TOWARDS RELATIONAL BECOMING!
AN INVESTIGATION
ON
CONFLICT NARRATIVES

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DISSERTATION

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CHAPTER I: Introduction

We live in a world that contains many paradoxical and opposing views, beliefs and truths. Unfortunately, we have yet to establish a way of living together amidst multiple truths. We are at a very specific turning point in human history. An urgent need exists for relational maps to guide us through the world; maps that are fluid and continually constructed with active participation of self and others and that enhance our understandings of complexities and challenges in the changing world. A relational map is a floating signifier that flexibly constitutes invitations to participation, collaboration, and partnership through practical usage, social utility, and social justice. Discursive frameworks construct our ideas, hopes, and desires. Within these frameworks, resistance and barriers are articulated, discussed, and reconstructed.

The 21st century is an age of political disintegration, environmental disaster, global financial integration, and cultural clashes. These changes impact our relationships with one another. But could this century be different? Could we change this century into an age of dialogue, collaboration, and partnership? We do what we have learned to do in relationships. Our doings are embedded in dominant social, cultural, and economic narratives. We are part of a feedback loop that feeds and is being fed by these dominant discourses. Could we become more aware of dominant discourses and not fuel their existence? Or, do we have no choice but to become part of the perpetual cycle of discursive destruction?

What I wish to provide in this dissertation is a relational map that could support us in navigating our relationships and in relating to each other in a way that does not fuel the current dominant discourses of individualism and modernism. In our everyday interactions with one another, this relational map might guide us to give closer attention to what create in our interactions with one another, and become mindful of the impact of discursive regimes on the positions we take and on the language that we use to express ourselves.

Different discourses (e.g. social, cultural, financial) have elevated, minimized, dismissed, or supported certain voices in relationships that we construct with one another. Through deconstruction of each discourse, we can seek local coherence and relational ethics that respond to each utterance and action in its relational, historical, and political contexts.

Foucault (1981) links discourse to its ordering function in society. He refers to 'the order of discourse' as the more enduring, pervasive aspects of social practice that stabilize social ordering. Since language exists long before any individual comes to life, the field of 'discursive psychology' suggests that we cannot study mind outside language or discourse. The mind is a social discursive domain, not solely an individual's private domain. We are 'carriers' of discursive meanings, rather than 'originators' of such meanings. Humans as 'carriers' of discursive meanings take positions in society. Rights, duties, obligations, and related cultural discursive formations have been constructed long before us. To conclude, a discourse is patterned and repetitive. It is fluid and mobile. It is pervasive. Nothing can be said outside of the world of discourse. Therefore, discourse is a regulated system of statements that govern our daily lives though we remain unaware of its effects. When a discourse becomes dominant, influences us in certain ways. It trains us to behave in social settings according to its mandate.

In this dissertation, I remain focused on discourses dominating in the field of psychotherapy and on the relationship between therapists and clients. The discourse of psychotherapy is influenced by other social, cultural, and financial discourses, as discourses are interconnected and shaped by each other. These discourses, together, shape our lives.

Being enveloped by many discursive regimes or grand narratives, we have developed an inability and inadequacy to stand with one another in the ever-changing world. Specific discourses dominating in the field of psychotherapy, such as individualistic/modernist discourses, have limited our responses to the day-to-day experiences of challenges that take place between clients and therapists in mental health settings. In this dissertation, I show how dominant discourses influence therapists' interactions with parties involved in conflict. I share my learning, challenges, and epiphanies in this process, as these learning experiences show how therapists acquire competence in using conversational collaborative practices derived from a social constructionist framework.

Purpose and Research Question.

This dissertation is a response to the following research question: *What guides us to define conflict relationally?* I am curious how we can relate to others in a different manner during conflict to make sense of and participate in the deconstruction and reconstruction of conflict.

We need to learn how to do things together -to collaborate- in this evolving world when we experience differences in views, ideas, and solutions, in our relationships with one another. This dissertation illustrates how to deliberately create, co-create, and re-create communities of understanding to bridge between people and their worlds. It highlights the necessity of co-creating a new set of principles (that include relational ethics, values, and skills) that enable us to be comfortable with a multiplicity of ideas, with polarized views, and with discomfort to generate ideas to live together in a collaborative and dialogical fashion. This dissertation considers the interconnectedness of dominant discourses and their alliances to work together to either subvert or sustain certain discourses in people's lives.

Rationale and Significance of the Investigation.

In unique ways, this investigation continues a dialogue on collaboration in therapeutic settings. In each chapter that follows, I introduce the relational map that helped my conversations with clients to generate new meanings. I back up my collaborative conversations with clients with an articulation of the constructionist ideas that guided me in the development of this relational map. Through dialogue with each party, I co-construct narratives shaped and marked by curiosity and a multiplicity of truths rather than rigidity and divisiveness.

I undertook this research to study how a therapist can be an agent and a role model in relation to the ethics of collaboration. I avoid imposing my own or others' professional expertise on clients. I focus on the therapists' awareness and the shift in their use of language when they utilize and co-construct the relational map in every encounter with clients. In the following chapters, the relational map is flexibly co-designed to respond to clients' unique situations sensibly.

