What is the Insight Mediator Looking for?

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Introduction

A lot of important work has been done, and still remains to be done, to better understand what Insight Mediators do to accomplish their goals. Gaining this understanding will be important for the work of training new Insight Mediators. In order to prepare this fourth Insight mediation working paper[1], Cheryl and Ken invited Mike Stebbins into the conversations. We are grateful for the contributions he brings and look forward to Mike's continued participation.

The focus of this paper is the question of our title: "*What is the Insight Mediator Looking for*?" After preparing and discussing a number of draft texts, we formulated the following five points. These points are not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, they represent insights we gained by drawing on Lonergan's self-reflective method to better understand Insight Mediation.

Ken prepared the initial drafts and then the three of us discussed the drafts, making changes along the way. At various moments throughout the paper, we have retained the first person singular accounts from Ken's original draft in this text. We have named our advanced-level Insight Mediator, "Marie."

(1) Clarifying the Question:

What Change is the Insight Mediator Looking for that has the Potential to Increase the Probability of Productive End Result?

We have formulated this question with the assumption that there is indeed some specific "thing" that our IM mediator, Marie, is looking for, even when she is open to a wide range of different possibilities, and even as she remains careful not to focus on any one particular event. This may sound like a contradiction. But it isn't. So, to clarify, Ken will give you an example illustrating what we mean.

This past weekend I was looking for a way to hang up my backyard bird feeder. The tree I had used last year was damaged in a storm and taken down this past summer. So I needed an alternative. I began by looking for another tree and I found it. But it didn't have a limb of the right strength at the right height to hang the feeder. So I made the decision that I will attach something to the tree to hang the feeder. I knew where the feeder needed to be located with respect to the tree trunk. So I knew I needed something to emulate a branch that would locate the feeder in that spot.

I could have gone online to look for a bird feeder "hanger" that I could buy. But I decided to see if I could find something in the jumble of stuff I keep around the house. Whenever I do a home repair job (which is often), I always keep all the leftovers. So I always have a considerable jumble of stuff around in the house and in the garage. I decided to search through this jumble.

I knew what type of result I needed to achieve. But I did not know how I was going to achieve this result. And so I did not know what sort of object I was looking for in searching through the jumble. Consequently, I had to keep my mind open to a very wide range of data and possible options. If I were to focus my mind on one thing, I knew I would not succeed. I had to pull my mind away from focusing on any one object.

What I did keep clearly focused in my mind, however, was the type of result I needed to achieve. This meant that as I pawed my way through the jumble of stuff, I was examining each object with a very particular question: "Will this achieve my result?" I examined a wide range of objects and discarded most of them in

[1] Working papers 1, 2, and 3 can be found on the *Insight Today* blog at https://www.insighttodayonline.com.

my pursuit of an answer to my question. Eventually, I hit on an insight: a flag pole holder. I needed one of those flag pole holder brackets that mounts on the side of a house with a short pole that goes up at a 45 degree angle. I found all but one of the pieces in my basement-garage jumble. And I found the final missing piece at my neighbourhood hardware store for a reasonable price. I spent Sunday afternoon mounting my bird feeder.

Thinking back on the operations my mind performed during this process, and thinking ahead to our conversation on Insight Mediation, I discovered that my bird feeder searching was similar to Marie's searching in an Insight Mediation.

We will draw on Bernard Lonergan's philosophy to explain this. We will use Lonergan' terminology with the assumption that, eventually, this may not be the ideal terminology to use when explaining or teaching IM (Insight mediation).

Lonergan coined the expression, *open heuristic concept* to explain what the mind is doing in asking questions and when searching for understanding. We have "something specific" in mind when we are searching, but we don't know what it is, so we keep ourselves open to a wide range of data and a wide range of options. Yet the "something specific" provides the criteria that will tell us when we have found what we're looking for.

This is what we mean when we ask the question: What is Marie looking for when she is mediating? There is an "open heuristic concept" that is focusing her mind and guiding her searching. In the remaining points, we present some features of this open heuristic concept.

(2) Evoking a Change in the Listener

Part-way through a mediation, our Insight Mediator, Marie, is looking to have a conversation with one of the parties, the speaker, that will evoke a change in the other party, the listener. This is important because mediators frequently ask questions in order to gain insights for themselves. At other times, they ask questions in order to evoke insights in the speaker. Marie, however, does not focus on either of these. Rather, she focuses on the listener while he listens to the speaker, and she is focused on the listener gaining an insight that results in a change in his pattern of listening to the speaker.

(3) Threat Feelings as Data

In the third point, we speak about the importance of threat feelings as the data that IM mediators explore. In conflict, parties display threat feelings in their reactions to each other, and it is essential for IM mediators to focus their questioning on these data. We will speak about these data in relation to our question: What is the Insight Mediator Looking for? To clarify, Ken provides a personal observation.

What never ceases to amaze me is that, while my own response to the display of threat feelings in conflict is generally to step away from the threat, Marie's response is always to step towards the threat. I noticed this again during a three-way conversation, in Marie's response to both me and the other participants. The participant's question and my own reply both focused on "how to get around" the problem posed by a party's display of threat feelings. Marie's reply, on the other hand, was straightforward. The Insight Mediator does not "get around" the threat feelings. Rather, she moves towards the threat feelings to explore them in order to discover something important.

This "something important," we believe, is central to what we are looking for with our question: What is the Insight Mediator Looking for? Marie's searching in a mediation seems to be guided by the assumption that exploring threat feelings achieves the result that is sought. On their own, however, simply naming or describing the threat feelings do not provide insights. IM mediators move into the threats in their

questioning, but they move through them and out the other side. We will say more about this further movement in the next two points. But the threat feelings do provide the required data. Insight Mediators need to attend to these data, and their questioning needs to focus on the threats.

