# TOWARDS RELATIONAL BECOMING!
## *AN INVESTIGATION*
## *ON*
## *CONFLICT NARRATIVES*



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## DISSERTATION

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## Tahereh Barati Bagherabad

born on the 23rd of July 1966
Mashad, Iran
living in Toronto, Canada

This PhD dissertation has been approved by:


Prof. dr. C. P. M. Wilderom (Supervisor)
Prof. dr. S. McNamee (Supervisor)

**GRADUATION COMMITTEE**

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**Supervisors**
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Prof. dr. S. McNamee, University of New Hampshire, USA

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Prof. dr. H. Desivilya Syna, The Max Stern Yezreel Valley College, Israel
Prof. dr. J. Winslade, California State University San Bernardino, USA

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# ABSTRACT

This study explores the utility of relational being and relational map as guiding concepts in the practice of psychotherapy and mediation. This thesis is an exploration and showcase of the transformation of conflict narratives through collaboration and dialogue. Informed by narrative, relational, constructionism, and Deleuze's ideas on rhizomatic language, my approach is characterized by a not-knowing and curious positioning, multiple theoretical and narrative voices, and the co-construction of meaning.

The traditional discourse of psychotherapy is nurtured by dominant discourses of individualism. Psychotherapy and mediation, both developed within the general philosophical framework of individualistic discourses, focus on problems and the centrality of an individual. The result has been a sense of a fixed subjectivity (i.e. a stable and unchanging person) as well as divisiveness, which has led to what many refer to as the practice of othering.

In this thesis, the fundamental concepts of individualism are questioned. Alternative discourses emerging within relational and constructionist philosophies are explored and used to illustrate the inadequacy of individualistic accounting. The concept of self as relational being is introduced as opposed to self as bounded being (Gergen, 2015). The concept of self is used in this study as a theoretical tool, a practical tool and a research tool. This thesis employs discourse analysis and narrative analysis through illustrations that include attention to the negotiation of discursive regimes and their influence on human relations.

The relational analysis of problems in human relations avoids constructing people as determined within discourse and, instead, supports ways of stepping outside of dominant discourses to shape and reshape people's lives. Collaborative, relational, narrative practices of psychotherapy are illustrated as effective practices that address many sorts of conflict, including those influenced by tradition, power relations, culture, and economics.

The articles in this dissertation are grounded on the assumption that change is afforded by the conversational interactions of therapists and clients in a collaborative, dialogical manner. Participation and collaboration of both parties are central to the development of mutually acceptable interaction. Setting a stage for dialogue is vital in this process, as individuals are invited to experience and re-experience themselves in a dialogical way. This could facilitate steps towards reconciliation and connection between people as relational beings. Drawing on many philosophers and therapists, I examine how the collaborative construction of therapy is accomplished in these articles. I conclude this dissertation with a discussion of the limitations and implications for future investigation.

# 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.

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- ➢ 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:

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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.

# CHAPTER II

## Prologue

The following article is based on relational, narrative, and constructionist ideas in therapy. To do therapy within this framework, a shift in thinking and practice is required. The shift from "mental to social process" (Gergen, 2011) is critical. The role of therapists, in this framework, is not to "work at plumbing the depths of clients' subjectivity" (Gergen, 2011, p. 243). In contrast, it is to learn the client's discourse.

The relational constructionist framework offers ideas to practitioners that creatively set a stage for conversations about discourses that dominate. Participants are invited to position themselves relationally to one another, as well as to the relevant dominant discourses. The following ideas are suggested:

- Engage participants in *meta-communication*: Tannen (1986, 1990) refers to "information conveyed by the meanings of words as the message. What is communicated about relationships-attitudes toward each other, the occasion, and what we are saying -is called the *metamessage*. And its *metamessages* that we react to most strongly... whereas words convey information, how we speak those words -how loud, how fast, with what intonation and emphasis -communicates what we think we are doing when we speak: teasing, flirting, explaining, or chastising... in other words, how we say what we say communicates social meanings" (quoted by Mayer, 2011, p. 29-30). Participants are invited to pay attention to their own voice, tone of language, level of engagement, frustration, appreciation, confusion, in subtle or covert ways and note their impact on others.

- Invite participants to view and contextualize the presenting problem in the context of school and the dominant discourses about school, not within a person. The problem is viewed relationally not individually. The problem does not belong to only the client; it is not located inside the client. As Voloshinov (1986) says, "The organizing center of any utterance, of any experience, is not within (the individual) but outside-in the social milieu surrounding the individual being (p. 93) (quoted by Shotter, 2008, p. 55).

