

Viewing Needs Through an Equity Lens

With Roxy Manning

At a retreat, I supported a conversation between two men who had experienced a break in connection. One man of Chinese and European descent – let's call him Chris – shared the pain he experienced growing up in a primarily European community. He shared the taunts he had experienced, having people use slurs and language that insulted people from Chinese backgrounds, that made fun of the shape of their eyes, the tone of their skin. He was sharing this experience with a European-descent man – let's call him Robin – to help Robin understand the needs that were going unmet for Chris around safety, among other needs.

Unfortunately, Robin was not able to empathize with Chris. Instead, Robin spoke angrily about his needs for safety being unmet in the conversation. One way that he described his need being unmet was that Chris had called Robin a "White man." For Robin, the phrase, "White man," was a label that did not meet his needs for being seen for his full humanity. Robin's experience was that his needs for safety in being called a "White man" by Chris during that conversation were as equally unmet as the needs for safety Chris experienced in multiple settings in his childhood and adulthood.

Like Chris, some people have reported that when they try to bring up specific experiences related to their membership in a certain group, the depth of their pain is not acknowledged, and the focus instead shifts to the discomfort of the listener hearing their pain.

The essential shift in consciousness that NVC offers us is inviting our awareness to the understanding that all human beings share the same needs. It is this understanding that allows us to transform judgments of people's behavior, to reach for our shared humanity when people speak or act in ways that are challenging for us. Unfortunately, many people from groups with less structural power in society report that the beauty of the concept of universal human needs has been used to silence and minimize their experiences.

From a limited NVC perspective, all needs can be seen as equal, with an emphasis on equal space and attention to any unmet needs. However, the consequences of the needs going unmet for Chris in our example, who has experienced beatings in relation to his identity, were vastly different than the consequences for Robin. The idea that all humans share the same needs can be used, tragically, to obscure the reality that some people, based solely on group membership, have certain needs go unmet to a greater extent, for a greater length of time, and with more dire consequences than others.

When we think of ourselves we can readily realize that although we are human, and thus motivated by a full set of needs, in any given moment, some needs are not even in our consciousness while others are very much alive. If I have not eaten for ten hours while touring a museum, my needs for food and sustenance might be much more salient and urgent for me than my need for beauty. If I find myself near the museum restaurant, with only 30 minutes left before the building closes, I need to choose between meeting my needs for beauty by seeing one last exhibit, or moving into the restaurant and attending to my need for food. In that moment I would prioritize eating food rather than seeing another exhibit.

Ideally, when two people present with differing sets of needs, we can brainstorm and find new strategies that can meet everyone's needs. But in many situations, constrained resources mean someone's needs are met over another's. Members of some groups have had urgent needs go unmet for an unbearably long time, relative to other groups. Just as we would likely prioritize meeting the needs for food when we are very hungry over the need for beauty, we would also prioritize caring for the needs of those whose needs are systematically ignored and unmet over those whose needs have traditionally been met. Here are some thoughts to help you decide how to proceed in such situations:

Remember: All needs matter, but not all needs are equally met.

- Strive to find a solution that works for all.
- When time, energy, resources constrain the creative spaciousness that makes such a solution possible:
 - Prioritize the needs that have gone unmet the longest.
 - Prioritize the needs of those whose needs have gone unmet for longer, especially when systems are operating that contribute to needs being met for some over others.
 - Prioritize care and safety for those whose unmet needs have resulted or might result in significant harm.
 - Remember that continuing with the status quo, even when it is to allow time for creative solutions to meet all needs, is a choice that continues to prioritize the needs of those whose needs have been traditionally met at the expense of those whose needs have not been met. Consider meeting the needs of those who have not experienced care while new strategies are explored.

Remember, when a systematic imbalance exists in whose needs are attended to, If we insist on equality – treating everyone the same and offering equal support – we are continuing to perpetuate an imbalance.