more challenging task than observing one's sports performance. My experience has been that observing one's own communication style is a task in which we will be helped or hindered by the richness or poverty of the descriptive vocabularies and thought tools that are available to us. Thus, each dimension in the Six Dimensions/Five Transformations model presents the student with a distinct vocabulary of observation in relation to both self and others, a vocabulary for describing what is going on inside of me and what is going on inside of you, and for conceiving of how our two streams of activity fit together. Dimension 5 is special because its goal is to help people become aware of their own self-awareness activities and to incorporate new ones into their mental toolkit. (The kind of reflexive awareness I am encouraging my students to develop is the focus of a newly emerging field of cognitive psychology called "metacognition."[178])

8.2. A menu of self-awareness activities.

The examples of self-attention that I include in Dimension 5 are shown below in approximate order of ascending difficulty. Among the various examples given in the list below I will be concentrating in this study on exploratory self-questioning. That is because exploratory self-questioning fits well with the cognitive emphasis of the Six Dimensions model and because it is more directly applicable to teaching communication skills than the other entries. But in practice I advocate all of them and I recognize that different people will be temperamentally inclined to some rather than others. Many more examples of self-awareness activities could be added to the list (which is meant to be open-ended, as is each of the six dimensions proposed by this study).

1. **Unstructured self-listening** can happen when people choose a quiet activity such as walking, sitting on the porch, fishing, canoeing, or just loafing around without too much outside stimulation.

2. **Conscious self-observation** involves making a special effort to focus one's attention

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[178]Janet Metcalfe and Arthur P. Shimamura, eds., *Metacognition: Knowing about Knowing* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

on the present situation both as a participant and as an observer.[179]

3. **Structured inner dialogue** as exemplified by Gestalt therapy,[180] in which a person actively gives voice to each of several conflicting feelings, persons in conflict and/or aspects of the self in conflict.

4. **Role playing exercises** are used in a wide variety of training settings. Taking the role of the other can allow people to discover and observe new aspects of themselves.

5. **Listening to and through the body** can be done through yoga, tai chi, or giving or receiving massages, and by some forms of dancing. Since mental chatter can keep both our joys and our sorrows out of awareness, calming down by focusing on the body can allow a person to feel more present in their experience.

6. **Journal writing** can involve a person in an extended reflection upon their own life. By externalizing one's life experience in writing one can literally "look" at the stream of life experience that we are ordinarily inside of and therefore often cannot bring into focus.

7. **Self-expression in art and music** involve a similar kind of externalizing of experience that I noted in relation to journal writing. All of these forms of symbolic expression are deeply significant in the light of Carl Rogers' idea, discussed in previous chapters, that our experience becomes conscious primarily through symbolic expression.

8. **Meditation** often involves a systematic observation of one's own thoughts and desires in which the person adopts the role of the detached and compassionate observer of whatever is going on in one's mind.

9. **Friendship, psychotherapy and pastoral counseling** involve focusing on our life experience with the help of someone who is (hopefully) a careful and encouraging listener, and who is skillful at putting experience into words.

10.   **Exploratory self-questioning** involves learning to ask oneself particularly fruitful questions in the course of interacting with people and trying to solve problems. Questions are learning tools that allow us to focus our attention on a particular topic. Exploratory self-questioning can allow us to focus our attention on <u>our own performance or participation</u> in situations large and small.

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[179]Ellen J. Langer, *Mindfulness* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1989).
[180]Erving and Miriam Polster, *Gestalt Therapy Integrated* (New York: Vantage Books, 1974), 247.

8.3. Exploratory self-questioning as a way of focusing one's attention

Learning to ask fruitful questions of others, of oneself and about one's situation or task at hand is an important part of the professional training of psychotherapists,[181] engineers, architects,[182] and mathematicians,[183] among others. (It is also part of the communal life of the Quakers, as I have observed in attending various Quaker meetings, and part of Jesuit religious practice, as a Jesuit friend shared with me.)

I believe that cultivating fruitful questions is a cultural pattern we can all benefit by adopting. In the case of the professions, it is important because professional practice is more that simply applying technical knowledge. One must enter into and understand a situation well enough to make good judgments about which technical knowledge applies and what elements in the situation are unique and require a uniquely creative response. Asking fruitful questions is a major part of that process of entering into and understanding. And as I see it, the same is true of all of us in everyday life. We cannot navigate through life by simply applying already known rules. There is always the question of "Is *this* a situation to which *that* rule applies?" And there are always new situations for which there is no rule at all. We have to both bring our previous knowledge to each encounter and also open ourselves to learn about the unique elements of each new situation. Of course, this would be bad advice to give someone who was about to join the army. In arguing for a rich set of exploratory questions, I am arguing in favor of people negotiating and making up their own minds rather than following orders. (Within reason, though, since I myself obey traffic signals, and my life depends on other people doing the same.)