This dissertation illustrates how inviting parties in conflict into conversation and engaging them in dialogue and collaboration makes a difference in people's lives. Furthermore, this dissertation generates understandings helpful to practitioners conducting professional therapy with clients. In the following chapters, I suggest the 'discourse of construction' as an alternative discourse to the current dominant discourse in psychotherapy; it offers new possibilities to address problems in the relationships between therapists and clients.

My approach to conflict differs from the traditional approaches to conflict in the following ways:

a) I believe that traditional approaches to conflict offer solutions derived from modernist/individualistic narratives. Individualistic solutions solve specific functional problems. Traditional approaches to conflict view conflict as a set of processes, methodologies, or tactics. However, conflict is a way of thinking, a way of being, and a set of values (Mayer, 2012; McNamee, 2011). Most books about conflict present individually-based ideas and tactics to resolve or avoid. These works define the root cause of conflict from the individualistic perspective. Individualistic approaches to conflict require a patient to see an expert to arrive at a proper diagnosis of the problem. "All suggestions flow from the diagnosis. Little is done until a diagnosis is reached... The diagnosis is the first key ability for a professional to connect with a patient... Most diagnosis has its roots in the theoretical background knowledge of the field" (Furlong, 2005, p. 4) and search for the root cause of conflict within an individual.

Conflict is conceptualized as either bad or problematic; it is pathologized. For instance, one of the popular approaches in therapy is cognitive behavioral therapy. This approach focuses on individuals' issues in relationships with others. This modality makes him/her responsible for changing his/her thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Chapters II and V discuss the limitations of this approach in addressing social issues such as bullying and financial disputes resulting from the current monetary system. Conflict should be viewed from a relational perspective to bring people's worlds together and construct new realities.

Traditional conflict resolution approaches, born into and nurtured by dominant grand narratives and discourses, have brought us to where we are today. They do not offer us new ideas or possibilities, as they perpetuate individualistic discourses. The traditional approaches to conflict seem less effective and responsive to complexities of the changing world. We need to conceptualize conflict within a non-individualistic framework. We need new ways of viewing, facing, talking, and responding to conflict in our daily interactions with one another. We cannot solve a problem by using the same rules that originally constructed it (Einstein, 1954).

b) Another shortcoming of traditional studies on conflict, in my view, is that they locate conflict within individuals or between individuals or parties. They do not include the influence of dominant discourses in the formation and maintenance of conflicts between parties. The cultural, historical, political and social contexts that construct conflict between people are often ignored, underestimated, and denied. Therefore, these approaches do not focus on the particular power relations within which conflict emerges and resides. They ignore the larger and broader contexts that contribute to the construction of conflict. These approaches trap us in dichotomous rhetoric (us versus them) that re-produces conflict in relationships. I suggest that conflict is socially, politically, and financially motivated and constructed. Conflict is reproduced in interactions between multiple discursive regimes. I invite us to go beyond divisiveness, subjectivity, and deficit-based languages that reinforce the domination of individualistic discourses.

c) Individually-based solutions do not challenge the ongoing systemic oppression and subjugation in relationships with marginalized people such as indigenous people as well as racial and religious minorities. These solutions create conflict between people in power and marginalized people, as they deny the impact of systemic problems in one's life. Individually-based approaches in psychotherapy do not target socially-constructed problems such as the de-legitimatization of the other. The de-legitimatization of the other's experiences and stories create tensions between people. Bloom (2015) says, "the creation and presence of enemies has played a fundamental role in forming and sustaining societies and collective identities across time and context" (p. 1). These identities become

fixed, as our attention to the historical and relational contexts becomes minimized. Relational discourses define self as a "relational being" (Gergen, 1993) and shed light on systemic problems to make them visible. Relational discourses seek solutions to heal the historical wounds that exist in relationships.

Dominant discourses create oppressive narratives about the other and influence our position and approach towards problems that marginalized people, such as African-Americans, indigenous people, and women bring to therapy sessions. These oppressive narratives are totalized without therapists' awareness of the impact of dominant discourses in the field of psychotherapy. In chapter IV, I explain how Children's Aid Society, a child welfare agency, had taken fixed positions in relation to Rima's past trauma story. The fixed positions escalated conflict between Rima and the child welfare workers.

Over the course of history, many people and groups have been singled out, subjugated, and defined as the other. They continue to be perceived as threatening figures despite changing circumstances or new information challenging such assumptions (Bloom, 2015). For instance, African-Americans, during the time of slavery and post-slavery, were brought to the United States for the benefit of whites. Native Americans are still being mistreated and denied their rights. Women have been framed throughout history and into the present as a means to bolster patriarchal systems. Minority religious groups continue to be subjugated and marginalized. These groups have less power and privileges in society; they are viewed as different- the other.

The shift to relational discourses relates stories of systemic concerns that African-Americans, indigenous people, and women experience more acutely. The shift to alternative relational discourses challenges the current systematic imbalance of power and unequal distribution of resources in relationships between people. This shift scrutinizes the practice of othering, as well as the daily use of deficit-language in interactions between people.

