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How Problems Develop

A Frog Story and a Shift in Perspective

One sunny morning, a big frog decided to swallow all the water of the earth. It sat there proud, full. It looked like a mountain of water, blue and green, its skin almost transparent under the tension. It could not move; it was too heavy. So it just sat there, staring at all the animals and humans gathered in front of it. "What are we going to do?!" cried all the living beings. "We will all die if it does not give back the rivers, brooks, and oceans." For three days, they prayed and begged the frog to let go of the waters. But the frog would not move. The children were crying, the elderly suffering, and the desert sand could be seen creeping closer to the horizon. Something had to be done.

—Translated and adapted from Gougaud (2000)

Reflection Questions

- What would you do? How would you get the frog to open its mouth and free the waters? Write your ideas.
- Can you think of five or six solutions? If so, write them down.
- Where do your solutions come from? Which life experiences might have inspired these solutions? Have you been exposed to similar methods of solving other problems? Explain.

LESSONS FROM THIS STORY

Behaviors and Intentions

Most people—even mental health professionals and educators in bullying prevention workshops—would poke, hit, or shoot the frog. This simply shows that, despite our best intentions and our most genuine stance against aggression, our solutions may be remarkably incongruent with our values. There is a false belief in Western cultures that people’s behaviors, particularly youth’s misbehaviors, are a reflection of “bad intentions.” This oversimplification of the complexity of factors affecting human behavior is quite saddening in that it leaves educators taking drastic measures to control students instead of building on what is generally already there: young people’s desire to please, be loved, and avoid trouble. Many young people who engage in disrespectful or bullying interactions feel rather stuck in, and resentful about, their unhappy lives. Given a chance to share their hopes and dreams, their values and preferences, many would actually prefer to be appreciated and stay out of trouble. These intentions are clearly not reflected in the school behaviors most visible to the staff. We will come back to this idea in subsequent chapters, as well as how to help young people articulate and live in ways more congruent with their intentions and preferences.

The Observer’s Versus the Actor’s Seat

So far you were simply a reader, an observer of the challenges in the story. You are not (hopefully!) starving, sleep-deprived, or in danger. Usually, from a place of comfort and perspective, your mind generates the most solutions. If only a few solutions to this problem came to your mind, you can only assume that even fewer ideas would be generated under duress. This is often what happens to students, especially the younger ones. In the quiet space of an office, they so badly want to stay out of trouble and yet, in the midst of an upsetting interaction, they wind up reacting in the only way that comes to their mind and body: disrespect or bullying. The actor’s seat is much more demanding than the observer’s from which many ideas can be generated intellectually.

Quantity and Quality of Solutions Generated

Why do we struggle to find a list of various solutions to this story? Both the quality (type of) and quantity (total number) of solutions we generate are shaped by our life experience and, in particular, the context and culture that surrounds us. Cultures can shape the options that are available to you, as well as render other options impossible. You simply cannot imagine a solution outside of the social *discourses* (see Glossary) that have shaped your life, unless those solutions are somehow exposed.

For example, most workshop participants in the United States think of individual actions in response to this story's problem. This is not the case when this story is presented in more collectivist countries where people are culturally trained to consult with elders and include the community in their decision. People from the South Pacific Islands, where this story is told, came up with a remarkable ending:

The animals and the humans caucused to find a solution. One of them finally proposed to organize a feast, where everyone could try to make the frog laugh. So they each, one by one, tried their silliest grimaces, their funniest dances, and their most creative jumps. The frog, although obviously interested, would simply not move. Finally, a little snake, who had been rather quiet throughout this journey, started to twist and turn in all directions, as if tickled by an imaginary being. The frog first hiccupped, tried to regain his composure, and eventually, unable to control his giggles, laughed all the waters out of his gigantic mouth, replenishing the earth and the living beings of their oceans, brooks, and rivers.

