

Relational consciousness and the conversational practices of Johnella Bird

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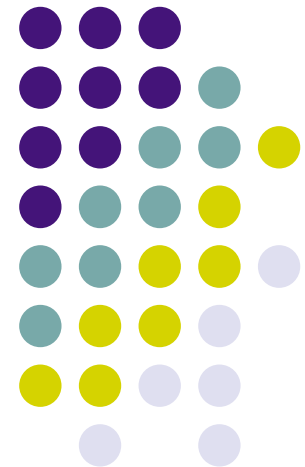
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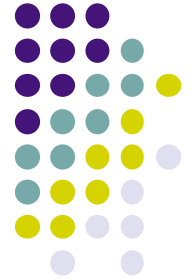
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Overview

- An introduction to Johnella Bird
- Johnella Bird's view on Relational Consciousness
- Conversational practices of Johnella Bird (examples):
 1. Negotiating conflicting discursive positions between partners in a relationship
 2. Exploring a partner's experience of hurt in a relationship, following unspoken assumptions
 3. Negotiating the power relation

Johnella Bird



She is:

- a counseling practitioner and co-director of The Family Therapy Centre in Auckland, New Zealand.
- The author of three books:
 - Constructing The Narrative In Super-vision (2006).
 - Talk That Sings (2004).
 - The Heart's Narrative (2000).
- Presentations of her work on CD's and DVD's .
- Her website:
<http://www.cybersoul.co.nz/hearts/>



Johnella Bird



- A careful focus on both the therapist's use of language, and on how the therapist works with partners' use of language with each other.
- Her collaborative search for better language sees therapists *negotiating* language with clients, and therapists helping partners negotiate relationally acceptable language with each other.
- That is, relational language 'stands in' for relational reality while also shaping relations between people. When such language comes to represent experiences or people in ways deemed objectionable by either partner (Strong & Tomm, 2007), it can be useful to invite reflection on how such language affects their relationship.
- From such reflections couples can better consider alternative language to describe each other and their relationship.

Relational Consciousness



Language is relational

- Language is profoundly relational in that it is humanly constructed and is usually used in ways that reflect trust and agreement among those sharing a language (Wittgenstein, 1953).
- For people to unproblematically talk with each other pre-supposes some level of social agreement on their use of language (Heidegger, 1971).
- Thus, any word's meaning is social if we use it in agreed to ways, to suit our conversational partners and ourselves. Stray too far from agreed to use, and misunderstandings or disagreements ensue, and this is precisely where words and meanings stop being negotiable as Foucault (1972) pointed out.

Relational Consciousness



- Bird's relational consciousness, as we see it, involves bringing notions like those just described to conversational life in relational therapy.
- To use any word in a relationship is to invoke a potential negotiation on how it could be shared – words characterizing the therapeutic relationship included.
- Embedded in most people's talk are words that have lost any sense of having been negotiated, despite relational implications possibly at odds with partners' intentions.
- Action researcher, John Heron (1996), described the continued and unquestioned use of such words as a kind of 'linguistic sleepwalking'.

Relational Consciousness



- Relational consciousness isn't so much about putting shared meaning to individual words as it is about recognizing that words are outcomes of ongoing human negotiations.
- Such negotiations can break down, stabilize into meanings worth extending (or not), or become conflictually paralyzed by partners' notions of correct meanings – their meanings, at the expense of those differently taken up by others.
- Meanwhile relationships continue as the affected backdrop for such negotiations or their failure.
- While partners might disagree on particular meanings, their relationships can be strained by such disagreements; disagreements that, when expressed in either/or terms, lose an agreeable sense of negotiability.

Relational Consciousness



- For Bakhtin (1984; Morson & Emerson, 1990), language can be ‘only half mine’; it comes freighted with others’ uses and intentions, and can be received quite differently than intended.
- These aspects of language use cannot be controlled individually; there is conversational work to be done, to construct or negotiate a shared language of intentions, understandings and actions (Anderson, 1997; Anscombe, 1957).
- Lynn Hoffman suggested (2002) that, when partners speak and understand from conflicting discourses, a third, agreeable (i.e., to each partner) discourse may be required to enable dialogue where the prior, conflicting discourses could not.
- Relational consciousness, involves a particular sensibility toward language; a sensibility therapists can invite clients to take up by collaboratively exploring the origins, use and implications of language for their relationships.
- Translated to relational life beyond therapy, it ideally remains a resourceful sensibility clients can call upon when language is coming up short for their relationship.

Relational language-making



- Johnella Bird defines her linguistic usage in therapy (and also in everyday conversations) as ‘Relational language-making’.
- The relationship is between the self and thought.
- Conventional linguistic usages embodying ‘fixed meanings’ are consciously and consistently avoided in order to leave meanings open for negotiation (Bird, 2004, p. 6).



