

Through the Lens #10

Group Emotional Process in Decision-Making

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Can Intervention Work?

Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus¹ have recently published a book entitled, *Can Intervention Work?* They have each carried out assignments for Britain and the US in various countries for a number of years. Rory now works out of a think tank that he established at Harvard University. The two authors—extremely experienced in world affairs—use as their major examples the U.S. interventions in Bosnia and Afghanistan.

They contrast the largely successful intervention in Bosnia, where after 15 years, peace is still durable and government stable, with that in Afghanistan, where corruption is rampant and there is no peace. The authors observe that intervention rarely produces the kind of result that was obtained in Bosnia. They try to parse what goes into a good result. They conclude that it takes a huge dedication of resources of manpower and money with much thoughtfulness going in, as well as a great deal of understanding of the culture, language and many people trained in the culture and language of the country, to get a positive result.

In contrast, the United States' Afghanistan war and subsequent intervention to try to build a democracy seems to be failing after many years of fighting a hot war with severely injured troops, much loss of life, and tremendous expense of materials and monetary resources. In a televised presentation, Rory Stewart was asked what he thought went into the failure of so many unsuccessful international interventions. He answered with three words: fear, guilt and optimism. Each of these is, of course, an emotional reaction. These three emotions account for nations going into countries where realistically, outsiders can do nothing to improve the situation. It is the authors' belief that most chaotic situations abroad can only be sorted out by the people living in the country, without outside intervention.

An example of fear driving intervention would be when the US went into Viet Nam. The fear was that if Viet Nam fell to communism, all of Southeast Asia would follow.

Guilt-driven interventions mean that we often wait until the situation is too complex and horrific for any hope of a positive contribution. When we finally do intervene, it seems as if there is no choice; we must do so, in order to save thousands of lives that are being lost to ethnic cleansing or genocide. At that point it may be too late for any type of intervention to succeed.

Optimism often sends the US and its forces into situations in countries where, realistically, nothing can be done with the amount of force we are willing to commit. An example of that type of operation would be Somalia, where the dead bodies of our soldiers were dragged through the streets in ridicule. Optimism prompts decision-makers to think that there is nothing that can't be solved by the great power of the U.S. In fact, the authors believe that there are many situations that cannot be resolved by outside intervention. The people who live there must solve them. In fact, intervention by a third (or more) force(s) often succeeds only in making things worse.

The Crowd

A second, most interesting book, *The Crowd*^[21], was written in the 1800's in France by Gustave Le Bon. He lived through the French Revolution and made it his business to observe more than to be a part of the crowd that had taken over the country. His observations on crowd behavior are no surprise to students of Bowen theory. In crowds, emotions rule and there is no access to creative, constructive or logical thinking. The behavior of a crowd is like that of young children: impulsive, intensely emotional and suggestible. Because of this, the loudest voice can get a crowd to do whatever it wants.

Interestingly, this crowd behavior carried over to the decision-making by the legislature. In some cases, the lawmakers voted for measures that would mean their own demise, under the influence of crowd behavior! Reading "*The Crowd*," while thinking Bowen theory, we can recognize what Bowen called "group emotional process" at its most intense.

Putting the two books together with "the lens" that makes a difference

By reflecting on these two works in tandem, and thinking systems, I think it is possible to draw some interesting conclusions. The best thinking is not done by a group. Group decisions are very similar to actions taken by a crowd. Be that as it may, *most important national decisions, such as those to intervene in another country, are made in groups around tables—the Congress or various councils.* Because groups revert more to emotionalism and less to thinking, many important family, corporate, educational, church, and international decisions are based on emotions and not on logic or rational thinking. The inputs of experts who may have devoted their lives to a situation are rarely consulted, and when

they are, they are rarely heeded. Rather, optimism, guilt or fear takes over the decision-making process.

