Excavating Our Frames of Mind:
The Key to Dialogue and Collaboration

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Conversations between colleagues who hold divergent views of a case or practice situation often take the form of a win–lose debate in which contenders, arguing from within their respective frameworks, find they are unable to reach mutual understanding. The resulting impasse makes mutual understanding and collaboration difficult. Our typical way of resolving the impasse is to invoke the evidence for our own position, hoping that the facts somehow speak for themselves. Strangely, this may only exacerbate the impasse and worsen our view of our colleagues, whom we presume to be ignoring the facts. This article attempts to show that reflecting on the frame—not debating the facts—might be a more helpful way to approach such impasses and to reach mutual understanding.

Key words: collaboration; dialogue; frame reflection; reflective practice

Conversations between colleagues who hold divergent views of a case or practice situation often take the form of a win–lose debate in which contenders, arguing from within their respective frameworks, find they are unable to reach mutual understanding. The exhilarating convergence of meaning that sometimes accompanies our attempts at dialogue eludes us. Instead we feel misunderstood, as if we inhabited a foreign world whose landscape was unfamiliar to others and whose boundaries were vulnerable to invasion.

The Young Woman/Old Woman
Most readers are familiar with the line drawing of the old woman/young woman. An individual does not look at different lines to see the “other” woman: The same lines constitute both. Perplexed onlookers who see different things find it exceptionally hard to explain to each other how they orient to the lines so the woman they see appears. The conversation that unfolds between them is prototypical of so many professional conversations: “Why can’t you see her? Just look, she’s right there!” Because it is in the manner of looking, not in the picture itself, that the other woman lies, no amount of pointing to “the facts” helps someone who has not learned how to look to see the other woman. Until the person reorients to the lines, the second woman simply does not exist.

So it is with the frames of mind that orient us to professional practice: We may look in the same direction, even at “the same lines,” and not see what our colleague sees. It is a problem that afflicts our attempts at dialogue across disciplines especially, but it is not a rare event even in our own discipline. At case conferences, for example, where our respective areas of expertise are supposed to contribute, like pieces of a puzzle, to a complex formulation of the case, we sometimes feel that we are putting together different cases, not talking about different aspects of the same case. One colleague sees the young woman; the other, the old woman.

What we need when a convergence of meaning eludes us is a willingness to reflect on the frames of mind that are world constituting for us, that
selectively filter our looking, that shape what we attend to, name, and render into our official accounts of our cases (Bruner, 1986b; Mezirow, 1990; Schon, 1983, 1987; Schon & Rein, 1994; White & Epston, 1990). When we make how we look rather than what we see the subject of our mutual inquiry, we have the possibility of real dialogue and mutual understanding. If we could surface the assumptions, values, and practices that undergird our knowing, that exert their power invisibly, giving us worlds that we take as self-evidently “real,” we have the possibility of saying to our colleague, “This is how I am looking at this. Let me show you how to look so you can see what I am seeing.”

**Learning to See What We Do Not See**

Just as we can be blind to the buildings and landmarks we pass daily on our way to the office—when our frame of mind is of getting to work rather than sightseeing—so too in professional practice our ways of looking, disciplined by personal and professional interests, bounded by institutionalized roles and routines, and rehearsed until they are second nature to us, determine what we can and cannot see. It is what we do not see that is problematic in our conflicts with colleagues, and the problem is not resolvable by our colleague simply showing us “the facts.” We cannot see the facts that are relevant to another’s frame until we first shift our way of looking.

Bruner (1986a), commenting on the world-constituting effects of preferred frames or “narratives,” said:

> It is not that we initially have a body of data, the facts, and we must then construct a story or theory to account for them. Instead . . . the narrative structures we construct are not secondary narratives about data but primary narratives that establish what is to count as data. New narratives yield new vocabulary, syntax, and meaning in our ethnographic accounts; they define what constitute the data of those accounts. (p. 143)

There are no self-evident facts that ever add up on their own to understanding; rather, it is when a person first has a theory or a framework that he or she knows what facts to look for. The act of framing draws the boundary around what is to be noticed and named as the relevant things of a particular world that establishes the story in which those facts belong and cohere. “Things are selected for attention and named in such a way as to fit the frame constructed for the situation” (Schon & Rein, 1994, p. 26). Other features or details from the sea of potential facts—what White and Epston (1990) and Goffman (1974) would call “unique outcomes”—simply do not exist for us, until we change the framing “story,” the framing metaphors, assumptions, or “ways of looking.”

