

Chapter 6

Observation and Observation Mixed With Evaluation

Attitudes, actions, and the way you see the world are the result of the autonomic nervous system moving between states of connection and protection.

—Deb Dana

The key distinction that considers observations alongside observations mixed with evaluation can support us in understanding how we witness the world around us and our reactions to it.

We have likely all experienced the dawning of awareness when what we thought was a description of sensory information turned out to be an observation mixed with judgment.

Exploring this key gives us the space for greater self-understanding, as well as for choice about where to place our attention.

The brain, an organ shaped by our history, aims to protect us. It quickly and subconsciously interprets sensory information and organizes it: safety or danger? Connection or protection? When integrating the NVC process, we are invited to focus awareness and curiosity on this biological reaction, bringing compassion to it. Taking a step back, we can reflect on the cues (observation) that ignited our assessment (evaluation) and explore whether our behavior stems from an impulsive reaction or from a mindful response. As we pause to observe, we create space for self-awareness. By recognizing what stimulates us, we can choose how to act. With

practice, we can also learn to discern whether we are reacting to something happening in the present moment or to cues from the past that have resurfaced.

Marshall Rosenberg frequently credited the philosopher J. Krishnamurti with saying that the ability to observe without evaluating is the highest form of intelligence.¹ Yet that in itself is an evaluation! Judgments and evaluations have a purpose; Rosenberg did not ask us to avoid them entirely. He encouraged us to be aware of and sort them from the sensory experience so that we can increase the likelihood of responding from conscious choice. Observing our thoughts without believing or acting upon them involves “metacognition”—the act of reflecting on our cognition (thinking process). In so doing, we tap into structures and functions of the brain that have evolved more recently. Cultivating a willingness and ability to observe with awareness, we can better understand ourselves, clarify our reactions, and when ready, direct our compassion to more effectively connect with others.

The Power and Limits of Evaluation

The capacity to quickly evaluate stimuli is a survival strategy of the brain. But the value of appraisal extends far beyond that. Evaluating what is safe and what is a threat contributes to the survival of our species. Our ability to assess can also be immensely valuable. Evaluations can help us to determine whether what we are experiencing aligns with needs. For example, if we are sharing a meal with friends, we may assess the situation and count joy, connection, and food among the needs being met. If we are hosting, we may also be meeting our need for

¹ See Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication*, 28.

contribution. In alignment with this need, we look for anything missing and discover the drinks are not on the table. We swiftly assess strategies to bring these to the table before acting.

As humans, we are also meaning-making creatures. Needs for understanding, an internalized sense of order, creativity, and purpose drive us to assign meaning to our world.

Evaluations, though, often incorporate thoughts, moralistic judgments, assumptions, and internalized norms. Our interpretations are narratives we have absorbed often without realizing it. When an observation is mixed with evaluation, we confuse thoughts, judgments, and overarching narratives with our sensory experience. We may state our evaluations as if they were facts. Mixing observations with evaluations in interpersonal relationships may be perceived as an attack or blame, activating defensiveness and emotional shutdown. When we mix observations with evaluations, we tend to react primarily from our internalized story rather than from the sensory experience. It is important to say that Rosenberg did not imply with this key differentiation that we should let go of our capacity to evaluate, but encouraged us to bring awareness to the process of mixing observations with evaluations.

Whenever we notice some intensity within, we might pause to witness our habitual thinking.² As we do so we may discover old interpretations and beliefs stemming from past experiences. As long as these unexamined associations continue to be recycled, they will continue to stimulate reactions. Bringing awareness to evaluative thoughts enables us to choose a different response and step into our power.

² For more information on pausing for self-empathy, see Chapter 14.

Observation

When we intentionally shift our attention to an observation, the first of four components in NVC expression (observation, feeling, need, request), we aim to identify to the best of our abilities the sensory input only. What do we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell that affects our experience? We might also observe thoughts, memories, and imagination, whether they arise as words or images. Concretely this may sound like: “When I hear/see . . .” or “When I remember (or imagine) seeing/hearing. . . .” The intention in sharing an observation is to create a shared reality on which to build connection.