Triggering laughter in an opponent is just one of many possible options in solving the problem. It is a solution that is more readily thought of in certain cultures. This is not to say that in this story laughter was the ideal solution. There are many ways of solving the problem in the story: the frog can be tickled, massaged, introduced to an appealing partner, presented a juicy fly, made to be too hot, etc. Solutions do not necessarily have a value in and of themselves. As mentioned above, what really matters is access to a variety of solutions and the possibility to choose one that is congruent with personal values and intentions. Aggression comes to most North Americans' minds as not simply one solution but as the only solution, even if aggression is incongruent with their values. This example illustrates the limiting power of culture and context in the process of generating solutions. Such a narrowing and impoverishment of possibilities affects everyone, everywhere, in all spheres of life, and it becomes particularly evident in contexts such as schools, where the social pressure to follow certain norms is particularly strong.

For example, a teacher brings her students to an assembly. One of the students talks excitedly to his peers. Several thoughts go through the teacher's mind:

- "He's enjoying this performance so much. It makes me happy to see that."
- "I wonder if he's going to get out of hand; maybe I should calm him down now."
- "What will my colleagues and principal think if I don't do anything?"
- "What if all the students start thinking they can do that, too?"

These thoughts only happen in cultures and education models where teachers are expected to keep control of a large number of students and are evaluated for their performance. This teacher would not, for instance, have the following thoughts:

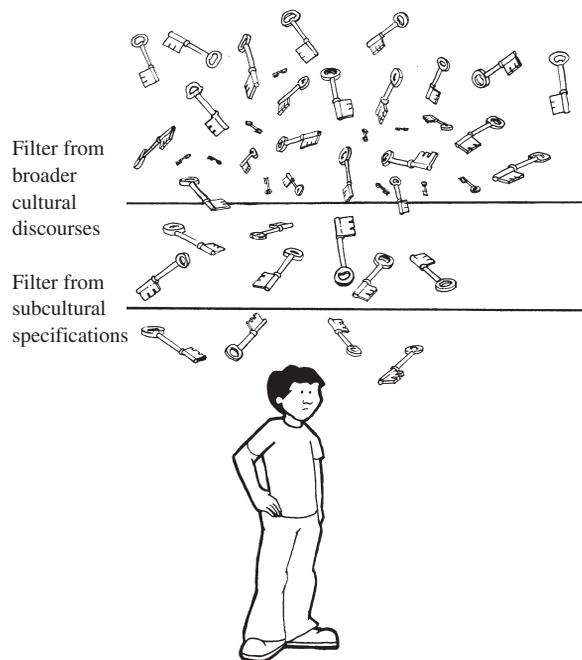
- “He is possessed by an evil spirit today.”
- “He is shaming his whole family in public.”
- “When he realizes that he is upsetting the community, he will be so embarrassed.”
- “I hope that the eldest in the class will soon tell him to be more quiet.”

These thoughts would not fit in the dominant North American culture but would fit in other countries with different social structures. The cultural context of one’s life shapes the options that come to mind in a challenging situation.

USEFUL OPTIONS ARE ALSO ELIMINATED

Once an individual thinks of a series of options to deal with a problematic situation, can that person simply choose his or her favorite option? Unfortunately, no. The person’s thoughts will typically, once again, be subjected to a cultural filter of what is acceptable in a specific context given specific protagonists. If solutions are visualized as keys to solve problems, then the impact of culture is to limit the number of keys that an individual has access to in a given situation (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 Culture limits access to a wide range of solutions.
(Keys represent solutions to problems.)



Let us consider an example of a student who regularly engages in bullying behaviors. Since this example is a classic scenario found in various grade levels, we will not specify the age. Antonio was bigger and stronger than most other students his age. Antonio did not hesitate to punch or push other students when a game was not evolving as he wanted. He intimidated most students, including those from upper grades, because he was more physically fit than anyone else and was a brown belt in karate. By the time Antonio was referred to counseling, he was getting sent to the office almost daily and was suspended from school regularly. Everyone had talked to him, created special disciplinary plans, invited him to reflect on consequences, consulted with his parents, and tried a variety of behavioral modification programs, all to no avail. Most people could think of numerous options other than aggression and would share them with him. The following are some of the options suggested to Antonio:

