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As both political philosophy and personal lifestyle, social anarchism promotes community self-reliance, direct participation in political decision-making, respect for nature, and nonviolent paths to peace and justice.

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Activists and "difficult people"

Brian Martin

All of us encounter people whose behavior we find difficult, and many of us are difficult ourselves, at least at times! This poses a particular challenge for social activists trying to promote a more egalitarian, just, and decent society. The problem of "difficult people" needs to be recognized and addressed in a way compatible with a vision of a desirable future.

Over the years I've participated in many types of organizations, and I've spent time talking to people with diverse personal experiences. It seems safe to say that all types of organizations routinely suffer dysfunctional dynamics, such as destructive gossip, undermining, ostracism, cliques, rivalries, discrimination, harassment, bullying, power plays, corruption, set-ups, and purges. This sort of thing occurs in government departments, corporations, churches, labor unions, and large environmental organizations, all of which suffer the pathologies of bureaucracy. Hierarchy provides ample resources for bias, abuse, and other forms of nastiness.

Some people might imagine that there are fewer problems in groups that are concerned with "good causes," such as feminist, social welfare, or peace organizations, and especially in groups aspiring to nonhierarchical processes and goals. Alas, as participants know only too well, the problems are just as great. (Anarchists too? Surely not!) Indeed, because people who join such groups often have high expectations that a group's dynamics will reflect its stated ideals, they are often more deeply disillusioned by put-downs, power-mongering, and backstabbing than they would be in a "conventional" organization.

The consequences are enormous. When individuals, keen and committed and putting full trust in other members of a group, are insulted, humiliated, attacked, or betrayed, the experiences may turn them off activism for years or a lifetime. A deeper question is whether activists, who aspire to a better society, can really do any better in working together than typical behaviors in the system they seek to change. Furthermore, "changing the system" does not automatically change interpersonal dynamics: social and personal change need to occur together.

Conflict and the expression of emotions such as anger can be a good thing in a group, if used constructively. It's possible for an individual's angry outburst about others' lack of action against injustice to be channeled into renewed commitment by group members. The contrast here is not between harmony and conflict but

between effective, supportive organizations and ineffective, damaging ones. All too often, conflict and anger serve to deepen rather than heal emotional wounds.

Although there are significant problems in interpersonal dynamics everywhere, from the biggest companies to small amateur theatre groups, these problems are not often widely discussed outside the organization in which they occur. Infighting in political parties gets some media coverage. Less commonly there will be news stories about nasty power plays involving senior figures in a business, the police force, or a group like Amnesty International. But for insiders, this is just the tip of the iceberg. Go into any organization and listen to people's stories and a much different and less uplifting picture emerges. (Not much is written about this. An academic example is Kolb and Bartunek, 1992. On a lighter note see Levine, 1998.)

Members of organizations seldom want to advertise their internal problems. For leaders, their own status depends in part on the reputation of the organization, whether this is Microsoft, the World Bank, or the Defense Department. For people at other levels, exposing dirty linen is a good way to lose a job or fall out with those with influence. Even more seriously, organizational members, especially leaders, may deny there is any problem and be unable to hear negative information.

This is also true of small groups, such as local sporting clubs or self-help groups. Feuding on the inside can be debilitating, but often this is hidden from outsiders. Although group members may be unhappy with each other, they often have some commitment to the organization or the organizational ideal and thus are reluctant to run down the group in public. More deeply, they may be unable to even recognize that there is any problem.

This applies with extra force in groups seeking social change, where revealing internal problems is seen as hurting the cause. The ironic upshot is that the prevalence of such problems is seldom admitted, so little attention is given to collaborative approaches to overcoming them. Even when groups learn ways of dealing with problems, the improvement may not last due to high turnover.

Social activists sometimes argue that problems in social movement groups are rooted in the hierarchy and competition of the wider society. The implication is that once fundamental social change occurs—such as the elimination of capitalism or patriarchy or the state—then groups can achieve a level of harmony and solidarity that is impossible in the present-day flawed world.

No doubt there is some truth in this. However, this argument also can act as an excuse not to look into problems now. After all, one would expect groups committed to justice and equality to do at least a bit better than those pursuing profit and power, but there's not a lot of evidence that they are. Being committed to

creating a better society doesn't by itself lead to effective interpersonal dynamics. Personal skills need to be developed.

It is common to distinguish between task and maintenance functions of a group. Task functions are about getting the job done, whereas maintenance functions are about sustaining the group. Action-oriented groups are known for neglecting maintenance functions, leading to burn-out and alienation. This causes people to leave, so lessons have to be relearned. While action seems urgent now to prevent problems such as logging, worker exploitation, or torture, and attention to group dynamics can seem like a luxury, in the long run sustaining the group is essential.

