Asking more than, «How did that make you feel?»: The Insight approach to feeling and valuing in conflict

Preguntar algo más que, «¿cómo te ha hecho sentir eso?»: Enfoque insight de los sentimientos y la valoración en un conflicto

Marnie Jull
Royal Roads University, Victoria, CANADA

Received: 03/11/2017
Accepted: 13/11/2017

Abstract: This article addresses how a practitioner can help to dissipate interpersonal conflict by recognizing and responding to feelings. Using conceptual resources from the Insight approach, the article proposes that reflexive inquiry into feelings as indicative of valuing can generate more expansive possibilities in transforming conflict. A case study of an intervention into workplace conflict explores how asking about feelings can elicit reflexive curiosity, rather than defensiveness, when a practitioner’s questions focus on discerning significance registered in a party’s felt response. The article’s autoethnographic method indicates practical strategies as well as theoretical supports to analyze and respond to interpersonal conflict.

Resumen: Este artículo trata cómo puede ayudar un profesional a disipar un conflicto interpersonal reconociendo y respondiendo a los sentimientos. Basándose en las fuentes conceptuales del enfoque insight, el artículo propone que la investigación reflexiva de los sentimientos como indicativo de la valoración puede generar mayores posibilidades para la transformación del conflicto. El caso práctico que se presenta de una intervención explora cómo preguntar por los sentimientos puede dar lugar a la curiosidad reflexiva cuando las preguntas del profesional se centran en discernir la importancia dada a la respuesta sentida por una de las partes. El método autoetnográfico del artículo presenta las estrategias prácticas así como los soportes teóricos para analizar y responder ante un conflicto interpersonal.

Keywords: Insight approach, feelings, values, interpersonal conflict, conflict resolution.

Palabras clave: Enfoque insight, sentimientos; valores, conflicto interpersonal, resolución de conflictos.

Marnie Jull, PhD
Associate Professor and Program Head of the Conflict Analysis and Management program at Royal Roads University in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Marnie writes, teaches and practices the Insight approach in the areas of conflict, leadership, creativity and change.
Contact: marnie.jull@royalroads.ca
In our professional and personal roles, conflict practitioners regularly encounter and respond to feelings – our own and other people’s. How we encounter and respond to them depends on what we understand to be true and significant about feelings in general, as well as the specific emotions we encounter. If a practitioner understands certain feelings to advance or impede a rational negotiation, then her response to the expression of emotion might be oriented to maximize or minimize that feeling for a negotiation’s successful outcome (Harinck & Van Kleef, 2012; Liu & Wang, 2010; Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004). Other practitioners, who understand emotions to be appraisals of personal or relational significance, might respond to an expressed feeling with elicitive questions to discover core concerns (Shapiro, 2002; Fisher & Shapiro, 2005) or to facilitate a reappraisal of the emotional experience elicited by the conflict (Jameson, Bodtker & Linker, 2010; Jones, 2005; Jones & Bodtker, 2001). Recognizing the variety of approaches to understanding and working with emotion, several conflict scholars have pointed to the need for more research on the theory and practice of responding to feelings, including: the role of emotion in theories of conflict transformation (Jameson, Bodtker, Porch, & Jordan, 2009); the interplay of emotions and cognition in conflict (Olephants & Druckman, 2014); and the intersections of value, emotion and conflict (Nair, 2008).

This article contributes to the research on emotion and conflict by using conceptual resources of the Insight approach to investigate the practice of responding to feelings to dissipate interpersonal conflict. I use the term ‘dissipate conflict’ purposefully because it expresses a diminished intensity or salience of a conflict that can enable new possibilities to emerge. Instead of framing conflict as a problem ‘out there’ to be resolved or transformed, I affirm the Insight approach’s recognition of conflict to be a complex, dynamic interactive process of emergence and change (Sargent et al., 2011). The Insight approach connects feeling, valuing, and decision-making in conflict to explain the emergence of conflict as a decision to defend generated from a party’s felt sense of significance (of threat). Through this framing of conflict, I ask the question: how can a practitioner help to dissipate interpersonal conflict by recognizing and responding to feelings as they relate to the process of decision-making? To respond to this question, I reflexively investigate a case study of a workplace conflict in which two distinct responses to feelings had different impacts. In one instance, paying explicit attention to feelings «made things worse» by generating threat that escalated the party’s conflict behavior. In another instance, attending to feelings «made things better» by generating insight through which new possibilities became available. Through the investigation of this case, I find that reflective inquiry into feelings as indicative of valuing can support the dissipation of interpersonal conflict.