The many examples of exploratory questions given by Donald Schön in *The*

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[181]This is especially true in narrative therapy. For dozens of inspiring examples see Jill Freedman and Gene Combs, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities* (New York: Norton, 1996) chap. 5.

[182]Donald A. Schön describes this as a process of inquiry and reflection-in-action in *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

[183]For a list of questions that constitute a method of solving mathematical problems, see George Polya, *How to Solve It: A New Aspect of Mathematical Method* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), xvi.

Reflective Practitioner[184] suggest that we use questions to make a kind of 'space' in our minds for things we do not know yet (in the sense of <u>understand</u>), or have not <u>decided</u> yet, or have not <u>invented</u> yet, or have not <u>discovered</u> yet. "Hmmm," an architect might think, "how could we arrange this building so that it follows the contour of the land?" The answer will involve a complex mix discovery, invention, understanding and decision. In general, one cannot think about some topic about which one knows nothing. But that is just what questions allow us to begin doing.

Because they focus attention, provide a theme and give energy by creating a psychological momentum toward resolution, exploratory questions can be powerful thought tools. Thus, teaching people to ask such questions has social and political implications. I imagine that persons encouraged to question would be more likely to question the status quo in their society, and might be more creative in working with others in cooperative problem solving situations. One aspect of a culture is its tacit list of "questions you will be applauded for asking" and its tacit list of "questions you will be ostracized for asking." In contemporary America, "How am I going to find a job?" is a question everyone is encouraged to ask, but "What are we going to do about the long-term unemployed?" is a question that very few American politicians are willing say out loud. Questions suggest that <u>there could be answers</u>, and thus they contain elements of advocacy, hope and even of self-fulfilling prophecy. Questions can give symbolic form and focus to our <u>intention to learn</u> and our intention to solve a particular problem.

As I noted in my introduction to chapter 6, we are drawn to study interpersonal communication partly as a result of communication breakdowns. Hopefully, these problems evoke in us the exploratory question "How could we do this better?" rather than such profoundly unproductive question as "Why are you so unreasonable... uncooperative... stuck in your own way of doing things?" etc.

When I teach a class in communication skills I am implicitly or explicitly seeking to get participants engaged with the question "How could we do this better?" I hope to stir up in my students a combination of curiosity and hope that will motivate them to work through the embarrassment that can arises when one discovers that one is not

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[184]Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York:

coping with some part of life as skillfully or creatively as one would like. And the various dimensions of the Six Dimensions model presented so far all imply that the reader or student has been inspired by some similar mixture of curiosity and hope focused on one's own learning. So this chapter makes explicit what has been implied all along. By presenting a long list of provocative questions I hope to <u>both</u> provide new depth of content for my student's self-questioning and also help them to become conscious of the questioning process itself (the same <u>learning at two levels</u> I mentioned in my chapter on adverbs). This chapter represents my exploration of the meta-question "What group of questions would be fruitful to ask in looking at one's own life activities?"

8.4. A preliminary list of exploratory questions

No one list of self-awareness questions could possibly meet the needs of every person in every situation, so the following questions are offered as examples that might be adapted by the reader rather than as a fixed list of recommendations. Next to each question in the table below I have given the field in which I have encountered that question. There are an infinite possible number of such questions. Choosing the most fruitful one to ask oneself in a given situation will always be an art. But the situation is not hopeless. People learn various arts every day, from cooking to painting, by seeing how skilled people do them. Table 8.1, below, is a list of questions from a selection of highly skilled question-askers.

[Postscript 2002: Since 1997 when the following material on exploratory questions was developed, it has become part of Chapter Five of *The Seven Challenges: A Workbook and Reader About Communicating More Cooperatively*. The *Workbook* is available by contribution or of charge on the Internet at www.coopcomm.org/workbook]

Basic Books, 1983).

Table 8.1. -- A preliminary list of exploratory questions.

Question	Source fields
How does this feel to me? What am I experiencing right now?	Gestalt therapy.
How could I have done that differently? What can I learn from this?	General psychotherapy.
What kind of explanations do I give myself when bad events happen? How could I view this difficult situation in a different light?	Martin Seligman's research on learned helplessness and explanatory style.[185]
What is the most important thing that I want in this situation? What solution might bring everyone more of what they want? What is my best alternative to a negotiated agreement? What kind of self-fulfilling prophecy to I want to set in motion in this situation?	Conflict resolution, negotiation, management, especially *Getting to Yes*.[186]
What possibilities would be suggested if I were to look at this situation as if it were an airplane... a car... a circus... a movie... a Broadway musical..., etc.? What does this situation remind me of?	Creative problem-solving in the arts, architecture, engineering and management.[187]

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[185]Martin E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism* (New York: Knopf, 1991).
[186]Fisher, Ury and Patton, *Getting to Yes.*
[187]Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner.*

Table 8.1. -- A preliminary list of exploratory questions (continued).

