Why People in Relationships Often See Things So Differently

"Who started it?" is a simple question with a complicated answer.

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Some relationship problems are the result of mental illness, addiction, abuse, or just plain meanness, but most are not. This post is about the majority of relationship problems that arise between good, intelligent people who just see things differently—so differently that they have trouble working things out.

The relationships could be between parents and children, spouses, other romantic partners, brothers and sisters, or friends. The psychological principles are basically the same in all these cases.

How can they both be right?

When I conduct therapy with families in conflict, I often have the following experience. As I listen to the individuals speak, they seem so reasonable—and yet they see each other as so *un*reasonable. As each person describes their view of the problems, their actions seem easily understandable as responses to the other person's unfair, hurtful behavior—but the same is true of the other person's description of the problems. Accounts of specific incidents are especially striking in this regard because they seem to be factual reports of what happened, not interpretations, and yet the two sets of facts are usually different in important ways.

Internally, I find myself nodding in agreement with whoever is speaking and sharing some of their feeling that the other person is the cause of the problem. If I were foolish enough to express my reaction, I might turn to the other family member and say something like, "How can you do this to him? It's just wrong."

Of course, when I turn to the other family member and hear her account of what happened, I generally have a similar reaction, along with a thought like, "Oh, he didn't mention *that*." The swinging of this pendulum, back and forth, is the result of looking at a situation from different perspectives. Each perspective seems so clear and compelling—until the other perspective is considered.

In putting the puzzle together, it helps to understand how the pieces came apart. Why do reasonable, well-intentioned people sometimes develop radically different perceptions of the same situation?

One reason is *self-serving bias:* the human tendency to interpret information in ways that favor our agendas and make us look good to ourselves. Self-serving bias is one of the most ubiquitous findings in social-cognitive psychology (Shepperd, Malone, & Sweeney, 2008); it is all over the place, and normal people do it all the time. Self-serving bias is what makes it seem like what is good for us is objectively, morally, and absolutely right.

When did the problem start?

Another factor is that people sometimes have different perceptions of the boundaries of the incidents in question—that is, the points in time at which the episodes begin and end. One reason why these perceptions differ is that interaction patterns often involve back-and-forth sequences that can be diagrammed like this (Shapiro, 2015a; 2015b):

.... B → A → B → A → B → A ....

One important example is a series of belittling comments that each person made in retaliation for a previous belittling comment by the other person, who made their comment in retaliation for something the first person said yesterday, and so forth. In these chains of causality, there are no cut-points that mark the beginning and end of episodes, but people often imagine that there are. This results in disagreements about when a conflict began and who started it.

Disagreements are usually consistent with self-serving bias: Both people believe the episode began with a hurtful behavior by the other person, and their own hurtful behavior followed as a justified, logical response. They are like two children in trouble for fighting who point to each other and say, "He started it!" It's likely that neither is lying because both believe in the validity of their perception.

When Person A is startled by Person B's behavior and says it occurred "for no reason," it's likely that there was a reason, but it occurred before Person A's definition of the episode. Behavior does not necessarily occur in response to the stimulus that immediately preceded it. Sometimes there are long delays between stimulus and response—which can make the response seem to occur out of the clear blue sky. We might blow up in reaction to an ordinary comment because we are fuming about something the person said a week ago.

When this type of misunderstanding occurs in couples or families, they can often learn a lot by pushing back the boundaries of the episodes until they take in more of the interaction history. One useful question is, "What was on your mind when you reacted to me like that?"

Self-fulfilling expectations

In every new interaction, each person's behavior is influenced by his memory of the other person's past behavior in similar situations. For example, if a husband believes his wife has unfairly criticized his past purchases of equipment for a hobby, he might overreact to an innocent question about an item he just bought. If the wife perceives him to be offended by a perfectly reasonable question, she might react by angrily citing past purchases of his that turned out to be poor uses of their money. This reaction might confirm the husband's initial fear that she would oppose his recent purchase, making him more angrily determined to defend it—and an argument is off and running.

In this sequence, the husband expected an argument, and he got one, but not for the reason he thought. His expectation of criticism was not confirmed because it was accurate but because he responded to the expected behavior before it happened—and thus caused it to occur.

When people expect anger and react by becoming mad themselves, they often elicit anger from someone who might not otherwise have gotten mad at them. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which people elicit what they expect and then believe their prediction was confirmed. For people in the midst of this interaction pattern, it can be hard to see what is happening, but slowing things down, stepping back, and talking things out can reveal this pattern—which might make it easy to prevent in the future.

The problem here is *time*—specifically, family members' confusion about the location in time of the causes of each other's behaviors. When reactions seem to make no sense as responses to the present, one hypothesis is that people are responding to memories of the past and/or expectations of the future.

It is useful to remember that people always have reasons for their behavior, even though the reasons might not be visible at the time the behavior occurs. We can usually make sense of these actions by expanding our conception of the episode's boundaries backward in time so they encompass the relevant history and forward in time, so they encompass the relevant expectations. When these memories and anticipations are put on the table and discussed, we have the information we need to correct misunderstandings, reassure fears, apologize for the pain we have caused, and make plans for interacting more transparently and happily in the future.