Some groups, such as nonviolence, feminist, and green groups, have made a lot of progress in dealing with group maintenance, for example by developing skills in listening, facilitation, conflict resolution, and consensus decision making (Butler and Rothstein 1987; Coover et al. 1981; Gastil 1993; Kaner 1996; Shields 1991). In some cases, groups have been able to handle problems that would have torn another organization to shreds.

In spite of the skills developed and successes achieved, it would be foolhardy to claim that no problems remain. For those who have been around for decades, the situation can be depressing, since it seems like newcomers have to learn it all the hard way, with old lessons about everything from sexism and domineering behavior to rules and good procedure needing to be covered from scratch.

More challengingly, for some people and some behaviors, it seems like nothing works, at least from the standard repertoire. What if all the best skills in mediation, facilitation, mutual support, and so forth cannot deal with certain "challenging behaviors"? This is when the problem of the "difficult person" comes to the fore.

There are some people who, at least some of the time, do not behave rationally, sensibly, and certainly not nicely. The conventional techniques of consensus decision making and conflict resolution assume some degree of rationality and good faith. For example, what is the point of spending hours reaching consensus when a willing participant immediately goes out and does something contrary, or who in other ways undermines the group?

It would be nice to imagine that these behaviors are entirely a product of a dysfunctional society and will disappear in an ideal world, but that is really wishful thinking. Personal behavior is not entirely due to social structure. Other factors, such as upbringing, diet, experience, and neurophysiology, affect behavior, so it may be that the problem of extremely difficult behaviors will never go away entirely. In any case, a better society cannot be created overnight, so for the time being it is valuable to know how to deal with difficult behaviors. Everyone is

potentially subject to negative emotions such as envy and greed (Berke 1988), and some people can be consumed by them.

It is my working hypothesis that most people have good intentions most of the time, though there are a few who set out to be difficult, such as “plants” who aim to cause disruption in social movement groups. But different people’s good intentions can interact to cause all manner of unpleasant consequences. It is wise to remember that every one of us is difficult for others in some ways on some occasions. For example, someone with a strong task orientation can be a tremendous asset to a group; such a person can also be seen as bossy and insensitive. This sort of “difficult behavior” can readily be addressed by changing the context, such as by others asserting their needs to deal with emotional issues. There is always a risk that labeling someone as a difficult person can prejudge the issue and maybe even create a scapegoat.

While anyone can be difficult in certain circumstances, my main concern here is with persistent behaviors that are obviously disruptive and damaging and that persist despite others’ repeated sympathetic and creative efforts to resolve problems.

Difficult people often have had an unsatisfactory upbringing, which may have involved abuse, inconsistent discipline, or withdrawal of love. Often, if you know about a difficult person’s background, it is much easier to feel sympathy for them, even while rejecting their behavior.

To summarize the argument so far: difficult organizational and interpersonal dynamics are found everywhere, but groups often do not admit the scale of their problems to outsiders. While some problems can be attributed to the nature of today’s society, others are likely to be more deep-seated. Standard approaches such as facilitation and conflict resolution depend on assumptions about good faith that do not hold in all cases. Therefore it is worth exploring what can be done about the most challenging cases of persistent difficult behavior.

In talking about toxic organizations and “difficult people,” I draw to some extent on my own experiences over the years, naturally enough. This includes involvement in environmental, peace, and radical science groups, several universities, and amateur musical groups, among others. But at least as important is talking to lots of people—both in interviews and casual conversations—and reading accounts of the dynamics of organizations. Through my studies of suppression of dissent and my involvement with Whistleblowers Australia, I’ve been in contact with people from all walks of life, from churches to the police, who have provided stories about unsavory dynamics that seldom are exposed to wider audiences.

Although a group may be functioning pretty well, it is common for most attention to be focused on difficulties, and these are often associated with one or a few individuals. That is what I’m doing here, too, but this should not obscure the

broader context in which most relationships work pretty smoothly most of the time. Personally, I have enjoyed many years in several different types of groups that have been supportive, harmonious, and productive.

Ideas for responding to difficult behavior can be found in a number of different arenas from a range of perspectives. In the following sections, I outline what is on offer from a number of areas: verbal self-defense, sexual harassment, bullying, manuals on difficult people, antisocial personality disorder, and stalking. I look especially for insights that are compatible with the philosophy of egalitarian social change groups. Such a brief survey cannot be comprehensive, of course, but it illustrates how ideas can be drawn from various sources and brought to bear on a problem. The aim here is not to come up with a standard approach, much less a definitive solution, but rather to illustrate the process of searching.

The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense

Suzette Haden Elgin has written a series of perceptive books on the theme of “the gentle art of verbal self-defense” (Elgin 1989, 1993, and many others). She analyses the standard patterns of verbal attack and proposes ways of defusing, diverting, or countering them. Without doing justice to the wealth of insight in her work, some idea of her approach can be gained from these steps for dealing with hostile language (Elgin 1997).

