

Kluwer Mediation Blog

The map is not the territory

Charlie Woods (Core Solutions Group / Scottish Universities Insight Institute) · Thursday, February 8th, 2018

In 1933 Alfred Korzybski wrote: “A map is not the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a similar structure to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness.” More recently (2006), James Robertson wrote (to reference him once again, this time from ‘The Testament of Gideon Mack’): “We trust in maps because when we test them out, on a walk or a drive, we find, generally speaking, that they are telling the truth... And yet they are only pictures. They are not the real terrain, only representations of it. But our inclination is nearly always to believe the map.”

I am particularly struck by the notion that we are inclined to trust maps and feel they are telling us the truth and the relationship of this to the idea that there are at least three truths – your truth, my truth and the truth. Given there can be many different maps of an area, depending on what you wish to focus attention on, there might well be numerous ‘truths’.

Things are often not what they at first seem and we frequently see or hear or sense things differently, depending on where and in what circumstances we find ourselves in. If I remember clearly (a big assumption – see below), an early experiment in mental mapping asked students in London and Edinburgh to map where Leeds was. Those in Edinburgh put it closer to London and those in London put it closer to Edinburgh – it is around halfway.

On top of differences in perspective our memory apparently doesn’t work like a tape recording but draws things from different stores in the brain depending on context in which it’s needed, which can obscure our [understanding of ‘the truth’](#).

Plus we are easily distracted and might not even notice certain ‘truths’ – for example, did you see the gorilla [here](#) first time around?

And if all this wasn’t enough, if I understand it correctly (another big assumption!), quantum mechanics shows that the outcome of an experiment can change depending on how it is observed; suggesting that there might not be [a truly objective reality out there at all!](#)

What might all this have to do with mediation? Drawing as clear a picture as possible of the mental maps that parties have of their truth (of where they have come from, where they are now and where they might be going, along with the assumptions used in their construction) would certainly give real meaning to the idea of an exploration phase! Getting permission to share all or part of these maps where appropriate could be extremely valuable in terms of increasing understanding of different truths. Being able to compare maps might also be really helpful in reality testing. Maybe a

mediator could also play a role in offering their own maps of the territory to help summarise and test understanding or to offer straw men to help test future possibilities.


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