



Process Oriented Psychology: Advanced Practices for Dispute Resolution

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Abstract

This article introduces Process Oriented Psychology – also known as Processwork – a relatively new approach to working with dispute resolution and conflict. Process Oriented Psychology is a comprehensive awareness-based paradigm that seeks to observe, follow, and support the flow of information signals as they emerge and unfold through communication in people, groups, and communities. It is a humanistic, trans-disciplinary approach for developing awareness and change, drawing from Jungian and Gestalt psychologies, sociology, systems and communications theory, Taoist philosophy, indigenous knowledge, and physics.

Process Oriented Psychology has been evolving over the past 30 years under the guidance of Dr Arnold Mindell and his colleagues and is now practiced worldwide. Key concepts and methods are outlined and illustrated here, together with examples of their application to different dispute scenarios. The methods have much to offer by way of deepening and extending our ability as conflict intervenors in dispute resolution and enhancing relationships in multiple settings.

I have practiced for many years as an educator, psychotherapist, and organisational consultant, and currently work as a mediator, facilitator and conflict coach in organisational, community and family contexts.

I am eclectic in my approach to dispute and conflict work and draw on ideas and practices from a variety of disciplines to inform and guide my work. In doing so, I sometimes feel like a jack-of-all-trades and, despite the “master-of-none” epithet that often accompanies this complex identity, I believe it affords me access to powerful ideas, methods and tools which assist me and others in resolving disputes and rebuilding personal, workplace and community relations.



Process Oriented Psychology (POP) offers an abundance of concepts and practical methods and emphasises the value of role fluidity in our personal, professional and social identities. It enhances one's ability to utilise these methods effectively.

POP draws from a diverse assortment of ideas and theoretical sources. I feel at home in the midst of this diversity and wish to share some of its abundance with those who may not be familiar with POP.

While I am addressing the application of POP to dispute resolution interventions, many of the ideas presented here have relevance and value in your personal communications and interactions. Indeed, your ability to integrate and apply them in your personal life and relationships provides a foundation from which to develop authenticity and excellence in professional development and POP practice.

POP espouses core values of empowerment, self-determination, deep-democracy (the proposition that all voices in the field and all "levels of reality" are needed to reach sustainable solutions to disputes and conflicts) and voluntary participation that are familiar to most alternative dispute practitioners. Like classic mediation, POP holds that conflict work and dispute resolution are not just about finding a solution to a dispute. It aims to integrate development and capacity building, enhancing communication and relationships as part of the process.

Awareness: Processing the familiar and the unfamiliar

A core tenet of POP is that it is "awareness" rather than the facilitator or mediator that enables change or resolution to happen. In this sense, practitioners follow and amplify the process (the flow of information signals) as a guide to what is unfolding and raise it to awareness. POP practitioners trust that a sustainable direction and resolution will emerge once all voices and perspectives are raised to awareness.

POP, like Gestalt psychology, prefers concepts of nearer (more familiar) and farther away (less familiar or marginalised) from our awareness rather than words such as conscious or unconscious. Noticing visual, auditory, kinaesthetic relationship and world information channels therefore becomes a baseline for POP practice. From this perspective, our core job as mediators or facilitators, in the first instance, entails offering and using methods to expand attention, amplify and extend parties' awareness of what is less known to them, and to recognise what is more difficult for them to hear, acknowledge or relate to.

Our awareness of information signals and how we respond to them is, of course, relative to and dependent on who we are, how we see ourselves and what aspect of our identity is supported or