Question	Source fields
If I am successful in carrying out my intended course of action, what kind of person will I become?[188]	Social constructionism. In the social constructionist view of being a person, a sense of self is the overarching story that persons tell to make sense out of their actions and the events of their lives. Each of our actions supports the development of some stories and inhibits the development of others.
How many times can I remember when we all got along together just fine, when we didn't have this problem? How did that work and what did that feel like? (focusing on success) Looking back on this accomplishment, what seem to be the turning points that made this possible? What were all the details of that moment of success? Reviewing all these moments of success up to now, what kind of future could be possible?	Narrative therapy.[189] (These are typical questions from narrative therapy that I have translated into a first person inquiry.) The central concern of narrative therapy is that the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of our lives and our life difficulties always leave out the kinds of events in our lives that might support a more energizing story. Narrative therapy in intended to bring these "sparkling moments" into the foreground of attention, and to use them as a basis for creating a story that emphasizes strength and resourcefulness rather than illness, dysfunction and disability.

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[188]Suggested by Barnett Pearce in a personal conversation and expressing the point of view explained in Pearce, *Communication and the Human Condition*.

[189]Freedman and Combs, *Narrative Therapy*.

Table 8.1. -- A preliminary list of exploratory questions (concluded).

Question	Source fields
------------------------------DIMENSION 1: EXPERIENCING------------------------------ What am I experiencing right now? How could I expand my awareness of and vocabulary of experience? --------------------------DIMENSION 2: INTENTIONS AND GOALS------------------------ What kind of conversation do I want to have? What kinds of conversations are possible to have? What are my long range goals and what are the tensions between them? In what kinds of directions would I like to develop as a person? ----------------------DIMENSION 3: ACTION AND INTERACTION-------------------------- What actions are possible for me in conversation and interaction? What new actions might be possible for me? ------------------------DIMENSION 4: QUALITIES OF INTERACTION----------------------- What styles of interacting do I rely on in order to coordinate my life activities with the life activities of others? What qualities of action are possible in interpersonal communication and how can I steer the qualities of my interactions with others? ------------- DIMENSION 5: SELF-OBSERVATION AND SELF-QUESTIONING--------------- How could I improve the quality of the attention that I bring to my own life? What kind of creative question might help me see my current problem in a new light? -----------------------------DIMENSION 6: INNER RESOURCES------------------------------ What inner resources (stories, maps, skills) am I bringing to this situation, am I mobilizing to meet this challenge? What *alternative* inner resources *could* I bringing to this situation? In what ways do I need to revise my map of myself or of this situation? What new information and/or skills would help me handle this kind of challenge? Who are my heroes, saints, exemplars and permission-granting figures.	Psychotherapy, nonviolence training and the Six Dimensions model.

There are several underlying themes or qualities in these questions that I believe make them creative or generative.   And these qualities are related to the adverbs discussed in the last chapter.   First, the questions generally express a courageous openness to new experience and new understanding (they are all open ended).   Second, they are concerned with actions and process ("How could I do this differently?") rather than with classification or blame. (For example, the Broadway song lyric, "What kind of fool am I?", is a question directed toward the self, but a fruitless one.)   Third, they embody a creative stance in relation to one's life and one's problems, rather than a rule-following stance.   And finally, they encourage delving into the details of one's situation rather than abstracting or generalizing.

While the questions shown in Table 8.1 cannot begin to exhaust the possibilities of framing productive questions to be addressed to oneself, the questions shown do express some of the power of carefully framed questions to draw us into a deeper engagement with our own processes of living. My hope in teaching my students how to ask and adopt these kinds of questions is that the questions will help them focus their attention on their own communicating and relating styles, a difficult but rewarding and empowering task. Perhaps one weakness of many communication skill training programs (and one of my own) is that they try to give people "the answers" before people have gotten fully engaged with the questions. So the answers have little or nothing to connect with in the lives of the intended recipients. This is an open-ended challenge for me in the development of my training activities. Stated as a challenging question, it would be, "How can I get my students more engaged in the open-ended quest for better communication, regardless of what specific recommendations I may feel are worthwhile?"