What we observe is contingent upon a constellation of factors, such as specific time and context. When irritated, for example, chemicals in our brain change our perceptual processing, narrowing our focus on different stimuli. As the saying goes, focused on the trees, we miss the forest.

The NVC observation aims to sort our sensory experience from opinions, beliefs, and any framework or language that implies moralistic judgments. Pausing to observe, we take a step back and identify the sensory stimuli we are responding to. We can notice that our meaning-making mind is adding its preferred interpretations.

Language allows us to communicate our thoughts, and is a primary aspect of thinking. As a social construct, language per se is not observational. Words that refer to objects—“table” for example—seem observational. However, deeper inquiry suggests this view points to a social agreement of labeling crucial coexisting qualities—a piece of furniture with a flat top that provides a level surface on which objects may be placed. A table may be round or square, have

multiple legs, and be made of wood or plastic. “Privilege” is an abstract noun that aims to cluster many observational experiences. But it, too, is not observational. The point is that within our cultures, we are socialized to agree upon what we define as “table,” or “respect,” or “privilege.” The more conceptual agreement there is, the less we question our “observations.” The more emotional charge there is around an “observation,” the less agreement we experience. Ultimately, our growing awareness of the cultural lens allows us to decide how we want to see the world. A seed of choice lies in what meaning we assign to our “observations.”

It can be helpful to think of an observation as something a video camera might record—what we see or hear can be captured in a recording of the event. Staying with that metaphor, an observation mixed with evaluation is how the person behind the camera interprets what they see. This metaphor can be expanded. As we hold an observation with care and awareness, there is another crucial point to consider: Whoever is behind the video camera will direct it toward certain aspects of an event. The brain learns to register which details in an event are relevant to notice, particularly details perceived to relate to safety. For example, due to personal, cultural, and historical experiences regarding police, Black people generally are much more likely to notice the presence of police and place it in the foreground in relation to many other elements that may be present in the situation.

As we learn to identify an observation, we are called to consider that our attention is, both consciously and unconsciously, focused on one aspect of an experience. The lens through which

we observe is shaped by prior knowledge, expectations, past experiences, beliefs, and our quality of attention.³

This preprogrammed selectivity of stimuli explains significant differences in perceptions, feelings, and needs. For example, an Islamic person living in the United States is conditioned to place attention on different stimuli than an Islamic person living in Saudi Arabia. These variances in perception can be noted in personal and social identity groupings across the board. Our gender identity, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, and mental and physical abilities all influence our perceptions of reality, which are often amplified and compounded by intersectionality. A transwoman of color is likely to observe movement on a dark city street differently than a White cisgender woman, all other variables being equal. All our observations, influenced by personal, family, cultural, and systemic conditioning, are the result of filtering things out and including only what the brain registers as relevant. As much as we would like to think otherwise, the observation is still a subjective experience.

Holding these filters with care, we can acknowledge that the appraisal process varies, person to person. Any reaction we have is, in part, the result of the brain filtering for certain stimuli and interpreting it in a way that is unique to our experience. Trauma adds another layer of complexity. With such understanding and self-compassion, we can hold our entire experience—including ongoing reactivity—as sacred.

Rather than seeing these differences in observations and their appraisal as obstacles to connection, this diversity offers us an invaluable opportunity to appreciate the subtleties of being

³ The scientific term for this phenomenon is *inattentional blindness*. See Trafton Drew, Melissa L. H. Vo, and Jeremy M. Wolfe, "The Invisible Gorilla Strikes Again: Sustained Inattentional Blindness in Expert Observers," *Psychological Science* 24, no. 9 (2013): 1848–1853.

human. The more we can appreciate the multitude of observations that can be had, whether internal or external, the more we can grow in compassion and love. The path from evaluation to observation can be a rich territory of self-discovery, empowering us both intra- and interpersonally, as well as collectively.

