Change through Curiosity in the Insight Approach to Conflict

Cambiar mediante la curiosidad según el enfoque insight del conflicto

Megan Price
George Mason University, Arlington, VA, USA

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Abstract: Conflict behavior, as explained by the Insight approach, is the function of a decision to defend against a valuing of threat. However, defending against threat isn't simply a choice, but a product of the biology of survival. This essay explores the psychological effects of threat, as well as their antidote: curiosity, showing that curiosity targeted toward the interiority of decision making in conflict can generate both a feeling of being understood and a self-awareness that sets the stage for new, transformative possibilities.

Resumen: La conducta en un conflicto, tal y como explica el enfoque insight, es la función de una decisión de defenderse de una valoración de amenaza. Sin embargo, defenderse de una amenaza no es una opción sencilla sino el producto de la supervivencia biológica. El presente artículo explora los efectos psicológicos de la amenaza, así como su antídoto: la curiosidad, demostrando que la curiosidad abordada hacia la interioridad de las decisiones en un conflicto puede generar tanto un sentimiento de ser entendido como de autoconciencia que allana el camino a nuevas posibilidades de transformación.

Keywords: Insight, Curiosity, Conflict, Bias, Change.

Palabras clave: Insight, curiosidad, conflicto, sesgo, cambio.

Megan Price, PhD
Director of the Center for Applied Insight Conflict Resolution in Washington, DC and heads the Insight Conflict Resolution Program at George Mason University, where she also teaches in the graduate program at the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution. Dr. Price's research and practice focus on designing reliable, context-based solutions to systemic social conflict through targeted curiosity.
Contact: mprice11@masonlive.gmu.edu

«Curiosity will conquer fear even more than bravery will.» (Stephens, 1912, p. 13)

For the Insight approach to conflict analysis and resolution (the Insight approach),threat forms the basis of conflict behavior and curiosity facilitates its transformation. The Insight approach proposes that if we can become curious about how we are using our minds when we engage in conflict behavior then possibilities for new ways of interacting emerge. At first blush there may not be anything particularly remarkable about this proposition. Mediators and conflict professionals spend their lives being curious: asking questions, seeking information, understanding the disputes and challenges that clients and parties put before them. What is noteworthy, however, is two fold. First is the specific focus of curiosity advanced by the Insight approach –a focus that is targeted toward the interiority of decision-making in conflict. Second is the explanation that this focus provides for why curiosity can be so powerful in changing dynamics of conflict. In this essay, I discuss curiosity as the foundation on which we engage with our worlds and use our minds, in particular how curiosity targeted toward*how* we use our minds improves the thinking that we do under threat. The effect of this kind of curiosity is a «feeling of being understood,» which reopens our minds and frees us to consider new, more creative ways of interacting that can transform conflict.

Curiosity

Curiosity, most simply put, is the desire to know.It has been recognized over the years as a common, innate human characteristic, one that compels usto ask questions (both implicitly and explicitly), seek knowledge, gain understanding and make appropriate decisions (Golman & Loewenstein, 2015; Kidd & Hayden, 2015; Noordewier & Dijk, 2017). From infancy, we are drawn to contrasts, textures and sounds, and we use our hands, eyes and mouths to discover the contours and substances of the world around us. As children, Piaget (1962) observed, we use curiosity and play to "construct knowledge,» and begin to assemble coherent representations of relationships in the world. As we learn and grow, we become more refined in our quests for understanding. We seek explanations and explore cause and effect. We search out the new and the challenging. Through curiosity we engage fully in our worlds and advance our lives (Kashdan, Rose & Fincham, 2004).