In discovering that students in communication classes have a difficult time focusing their attention on their own style of interacting, (that is, they have difficulty adopting the participant-observer role) I stumbled onto a topic that other scholars have already studied at length. In the remainder of this chapter I will explore several views of the psychological significance of self-attention. Communication skill classes are, in fact, a microcosm of human development. The self-attention that makes it possible to learn new ways of talking and listening is, in fact, one of the central, if not *the* central, themes in the development of the self.

8.5. Self-observation and self-awareness in human development

Throughout this study I have made frequent references to Robert Kegan's view that an increasing capacity to observe oneself is the central theme of human development. According to Kegan, if all goes well in the course of development, by school age children are capable of observing their sensations; by the mid-teens young people are generally capable of focusing on their feelings; by the mid-twenties many people can think about their own thought processes; by the mid-forties many people can hold their social roles at arm's length and live through them but not in them. Many people stop at this point but some people continue this trajectory of development, becoming able to contemplate the ways that different cultures, including their own, bring many social roles together under different overarching visions. Of course, not everyone progresses through this curriculum of development at the same pace or with the same degree of mastery.

These stages are strongly linked to interpersonal development. What we can not recognize in ourselves, we will have a hard time empathizing with in another person. Kegan's vision appears to me to proceed from the personal to the interpersonal. An equally satisfying story could be told from the other direction: portraying personal development as a series of interiorizations of relationships. From this point of view, which is the "object relations" view, we learn to pay attention to ourselves because and in the way other people pay attention to us. This alternative view of the direction of causality in human development would not change Kegan's fundamental insights. But I think a more relational view might offer important suggestions concerning the unanswered question that he acknowledges about how to nurture human development and about how development gets stuck. To the degree that Kegan is right about the role of self-awareness in human development, to that degree teaching people to engage in exploratory self-questioning is a direct kind of developmental coaching.

8.6. Changing the questions in one's inner dialogue

From the point of view of the relational interiorization described above, we learn to ask questions of others because others asked lots of questions of us very early in our lives. Ordinarily the object of our questioning is some other person, object or state of affairs.   We gradually interiorize the questioning, instructing, affirming, scolding, ordering voice of the other and it becomes our inner voice of thought[190] that allows us to pay attention to ourselves and to engage in some degree of self-inquiry and self-direction.

While I would like to express my appreciation for the love and devotion of parents everywhere for their children, it still may be true that the questions we first interiorized from our parents are not the most enlightening or fruitful question for us to ask ourselves today. This applies especially to such logically impossible-to-answer questions as "How could you be so stupid?" or "How could you do this to me?" Because our self-awareness is meditated by our learned styles of inner inquiry, some of us may find ourselves locked in a cycle of fruitless self-accusation.

In relation to this problem, Dimension 5 offers two new possibilities. One is a list of potentially more rewarding questions to ask (and other suggestions for greater self-awareness). The second is an explicit naming of the self-awareness and self-questioning processes, which invites people to start paying attention to the way they pay attention to themselves. There is room here for all the adverbs that I discussed in the last chapter, especially "awarely" and "caringly." I believe that all the adverbial qualities proven to make for a healing, growth-promoting dialogue between therapist and client, teacher and student, parent and child, <u>also make for a healing dialogue within one's own mind</u>![191]

8.7. Learned optimism and the inner dialogue

In this section I am going to review the work of Martin Seligman on learned helplessness and learned optimism, and show how the theme of self-attention is central to

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[190]Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 172 and 222.

[191]A relational way of understanding Carl Rogers' statement that, "As persons are accepted and prized, they tend to develop a more caring attitude toward themselves." (Rogers, *A Way of Being*, 116.), would be that we remember and mentally repeat the nurturing conversations we have.

his approach.

Seligman became deeply interested in how people cope with helplessness after his father suffered a stroke and became an invalid. Seligman was puzzled by the fact that in the behavioral psychology of the 1950s and 1960s there was no category of learning that applied to "learning to give up," that is, learning that no effort on one's part will bring any positive result. In 1965, Seligman and his graduate student colleague, Steven Maier, conducted a series of experiments on dogs which contradicted the dominant view that helplessness could not be learned and demonstrated that dogs could be conditioned to adopt a helpless stance. If the dogs were given electric shocks and no action to turn off the shock was effective, the dogs would stop trying to escape from the shocks even when it was later possible to escape. They had learned to behave in a helpless manner.

Convinced that he was on the trail of something fundamental in behavior, Seligman turned his attention to people and the processes by which people become discouraged. Over several decades of work he developed his theories of learned helplessness and learned optimism. During this time the entire field of behavioral psychology underwent a paradigm shift that reintroduced cognition into explanations of human action. Stimulus-response models were replaced by stimulus-evaluation/interpretation-response models.[192] And Seligman's ideas developed in a similar direction.