Schon and Rein’s (1994) distinction between “disagreements” and “controversies” makes it clear how our controversies are fueled by very basic differences among us in how we orient ourselves to the facts:

Although the boundary between disagreement and controversy may be blurred or elusive, controversies often arise in a way that is unmistakably clear. When they do present themselves, they are marked by their stubborn resistance to resolution by recourse to the facts. Facts play a very different role in policy controversies. . . . the parties to a controversy employ different strategies of selective attention. Depending on their view of the issue, they differ as to what facts are relevant. . . . Even when the parties to a controversy focus their attention on the same facts, they tend to give them very different interpretations. (pp. 4–5)

The problem in professional practice is that differing opinions about “what to do” with a particular client or in a particular situation often mask a deeper and more complex “controversy” over “the kind” of client or situation it is in the first place. And what kind of client it is, is nowhere given in some set of self-evident facts. Rather, it is always established by how we look, by the preferred narratives that structure our entire orientation to the world. Framing our practice worlds as we do, we find the facts consistent with our frames and inhabit the worlds they specify, no longer seeing the alternative worlds that might lie outside the margins of what we have come to know. We act to produce (and be produced by) the worlds that match and confirm our frames. Other worlds are only phantom possibilities, kept invisible by our policing of the boundaries of our world making. It gets harder and harder to see what we do not see.

The idea that what we see is as much a reflection of how we look as of what might really be
there has been the key insight of the constructivists (see for example, Bateson, 1972; Maturana & Varela, 1980; Watzlawick, 1984), whose ideas found a congenial reception among family therapists several decades ago. They were among the first to insist that our knowledge of the world was always knowledge of the world of our own making, that there could be no neutral vantage point from which we might seek to find it the way it "really is." What Bateson (1972) referred to as our "maps" of the world, or Mezirow (1990), our "habits of expectation," or Goffman (1974), our "interpretive frameworks," always constrain what we can know: Only the aspects of our experience that can be assimilated to our frames can become meaningful for us. The rest is noise.

The worlds we inhabit are not, however, mere fictions arising from private structures inside our own heads: What the constructivist account of the cognitive and biological constraints on our knowing misses is that we always act within an inherited, historical context that structures our experience for us; that it is the discourses of our time and place and the very real social and material practices and arrangements of power to which our words and ideas are tied that give us the frames through which we make meaning of our experience. The thoughts, words, habits, and practices that we call our "own," even the personal "voice" we struggle to acquire, are always the habitation of words and practices from elsewhere, always the site of multiple and conflicting voices speaking through us, always inscribed by our institutional biography. We produce and are produced by the stories that are given to us in the preferred narratives of our gender, culture, social location, profession, even the agency and team with whom we work. We come to know who we are by seeing ourselves through the narratives available to us, by shaping ourselves to them. The aspects of our experience that can be assimilated to the available narratives become meaningful for us. The rest remains untold, unspeakable (White & Epston, 1990). This, too, is how disciplinary power works, by colonizing us from within, so we become the willing inhabitants of the worlds specified by our preferred narratives (Foucault, 1980).

To enter each other's world, we must first know how to get there. But we also have to be willing to "shift frames," to suspend the ways of looking that orient us to our own world. The problem, as Gilovich (1991) made so abundantly clear in his wonderful review, "How We Know What Isn't So," and as Goffman (1974) also argued, is that we have a remarkable ability to assimilate even the most discordant facts without altering our framing assumptions and to "disattend" to information that would disturb our frames. We may even find it easier to censor and distort our own perceptions than to change the habits of looking that are world constituting for us (Gilovich; Goffman, 1974; Goleman, 1985; Kuhn, 1962; Mezirow, 1991). We simply do not see what we cannot see, and worse, we often do not want to see what we cannot see.

When this basic human tendency to preserve the stability of our worlds is buttressed by institutional authority, we have the potential for enduringly contentious controversies that remain impervious to alternative evidence. When we lose the capacity to look differently, our own world suddenly becomes self-evident, so unproblematically "the way it is," that the other's world can seem blatantly incoherent. Curiosity is replaced by dogmatic insistence on the facts as we see them. Argument replaces dialogue. We tend to be rewarded for this in professional life: The need to look and feel competent can lead us to champion the authority of our knowledge with colleagues and with clients. Instead of inviting mutual inquiry into our ways of world making, we defend our world, even impose it on others.