Clients bring narratives of their experiences of oppression to therapy. Therapists, intentionally or unintentionally, perpetuate the practice of othering when individualistic theoretical orientations overshadow therapists' attention and therapists do account for the social and cultural contexts that contributed to clients' experiences of oppression and trauma. This dissertation addresses this as both a political and social issue.

d) Individualistic therapeutic frameworks do not sufficiently address what victims of collective violence endure. Relational discourses create opportunity for the self and the other to seek local coherences as responses to ongoing injustice in people's lives. For instance, in chapter IV where Rima's story is told, the ongoing trauma and abuse in her life during the time that she was in care had been framed as her personal problem. Rima's experiences of trauma and abuse had not been acknowledged by the larger system of child welfare. The workers at the child welfare agency struggled to find answers to why the ongoing abuse had been permitted for so long. Relational discourses create an environment in which new understandings and meanings are generated. Both parties become open to listening to each other's stories of struggle and resiliency. Through this active listening, they work together to co-create new narratives responsive and sensible to one's situations. These collaborative and dialogical processes construct new social worlds and connect people in a powerful way.

e) Human needs are constructed within and by dominant discourses. These needs are "the core of all conflicts. People engage in conflict either because they have needs that are met by the conflict process itself or because they have needs that they can only attain (or believe they can only attain) by engaging in conflict" (Mayer, 2012, p. 11). Human needs are formed based on social, cultural, and financial contexts that people live in; "needs are embedded in a constellation of contextual factors that

generate and define conflict" (Mayer, 2012, p. 11). When human needs are addressed and studied reflectively and relationally, we discover how people's needs are formed in discourses and how people decide to pursue certain needs based on dominant discourses. Language, emotions, values, and structures in which people interact contribute to conflict in human relationships (Mayer, 2012), as they are constructed through human interactions and relationships in society.

f) This dissertation fills in the gaps in our current knowledge of human relations particularly, our understanding of ourselves as relational beings and relational becomings. Relational approaches invite us to move away from individualistic and modernist discourses and to embody the discourse of construction in relationships. This shift is important given the complexities that we face in our current social and political climates. The paradoxical nature of differences demands that we participate, collaborate, and partner with one another to arrive at new, ethical, and just understandings of the self and the other.

The following articles (chapters II, III, IV, V) that make up the body of this dissertation rest on the elaboration of a collaborative, relational map. These articles invite us to view conflict differently when it emerges in personal, interpersonal, and inter-system contexts. They elevate a platform for further discussion, dialogue, and exploration of this concept to reduce human suffering, raise collective awareness, and increase our interpersonal knowledge.

Theoretical Framework.

Conflict is a well-studied and well-researched concept in human relationships. In this dissertation, I introduce you to my journey of conceptualizing conflict and the narratives associated with it, as well as the common understanding of the relationship between conflict and self/other positioning. My understanding of conflict is inspired by the works of many philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, and therapists entangled in the exploration of the notion of conflict and have reflected upon its presence in human relations.

I am influenced by the works of philosophers and phenomenologists such as Martin Buber (1970) and Emmanuel Levinas (1930), particularly, when they discuss the relationship between self and the other. I use their ideas in this dissertation with the knowledge that their orientation is not based on a social constructionist framework; however, these ideas facilitate the process of becoming and support us to become more considerate of the other.

I am immersed in ideas that originate from the works of constructionist philosophers such as Michel Foucault (1970), Gilles Deleuze (1990), Kenneth Gergen (1993), and Richard Rorty (1997). These philosophers and scholars challenge individualistic and modernist discourses and have contributed significantly to the formation of relational discourses.

I am inspired by the works of therapists, such as Harlene Anderson (1993), Michael White and David Epson (1997), as the founders of collaborative and narrative therapy practice. These ideas are inspired from and embedded in the works of French philosophers Michel Foucault (1976), Gilles Deleuze (1993), and Jacques Derrida (1981). These ideas have guided me to develop my collaborative relational practice when working with families, couples, and individuals in my clinical counselling practice.

I am interested in Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981, 1984) view of meaning, which, among other things, focuses on what takes place in communication between people in immediate relationships, as these communications relate to their cultural surroundings. For Bakhtin (1981, 1984),

our words are never really ours alone; they come with prior claims on their meaning, and people then use them to fit their conversations with others. In this sense, the words and ways of talking used by partners in a relationship, as well as therapists and clients, have relational qualities. In other words, clients' and therapists' language stands in for a thing or experience, which has been described, while its use shapes developments between partners in a relationship.

I am drawn to Lev Vygotsky's (1984) work in child development. Vygotsky (1978) talked aboutZone of Proximal Development, as a relational proximal space between the self and the other. He highlighted its importance in sharing and negotiating meanings and in contextualizing understandings of life and relationships. Knowledge is not created outside of the relationship between the self and the other. Knowledge is coupled within the interactional space that the self and the other create together. Knowledge is combined with emotions and actions towards one another. I refer to Vygotsky's ideas in chapter II, as well as in my work with families with young children. I am particularly influenced by his discussion of learning as a social act. Vygotsky talks about the zone of proximity between a learner and a teacher and how such a space allows construction of learning to take place for students. I find this concept useful in my work with schools. His ideas are explained in chapter II when referring to child development and language in children.

