

Beyond “Evaluation”

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Some controversy in the NVC network has been associated with the question “Is X an evaluation?” (where “X” represents whatever word is under discussion). I believe that this question often creates more confusion than clarity. In this message, I offer a somewhat technical approach to exploring the risks of using a particular word. [2117 words]

To me, **the idea of an “evaluation,” as it is used in NVC circles, smashes together a bunch of different ideas, which are better kept separated if one wants to develop a nuanced understanding.**

Distinguishing “observation” from “evaluation” is a central tenet of NVC, and is covered in Chapter 3 of Marshall’s book “Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life.” That chapter says many helpful things. However, one thing that I do not find in the entire book is a *definition* of the word “evaluation.”

I suspect that lack of a definition reflects a desire in Marshall to “paint in broad brushstrokes,” to offer potent general ideas, for the purpose of interrupting old ways of thinking and pointing us in new directions. I believe what he said about “evaluation” was offered as a tool for breaking mental habits — but the concept of “evaluation” wasn’t intended, and doesn’t serve us well, as a precise tool for detailed analytic thinking.

In classes I’ve taught, I’ve seen students get into serious trouble if they make the mistake of taking things Marshall said too literally, believing that the catchy sayings Marshall offered are absolute truths which are meant to be applied as rules in all situations. I think the idea of “evaluation” is like that — useful as a high-level idea, but liable to get people into trouble if they try to apply it as a precision tool in a way that it was never designed to be used.

I see the question “Is X an evaluation?” as an inadequate question for supporting nuanced understanding. What might be better?

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First of all, I am concerned that the form “Is X a Y?” is itself problematic, and can lead to inappropriate static generalizations. That’s because the meaning and nature of a word depends on the context in which the word is used, and who is experiencing the word.

Consider the word “love.” Is “love” a noun? A verb? An emotion? A need? An endearment? A tennis score? The answers depend on the context, and **to omit the context guarantees that any answer will be *wrong* in some contexts.**

So, a more precise question form might be “*In situation T, if person A says sentence S to person B, is person B likely to hear the word X as a Y?*” Or, more concisely, “*In context C, is X likely to be heard as a Y?*” Even more concisely, but less accurately, we can reduce this to “*In context C, is X a Y?*”

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What are some questions we might ask instead of asking “Is X an evaluation?”

Here are some suggestions that might provide a more robust framework to support understanding:

1. In context C, **is X an *idea* or an *observation*?**
2. In context C, if X is an idea, **is X an *abstract concept*, or an *interpretation of observations in a particular situation*?**
3. In context C, to what extent **does X relate to a person or people?**
4. In context C, **to what extent is X likely to be heard as implying a *value judgment of “bad” (or “good”)*?** (Example: “They are skillful” is likely to be heard as implying a value judgment.)
5. In context C, **to what extent is X likely to be heard as implying a *moral judgment of “bad” (or “good”)*?** (Example: “They are selfish” is likely to be heard as implying a moral judgment.)
6. In context C, **is X *meant* to imply a moral judgment? And is there likely to be an opportunity to address any misunderstandings about this?**
7. In context C, **is X likely to trigger intense feelings? And is the context likely to support *productively processing those feelings*?**
8. in context C, **is X likely to support increased understanding, compassion, and empowerment?**

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Let’s run through an example. Consider the word “domination”, in two different contexts.

In context P, the personal context, someone says to their partner, “*You’re trying to dominate me!*”

In context T, the teaching context, Marshall says:

MRB: *Life-alienating communication both stems from and supports hierarchical or domination societies, where large populations are controlled by a small number of individuals to those individuals, own benefit.* [“Nonviolent Communication”, Chapter 2]

Let’s try applying the questions.

1. Applying question #1, the usage in context P, “*You’re trying to dominate me!*” reflects an *idea* about what is happening in a particular situation. In context T, “*domination societies*” is also an idea, although not about a particular situation. In both cases, you can’t see “domination” with a video camera, so it’s an *idea*. I believe that, **while sometimes expressing ideas can lead to disconnection, the likelihood of an idea stimulating disconnection depends on the answers to other questions.**
2. Applying question #2, in the usage in context P, the characterization “*dominate*” is clearly an interpretation of some underlying events that were observed.

However, in context T, “*domination societies*” is an abstract concept but *not* an

interpretation of particular underlying observations. "Domination societies" is simply an *idea* that exists independent of any particulars — and independent of any observations. Things would change if one were to say, "Feudal Europe was a domination society" — that sentence offers an *interpretation*, because it is about a particular situation, and offers a conclusion reached on the basis of underlying observations.

As I have defined these terms, **both abstract concepts and interpretations are products of our thoughts, but "observations" are only relevant to interpretations, not to abstract concepts (because the latter are not about anything in particular)**. When Marshall invites us to "maintain a separation between our observations and our evaluations," I believe he is referring to what I am calling interpretations, but not to abstract concepts. In the quote above, when Marshall refers to the abstract concept "domination societies," he offers an explanation of what he means, but that explanation *does not contain an observation*, something that could be captured with a video camera. He can't offer an observation, because he is talking at an abstract level.