Why we take up the frames we do and later lay them down when we find ourselves possessed by new questions and interests, how it is that we sometimes find ourselves suddenly available to a way of looking we could not previously have imagined, why a writer whose ideas were once impossibly opaque to us later opens for us a way of looking that we no longer resist, how it is that we are compelled to "have a look," and why an idea we once resisted suddenly calls to us—are questions that arise precisely because we do sometimes change our frames. When we are somehow
enticed to have a look outside the frame, when we find ourselves curious about what might exist at the margins and in the gaps of what we know, when we have reason to doubt that we see clearly and completely, we sometimes discover the limitations of our frames.

One of the best ways to perceive evidence that might shake our certainty about our frames—what Schon and Rein (1994) called our “frame-induced blindness”—is to deliberately open ourselves to help from others who see things differently. It is when we allow the boundaries of our world making to be blurred a bit (Geertz, 1980), when we “break our frames” (Goffman, 1983), when we resist the urge to see the familiar, when we open ourselves to ways of looking that cross the usual disciplinary and institutionalized boundaries, that we can begin to see differently. Real dialogue depends on us being passionately committed to our own world, and simultaneously, passionately interested in other worlds. It is possible to work for the realization of our values and interests, but to do so in a way that remains continuously open to inquiry and dialogue (Freire, 1985). Such a dialogic engagement with our ways of knowing not only makes us more accountable to our colleagues and clients, but also keeps us open to discovering new phenomena that are incongruent with our habitual ways of looking.

This ability to engage and play with our frames is the central dialectic of what Bateson (1979) would have called “second order learning,” and others (for example, Brookfield, 1995; Mezirow, 1990) would call “transformative learning.” It is the essence of creative practice. We all do it. But learning to do it with our colleagues and clients, and doing it consciously and deliberately, in an effort to illuminate how we came to know what we know, is the challenge.

**Practice Is Bounded by Multiple Frames**

What we see when we see a case or a problem to be solved is always the product of our ways of looking. Our professional education is, to a great extent, an effort to discipline our ways of looking, to help us adopt and see through the eyes of the discipline’s store of knowledge, preferred analogies, theories, and discourses. The signature activity of professional practice is to know how to construct from among the ambiguous features of a troubling situation, a special, disciplined kind of coherence, a world that matches our professional values, knowledge, and skills (Goldstein, 1990; Heineman, 1981; Imre, 1985; Papell & Skolnick, 1992; Schon, 1987). We do not come upon the world “as is,” or find our cases ready-made. We have to make them. We do not ever fall on an “enmeshed family,” an “inner child,” a case of workplace harassment, an abuse of power, or any of an infinite variety of other problems, until we first know how to see them, and this we usually learn from someone more experienced who shows us how to look, how to use the questions and methods that reveal the details we are to notice and name, and how to organize those details into a coherent picture of the case. Trying on frames under the guidance of someone who knows how to look is how we learn to see “narratively,” for example, or “cognitively” or “structurally.” Our entire education—in school, in the field, through conferences and supervision—is an apprenticeship in ways of looking, a rehearsal of the paradigmatic problems of our discipline, and the discourses through which we make them coherent and communicable to others who share our values and interests. These frames distinguish us from our colleagues in other disciplines. They orient us differently to the world, to our clients. They set our work apart as countercultural, radicalizing, subversive of conventional knowledge practices—projects in framing alternative worlds and more democratic, empowering practices. It is this “prophetic” side of our world making (Freire, 1985)—this rare ability to resist the hegemonic hold of official dogma, and to imagine a different world—that has been social work’s legacy.