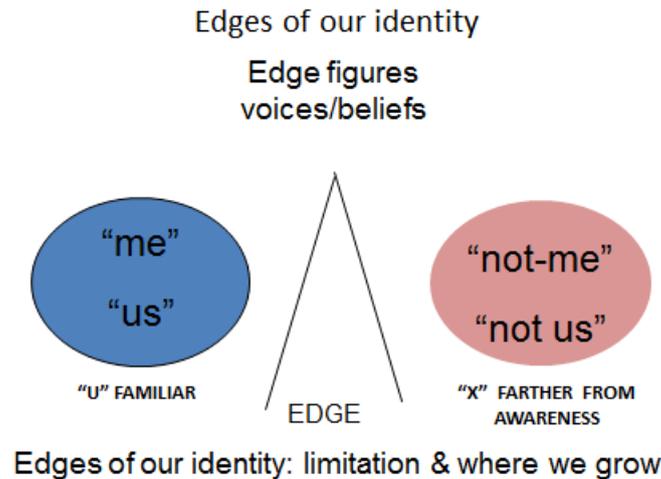
disturbed by the flow of information signals we encounter in any given context or environment, for example, our position in a family, workplace or social situation. For example, I might feel proud of my identity as a good father and so I might want to defend myself or hide information that might suggest otherwise in order to preserve this ‘good parent’ identity in a family context. In a different context, challenges to that aspect of my identity might not bother me as much or at all.

Awareness and identity

Our identity (me or us), at any given moment, forms around what we are familiar with, our beliefs and what we value and are comfortable with. Mindell (1995 p41) describes an edge as a “communication block that occurs when an individual or group, out of fear, represses something that is trying to emerge.” The “Not me (us)” is less familiar and we have a boundary or an edge against it. In other words, we do not accept it as belonging to, or as part of, me or us. It is often felt as strange but it may simply be unknown to us, though others might recognise it as part of our identity as, for example, when we receive feedback that does not fit with our self-image. We may acknowledge, or tend to marginalise or reject, what does not fit with the “me” or the “us” identity. If the latter, it may disturb or threaten us, as so often happens during disputes and conflict. Sometimes we like the feedback we get, sometimes not, though we may have difficulty accepting either as part of our identity. Sometimes we are just troubled that we were not aware of being like that. POP conflict work can help strengthen, expand and disturb our identity; indeed we tend to have different identities that may surface at different times or contexts.

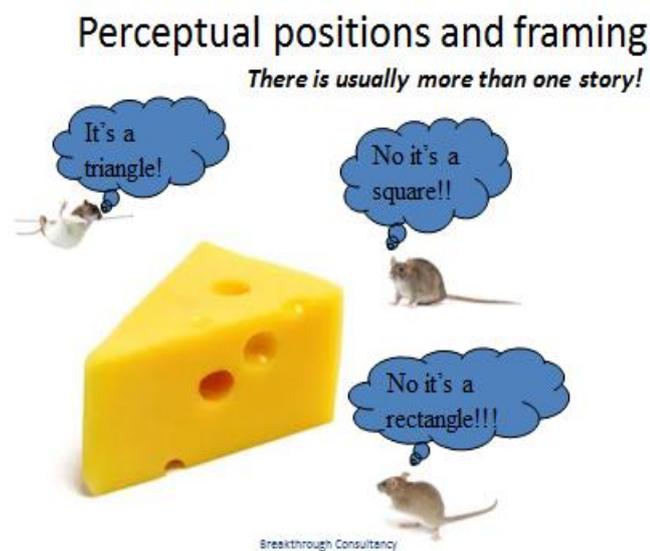
For example, we may see ourselves as being helpful in a situation while, despite our best intentions, the recipient may view us as interfering or taking over. It is likely that we have minimised or ignored subtle signals from the recipient if we are not aware that they are reacting negatively to our “helper” identity. If they say nothing, we may continue to be unaware or get a shock if they confront us with the “interfering” identity, and we may react defensively.

Making it easier for parties to seek out and accept information they may marginalise helps people become more self-aware, recognise boundaries, manage and communicate around disturbances or threats related to their boundaries and, therefore, more easily resolve disputes. In many senses, conflict and disputes arise at our boundaries and edges. Edges are our limits and where we become defensive but also where we are vulnerable and can grow and expand our abilities and identity.



Horizontal and vertical awareness

Those in conflict often struggle so as to establish the truth (the facts) as in so doing they hope to establish the rightness of their claim or the correctness of their perceptions or, indeed, prove the other side wrong or needing to change. Often as practitioners, we use familiar methods, what I term as “horizontal” methods of helping people. These help people expand and articulate their own perspective; to listen to and even step into the shoes of the other side and to take a neutral perspective, all of which help to extend awareness of the situation and mutual understanding. For example, expanding one’s perspective or using basic advocacy and inquiry skills... This is my worldview ...what is yours...how might others see it?





