

Sarah Schulman, *Conflict is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair*, Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver, 2021

I. Conflict vs. Abuse

1. In arenas in which real abuse could conceivably take place, there are those who feel persecuted and threatened even though they are not in danger, and they often lack help from those around them to differentiate between the possible and the actual. Bullies often conceptualize themselves as being under attack when they are the ones originating the pain. Everywhere we look, there is confusion between Conflict and Abuse.

If a person cannot solve a conflict with a friend, how can they possibly contribute to larger efforts for peace? If we refuse to speak to a friend because we project our anxieties onto an email they wrote, how are we going to welcome refugees, immigrants, and the homeless into our communities? The values required for social repair are the same values required for personal repair.

2. “Differentiating between *Power Struggle* and *Power Over*...is the difference between Conflict and Abuse. Abuse is Power Over and Conflict is Power Struggle....All human relationships have power dynamics and that is neither good nor bad. Power is not the problem....It’s how it is wielded.” - Catherine Hodes

3. The question “Are you unsafe or uncomfortable?” was very inspiring. Does the person feel unsafe when they are not actually unsafe, but rather because the other party, with whom they are in Conflict, is bringing up issues about their life that are troublesome and therefore initially feel overwhelming and difficult to face...Which kind of *safety* are we endorsing here? Is it the safety from psychological “power over” and actual harm? Or is it the safety from being uncomfortable by accurate information that challenges one’s self-perception? ...I think a good friend, family member, or citizen would [also] ask: “What would the other person say happened? What would she say is going on here, and how does she understand it?”

4. The definition of “violence” has now expanded to include a new continuum of behaviors and feelings that are also generically used to ascribe a negative value to a person’s actions. The word “violence” has expanded far beyond the field of physical assault to also mean emotional abuse and, unfortunately emotional conflict where there is no abuse....Not only are revelations unwanted, they get mischaracterized as harm.

For this reason I propose that as part of an evolved consciousness about not exploiting the rhetoric of victimization, the word “violence” should be used to describe

physical violence. Emotional cruelty, shunning, group bullying — these things can be worse than some violence, but they are not the same.

5. Being reminded that one was once in danger has to be differentiated from whether or not one is currently in danger. Confusing the two is a situation that quickly becomes destructive. Being conscious about one's own traumatized past experiences, and how they manifest into current traumatized behavior, can be a force for awareness of one's own reactions, not a means of justifying the repression of information.

[U]nprocessed violation and pain cannot be at the helm of control of what information is allowed to be expressed by others.

II. Escalation

6. The force that takes Conflict and misrepresents it as Abuse is called Escalation. Escalation is a kind of smokescreen to cover up the agent's own influence on events, their own contributions to the Conflict....Escalation...is a resistance to self knowledge.

Certainly I am not a practitioner of doing nothing. There is little more destructive than the passive bystander allowing cruelty to be freely imposed....But there are all kinds of actions: some are designed to acknowledge and reveal the sources of conflict and pain in order to resolve them, and some are designed to obscure those sources so that resolution/change can never occur.

7. There is not evidence that time heals all wounds, or even most wounds; instead, it freezes unnecessary enmity and makes it harder to overcome. Time allows perpetrators to forget the pain they have imposed. As Bertolt Brecht said, "As crimes pile up, they become invisible."...Therefore, this is not argument for silence. Silence can itself be an escalation.

8. In thinking and working on this escalation process, I have come to understand that the same action of unjustified escalation most often comes from one of two positions: Supremacy or Trauma. And in realizing this, I am surprised by the similar behaviors expressed by these two divergent experiences.

9. Of course, there are many things about each of us that we wish were not true, and because their revelation may subject us to criticism, we want to hide them. But in the case of Supremacy, the social striations of power in which we live often do that work for us. For example, we all know about "Driving While Black," where Black people get pulled over because they are Black. But we don't have a concept called "Driving While White" where white people don't get pulled over because of our skin color. Yet not

being pulled over is as significant an experience as being pulled over. But it is obscured. In not being pulled over, our Supremacy keeps us from the information that we are protected from being unjustly pulled over.

Supremacy tells us that not being pulled over means that nothing is happening when, in fact, enormous events are taking place and we come to experience this kind of protection from information as a “right.” We become distorted in our expectations that the objective, neutral, and normal condition is to not be confronted with our Supremacy, i.e., the consequences of our actions and experiences on others. And when we are informed against our will, we experience this shift in privilege falsely, as a violation, something to be repelled and punished.

10. [W]e know that usually a traumatized person has been profoundly violated by someone else’s cruelty, overreaction, and/or lack of accountability....The traumatized person’s sense of their ability to protect themselves has been damaged or destroyed. They feel because in the past they have experienced profoundly invasive cruelty and they know it is possible. Or in the case of ongoing systemic oppression, they receive cruelty from one place, and project it onto another.

11. But one key difference in the projection and anxiety of supremacy behavior vs. traumatized behavior is that the feels to the supremacist as a “right” often feels to the traumatized as “shame.” The actions may be the same, they may both shun, blame, project, refuse to repair. But the feeling inside is very different. There is a strong element of shame in Trauma that makes thinking and behavior so inflexible. The person cannot accept adjustment, an altering of their self-concept; they won’t bear it and they won’t live with it. And if their group, clique, family, community, religion, or country also doesn’t support self-criticism, they ultimately *can’t* live with it.

12. This question of shame seems important in escalation. Why does one person approach a situation and want reconciliation and peace, while another approaches the same situation and needs to shun, destroy, and thereby feel victorious?....[P]eople who come at conflict from guilt approach it very differently than people who come at it from shame....[P]eople who come at it from guilt very much want to negotiate, are able to apologize and admit fault, can make concessions, and are invested in positive resolution. People coming from shame, on the other hand, direct anger, aggression, and blame towards the other party. This difference was explained by the assessment that people who feel guilt experience less emotional stress and anxiety than those who feel shame. And guilty people can therefore focus more on the implications of their own

actions on others. They found that those who feel shame also feel more threatened and are deeply concerned about what other people think of them.

III. Repair

13. On some level it all comes down to Feeling Better versus Getting Better. Repressing information about ourselves or our friends, creating scapegoats as a way to avoid our problems, using shunning to unite a clique and create group identity — all of these make people feel better because it makes them feel superior. But the only way to truly get better is to face and deal with each other, sit down and communicate. And I think the difference between these two choices is determined by what groups (cliques, families, nations) we belong to. If we are in groups that cannot be self-critical and therefore punish difference, we will join in on the shunning, excluding, and cold-shouldering. But if we are in groups that promote acceptance, intervene to create communication, and recognize that people have contradictions, we will be able to face and deal with the true nature of Conflict: that it is participatory, and cannot be solved by being cruel, spreading rumors, enacting laws, or incarcerating, invading, and occupying.

When we don't refuse cruelty, ultimately we stand for nothing; we are hypocrites, and our public selves are phony.