

Naturalistic Observation of How Conflicts are Addressed

[1] Introduction

This experiment is designed to examine how interpersonal and other conflicts are addressed in everyday life.

Since most of life, for us humans, is conducted by our Type 1 thought systems, most of our lives is dominated by the tendency of Type 1 thinking to imagine that the world is black-and-white, either-or, good-or-bad, or right-or wrong. What that means, when we stray into conflicts—as is absolutely inevitable in real life—is that our first inclination is to think that we are either in control or being controlled, and so to either celebrate or bristle, dependent on which side we've wound up on. This is the very paradigm of what psychologists call 'reactive' behavior, and one of the slipperiest things about such behavior is that reactive people are never in charge of themselves. (Why not?) The effect is that reacting reactively tends to be self-perpetuating (putting us even less in the driver's seat).

To be sure, people can, and do, have more than one way to react to such thoughts—including, of course, taking a step back, bringing our Type 2 thinking on board, and considering a wider, more sophisticated range of responses. But it's built into us that we have this first set of reactions and frankly much of the time we run with them.

To be sure, all normal people learn to act with more restraint than do two year olds, and so even when some part of us thinks it's time to clunk someone else on the head some other parts of ourselves are likely to intervene and make us think that, first, that's not the best thing to do and, second, that there are some alternatives that might serve us better.

But since one of the peculiarities of the cultures and societies we currently live in is that the predispositions of our Type 1 thinking are extrapolated, sometimes quite directly, to political and cultural realms, despite what I just said governments and nations still overwhelmingly act as if force is the only way to get things done—especially when what needs doing is important. Think of the 'Wars' on Drugs, Cancer, Crime, Terrorism and even Mosquitoes and Viruses that governments have launched over recent decades.

Of course, most modern governments have learned enough to understand that sometimes the mere threat of force is sufficient, but they all prepare themselves to back up their interventions with force, whether that means deploying the police or sending off their armies. Even though wars get fought far away (at least for us Americans, now) the fact is we all *know* such things, even when we don't pause to think about their psychological, let alone moral implications.

Not incidentally, this is a realm where differences in race and other marks of social position have enormous impact on the way we experience our own country. The threat of violence is, literally, different for Blacks and for Whites (and for various other social and cultural groups, too, of course), so that an old, well educated, reasonably well off, white guy like me needs to remind himself that he lives in a different world when it comes to talking about such things.

This experiment is designed to take a look at how common and how pervasive the threat of force is—indeed, how *normative* it is. There are of course many ways to examine such issues, but for this assignment you'll look at what may seem a relatively minor one—though one of the questions you'll want to ask yourself is whether it really is as minor as it might seem at first.

What you'll be looking at is how commonly and how regularly people who finds themselves involved in conflicts are depicted responding with force to them. Or, to say the same thing in different words, how often people are shown responding to challenges by various efforts to force their will and their way on whatever is challenging them. Thus in a TV show, movie or story

- When a kid doesn't do what a parent wants the parent's response is to punish them
- When someone disagrees with the protagonist the latter responds by telling them how things are going to go and brooking no opposition
- When someone is faced with a difficulty their response is to grit their teeth and go forth to enforce their will on things (or people)
- When people disagree—or represent different social groups—they fight to see who will win

Some of these examples—and you can readily find a great many more—involve actual acts of violence, as when the so-called good guys go forth to make the world a better place by subduing the so-called bad guys (and do, please, pause to consider how easily we justify such actions in our minds once we've labeled the parties with terms like 'right' or 'good', and 'wrong' or 'bad'). But others seem utterly mundane, even though they involve rather arbitrary impositions of one person's will over another—and *despite the fact that much psychological research tells us that such intervention are the **least likely** way to get people to change their minds.*

[2] Protocol

The first thing to do is to decide where you are going to look for the observations you will be making. Since people come into conflict in zillions of different ways, and since conflicts present in so many ways, you can find examples all over the place. For this reason, while I do encourage you to use your imagination I also urge you to choose one or two sources and stick to them.

Possible sources:

- Listen in to conversations fellow students are having in the cafeteria.
- Watch a bunch of movies or TV shows.
- Read some political speeches.
- Do some searching on the Internet around various controversies or other disagreements.

Once you've chosen your source chose how you're going to record your observations. Exactly how you do this will depend on what your source is. If you're listening into other people's conversations you probably want to listen for a specified amount of time (say, ten minutes) and record how many times during that period one person attempts to impose their ideas, their plans, their points of view or some

other personal preoccupation.

If you're using a TV or other video source you can do the same, or you might simply make note of how many of the programs you watch feature episodes where one person attempts to impose their viewpoint on another. Or record how often conflicts are dealt with by one person trying to physically force another to do what they want. Or record how often characters try to settle their differences by physical force or slugging it out.

[3] Variants

Don't bite off more than you can reasonably chew, but there are many interesting variants of this project you can consider. For instance

- You might make a table of all the TV shows presented over a 24hr period and make note of what percentage of them feature efforts to impose one person's will on another, or solve problems with force; or you might make a table of all the TV shows being presented at different times of day on different channels and make note of what percentage feature such efforts—and what patterns, if any, you can perceive about when shows with examples of the use of force in them are presented. Or you might chart what percentage of news time is taken up with reports of fights or shouting matches.
- You might compare different sources of stories or observations of efforts to accomplish goals by acts of will. How many news shows present stories about resolving conflicts by imposing solutions vs how many entertainment shows do?

[4] Writing it Up

Once you've made your observations you'll need to write them up.

Start by stating what it was that you decided to look for.

Based on the kinds of observations you made, record your results. This is the raw data you will have accumulated and it is usually best to put it into a table.

Explain what you observed in words—what do those raw data show?

Then explain what you conclude about the raw data. What do they show? Dependent on which particular kinds of observations you will have made you will be able to say different things about what your data show, of course, but for this section concentrate on the *patterns* you found.

Next, put your results in the context of psychology. What do your data tell you about the way people use Type 1 and Type 2 thinking? What do they suggest about the role of emotional responses in determining how people interact?

Finally, provide some of your own thinking about the project. What did you learn from it? Which parts,

if any, surprised you, and why? Were your expectations confirmed or were you disappointed? If your data were different from what you expected, what might the explanation be? Was your thinking off the mark, or were there sufficient problems with the experimental protocol you created that you weren't able to make accurate observations? What would you change if you were to do it again? What do the data you found suggest about the next round of experiments to do?

Type 1 thinking tends to treat observations as neutral phenomena. Something happens, our minds register it: It's just data and we move on along unchanged by it. But is this really true? Is exposure to watching people attempt to impose their will on things just recording what happens, or does it change us? If it changes us, what sorts of changes might occur? Are we put on high alert—and if so, how does that affect us? Does it make us more reactive and hence more prone to respond impulsively without thinking about the implications ourselves? Which is cause, which effect—are you hearing about impulsive behavior because people are impulsive creatures, or are people being impulsive because they've heard so much about people being impulsive?