Curiosity comes in different shades and propels us forward, despite the fact that much of the time we neither notice our curiosity nor do we feel particularly curious. Scholars have identified two types of curiosity: diversive curiosity, which facilitates a general exploratory inclination towards novelty; and specific curiosity, which facilitates the satisfaction of uncertainty where more information about a particular thing is desired (Kashdan et al., 2004). Whether the focus of our curiosity is novelty or the satisfaction of uncertainty, it appears to have asweet-spot, contained within what researchers call the «information-gap»(Loewenstein, 1994). When the information-gap is very wide or very small, curiosity rarely emerges. Kang and colleagues (2009) discovered that in a laboratory test involving trivia questions, players were least curious under two conditions: when they had no knowledge foundation for answering the question and when they were extremely confident that they knew the answer; in other words, when the information gap was very wide or very narrow. Players were most curious when they had some idea about the answer but were unsure if they were right.Other research has produced similar findings(Litman, Hutchins& Russon, 2005; van Dijk & Zeelenberg, 2007), demonstrating that neither complete unknowing nor complete knowing, but ratherincomplete knowing *–uncertainty–* drives curiosity. Of course, salience, or the degree to which information matters to a person, influences the degree to which uncertainty drives curiosity, as does whether a person anticipates that they will learn positive or negative information as a result of resolving the uncertainty(Golman & Loewenstein, 2015). We are more inclined to seek items of interest that we believe will be positive than items that are uninteresting or threatening. As Noordewier and van Dijk put it, «curiosity is part of people's exploratory nature and it reflects the anticipation of discovering something new.» (2017, p. 412).

Lonergan, the philosophical forebear of the Insight approach, recognized that in addition to patterning interactions with the outside world, curiosity also patterns our cognitional effort-how we use our minds– as we come to know, value and decide to act. Price (2013 and this issue) captures this curiosity in his explanation of the regular and recurrent way we use our mind, what he calls the «flow of human consciousness»or the Insight Loop. The Insight Loop depicts seven operations of consciousness driven by spontaneous, yet specific, questions that we ask and answer of ourselves to come to know, value and decide to act. The progression goes like this. First we encounter data –a sound, a shape, an inkling, a context. As our attention is drawn to it, we engage in the operation of experiencing. Having experienced the data, we spontaneously seek to understand it, asking ourselves, «what could it be?» From there, we spontaneously verify our insights to come to some degree of certainty about the information we are considering by asking ourselves, «is it so?» And as we orient the information to our own lives, we wonder at its significance in an act of valuing asking, «of what significance is this to me?» Depending

on the significance we discern, we ask ourselves in an act of deliberating,«what could I do about what I have come to know?» Then, in evaluating our options, we ask «what would be best to do?» And as a culmination of our interior curiosity in an act of deciding, we ask, «Will I commit?» The manifestation of this interior performance of using our minds is an outward action: a behavior. As things that we do, it is important to point out that each of these curiosity-driven performances can be performed more or less well. Price lays this out in this issue, showing that the more curious we are, the better we perform, leading to higher probabilities of considered and appropriate actions. Not only, therefore, does curiosity both drive and enhance our understanding of and engagement with the world around us, but it drives and enhanceshow we engage our minds as we come to know, value and decide to act.The interiorand exterior dimensionsof curiosity make it a particularly powerful tool in transforming conflict, particularly when we recognize that curiosity is highly affective.

Curiosity has been shown to activate the reward centers of the brain as we engage with and explore novelty, pursue the utility that information can provide, and seek to satiate our uncertainty (Kidd & Hayden, 2015), bringing with it intense pleasure. It can also induce anxiety, especially when the information that is anticipated may be negative or threatening (Golman & Loewenstein, 2015). This anxiety, Golman and Loewenstein (2015) suggest,often results in the «ostrich effect,» where we avoid seekingnegative information because we are worried about the outcome of learning it. Anxiety,evoked by the anticipation of threatening information, in effect, has the power to shut down curiosity. When our curiosity is shut down, we become certain. We no longer seek new information.