**Conceptual Resources**

The Insight approach’s conception of valuing is a useful theoretical tool to support this exploration of how a practitioner can respond to feelings to facilitate the dissipation of interpersonal conflict. Valuing, as explained by the Insight approach, is the operation of consciousness that discerns significance (Price, 2013; Price, 2016). Valuing is what we do with our minds when we discern meaning, relevance, hopes, threats, or other indicators of impact or importance. Valuing orients us to what matters to ourselves and others. Feelings are connected to valuing because our felt responses – whether they are feelings of aversion, attraction or neutrality – indicate significance (Price, J. this journal). Sometimes our felt responses are registered pre-reflexively, in that we may not be able to articulate what the felt response indicates; other times our felt responses are clear discernible indicators of what matters, and why.

Valuing has an important role to play in decision-making, because any significance we discern is directly related to the options that we consider, evaluate and decide to do in response (Melchin & Picard, 2008; Picard, 2016; Price, 2013; Sargent et al., 2011). The Insight approach connects feeling, valuing, and decision-making in conflict to explain the emergence of conflict as a decision to defend generated from a discernment of threat registered through our felt responses (Melchin & Picard, 2008; Jull, 2016; Picard, 2016; Price, 2016; Price, 2013; Price, J. this journal).

Importantly, our knowing, valuing and deciding are carried by the roles we play within the complex patterns of interaction in which we are situated (Price, J. this journal). In our continuous enactment of our various social roles (parent, citizen, friend, pedestrian, customer), our consciousness is

---

1 In using the word ‘practitioner’, I highlight that the intended reader of this article is a person who engages with conflict in a variety of personal or professional contexts. The word ‘practitioner’ privileges the practice of engaging with conflict more than it identifies a specific role in which that practice can be enacted. While some of us engage with conflict as part of a professional role (as a mediator, negotiator, academic or conflict coach), most of us engage with conflict in the variety of roles that we play: as parent, colleague, employee, friend, spouse, citizen, student, and so on. Because the practice of engaging with conflict is not limited to a professional role, we are all practitioners to some extent. 2 In this paper, I use the term ‘feeling’ and ‘emotion’ interchangeably to denote affective dimensions of conscious experience.
carried by the vastly complex networks of meaning (narratives, rules, customs, concepts) that shape what is possible to know, value and decide (Jull, 2016). For example, the roles of supervisor and employee situate individuals in relation to each other, and the organization, in a way that carries their knowing, valuing and deciding. Their roles pattern what they pay attention to, what they understand, what matters to them, what they consider is possible, what they think should be done and ultimately what they do.

Paying attention to the knowing, valuing and deciding carried by and enacted in our social roles is important, because when we pay attention to what our minds are doing, we become reflexively self-aware. Reflective self-awareness, in the Insight approach, explicitly directs our attention to how we are using our minds –to our performance of our operations of consciousness (Price, 2013). In paying attention to our minds, we are afforded the opportunity to become curious about what we are doing with them, thereby offering a chance for a more expansive performance of our operations of consciousness that can alter the trajectory of conflict (Picard, C., this journal; Price, M., this journal).

In wondering about what our minds are doing, we can become more curious than incurious, more mindful than reactive, or more imaginative than limited. More specifically, non-confictual behaviors can become more possible when our consciousness is more animated by curiosity and less contracted by threat.