- Encourage participants to bring forward their lived experiences, knowledge and wisdom. Each participant becomes mindful of the language s/he uses, as language constructs reality and opens up or closes down possibilities.

- Invite participants to practice double listening and double meanings. They are encouraged to search for threads of resources and strengths in children's lives and disengage from diagnostic descriptions of children's behaviours.

- Practitioners take a position that honours clients, as people, before helping: Engaging in conversations is not possible unless one honours the other for who s/he is and appreciates his/her expertise and knowledge. The therapists or other institutional representatives are encouraged to avoid taking a superior position and instead begin with getting to know the clients and negotiating their place in clients' lives. Listening attentively to clients' stories allows us to appreciate that clients have already tried to solve problems.

- Disentangle blame and responsibility: By practicing deliberate and rhizomatic language, therapists examine the relationship between clients and problems. When people are engaged in talking about their relationships with problems, they often experience both ability and responsibility to address the problems (Madsen, 2007).

- Practitioners are mindful of the possible challenges to communication: The following challenges are outlined by Mayer (2012): a) Reactive devaluation: when everything we "hear from those we are in conflict with is to be treated with suspicion at best and often with immediate and unambiguous dismissal" (p. 192), b) Report talk versus Rapport talk: when the "primary goal of one party in a communication is to convey information whereas another's is to build or experience a connection" (p. 194), c) Assumptions about being understood: when we assume what one party means without clarification and examination, d) Speaking with Power: "delivering difficult messages powerfully, clearly, and at the same time respectfully can be a daunting challenge" (p. 196).

- Encourage participants to pay attention to those "*dialogical or interactive* moments when and where there is a 'gap' in the stream of communication between two (or more) speaking subjects... when one has finished speaking and the other has to respond, the bridging of that 'gap' is an opportunity for a completely unique, unrepeatable response, one 'created' or 'crafted' to fill the unique circumstances of its utterance. It is in this way that all *dialogically structured* events inevitably bring into a situation something novel and unpredictable, something that goes beyond all pre-existing schematisms" (Shotter, 2008, p. 55).

- Encourage participants to develop communities that could "support the enactment of preferred lives" (Madsen, 2007, p. 199). Isolation and lack of resources increase the gap between what people prefer to do and what they actually do.

# ARTICLE I: Collaboration between Home and School-A Relational/Narrative Approach[1]

## Abstract

*In this article, I share my inspiration with Social Constructionist ideas, Narrative Therapy Practice and Vygotsky's ideas in creating collaborative conversations between home and school. In elaborating these ideas, I explore the following: the discourse of construction, the construction of conflict, self, language, and school. I focus on how differently the challenges that students, parents, and school confront can be reviewed differently within the constructionist discourse. This article highlights intentional steps towards social collaboration and ways of working towards dissolution of conflict/problems in relationships traditionally centered on students. This is about extending conversations to other important players in students' lives and working with all parties to bridge home and school and bring about change in students' relationships with others. Examples of conversations and specific points of focus have been described in this article. These illustrations incorporate and mould the ideas with respect to the particularity of students and their situations. I create new possibilities for families and their children to have constructive, meaningful, and dialogical conversations with school administrators.*

## Introduction.

In this article, I share with you my work as a consultant at both home and school. The transformative effects of my work with parents and schools are related to the utilization of concepts/constructions echoed in the field of psychotherapy since the 1980s. I elaborate on these ideas and highlight distinctions between individualistic discourse and the discourse of construction. I begin with introducing the discourse of construction followed by a brief elaboration of constructions such as self, language, conflict, and school from a constructionist point of view. I illustrate how relational and dialogical approaches address people's problems in comparison to individualistic approaches. I center my argument on relational ways of reducing challenges in relationships between students, parents, and schools. Conflict constructed within interactions between home and school invites in-depth dialogues facilitating the coordination of actions and collective efforts in addressing issues concerning children/students at home and school.

## The Discourse of Construction.

The term "constructionism" has been reverberating across the social sciences since the 1960s. Constructionist ideas have highlighted both the ever-changing forms of social reality and the processes by which social reality is put together to give meanings to our lives. "The leading idea has been that the world we live in and our place in it are not simply and evidently 'there' for participants. Rather, participants actively construct the world of everyday life and its constituent elements" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, p. 3).