POP also offers a “vertical” dimension, to complement the horizontal one, in the form of three levels of reality... or truths as some prefer to call them. These help us explain, affirm and capture subtle dimensions of perception that are less easy to notice and that may often be marginalised or become contentious. The POP model helps us understand how seemingly contradictory information can be affirmed as real or truth and how we can find common ground by going deeper into our experience. This model of reality helps us transform polarisation and reach sustainable solutions more easily once different levels of reality are experienced and accepted as true and real, albeit less tangible or fleeting at times. For example, we can build trust and mutual understanding by noticing and amplifying internal conflicts a person may be experiencing or by exploring both sides of an opponent’s double message that is creating confusion or distrust.

Three levels of reality

POP highlights three types or levels of reality as follows.

Consensus reality refers to what is measurable, to what we are agreed upon. For example, we can agree on disputed roles and responsibilities in the workplace by reference to our job descriptions or measure the weight of an object in kilograms.

Non-consensus reality refers to experiences or information that is subjective, atmospheric or to feeling states that are momentary, fleeting and sometimes dreamlike. They are not measurable or agreed upon but are no less real to the individual or group experiencing them. For example, I may experience you as oppressive but you may experience yourself as helpful and it may be difficult to prove or measure either, but discovering how both are real is the beginning of a deeper inquiry into what is happening or trying to happen.

Essence level reality refers to subtle experiences that are felt but cannot, at first, be expressed in words. Essence level is unitary and non-dualistic, which offers the potential for connection and common ground at a deeper level that is often obscured by the polarisation of consensus and dreamlike level perspectives when in conflict. At this level we seek to connect with what is right or of value in opposing or even offensive behaviour.

For example, during the Irish peace process some years back, I asked some Republican and Loyalist antagonists, who both wanted peace, to imagine what it would be like for them when they had achieved peace. Their descriptions were almost identical. However, when I asked them how they would achieve it their solutions were almost diametrically opposed. Nonetheless, the shared experience in what peace felt like (essence level) albeit momentary, enabled them to feel their connection or common ground. This connection helped them stay related at that level during contentious discussions and dream



sharing that followed and eventually drew them toward temporary resolutions and creation of a modicum of the peace they so desired.

Role work

Roles are another key tool in POP. When combined with the levels of reality, roles offer us in-depth ways of understanding and working with tricky aspects of conflict, enhance mutual understanding, repair relationships and resolve interpersonal and group conflict.

Our roles are linked to our identity and we usually occupy many different roles. We may feel like we are enthral to what we perceive as our role, which makes us behave in a constricted, robotic or defensive way rather than being able to switch fluidly between roles, as we usually need to do. For instance, a father, who cannot step out of his work role when relating to his small children, imposes inappropriate expectations on them, and as a result may be experienced by them as oppressive or unreasonable.

Some roles exert influence by their presence in the group, others by their absence, and some, even though absent, are felt as though they were present, which can be confusing or disruptive. Amplifying and unfolding roles can therefore be used to help a group become more aware of itself and its culture and dynamics, such as an unsympathetic boss, a maverick innovator, a vengeful worker, or a poor performer.

I combined roles and reality levels when I worked with parties to a dispute between a manager and his 'report' (subordinate). They had been peers and friends until one had been promoted. There had been several relationship pinches and more intense unresolved confrontations between them. Mediation helped clarify work responsibilities, and role renegotiation resolved many of the breakdowns in communication and clarified mutual work-role expectations. However, it was clear from the atmosphere in their presence and the terse communication and tightness of the nonverbal bodily signals, there was much that remained unresolved. We had addressed the consensus level realities of their organisational roles so I decided to open up more subjective non-consensus levels by noting the tense atmosphere, acknowledging their non-verbal signals, and amplifying the roles implied in their speech and stories.

I asked both to describe the atmosphere in the room as if they were giving a weather report. At first they were reluctant, but with some encouragement, questioning and sharing of my own experience of the atmosphere around them, they acquiesced and shared attributes like high pressure, storm clouds, cold front, lightning. With some humour and shyness, they created a 'weather picture' which they both were familiar with but had been unable or unwilling to speak about or acknowledge openly. We explored what it was like to work in that atmosphere, how others might be experiencing it and what their respective forecasts (hopes) were.