What he found was that people who become discouraged and depressed in the face of adversity make three characteristically pessimistic interpretations of their situation. First, they are likely to conclude that the adversity will go on forever. Second, they are likely to conclude that the adversity will contaminate everything in their lives. And finally, they are likely to conclude that the bad events are totally their own fault. When taken to extreme lengths this process has been described as "catastrophizing," an immobilizing kind of exaggeration, but even moderate amounts of this kind of thinking can discourage a person from making creative efforts to change their situation.

Optimists, on the other hand, are likely to conclude that troubles will be limited in time, will be confined to one situation, and are probably a matter of random bad luck. Optimists succeed in life better than pessimists, according to Seligman's data, not

[192]For an example of the present cognitive emphasis in behavioral psychology, see Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman, *Stress, Appraisal and Coping* (New York, Springer, 1984).

because their picture of life is more accurate, but because their picture encourages them to make many efforts to reach their goals. In family life, school, health matters, work and politics (that is, just about everywhere) <u>explanatory style</u> has a drastic effect on people's resilience in the face of difficulty.

Seligman is careful to point out that there are times when pessimism is very appropriate, for example, when the cost of failure is quite high, as would be the case if someone were overly optimistic about their ability to drive a car after heaving drinking. But many people, young and old, at work and at school, are pessimistic in situations where they have little to lose and much to gain by making additional efforts. It is these people that Seligman hopes to help by teaching them how to observe and change their explanatory style. And he sees the pessimistic explanatory style as a major contributing cause of depression.

Seligman recommends "...listening in on your own internal dialogue and disputing your negative dialogue"[193] with contrary evidence and arguments. He presents the outline of a structured inner conversation that highlights the negative interpretations that need to be challenged. It seems to me that it is one of the weaknesses of an otherwise informative and inspiring book that he does not acknowledge that observing one's own thoughts may be a demanding activity for many people. Also, some cultures and some people have more of an accepted tradition of arguing than others. But even though these are significant reservations, what is important to me is that Seligman's program of self-change <u>starts with self-observation</u> and <u>includes a kind of inner dialogue</u>. Thus, the "learned optimism" program maps easily on to Dimension 4 (style of action) and Dimension 5 (self-observation) of the Six Dimensions model. The style of action that Seligman wants to help people change is <u>the style of an internal conversation characterized by sweeping negative generalizations</u>. (Seligman's work is a strong confirmation, from a completely different world of research, of Bandler and Grinder's recommendations reviewed in chapter 7.) The adverbial elements described in Dimension 4 (such as, "more specifically," "more creatively," etc.) apply equally well to both inner and outer conversations.

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[193]Seligman, *Learned Optimism*, 255.

Seligman's approach to changing one's explanatory style follows the "direct challenge" method of confronting one's unrealistic thoughts pioneered by the psychotherapist Albert Ellis.[194] But I think it would be a mistake to stop with only that one style of rather abrasive inner inquiry, because such a style may not be equally fruitful for all persons. One possible alternative for an inner dialogue is the creative self-questioning tradition in engineering and design that I am describing and advocating in this chapter. Translated into this perspective, one might confront and challenge unrealistic thoughts by asking oneself questions such as:

> What instances can I remember when I did better than this?
>
> What could I learn from this that would change what I do in future?
>
> How could I view myself in this difficult situation in a more possibility-affirming and self-affirming way?

No one style of inner dialogue will suit all persons. Because many arguments produce bad or mixed results, I believe that starting an argument with oneself will not necessarily be the best way for many people to steer their thinking away from self-defeating generalizations.

8.8. The emotional significance of the participant-observer role

At various points in this study I have commented on the fact that communication training involves encouraging and sometimes even demanding that people observe themselves in action. In my experience, this challenge to the student or workshop participant is often made without being named as such. In this chapter I have been naming that process in three ways. First, I have been trying to clarify my understanding of the varieties of self-observation. Second, I have assembled a toolkit of self-observation methods. And third. I have been trying to develop the rationale of an explicit conversation about self-observation. I would like to both challenge my students to observe themselves more skillfully, so that they can guide their action in fruitful directions, and also support them in that effort by inviting them into a conscious dialogue

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[194]Seligman, *Learned Optimism*, 72.

about self-observation and the part it plays in one's development as a person.

Thus far in my discussion of exploratory self-questioning, I have argued that certain kinds of carefully framed questions can help to focus our attention on a learning task, help us look at a situation from revealing new angles, and provide us with a theme around which to organize our exploration of new skills and new styles. I am convinced that self-questioning is one of the ways that we challenge ourselves to learn, and one of the ways in which a person can adopt the participant-observer stance that facilitates learning.