In sum, this study is grounded by several conceptual resources drawn from the Insight approach. Briefly, conflict behavior is understood to be the result of a decision to defend based on the discernment of threat registered through our valuing. Valuing is a cognitive operation that discerns significance through our felt responses; our valuing also shapes our deliberating, evaluating and deciding. In this way, our feeling and valuing are functionally related to our decision-making. Moreover, our individual knowing, valuing and deciding are carried by the complex social roles we enact. Finally, paying attention to what our minds are doing affords the opportunity to become more curious, thereby enabling new possibilities to emerge. Having identified some of key conceptual resources that inform this study, I return to the inquiry’s guiding question: how can a practitioner help to dissipate interpersonal conflict by recognizing and responding to feelings as they relate to the process of decision-making?

Method
To respond to this question, I explore an intervention in a workplace conflict using an autoethnographical stance of inquiry (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnography is a method, presented as a first-person narrative, in which the researcher’s attention is focused on her own subjectivity, acting in relation to the subjectivities of others (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). In the case that I present here, I explore the dissipation of a workplace conflict by investigating my own subjectivity in the role of a practitioner as I interact with an aggrieved party who has approached me for conflict coaching. This autoethnographic method, because it affords access to the interiority of subjective encounters, generates rich intra-personal and interpersonal data for analysis (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). As such, it is a useful tool for investigating a practitioner’s subjective interventions in interpersonal conflict and is well suited to exploring the application of concepts from the Insight approach (Jull, 2016). Although detractors of the method question the objectivity and transferability of the discoveries generated through autoethnography (Clough, 2000; Delamont, 2007), proponents of the method assert that recognizing the subjective partiality of authoethnographic knowledge claims does not detract from their quality or validity (Ellis et al., 2011; Marshall, 2004). Instead, the method’s capacity to illuminate the complexity and partiality of subjective processes contributes to its quality as an investigative tool (Ellingson, 2011).

As I note above, I am investigating more than my own subjectivity in this case. My inquiry is focused on the relation of my subjectivity –in my role as a «conflict coach»– to the subjectivity of a woman named Alia who was struggling with a workplace conflict. I therefore supplement my autoethnographical focus with «quality checks» adapted from Marshall’s (2004, 2011) work. These quality checks begin with a reflective commentary that situates the autoethnographic findings within a wider context of social meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). I follow the reflective commentary with an account of a «debriefing inquiry» that I conducted with Alia after I completed my analysis to confirm the «accuracy» of the account and to explore additional points of significance in it (Jull 2016).

The case study, then, is composed of three sections. First, the case is presented as a first-person dramatic narrative, or vignette, developed from my conflict coaching session with Alia. Second, I follow the vignette with a third-person reflexively analytical commentary that explores theoretical and practical implications of the vignette. Third, I conclude with an account of my «debriefing inquiry» with Alia through which I explore and refine my findings. In sum, these three parts –the autoethnographical vignette, reflexive commentary, and debriefing inquiry– are the methodological means through which I respond to the question of how a practitioner can help to dissipate interpersonal conflict by recognizing and responding to feelings as they relate to the process of decision-making.
Vignette

In the conversation that follows, I am talking with Alia as an informal conflict coach. She has recently had a difficult conversation with her immediate supervisor, Jacob, and their more senior director, Bettina. One week ago, Alia complained to Bettina about Jacob’s behavior, following which Bettina invited both Alia and Jacob to her office to discuss Alia’s concerns. Alia called me after the meeting. After she introduced the situation and we agreed to discuss it, I ask, «What was your concern with Jacob?»

«Well, my colleague Jan and I have been assigned to collate information on a corporate reporting project,» she responds. «Although corporate reporting was identified as an important priority in the division, Jacob regularly makes dismissive comments or even jokes about the project during staff meetings when I raise it as a topic. He’s making it very hard for me to get cooperation from other staff when I need them to provide data.»

I find my understanding of the situation is being carried by an evocative imaginary scene of a work meeting in which Jacob is joking, Alia is reacting, and their colleagues are on-lookers in various states of attentiveness. Sensing there is more that she has to say to explain the situation, I decide to remain silent, listening.