I then invited them to describe other roles that might be present in the field, besides their formal roles, which might be creating the ‘stormy’ atmosphere. They began by naming and then exploring various roles that occurred from time to time like accuser, defender, excluded one, powerless one, hurt one, and protector; each role having appeared in or implied by the stories they had told. In doing so, they revealed how the atmosphere showed itself and was created. I asked both to speak from these roles and amplify the thoughts and feelings that someone in such roles might have. Sometimes I led the way by playing a role and amplifying it myself. Then, if they signalled some resonance or response, I encouraged them to occupy or respond to the role. This slight distancing, achieved by speaking from one role to another role, rather than personally, eventually opened the way to speaking more personally and directly to each other. Teasing out the complex interplay of personal and work roles alongside the more fleeting non-consensus role experiences enabled them to become aware of and disentangle the complexity of their relationship – much to their mutual relief and benefit.

They began to speak of how their roles and relationship changed when one was promoted and the other was not. They explored the roles of the one with positional power and the one who had the relational power and withdrew it as a kind of revenge (framed as an essence level movement to assert and take back some power and recover a feeling of equality). Likewise, they discussed the role of the promoted one, who struggled to manage the new position, was fearful of being seen by other ‘reports’ to favour his friend, and had unintentionally disadvantaged his friend in the process. This behaviour had in turn triggered his former colleague’s withdrawal from their friendship. Eventually they both spoke from the role of friends. Both were able to acknowledge and mourn their loss of friendship and state their wish to re-establish that relationship.

Roles and rank

Tracking and exploring roles are key ways of raising awareness of what shapes the group ‘field’, or the conflict system, and reflects the way that POP combines ideas from quantum physics and role theory to help us understand and express the dynamics of relationships, groups and even our internal voices and energies. In terms of the influence and relative power in any given system, some voices or roles are experienced as more dominant and others more marginal. Differences in rank, power and privileges that accompany particular roles can create conflict. This may be particularly true where there is lack of awareness of power that the parties to a conflict hold and how they use it. POP offers powerful tools for raising awareness of and providing a language for discussing different types of rank such as positional, social, economic and psychological powers. This type of framing helps illuminate and enhance the parties’ ability to make sense of the subtleties of power misuse and abuse that may be difficult to articulate but that are keenly felt.



Power imbalances, the accumulation and concentration of power in one person, role, or group tend to blind the holders of such power to the distress of those who are impacted by the use of such power. We tend to be more aware of the power we have not got and that others have than we are of the power we do have. Awareness of different kinds of power, rank and privilege, its use, misuse and impact, intended or unintended, helps uncover much of what troubles us that is hidden or undiscussable in disputes and conflict.

Mapping the generative field (context) helped a senior manager who was in conflict with one of his middle managers (a direct report) and had come to view him negatively. The subordinate was perceived as being incompetent and lazy, not interested in learning to deal with the negative feedback he was receiving or resolving the relationship difficulties he was encountering. Initially this piece of work was intended as a mediation between the two. However, having interviewed and discussed intervention options with the senior manager, I decided that conflict coaching with him was a better initial approach. With his permission, I interviewed the employee with whom he was in conflict – and gained their assistance in helping to identify issues that needed to be addressed and actions the senior manager might take to deal with the conflict. Over the course of 6 conflict coaching sessions, the manager improved his ability to deal with conflict and manage the performance of his adversary more effectively and successfully addressed the substantive issues underlying the conflict. These actions radically changed the way they communicated.

To begin, we mapped and amplified the background field (context and culture). The field had, to a significant extent, been shaped by an incomplete merger of two organisational cultures. We also helped the manager to express various opposing positions, to describe various reactions and to identify key roles in the field. This helped the manager better understand the circumstances that produced the mismatch in expectations between him and his ‘report’ (the worker). We also helped him to recognise the impact of the merger on rank and power imbalances. Through this exercise, the manager became aware that the ‘merger’ was probably experienced by his ‘report’ as a ‘takeover’ by one organisation of the other, the imposition of the larger corporate culture and the resulting marginalisation which loaded the dice against their chances of working well together.