Wittgenstein's (1953) ideas on language also inspire me. He claims that language constitutes our realities and our relationships with one another. The experience of self exists in the ongoing interchange with others; the self continually creates itself through narratives that include other people who are reciprocally woven into these narratives.

Relational, dialogical, and collaborative approaches, by which I am inspired and drawn upon, in chapters II, III, IV, and V, highlight that conflict and social divisions are consequences of grand narratives (i.e. individualistic/modernist discourses). Relational discourses invite us to pay attention to multiple voices exchanged in conversations. Through genuine curiosity, we learn to appreciate a multiplicity of ideas, voices, and views in conversations. This co-mingling effect allows our engagement with the other to reach its profound depth. Curiosity as an agnostic activity is encouraged, as it contributes greatly in unsettling exchanges and challenges certain paradigms in our thinking towards the other. This agnostic activity invites us to take a philosophical stance (Anderson, 1997). This will lead to the transformation of identities, as disputants in conflict together explore each other's landscapes of identities (White, 2007) and take part in re-authoring conversations (White, 2007) that construct new fluid identities for the parties in conversations. "To contain more than one's capacity is to shatter at every moment the framework of a context that is thought to cross the barriers of immanence... We can learn to invite the feeling that we have in the incomplete, un-worded, unknown of connection to the un-answered without perturbing its uncertain, un-centered character. To do less would be to invite an enactment of a shadow existence" (Levinas, 1969, p. 27).

Collaborative practices invite dialogue, newness, and surprise (McNamee, 2004), which in turn, engage people in a less abstract type of conversation than one of debating abstract positions. When people are truly attentive to the process of relating, they extend possibilities for being relationally responsible (McNamee & Gergen, 1999).

Relational discourses view everything in their cultural, political, and socio-economic contexts. These discourses suggest that the self does not exist outside of its relationships with others. An individual's problem is not located within the individual, but placed within one's relational contexts.

This practice suggests a separation between the self and its problems and invites us to view the self in relationship with its problems. It believes one's problems are socially constructed. This view

allows us to search for solutions outside of individuals' biological frame; solutions and problems reside in-between people, in their broader contexts, including one's cultural, social, linguistic, political systems, and environments. Cultural belonging, political stories, and psychological status are ingredients in one's narrative. When a problem is placed in social, historical, and political relations, its solutions cannot be personal. Solutions must be found in social, historical and political relationships between the self and the other.

Dichotomous thinking and binary language is embedded in dominant discourses (individualism and modernism) inviting people to speak from abstract positions and use language to imply: *this is what I believe, this is true, this is right, and this is wrong*. Dichotomous thinking amplifies the use of deficit-language in our relationships and leads to the development of a 'single truth,' the attitude of 'us versus them,' and the practice of othering. Inviting each other to speak from our experiences and metaphors that describe our lived experiences allow us to consider other possible options. "We might then exchange positions from time to time, with each of us taking the side of the other. We would each end up with an appreciation of both positions, and still be friends. ... Each metaphor creates an enemy, and thus reduces the chances of dialogue. If we created other metaphors, would better options become available?" (Gergen, 2015, p. 38) Collaborative practices offer rhizomatic language describing conflict, as a rupture in routines and norms, as an invitation to the emergence of new possibilities that require further coordination of ideas and actions. Dichotomous language is divisive, while rhizomatic language is invitational and welcoming new possibilities to our lives. The development of opportunities and possibilities is formed only in interactions between self and others.

The possibility of making collaborative movements, performing emotions, coordinating, and collaborating with one another is possible when the self learns to connect with the other. As Gergen uses the analogy of a butterfly in his book: *Relational Being (2011)*, in which the other is a wing and is part of the equation of we. When it is denied, its absence prevents the self from flying. When the self does not accept and include the other in partnership and dialogue, the self disables itself from moving forward. Gergen (2009) says a relationship becomes "challenges of flight" (p. 153). "A person is essentially constituted by a multiplicity of relationships. The individual represents the common intersection of a myriad of relationships. These relational residues resemble the wing of a butterfly. This wing enables one to soar in many directions; however, like the butterfly two wings are required for flight" (Gergen, 2009, p. 151).

Gergen characterizes the three major contributions to reality making. He (2015) outlines what constitutes reality as follows:

a) The language we live by: Through coordination of language and actions, we lay the groundwork for establishing morality. As we coordinate talk and actions within various contexts, we establish a right way to do things (p. 35).

b) The process of daily conversation: Our conversations achieve a sense of a common reality. This idea specifically proposed by Garfunkel, proposes that our interchanges are deeply reliant on *ethnomethods*, that practices of talking and acting that we use to achieve a rational or taken for granted order (p. 48).

c) The institutions we create: Our traditions of speech are often embedded in larger organization. Such organizations have authority over matters of reality, reason, and right. Foucault called these institutions *disciplinary regimes*. These regimes employ various measurement procedures, whereby we are scrutinized and classified in their terms. In fact we offer ourselves for examinations of various sorts... we are giving ourselves over to the disciplinary regimes, to be

labelled, and explained in their terms. And when we carry these terminologies into our daily lives. We extend the power of the disciplinary regimes...we participate in our own enslavement. Foucault was concerned with ways of mobilizing *resistance* to the expanding domains of *power/knowledge* as he termed the process of cultural disciplining. Making sense always requires that one participate in some process of 'making knowledge,' whether it to be the result of disciplinary regimes or simply the informal communities in which we live (p. 51-2).