1. Keep non-attached. (Emotional non-attachment is valuable to avoid being sucked in by the hostile speaker.)
2. Really listen. Use “Miller’s Law,” namely assume the other person’s statement is true and ask what it could be true of.
3. Be aware of metaphors. A usual metaphor is that “disagreement is combat.”
4. Use “computer” or “leveling” modes of speaking. Computer mode is nonpersonal and neutral. Leveling mode is “telling things straight.” Avoid blaming, placating, or distracting modes.
5. Use appropriate presuppositions. Rather than stating a person’s known bad behavior, assume it while moving towards a solution.
6. Deal with verbal attacks. Ignore the “bait,” and respond to the presupposition. For example, if a person says, “If you really cared about the environment, you’d support this petition,” you can respond, “When did you start thinking I don’t care about the environment?”
7. Reduce tension, for example by using “I” messages (“When you yell, I feel upset because real communication is shut down”).

There are many skills to be learned to be able to fully use Elgin's approach, and considerable practice may be required, especially to break bad verbal habits. If the gentle art of verbal self-defense were widely taught and practiced—or some other such system for dealing with conflict at the verbal level (e.g., Rosenberg 1999)—the level of toxic speech and associated behavior would be greatly reduced. Would it eliminate all bad behavior? Certainly not. But using the best possible verbal skills to defuse difficult interactions should be a prerequisite to taking more drastic actions. This is no trivial matter. Few individuals are really versed in verbal skills that can defuse a potential blow-up, resolve bitter disputes, and lay the foundation for collaboration.

Elgin argues that hostile language should be recognized as something that is bad and, rather than treating it as acceptable or inevitable, efforts should be made to promote alternatives. (Similarly, Tannen (1998) has documented the negative effects of a culture of argumentation.)

Sexual Harassment

What is called sexual harassment includes not only verbal behavior but also inappropriate staring or touching as well as more obvious grabbing, pinching, openly masturbating, promising advantages in return for sexual favors, rape, and sexual assault. Harassment can be distinguished from other behavior in that it is unsolicited, unwelcome, and unreciprocated. Most sexual harassment is by men against women. It has occurred for centuries, but only since the 1970s has the behavior been named and made into a social issue (Farley 1978; Morris 1994; O'Donoghue 1997; Rutter 1996; Stanko 1990; Wise and Stanley 1987). Also important is the issue of "public harassment," which affects women, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and gays/lesbians (Gardner 1995).

The institutional response to sexual harassment has been to pass laws and set up formal procedures: many workplaces have a sexual harassment policy and committee. Unfortunately, most targets of harassment never report incidents; formal procedures, when invoked, often fail to work effectively. Far more potent than official channels is general awareness of proper behavior and peer support for confidently responding to unwelcome behaviors.

Despite all the attention to sexual harassment, it continues on a substantial scale. The existence of policies and formal procedures means that managers seem to be absolved of any further responsibility for taking action. Most leaflets put out by organizations emphasize procedural responses, with little attention to developing skills for handling harassment personally. Policies often are tokenistic, giving only the appearance of concern. Procedures may be ill-conceived and operate as a process of further harassment.

Sexual harassment occurs within social change organizations too, where it is exceptionally damaging and hard to deal with. For example, if a charismatic leader of a group expects to have sex with new female members, existing members may not speak up because the group is doing good work and the leader is so vital to its success. Action groups seldom have formal procedures for sexual harassment and, in any case, using them would cause incredible tensions.

An alternative to official channels is direct action. The best treatment of the direct action response to sexual harassment is Martha Langelan's book *Back Off!* (1993). She describes three types of harassers. Predatory harassers obtain sexual thrills from humiliating women. Dominance harassers, the most common type, seek to bolster their male egos. Strategic harassers try to maintain male privilege in jobs or physical locations, such as by harassing female employees in predominantly male occupations. In all cases, sexual harassment has far more to do with power than sex.

To deal with harassers, Langelan recommends "confrontation" at a personal level, as opposed to appeasement or aggression. Examples include a woman who stared down a man who made a sexual comment at a business meeting and a group of women who, after finding other options didn't work, confronted a waterfront worker who had sexually assaulted one of them. Langelan spells out how to proceed in a confrontation: a woman names the behavior, holds the harasser accountable, makes direct honest statements, demands that the harassment stop, says that all women should be free of sexual harassment, sticks to her own agenda, uses appropriate body language, responds at an appropriate level, and ends the interaction on her own terms. Langelan draws on feminist self-defense theory in her analysis and recommendations.

The technique of confrontation could be used for some other sorts of difficult behaviors, such as racial harassment or persistent hostile actions by an individual. It can be included in the repertoire of social action groups. Before proceeding, it is important that the offending behavior be widely recognized as unacceptable.

In summary, insights from combating sexual harassment include the importance of naming undesired behaviors, the inadequacy of official channels to address the problem, the importance of changing the culture so that sexual harassment is recognized and stigmatized, and the value of building confidence and skills to be able to take direct action against harassers.