«And I talked to Jacob about this,» she continues. «He said that although he thinks I’m a good worker, the corporate reporting project is misguided from senior management. So he seems to feel entitled to continue to roll his eyes or make jokes about it. After another dismissive comment in a staff meeting last week, I complained to Bettina, our senior director, about Jacob. And so she set up a meeting with the three of us.»

I decide to follow her narrative sequencing of events and ask, «What happened then?»

«Well, Bettina ended up being a kind of informal mediator, although she’s only had some basics in conflict training that they give managers in our division. She started by asking me to describe the problem. I tried to tell her about Jacob making jokes when I mention corporate reporting, but Jacob interrupted me to say, ‘But it’s not about you. Everyone knows that project is a waste of time.’ So then Bettina looked at me and said in a nice but annoying sort of way, ‘How does it make you feel when Jacob makes comments like that?’» Alia takes a breath. Her tone is charged with emotion, but I am uncertain what it signals. I decide to make an open-ended prompt.

«And?» I say. I am aware of my attention moving quickly, wondering about Jacob’s interruption, Bettina’s question, curious what Alia might consider significant, and how she might have reacted to it.

«I was really uncomfortable with the question,» Alia continues. «So I said to her, ‘well, my feelings aren’t really the point here.’ So then Bettina said, ‘It’s just that you seem really angry.’ Which made me say, ‘Yes, I am angry, but we’re not here because I’m angry. We’re here because of Jacob’s behavior!’» Alia pauses after her recounting of that incident, her tone having risen to a much higher level of intensity. I find myself pausing with her.

«The whole conversation didn’t go well,» she sighs, more subdued. «I was in such an awkward position. Although I was angry, and still am, I don’t want to be seen as some irrational female next to the supposedly rational Jacob. I also really don’t want to be seen as an overly sensitive colleague who takes personal offence at something that wasn’t meant personally. So although I felt myself getting angrier, I found myself agreeing to Bettina’s suggestion that Jacob and I try to work more co-operatively with each other.» Her tone becomes increasingly charged as she says, «And so now I don’t know what to do – talk to the union about harassment or try to forget this whole conversation happened, I don’t know.» Her voice is infused with aversive intensity as she talks about her options. She pauses. I register a complex sense of her valuing and deliberating, her feelings and options, as well as some of the roles and narratives that carry them. At this point I am aware there is readiness, on both our parts, for us to engage more deeply. There is a surplus of data to consider, which seems fitting to acknowledge.

«That was a lot.» I say.

«It sure was,» she responds.

I begin to summarize my understanding of what happened: «So there’s Jacob’s behavior in staff meetings, and then your complaint to him and Bettina, which led to the meeting, and those interchanges, and...» She interrupts me.

«Jacob was such a... jerk!» She pauses. This is clearly the significance on which her attention is focused.

«And what was it about his behavior that was so... jerkish?» I ask. In doing so, I focus my attention on her valuing, inviting her to identify and explore the significance registered by the aversive feeling.

«He sat there saying almost nothing,» she fumes. I recognize that I have several options in responding to the strong feelings she is expressing. I deliberately avoid asking «How does it make you feel?» as Bettina had done. I do this because Alia’s frustrated tone, and intensity of expression, convey such an unmistakable aversion that it is not necessary for

---

3 Alia is an acquaintance, with whom I have connected for informal conflict coaching, both as a coach and as a coachee. She is not a client with whom I have a confidentiality agreement or professional obligation. Her name and other identifying information has been changed to protect her and others’ anonymity.
me to ask her directly how she is feeling. In recognizing her aversion, I wonder about it—is it outrage? Annoyance? Frustration? I decide to verify with her, using a tone that resonates with her affect on a more subdued register.

«His silence really annoyed you.»