The Insight approach recognizes that curiosity can be shut downin situations of conflict too. Price (2013) describes conflict as a function of the interaction of concrete, stress-based, fight flight, freeze and fawn behaviors that stem from the interiority of a decision to defend against a valuing of threat. Valuing threat brings with it emotions that range from anxiety, to worry, to fear, to hurt, to loss, to injustice. Captivated by threatand the emotions that accompany it, our conscious performance plummets (M. Price, 2017). We move quickly through the questions of interiority that move us from experiencing to knowing to valuing to deciding. We become inattentive to new information, certain that we know, quick to judge and rash in our responses. In effect, the curiosity that we use to advance our minds shuts down and we stop using our minds very well. The acute observations and discoveries of cognitive psychology and neuroscience correlate these effects.[1]

The Cognitive Psychology and Neuroscience of Threat

The neuroscience of threat illuminates some of the challenges to cognition that we experience in conflict. Physiological evidence shows that when the amygdala, which is the emotional center of the brain, registers threat –something that happens even before our brain's visual center has a chance to fully process what is going on, let alone our critical thinking centers– it immediately triggers the hypothalamus to activate a stress-response (fight, flight, freeze or fawn) through our sympathetic nervous system. It does this by signaling the release of adrenaline into our bloodstream. Adrenaline is responsible for all the sensations we feel under threat –the increased heart rate, the hotness from heightened blood flow, the rapid breathing, the sharpening of senses– all to facilitate the body's access to the energy it needs to survive. If the perception of threat is sustained in the amygdala and verified in other regions of the brain, a second phase of arousal is activated and cortisol is released to help keep the body on high alert. When our body is on high alert, we are poised to defend.

While this response is essential for our survival in instances of imminent threat –if we are caught in a car fire, or under attack, or rescuing a person in danger– it shuts down critical thinking, which works against us in interpersonal relations. Matto and colleagues explain that cortisol inhibits the relaxation of the amygdala preventing incoming information from flowing freely to the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for executive functions like critical thinking, reasoning, planning, problem solving, decision-making and impulse control(Matto, Strolin-Goltzman & Ballan, 2013). In other words, when threat activates stress, our higher-order thinking shuts down and our cognitive performance suffers. Perry writes that «often we lose the ability to 'think' or even speak during an acute threat. We just react» (Perry & Szalavitz, 2007, p. 65). In situations of imminent threat, our stress response can save our lives. In situations of conflict, the response can be maladaptive.

Cognitive psychologists have identified a number of cognitively deficient trends that result from perceptions of threat and affect both the quality of the information we consider and the quality of our decisions as we interact with others. Among these cognitive deficiencies are tunnel vision, selective perception, and confirmation bias. These deficiencies affect what we think we know and keep us in the place of extreme certainty that Melchin and Picard hold to be responsible for hardened positions (2008).Tunnel vision, for example, describes the way that threat focuses our attention ex-

1 For more on this, see (M. Price, 2017)

clusively on one central object, for example what we believe to be threatening, or our goal to stop it. It blocks ourability to notice or pay attention to neighboring information that might tell us about the adequacy of our thinking (Stagner, 1967, p. 56).

Tunnel vision's intense focus amplifies selective perception, which is the result of attending only to data that confirms our beliefs or expectations –including expectations of threat– to the exclusion of data that disconfirms them. While we may be curious in these instances, our curiosity is limited. It is targeted only toward bolstering our positions and supporting our claims. Contradictory information is discounted. In this way, the bias of selective perception entrenches confirmation bias –where we become certain that what we think is true because of what we have selectively perceived and despite the inadequacy of our attention. These cognitive deficiencies, recognizable in our own experiences and demonstrated by the adrenaline and cortisol that saturate our brains when we interpret threat, bias the information we attend to and suppress critical questions, inhibiting our ability to be genuinely curious, think critically and course correct when we are defending ourselves against the threats we discern from others.

When the threats we perceive become certainties in our minds, our primary concern israrelynot to discover the adequacy of our thinking but to protect ourselves and what we care about. This leads us to succumb to the bias of egocentrism. When we are egocentric we take ourselves to be the most important point of reference (Keith& Sedikides, 1999; Stein, 1988). In doing this, we discount the significance of others, we stop being curious about them, and we tend to explain behavior we find threatening, not in terms of how it is threatening to us, but in terms of the personal disposition of the person to whom we attribute it (Stagner, 1967, p. 47). This tendency is called attribution bias (Stein, 1988, pp. 249–50).The person becomes the problem –the jerk or the cheat or the monster. There is logic to this given that actions are clearly, and visually, linked to people, and it is explicable given the superficial thinking we do under threat. The trouble is that it is biased, uncritical and often misplaced. We erroneously conflate the actor and the threat, and ascribe motivation and intent where it may not be. Rather then discerning what is threatening, we use conflict behaviors, shutting ourselves off from curious or empathetic engagement with another, entrenching our certainty and sharpening our divisions.