Bullying at Work

Most people are familiar with bullying that occurs between children. A bully may threaten, steal from or hit another child, or demand performance of humili-

ating actions. Sometimes the process is a collective one, in which the target is bullied by several children or even a whole class or neighborhood.

Since the 1990s, there has been increasing public recognition that bullying routinely occurs between adults, particularly at workplaces (Adams 1992; Bassman 1992; Davenport et al. 1999; Field 1996; Hornstein 1996; Marais and Herman 1997; Namie and Namie 1999; Randall 1997). (A few researchers had been documenting this problem much earlier: Brodsky 1976; Leymann 1990 and major earlier work in Swedish) When this occurs one-on-one, it is typically called bullying, harassment, or abuse. When several people join in attacks, it is often called “mobbing.”

Much bullying is perpetrated by bosses against subordinates, but it can also occur between co-workers. It can certainly occur in social action groups, which have certain similarities to workplaces even when members are not paid, and where there are always differences in power, whether formal or de facto. Bullying can occur even in egalitarian groups: as my friend Steve Brigham says, “Power is as subtle as it is brutal.”

A key element is recognizing that bullying is occurring. Bosses can bully by making persistent nit-picking or derogatory comments, by withdrawing privileges, by imposing too much work, by not giving enough work, by blocking promotions, and by refusing to communicate, as well as the more stereotypical anger and shouting. Without an understanding of bullying, targets often blame themselves. After all, the boss, and sometimes workmates too, are saying that the target is inadequate and deserving of everything that happens. Naming the behavior of bullying can be empowering.

Still, options seem to be limited. They boil down to: putting up with the abuse, which usually means it continues or gets worse; fighting back, which escalates the clash enormously, with the bully often “winning”; or leaving the job.

The last two options reflect the well-known choice that dissatisfied customers and others have between “voice” and “exit” (Hirschman 1970).

In hierarchical workplaces, people higher up—the boss’s boss, for example—almost always side with the boss against a subordinate. To do otherwise would undermine the organizational power structure. Grievance procedures and other official channels are seldom much better.

A key element is the culture of the workplace. If it is open and supportive, then good behavior will be encouraged. If bullying occurs, peer pressure and, if necessary, collective action can be mobilized against it. Formal anti-bullying policies and grievance procedures probably will be unnecessary but can provide symbolic validation for the workplace atmosphere.

On the other hand, if the workplace is a “snake pit” (Schwartz 1990), namely competitive, unsupportive, backstabbing, and hostile, then bullying will not only

be tolerated but actually rewarded by higher-ups. Bullies can rise in the hierarchy, gaining ever more power and causing ever more damage, thereby further entrenching the bullying culture. This is the more common situation! Serial harassers knock off one target after another, typically picking people who are more vulnerable and who are unlikely to be able to mobilize support. One person can become the scapegoat for everything wrong in the workplace, a typical scenario for mobbing.

It would be nice to imagine that these behaviors are entirely a product of a dysfunctional society and will disappear in an ideal world, but that is really wishful thinking. Personal behavior is not entirely due to social structure.

Although most attention is given to the target of bullying, the bully is also in need of help. Bullying is not rational. It can be understood as the exercise of power for psychological gratification at the expense of others. It is definitely not the best way to improve performance.

In a social action group, none of the individual options for targets provide an attractive solution. Putting up with abuse allows it to continue. Confronting the bully can lead to a major internal battle, debilitating the organization. Leaving the group saves the target from further harassment, but leaves the bully in place and saps the movement of much needed activists. The best solution is changing the culture of the group, but that is difficult indeed, especially if bullies occupy top positions.

One book in the area, *Militant Managers* by Carol and Alvar Elbing (1994), describes a valuable approach. Faced with abusive behavior, the worker tries a graduated series of actions, starting with low-key dialogue, documenting the boss’s response, and taking stronger measures if necessary. For example, a first response to aggressive language is echo feedback: when the boss says, “Your work is pathetic,” the worker responds “Pathetic?” This may make the boss aware of the message being sent. If this doesn’t help, the next step is an “I” message: “When you say my work is pathetic, I feel demoralized.” The Elbings present a whole series of measures, up to desperation methods, including demanding something in exchange for doing what the boss wants, responding to aggressive methods by being unhelpful, and going to the boss’s boss. In essence, this is an experimental approach. A self-aware group can use this approach for examining its own dynamics, trying different methods, and seeing how people respond.

Another valuable approach is presented in the book *Work Abuse* by Judith Wyatt and Chauncey Hare (1997). They argue that the central dynamic in toxic organizations is shaming. Workers are humiliated by others but also heap shame on themselves, whether for particular failures or for not measuring up to others.

Wyatt and Hare tell how to understand the shaming process in the organization, how to stop shaming oneself, how to avoid being affected by shaming from others, and finally how to align one's interests with those of others in order to survive and thrive. In essence, they provide a manual for developing a sturdy view of the world that can survive the buffetings that are encountered in most organizations.