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Today, fifty years after constructionist ideas rippled through the social sciences, we witness an expansion of "constructionism"– from "social construction of mind" (Coulter, 1979) and "self" (Wiley, 1994) to "social construction of social problems" (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). Constructionist ideas have become a new framework to understand and address social matters in a relational dialogical manner. These ideas inspire us to bring about change to 'old problems' that exhausted our energy and resources. These ideas bring forward a new framework of talking and positioning in our relationships that invite multiplicity of views, opinions, and ideas to discover solutions to problems.

Since the 1960s, this paradigm shift moved away from the foundational, essentialist, and modernist/individualistic discourses to the discourse of construction. This shift has had a significant impact on human social sciences including psychology and human relations. It has opened up new possibilities to deconstruct problems and reconstruct them differently.

The discourse of construction permits us to be critically thinking and questioning essentialist notions such as self, mind, power, and systems.  The constructionist point of view invites us to consider everything in life as a construction. This way of viewing life has enabled us to engage in talking about *the* self, mind, education, and other worldviews differently. It encourages us to deconstruct and see them in non-foundational ways, as they can be reconstructed again to fit our unique conditions.

Four aspects to the constructionist orientation (Gergen, 2015) are worthy of noting here. I contrast these aspects with those of the dominant individualistic discourse throughout this article. The four aspects are the following:

a)  Self is a relational being. Self develops its meanings in relation to others as opposed to self as a bounded being separated from others.
b)  Language is not a tool to present or transfer messages/information from one person to another. Language constitutes realities (Wittgenstein, 2009). It is pragmatic. It makes new worlds possible for us. "Language has the power to shape our consciousness; and it does so for each human child, by providing the theory that he or she uses to interpret and manipulate their environment" (Halliday, 1993, p. 107).
c)  Truth is contextual. It exists within the 'local coherence' instead of universalizing a single truth and making it as a norm for all.
d)  'Objectivity' in human relations is not possible.  Values guide knowledge making processes. 'Self-reflection and self-reflexivity' are critical elements of deconstruction and reconstruction of patterns of interactions.

Having outlined these aspects, let's move to the definition of discourse.

### *Definition of Discourse.*

Discourse "refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events. It refers to a particular picture that is painted of an event (or person or class of persons), a particular way of representing it or them in a certain light" (Burr, 1995, p. 48). The way we learn to organize our knowledge, ideas, or experience is rooted in language.  "Each discourse brings different aspects into focus, raises different issues for consideration and has different implications for what we should do. So discourses, through what is said, written or otherwise represented, serve to construct the phenomena of our world for us and different discourses construct these things in different ways" (Burr, 1995, p. 49). There have been many different discourses throughout human history; some discourses have been more dominant than others due to the particular social, political, and cultural contexts. Michel Foucault (1972) became one

of the theorists of 'discourse'. Foucault's articulation of dominant discourses allows constructionists to question the taken-for-granted ways of knowing and understanding the world.

### *Language as Construction.*

To constructionists, language is defined as an embodied activity. Language manifests dominant knowledges and ideas of people's lives. In language, we construct our lives and all that is meaningful. "Language is essentially a differentiating medium, with every word separating that which is named or indicated from that which is not (absent, contrary). Thus, whenever we declare what is the case or what is good, we use words that privilege certain existents while thrusting the absent and the contrary to the margins" (Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett, 2001, p. 680).

In psychotherapy, particularly in interactions between therapists and clients, language is critical. The modernist/individualistic discourses shape and form therapeutic language in a certain way. They introduce a certain language, a pathway to formation and, ultimately, utilization of pathologizing/diagnostic language. Individualistic discourse encourages and places problems within individuals (White, 2007).

The discourse of construction, however, brings a new set of 'statements' to the field of psychology, psychotherapy, and the client/therapist relationship. This discourse introduces a new way of talking between client and therapist; it places problems in-between individuals. It locates problems in their particular social, cultural, and family contexts, rather than within a self-contained individual.

### *Narrative Therapy Practice.*

Within the discourse of construction, Narrative Therapy was born in the early 1980s. Narrative Therapy sheds light on and unpacks one's values, beliefs, qualities, interests, abilities, and problems, understood as constructions born within one's relationships with others. This differs from the traditional models in therapy, based on individualistic discourse, where everything that makes us human is presumed to reside inside/within the body or person. Narrative Therapy questions the belief that one's problems are a reflection of one's identity or the identity of others. This approach encourages therapists to pay attention to all contributing factors in the formation of problems including the language that clients use in therapy settings. It supports therapists' efforts to adopt a wider lens to view, learn, and understand clients' concerns. Narrative Therapy is a relationally focused approach that articulates the location of problems outside of individuals. It places problems in the interactive flow of relationships. Michael White (2007) says,

> Externalizing conversations can provide an antidote to these internal understandings by objectifying the problem. They employ practices of objectification of the problem against cultural practices of objectification of people. This makes it possible for people to experience an identity that is separate from the problem; the problem becomes the problem, not the person (2007, p. 9).