This understanding of sources of the conflict and of their impact had gone largely unacknowledged. The lack of awareness of the effect of the merger resulted in resentment, low morale, and an attitude of non-cooperation and resistance among many of the marginalised group. This awareness provided a measure of relief from self-blame for the manager, who was beginning to feel incompetent in the face of his failure to motivate and manage his ‘report’. In the coaching sessions, he could admit how he had taken short cuts, and had dealt with his ‘report’ in ways that unintentionally undermined and marginalised him as he was struggling with his new role. He was able to share these insights in conversation with his ‘report’. He asked about his report’s experience of the merger which led to a more



open, less judgmental sharing of experiences, together with a chance to reflect on their current difficulties. When he had considered his own behaviour, the manager softened his judgmental attitude towards his 'report', acknowledged how he had felt exposed, and said he felt his own reputation and competence was under threat. Through increased awareness of his own vulnerability, he could empathise with the plight of his 'report', was more ready to hear his perspective and was less fearful of him. The manager also realised:

- how afraid of conflict he was;
- how much he avoided using his power and authority as a manager to lead and empower; and
- how he needed to learn how to assert his own interests in interactions with his 'report'.

He learned several POP skills. These included:

- how to search for what is of value (essence) in his report's intention rather than focusing on the negative presenting behaviour;
- how to treat his opponent as his teacher and inquire into his world rather than stereotyping him as a failed manager; and
- how to pick up accusations (inquirer rather than defender role) and work with them to their mutual advantage rather than be defensive or afraid of them.

Using these and other methods he altered his management methods, resulting in a creative and mutually satisfying working relationship. For the manager, this amounted to major shift from feeling he had lost all hope of generating a positive relationship.

When the process is applied to a group or team dispute intervention, participants map out their respective roles in the field on a flipchart. By means of this visual reference, they reflect on the nature of these roles, describe how they are expressed or experienced and discuss their relative rank and power in the system. Using different symbols and relational lines, they build a shared picture that depicts their relationships, allows them to identify commonalities and highlights differences in perspective. The recognition that results from this exercise can be deepened by asking people to occupy these roles and then voice and amplify those experiences and perspectives. This process enables the rest of the group or organisation to enhance their understanding of the role and often the person occupying it. Other members are invited to join in voicing and amplifying a particular role at a given time, ensuring that people do not get stuck carrying the more unpopular or rejected group roles. In this way, all can help fulfil a role function effectively, even if one person is appointed to a given role.

In groups or teams, these practices are usually revealing, and often uncover hidden or marginalised roles. The shared awareness of different members creates a shared picture and felt sense of tensions, power and role challenges and difficulties and their impact on the group. Role awareness alone



can noticeably change the dynamic, but when people move beyond communicating as a role and speak personally, if they are ready, deeper connection and relating occurs. It is important to pay attention to the transition from voicing a role to speaking personally. In this way role work enables the deeper movement and change that helps resolve the issues in dispute and reconfigures relationships and communication in a more constructive and sustainable way.

A cyclical model of conflict

Mindell (2017, p3-20) published a cyclical, phase model of conflict – the development of deep-democracy (another core concept in POP). As mentioned earlier, deep democracy posits that all voices in the field and all ‘levels of reality’ are needed to reach sustainable solutions to disputes and conflicts. This contrasts with the decision-making processes of everyday democracy that often result in the marginalisation or suppression of the minority point of view. The more common methods also tend to circumvent non-consensus.

Mindell’s model proposes a circular process of conflict; and sees conflict as a phase in the evolution of deep democracy. It is a developmental and relational model that considers more than the ending or resolution of conflict. Tension and conflict are framed as a phase in a process of awakening and evolving. Conflict is a way of relating and as a disturbance in our way of relating and is a necessary and natural phase of the evolution of the individual, group, or community. I feel it is a more hopeful model in contrast to the more common Glasyl (1999 p84-85) model of conflict escalation, which just portrays the evolution of conflict as going from bad to worse, from latent conflict to open discord – even catastrophe. It helps intervenors, and more especially parties to a conflict, locate themselves within the different phases of the conflict and then choose intervention methods best suited to that phase.