«Yes!» she says, and adds, «It was infuriating!» Applying the concept that her feeling registers significance, I invite her to articulate her valuing by asking,

«What was so infuriating about his silence?» I recognize this to be a crucial question, as it invites Alia to make a connection between her emotion and the significance it expresses. She pauses, thinking hard, and then responds,

«Because I became more like an attacker, and he became the victim!» She is using a metaphor that could signify multiple threats or gaps: personal, practical and structural. I recognize these possibilities, and hypothesize (incorrectly, as it turns out) if her concerns were personal.

«So you worried you were looking bad in Bettina’s and Jacob’s eyes?» In asking this question about a threat to her sense of self, I invite her to become curious with me, to become reflexively self-aware of the significance of Jacob’s behavior.

«Not really, although that was part of the issue. But what really infuriated me was that he wasn’t being a respectful supervisor.» Just like in our staff meetings, he has no clue about his impact on others. So in that conversation with Bettina, he sat there, passively aggressive, until he could get out of that office. He could have stepped up and had a conversation, but he didn’t.» In articulating her concern to me, Alia expresses a gap between the desired enactment of Jacob’s role of supervisor, and his undesirable (to her) actual performance. She expresses her valuing much more clearly, and together we can reflect on that.

«So the annoyance you were feeling—in the office and during the meeting with Bettina—was about Jacob not acting like a respectful supervisor?»

«Exactly! It was not the issue of him hurting my feelings. It’s that when he rolls his eyes he is preventing me from doing my job. It undermines the value of my role, which means that people start withdrawing cooperation that makes it possible to work effectively in this place. He should be creating cooperation rather than blocking it by rolling his eyes when I talk about corporate reporting. That’s what made me so angry!»

I respond to her by verifying, «So your anger is about Jacob preventing you from doing your work, from being the kind of worker you want to be.»

«Yes, exactly!» says Alia, exhaling deeply. Her voice expresses a tone that I recognize as relief and connection. We pause to absorb the moment. She continues, in a much more even tone, «And if I could only get that across to him, and Bettina, it would be easier.» The quality of the conversation has radically shifted as Alia’s tone changes from a contracted intensity to a more expansive state.

«What do you want them to know?» I ask, orienting us to generative possibilities. There is a pause, as she reflects on my question. She is unsure of the response, and her curiosity is being activated.

«That I’d like him as a supervisor to contribute, rather than block, cooperation on a difficult corporate project. It wasn’t about my feelings being hurt.»

I paraphrase what she has said, so she can further reflect on it. I say, «It’s difficult enough for you to be working on the project, and you’d prefer him to generate collaboration—or at least not get in the way when you’re trying to get things done.»

«Yes, that’s it, and...»

Now that Alia has clearly discerned the significance of his behavior, and what she would like to be different, she becomes more expansively imaginative in her deliberating about what she could do to engage with Jacob, with Bettina, and her colleagues to further the cooperation needed to fulfill her role. Her anger has dissipated and her mind spontaneously deliberates more imaginative possibilities of how to more expansively work on the corporate reporting project. Our conversation turns to generating further options, evaluating their merits and determining a course of action. Both the options of the harassment complaint and complete avoidance have fallen away as she engages further in the conversation with me.

**Reflexive Commentary**

What happened in this conversation to shift Alia from a contracted state of limited defensive options (a harassment complaint or complete avoidance) to a more diverse and imaginative range of options? A succinct response would be that through my responses, our conversation focused on her valuing, particularly the significance she discerned in Jacob’s behavior. Because she was afforded the opportunity to recognize the significance of his behavior to her (registered through her feelings), she was able to understand more clearly what mattered to her: that Jacob was inhibiting workplace patterns of cooperation by devaluing the corporate reporting project.