The process of shaming is certainly alive and well in many social action groups. Members are often made to feel ashamed because they are not doing enough, a process commonly called guilt-tripping. Even without any ill intent, those energetic and committed activists who put in the most time, take the most radical stands, and put their bodies on the line can make others feel inadequate and inclined to drop out rather than put up with guilt for not measuring up to the highest standard. (In a parallel process, dedicated activists can be put down by others as "freaks," having no life, or "activiholics.")

Social activists might be inclined to dismiss Wyatt and Hare's approach since it focuses on individual change. It is important to emphasize again that social change does not automatically change individuals: social and personal change need to occur hand in hand. If activists can develop psychological skills to survive toxic interpersonal dynamics, then they are in a position to help their groups survive and become more effective. Social change groups come under incredible pressures from their opponents and they typically lack the financial and symbolic resources of mainstream organizations. Therefore, arguably, they are more vulnerable to infighting than many hierarchical organizations, in which the rules are more clear-cut and in which entry and exit are more restricted. If anything, activists need greater skills at surviving shaming and negotiating complex and hostile interpersonal relations than ordinary workers.

In summary, some of the things that can be learned from the area of bullying include the value of recognizing adult bullying, the options of openly opposing it or leaving, the possibility of experimentation with responses, and the path of developing psychological skills to survive in a toxic organizational environment.

"Difficult People"

Bullies are just one category of "difficult people," though an important one. For handling varieties of difficult behaviors, there are now quite a few practical manuals (Bramson 1981; Brickman and Kirschner 1994; Hauck 1998; Lloyd 1999; McGrath and Edwards 2000). One common approach is to divide people into a variety of personality types, describing typical behaviors, and then to advise responses that are appropriate to that personality type.

For example, Robert M. Bramson (1981) in *Coping with Difficult People* describes seven main types of difficult people: hostile-aggressives, complainers, nonresponsives, superagreeables, negativists, know-it-alls, and indecisive stallers.

There are quite a few ways to classify people into personality types, such as extroverts and introverts. One of the dangers of doing this is that a personality type may be seen as part of an individual's essence. Actually, few individuals conform perfectly to a model personality type. Furthermore, there is not much evidence of a biological foundation for personality types. It's more useful to think of personality types as classifications that capture regularities in some people's behavior. So it is better to say, "Chris behaves in an extroverted way on many occasions" rather than saying "Chris is an extrovert." In other words, a personality type is a way of describing a person's behavior, not something built into the essence of a person.

What general insights can be drawn from writings about difficult personalities?

One vital insight is to check your own behavior: you might be the one being difficult. This can be remarkably challenging. A common psychological mechanism is projection, in which a part of one's personality or behavior is attributed to others, so it is not surprising that people often think that difficulties are due to others, taking no responsibility for their own role. For example, Frank was jealous and hostile towards others but could not accept this consciously, instead thinking that others were resentful of him and out to get him. (On projection and introjection as the foundation for the psychological dynamics of oppression, see Lichtenberg (1994).)

Another way of thinking about this is to say that people lie to themselves, for example about their charm, intelligence, appearance, emotional stability, and so forth. Not wanting to hear contrary comments, self-deceivers unconsciously encourage others to lie to them. Nearly everyone does this on a routine basis to some degree. When Choi says, "How did you like my comment at the meeting?" obviously believing it was great, the easiest response is to say, "You did well." Self-deception and lying to others are intimately connected and far more pervasive than normally recognized or acknowledged (Bailey 1991; Ekman 1985; Ford 1996; Nyberg 1993). Although it can be argued that lying and self-deception are often beneficial, at least in mild forms, they can be a serious hindrance to recognizing major behavioral problems, including that one is a persistent offender in interpersonal relations.

Perhaps the safest way to find out about your own behavior is to approach close friends individually and confidentially, seeking feedback on how to improve. The way this is done is crucial, so that your friends don't just tell you what they think you want to hear. One way is to describe your actions skeptically and invite comment: "I think I went off the rails at the meeting the other night when I started

shouting ...” Another is to sound out future options: “I’m thinking of questioning Jim over the finances. Should I do that in person or in writing?” Being able to laugh at one’s actions and make self-deprecating comments can make it easier for others to give feedback. Sometimes direct requests for assistance can work: “I want to interact better with Sophia. What do you suggest?”

A more brutal method is to commission an independent person to interview those with whom you interact and to compile a report based on anonymous comments. Some organizations use anonymous surveys to obtain comments from superiors, subordinates, and peers.

Another insight from the manuals on dealing with difficult people is that different people behave differently. That’s obvious enough but its implications are far-reaching. One person may need support and sympathy whereas another may respond best to honest blunt statements. Understanding other people and how best to interact with them is something that requires continual learning.