In this section I am going to discuss the emotional significance of the participant-observer stance, relying on Thomas Scheff's *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual and Drama*.[195]

In this work, Scheff takes the literary criticism idea of *aesthetic distance* and applies it to the problem of emotional trauma.[196] In its original use, aesthetic distance was a metaphor to describe the observer's relationship to a work of art. If a play on the stage did not stir up any feelings in audience members, they (or the play itself) could be described as over-distanced. If, on the other hand, audience members leapt on to the stage to try to save a member of the cast from his or her fate in the drama, those audience members could be described as under-distanced. In order for a play to have its right effect, the audience members must maintain a delicate balance in which they are close enough to be emotionally caught up in the drama but also safe in their knowledge that they are "just watching a play." At that point of balance, described as the aesthetic distance, audience members are free to weep for the tragedy portrayed on the stage or screen, and in the process release their own pent up feelings sorrow and loss, (that is, to experience catharsis).

Scheff takes the idea that aesthetic distance facilitates catharsis and uses it to understand the dynamics of psychotherapy and the significance of rituals, especially rituals of grieving. A key element in Scheff's argument is that we have a biological need to release the tension associated with strong emotions. One cannot live without experiencing loss and frustration, yet many societies actively discourage people from

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[195]Thomas J. Scheff, *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual and Drama*, (Berkeley: University of Calif. Press, 1979).
[196]Ibid., 63.

expressing the emotions that are a normal response to various kinds of stress. This emotional repression becomes self-perpetuating, in that people who have had their own feelings repressed into unawareness will be very uncomfortable with the expression of feelings by others.[197] The long term consequences of such emotional repression can be "a defense against emotional commitment, a denial of feeling, and an impoverishment of the personality."[198] (Other studies published after Scheff's, such as those of Arno Gruen[199] and Alice Miller,[200] assert that the repression of feeling as a key part of the culture of cruelty.)

Many cultures use rituals to help their members work through the natural processes of grieving. The experiences of loss are stylized, and thus distanced, in these rituals. For example, in funerals music, special clothing and special words help people to distance themselves from the immediacy of their experience of loss, and create a safe context in which to experience their emotions. Similarly, in psychotherapy a person may revisit the traumas of their life, but the context of the therapy room and the relationship with the therapist create an alternative ground from which to <u>both</u> observe and to some degree re-experience one's own suffering. In examining how people cope with their feelings, Scheff introduces the distinction between emotional distress and emotional discharge. People can experience an intense amount of emotional distress without necessarily going through the physiological processes of crying, shaking, laughing, etc. needed for the tension to be discharged. What is required for discharge is, paradoxically, a slight distancing from the feeling process itself.

Scheff's response to the problem of emotional repression is to teach and advocate forms of therapy such as Re-evaluation Counseling that focus on creating a safe setting in which a person can discharge painful feelings. However, since Scheff wrote *Catharsis* in the 1970s, the cognitive emphasis in the world of psychotherapy has grown much larger and it is now clear that <u>the way people interpret events</u> is as important as the events

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[197]A similar point is made by Arno Gruen in *The Insanity of Normality* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992).

[198]Scheff, *Catharsis*, 121.

[199]Arno Gruen, *The Betrayal of the Self*, (New York: Grove Press, 1989).

[200]Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good*, Hildegard and Hunter Hannum, tr. (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux,1983), 58.

themselves in triggering emotions.[201] So Scheff's description of emotions as simple biological responses to stressful situations would now be viewed as probably applying to only a few situations. Also, Scheff's emphasis on early trauma seems to me to be unnecessary, given the developmentalist arguments, which I accept, that suffering and loss are continuous elements in life.[202]

But in my view, these aspects of Scheff's argument do not diminish the value of Scheff's ideas about appropriate emotional distance. Precisely because the experience of loss is an unavoidable part of being human, we need to understand more about how to let ourselves grieve in satisfying ways.[203] Scheff views the main emotional problem of Western countries as one of being over-distanced, of having withdrawn into a safe numbness in which we observe the events of our lives but we are no longer emotionally engaged. But this overview is balanced by his acknowledgment that most of us veer back and forth between too much emotional stimulation and too little. Perhaps because he is a sociologist, Scheff's discussion deals with the help people get from cultural institutions (such as drama, film and psychotherapy) to find the life-nurturing middle ground, and with the interference that people get in the form of repression. He does not deal with the process of finding this middle ground as a developmental task, a possible skill that people might or should commit themselves to learning.