The threats at the root of conflict behavior instigate this cascade of cognitive biases, which produce strong but often unfounded certainty around what is thought to be true and pattern the actions we take to defend against it. Stagner (1967) observes, «erroneous percepts sometimes 'create' the reality they had implied» (p. 46). The fear that is imagined to be true becomes a reality as we try harder and harder to defend against it. Our fear becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, thereby escalating the conflict cycle. Kahnemann explains that we latch on to negative information because biologically we prioritize the bad over the good. He calls this «negativity dominance» (Kahneman, 2011, p. 300). Our brains actually process indicators of threat faster than indicators of positivity –a survival defense– and we fall prey to the expectation that the threat, or negative interpretation of an event or person or group, is true, and on that basis we act.

In conflict, it would seem, our minds are our worst enemies. They mire us in error out of a compulsion for self-preservation and lead us to make decisions that further endanger ourselves, what we care about, and our relationships. The Insight approach explains our cognitive deficiencies and biases in conflict as a function of poor conscious performance, which is characterized by a dearth of curiosity. In its place is a certainty about what we know and righteousness about what to do about it; both rooted in error and bias. While bleak in the sense that our preservationist tendencies seem to be a function of biology over will, there is hope. While our minds may be our worst enemies, they may too be our saving grace. How we use our minds is something that we can become reflexive of, despite the error and bias. We can choose to pay attention, choose to be curious and choose to improve our performances, as well as help others do the same.

Becoming Curious about How We Use Our Minds in Conflict

> *«The investigator needs a well-stocked mind, else he will see but not perceive; but the mind needs to be well-stocked more with questions than with answers, else it will be closed and unable to learn.»* (Lonergan, 1985, p. 17)

In conflict, as we have seen, we are wired to use our minds less well. We are contracted, constrained by threat, and pulled down by meanings riddled with error and bias. We resort to uncritical thinking, reactive valuing, limited deliberating, rash evaluating and constrained deciding aimed at defending ourselves against threat (See Jull, Picard and Price this issue). The result is conflict behavior –the kind of stress-based behavior that ignites the conflict cycle that Picard (2016) characterizesas defend-attack-defend patterns of relating. The Insight approach proposes that if we become curious in a targeted way about how we and others are using our minds to make decisions that result in conflict behavior, then change becomes possible.

To wonder about conflict behavior from the perspective of the interiority of decision-making as the Insight approach

does, it is important to keep in mind the pattern of consciousness that Price formulates, which describes the functional relationship between the questions that drive the operations of our minds as we come to know, value, and decide to act. Price writes,

Once we differentiate the conscious act of deciding from the act decided upon, it becomes possible to attend explicitly to the fact that deciding (*Will I do it?*) is a function of an inner performance of evaluating (*[…] What is best [to do]?*), which is a function of an inner performance of deliberating (*What could I do?*), which is a function of [the] conscious valuing of[what one has come to know of their] concrete circumstances: their apprehension of […] value (*[What is the significance of this to me?]*)» (2013, p. 119).

When we pay attention to and become curious about the way a person has answered the questions of consciousness that have patterned their decision-making –from «will I do it?» to «what is the best thing to do» to «what could I do» to «what is the significance of this to me?»– the decision-making operative in their action becomes discoverable for both the questioner and the respondent. This is powerful. As we saw above, when we apprehend threat, our critical thinking shuts down and we become certain in a way that is burdened by error and bias. We rush through our thinking as we come to know, value and decide to act, and we fail to adequately answer the questions propelling our consciousness. Bound by threat-induced certainty there is no discernable information gap and therefore little room for the uncertainty necessary to be curious. In order to generate curiosity and produce new insights, we must question our decision-making in a targeted way; in a way that invites us to be critically reflexive about how we have used our minds –how we have answered the questions of our consciousness– to come to the decisions we have made.

