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Interpersonal Conflict Narrative

Power

Previously, I have discussed the role of participants’ goals in conflict situations. More specifically, I’ve discussed the goals of two participants: myself and a sighted man interested in helping me. In this version of what I call “the helping interaction” (a common experience of many disabled people), a man at a Greyhound terminal overtly offered unsolicited help as I attempted to make my way to the bus we both were riding. I’ve discussed each of our goals with a special emphasis on relational and identity goals: the man and I both experienced considerable face threat and conflict over the nature of our relationship as strangers (one blind and the other sighted). The conflict itself is quite important since it represents the differing goals and needs of each participant. However, power often lies at the center of conflict; my conflict with the sighted man is no exception. Taking a close look at the power dynamics present in our conflict not only offers a new paradigm through which to view the conflict itself, but ways in which we could have transformed our conflict into constructive problem-solving.

Power is the ability to influence the thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of others (Dunbar, 2004). Though there is some disagreement about the exact nature of power, scholars agree that power comes from the mutual trade of power currencies, or sources of power. Wilmot and Hocker (2007) suggest four currencies for trade: resource control, interpersonal linkages, communication currencies, and expertise. Resource control relates to economic and material resources such as authority delegated to a person by society, money, material goods, and personal/professional resources. Interpersonal linkages relate to interpersonal networks; it’s not what you know but who you know that matters. Interpersonal linkages increase one’s power base through association and collaboration with others. Communication currencies are skills that allow individuals to build rapport with others, resolve conflicts, and negotiate mutual goals. Expertise relates to knowledge held by an individual on any subject of interest. All of these currencies are equally important, and their successful trade depends on how much value an interactional partner has for a currency a person possesses.

As Dunbar (2004) notes, power is not always manifest or visible (P. 236). Sometimes, power and even the power currencies possessed by an individual or group are invisible. Invisible power is usually granted to dominant groups in society. In this case, the sighted man has invisible power currencies since the world caters to the sighted; not only are our social structures and institutions geared to a visual audience, but our conceptions related to ability also reflects ethnocentrism favoring sightedness. As a result, the man felt justified in his attempts to help me. Most outside observers to our conflict might agree since, like him, they may not be aware that blindness is more on the level of an inconvenience than a debilitating handicap. The man has the invisible power currencies of resource control (a world that caters to him) and interpersonal linkages (a society which believes that the sighted are inherently more able than the blind).

The privilege of holding invisible power is that such empowered persons are rarely aware of their power. The opposite is true for persons without invisible power: disempowered individuals and groups are quite sensitive to power differences, their causes, and their affects. The sighted man in the helping conflict certainly had no conscious awareness of his social power and thus was not able to understand why I felt vexed by his insistence on helping me. On the other hand, I was quite aware of our power differences and behaved in a manner typical of lower powered persons: I did not clearly communicate my identity and relational needs to him (Wolfe & McGinn, 2005). In their article discussing perceived relative power and negotiation, Wolfe and McGinn (2005) also explain that those who perceive greater power differences between themselves and their counterparts tend to have a harder time negotiating and solving problems. As a result, I attempted to reject the man’s offers of assistance with as little interpersonal contact as possible: I attempted to deflect him by simply telling him that I was fine. My deflections are also typical of lower powered persons; lower power persons rarely escalate conflict and air grievances for fear of retaliation from the higher powered person (Dunbar, 2004, P. 240). My continued rejection attempts not only hurt the man’s feelings, but also prompted him to unconsciously flex his power by “putting me in my place” and punishing my rudeness; this is one example of behaviors typical of higher powered persons to maintain their power (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007, P. 115).

In our conflict, the sighted man and I were trapped in the exercise of distributive power, or trying to win and causing the other to lose A better option would have been to balance our power through integrative means, or strategies rooted in equitable interdependence (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007, P. 95). Since power is often the central focus in conflict, shifting power dynamics and balancing power would have allowed us to move forward and discuss our needs while meeting the needs of the other. We would have then been able to move power from the central focus and begin to talk about ours and the other’s personal rights and interests (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007, P. 98-99). There are a number of strategies we could have used, but the most helpful strategies to this situation might have included recognizing our separate and joined power and our level of interdependence.

It’s important to understand that power is not a fixed thing before discussing how to balance it. Power shifts from one person to another in a communication situation. The power of one individual or group is also relative to the power of the other individual or group (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007, P. 104). Shifts in power rely on interdependence. Either individual in a relationship has power to the extent that their interactional partner depends on their resources and has limited or no options to meet their needs through other avenues; interactional partners who recognize their interdependence tend to negotiate and problem-solve more effectively than those who don’t (Wolfe & McGinn, 2005). For that reason, it’s also important for both partners to recognize and accurately assess their own and the other’s power and resources.

In the case of the helping interaction conflict, the first step is for both the man and me to recognize our separate power and resources. As noted earlier, the man has invisible power supported by society. Recognizing his invisible power would have allowed him to make better decisions about how to use it. For example, the man could have asked if I needed help rather than assume I did. In so doing, he would have empowered me to make choices about the nature of our interaction. Empowering lower powered persons by restraining and sharing power is one way to balance power (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007, P. 122).

Since the man offered unsolicited help, it’s reasonable to assume that he may not have been aware of how blind people travel. Safe travel was certainly one of my goals, and he may have felt that he was the only one who could have satisfied my goal. In reality, I had other alternatives (cane travel skills) and thus depended less on him than he thought. He may have assumed that since he had no alternatives than to travel with eyesight, I didn’t either. This possibility is supported by Wolfe and McGinn (2005) who observed that, in the absence of information regarding an interactional partner’s alternatives for goal satisfaction, negotiators or people in conflict are likely to assume similar alternatives. In this case, his assumptions regarding my alternatives were incorrect and played a large part in how we interacted together.

I had currencies valued by the sighted man. As a result, I had power. The man depended on me to feel good about himself as a helpful person. By reducing interpersonal contact to saying “I’m fine,” I withheld this particular communication currency from him. Dunbar (2004) would refer to this power as “latent” power because while exercised, it wasn’t overt (P. 236). A better option would have been for me to acknowledge his helpfulness. Acknowledging his need for self esteem would have disarmed him. I also might have then been able to share my expertise currencies regarding blindness and how blind people travel. He certainly would have been more willing to listen, and he might have felt less defensive if he understood why I rejected his help in the first place.

Recognizing our separate power and exercising it appropriately creates integrativeness or shared power. Integrativeness is more easily achieved when both parties in a conflict or negotiating situation feel that their relative power is equal (Wolfe & McGinn, 2005). Balanced power relationships also create individual and joint satisfaction (Dunbar, 2004, P. 240). When interactional partners actively share power, they become interested in helping the other get their needs met; sharing power becomes synergistic in its own right and power continues to build (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007, P. 120). In our conflict, both the sighted man and I would have felt better having walked away from a positive interaction with shared power than the interaction we had instead.

The dynamics of power are just one more element of the helping interaction and the conflict it created between the sighted man and me. As is true with other conflicts, power imbalances overshadowed our interaction and created significant difficulty in expressing our identity and relational needs. The goal of this paper has been to analyze the various power currencies we each possessed. The sharing or withdrawal of these power currencies did not happen in isolation; one person’s choices of how to exercise their power affected the other’s. Had we made better choices about how to exercise our power, we may have been able to shift our discussion to our needs and thereby resolve our conflict. In my next discussion, I will outline our conflict styles and how utilizing a wider variety of styles may have helped us to overcome our differences and work for mutual benefit.

References

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