---

4 See Price, J. (this journal) for a more elaborated discussion of personal, practical and structural gaps. 5 In my debriefing inquiry with Alia, I discover that I had misrepresented her in this passage. I had initially incorrectly recollected her concern to be that Jacob was not a responsible or caring supervisor. Alia corrected me, emphasizing that «caring» was not her concern about Jacob’s behavior. Instead, it was that his disrespect prevented her from doing her job of activating her colleagues’ contribution to the corporate reporting project.
project. In recognizing this significance, she moved from a contracted, reactive valuing of Jacob ‘being a jerk’ towards a more mindful discernment that the pattern of cooperation in her workplace was at stake (rather than a personal hurt or practical concern). In the process of more mindful valuing, she spontaneously generated more options to further the collaboration that mattered to her, options that she could subsequently evaluate and commit to do.

How did Alia’s performance range move from a more contracted reactivity to a more expansive state? In my conversation with her, I was able to notice and inquire about the feelings that signaled her valuing in such a way that she could articulate them. The process of making an explicit statement to me-about an implicit state in her-required her to engage in reflexive self-awareness. In other words, my responses to her feelings, tone of voice and choice of words directed her attention toward them and what significance they indicated. In this way, my responses carried her consciousness toward paying attention to what mattered to her, something that was felt, but had not been explicitly explored.

Alia’s annoyance indicated a threat, rooted in a gap between how Jacob was performing his role as supervisor and her sense of how he should be doing it. There was a gap between her affirmed notions of respectful supervisor behavior and her sense of his affronting enactment of supervision through joke-making. This gap manifested as a threat to her ability to perform her job well in a collaborative work setting. This then dynamized her decisions to (assertively) defend against her sense of Jacob’s inadequate supervision through her complaints to both him and Bettina. Although I had wondered if there might have been a personal threat (a diminishment of her sense of self in relation to her colleagues) or practical one (her financial security being in jeopardy), she clarified that her annoyance registered a violation of socially significant norms, an inhibition of how she could enact her role and complete her tasks.

In speaking with Alia, I noticed that she was very comfortable discussing her feelings—a sharp contrast from her response to Bettina’s question, «how does it make you feel when Jacob makes a comment like that?» Bettina’s question, asked in the context and tone that it was, had the effect of producing Alia’s defensive response that «my feelings aren’t the point!» Furthermore, it led Alia to consider escalating her defense by filing a formal complaint or retracting in avoidance.

Applying the discovery of the Insight approach that decisions to defend come from a discernment of threat, there are several possible threats that could have led Alia to refuse to discuss her feelings. First, Bettina’s direct question may have communicated to Alia that Bettina was not paying attention to the annoyance she was communicating through her tone, choice of words, and other somatic cues. Bettina’s perceived lack of attention may have indicated to Alia a gap between what a good listener should do and what Bettina was doing. Second, Alia may have discerned a threat in Bettina’s request to her, and not Jacob, about her feelings. In other words, Alia may have considered that Bettina’s question situated Alia in a narrative of being more (negatively, vulnerably) emotional in contrast to Jacob’s more neutral affect. Third, Bettina’s attention to Alia’s feelings could have been threatening in so far as it implied that Alia’s response to Jacob was personal (unprofessional, idiosyncratic) rather than oriented to his performance in the role of supervisor. Whatever the threat was, its effect was Alia’s defensive declaration that, «my feelings are not the point.» Alia did not want to talk about her feelings. She wanted to highlight that it was Jacob’s collaboration-diminishing behavior in his role as supervisor that concerned her. Paradoxically, Alia’s valuing—her felt response—was vital to the conflict, even as she declared her feelings to be irrelevant to the topic of discussion.

This paradox is at the core of the investigation at hand. In the office, Bettina’s direct question about Alia’s feelings had the effect on Alia of precipitating more reactive valuing, which led her to escalate her defensive response by declaring that her feelings were not the point. In contrast, my questions and responses to Alia about her feelings elicited a reflexive articulation of her deep concerns and more expansive consideration of further options.

In this analysis, it is clear that context—where we are, who we are with and why—is always a significant factor in how we value and what we decide to do. Context influences our roles and carries our consciousness. It influences our interpretations, our valuing and our responses. In my discussion with Alia, I was situated as conflict coach—a different role than Bettina in the room.