Curious questions targeted at eliciting the threat registered through our valuing and the decision to defend against it produce the uncertainty necessary to reengage the criticalthinking that has been compromised by the physiological effects of threat in the brain. It activates the sweet-spot of uncertainty that reactivates curiosity, making the reasons we do things in conflict discoverable. Insight mediators do this, as do Insight practitioners in the areas of social conflict, terrorism, theater, policing and school discipline.

When Insight practitioners ask questions that are targeted at the valuing and deciding patterning a person's conflict behavior; for example, «What is at stake for you?» (a question for valuing)and «What will doing that change?» (a question for deciding), not only is curiosity activated, but because these questions are targeted in a nonjudgmental way to understand a person in terms of their own valuing and decision making, they produce the feeling of being really understood. Once a person begins to feel understood, the possibility for critical reflexivity and self-awareness emerges that can improve the respondent's thinking about both themselves and those with whom they are in conflict.

On Feeling Really Understood

Researchers have been studying the effects of both being curious –of asking questions and wondering– and the effects of being on the receiving end of curiosity –of being wondered about. What they are finding is that when we are wondered about and when we feel understood by others, transformative shifts take place. Three decades ago, Prilleltelsky and Lobel (1987) replicated a 1969 study by van Kamm on the experience of «really feeling understood.» They discovered that when individuals have the experience of another's understanding of them in terms of their own understanding and decision making three emotions predominate: satisfaction, security and tension relief. These emotions are the opposite of the anxiety, fear and stress that accompany threat. When we feel understood, we relax and we open up; we make connections that feel good, ease threat, and temper defense.

Part of this is due to the fact that people have an inherent desire for self-disclosure. According to Tamir and Mitchell (2012), 30-40% of conversation communicates personal experiences and feelings. Through a series of five studies, they showed what people have experienced for ages –that sharing about ourselves with others has intrinsic value. In fact, self-disclosure is associated with the reward and social bonding centers of our brains and «may serve to sustain the behaviors that underlie the extreme sociality of our species» (Tamir & Mitchell, 2012, p. 1842). On the flip side, when we do not have the opportunity to self disclose and as a result feel misunderstood, the experience is associated with negative affect and social pain (Morelli, Torre & Eisenberger, 2014)

This is particularly true in conflict. Conflict escalates when we feel misunderstood, because feeling misunderstood activates a sense of threat (Picard, 2016). But, Gordon and Chen find that when individuals perceive that their «thoughts, feelings and point of view» are understood in a conflict situation, that perceived understanding acts as a «buffer against the deleterious effects of conflict» (2016, p. 255). These findings hold true in relationships that range from intimate partners to strangers (Morelli et al., 2014). The satisfaction, security and relief that we feel when we are understood make us feel good, support clear thinking and help us connect with others.

Feeling understood happens when we are listened to and wondered about on our own terms, and the effects are powerful. The targeted curiosity of the Insight approach fa-

cilitates that understanding, allowing us to consider, in a way that did not seem necessary while propelled forth by the protective armor of cortisol, what *is* upsetting and what *is* at stake for us within the conflict interaction, and why we are defending in the ways that we are. Having the opportunity to articulate the threat and defense patterning conflict behavior initiates two further phenomena that are critical to conflict transformation. First, we are able to reflect on ourselves, generating critical reflexivity and self-awareness. And second, through that self-awareness, the certainty that absorbed us under threat becomes uncertain and space for new knowing, valuing and deciding emerge.