The way people create an appropriate emotional distance varies considerably from person to person. In general, Scheff has found that, in relation to a burden of unexpressed painful feelings, focusing on the present is more distancing than focusing on the past, fiction or fantasy is more distancing than real events, rapid review is more distancing than detailed review, and focusing on positive emotions is more distancing than focusing on negative emotions. In relation to film and drama, "Any dramatic technique which reminds the audience that the action is not real increases the distance. The use of masks by characters in primitive dramas is an example."[204] Other techniques include stylized

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[201]Lazarus and Folkman's *Stress, Appraisal and Coping*, noted above, is an example of recent thinking about the way that cognitive processes shape our emotional responses.

[202]For an extended explanation of this view, see Judith Viorst, *Necessary Losses* (New York: Bantam, 1985).

[203]There are many current books on this topic. For example, see Therese A. Rando, *Grieving* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1988).

[204]Scheff, *Catharsis*, 138.

language, irony, comedy, asides to the audience, music, settings in the distant, fabled past or far future. With regard to contemporary culture, Scheff notes, "It is possible that a large segment of the mass media audience in the United States is currently fascinated with violence, horror and disaster drama because it represents an unconscious search for experiences that decrease distance so that catharsis can occur."[205]

Scheff does not mention philosophy, but it seems to me that withdrawing into a world of abstractions is clearly a way of trying to hold one's experience at an optimal distance, a distance that allows a person to both participate <u>and</u> observe. The same would hold true for professional vocabularies, a major form of stylized language. Medical vocabularies help doctors to stay emotionally calm while participating in the sort of life-and-death actions (for example, cutting open another person's body and removing an internal organ) that would cause most people to be incapacitated with emotion.

As a communication trainer, I am actively involved in coaching people to develop the appropriate aesthetic distance in relation to their problems and conflicts. The vocabularies of conflict resolution (for example, terms such as "BATNA," Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement) are just the sort of "stylized language" that allows people to both back away and stay engaged. Thus, I see skill at finding the appropriate aesthetic distance to be part of the demands of everyday life, not just a part of psychotherapy. For example, William Ury, a teacher of negotiation skills at Harvard, describes the first step of his negotiation method as mentally "going to the balcony,"[206] that is, adopting a perspective of sufficient distance to allow a person see the whole situation, thus avoiding rash moves. I believe that Scheff and Ury are talking about the same thing, a universally human, universally necessary and universally difficult process.

In terms of seeing participant observation as a universal process, I think the idea of aesthetic distance can be applied to <u>thinking</u> as well as to feeling. We are always trying to maintain an optimal distance from our object of inquiry: too close means lost in the details, too far back means too abstract or "schematic." The tools we use to achieve an <u>aesthetic distance of cognition</u> are metaphor, story, diagram and organizing image, but

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[205]Scheff, *Catharsis*, 146.

[206]William Ury, *Getting Past No: Negotiating Your Way From Confrontation to Cooperation* (New York: Bantam, 1991), 11.

there is no ideal solution.[207] It would be of great benefit to us if we could learn the art of finding the aesthetic distance, both of the feeling and the thinking varieties, but, in my view, in trying to learn this we are largely at the mercy of our local culture, which may or may not be able to help us.

In promoting the practice of exploratory self-questioning, I am trying to provide my students with a gentle method of both observing and entering more fully into their ongoing conversations with other people and their ongoing conversation with life. In entertaining these self-questions we create a mental conversation in which we shift back and forth between the role of questioning observer and the role of the responding participant. Coping with life requires that we find a creative middle ground of participant-observation, avoiding the pitfalls of numbness and withdrawal on one side and over-stimulation and disorientation on the other. We have to be close enough to our problems and challenges to be emotionally stirred up and motivated to solve them, but not so close that we feel overwhelmed. I hope that by introducing my students to the topic of self-observation, to various self-awareness practices and to the practice of exploratory self-questioning, I will give them some of the tools they need to find that life-supporting middle ground.

8.9. Conclusion: The significance of self-observation

The work of the scholars reviewed in this chapter suggest that learning to observe one's thoughts, feelings and actions is as important in life as eating or breathing, "a core competency" of a well-lived life, to use current language. People have actually known this truth for a long time. Socrates taught that the unexamined life is not worth living. And many religions (Buddhism, Hinduism and Catholicism come immediately to mind) emphasize self-observation and moral self-examination.

But those who have already known this truth have not necessarily known why it is true, or how someone outside of their tradition would approach it. Thus, I see the modern researchers I have reviewed, Kegan, Seligman and Scheff, as renewing and extending one

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[207]The dream of developing an ideal form of knowledge about life is the theme of Hermann Hesse's novel, *The Glass Bead Game*. In the story, the high priest of the game that includes all knowledge decides that the players have become too removed from the actual processes of living. He gives up the quest for perfect understanding and goes back to living an ordinary life.

of the great discoveries of human culture. This is important to me because as I coach people to observe their own experiencing and their communication styles, I am continually challenged to make this idea more accessible to others, to understand it better myself, and to find new and more engaging ways of expressing it.