Informing and shaping meaning

The languaging of experience through available language.



Researching the embodied experience which occurs in the present moment with the act of speaking. Then engage with this through a relational language-making process.

Relational language-making process (definition)



- ...shifts linguistically what has been/or is subjectified (i.e., attributes, ideas, feelings, experiences that are conceptualised as belonging to the person) to the status of an object in relationship to the person (client).
- This way of languaging acts to shift the focus, from that of an individual self to a self always in relationship.

Relational language-making



- Language is seen as a conceptual resource for meaning as it is used in relationships.
- Linguistic meanings can stabilize and become taken for granted; binding or constraining relationship partners to understandings and patterns of interaction that may fail to serve their relationship optimally.
- Bird engages clients in reflective inquiries into meanings that may have become problematic or objectionable for each other, and for their relationship.
- Such inquiries can transform what otherwise might seem individual perceptions into descriptions that shape relational experience, and one's participation in it. (e.g., relational consciousness)

Relational language-making



- As a common example, in responding to a client's description of being responsible for a situation, a therapist might ask, "when you're being responsible how does that make you feel?". Instead, Bird, from her relational language-making approach, might ask, "how would you describe this sense of responsibility that you hold?" (Bird, 2004, p. 12).
- The self is known and experienced in relational interactions with one's partners and physical reality. Consequently, the words and phrases used to describe (and relate to) oneself and one's relationships are best understood in relational as opposed to individual contexts of meaning.
- Partners are invited to collaboratively develop a language of *co-constructed* or negotiated relational consciousness, a language mutually suitable for going forward together in therapy.
- The aim is for partners to learn to negotiate shared language for understandings and relational actions where they might otherwise impose them on each other.

Relational language-making - escaping the binary



- Client: I don't want to pressure her - is reconstructed into (Bird, 2004):
 - What are the things you do to reduce the pressure on her?
 - What are the ideas you hold about the sort of pressure that works for the relationship and the sort of pressure that work against the relationship?

Conventional and relational language-making

A positioning tool

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Conventional Language Use	Relational Language-Making
I am a perfectionist	This perfectionist attitude I take to my studies...
I am ashamed	This shame I feel as a consequence of...
I am a failure	This sense of failure that I carry as a result of...
I am confident	The experience of confidence I held when...
I feel angry	This anger that I feel as...
I don't think that was fair	This lack of fairness that I experienced in this...
I believe in justice	This belief in justice that I took up around...
I acted	The decision I made to act in respect to...

The language of relational presence

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Absence	Presence	Relational Presence
I fell unsupported by you.	I feel supported.	The type of support I need from you.
You don't consider me.	You don't consider me.	The kind of consideration I'm looking for
I'm not confident.	I am confident.	Have I ever experienced a degree of confidence?
I'm not comfortable.	I am comfortable.	Has there ever been a sense of comfort in...?
I'm not ambitious.	I am ambitious.	If I was to take up an ambitious attitude where would I begin?
We don't communicate.	We do communicate.	Has there ever been a degree of communication in the relationship?
We aren't intimate.	We are intimate.	If there was intimacy in this relationship, what would be different?

diagram 5: relational presence

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What/who contributes to the reducing of this confidence experience?

What/who contributed to the strengthening of this confidence experience?

What is the effect on self, on relationships, on others, when I hold this confidence?

What is the history of this experience of confidence? Do I feel this degree of confidence now? If this confidence was to strengthen, what would change?

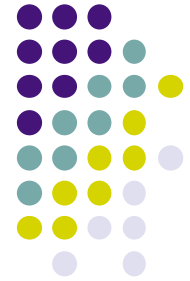
the experience of professional confidence

When I act with a sense of confidence, what do I notice or feel?

Which ideas and practices support the building of a sense of confidence in my life?



Conversational practices using relational language-making



- Negotiating conflicting discursive positions between partners in a relationship.
- Exploring a partner's experience of hurt in a relationship, following unspoken assumptions.
- Negotiating the power relation.

1. Negotiating conflicting discursive positions between partners in a relationship.



- Couples usually seek couples therapy because of “relational matters” (Gurman, 2008, p. 3), where conflicting discourses (i.e. disagreements, conflict) occupy partners.
- When partners in a relationship might disagree on particular linguistic constructions of meanings, their relationship can be strained by such disagreements; disagreements that, when expressed in either/or terms, lose an agreeable sense of negotiability.
- As extensions of the sense making and potentially conflictual capacities of language Bird suggests that partners develop awareness as to how conflicting discursive positions (meaning the point of view of each partner in a disagreement) affects their relationship.
- When moving from a ‘private’ construction to a relational construction of experience such language can be collaboratively reflected upon and possibly alternatively negotiated (Bird, 2004).