Alia, however, was not only responding differently to the engagement with her feelings because of our particular context. She was responding to different strategies for engaging with her feelings. Alia’s sense was that Bettina was inviting Alia to expose vulnerable feelings so Jacob could concede a hurtful impact. Alia rejected Bettina’s strategy. In contrast, I recognized Alia’s feelings as indicative of her valuing and asked about them so that she could explore and articulate the significance of Jacob’s behavior—something that had been previously obscure to her. My attention to her feelings

---

6 I verified these hypotheses with Alia in our debriefing inquiry, summarized below.
became a focus for Alia herself to discover new significance, rather than a means to elicit a concession from Jacob. She welcomed this strategy. These two approaches to engaging feelings in conflict demonstrate very different results.

In bringing the focus of our conversation to Alia’s feelings, as I mention above, I deliberately avoided asking her directly «how do you feel?» Instead, I responded to her valuing by recognizing its manifestation in her verbal statements. For example, I understood her description of Jacob as a ‘jerk’ as a moralizing statement—not a fact, but an expression of Alia’s aversive felt response towards Jacob (J. Price, this article). To discern the significance hidden in her moralizing statement that Jacob was a jerk, I focused my attention on her valuing. I became curious about it in order to generate reflexivity in Alia around the significance of Jacob’s behavior. I asked Alia to articulate the behavior she found to be aversive, or «jerkish,» then I named her felt response to it, «annoyance». Upon confirmation, I invited her to articulate the connection between her felt sense of annoyance and the significance of Jacob’s behavior. In doing so, Alia discovered that her greatest concern was her supervisor blocking her ability to work effectively with her colleagues. This discernment and articulation was a gradual process of reflexive self-awareness focused on her valuing. Through a better understanding of her valuing, she was able to get insights into what it was that really bothered her about Jacob’s behavior, something that she felt, but had not yet articulated. Through reflexive self-awareness, Alia spontaneously shifted from contracted, reactive valuing towards a more expansive, mindful valuing. This helped her generate new options for responding to Jacob’s behavior, thereby dissipating the conflict towards more generative possibilities.

As noted above, mine and Alia’s roles in this conversation carried our consciousness. They set the horizon of what was possible for each of us, together, to know, value and decide. Our roles, as «listener» and «speaker», carried how we came to understand and respond to Alia’s situation. Similarly, Alia’s role as employee carried her knowing, valuing and deciding in relation to Jacob. Alia’s valuing would be different if Jacob was a summer student in the office or a colleague from another division. Jacob’s behavior was meaningful to Alia because of his role as her supervisor and his influence over the complex patterns of interaction that carried others’ decision-making about how to engage with the corporate reporting project.

In my role as listener, I found myself noticing, wondering, imagining, hypothesizing, feeling, valuing, discerning significance, deliberating how to respond, evaluating the best response, and deciding—to remain silent, make statements or ask questions. My decisions—of what to say and how to say it—were generated from my understanding and valuing of her specific story as well as conflict interventions more generally. In other words, my reflexive awareness, which included noticing my own conscious performance, had an impact on hers. My performance was relatively expansive: I was attentive and curious, and my curiosity was directed towards her knowing, valuing and deciding, which helped her to focus her curiosity there, too, engaging her own reflexive self-awareness.

**Debriefing Inquiry: Speaking with Alia elicits additional significance**

After completing a draft of the vignette and the reflexive commentary, I sent the text to Alia for us to discuss in an informal conversation, oriented to verify the account’s «accuracy» and further investigate its meaning and implications. The following brief account of that conversation reveals several additional points of significance. Our first conversation, several weeks before, had clarified my interpretation about Alia’s discernment of threat (related to Jacob’s role as a disrespectful, rather than uncaring, supervisor). I begin our second conversation with her by asking how things are going with Jacob.

> «I can’t say that the issues with Jacob have gone away,» she says. «But it has made a difference to be able to focus on what I can do in my role, and recognize what matters to me. There’s something very valuable about that.»