On Becoming Curious about Self and Other

In conflict we sense our emotions, our intuitions, our desire to respond, but because of the impoverished thinking that we do, we do not critically consider these things. We are often certain about threat and overcome with the feeling of it, but uncertain about what is specifically at stake and what makes our decisions to defend the right things to do. Jull (this issue) illustrates this in her vignette with Alia. Alia is frustrated about her workplace situation with her supervisor Jacob, and particularly annoyed with how her senior manager, Bettina, has handled a complaint she made, leading her to withdraw and contemplate filing a harassment charge. While Alia is clear that she is frustrated and annoyed, it is not until Jull asks her about her valuing– about what was frustrating and annoying to her –that she contemplated the personal significance of Jacob's and then Bettina's behavior which led to her reaction. Once Jull initiates curiosity, the uncertainty about the origins of her feelings leads Alia to contemplate them, resulting in relief, feeling understood, and the emergence of new possibilities for responding within the conflict.

The obscurity around our own thinking and feelingin conflict is linked to our intense focus on the object that threatens us and what we see to be the source of our concern. This positions us to be responsive to questions about our interiority, because while there is certainty around the threatening thing, the contours of the threat are uncertain and yet to be discovered. The uncertainty about how something is threatening and what makes our responses effective at stopping it leads us to be curious –to want to satisfy the unknowing– once curiosity is initiated. Curiosity can be initiated from within, if we cultivate the mindfulness to do so, or from without by an attentive third party or even conflict partner. Curiosity about our valuing and deciding gets us to wonder, «What is at stake for me?» and «What is the best thing to do?» When we begin to wonder about these things, we are compelled to search for the answer –which is neither too distant to know or too known to wonder about. Our curiosity, and by consequence our pre-frontal cortex and critical thinking center, is reactivated as questions directed toward our interiority focus our attention on how we are using our minds, rather than on the object that we find threatening.

As we become curious, aware and critically reflexive of our own minds in conflict, we also open space to become curious about those with whom we are in conflict and by whom we expect to be harmed. Picard (2016) writes that «resolving conflict requires interventions… that dislodge the certainty of these expectations [of harm,]…[evoking] a different response, a response of curiosity about something unknown, rather than certainty about something presumed known» (p. 156).

Research on reflection shows that when we engage with our own thinking, we are able to think more critically, come up with more accurate answers, approach problems more creatively and come to better solutions (Hao et al., 2016). Being wondered about by another on our own terms induces critical reflexivity, self-wonder and curiosity about the other, what we think we know about them,and the conflict situation more generally. This begins a transformative process that opens the opportunity for self-disclosure on all sides, reigniting curiosity in a way that activates the critical thinking that has been bypassed by threat, and allowing for both discovery and feeling understood.

A finding from neuroscience called, «brain coupling,» illustrates this idea(Hasson, Ghazanfar, Galantucci, Garrod& Keysers, 2012). Brain coupling involves the parallel patterning of our brains as we communicate. When we listen to stories, for example, the brain patterns of the listeners mimic the brain patterns of the storyteller as the listeners interpret the storyteller's words. Similarly when we are asking and listening to questions, our minds physiologically sync. The curiosity of the questioner is mimicked in the respondent, whose wonder begins to open up in a new way in a search for the answer the questioner is seeking.That wonder and the social connection of feeling understood that resultsis rewarding. It reduces threat in a way that can change the trajectory of conflict.

The Insight approach suggests that curiosity directed at the data of consciousness patterning conflict behavior ignites critically reflexivity, which improvesthe way we use our minds in conflict. We can be curious about a lot of things –what happened, who did it, what we could have done differently– but the unique orientation of curiosity in the Insight approach toward how a person is using her mind enhances its efficacy as a method for transforming conflict. It keeps curiosity focused on eliciting an understanding of a person on her own terms. How is *she* valuing and deciding in this moment? Because when we can elicit that information, it generates a feeling of being understood, reducing threat, and

facilitating consideration and correction of the mired thinking that we do under threat. New, more creative opportunities for interacting become possible. The theory of change, therefore, that anchors the Insight approach is that by directing our curiosity toward the valuing of threat and decisions to defend patterning conflict behavior, the opportunity for discovering how we are using our minds to make decisions in conflict opens up. From this vantage we are able to improve the way we use our mindsin conflict, transforming them from our worst enemy to our saving grace.

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