However, social workers do not necessarily share a common frame even when they share the same credentials. Because the frames of the profession are always matters of some controversy, there is no standard, normative social work frame to which our ways of looking are ever fully assimilated and which we can invoke as the single source of our framing assumptions. There is no doubt that the frames of the profession can be enormously influential in the way we work: Who can read Freire or Foucault and live in the world the same way ever again? But such “espoused theories” (Schon, 1983) do not have a total hold on the way we do our work. If we were to probe deeply and honestly, we might find that our work is populated by voices and interests of which we were unaware—by agency procedures and routines, by interpersonal dynamics on our team, by
local politics, by cultural biases—that have become the invisible boundary of our world making, policing from within the kinds of worlds we construct, the cases we see, the roles we inhabit, the way we engage our clients with our knowledge. We might find that some of our work is governed by theories that we have uncritically assimilated into the very ground of our being simply by virtue of our immersion into the language and culture of our particular time and place, theories that are all the more powerful because we collude so successfully to render them unspeakable in professional conversations. Added to that, our own selves are never fully assimilated to the roles we occupy: Our personal needs and interests, our personalities, our unexamined values and assumptions, our gender, social location, even our fluctuating moods and aspirations, all spill over into “how we look.” Our work is always bounded by such multiple and shifting frames. Our professional identities are always complicated projects of assimilating the assumptions, values, and beliefs taken up in the discourses and practices we try to make our own.

**Excavating Our Frames**

Some might argue that the signature of responsible professional practice is the absence of such multiple ways of looking, that these are the vestiges of a profession not yet empirical enough, and that truly ethical, accountable practice should be informed by empirical evidence only (for some of this debate, see for example, Barber, 1996; Gambrill, 1999; Goldstein, 1990; Hartman, 1990; Ivanoff, Blythe, & Briar, 1987; Reid, 1994; Witkin, 1991). According to the empirical practice argument, our multiple ways of looking pose a problem that can be solved by standardizing the frame.

This article favors a different argument—that our multiple ways of looking are not a problem needing solution, but rather the very condition for dialogue and creative collaboration. The problem is not the diversity of our ways of looking perse, but the difficulty we experience when we try to excavate them and describe them to each other and the lack of conversational space wherein such dialogue is welcomed and nurtured. Much of our professional conversation is devoted instead to policing the authorized frames of our team or agency. When asked to explain our work, what we actually do with our clients, many of us have learned so well to invoke the authorized theories as explanatory devices for why we do what we do that we rarely see in our daily practices the legacy of frames far more complex and remote from our conscious awareness.

When we ask ourselves questions such as “How is my way of looking at this situation simultaneously making possible and limiting my understanding? What assumptions am I making? Where did I learn these values? What values (professional or personal) orient me? Is my understanding being framed by values and interests that are not really my own, that I have assimilated uncritically? What feelings am I aware of in this situation? Does this situation remind me of one in my past? Are my feelings constraining my perception in this situation? Have I been recruited to a view that is suppressing information that might help me change my frame of mind? How might someone whose gender, social location, or culture is different from mine look at this? Is there an opposite way of looking at this, or a way that I immediately respond to negatively? Can that teach me something about the assumptions I am making? Why do I feel threatened when I am challenged on this issue? What values or assumptions are being shaken?”, we may begin to uncover the sources of our framing assumptions and values.

When such inquiry is combined with a rigorous inquiry into what we actually do, into the ordinary, minute details of our everyday practice (“Why did I do it this way? Where did I learn that? What assumptions, personal theory, or values are suggested by my actions? Could I have done that differently? What assumptions or personal theory might be implied by the alternative course of action?”), we can begin to see how much our practices are bearers of institutionalized frames that we might choose to change. Such daily and ordinary habits as the kinds of questions we ask and the forms we fill out, the way we dress, how we organize our office furniture, the way we document and present our cases, how we greet our clients and how much time we allow them, are all so automatic as to escape our attention, but they reveal the powerful regulatory effect of the institutional context of our work—a context that gives us the roles and procedures that frame practice for us, sometimes in ways that are incompatible with our personal or professional values, without us even being aware. When we begin to question what we actually do—not just what we say about what we do—we can sometimes see the
frames that really govern our work. When we engage with our knowledge in this way, making what feels natural and comfortable problematic, we have the beginning of authentic accountability to each other and to our clients.