Translated into my frame of reference, systems theory, the significance of self-awareness and self-observation is that we are always, to a greater or lesser degree, trying to steer our life activities toward success and fulfillment. We are always trying to get the basketball to go in the hoop, and our fingers to hit the right keys (or at least some enjoyable keys) on the piano keyboard of life. And in order to steer we have to observe. In regard to fulfilling interpersonal communication, we are always trying to coordinate our actions, experiences and feelings with those of other people, a complex task!

Another way of putting this would be to say that the better we can observe, the better we will be able to steer. Each step in the Six Dimensions/Five Transformations spiral story invites a person to engage in a new kind of self-observation, provides one possible vocabulary for doing so, and encourages people to begin actively steering their actions and interactions toward mutuality and "win-win" solutions.

Of all the actions we take in life, our story-making, life-interpreting, metaphor-invoking, classification-using, skill-mobilizing activities are the most worth observing and the most difficult to observe. The great achievement of cognitive psychology has been to demonstrate that without always realizing it we are continually shaping and steering not only our actions but also our experience of life. We do this by being selective about what we let into awareness, and by using a variety of thought tools to give structure to what we do let in. I have labeled these experience structuring activities and capacities as "inner resources" (although I am not entirely satisfied with using a noun to label a process). Because we live in and think through our experience shaping style, it is a great challenge to make it the focus of conscious attention. It shapes our way of attending to it! Much of psychotherapy is the process of helping people to observe their own experience-guiding activities, and encouraging them to take creative responsibility for guiding their experience toward fulfillment and away from self-defeating thought patterns and life styles.

The story-making, life-interpreting, metaphor-invoking, classification-using and skill-mobilizing activities I mentioned above, and which are the topic of the next chapter, provide the inner structure of our everyday conversations and our conflict resolution efforts. Ultimately, helping people communicate better involves helping them develop, change, renew or revise the inner resources they bring to each encounter. Communication training thus shares some of the goals of education, psychotherapy and religion, which, each in its own way, tries to help people develop new inner resources.
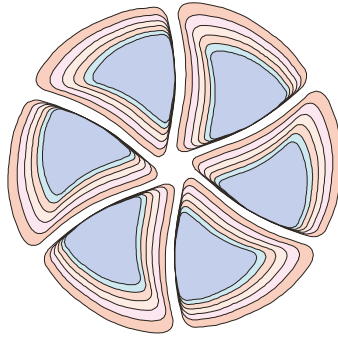
Ordinarily, we rely on our parents and our culture to give us whatever mental toolkit we need to get through life. Part of the postmodern condition is the realization that both parents and cultures sometimes have valuable traditions to pass on and sometimes do not. Sometimes both fail in catastrophic ways, as in Nazi Germany, child abuse or the Vietnam war. To some degree people have always been responsible for creating and steering their own lives, but the extent of this varies enormously between traditional and modern cultures. In the context in which I do my communication teaching, people have almost total responsibility for creating their lives, but not necessarily the skills or knowledge to do so.

The Six Dimensions model is my effort address the needs of my students by translating the best available research into a map of steps toward greater self-awareness and better communication. It was not my original intention to have this be a general map of human development. But I have discovered in the course of my work on this project that <u>interpersonal communication is, in fact, the moment-to-moment process of human development</u>. (For example, the "paying attention to one's experience," which is at the heart of many recommendations for better communication, is exactly the paying attention to one's own thoughts and feelings that Kegan[208] has identified as one of the central themes of human development.) So rather than trying to keep these two levels separate, I have tried to show the many links between them. I realize that this makes my approach to learning new communication skills more complex. My hope is that it also makes it more significant in the lives of my students.

Cognitive therapy and many popular self-help books appeal to people to look

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[208]Kegan, *The Evolving Self.*

directly at the scripts, myths and metaphors that shape their lives. I am not sure this is the best advice, because it may demand more self-observation skill than most people have, and thus set people up to fail. In arranging the sequence of topics in the Six Dimensions/Five Transformations model, I have introduced the idea of self observation before introducing the idea of inner resources. This reflects my experience of how difficult it is for people to observe their own story-making and metaphor-using, etc. My hope is that by encouraging my students to engage in a series of graduated self-awareness efforts involving experience, intentions, forms of action, styles of action, and kinds of self-observation, I will help them build the skill they need in order to contemplate, and then perhaps rewrite, the scripts that shape their conversations and guide their lives.

Imagining How Six Processes
Could Work Together
Drawing by Dennis Rivers