In chapters II, III, IV, and V, each article offers ways of talking and positioning that invite people to work together and view themselves as an extension of each other. There is no I without the other (Gergen, 1993). The self and the other are not separate entities; they are intertwined and interconnected. When an I meets another I, they become we.

My Interest: The Relational Map.

I have a longstanding desire and interest in understanding conflict, its impact on people, and its construction in human relationships. I grew up with the political turmoil and conflicts in Iran that led to the 1979 revolution and aftermath. Many people were impacted by the political conflicts and the transformation from monarchy to theocracy in 1979. Since then, I have been intrigued by the impact of drastic political, social, and cultural change in society and in people's lives. How does it happen? Who makes it happen? How can we do things differently? These questions have lingered in my life for so long. I am interested in exploring how social and political change take place, but also how to lessen the damage it causes to people. Experiencing conflict politically and socially has made me aware that change in the macro level discourses will affect and have significant implications for interpersonal relationships (i.e. the micro level).

When I became a family therapist in 1991, my interest in conflict shifted from a focus on political conflict to interpersonal and inter-systems conflicts. I noticed the presence of conflict everywhere, in every relationship that we have with others -between couples, family members, home and school, employees and employers, and so forth. I became curious how we, as humans and as practitioners, work with others' use of language. In the therapeutic context, I paid further attention to the therapist's positioning and its impact on clients' positioning. I became preoccupied with the bidirectional process of therapy and how we, as therapists, position ourselves in the discourse of psychotherapy at the macro level. I wondered if this positioning created a distance between clients and therapists and how this distance contributed to interpersonal conflict between clients and other members of their social network. As I experienced and practiced more, I became more curious about the process of change when all parties work together, particularly when change takes place without force, imposition, and othering.

My dissertation is a continuation of my interest and curiosity to view conflict relationally and to showcase what I have gained in the past few years. I was introduced to social construction in the mid-2000s. I became deeply interested in viewing problems in interpersonal relationships (micro level) as being linked to their social, relational, cultural, and political contexts (macro level).

In my encounters with other social constructionists at Taos Institute, I learned to view everything as construction. Everything in our living conditions is *made* by people in a particular time and place. To change what is not working for us, we need to engage in a different kind of conversation with one another. The new language requires ingredients that invite both parties to be open, sit, and listen to each other. It requires our openness and ability to include the other as well as suspending our truths to talk about contradictions that may exist in multiple truths, ideas, and views that we share. My journey began when I became committed to searching for possible ingredients that could coach me to capture and arrest sparkling moments (White, 2007; Shotter, 2011) in my conversations with others; moments have the

potential to generate possibilities and create spaces for conversations on issues that matter to us.

Conflict lost its individualistic meaning for me and became a relational phenomenon, a phenomenon constructed in relationships. This awareness helped me to develop a relational map and guided me to maintain a collaborative position when talking with others, standing with others, and sitting with discomfort resulting from differences in views, ideas, and positions. My constructionist orientation and philosophical transformation are reflected in the literature reviews found in each of the following articles (chapters II, III, IV, and V).

Through this development, I learned to engage with people differently. I became further aware of how to use language, how to work with others to trace the footprints of dominant discourses in the formation of conflict, and how to view conflict not as a negative phenomenon to be avoided, but instead as an opportunity to learn from and reorient ourselves in relationships.

I began to review individualistic discourses, as they circulate in our daily interactions with one another. Individualistic discourses define self as a bounded being. Individualism means promotion of the right to exercise one's goals and desires. It means valuing independence, self-reliance, and denying the web of connections that contribute to our success. It means advocating interests of the self over the other -the other can be another individual, as well as the groups, nations, or even the environment that surrounds the self.

Individualistic discourse makes the self its focus and starts with the fundamental premise that the human individual is of primary importance in the struggle for liberation. The notion of sovereignty of self has forced the self to the center of every interaction in pursuit of its own needs. Individualism has become a belief that prompts one to act in their self-interest. The centrality of self keeps the other at a distance and, at times, defines the other as 'it'. The self learns to be closed off and creates walls and boundaries to protect itself in relation to the other. Ken Gergen (2011) says,

> When a fundamental distinction between self and other is established, the social world is constituted in terms of differences. The individual stands as an isolated entity, essentially alone and alienated. Further, such a view lends itself to a prizing of autonomy- of becoming a 'self-made man,' who 'does it my way.' To be dependent is a sign of weakness and incapacity. To construct a world of separation in this way is to court distrust; one can never be certain of the other's motives. And given distrust, it becomes reasonable to 'take care of number one.' Self again becomes an unquestionable motive, both within the sciences (such as economics and social psychology) and the culture at large. In this context, loyalty, commitment, and community are all thrown into question, as all may potentially interfere with 'self-realization.' Such views represent an extended critique of Western individualism (p. 5).