Stephanie: I enter my daughter's room and feel shocked. The room is a total mess, I think. Asking myself what it is that I see, I take note of a wet towel on the bed, several pieces of clothing on the floor, paper, glue, and scissors on a bookshelf. This awareness helps me to understand the subconscious mental process that got stimulated by sensory information, what we call an "observation" in the NVC process.

I pause and see myself thinking (observing thoughts), "She is so messy!" And then I become aware of and observe a memory. As a child, my parents would never have allowed me to keep my room like that. This is part of why I feel overwhelmed as the need for order emerges in me.

When I walked into the room, I was not just reacting to the present moment. My primary reaction stemmed from past conditioning that I subconsciously carry within; I felt flooded by fear because my brain associated "disorder" with getting scolded, and my body remembered the feeling. In fact, my muscles constrict as I think of this. I observe my explicit memories, implicit associations, and body sensations. Breathing into this awareness, I feel empowered to understand where my reaction and evaluation came from. And owning my perceptions, I can dialogue with my family more skillfully.

Understanding Why We React

Understanding why we react can help us hold it with care. The subcortical regions of the brain appraise stimuli as safe, dangerous, or life-threatening. Based on previous similar experiences, the brain assesses a situation and directs us to safety, either through social engagement or through self-protection that mobilizes or immobilizes (fight, flight, or freeze). This survival-based biological system is so basic and ubiquitous that we share it with many other living beings, including invertebrates. The practice of redirecting the mind to observation empowers us to find our center and monitor sensory information, physical sensations, emotions, and mental activity. The autonomic nervous system, in particular, attends to cues from inside the body, the outside environment, and our relationship with people. This is called neuroception.⁴ Awareness of neuroception can support self-understanding and healing, even from trauma. With self-compassion, we can observe our inner state and the ways it has been shaped by the past. Author and licensed clinical social worker Deb Dana writes, “Neuroception launches a cascade of embodied events that become a story. . . . The physiological state creates a psychological story.”⁵ Thus, the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of experiences do not begin in the thinking brain, but rather in the autonomic nervous system. Pausing helps us interrupt habitual patterns of reacting based on past experiences (and the meaning our brain has made of them). It allows us to make new choices and thus reshape our autonomic, automatic, patterns of mobilization and immobilization.

⁴ The term *neuroception* was coined by Stephen W. Porges, “Neuroception: A Subconscious System for Detecting Threats and Safety,” *Zero to Three* 24, no. 5 (2004): 19–24.

⁵ Deb Dana, *Polyvagal Exercises for Safety and Connection* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020), 24.

The more we understand this process, the more we can step out of identifying with what is stirred in us. We may begin to observe how the mind attaches pleasant/unpleasant qualities to external or internal events. Self-observation also supports us in learning to see how raw sensory input gets quickly intertwined with evaluations. Gradually, we become more aware of how the focus and interpretation of our experiences are affected by our history and conditioning.

It is worth noting that how we perceive and interpret stimuli is biased in such a way that we only take in what supports our particular worldview and the emotion/mood we are feeling at the moment. We are affected by our emotions, our overarching emotional storage system, and the body which stores this energy in motion. This is one more way that our physiological state connects with the story and lens that we filter information from. As the old adage goes, “We see things not as they are, but as we are.”⁶

Our emotions anchor themselves in our body around core beliefs we internalized from moments of intense stress or trauma, especially during early childhood when we did not have easy access to resources and/or the capacity to protect ourselves. Perhaps we heard the messages that formed these core beliefs from parents or other adults. Then, in an attempt to guide and shield us from future pain, our minds recorded or crafted them. Core beliefs can be about ourselves: “I always mess things up in relationships,” or “there’s something basically wrong with me.” We may have core beliefs about other people: “I’ve got to look out for myself because no one else is,” or “People of a different ethnic group, religion, or gender are threats to people like me.” And they might be about the world: “It’s dangerous out there!”