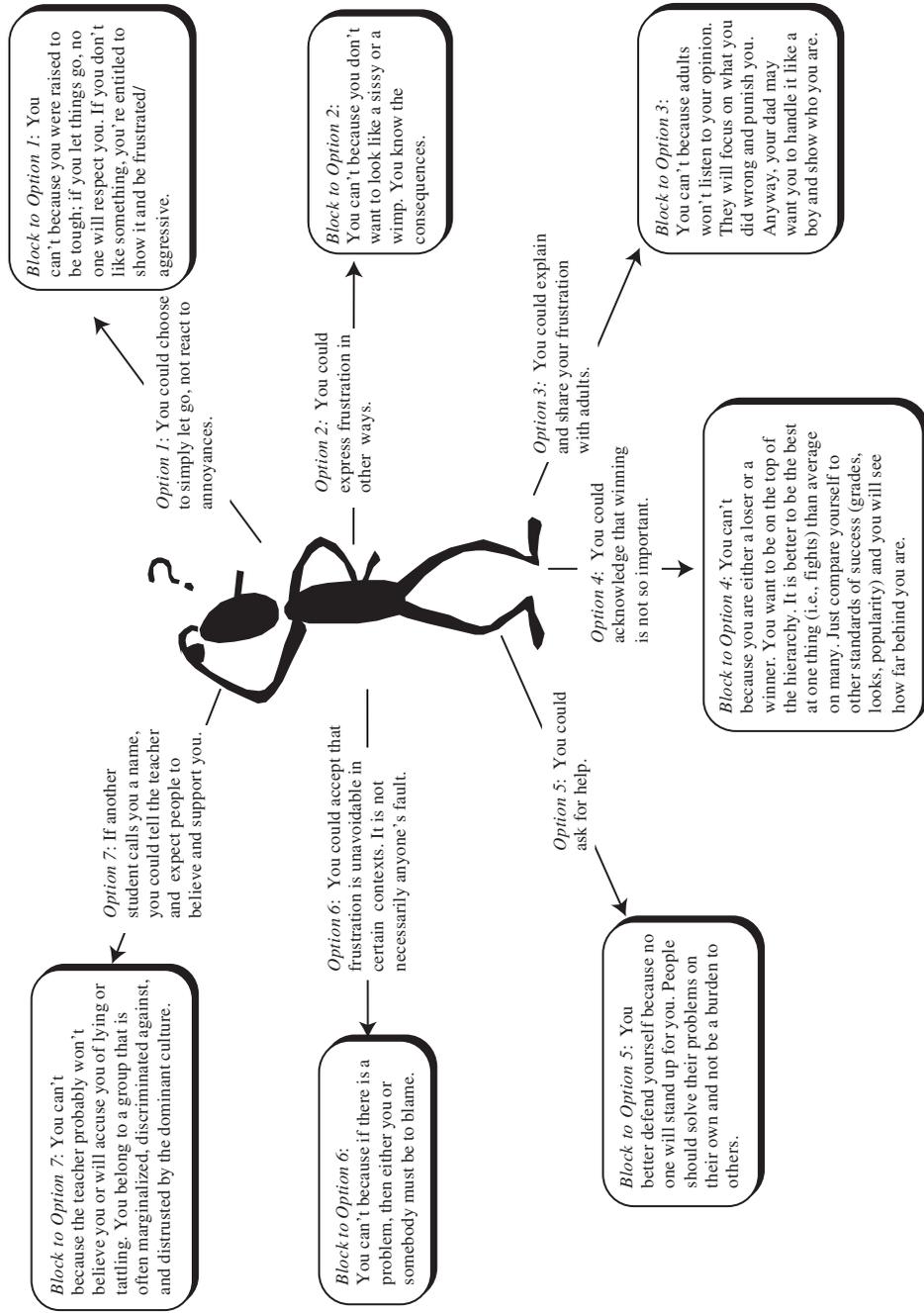
- Choose to simply let go of the little annoyances and not react to everything.
- Express the frustration in other ways.
- Explain and talk about your frustration, instead of hitting.
- Give others a chance—you just can't be the winner all the time.
- Ask your teacher for help when you have a conflict with other students, instead of trying to solve it yourself.
- Realize that sometimes nobody's at fault, and the situation is just frustrating; frustration is a normal part of life.
- When a situation feels unfair, trust that your teacher, principal, and counselor will support you; you have to give them a chance to help you.