Mindell’s model provides parties with a basis for choice and helps them come to an agreement to work on a particular phase of the conflict rather than fighting over which phase of the conflict they are in. For example, I have worked with couples in mediation where one party is ready to separate and the other is not, or where one party wants to fight and polarise while another wants to make peace. Getting agreement to work on the same phase reduces process conflict and raises awareness of skills choices likely to be most effective at that phase.

Four phases of deep democracy (conflict)

“Phase 1: Let’s enjoy! Here personal or relationship atmospheres are characterised by “let’s be happy” and not ask ourselves to deal with any tensions.

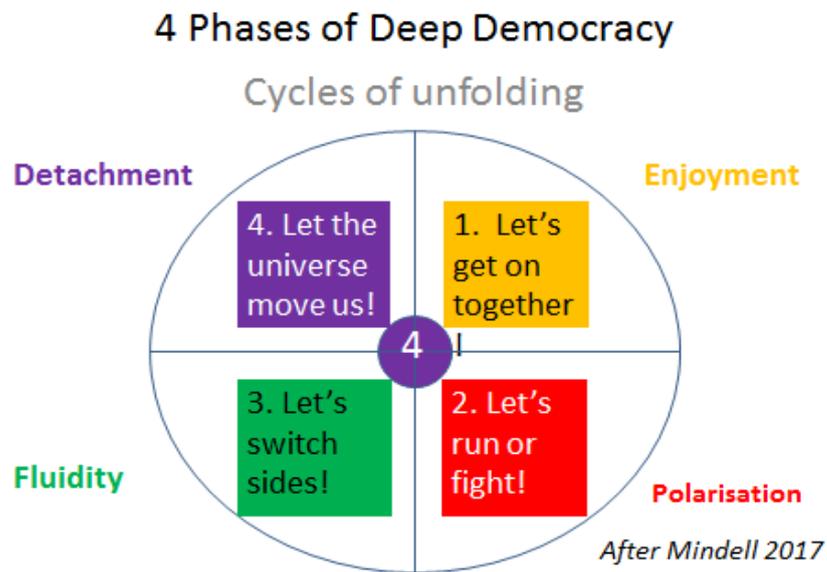


Phase 2: *Tension or conflict. We can't avoid noticing bad moods, tension and conflict. Let's run or fight!*

Phase 3: *Role switching. Sometimes it is possible to "role switch" and dream into the "other side" of an issue or relationship, the side that is bothering us. In this phase, as in dreams, we can imagine and sometimes even feel into the people or things that are bothering us.*

Phase 4: *Detachment, sensing how the universe moves you. Inevitably, through relaxation, becoming worn out, or "getting on the balcony", some detachment often occurs even if short lived. At such times, our minds open up and we become more accepting of life."*

(Mindell 2017, p5)



"Phase 4 is also a phase, however, which means that it too will change, and we move to another phase, often phase 1, hoping to avoid problems – which then eventually evolves once again into the tension of phase 2 and/or other phases." (Mindell 2017, p 5)

Many will easily recognise some or all of these phases. In **phase 1**, most of us at one time or another chooses to avoid problems – “if it isn't broke don't fix it”. Let's just get on with the work or fun; we are happy – don't go looking for trouble. We tend to be self-absorbed. We ignore tensions or sweep them under the carpet and focus on the good things. It is OK to be happy and enjoy our good fortune and togetherness.

However, there comes a time when what intrudes or interferes with our enjoyment and togetherness can no longer be ignored. **Phase 2** can appear in various forms, such as a not wanting to have anything to do with the disturber, wishing to exclude, attack or get away from the hated other. We



may take a stand against bad behaviour or the people we oppose; we become polarised. We may do this effectively or poorly; or we may be afraid to act at all for fear of loss or retaliation. If this phase is handled well, we build awareness of personal or group identity by what we oppose or stand for. We become more certain about what we want and usually what the other person/side wants – even if we have little acceptance of or sympathy for their side. Neutrals may be treated with suspicion. Awareness of our social differentiation and diversity emerges strongly. We tend to use our rank and power to dominate, defend, articulate and fight for what we believe. This phase can be costly and painful and often, though not necessarily, destructive. To maintain positive relationships, organisations and societies, we need to learn to engage in conflict in a healthy non-destructive manner. This allows us to move to phase 3. Avoiding or discounting conflict will not result in a sustainable resolution.