⁶ This quote has been attributed to the Talmud, Kant, Anais Nin, and others. In other words, the origin and translation are uncertain; the version we collected most likely comes from a text on oration published by Harvard in 1891.

We might harbor such subterranean limiting beliefs for decades. Yet, if we become aware of them and decide they no longer serve us, we can (with empathy, and compassion from others, and sometimes through trauma-release support) loosen their grip and learn to embrace our history with compassion. We might ask ourselves which thoughts come up regularly when we find ourselves in challenging situations. What have we learned in the past that now limits us?

In discovering that a core belief we no longer wish to subscribe to has touched our present reality, we can root ourselves in the power of the observational mind. We might review our actions, reactions, and inactions. Mindfully observing the emotions that arise, we make space for our feelings without fully identifying with them. We can pause and ask ourselves whether there are connections between a memory and how we think, feel, and behave today. As we separate what we actually see, hear, or otherwise sense from the stories or beliefs we have developed about similar situations, a path for new interpretations and responses opens. Beginning to connect with the inner and outer resources that can help us interrupt the thoroughfares of habit, we may cultivate more personal power, day by day.

Clarifying What Is Ours

Observation is a practice that can help us connect the dots between our reactivity and the stories we tell ourselves. The more we become aware of the train of spiraling thoughts, the more we can redirect our attention. In so doing, we empower ourselves to connect to a broader perspective of what is observable. With practice we may be able to do so also in moments of dysregulation. We can learn to observe and appreciate our thoughts,⁷ realizing that they are our

⁷ This is what Rosenberg called “enjoying the jackal show.” By playfully calling it a “show,” we can choose to watch it rather than be an actor in it. See more about the jackal show in chapter 15.

thoughts and not our direct experience. By differentiating between external cues and our brain/body's reactions, we avoid getting sucked into automatically believing they are the truth. That space allows us to distinguish between habitual, repetitive thoughts and interpretations, and what is actually happening now.

Evidence shows that when the brain is processing a stimulus, there is a time frame during which additional or new information cannot be addressed. The technical term for this is the “psychological refractory period.” A pause is crucial to allow the brain to let in more information and choose a response. Without that pause, we will mindlessly react to what we take in through our macro lens (magnifying one object) rather than a wide-angle lens (allowing for many objects to be included in the picture). Our pause calls us to awareness so as to nurture a broader perspective.

Being fully present can also be a gift when we find ourselves in boundless joy. Then, too, we can ground ourselves in observation of the sensory input, fully savoring what exactly contributes to our delight. Attunement to the observation may amplify a cascade of nurturing emotions. In this unfolding, our presence frees us to open as the moment calls, expanding our awareness within and without.

The Power of Observation in Social Change

Deepening our self-connection naturally opens the door to our sense of connection with others. Nurturing curiosity grows our capacity to observe our own body language and that of others—eye contact, facial expression, tone of voice, posture, gestures, timing, and intensity of

response. Observing is a step toward determining the needs in play, and this information will contribute to our connection with others in the energy of life.

An observation, despite the variety of angles it can be made from, is typically less arguable than a judgment and less emotionally charged. So observations can de-escalate conflict based on different interpretations. Observations create more space for sharing context and increase the possibility of a shared reality on which to base the conversation.

Even so, sensory input—an observation—can be processed, or perceived, differently. Bringing attention to the host of internal and external stimuli and how differently they can be processed, contributes to holding with loving awareness the complexity of both our and other people's experiences. Acknowledging these differences empowers us to connect with one another's humanity, rather than trying to convince others to see it our way.

Humbly, we can recognize that we are limited by our viewpoint and do not have observational access to others' feelings, needs, and intentions. While we do not really know all that goes on, we can choose to stay grounded in the information that reaches us through the senses.