Although these options seemed perfectly reasonable to many, none of them were reasonable to Antonio—none of them fit with his life experience and the beliefs he was taught. Like many students who engage in bullying, Antonio would, without even thinking about it, eliminate these options because of the cultural training he received. As shown in Figure 1.2, his cultural training created powerful blocks that rendered each of the previous options very unappealing.

DOES EVERYONE HAVE THE SAME CONTEXTUAL BLOCKS?

Contextual blocks come from people's experiences with a broader set of cultural specifications. By *specifications* we mean the specific "shoulds" that members of a culture generally ascribe to. For instance, in Western countries there is a belief that young people should learn to think for themselves

Figure 1.2 Cultural training creates powerful blocks that render many options unrealistic.



or to be independent. These shoulds are specifications that result from a broader cultural discourse of individualism, where individuals are expected to function autonomously.

These shoulds (i.e., specifications) are not bad in and of themselves but can have negative effects in certain contexts, and they certainly limit options. A culture's particular set of shoulds has a significant impact on the types of problems that develop. For instance, anorexia can only develop in a culture that values thinness; stealing can only develop in a context of unequal distribution of resources or of valuing material possessions, or both; domestic violence mostly happens in cultures where men have more power than women; bullying happens mostly in cultures where boys have to show that they are tough; teenagers only rebel against adults in cultures where they are given little power as youngsters.

As such, Antonio, or even his family, did not invent the contextual blocks described previously. Blocks generally come from the broader culture. Families and communities play a role in emphasizing—or not emphasizing—certain discourses as well as adding certain particularities to existing beliefs, but they do not create them in a vacuum. In the case of Antonio, as with many other students perpetrating bullying, the blocks came from patriarchy, capitalism, individualism, racism, and adultism. The following list includes some underlying cultural discourses of cultural blocks:

- Patriarchal cultures generally invite boys to be tough and physical (Ashton-Jones, Olson, & Perry, 2000; Katz, 1999; Kimmel & Messner, 1998; Kivel, 2002; Pollack, 1999).
- Capitalistic cultures emphasize the importance of being a winner, being right, and being on top of the hierarchy (Dewey, 1989; Huntemann, 2000; Jhally, 1998; Katz, 1999).
- Individualistic cultures promote a focus on one's own needs, desires, and rights, often at the expense of the community; most important, causality also becomes located in individuals as opposed to context (Dewey, 1999; Gergen, 1991).
- Cultures with issues of racism are associated with problems of distrust between races in such a way that relationships become polarized between power and disempowerment (Hall, 1997; Hooks, 1996; Kivel, 2002; Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2002).
- Cultures with adultist beliefs often inadvertently minimize young people's rights and knowledge by assuming that age determines a person's competency. Adultist practices unfortunately create a situation where adults are entitled to yell disrespectfully at youngsters and are unfairly given more credibility and responsibilities than young people in almost all spheres of life (Zimmerman, 2001). Adultism is about misuse of power and does not refer to the normal responsibilities of adults in relation to young people.

Table 1.1 summarizes common effects of these discourses.

