

Independence vs. Interdependence in NVC

With Bob Wentworth

I'd like to share something that might help illuminate one aspect of some differences in views that I've been sensing in the NVC network. I have hope that this might also contribute to people's journeys of learning and practicing NVC. This topic is important to me because I see growing our skills around engaging with Interdependence as what offers hope for a more peaceful world.

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I have an idea that there are several orientations to relating to self and others which are relevant as people learn NVC and deepen their practice:

1. **Enmeshment** - In this orientation, there is confusion about who is responsible for what. Someone who is *enmeshed* likely believes that others cause their feelings, may take responsibility for others' feelings, may believe it is others' job to meet their needs, and is likely to base relationships on unspoken expectations and implicit demands. Many people function in this way, before encountering NVC.
2. **Independence** - In this orientation, there is self-responsibility for one's own feelings and needs, and a release of taking unhealthy responsibility for others' feelings and needs. Someone who has embraced *independence* often feels a sense of freedom and relief, having been released from unhealthy patterns of *enmeshment*.
3. **Interdependence** - In this orientation, there is both self-responsibility for one's own feelings and needs AND recognition of the ways that, as social animals, we need one another and affect one another. Someone who has embraced *interdependence* recognizes both that (a) we can substantially influence our feelings through the stories we tell ourselves, and it is empowering to take charge of our own needs, AND, at the same time, (b) as human beings we are hard-wired to have our well-being be influenced by the way we are treated by those around us, and self-responsibility includes taking a degree of responsibility for the consequences of our choices, including predictable impacts on others. This awareness allows us to experience freedom AND relate to one another with more experience of care for all.

I have a sense that **conflict sometimes emerges** (and has done so in the NVC trainer network) between people with an ***independence-orientation*** and those with an ***interdependence-orientation***. It makes sense to me that a conflict might arise if people with an Independence orientation don't discern the difference between Enmeshment and Interdependence.

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My sense is that Marshall Rosenberg sometimes enjoyed using "shock" tactics in his teaching, making extreme, absolute-sounding statements, to try to shock people out of an unhealthy pattern that they were stuck in. So, he might say something like, "You can't make anyone else feel anything—you never have, and never will." For someone who is used to living in an Enmeshed way, such a statement can land like a bucket of cold water. The words can wake them up, helping them to break free of deeply embedded assumptions they have been making about the world. This can be a step towards seeing the ways in which their own interpretations shape their experience of the world. It can be a stimulus to moving towards more self-responsibility and empowerment.

All that's great. But, such a way of teaching can also lead to problems. While absolute statements can be helpful in interrupting old patterns, they also oversimplify and distort reality.

A statement closer to the truth might be something like this:

Our feelings arise from the interaction of external events, what we observe, the stories we tell ourselves about our observations, the state of our needs, our biological and psychological predispositions, and any unhealed emotional wounds.

For most people, it supports freedom and empowerment to learn to **focus on the causal factors that are within our personal locus of control**. It's helpful to learn to hold our interpretations loosely, to choose stories that support well-being, and to interpret feelings as guides that can help us connect to our needs. It's also helpful to become aware of the impacts of emotional wounding, manage this, and, to the extent possible, work to heal.

Yet, this doesn't negate the possibility that there may be times and ways in which it may also be helpful to attend to **enhancing how we relate to one another**. For oneself, this involves acknowledging, and taking a degree of responsibility for, the impacts that we have on others—being open to caring and learning, without slipping into self-blame or taking inappropriate responsibility. (It can require considerable learning and discernment to find a healthy way of achieving this.) With regard to others, enhancing how people are relating may involve inviting others into awareness of what might make life more wonderful. (I see "how to do this with skill when people don't see the impacts of their choices" as an area of active investigation and learning.)

This is a nuanced way of thinking about things. It's not catchy, and it's hard to convey in a workshop aimed at people who are still stuck in the stage of *enmeshment*. But, I believe it captures more of how the world works.

I have a concern (and experience) that believing “You can’t make anyone else feel anything” and “Others are responsible for their own feelings” can lead to callous behavior. It's a variant of the “obnoxious phase” of NVC. People can fail to recognize that their choices impact others, and fail to take personal responsibility in a healthy way.

If you swing the head of an axe into somebody's leg, they are going to feel intense pain (if they have the usual neurology). Yes, they can somewhat modulate their experience, based on the stories they tell themselves about what has happened. But, the person wielding the axe played a very important role in creating their experience. I have often heard people trained in NVC say things that seem to deny this dimension of reality. To me, this is a form of “Denial of Responsibility,” which Marshall identified as a type of Life-Alienating Communication. (It's very painful to be on the receiving end of such communication, which attributes *none* of the responsibility to the one whose choices had an impact on others' needs.)

- An *enmeshed* person on the receiving end of others' behavior that has a negative impact on their needs might respond from a stance of blame and victimhood.
- Someone focused on *independence* might believe that the one affected by others' actions should simply “Get some empathy,” and that should be the end of it. They may feel frustrated with, or pity, the Enmeshed person for what is perceived as a lack of self-responsibility and personal empowerment.
- Someone focused on *interdependence* might both do the inner work they need to do to care for themselves AND name the impact that others' choices have had. The latter is not done from a stance of blame, but with an intention of helping to improve what happens in the future.

An *interdependence*-oriented person may choose to attend to BOTH inner factors AND outer factors

that affect their experience. Unfortunately, such a choice is likely to not be understood by people who are *independence*-oriented; I have the impression that they are likely to inaccurately interpret the *interdependence*-oriented person as coming from a place of *enmeshment*. (I don't yet have clarity about how one can skillfully transform such misunderstanding.)

There are even more nuances to all this, but I think that's enough for now.

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I would enjoy hearing about it if you've found this essay in any way helpful.

Wishing you life-serving interdependence!

~ Bob