One common recommendation is to try lower-key responses first, only taking stronger stands if necessary. For example, Paul Hauck, in *How to Cope with People Who Drive You Crazy* (1998), has three “rules of assertion.” First is to respond to good behavior with your own good behavior. Second is to respond to bad behavior with reasoned argument. Third is that if reasoning doesn’t work on the first two occasions, then you should respond with something equally annoying—such as noncooperation—but without anger, guilt, pity, or fear of rejection or harm. This is similar to the Elblings’ recommendation to try various responses, escalating to stronger measures only if necessary.

In summary, some things to be learned from manuals on “difficult people” include the importance of checking one’s own behavior, the need to be aware of self-deception and lying, and the obvious point that different people behave differently.

“Antisocial Behavior”

In North America and Australia, psychiatrists classify psychiatric disorders using the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (1994). (For a critique, see Kirk and Kutchins 1992.) Several of the personal types in the so-called *DSM* can be extremely challenging for action groups. For example, the dependent or co-dependent personality type is characterized by attempts to manipulate and control the behavior of others, to ensure that they provide continual attention to the person’s needs. What is called borderline personality disorder involves both demands for individual closeness and active undermining of other people’s relationships that are seen as competing. While much can be said about these, I will focus here on what psychiatrists today call antisocial personality disorder. People

with this disorder used to be known as psychopaths or, later, sociopaths (Black 1999; Cleckley 1976; Hare 1993).

...A personality type is a way of describing a person’s behavior, not something built into the essence of a person.

The word psychopath can conjure up images of Hannibal Lechter, and indeed many serial killers are sociopaths (Ressler and Shachtman 1992). But this picture is quite misleading. Actually, there is a continuum of “antisocial behavior.” Everyone has at least a small component. There is no sharp division between “normals” and “sociopaths.”

Some people diagnosed as sociopaths go through life never achieving much of anything by conventional standards, engaging in petty crime, personal betrayal, and deception. They can be called “unsuccessful” sociopaths. Others, though, are more attuned to what is required to avoid repercussions for themselves, and can rise through the system to obtain respected positions, including as doctors, businessmen, or politicians. Nevertheless, their behavior is often quite unscrupulous, with no regrets for people harmed along the way, something that can be an advantage in some occupations.

There is a risk in any form of labeling, and to call someone a psychopath may seem to imply that they are a qualitatively different type of person from others. As noted before, categories can be helpful if they highlight regularities in people’s behavior. The category of antisocial personality disorder is unusual in psychiatry in that the person has no delusions and is legally completely sane. Whatever the labels, there is no doubt that some people’s behavior is striking and persistent and very difficult to handle.

People diagnosed as having antisocial personality disorder are often said to have no conscience. They often act on impulse with no regard to the feelings of others nor the consequences for themselves, and have no guilt about the harm they cause. They are typically willing to say whatever is necessary to get what they want and to avoid punishment. Common behaviors include repeated instances of theft; repeated lying and conning of others; impulsiveness and lack of planning; aggressiveness, including involvement in fights and assaults; disregard for safety of self and others; repeated failure to honor work and financial commitments; and lack of remorse. For a clinical diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder, this pattern of behavior must be found throughout all aspects of an adult’s life—not just in one component—and must have been preceded by “conduct disorder,” the child version of antisocial personality disorder, before age 15.

For example, Jack, a member of an environmental group, was impulsive in meetings and would swear and threaten others. Even after agreeing to a decision,

he would often take contrary action without consultation, sometimes taking unnecessary risks, never apologizing and frequently lying convincingly to justify what he had done. Some members found out that as a child Jack had been a bully to other children, intimidating and hurting them. Many in the group tolerated his behavior, helping him when he got into trouble with the police or other greens. Whatever response was made, his actions persisted and over the years caused many members to quit while dividing those who remained.

Antisocial personality disorder has received relatively little attention considering that it is claimed to affect perhaps 2.5 percent of the population (most of them men), as much as any other psychiatric disorder besides depression. One reason is that most sociopaths do not appear to be “crazy” by popular perceptions. Another is that they do not see anything wrong with themselves and so do not seek help. Finally, psychiatrists have not discovered any reliable method of helping sociopaths. Whatever therapy is used, their behavior continues much the same, though in milder cases improvement occasionally occurs spontaneously.

Superficially, there is a similarity between sociopaths and antiestablishment rebels. In both cases there is a defiance of authority. The difference is that sociopaths defy authority out of whim or self-interest, and would have no more respect for a consensus decision, even one in which they had participated, than any other decision. Rebels, in contrast, are opposed to authority because it is unaccountable and the source of injustice and oppression. Nevertheless, social activists may be attracted by a sociopath’s challenges to authority because of the overlap with more political and principled forms of rebellion.

Similarly, the label “antisocial” may be greeted with approbation in some circles. If “society” is identified with currently dominant social institutions, then to be “antisocial” is to be against social oppression. This is a linguistic version of the confusion between sociopaths and antiestablishment rebels.