The individualistic discourse of self as a bounded being has been under scrutiny, as it has brought unnecessary suffering, isolation, and divisiveness to people's lives. As Sheila McNamee (2011) says,

> The individualist tradition champions the self as the source of thought and action. Consequently, we conduct psychotherapy to educate individual minds, reward and punish individuals at work, and hold individuals responsible for all their actions, thoughts, beliefs, and more (p. 154).

Psychotherapy as a profession champions and perpetuates the dominant individualistic discourse. The field of psychotherapy and psychology focuses on the individual and its mind. It places everything within the mind of the individual and aims to learn about self and its mind. This field, by its

nature, reinforces and supports the reproduction of centering self in relationship and perpetuates the division between the self and the other. It emphasizes the construction of bounded beings in society.

Starting in the 1960s, individualism received systematic empirical attention and recognition in the field of psychology. With the help of psychotherapists as experts, people began to internalize individualism and self-reliance. The pursuit of individual goals became social norms. The consequence of this discourse was the loss of family and community. With the loss of family and community, individuals became fragmented and new diasporas emerged. This new self is configured and defined self as a lonely, undervalued, and fragmented entity obsessed with gaining personal recognition. Science and medicine became powerful sources of influence. People became preoccupied with their physical and mental health. With the advent of new technologies, this way of living and being created emotional distress, as people tried to integrate this discourse into their lives (Cushman, 1995).

The therapeutic analysis of self became part of public life. This manifested itself in movies, radio, and television. This was the beginning of the 'linguistic turn' when psychological terminologies became more accessible and commonly used in everyday life. The therapeutic analysis of self aimed to cure people to return them to society. The field of psychiatry and then psychotherapy became helping professions to study those who fell outside of the social norms and needed to be treated to become normal again. Cushman (1995) described "psychotherapy as a social institution with many theoretical frameworks, ideologies, and guilds. It features some of the most varied and creative ideas of the past 150 years" (p. 2). Aligned with individualistic discourses, psychotherapy helped individuals become normal beings and function in a modern society.

These discourses dictate the importance of paying attention to the self and disconnecting from the other to better protect the self's sole interests. Relating to the other like this gradually leads to numbness and lack of responsiveness towards the other. It makes the self ignore what happens to the other in society. Under the influence of these discourses, the self/an I views itself as separate from the other/another I. The other/another I is viewed as a means/object to the self/an I. The self/an I sees the other/another I as a threat to be avoided or eliminated.

I believe conflict emerges from this arbitrary division between the self and the other dictated by individualistic discourses. Modern social sciences have contributed to this division. The dominant discourse of individualism does not offer a framework that responds to our interpersonal and international conflicts; it perpetuates and fuels conflict in relationships. We need to begin to have conversations about transforming the social institutions of psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy to provide services that steer us towards becoming bounded beings and that serve specific socio-economic and political groups. We need to re-view traditional approaches that define the other as a problem. This review invites us to become further aware of inequalities that exist in our relationships with one another, particularly, in the relationship between clients and therapists.

Viewing conflict relationally has brought new possibilities to my everyday conversations with clients. I have developed a relational map that guides my work with clients. My relational map draws on therapeutic approaches such as Collaborative practices (Harlene Anderson), Narrative practices (Michael White), and Narrative Mediation (John Winslade & Gerald Monk). The following critical assumptions inform my relational map in collaborative work with clients:

➢ The problem is the problem (the person is not the problem).
➢ People have expertise on their own lives.
➢ Having curiosity and taking a not-knowing position leads to a better engagement.

- Taking a philosophical stance in relation to others
- Viewing self as a narrative and life as multi-storied.
- People are the primary authors of their life stories.
- Problems are constructed within cultural contexts.
- Dominant discourses such as individualism perpetuate fear and the practice of othering as well as divisiveness and deficit-language.
- Language constitutes our realities.
- Problems and conflicts are socially constructed and motivated.
- Identifying the dominant discourses that guide human interactions recreates conditions for collaboration

In this dissertation, I illustrate my experiences with clients and how I use the relational map in my therapeutic relationships. I share how the relational map supports me in the process of meaning-making and addressing dominant discourses that form problems in clients' lives. These experiences are illustrated in chapters II, III, IV, and V.

Collaboration as a Relational Map to Conflict Competency.

Inspired by the work of Ruble & Thomas (1976), I developed an idea that conflict emerges in interpersonal relationships when the balance between expressing and asserting oneself and considering or cooperating with the other has been compromised for personal, relational, social, and cultural reasons. The balance varies in relationships. Reaching the balance means overcoming the challenges of flight (Gergen, 2011). The balance introduces us to new lines of flight (Deleuze, 1993). The imbalance often leads to experiences of conflict, as our needs are unmet. What contributes to the imbalance is usually found within dominant discourses. Learning and dissecting the taken-for-granted discourses help us to avoid perpetuating the imbalance in a relationship and, instead, allows us to construct a relationship in a collaborative manner.

We often assume that we are trapped into the taken-for-granted narratives. Our ways of acting and thinking play a significant role in having thin descriptions of the other. These correspond with dominant discourses and perpetuate and strengthen them. Influenced by dominant social and linguistic expressions and discourses, we learn to define the other in a divisive way. *"Often the language of objective reality is used to generate hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion"* (Gergen, 2015, p. 45). This division embedded in language and discourse is illustrated explicitly in chapter V.