This means that problems are externalized and located outside clients. Both clients and therapists begin to talk about the problems as separate entities in relationship with clients and how they influence clients' lives. A client characterizes a problem in detail; s/he describes the problem in a way that allows him/her to get to know the problem and its influence on his/her life.

During the course of describing the problem, a client names the problem. For instance, problems such as 'anger or fear' are named and viewed as separate from the client. This way of talking

is very different from locating the problems within the individual; for example, "a client is in relationship to anger" as opposed to "a client is angry." The client, in collaboration with her/his therapist, begins to characterize 'anger or fear' and makes a detailed description/image for the problem to her/himself and therapist. Externalizing conversations allow client and therapist to trace the impact of 'fear or anger' in the client's life. For instance, a client might say s/he notices that 'the anger' is getting bigger or more visible when her/his parents have 'arguments' about her/his school marks. By mapping the presence of 'fear or anger' in one's relationships, 'fear or anger' become further traceable and known to the client. For instance, questions, such as: when 'fear or anger' happens, or when it increases or decreases, or in what relationships it becomes visible or invisible, assist the client in tracing the presence of 'fear or anger' in his/her life. Thus, the client becomes aware of ways to interrupt or disrupt the problem's formation and its maintenance in his/her relationships. The client also will notice others' contributions in the formation, fueling, or dismantling 'fear or anger' in his/her life.

This way of viewing self (as separated from the problem) is a revolutionary idea and is a "counter practice to those that traditionally tied people to restricting 'truths' about their identities" (White, 2007, p. 9). The separation of people from their problems does not "relinquish people from a responsibility to address the problems that they are encountering; rather it makes it more possible for people to assume this responsibility" (White, 2007, p. 26). When problems are located and described as byproducts of inter-actions, the implication is that they are constructed by what people do together. And just as 'problems' are constructed in inter-actions, so is the self. One, alone, cannot create a story. One's story is constructed with others' participation and engagement. During this participation and engagement, new ideas, meanings, and forms of life are constructed.

### *The Self as Social Construction.*

The description of self varies depending on what discourse is dominant in society. Specific interpretations and descriptions of self developed within the modernist discourse since the 17th century. Individualistic discourses describe self as a bounded, unique, and independent being who is separated from others. The distinction between self and the other as well as 'action and agent' is related to individualistic discourses. With this view of self as a bounded being, the discourse of construction introduces other descriptions of self; for instance, self as a relational being (Gergen, 2009) and self as a narrative self (Anderson, 1997). According to Harlene Anderson (1997), ''self, is an ongoing autobiography . . . an ever-changing expression of our narratives, a being-and-becoming through language and storytelling as we continually attempt to make sense of the world and of ourselves'' (p. 216).

Bakhtin (1986) stated that "no one person's voice is ever even his or her *own*; no one existence is ever clearly bounded. Instead, each voice is always permeated with the voices of others. Each voice resists and contests some voices, and it embraces others, but there is no *one* that could coincide with itself.... *two* is the minimum number, because life requires dialogue" (p. 58).

We make each other's worlds in our active involvement and joint activities. Therefore, individuals don't exist as separate entities; a particular self does not stand-alone. S/he exists in coordination with other people working together and orchestrating the formation of new meanings, understandings, and knowledges. This discursive tradition (individualistic discourse) is replaced with the constructionist relational stance, which defines self as a relational self (Gergen, 2009). A relational self is a multiple self, operating within relationships and contexts. Interactions among the multiple selves are opportunities for the emergence of conflict; therefore, conflict is omnipresent.

*Conflict as Social Construction.*

Conflict is seen as a phenomenon constructed within relationship. From a constructionist point of view, conflict is an integral feature of our daily interactions with others, allowing us to realize that differences between self and the other are inevitable and need to be negotiated through collaboration and dialogue. Our ideas, values, and beliefs about self and the other emerge from the relationships we inhabit. Conflict may also appear when we become aware of discrepancies in our points of view, when there is incongruence between our expectations and that of others, and when there is an identifiable difference, per se, such as race, religion, class, and gender. All differences are context-based; they have to be understood in their own particular social, cultural, political and relational contexts. What one experiences, as a difference in a particular culture/context, is not the same as in another culture/context. When our focus on or understanding of conflict avoids an essentialist/fundamentalist stance and, instead, adopts a constructionist stance, we become curious about the emergence of conflict in relationships. Our curiosity allows us to make sense of conflict; it invites us to coordinate our actions to generate new meanings and construct social realities.