Social activists need to know that some people persistently behave detrimentally to those around them and that it is extremely difficult to change their behavior. This is a challenge to the belief that we can build an ideal society in which everyone will contribute and be supportive. It is also a challenge to the use of consensus decision making, given that it is possible that some participants will feel no guilt about breaking agreements.

One of the suggestions for dealing with serious bad behavior, especially in a child, is to provide really firm rules and ensure that penalties are imposed for bad behavior. This may help to prevent development of a pattern of acting without any apparent concern for the consequences, for self and others. But this goes against a common attitude among social activists, as well as social reformers more generally, to show generosity to rule breakers and to give them “another chance” without any externally imposed rules for dealing with a repetition.

In summary, there is a need to realize that some people display persistent damaging behavior that seems almost impossible to change. Methods and plans should take this into account.

Stalking and the Potential for Violence

A stalker can use a variety of techniques to terrorize their target, including harassing or harming the target’s pets, lovers, relatives, and co-workers. Stalkers can be incredibly persistent with their calls, watching, and sending of letters, continuing after rejections, restraining orders, and time in prison. In recent decades, the incidence of stalking seems to have increased greatly, at least in the US (Gross 1994; Schaum and Parrish 1995). Most stalkers are men and ex-lovers are often the targets. Some stalkers are serial offenders: if a target is removed, they find someone else to stalk. The effect of stalking on targets, even when no physical violence is involved, is often devastating psychologically.

As in the case of sexual harassment, official channels are usually ineffective. Police recommend restraining orders but often these are repeatedly violated and sometimes they aggravate the situation. The basic strategy to counter stalkers is to take a firm stand, document the problem, take safety precautions, and build support from friends, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, police, and others.

Social activists can be targets of stalking too. Most of the recommended responses are compatible with activist practices, but a couple may go against the grain. One recommendation is to screen potential mates and friends, for example by asking others about their family backgrounds and gender roles. While some activist groups screen new members, formally or informally, others welcome any new face without scrutiny.

Most stalkers desperately seek contact with the target, whether a conversation or even just a wave. They believe the target really wants to interact with them and take even the slightest bit of contact or reciprocity as a stimulus to persist. So targets are advised to say no quickly and directly, without qualifications or anything to soften the blow to the stalker’s ego. That is compatible with the preference of some activists for “straight talking.” The next step, especially when the situation escalates, is to cut off all contact with the stalker. Even to answer one of 20 calls may be enough to encourage a stalker to continue phoning. Many activists believe in the power of dialogue to heal interpersonal friction, so cutting off contact may be hard to implement.

Gavin de Becker’s book *The Gift of Fear* (1997) deserves special mention for its wealth of insight into dealing with violence, including stalking, superpersistent people, death threats, workplace and domestic violence, based on years of experience devising programs to defend movie stars, politicians, and others in the US.

De Becker says that humans have an instinctive fear response in the presence of danger and that this response should be heeded rather than overridden by rationalization. Also, you should not overload or wear down your fear response by worrying when there is no immediate danger. So when you have a gut feeling that a situation is dangerous, you should act immediately. On the other hand, you shouldn't worry about hypothetical dangers. (Obviously, this is different from the dangerous situations in which activists place them by choice, for example in civil disobedience.)

One of de Becker's key messages is that violence can usually be predicted. There are warning signs such as threats, previous violence, buying guns, stalking, and so forth. Contrary to the frequent claims that violence is "senseless," de Becker says usually there is a lot of sense in it. Indeed, he says one of the best ways to predict the behavior of others is to put yourself in their shoes.

The Gift of Fear includes information about the characteristics of violent men, signals of possible attack, how to respond to extortion and threats, and the limitations of police and courts. Indeed, it has so many insights that it would be worthwhile as a study guide for any organization.

In summary, there is a lot to learn about stalking and other threats of violence. There are some lessons, such as the technique of cutting off all contact with stalkers, that social activists may find contrary to their usual thinking.

Conclusion

Ideas about dealing with difficult behaviors can be drawn from a variety of areas. I have outlined some ideas from a few areas; there are many others to be explored. What is significant is that there are numerous insights available, many of which can be taken up by activists. Furthermore, this suggests the value of a more focused study oriented to a group's own needs. Let me summarize some key points, selecting those that are most compatible with the goals and methods of groups seeking self-managed and egalitarian futures.

A vital first step is to acknowledge that difficult behaviors and difficult group dynamics exist. Furthermore, some people exhibit difficult behaviors so regularly and predictably that it makes sense to call them "difficult people"—though it may still be better to focus on the behaviors. Not all difficult behaviors can be attributed to hierarchies and other damaging social structures.

Standard techniques of facilitation, mediation, and effective communication should be learned and used before contemplating "stronger" measures. However, it may not be possible to deal with some difficult behaviors or people using means based on rationality and dialogue.