(4) The Listener's Judgement Changes the Listener

In this fourth point, we speak about the insights that IM mediators seek to evoke in the listening party, notably the *reflective insights or judgements*.

In the past, we spoke about a successful IM mediation as one in which the mediator facilitates a transformation through insight. We've said that her job is to help parties make discoveries that transform their patterns of interaction. Their interaction shifts from a pattern governed by defend-attack responses to one governed by curiosity-cooperation responses.

In the years since the publication of *Transforming Conflict through Insight*, our understanding has developed so that we place more emphasis on the role of "reflective insights" in this transformative process. In the book we made a distinction between "direct insights" and "reflective insights.[2]" Since then, even though we realize that parties do gain direct insights that are important, we now focus more on "reflective insights" as playing the central role in the transformation.

After the publication of *Insight*, Lonergan shifted his language and used the term "judgement" in place of "reflective insight." When speaking to a wider public, we find that the word "judgement" usually evokes a range of images and meanings that get in the way of communication. Often the word "verification" provides a better alternative. But for the present purposes, for purposes of clarity among us, we would like to use the term "judgement" to refer to this cognitional operation.

We believe that what Marie looks for in a mediation (her open heuristic concept) is a change in the listener that begins to emerge when he makes the judgement that he is no longer certain about his prior understanding of the speaker. This judgement opens him to considering the possibility that his understanding of the other could be wrong in some important way. This "discovery" is not a direct insight, although it follows on a direct insight. It is not simply new information, although it follows from the disclosure of information that may be new in some way. Rather, it is a judgement. When he understands the "something new," he follows this by making the judgement that something important about his prior understanding of the other may not be correct. With this judgement, he becomes open to new information and new insights, and this changes his form of engagement with the other in the conflict.

(5) The Listener's Judgement about the Speaker's Value as Necessary Threat

In this final point, we ask: what special type of judgement has this effect of transforming the listener's pattern of involvement in conflict? There are many different judgements that parties make in a mediation that do not have this effect of transforming the conflict. What makes this special type of judgement different from the others?

We already know that this judgement is to be arrived at by exploring the parties' threat feelings. But we also know that mediators can explore threat feelings in ways that do not lead them to this special type of judgement. What should mediators be looking for to guide them in exploring the threat feelings?

Observing Insight Mediators, and thinking back about conversations we've had, we are struck by the way they speak about getting parties focused on the same information about their involvement in the conflict. We have asked ourselves: Same information about what? On each occasion, Marie's questioning evokes one party's articulation of something beneath her threat feelings, and then she turns to the other and

[2] We also spoke about "inverse insights." Since then, we no longer use the term "inverse insight" because we do not think it helps clarify what the mediator is doing.

asks for his understanding of what she's expressed. She is always looking to get parties to sit up and take notice of the same information. But it seems to be information about what lies behind or beneath the threat feelings. In the strategy, "Exploring Expected Futures" discussed in Working Paper #3, for example, the mediator sets up this conversation by exploring one party's expected dire future while the second party listens. Then, by asking the listener what he has understood from the first party's account, she is inviting the listener to compare what he just understood with his prior understanding. This can lead to the judgement discussed in the previous point. But our question is: Judgement about what?

We believe the judgement is effective in transforming conflict when it is about the value or disvalue that lies at the heart of the threat feeling. In Lonergan's terms, she is probing the *feeling as intentional response to value*[3]**.** Her probing seeks to unearth the value at the heart of the feeling. We believe that, in our analysis of the strategy, "Exploring Expected Futures," we arrive at a formulation of this objective when we speak about the IM mediator asking the speaker about the value she is protecting. When the listener understands the speaker's articulation of what she is protecting, he is often surprised. "I never expected that!" This surprise arises because he compares this with his own assessment of her intentions and judges that his prior understanding was not correct.

Here, we believe, is what the IM mediator is looking for. The mediator has created a situation in which the listener can safely listen to the speaker. The listener listens to the speaker answer the mediator's questions as Marie probes expected futures. Eventually, the listener understands something new, something he had not previously understood. *The listener makes the judgment that he is no longer certain that the value the speaker is pursuing or protecting necessarily threatens what is important to him.*

What is important for transforming the conflict is that the listener's judgement has a direct impact on his own threat feelings. Once the speaker is judged to be pursuing or protecting a sufficiently different value, one that does not actually threaten the value the listener has been protecting, the listener's own threat feelings begin to dissipate. The speaker's actions are not focused on harming him, they have a different objective. With this judgement, the listener experiences a release from his own need to protect something that is important for him. The speaker's actions do not aim at harming his own "something important," the value that underlies his own pursuits.

Our threat feelings arise because of what we understand and judge about the value that the other is pursuing or protecting. We have our own values that evoke our feelings, and when these values are threatened, we shift into defend-attack mode. In conflict, it is our interpretation of what the other is pursuing or protecting that threatens our values. When we make the judgement that our interpretation is not necessarily correct, this has an impact on our own threat feelings. Often enough this results in our threat feelings beginning to dissipate.

References

Melchin, Kenneth R. and Cheryl A. Picard, *Transforming Conflict through Insight.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.

Picard Cheryl A., *Practicing Insight Mediation.* Toronto: Univ

[3] See *Transforming Conflict through Insight* pgs. 84-90, and *Practising Insight Mediation* pgs. 44-47.