1. Negotiating conflicting discursive positions between partners in a relationship.



- Bird questions and reflections invite and negotiate a focus beyond individual positions and back upon what serves and doesn't serve their relationship (relational consciousness).
- Some might see a paradox here as relationships are comprised of individuals, whereas "relational consciousness" implies a sense where individuality disappears.
- John Shotter (1993) has written along the same lines about 'knowing of a third kind'; a sense of what 'we-ness' comes to entail for people in relationships, in a mutuality that transcends their individual experiences.
- This isn't only about particular words it is also about how such words come to be shared, in shared ways of addressing each other.

2. Exploring a partner's experience of hurt in a relationship, following unspoken assumptions.



- The ideas and behaviors of one partner can represent, to the other partner, a movement away from what may have seemed a shared understanding, a sense of closeness, a hope, or a dream.
- Such movements away from perceived mutuality can create conditions where the relationship suffers the effects of cumulative small injuries (e.g., a partner's experience of hurt; see Miller & Stiver, 1997).
- These small injuries can make evident the unmet everyday expectations to which partners hold each other, those which are often assumed (taken for granted) rather than identified and negotiated.
- A lack of success in either repairing these small injuries or renewing relationship expectations can result in couples limiting the emotional and physical availability they extend to each other, and their relationship.
- Partners may have limited linguistic resources to negotiate their way, through dialogue, beyond such injuries and problematic interactions.

3. Negotiating the power relation



- Power relations are an ever present, integral part of every therapeutic conversation, interaction or movement; they can never be separated out or becalmed by good intentions or a single conversation.
- As Foucault claimed: “power is everywhere: not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere...” (1973, p. 93).
- This means that no individual can hold power alone because power does not emanate from one source. In a sense, power is inscribed in people’s social forms – in ways of being, and in the spaces inherited by people (Foucault, 1980; Paechter, 1998).
- Power is therefore inherent in our institutions and our relationships, in the ways people relate to each other, and in the language people use with each other (Paechter, 1998).

3. Negotiating the power relation



- Bird (along with Bateson, 1980) describes power as an abstract notion, like other abstractions: "Truth, justice, love and commitment are abstract notions brought into existence through the relational environment" (Bird, 2004, p. 158).
- Power in this sense is often attached to particular linguistic abstractions that partners may try to make real (at their partner's and the relationship's expense) when arguing over truths, words or descriptions of the other, or about a difficult situation.
- Said differently, power relations arise when particular linguistic constructions (e.g., ideals, 'truth', goals, expectations) affecting people in relationships are enacted or responded to as non-negotiable.

3. Negotiating the power relation



- Bird suggests that relational language-making can help make explicit and alternatively negotiable the meanings behind these power relations, as taken for granted notions to be named and critically reflected upon.
- Power relations can be seen as efforts to use and act from language, to have “power over” others, or to have “power with” (i.e., share power) others (Miller & Stiver, 1997).
- The nub of any “power over” issue comes down to one partner’s (or the therapist’s) insistence or imposition that the other(s) live by his or her linguistic construction.
- Conversely, “power with” in this context refers to linguistic constructions that are mutually negotiated and shared in explicitly recognizable and accepted ways.
- Once such understandings over power relations are acknowledged by both therapists and clients, Bird (2004) suggests that therapists can use relational language-making to avoid imposing therapist’s own meanings (or common assumptions) upon the client.

Ending



- Relational consciousness is less about putting shared meaning to individual words than it is about being sensitively oriented to how words and meanings feature as outcomes of ongoing human interactions.
- Such sensitivity is central to how we see language and consciousness negotiated in mutually satisfying or accepting ways through language use – words, as well as all features of communications (gestures, tones of voice, etc.) that accompany their use
- Relational consciousness is an enacted sensitivity to how one's use of language performs in terms of how others respond to that use. What may seem like one's individual utterances call forth dialogue responses from one's conversational partners, responses that shape an inescapable hermeneutic circle of mutual construction (Bakhtin, 1984; Gadamer, 1988).

Books by Johnella Bird



Bird, J. (2006). *Constructing the narrative in supervision*. Auckland, NZ: Edge Press.

Bird, J. (2004). *Talk That Sings: Therapy in a new linguistic key*. Auckland, NZ: Edge Press.

Bird, J. (2000). *The Heart's Narrative: Therapy and navigating life's contradictions*. Auckland, NZ: Edge Press.



Links

- Johnella Bird's website:
 - <http://www.cybersoul.co.nz/hearts/>
- Collaborative Psychiatry (an introduction to Johnella Bird's practices):
 - http://www.collaborativepsychiatry.com/strategies_1.htm
- Ottar Ness' website:
 - <http://www.ottarness.com>
- Professor Tom Strong's website:
 - <http://www.ucalgary.ca/strongt/>