It is our understanding that the distinction which Rosenberg offered between an external stimulus and an internal stimulus offers the foundation for growing an awareness of systemic patterns beyond single instances of experience. Those patterns transcend individual past experiences that still inform perceptions in the present, such as thoughts, beliefs, trauma reactions, and implicit associations. Those patterns encompass recurring and sometimes harmful

stimulations at the systemic level and can therefore be understood as included in a deeper level of internal processing of external stimuli.

Expanding our awareness so as to include the systemic patterns related to the observation will offer us important clues that can contribute to connecting with someone else's experience. Sometimes, an observation standing alone does not convey a larger, systemic reality. To take in the wholeness of a picture from a broader perspective, we can take several steps back, as if observing a mural. We may notice aspects we were previously oblivious to.

Stephanie: Yesterday I approached an unhoused, dark-skinned woman, wearing a hijab. I held a bag with a comforter in my hand. As I approached her, I said, "Good morning." She glanced at me and then bent into her tent, reemerging with her phone. She kept her phone in what seemed to me a tight hand, her elbow bent at mid-chest, while I asked if she wanted the comforter.

This is the external observation that I can report. If I stay with that visual observation, I feel confused, and connect with my need for understanding. It is only when I take into consideration the systemic aspects related to the visual observation that her behavior starts to make more sense to me. Hate crimes against Muslim people have been on the rise,⁸ as well as violence toward unhoused people by housed people.⁹ When I observe myself considering those

⁸ "Anti-Muslim Hatred Has Reached 'Epidemic Proportions' Says UN Rights Expert, Urging Action by States," *UN News: Global Perspectives, Human Stories*, March 4, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1086452>.

⁹ Cynthia Griffith, "Crimes Against Homeless People Increase Again in 2021," *Invisible People*, March 5, 2021, <https://invisiblepeople.tv/crimes-against-members-of-the-homeless-population-increase-again-in-2021/>.

frightening statistics in conjunction with my visual observation, I experience feelings of angst and sorrow. I want all people to be safe and have their basic survival needs met.

Depending on what aspects related to the observation I am holding in my awareness, my response to the woman will take a very different shape. If I only attended to my sensory observation, I might connect with needs for care and connection that I would perceive as unmet. However, if I held in my awareness these systemic patterns, I would connect with needs for compassion and care. I would then have a framework to understand how my approach likely stimulated feelings and needs in her that would not have been stimulated had she been a housed, non-Muslim, light-skinned passerby.

The observation related to our natural sensory experience does not integrate our constructed reality which is based on domination and power differentials. With awareness of the lens through which we see the world, we can devote our energies to gradually “correcting” our myopia, or shortsightedness. We can mourn the gap between our sensory processing and a wider awareness of the inequities among human beings linked to their social location.

While some of us may have a very attuned awareness of certain patterns, we may be completely oblivious of others.

Stephanie: I have never been unhoused, so it takes some intentionality for me to acquire a systemic lens in that regard. The more we develop a systemic lens, the more we can connect at a deeper level with people whose social location is very different from our own. This wide-angle view allows us to include aspects beyond external sensory stimuli and individual internal

observations. We are empowered to see themes arising from collective persistent attitudes, and the chronic stress-inducing patterns that influence how we see the world.

Each instance in isolation carries one message; compounded, they can deliver quite another. As author and activist Steven Wineman reminds us: “To be a member of a disenfranchised race or ethnic group or gender or class or sexual orientation, or to be a child confronted at every turn with an overwhelming system of adult power, is to be bombarded on a daily basis with messages that who you are as a person does not matter in the larger scheme of things; that you are not as good, not as smart, not as powerful, not as valid in the core of your being as the enfranchised others. Those messages are conveyed through acts of violence and gross brutality, such as sexual violence and gay bashing; they are manifested in material conditions such as severe poverty; and they are also encoded in countless mundane events which are invisible to the dominant group. The totality of these messages can be chronically traumatizing to the extent that they repeatedly create experiences of violation and powerlessness among oppressed people.”¹⁰

The practice of Nonviolent Communication aims to foster compassionate, heart-to-heart connection and to care for the needs of all people.¹¹ We are aware that including a systemic perspective when discussing this first NVC component may be controversial. We understand the observation component to be a strategy for connection and shared reality: Including a systemic perspective may support those needs.