The best thinking is not done by a group

Long ago, Bowen recognized that emotions tend to circulate and escalate in a group. He called it "group emotional process." When people get together, they excite each other and are excitable. Given a little time, with emotions circulating and escalating, this excitement can reach a pitch where all reason is lost. Observations made by Le Bon in *The Crowd* are illustrative of this phenomenon taken to an extreme degree.

Most important decisions of organizations and nations are taken by a group

Most of the time, however, really important decisions of corporations, schools, congregations, and—yes, even of nations—are made in a group, around the table or the circle. Also, experts in the area under consideration are rarely consulted. When they are, their advice is often not made a part of the decisions taken. Remember the pictures taken of President Bush and his inner circle after 9/11—the "national security council" gathered around the table at Camp David. Similar pictures come out of the White House on a regular basis from all administrations.

Because the best decisions are not made in a group, organizations and nations are often committed to initiatives with poor outcomes

Though in the Congress, people address the chair and often give carefully thought-out speeches, their thinking is most often swayed and even determined by the caucuses, blocs, donors, and parties to whom they owe allegiance. Their thinking is emotionally determined in behind-the-scenes meetings; they are not free to think on their own. As a result, the nation is often committed to laws that are not in the best interest of most people, or that are not in the long-term best interest of the country.

When consultants such as Stewart are sought out, it is most often to get them to agree with foregone conclusions, as he illustrates in his book with a conversation he had at one point with Richard Holbrooke.

Bowen as a leader

Bowen always tried to safeguard against group emotional process, both in his own thinking and in the groups he chaired. He recognized that the cerebral cortex works most efficiently and towards the best decisions when the emotions are calm. He worked hard to be a calm, thoughtful leader. A leader of a meeting is influential on the group emotions; if the leader is calm, the group will tend also to be calmer, enabling more independent thinking.

He also asked that people address the chair and not each other. In this way, they would have a dialog with the calmer person in charge, facilitating more thinking than emotions. If they started a conversation with each other, circulating in the room, group emotional process was not only possible, but also probable. Sometimes he asked people to write their thoughts before attending a meeting. These are all ways of trying to minimize group emotional process while maximizing logical—independent—thinking.

Bowen theory and group decision-making

Whether we are considering a family, a corporation, a congregation or a nation, it would seem that Bowen theory has much to offer the leaders of groups (parents, CEO's, presidents) when it comes to making important decisions. Questions to ask at such a time could be:

- **What are the facts?** Research, books already written, or consultants with years of experience in the field could all be called upon in advance of the actual decision-making time.
Since 9/11, it has been my belief that if the decision-makers had read all the books written by experts on Bin Laden and terrorism, we would not have gone to war against Iraq.
- **What is the best thinking of the people involved in the decision-making process?** Safeguards can be put in place so that people will be most likely to do their best independent thinking. They may be asked to speak only to the chair, not start conversations among themselves, and/or to write their ideas ahead of the meeting. They may be asked to read the writing of known experts or respected research ahead of time.
- **What are the guiding principles of this group?** Do the proposed actions fall in line with these? Have they ever been thought out?
- **Are emotions becoming intense in the group?** Perhaps a break—short or extended—needs to be called at various times, as when a day of prayer was called by one founding fathers during the writing of the constitution.
- **Is the leader of meetings aware of the need to stay as emotionally calm as possible?** This focus on self-management will make a significant contribution to the entire outcome.
- **Is enough time being devoted to the process?** The more important the decision under consideration, the more time—in session with decision-makers and on the calendar—needs to be devoted to the process. Good decisions are made slowly.

Were Bowen family systems theory to be brought in as a way of thinking about leading systems, one can't help but think that we would see many better outcomes in families, in larger systems and in the world at large.

^[1] Stewart, Knaus, *Can Intervention Work?* WW Norton & Co, New York, London 2011

^[2] Le Bon, Gustave, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* 1800's Publisher or exact date of publication not given.

If you have a question or comment you would like addressed in this column,
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