She continues, «And in your text, I think you’ve captured something important in recognizing that my feelings were related to Jacob as a supervisor, where his jokes blocked a pattern of cooperation that I needed to complete my task. I like the term, ‘pattern of cooperation’, she remarks, «And I like what you did with Bettina’s question about my feelings, especially that I didn’t want to be seen as taking personal offence.»

I nod, and verify with her, «I sense that there’s more to explore in Bettina’s question, isn’t there? Because her question was not ill-intentioned. I often hear inexperienced mediators in workshops trying to acknowledge the subjective experience of conflicting parties by using the phrase «How did you feel when...»»

> «Yes,» answers Alia. «Bettina seemed to want to recognize something about me. And sometimes talking about feelings can be liberating, even in workplaces like mine where expressions of emotions aren’t really the norm. So although Bettina might have been trying to open something up, her question had the opposite effect of shutting me down.» I find myself inclining toward an intelligible distinction between a «liberating» invitation to express feelings and the contractive one she experienced.
«I’m curious about the difference between a liberating expression and what actually happened?» I say. We puzzle silently for a moment. «I wonder if it was because Bettina was not focused on your feelings to discover what mattered to you or lay behind them. Instead, you had the sense that she wanted you to express something that would make you worse off for expressing.»

«Yes! It seemed that she was opening a space for me to express hurt feelings to Jacob so he could apologize, and that would be it. So that was a problem. Bettina’s question about feelings seemed directed at me being wounded, which I wasn’t. I was thwarted. And we weren’t anywhere close to that idea in our conversation.»

«There’s a big difference, isn’t there?» I respond. «Yes. It’s interesting. Although I had strong feelings, they weren’t personal. The feelings were more about the instrumental ways of interacting in an organization that neither of them seemed to recognize.»

«So if she had recognized that your feelings were an indicator that something significant was at stake, and addressed the significance through an acknowledgement of your feeling, that would have been better than a direct question?» I verify.

«Absolutely,» she says. «Although we never really know, do we? Contexts change.»

«No,» I agree. «These conversations are amazingly complex. But when you and I spoke, we did a few important things to open new possibilities. We recognized the emotion, identified the specific behavior that caused the feeling and made a connection between the feeling of annoyance and the blocked patterns of cooperation.»

«Yes, exactly. If Bettina had been able to do that, we would have had a different discussion.»

As my conversation with Alia continues, we move from the debriefing of this text to reflecting on a subsequent challenge that was arising in her workplace. In the ongoing stream of exchanges between her and Jacob, their conflict was not ‘resolved’, but had become a less salient part of the interactions that oriented each of them to the other, as well as to the wider workplace. In this way, the conflict had dissipated, and new possibilities became possible.

**Concluding Thoughts**

This study was animated by the question of how conflict practitioners can help to dissipate interpersonal conflict by recognizing and responding to feelings. In framing the investigation at its outset, I recognized conflict to be a process of decision-making, which can escalate and diminish in complex patterns of interaction. Framed in this way, the study applied an autoethnographical method to explore the subjective process of decision-making in a workplace intervention. Key concepts of the Insight approach were identified for investigation: that feelings register significance in the operation of valuing; that valuing is functionally related to deliberating, evaluating and deciding; and that a more expansive and reflexively self-aware performance of valuing can lead to different decisions. The case with Alia reveals that sometimes direct questions about feelings can precipitate a defensive rather than expansive response, particularly when the questions are not targeted to illuminate valuing or significance. As a listener, I discovered that my responses directed at Alia’s valuing generated reflection and new possibilities. By making an explicit articulation of an implicit discernment, Alia was able to spontaneously and expansively generate more imaginative options, thereby setting aside the unsatisfying options she had previously considered and dissipating her conflict with Jacob.

This study does not illuminate a particular technique, but instead explores a process of inquiry. This curiosity-driven process of inquiry focuses on discovery—the discovery of the understanding, valuing and decision-making that generate conflict—in order to facilitate its dissipation.
The Insight approach to feeling and valuing in conflict

References