¹⁰ Wineman, *Power-Under*, 42.

¹¹ Recognizing this goal allows us to ask ourselves: “With this interpretation of the components of NVC, who is included?”

According to Rosenberg, an observation is “specific to time and context”¹² rather than a tool to reach some “objective truth” around the human experience. The systemic context of Chinese people living in China, for example, is different from the context of Chinese people living in the United States. And the context of Chinese people living in the United States is different from the context of White people living in that same country.

When we refine an observation, we tease out opinions from observations. Nevertheless, recurring patterns of systemic oppression are not opinions. These patterns are often measurable. That many people find the data difficult to really take in is, in and of itself, one such pattern. If we make observations without taking into account these systemic patterns that deeply condition our experiences, our observations will lead us to different feelings and needs. Connecting with a wider frame informs what we will observe and how we will make sense of it.

Patterns of systemic oppression stimulate internal psychological effects not readily observable to the person with systemic power, privilege, or social status within the dominant culture. But those psychological effects do have observable symptoms. Here are some examples: In the United States, Black men are 30 percent more likely and Black women 60 percent more likely to be diagnosed with high blood pressure than White men and women respectively. Black infants have a 2.2 times higher infant mortality rate than White infants, regardless of the socio-economic status of the mother. Black children are 61 percent more likely than White children to attempt suicide as high schoolers as a result of depression.¹³

¹² Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication*, 26.

¹³ Mary-Frances Winters, *Black Fatigue: How Racism Erodes the Mind, Body, and Spirit* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2020), 71–72.

For those of us who are not affected by those systemic recurring patterns, the “observation” of systemic realities may just seem a cognitive exercise more closely linked to an evaluation. As such, it may be perceived as more disconnecting than connecting. Yet for those of us who live or witness day after day those dynamics, the systems that define power and privilege are omnipresent and shape our moment-to-moment inner experience.

Privilege has sometimes been described as whatever it is you do not have to think about. Understanding privilege at the personal and interpersonal level, we can easily hear blame. But the concept of privilege is connected to a cluster of concrete, measurable life experiences tied to the domination structures we continue to maintain. It is structural and unrelated to our attitude, and yet understanding privilege gives us greater choice in responding to life and people around us. When we realize we have greater access to power and resources, even if just in certain areas of life, we might wake up to realities that we are not accustomed to seeing, mourn the disparities in life that are linked to the systems of domination that are in place, and humbly use whatever privilege we do have to support more equity in the world.

We believe Rosenberg is addressing the systemic level when he talks about “gangs” in order to refer to “school systems, governments, police, corporations.”¹⁴ Learning to track the “invisible” patterns that lead to the staggering statistics we touched on and many other such data points is a challenging journey for White people. It requires tremendous courage and tenderness. This journey is, in our understanding, a key to connecting with the life context of another person’s core subjective experience, and thus is essential to the possibility of truly meeting each other. Certified trainer and assessor Roxy Manning has coined the term “systemic observation”

¹⁴ Rosenberg, *Heart of Social Change*, 10–11.

as a way to take into account the repeating patterns that reinforce separation and choicelessness.¹⁵ This wide-angle lens offers a broader scope with which to witness chronic internal reactivation by stimuli linked to the structures and systems we are all immersed in and by which we are all affected differently.

While bringing attention to these patterns can support us in growing greater awareness, there are also potential pitfalls. Attending to a wider picture, we may risk losing the specificity of the NVC observation. That specificity often supports heart-to-heart connection. The question then is how to remain attentive to systemic patterns while also offering enough specificity to move hearts. There is no either/or here.