Action groups need to find a balance between action and support. People will burn out or be turned off if there is insufficient support. On the other hand, providing support doesn't mean placating disruptive behavior.

Separation—cutting off contact, for example with a person who won't take no for an answer—may be needed. Before proceeding, a lot of evidence is needed about the seriousness of the behavior and its persistence. Furthermore, extreme care is needed before expelling a person from a group, since it could well alienate them indefinitely and possibly fuel their persistence. In the worst scenario, they may attack from the outside, for example through court proceedings. Another version of separation is splitting, when a group finds it easier to break up rather than continue to work together. This may be the best resolution to some problems.

Direct action against persistent or serious abusers can be effective, especially if done collectively. Again, extreme care is needed before resorting to direct action.

Official channels, such as formal grievance procedures or involving the police or courts, are often quite unhelpful. Official channels are only likely to help if the ground has been thoroughly prepared, by building support from all concerned.

Learning how to respond to violence, as well as to nonviolent difficult behaviors, can be put on a group's agenda. It can also go on individual agendas, since each of us needs to learn how to deal with internal conflict.

An experimental approach is valuable. Try one type of response first, usually a mild one, noting what happens. Adopt stronger responses as necessary.

We each need to work on ourselves. We are all difficult in some ways in some circumstances. By learning about our own difficult aspects, we are better able to understand others.

Most of the impact of difficult behaviors comes through their emotional impact. This applies even with violence in many cases. Therefore one way to deal with difficult behaviors is to develop control over one's thoughts, attitudes, and emotions so that one can respond in the most effective fashion. Rather than treating emotions as autonomous of one's self, at the mercy of others, emotions can be "self-managed." Control of thoughts and emotions has been the goal of several spiritual systems, sometimes criticized by activists for changing the self while leaving society unchanged. But changing self and changing society can be mutually reinforcing; indeed, it might just be the only way forward. By having some control over one's responses to difficult behavior by both fellow activists and by oppressors, greater insight is possible in how best to foster social change.

The key thing is not particular answers, but proceeding with the search with an open mind and a kind heart. That, most of all, is compatible with the quest for a better society.

Postscript

I sent a draft of this article to quite a few people and received many valuable comments. Many of these I have incorporated into the text, but in a couple of cases it seems easier to spell them out separately.

Chauncey Hare, co-author with Judith Wyatt of *Work Abuse* (1997), made several important points. First, he believes that knowledge and skills about the fundamentals of human behavior should be taught to all children, beginning in primary school years. Without such a broad-based learning process, authoritarian behaviors will “continue to sabotage any attempts to create a caring society.”

Second, Chauncey believes that “there needs to be a clear distinction made between behaviors that are personally derived (from a person’s past history) and those that are culturally necessary to be a member of a group.” We shouldn’t assume that all behaviors result from individual psychology. Good people can do bad things in bad environments.

Third, Chauncey says the distinction between “drama” and “process” is important. “Drama is the pull to reenact old behaviors over and over. Process is the ability to observe and discuss personal behaviors without being pulled into drama.” Today, most people are ashamed to talk about behaviors, so they aren’t discussed and drama prevails. Children need to learn process so they can talk about behaviors as adults. He goes further: “there is a norm, a group rule, that is enforced by shaming, that makes progressives not talk about behaviors ... actually this is a general rule around the world that progressives share. It is the Norm of Silence about Behaviors. It is ‘uncomfortable’ for people to talk about their own and others’ behaviors.” This makes it very difficult to foster behavioral education.

Ross Colquhoun, a clinical psychologist, asks, “If an egalitarian and just society needs to be inclusive of all people, then is it not incumbent on the group espousing these values to also be inclusive? If we accept this premise, then we need to consider how far this obligation extends and whether it implies an obligation to nurture, heal, rehabilitate, or at least tolerate the ‘difficult’ person. Especially for groups with limited resources, the question needs to be asked about how much time and resources they can afford to expend on helping the difficult person.”

Ross outlines several ways for activist groups to deal constructively with “difficult people.” One is to have procedures allowing for a probationary period of membership during which expectations are explored and clearly stated. Others are to develop organizational structures that include subgroups and suitable roles for individuals, to provide trusted validation of healthy behavior and constructive criticism of unhealthy behavior, to “create a safe environment in which difficult people, who otherwise are exposed to a hostile social world, can change and find fulfillment,” to “actively educate and encourage group members to communicate

in an assertive style,” and to set aside time and resources to discuss methods to “preserve the integrity and purpose of the group.” All in all, action groups have a great potential to support all members, including so-called difficult people, but appropriate processes need to be developed, used regularly, and refined.

Finally, converging with Chauncey’s concern about education, Ross suggests that groups should educate members about the nature and needs of difficult people. The point about learning is vital. Until activists begin to talk openly about behaviors, difficulties in groups are bound to persist.

There are lots of serious problems in the world and activists are vitally needed. But not all the problems are “out there.” Some are our own behaviors. *A*

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