

What Is An Observation In NVC?

Rachelle Lamb

NVC does not mandate that we remain completely objective and refrain from evaluating. It only requires that we maintain a separation between our observations and evaluations. NVC is a process language that discourages static generalizations; instead, evaluations are to be based on observation specific to time and context.

—Marshall Rosenberg

For those who are familiar with Nonviolent Communication, you already know that one of the 4 steps of the NVC process (typically the first) is to be able to make a clear observation. My own approach to teaching OBSERVATIONS is very simple and based on the above excerpt from Marshall's book. I offer exercises similar to those in Marshall Rosenberg's book *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Chapter 3: *Observing Without Evaluating*) to help people recognize the distinct difference between observations and evaluations.

For instance, for each of the examples below, discuss which are evaluations and observations.

The speaker was unprofessional.

The speaker arrived 50m late for his presentation.

Charlie behaved selfishly.

Charlie skipped to the front of the queue.

Do you notice the difference?

For in-person trainings I typically devote an hour to the discussion. What people report during the exercise is that it's much harder than they initially imagined it would be to come up with a clear observation. They are often surprised to realize that much of the time, they initiate their most challenging and touchy conversations with evaluations instead of observations which almost always makes matters worse.

I also use the following analogy that Marshall Rosenberg regularly used: a tape recorder or camera can record the facts of an event, but it can't record an evaluation. Evaluating is what your mind does after you see or hear something whereas a non distorting camera lens will capture what's in front of it.

I ask people the following: **Can you formulate an observation that you and those you're engaged in conversation with can reasonably agree on? Can you describe what actually happened instead of your interpretation of it? This doesn't mean that people will *welcome* or *appreciate* our observations, often they don't, especially if unsavoury things are being pointed out.**

For instance, "When you tell our son he's lazy and will never amount to anything (observation), I feel sad and concerned (feelings), because I value respectful and supportive conversations with our son (need), can you tell me what's happening for you in those moments when you speak to him that way? (request)"

There's no guarantee that what you've said, which begins with a clear observation of what the other person has just spoken, won't generate defensiveness. It stands a better chance

however of leading to a productive dialogue and is infinitely better than saying, “You’re destroying our child’s self-esteem!”

I tell people not to expect an observation to be “connecting”. **It’s usually not.** The connection happens at the level of **feelings and needs**, not when reference is made to the external stimulus that is bothering us.

Think Like A Screenwriter

I ask people to use all of their senses to describe what’s in front of them so that any person who isn’t present could easily recreate the scene in their own mind. Sight and hearing will usually be the most heavily engaged.

I suggest that they imagine themselves to be screenwriters whose job it is to descriptively flesh out the actors’ roles. It won’t be helpful if the screenwriter writes, “John treats his mother disrespectfully after 2 minutes of conversation.” This will confuse the actors and provide no direction of what they need to say and do.

The screenwriter must include both dialogue and actions: John is seated at the table. He looks across the table to his mother and yells, “You’re a terrible mother! I hate you!!” and swipes his plate of uneaten bacon and eggs to the floor with his right hand, breaking the plate, and then abruptly leaving the room slamming the door full force behind him. The mother starts crying as she moves to pick up the broken pieces on the floor.

You can clearly see what happened right?

If a person can’t make a clear observation, it will be almost impossible for them to proceed to the next step of feelings and needs because they’ll likely find themselves embroiled in a dispute about what actually happened. “It’s not true! I wasn’t inconsiderate!” We all know that vicious cycle!

How To Make A Clear OBSERVATION

- Learn to clearly and accurately describe what is *actually happening*.
- Be clear. Be specific. Be descriptive.
- Speak to the words, behaviours and actions that are observable by everyone who is present.
- Leave out your evaluations and interpretations.
- You’ll get an opportunity to articulate what’s happening *inside you* when you get to your feelings and needs.

More from Chapter 3 of Marshall’s book: “We subsequently worked together to create a list identifying *specific behaviors* on the part of the principal that bothered them, and made sure that the list was free of evaluation. For example, the principal told stories about his childhood and war experiences during faculty meetings, with the result that meetings sometimes ran 20 minutes overtime. When I asked whether they had ever communicated their annoyance to

the principal, the staff replied they had tried, but only through evaluative comments. They had never made reference to specific behaviors—such as his story telling—and agreed to bring these up when we were all to meet together.” —Marshall Rosenberg

What About Memory?

Memory can be a slippery slope. If we're recalling a past event, there is an increased likelihood that there won't be agreement on what transpired. Unless you have a recording of the event, there's a good chance that neither one of your recollections are accurate.