Gergen (2009) says, "The distinct features of traditional individualistic orientations are a) the subject matter is bounded, b) people are observed and analyzed as the other. The underlying message in these orientations is, in effect, *'we learn about you.'* The worldview of fundamental separation is sustained" (p. 267).

How we view conflict is linked to our orientations (individualistic or relational) that impact our approach of dealing with conflict. Many ways of addressing conflict exist. Different contexts require awareness and curiosity to develop our mutual capacity to understand conflict deeper and handle it more effectively. No universal way exists to handle conflict. However, we create our world when we work together. If we want to transform conflict, we must do it together. When conflict is viewed in a relational context, people can negotiate its effects, its formation, and its transformation. Through negotiating meanings, we negotiate terms of engagement and collaboration.

Ruble & Thomas (1976) introduce five responses (Forcing, Avoiding, Compromising, Accommodating, and Collaborating) that people give in relation to one another while engaging in

conversation to address conflict. These five responses are co-created according to a person's emotions and values and are manifested through the degree of our assertiveness and consideration of *the other*. Mayer (2012) introduces three main domains -cognitive, emotional, and behavioral- that work together to create responses to conflict. He says, "Emotions fuel conflict, but they are also a key to de-escalating it. Many emotions can prevent, moderate, or control conflict. Part of everyone's emotional makeup is the desire to seek connection, affirmation and acceptance.... the art of dealing with conflict often lies in finding the narrow path between the useful expression of emotions and destructive polarization" (p. 14).

One of the consequences of this imbalance is that when we encounter differences in views, we position them as the other and distance ourselves from having relationships with them. *In Beyond Neutrality*, Mayer (2004) suggests "six broad needs that we generally have in conflict: voice, validation, vindication, procedural justice, impact, and safety" (p. 153). I will elaborate further in the following chapters how practitioners play a significant role in helping disputants establish or increase a meaningful voice, and feel validated and safe in the process instead of being asked to ignore or swallow their feelings and beliefs. Collaborative processes offer a mechanism to co-create a platform to talk about 'the unsaid' in a way understandable and fair to all parties.

A considered response intends to satisfy the needs of the interacting person, whereas an assertive response focuses on the needs of the focal person. The cooperativeness dimension reflects the importance of the relationship, whereas the assertiveness dimension reflects the importance of the issue. The degree of attention each party gives to these two dimensions may indicate how much one is influenced by individualistic discourses.

A Forcing Response is when one expresses and asserts oneself without any consideration for the other. One attempts to satisfy one's own needs at the expense of the needs of the other person (Whetten & Cameron, 2011). A forcing approach is a one-way approach. It focuses on one's needs, desires, and hopes regardless of its impact on the other person.

An Accommodating Response is a cooperative and unassertive position that satisfies the other party's concerns while neglecting one's own. This approach is also a one-way approach. It serves the other's needs, hopes, and dreams and leaves the self's needs, wants, and hopes unattended.

An Avoiding Response is uncooperative and unassertive. It neglects the interests of both parties (the self and the other) as they sidestep the conflict and postpone offering a solution.

A Compromising Response "intermediates between assertiveness and cooperativeness. A compromise is an attempt to obtain partial satisfaction for both parties, in the sense that both receive the proverbial 'half loaf.' To accommodate this, both parties are asked to make sacrifices to obtain a common gain... this creates a climate of expediency that encourages game playing" (Whetten & Cameron, 2011, p. 384) and 'zero-sum techniques' which do not lead to solutions.

A Collaborating Response is "cooperative and assertive. It is an attempt to address fully the concerns of both parties" (Whetten & Cameron, 2011, p. 385). This approach is dialogical. It requires full participation. It focuses on finding alternatives to what is presented as a problem. It is a win-win situation where both parties are actively involved and participating in dialogue to create something that would not be possible without their participation and collaboration. This response offers uncertainty, 'not knowing' (Anderson, 1997), and reflexivity -"a condition to which we can aspire, knowing full well that it is not a permanent resting place but more like a comfort station alongside our marathon struggle to know what we are about" (Holland, 1999, p. 481).

The narrative approach to mediation (Winslade & Monk, 2000, 2008) offers ideas to change the cognitive dimension of conflict. This is reflected in my therapeutic work with clients. The emphasis is on double listening and double meanings of each story that allow people to give voice not to the problem-saturated story, but to their preferred story, including their dreams and hopes for their relationships.

In this dissertation, I deliberately avoid providing strategies or tactics to handle conflict better. I acknowledge, "All conflicts are multifaceted, having many different elements and potential ways of being understood and characterized. How we explain a conflict, and what aspect of a conflict we choose to focus on has a profound effect on how we engage with the conflict, or help others to engage" (Mayer, 2012, p. 165). Conflict exists in every aspect of our relationships because we are relational beings (Gergen, 1993).

