Kluwer Mediation Blog

Aging and conflict: re-visiting the fundamental attribution error

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This week the 5th World Summit on Elder Mediation is taking place in Glasgow: see http://www.eldermediation.ca/styled-2/index.html. It is an inspiring gathering, bringing together mediators from Canada, Ireland, Spain, Switzerland, England and Scotland, all committed to helping older people deal with conflict in a way that is humane and just. The range of issues is daunting – care decisions, guardianship, elder abuse, financial abuse, dementia and end-of-life choices – while the stories are heartening, reminding us just how liberating it can be for embattled people to encounter a skilled and committed mediator.

All of this made me think again about conflict. Is it different when we're older? Are we more or less prone to disputes? Well, the story, like all real-life stories, is a bit more complicated. To illustrate, I turn to one of the best-researched social psychological phenomena, the 'Fundamental Attribution Error' (sometimes known as the Over-attribution Effect). I will briefly explain how this cognitive bias operates before considering the impact of age.

Attribution theory was coined by German emigre to the USA, Fritz Heider. Heider had the appealing idea that we are all 'naive scientists', learning how to behave by trial and error. One of the skills that young children quickly acquire is the ability to predict other people's intentions. This helps us to navigate the social world, knowing who is well-intentioned towards us and who is not. These guesses about other people's motives are known as attributions.

Attribution theory posits two types of attribution: dispositional and situational. I make a dispositional attribution when I guess that your actions reflect your nature: you are late for our appointment, and I conclude that you are an unreliable person. Situational attributions involve attributing your behaviour to external causes: you are late for our appointment, and I guess that you got held up on the way, the car broke down, there was an emergency, etc, etc. Heider reckoned that we have a general tendency to look for dispositional attributions about other people. This helps us to make sense of their actions and provides an important degree of predictability: if I conclude that you are an unreliable person I can avoid you or take action to minimise the inconvenience that causes.

Most of the time our attributions serve us well. It can, after all, be life-saving to attribute negative motives to someone who may harm me. The problem arises when we make dispositional attributions when we ought to make situational ones. If your lateness makes me think that you are unreliable and therefore not to be trusted, I may behave in a more hostile fashion than the situation

warrants. If it turns out that I am neglecting a perfectly reasonable situational explanation (the traffic, other circumstances) I can needlessly jeopardise our relationship. The Fundamental Attribution Error refers to this tendency: to over-estimate dispositional factors and under-estimate situational factors. It seems that we are more likely to make this error in judgement when our cognitive load is high, i.e. when we're stressed or in conflict.

A related idea is known as accuser bias: if someone harms me I am more likely to account for their behaviour by reference to their disposition or nature. However, if I cause harm to another, my explanation will take more account of circumstances (the bias of the accused).

The phenomenon is significant in conflict resolution. When people are in conflict it is not uncommon for each 'side' to make a dispositional attribution about the other: 'that's the kind of people we're dealing with here.' Situational explanations are ignored, especially what is often the most significant factor of all: my hostile behaviour is precisely the 'situation' that led them to react in that way. As Lax and Sebenius put it: *'If you're seated at the negotiating table in the absolute, unshakable conviction that your counterpart is a stubborn and difficult character, you are likely to act in ways that will trigger and worsen those very behaviours'* (David Lax and James Sebenius, 2006, '3D Negotiation' Harvard Business School Press, p.81). So mediators often encounter vicious circles of conflict, with each side ratcheting up the hostility but effacing this contribution when trying to explain the other's response.

So, what is the impact of age on our vulnerability to this phenomenon? Researchers Katherine Follett and Thomas Hess found that, although not immune, middle aged people were less likely to make the fundamental attribution error than either the younger or older group (Follett and Hess, 'Aging, Cognitive Complexity, and the Funadamental Attribution Error' *Journal of Gerontology, Psychological Sciences, 2002, Vol. 57B, No. 4, 312-323*). On the face of it this finding would suggest that older people, like younger, may exacerbate conflict by making dispositional attributions when situational ones are warranted. There was, however, an important qualification. In an earlier study, Chen and Blanchard-Fields found that older people reduced their dispositional attributions when given sufficient time (Chen, Y and Blanchard-Fields, F (1997) Age differences in stages of attributional processing. *Psychology and Aging, 12, 694–703.)*

For those mediating with older people, these two findings would suggest that we tread carefully around attributions. Wherever possible we should try to create sufficient processing time: allowing stories to be told in their own time, taking breaks, talking through people's impressions and gently proposing alternative explanations may all help. This is not about minimising the impact of the other person's actions. Rather, we are trying to find an alternative, plausible explanations for behaviour that appears badly motivated.

In the interests of balance more recent research is worth highlighting. Grossman and others tested the 'wisdom' of a mixed age-group and found that *'relative to middle-aged people, older people make more use of higher-order reasoning schemes that emphasize the need for multiple perspectives, allow for compromise, and recognize the limits of knowledge.'* (Grossman et al, 'Reasoning about social conflicts improves into old age', *PNAS April 20, 2010, Vol. 107, no 16*). In spite of showing greater 'distractibility', older people were significantly wiser with *'wisdom gains occur[ing] mainly between middle and old age.'*

All of this suggests that the spirit of elder mediation is spot on. If we want to help older people to deal effectively with conflict, we need to create a safe, unhurried space for dialogue. This is

painstaking stuff, working and re-working familiar family stories to find neglected meanings that offer a more hopeful future. In this way older people's wisdom and awareness of multiple perspectives can begin to correct the over-attribution effect that dogs us all.

For further reading on attribution theory, see:
Brian Parkinson, 'Social Perception and Attribution' in Miles Hewstone, Wolfgang Stroebe and Klaus Jonas (Eds.) *Introduction to Social Psychology: A European Perspective (4th Edition)*. 2008, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing
Keith G Allred, 'Relationship Dynamics in Disputes: Replacing Contention with Cooperation' in Michael Moffitt and Robert Bordone (Eds.) *The Handbook of Dispute Resolution*. 2005, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

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