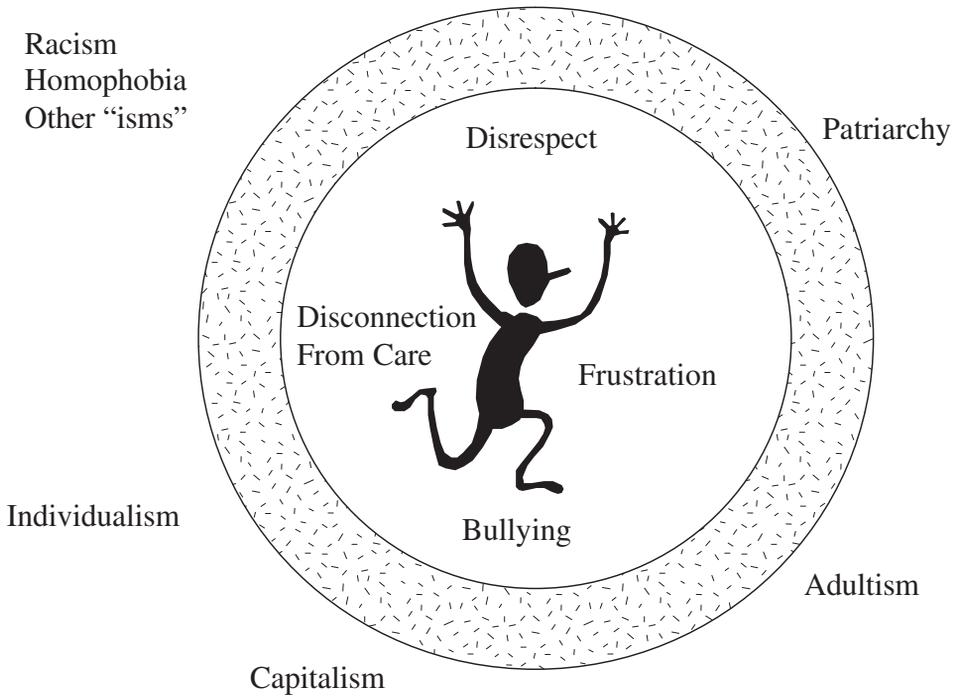
Table 1.1

<i>Patriarchy</i>	<i>Individualism</i>	<i>Capitalism</i>
<p><i>Effects on Girls/Women</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on others' needs • Sacrifice • Please, be gentle • Look good, even if it is uncomfortable or unhealthy • Be a good caregiver • Express emotions <p><i>Effects on Boys/Men</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be tough/strong • Be independent • Look unaffected • Be uncomfortable with affection and closeness • Focus on being the best at something • Disconnect from fear, pain, care, etc. • Be interested in sports • Act as protector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on personal needs and rights • Attain personal success • Emphasize privacy • Strive to own what they need (e.g., lawn mower, car) • Understand problems and successes as being located inside individuals • Be minimally connected with families, relatives, and ancestors <hr/> <p><i>Adulthood</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold the following beliefs: Adults are entitled to yell, but kids are not. Kids are rarely given power to make decisions. Kids are rarely given a voice or asked for their opinions. Teens rebel and don't know what they think or want since they are always told to listen. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on success as defined by financial or material ownership • Function in an environment of comparison, competition, and evaluation of performances • Dichotomize people as winners or losers • Create hierarchies (standards) • Allow exploitation of resources with little regard for environmental implications • Emphasize future gains over present time • Value doing over being <hr/> <p><i>Racism, Homophobia, Sexism</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a false belief of entitlement and superiority of one group over another; develop an intolerance of differences • Make invisible the values and richness of diversity • Create self-hate, self-doubt in oppressed groups • Struggle for power, which might include violence • Suffer fear, isolation, distrust • Hold narrow, stereotyped beliefs

Of course, not everyone is affected by all these specifications, and the intensity of each experience depends on race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnic identity, and so on. All of these discourses interact in such a way that they can create a cage around a person's sense of options (see Figure 1.3). Specifically, each of these discourses can rigidly structure people's experiences and reduce the space for individuals to be at their best.

As mentioned earlier, most educators try to assist students in thinking of other options. Unfortunately, the more serious the student's struggles, the less efficient this method is. In our experience, for change to

Figure 1.3 All of these discourses interact in such a way to limit a person’s options.



happen—for students to move away from disrespect and bullying—both options and contextual blocks need to be explored in a way that is relevant to students’ lives. Let us first explore in more depth some of the contextual blocks in school that may specifically contribute to problems of disrespect and bullying.

NOTE

For the interested reader, a more extensive discussion of certain discourses can be found in Resource C. We believe the “-isms” are the most fundamental contributors to the problems of disrespect and bullying. However, given the complexity of these theoretical concepts, we chose to describe them further in the resource section. We encourage readers to familiarize themselves with the application of this material and then plunge further into the depths of these critical ideas. Ultimately, it takes a lot of courage to honestly explore the profound influence that discourses have on our lives and on the lives of young people. We may not always be pleased with what we discover and may feel unsettled by the sudden visibility and insidiousness of these discourses.