Another potential risk is that in our desire to bring attention to systemic patterns, we may unwittingly cast people into categories. For example, clustering all Muslims as one group leads us to believe that each and every one experiences life in the same way. We then easily assume that all of them are fearful of living in the United States. When our “systemic observations” are still based on narratives of separation, we can unwittingly continue to reinforce a mentality of “us” vs. “them.” While growing an awareness of systemic patterns can support understanding, connection, and a shared reality, we also want to maintain awareness of the power to choose. Others are not bound by our interpretations, even if based on systemic facts.

Stephanie: While I found it supportive to uphold a systemic awareness around the unhoused Muslim person, I still want to stay curious and not jump to conclusions around her

¹⁵ Roxy Manning, “Unpacking Observations” (unpublished article, quoted with permission).

unique experience with me. Otherwise, I risk losing the opportunity to connect with her, based on a systemic narrative that I paradoxically hold onto in order to connect.

Systemic awareness can support a shared understanding of the depth and intensity of the needs stimulated by an external stimulus. As Manning writes, “If the intention of naming the observation is to create a shared reality . . . we often cannot have a shared reality without understanding the internal and systemic observations from the perspective of the person stimulated.”¹⁶ The question then is: how can we grow a systemic awareness, rooted in interdependence, as a humble integrating act of the collective and the individual? Any little step we can take in the direction of such integration supports us in creatively attuning to strategies that address the individual and also reshape systemic layers to better serve all beings and the earth. Attending to our observations can become a spiritual practice that invites us to be present with what is, rather than believing our stories, assumptions, or interpretations about what is. And it can become a practice that contributes to shifting the social landscape we live in.

This key distinction supports us in cultivating mindfulness in the present moment. With it, we can differentiate a witnessing awareness from mental activity that interprets and classifies experiences, both in the moment and systemically. In that sense, the observation can help us identify and frame stimuli in new ways, so we can release fixed views related to shared social constructions. The observation can become a fulcrum that supports us in reaching deep within ourselves and reaching out to all life with greater compassion.

¹⁶ Roxy Manning, “Unpacking Observations” (unpublished article, quoted with permission).

Summary

- This key distinction hinges on the understanding that an observation can be external (sensory stimuli) and internal (thoughts, beliefs, trauma reactions, implicit associations).
A systemic awareness around the chronic nature of certain stimuli due to the impact of the structures and systems we live in can support more connection. The observation is still a subjective experience.
- The evaluation consists of thoughts, judgments, assumptions, and internalized norms due to socialization and our personal history.
- Acknowledging how observations can be mixed up with evaluations can prompt us to learn about the lenses of others, especially those with less privilege, so as to expand our understanding and support deeper connection.
- Redirecting the mind to sensory stimuli, we can become increasingly aware of the ways our “emotional storage” influences what we see, then intentionally expand our view with a wide-angle lens.

Walking the Talk: A Life Example From Brazil

by Yuri Haasz, CNVC certified trainer

In my earliest memory, I huddled with many people in a dark place, fear and tension heavy in the air. Our Jewish family and community drew together in the bomb shelter; Israel was at war in 1973. Throughout my life, this event and others like it were woven together in a narrative of the “others” who wanted me and my family dead. They wanted

all of us Jews dead. We had to defend ourselves to survive. This ubiquitous story was reaffirmed in school history books, in public commemorations, and in the names of streets and squares.

Decades later, I dove into academic research on the Palestine question during my master's degree, only to have my world undone. Researching in the field, doing human rights work, and most importantly, discovering the Israeli new historians and like sources, I learned that a host of facts had been withheld from the narrative I had been fed growing up. To my shock, these facts around the events of 1948 and beyond, registered in the Israeli government archives, had been legally kept secret for decades. And even after coming to light, they were—and still are—denied by official institutions. These facts, continuously culled for the construction of a contemporary collective narrative, can be confirmed by eyewitnesses to this day. They are also supported by the evidence of destroyed Palestinian villages.

