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The Parking Lot Scuffle

Imagine yourself as Jay: What assumptions are you making about Tim as the conflict unfolds?

Jay drove to work alone every weekday. On this particular Monday morning, he arrived in his office parking lot a few minutes before nine o'clock. He had several thoughts on his mind and was not prepared to see a small moped parked in his reserved spot. In fact, because the moped was set back deep in the spot and between cars, he could not see it until he made the turn into the space. Jay slammed on the brakes but failed to stop before hitting the scooter. The moped wobbled and then fell to the ground. Jay backed up his car and then placed the car in park. He got out and moved quickly to examine the results. He was surveying the damage done to his own bumper when Tim, whom he recognized but could not name, approached him on the run. The following conversation ensued:

- 1T: What's your problem? What the hell did you do to my Honda? I said, "What did you do?"
- 2J: I drove into my spot and didn't see your bike. What was it doing parked there?
- 3T: Look, my tire's flat. I can't move the wheel. Crushed in and doesn't move.
- 4J: I didn't see it until I was on top of it.
- 5T: You are going to have to pay for this. I can't afford this.
- 6J: What was it doing in a parking space?
- 7T: What's your problem? It was parked. Look at the wheel. You came around pretty good.

8J: Listen, this is my spot. I didn't see it, and it shouldn't have been there. You're lucky I stopped when I did. Look at my bumper. What was it doing there?

9T: You ass. Who cares whose spot it is? Some jerk like you drives over my Honda and says, "This is my spot." I don't care who you are. You will fix my Honda!

10J: You are the one with a problem. Do you work here?

11T: What does that have to do with anything? Stop looking at your bumper; it looks fine. I want your driver's license and insurance.

12J: Who in the hell do you think you are? *(Starts walking away.)*

13T: You are not going anywhere. *(Grabs J's arm.)*

14J: Let go of me. You are screwed. I'm calling the police. *(Turns to move toward the office.)*

15 Tim slugs Jay from behind. The two scuffle for a few moments until others arrive to break them apart. ■

Discussion Questions

- Why did this conflict escalate to physical violence?
- What assumptions does your answer reveal?
- Consider the explanations that have been offered for well-known conflicts: the war in Iraq, the ordination of gay clergy in various religious denominations, the Columbine shootings, or others. What assumptions underlie these explanations?

CASE STUDY 2.2

Psychodynamic Theory and the Parking Lot Scuffle

The accident immediately created physiological arousal in Jay and Tim. Both were frustrated and angry—Jay because of the damage to his car and Tim because his scooter was crushed. The energy from this frustration had to be channeled, and it was directed against each other, the source of the frustration. At first, Jay attempted to keep the conflict in check by giving explanations (“I didn’t see it”) and invoking social norms (“What was it doing in a parking space?”). This represents the action of the superego, which tries to keep the expression of psychic energy within socially approved bounds. However, Tim’s attacks made Jay angry, and he dropped his efforts to resolve the conflict through “normal” channels. Escalation developed as the two exchanged insults and aggressive energy fed on itself, further escalating the conflict.

The conflict might have taken a different turn if the two had displaced the conflict by blaming the parking company for mislabeling the parking slots. This would have united them as they redirected their anger at a different target. Another way to manage the psychic

energy in this conflict would have been to suppress it. For example, Jay might have toned down his anger and conversed calmly with Tim to help Tim temper his anger. Then the two might have worked out a mutually acceptable resolution. Another way to suppress the conflict would have been for Jay to walk off and find an attendant or police officer who could have taken down the details of the accident. The case would then have been referred to their insurance companies. The two methods of suppressing the conflict would have had very different outcomes. The first approach dissipates the psychic energy associated with the dispute. The second, however, leaves this energy intact, and Tim would need to deal with it, either by displacing it or by finding some way to take it out on Jay, perhaps at a different time or place. ■

Discussion Questions

- How might anxiety have played a role in this conflict?
- What is a possible source of anxiety, according to psychodynamic theory?