3. Applying question #2, in the usage in context P, "dominate" relates to what is happening between two particular people. In context T, "domination societies" relates to a phenomenon among groups of people, but at this level, the term is not being applied to any particular person or group.

My sense is that **when a term relates to a person or people, this increases the possibility that it might stimulate disconnection**. *The risk is greater if the usage relates to a particular person or people. However, the mere fact that an idea relates to a person or people is not by itself sufficient to predict that disconnection is likely.*

4. Applying question #4, I personally do not interpret "dominate" in context P, or "domination societies" in context T, as implying *value judgments*. The notion of a *value judgment* is a bit unclear, so you might have a different opinion.
5. Applying question #5, in context P, I suspect the listener is likely to hear the sentence "*You're trying to dominate me!*" as implying a moral judgment ("you are bad"). I expect this usage is very likely to stimulate disconnection.

In context T, **when Marshall uses the term "domination societies," I believe it's likely that some people might perceive a moral judgment of such societies being implied by the term. Some people won't perceive a moral judgment, and will instead see "domination" as a technical description of what happens in particular types of societies**. The possibility of moral judgment being perceived is somewhat less problematic (less likely to produce disconnection), because what is being talked about is abstract, not about a particular society, or a particular person.

I don't know how Marshall thought about this term.. I have a guess that he might have been deliberately playing with a provocative term that had a little edge of moral judgment to it for some people, as a way of getting people's attention. But, he did this in a context where the overall message was one of moving beyond moral judgment. I imagine any unease in people about a possible moral judgment eventually was typically soothed, as people came to

understand the overall purpose of supporting more care and connection for everyone.

6. Applying question #6, in context P, I suspect the speaker saying "*You're trying to dominate me!*" intends to imply a moral judgment. This intention contributes to a high likelihood of the statement stimulating disconnection.

In context T, I suspect and hope that Marshall did not mean to imply a moral judgment when he used the term "*domination societies*." (I know I don't mean to imply judgment, when and if I use the term. But, I've grown sensitive to the way people react to the term, and sometimes use something else.)

Fortunately, **in a teaching context, there are likely to be opportunities to clear up any misunderstandings that might arise.** In the example, Marshall is likely to be able to say more, and connect with people in a way that supports the eventual emergence of an understanding that moves beyond any associations of moral judgment.

The teaching context matters. If someone walks up to a political adversary and says, "I'm frustrated that the U.S. is a domination society," this is likely to stimulate disconnection, and there probably won't be a chance to clear up any misunderstanding that is involved. I believe that **what language is useful in a teaching context is often different than what language is useful in interpersonal contexts.**

7. Applying question #7, in context P, the statement "*You're trying to dominate me!*" seems likely to trigger intense feelings. If the pair of people are walking through a grocery store when this is said, it's likely to trigger an unpleasant response, and there probably won't be a convenient opportunity to process the feelings that arise. On the other hand, if the statement is made during a couples counseling session, there are likely to be opportunities to process the feelings that are stimulated. In this case, even though intensity was stimulated, the statement could eventually lead to more honesty and closeness.

In context T, where Marshall says what he does, I don't think his words about "domination societies" are likely to stimulate intense emotions in most people. (Though, I've seen the term stimulate intensity for at least one person.) If intensity is stimulated in a live workshop (as opposed to when someone is reading Marshall's book), there is likely to be an opportunity to process the emotions, and for connection to be restored.

My sense is that **stimulating intense emotions is dangerous in contexts without any container to hold those emotions, but can be part of growth and healing, in contexts where intensity can be adequately cared for.** This affects the safety and utility of using particular language.

8. Applying question #8, in context P, the statement "*You're trying to dominate me!*" might ultimately lead to more understanding, compassion, and empowerment — it very much depends on the capacities within the particular relationship. However, there would probably be more effective, less disconnecting, ways to raise the same issues. I'd likely encourage different ways of expressing, given the chance.

In context T, my sense is that **Marshall's rhetoric usually lead to much more**

understanding, compassion, and empowerment for the people who listened to what he said.

This happened even though, in this case, he used an abstract concept related to people that I imagine some people might initially have heard as implying an edge of moral judgment.

I want to assess our use of language based on the results that it produces in the particular context where it is used. To me, this example illustrates the principle that the forms of NVC are not ends in themselves — what really matters is whether or not we are ultimately serving connection.

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Having gone through this analysis, I experience more clarity about why I am much more worried about the statement *“You’re trying to dominate me!”* than I am about Marshall’s use of the term *“domination societies.”*

I believe a similar analysis can be applied to other words that people are concerned about. I hope that this approach might support a more nuanced understanding of when words are likely to be helpful, and when they’re not.

If this message contributed to you in some way, I invite you to let me know.