Phase 3 readiness occurs when we reach impasse, become depressed or exhausted by the fighting and confrontation in phase 2; when the losses become too high or we fear the costs of continued escalation. When we are ready to move on we begin paying more attention to previously marginalised signals – our own and others'. Tension eases and we concentrate on possible solutions to the impasse. Phase 3 happens mostly at the non-consensus reality level. We explore roles with dual signals and ghost roles. We allow ourselves to experience “standing in the other’s shoes.” The hard boundaries of phase 2 begin to soften. We move beyond the edges of our identities (mental and emotional), even switch roles. We discover that the opposing side is often part of our own projected or marginalised selves; we may sense that in some ways we **are** the other. Identifying with the other’s role and perspective reduces tensions in our relationships and eases our communications and allows resolution to seem more possible and achievable than in phase 2.

Phase 4 is mostly an essence level experience. There is an ease, relaxation and sense of detachment, of effortless movement and flow that is difficult to express verbally yet is clearly felt. We realise that something has shifted, become realigned or settled; even if we are not quite sure what that something might be. Mindell, drawing on the ancient philosophy of Taoism, names it as “The Tao that cannot be said” – a deep connection to the universe that enables a state of connection with the ineffable combined with a sense of non-attached acceptance of what appears at other levels as conflicting positions or goals. In a sense, we are tuning in to universal guiding patterns and allowing ourselves to be moved by the essence of their creative energies.

Mindell explains how this deepest sense of self or “Processmind” (Mindell 2010 p7) can be accessed. We focus on developing and utilising this “essence level” connection to the infinite – the timeless and ineffable – to help us process conflict and bring us through the phases of deep democracy toward better relations with one another. Every individual and group has their own connection with the infinite and their sense of this experience of detachment. It is related to an essential meta-skill (an attitude



or quality of the way we use a skill) in dealing with intense conflict which Mindell calls eldership – an attitude that sees value in all views and perspectives.

In addition to being a phase in the overall process, Phase 4 experiences (see phase diagram) may be accessed briefly during other stages to enable us to move through them. It helps us gain perspective, be less attached to the forces of earlier phases that may polarise, possess or overwhelm us. Of course this experience of non-attachment is also only a “phase” and, as the universe turns, we again find ourselves revolving/ evolving into another phase, often phase 1.

Clients with whom I have used the model in the past year have found it enlightening and providing relief; enlightening in the sense that it helped give some structure to their own experiences and relief in that it eased the sense of despair and self-judgment about falling back into conflict. Some realised they were experiencing the conflict in different phases with regard to different issues and away from the globalised state of impasse they felt locked into. Others decided to stop ignoring or minimising problems and how they could “take sides”, their own and others’, in order to engage in conflict in a healthy and constructive way. They learned to trust that these actions would lead to the next phase of resolution. For example, one couple realised they were trying to pressure one another to function in the same phase and agreed to consider the possibility of operating in each other’s phases. This simple agreement gave them a sense of progress even before dealing with any of the substantive issues.

I have presented a brief overview of some concepts and methods from POP in the hope of awakening an interest and providing a doorway through which you may discover some powerful new ways of working with disputes and conflict. What I have written is partial, to say the least, in terms of reflecting the abundance that is available in Process Oriented Psychology. POP provides a plethora of “innerwork” practices and methods, over and beyond those I have illustrated in this article, which enhance our conflict interventions and the skills of our clients. POP encourages us to become better at transforming our own conflicts, not just those of our clients, and to let conflict and those with whom we are in conflict become our teachers. By doing this, we continue to develop ever more effective methods of resolving our differences and creating better relationships and communities. I hope I have demonstrated how some of these practices can be applied and that the references provided below will assist those of you who might wish to learn more about these ways of working to do so.



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