Kendra Cherry writes: *While we might liken our memories to a camera, preserving every moment in perfect detail exactly as it happened, the sad fact is that our memories are more like a collage, pieced together sometimes crudely with the occasional embellishment or even outright fabrication.* ([False Memories and How They Form](#))

So don't bother trying to figure out who's right or wrong about what happened. It won't help. It will only add fuel to the fire. Focus instead on the present moment, on how you feel NOW and what needs are arising inside you NOW. Here's an example, *"I've been tracking over the last few days that I'm still feeling hurt and resentful as I reflect on our conversation last week in the car when we went to visit my parents. I think we can both agree that it didn't go well and that neither one of us felt heard by the other. I would like to return to the conversation either now or at a time that works for both of us with the objective of both of us feeling genuinely heard. I don't like how not discussing it creates distance between us. Would you be willing to do this with me?"*

A conversation that references a past event is much more likely to lead to connected engagement if it retains a focus on **feelings and needs in the present moment** rather than who said what. The observation in this case makes reference to feelings of hurt and resentment over the past few days in the context of an earlier conversation that didn't end well.

The Nature of Reality

What has increasingly rendered the subject of observation challenging and frustrating in these times is the growing trend to elevate personal feelings and personal truths (aka MY truth) to the point of being factual and unassailable. If I *feel unsafe*, then it must be because of you. Clients have told me that they are often afraid to challenge a partner or friend's belief or behaviour because the person will frequently respond with, *"This conversation isn't meeting my need for safety."*

Clients also tell me that they haven't always felt this way and that something has changed in how people engage .. that social media platforms and identity politics have significantly impacted conversations. Once robust and meaningful engagement has deteriorated into people walking on eggshells so as not to cause upset.

As fertile and valid as a person's interior world is, we are at great risk of losing sight of the larger world beyond our own respective fabricated realities when we prioritize the personal to the degree that is often encouraged (and which NVC and other modalities can easily facilitate). In that distorted prioritization, we unwittingly lose sight of the larger forces around us that underwrite continued exploitation, destruction, violence, alienation, "othering", etc.

In the book *We've Had A Hundred Years Of Psychotherapy And The World's Getting Worse*, co-author James Hillman writes: *Not just any talk is conversation; not any talk raises*

consciousness. Good conversation has an edge: it opens your eyes to something, quickens your ears. And good conversation reverberates: it keeps on talking in your mind later in the day; the next day, you find yourself still conversing with what was said. That reverberation afterward is the very raising of consciousness; your mind's been moved. You are at another level with your reflections.

Facts Are Not The Story

More from Hillman:

“We've had a hundred years of analysis, and people are getting more and more sensitive, and the world is getting worse and worse. Maybe it's time to look at that. We still locate the psyche inside the skin. You go *inside* to locate the psyche, you examine *your* feelings and *your* dreams, they belong to you. Or it's interrelations, interpsyche, between your psyche and mine. That's been extended a little bit into family systems and office groups — but the psyche, the soul, is still only *within* and *between* people. We're working on our relationships constantly, and our feelings and reflections, but look what's left out of that.

What's left out is a deteriorating world.

So why hasn't therapy noticed that? Because psychotherapy is only working on that 'inside' soul. By removing the soul from the world and not recognizing that the soul is also *in* the world, psychotherapy can't do its job anymore. The buildings are sick, the institutions are sick, the banking system's sick, the schools, the streets — the sickness is out *there*.”

Everything that we observe is connected to a larger story. If you want to deepen your compassion, it's important to recognize and take in the enormous harm and suffering in the world. Take it all in: war, genocides, colonization, climate change, wildlife extinction, deforestation, over-consumption, drug and alcohol addiction, suicide rates, school shootings, rising mental illness, ADHD, anxiety and depression, untethered capitalism, oppression, racism, poverty, family estrangements, homelessness, etc.

Whatever has come between you and someone else, whatever stands in the way, at least initially, to crossing the bridge to their way of seeing and perceiving or vice versa, is almost certainly connected to a family of origin story and a much earlier story of displacement and all its associated horrors. It's important to know this.

If we're willing to deeply know our history, both personal and collective, and if we place life in the centre instead of our personal preferences and inclinations, we stand a better chance of making choices that will serve life in the long run, and that includes choices inside our personal relationships.

Any course correction begins with recognizing what isn't working and attempting to do something about it. You will need to be able to make a clear OBSERVATION. But don't stop there. How does what's happening fit into the much larger story and landscape of what LIFE needs during these especially troubled times? Let that guide you ❤️

Our capacity to live and be in healthy relationship with others requires that we be in healthy relationship with the beautiful world that sustains us.