Such inquiry into the full complexity of our knowledge making should be an integral part of our education for practice and our professional conversations. Helping students learn to see through the profession’s body of preferred knowledge and theory will always occupy a large place in the social work curriculum, but equally important is helping them learn to see in their practices the legacy of other framing assumptions and biases, including those so deeply inscribed by institutionalized power and authority. Research suggests that we have not done this latter part well. Many students and practitioners not only have trouble seeing the link between formal theory and practice, but alsoarticulating the theory implied or enacted in their practice. When asked to articulate the sources of their “knowing what to do,” many invoke the intuitive, tacit knowledge embedded in their own, and their colleagues’, accrued practice wisdom (Barbour, 1984; Carew, 1979; Dean, 1989; DeMartini & Whitbeck, 1987; Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 1996; Irving & Williams, 1995). It is true that what often begins for the novice practitioner as a conscious, deliberate effort to “see” through the eyes of the discipline’s store of narrative frames—and to see with a radicalness that sets their world apart—often leads with experience, to increasingly automatic habits (what Schon, 1983, called “knowledge-in-action”) that resist conscious critical reflection. Experience is a tremendous source of “knowing what to do” in future situations. We frame a current situation as we did an earlier one, automatically and effortlessly using the frame to probe and shape the current situation into something familiar and workable. Thus, experience confers enormous benefits: The cumulative knowledge of our profession, passed on through our curriculums, our best practices, and our professional discourses, becomes embedded in routines so automatic that we do not always have to “theorize first, then act” (Pemberton, 1981). Just as we come to inhabit and enact the customs of our own culture without always being able to articulate its rules, so too we come to inhabit our professionally disciplined practice worlds, enacting the roles and practices and constructing the cases conforming to its contours, without being able to unravel and articulate how we do it. Like riding a bike or speaking a mother tongue, we simply do it (see Polanyi, 1966).

Although it may be true that much of what we know how to do we have trouble explaining—that our “knowing” resides in the doing, not apart from it as a separate cognitive act (Schon, 1983)—the failure to try to make that knowledge explicit and communicable is a failure of accountability to each other and to our clients. The problem is not that we invoke personal experience as a source of knowledge for practice, but that we so often invoke it in an essentialist way that valorizes it as somehow above critical inquiry. We forget that experience is itself always mediated through the interpretive discourses available to us, always inscribed with institutional and cultural assumptions the moment we render it into language. Exactly what values and assumptions have made their way into our store of “practice wisdom” is what we must learn to uncover and articulate. We enact those frames in all our work, whether we admit it or not.

There is more to the work of excavating and articulating our frames than simply invoking our favorite practice theories (“I work from a systems perspective”), agency protocol (“That’s how we do it here”), or personal intuition (“It just feels right to me to do it that way”). Ethical and accountable practice depends on us learning to see and articulate the full range of our ways of looking. Unravelling the frames that govern our looking, to help others see what we see, is also the beginning of real dialogue.

Perhaps social workers will lead the way on these kinds of conversations. We may lack the stable institutional contexts of practice, the unitary and official knowledge, and the standard set of practices, which some might argue are the distinctions of being a true profession, but we have a rich history of diverse voices, multiple and conflicting missions and theoretical orientations. Perhaps, of all the professions, we are ideally suited to this hermeneutical task (Gadamer, 1976)
of exploring the implications of alternative framing assumptions and values and of making the reciprocal translation from one world to another.

Frame-reflective conversations can be fraught with difficulty, partly because official discourse leaves so little room for them, partly because they are subversive of official hierarchies of knowledge, partly because they demand personal transparency and mutual trust, partly because they demand that we step outside our own habitual and comfortable ways of seeing. But the effort should be worth it: Reflecting on our frames, in dialogue with others, we are free to imagine different ways of knowing, free to explore alternative worlds, free to engage in more emancipatory practices. There is no formula for this kind of conversation, and it will not magically resolve our differences. There may be times when it only helps to clarify them, but even that would be a step toward greater mutual understanding and respect.

Conclusion

Our attempts to collaborate with colleagues on teams, at interagency meetings, and in supervision, sometimes reach an impasse in which we feel that we live in nonintersecting practice worlds. Our typical way of resolving the impasse is to invoke the evidence for our own position, hoping that the facts will somehow speak for themselves. Strangely, this may only exacerbate the impasse and worsen our view of our colleagues, whom we presume to be ignoring the facts. A conflict over how to set the problem in the first place—over "what kind of case it is"—is not resolvable in this way. This article suggests that reflecting on the frame itself—not debating the facts—might be a more helpful way to approach such impasses and to reach mutual understanding.

References


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