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DEEP RELATIONSHIPS. ENDURING LEGACIES.

## Rock, Scissors and Paper Understanding the Deep Structure of Family Conflict Styles

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We've all played the childhood game to help make a quick decision. My parents tell me to spend the afternoon with my younger brother. He wants to join the neighborhood baseball game, while I want to go to a movie. We play Rock, Scissors and Paper. I play Rock and he plays Paper. Paper covers Rock, so I have to go to the baseball game. The three styles are in equilibrium. Rock can break Scissors, yet is covered by Paper. Paper can be cut by Scissors.

Numerous mathematical models and studies of species have shown that these three styles operate in nature, societies, corporations and individuals. Here, I will discuss how they can play out in families. The Rock represents force, competition, aggression. We have all heard of the classic, survival fight-or-flight response. In the fight-or-flight the Rock is fight.

Scissors represent flight (cutting off, separating from the aggressor), sometimes as a precursor to joining with other weaker members to be able to fend off the aggressor. In corporate competition an example of this would be smaller companies pulling back (cutting off, separating—the Scissors) from larger would-be hostile acquirers, to merge with other smaller companies, thus gaining the size and strength to resist the stronger. Scissors often involve two acts—cutting off or separating, with later joining or merging. In the family structure this would be represented by three younger, weaker siblings joining forces to resist the aggression of the eldest brother.

The Paper conflict style is covering up, or deception. In interpersonal behavior it may look like charming, disarming, pleasing, placating or seducing the other, to minimize the threat.

Now let's look at conflict in the family. Karen Horney (1885-1952) was a psychologist who investigated how maladaptive and counterproductive patterns of dealing with conflict and crisis, learned in childhood, can become frozen and can govern adult conflict behavior. This can be true even though the adult situation

may have no fit whatever with the childhood learning. Her three paths fit with the paths described above.

- First is **Moving Against** people (the Rock)—using power, aggression, hostility to get what you want. Get them before they get you.
- Second is **Moving Away**—separating, cutting off, distancing, pulling back (the Scissors). If I pull back from them I can't be hurt by them. Horney did not refer to the second part of Scissors, combining with others, because the very young child isn't socially mature enough yet to form coalitions.
- Third is **Moving Toward** others-- charming, disarming, pleasing, placating or seducing (Paper).

Two family stories from our experience can illustrate how destructively these paths can play out in families.

**The Jones family.** The father left leadership of the family business to his eldest son, Marty. Marty's younger sister Julie (seven years younger) was a school teacher with no interest or aptitude for business, so there was no conflict between them on this point. Marty married later than did Julie, and as a result their children were about the same age. They lived nearby, so the children of their two families were almost a blended family, and this brought Marty and Julie closer.

As the years went by, the business prospered and grew. The company built a new headquarters to replace the rambling collection of add-ons that the company had begun in. The entrance and the offices were not quite lavish, but very tasteful and impressive. Marty's lifestyle reflected the success of the business. Better cars, and finally a new home, so the two families weren't close by anymore.

Yet during this prosperity, distributions to the owners, including Julie, did not increase. Julie pointed out these seeming disparities, but was told somewhat bluntly by Marty that the business had prospered specifically because of reinvestment, and not bleeding the business needs for distributions. He told her that if she had come to some of the owners' meetings, she would have learned more about the business, what the needs of the business were, how it benefitted the family, its employees and the community. She replied that the one meeting she did attend was all talking, little listening, and she found it boring and preachy. He said that because she didn't attend, and didn't understand business she had unrealistic and somewhat greedy expectations about the golden eggs that the goose could provide.

The blow up happened at a joint family gathering. The discussion between the two of them, at a table of twelve, became a debate, then an argument, and finally a shouting match, mainly by Marty, who ended by hurling the accusations of ignorance, entitlement and greed at Julie, in front of all. She left the room in tears.

Julie had met the Rock, Moving Against, and had lost. A few clumsy attempts at patching things up in the coming months largely failed.

Then the Rock met the Scissors. Julie began to withdraw her family from contact with his. She separated, cut off contact, and withdrew love. His children were hurt, but so was he. Her children were hurt, but so was she. The crack became a gap became a chasm, and both Marty and Julie began to make negative comments to their children about the other. Julie began to associate with other owners who also felt that the distributions were unfairly stingy. Someone suggested contacting a lawyer.

The ways we respond to intense conflict and crisis in adulthood may represent an *irrational, reactive, unconscious* retreat to patterns learned in childhood. They are *irrational* in that they don't fit the test of "is this appropriate to this situation, now?" They are *reactive* in that they often happen with a conscious, considered decision.

For example, when losing traction on a slick road most drivers brake hard and attempt to steer back into the desired path. If the same drivers are questioned in a calm period and asked what to do when losing traction, most know to brake gently and steer *into* the slide, until recovering control. And, these patterns are often *unconscious*, in that we aren't aware that we are doing them. Others may see them in us, but we may not see them in ourselves.

**The Smythe family.** Several years ago one of the Aspen partners began to work with four adult siblings from Great Britain, three sisters and one brother. They had been separated by a bitter divorce when the children were fairly young. The divorced father and mother received shared custody, each getting two of the children.

After the divorce the couple continued their warfare with each, using the children as proxy weapons. His two children were poisoned against her and her two children, and vice versa, even though all four children were the children of both parents. This did not end until the death of one parent, and the subsequent frailty of the other.

Now in adulthood the four siblings realized that they had a divided, lonely family, through no fault of their own. They all agreed that they wanted to be the family that they had never had, but weren't sure how to do it. Working with the consultant, they began tentative, awkward steps toward getting together.

First, they tried safe social gatherings. Later, longer time together so that they could get to know one another. These meetings were mixed affairs, sometimes satisfying and moving, sometimes uncomfortable and silent. When misunderstandings or conflict occurred, each sibling cut off communication, pulled back from the group, and disengaged.

The consultant had used an assessment tool, the Hogan Development Survey, that profiles an individual's paths of responding to conflict or crisis along eleven dimensions. The dimensions correspond to Moving Against, Moving Away, and Moving Toward. A composite profile of the sibling "team" revealed that *each person* reached for the "Scissors" and moved away from others in times of conflict or crisis.

Each felt like the victim, pulled back, waiting on the perpetrators to initiate peacemaking, and apologize. The consultant pointed out how self-fulfilling this collective process was, ensuring that no one would take action to break the impasse of distance and silence. Once the siblings realized that these patterns ensured that they would not be able to become the sibling team that they wanted, they were willing to work toward conscious, explicit, constructive ways to work through difficulties, disagreements, and differences with one another.

Two things are critical to help a family achieve constructive ways of dealing with family conflict. First, they have to find ways to make conscious that which is unconscious. The exercise described is one way to help with this. For the second, consider this Zen parable which illustrates that unlearning must precede learning. The young Zen student was invited to the master's home for tea. The student held up his cup, holding it by the saucer, and the master began to pour. He poured until the cup was full and began to overflow. He continued to pour until the saucer was full and began to overflow onto the floor.

"Master! Please stop. My cup is full and will hold no more."

"And so it is with you. You will not be ready to learn our teachings here until you have first emptied what is already in your cup."

What's in your cup? What's in your family's cup? Learning what needs to be unlearned can be the first step toward making conscious choices for better ways of working through conflict. It's one of the most important things a family can learn.