When Israel was created in 1948, nationalist Jewish (Zionist) militias crafted the “Plan Dalet,” a systematic expulsion of the Palestinian people from lands where Palestinians composed 95 percent of the population at that time. These Zionist militias planned strategic massacres to shock and scare the people so they would flee. I have replaced my narrative of “fighting to defend ourselves” with a new narrative that I now believe to be true, however painful it is: “It was an ethnic cleansing.”

This is how my family “inherited” Israel and how my world came to be. It is also the history and origin of Palestinian anger and frustration. Falling upon this new perception, my world collapsed; my identity was displaced. I began to rethink my life and what I wanted for myself and others in this world. I started to speak out, to create

human rights projects, to engage in difficult dialogues for change. I found myself wanting justice and reparations for Palestinians, wanting new and different strategies for Jewish autonomy that didn't inflict domination over another people.

My former understanding of the world had been wholly shaped by the lens of a single story. Evaluations, judgments, theories, thoughts, and assumptions filled the gaps between real-world events to create the dominant narrative of my people. I began to focus my personal lens on the observable facts, a shared reality gleaned from sources on both sides. Critical Jewish academics who dare to challenge the national narrative cite evidence from Israeli archives. The documented reality of Palestinian survivors is further confirmed by evidence in the field. My understanding of the world at once was completely transformed, and my perception of my own needs and strategies along with it.

Practice: Expanding Observational Awareness

We cannot sense another person or ourselves when we are distracted by our unbridled thoughts.

This exercise is intended to support the integration of both brain hemispheres when practicing being present, also called "presence." While the left hemisphere picks up on language, the right hemisphere interprets nonverbal communication. Please find a quiet space and a partner. A human partner ensures verbal dialogue, yet this practice may be adapted to experience sensing with any being you choose to become present with. Begin by just reading through the practice together, for greater ease and flow in the moment. Then, decide together who will speak first.

We imagine this exercise will take no more than thirty minutes, counting transition time between speaking and listening.

Instructions for the speaker

Share what is on your mind/heart with an approximate intensity level of a maximum of five on a scale of one to ten, so there is enough emotional “charge” to give it life, without being so much that the charge could distract from learning.

Instructions for the listener

While the speaker shares, bring your attention to their body language—movement of the eyes, facial expressions, pauses, postures, gestures. Also attend to their speech patterns—tone of voice, intensity of voice, rhythm of speech. Make a mental note of the ways their nonverbal communication is connected with the content of the sharing. If you feel inclined to mirror the speaker’s body language, physically or mentally, we invite you to do so if it feels natural and easy, not exaggerated. Sensing into your own body, notice: How does that feel? Do any particular sensations come up? Any specific emotions?

Take a moment for both of you to center yourselves. Recalling the awareness practices you may have done individually from the beginning of this book, sink into the present moment, perhaps by sensing places in the body where tension may be held and then relaxing them. Acknowledge any thoughts that arise and allow them to pass, if they will. You may return to give these thoughts focused attention later. Invite your awareness to open to mutuality. When ready, convey this to your partner with a gentle nod of the head.

- Set a timer for five minutes and begin. The speaker shares about what is on their mind or heart.

- Once the five minutes are over, pause together, then set a timer for three minutes. Regain a sense of presence as needed. The listener now reflects back, in observational language, the body communication witnessed during specific moments of the sharing. For example, “When you were talking about your son’s birthday, you paused, then the pitch of your voice rose. Your hands that had been resting on your lap until then moved up to your heart. And then you laughed.”
- Reverse roles.
- At the end, set a timer for four minutes. Speaker and listener exchange their feelings, needs, and insights about what just happened.
- When the practice is complete, gratitude may be offered between partners.