In this dissertation, I propose ideas for practitioners to become better equipped to set a stage and foster conditions for conversations. This requires separating resolution from agreement (Mayer, 2012; McNamee, 2015; Gergen, 2011). Resolution requires learning ways of developing collaborative responses, inviting people to think outside of the box, encouraging one another to discover new territories of understanding and knowledge, and "gaining energy, lessons, and growth that a conflict has to offer. This process can be liberating, as it frees up energy that has been tied up in conflict, but it can also result in a feeling of loss when a conflict has provided meaning and focus for people" (Mayer, 2012, p. 124). Collaboration is the pathway to conflict competency. It is reached when an I/self maximizes the use of its capacity of existence to equally consider the existence of the other as part of itself. I believe that "our ability to expand our practice and to reach our potential depends on taking a broader view about who we are, what our purposes are, and how we can best work to pursue them (Mayer, 2012, p. 181).

Expressing oneself fully cannot be accomplished without engaging the other. These two dimensions, expressing self and considering the other, go hand in hand in every interaction we make with the other. The imbalance begins when we center our attention on one side of these two dimensions and lose sight of the need to give equal attention to both sides to create a relational space where the self and the other can speak and be heard. Through this process, we develop competency in being fully present, talking with, and staying with the other. When self begins to listen to the other, face the other, and consider the other, another I begins to listen to an I, face an I, and consider an I. This is how reciprocity is constructed in human relationships. In this exchange, an I values the other as an equal and as part of its unity.

As self expresses itself, it provides a platform for the other to express him/herself. Through these exchanges, we make relational approaches that embrace contradictions and allow an I to co-mingle with the other in the presence of visible and/or invisible differences. Collaborative responses become our preferred responses and invite connection, engagement, and cooperation in tackling issues that matter to all of us.

Co-constructing Conditions for Collaborative Responses.

To set a stage for ourselves to be able to collaborate with others, we need to reflect on our beings with one another. How do I want to be with the other? The following considerations and inquires assist us to create a platform to view the relationship between self and the other differently. The following questions engage us in developing responses that shape our preferred realities:

a) Equal footing: when the self perceives the other as equal. The question we need to ask ourselves is whether an I considers the other I as equal and as worthy to enter into conversation. An I has to approach the other I as worthy of discussion. An I becomes present to the other I. "Different people have different things to contribute to conversations and relationships, but the relative value placed on all contribution is equal. 'The more vocal' are not considered superior to 'the quiet'. Those who are 'serious and contemplative' are of equal value to those who are 'light-hearted and humorous'" (London, St. George & Wulff, 2009, p. 2).

b) Creating a Cohort: The question is whether an I focuses on self and pursues his/her own goals or whether the self invites the other to join and co-create mutual goals. "A cohort develops sensitivity to the individual needs of its members as well as what is required for the group to retain its value and integrity. The individuals become part of something bigger than themselves" (London, St. George & Wulff, 2009, p. 2).

c) Personal and professional connections and intersections: The question is what is left out when we separate the personal and the professional (London, St. George, & Wulff, 2009). How does this affect the relationship between the self and the other? Would it diminish aspects of this relationship? When the self is guided by collaborative responses, the self does not separate itself from its contexts- personal and professional. Personal and professional contexts intersect and constitute one's being (Anderson & Gehart, 2007). This is an invitation for *us* to maintain our integrity in relationship.

d) Hospitality: The question is what position is the self taking in relation to the other? Who is guest and who is host? When the self and the other practice being hospitable, they treat each other differently. Their roles as host and guest change during the conversation. Derrida (2003) talks about the importance of hospitality as an unconditional welcoming of the other.

I have to have an unconditional injunction. *I* must welcome the other whoever he or she is unconditionally, without asking for a document, a name, a context, or a passport. That is the first opening of my relation to the other: to open my space, my home, my house, my language, my culture, my nation, my state, and myself. I don't have to open it, because it is open, it is open before I make a decision about it. Then I must keep it open or try to keep it open unconditionally (Bennington, 2003, ques. 4).

e) Finding a Comfortable Location: Since conversation can take place everywhere, the question is whether attention has been given to the place and its surroundings and whether people feel welcomed and comfortable (London, St. George & Wulff, 2009).

f) The Process of Feedback: The question is whether an I is ready to listen to another I while another I is expressing itself. Collaboration is not possible if an I does not practice listening to another I's voice, views, and opinions. This feedback loop invites the self and the other to be part of the meaning-making process.

g) Not Investing in Outcomes: The question is how much the self is invested in achieving particular outcomes when entering into conversation with the other. The self must ask itself about its expectations before joining in conversation with the other. Does the self leave room for the other to express itself? Conversations are unpredictable. They lead to desirable and/or undesirable results. Conversation is an invitation for the self and the other to create a platform (relational space) for ongoing reflection and elaboration between the self and the other. When an I insists

upon, invests in, and anticipates outcomes, an I is positioned against creating a relational space for the other. This eliminates the presence and voice of the other.

h) Communication: Communication is an attitude, not a technique. To have successful communication we need to develop the following attitudes: a) caring about what others are saying b) having focused energy, c) engaging in a joint effort for interactive talk, d) disengaging from evaluation, problem solving, and persuading, e) tolerating those who have difficulty in articulating themselves, and f) remaining genuine and natural throughout the process (Mayer, 2012).

The impact of having the relational constructionist approaches in conflict and on the cohesion and unity of the self with the other is explained in detail and illustrated through stories in the following chapters.