The social constructionist stance introduces the assumption that the "individual is not the agent of reality construction" (McNamee, 2012, p. 41); however, ''life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue, a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium'' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293). The belief in dialogical nature of life invites us to not place the responsibility of conflict within an individual but instead places it in a relational process with others. We are encouraged to make an inquiry on how conflict is *made* in social interchanges. This inquiry requires us to locate conflict in a particular context and in larger social, cultural, and political contexts where distinct worldviews are created. Recognizing social, cultural and political narratives as a primary context to conflict provides us with greater understanding and connects us to many visible and invisible resources that would not be available otherwise.

*School as Social Construction.*

School is a construct with many multiple subsystems. Our understanding of school has emerged over time through the consensus of people to create a space and opportunity for children to learn skills for life. Like any institution, an educational system is filled with cultural, political, and social beliefs. It is designed and focused on preparing children to learn, take responsibilities, and adopt life skills to become useful contributors to society; its mandate includes a promise of an open learning space for children to practice basic fundamental principles of socialization, growth, development, and learning. The school curriculum is crafted and modified by communities to help children become active citizens. From the social constructionist point of view, school is a tradition influenced by larger cultural, political, and historical traditions and politics.

Sheila McNamee (2014) states, "People come together and coordinate. In ways that generate rituals ...standards and expectations emerge from these ritualized co-ordinations. We have expectations and beliefs. Those beliefs and values feed into our future co-ordinations. Those values and beliefs are made, not found. They are made with each other. So there is always a standard, but the standard is always within a particular set of relations" (p. 9).

As a clinician who meets with families and school staff to support students at school, I learned that bringing people together to share their views and beliefs is a useful way of moving toward

coordination of actions, which can generate support between home and school. This is an invitation to the co-creation of meanings. I emphasize the process of collaboration because "it is out of relational process that human meaning is born, that values and rationalities are formed. It is a collaborative process, then, that should be a foundation of educational practice. It is no longer the individual student that should center our concern, but participation in the relational process from which knowledge emerges. In this context, initiatives in collaborative learning are especially promising" (Gergen, 2015, p. 56).

I advocate for a fundamental shift in how we address students' problems at school. I invite you to consider this paradigm shift from the dominant individualistic discourse that sees knowledge as carried by fixed representations of the world, to the discourse of construction that sees knowledge as not being located in individual minds but that is continuously realized in the active process of making (Gergen, 2015).

If we accept the premise that knowledge is constructed through ongoing relational practices, we should become oriented in utilizing concepts such as Child Development and Zone of Proximal Developments in our educational systems more effectively. These two concepts strengthen relationships between students and adults, and give students a chance to develop their narrative of self and relational beings through dialogical and collaborative work. These notions address children's problems at home and school in a more reflective and dialogical way. Thorough in-depth collaborative dialogical processes, we (adults and students together) can reshape developmental processes in a fruitful fashion.

### *Child Development.*

The concept of Child Development has been elaborated and promoted in the discourse of modernism/individualism. However, It needs to be reintroduced to the educational system from the discourse of construction. When viewing 'self as a relational being,' child development is not about focusing on an individual's endeavors. Child development becomes a relational achievement constructed in collaboration between self and others. Lev Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, first talked about child development from this perspective. In the 1930s, Vygotsky's ideas were introduced in the West where they remained virtually unknown until the 1970s, when they became a central component of the creation of new paradigms in developmental and educational psychology.

Vygotsky explained that, "when a learner is attempting to carry out some intended activity but cannot manage it completely on his or her own, a more experienced co-participant can, by offering relevant assistance in the form of hints or demonstration, enable the learner 'to go beyond him- or herself' by taking over the new skill or knowledge and ultimately making it her or his own" (Wells, 2015, p. 63). A learner usually comes with a question; s/he chooses a topic or s/he encounters something or someone. His/her question initiates a conversation between a learner and an adult. The adult begins to extend the learner's meaning-making of his/her experiences of a topic. The adult creates opportunities for the child/learner to "incorporate the new information into his linguistic repertoire and extend his understanding of the topic in which s/he is currently interested" (Wells, 2015, p. 65).

In the following sections, I illustrate how a student develops a new understanding of a dominant dynamic between himself and his classmates; this understanding invites his teachers and classmates to learn new social behaviours and manners.

*Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).*

Vygotsky was interested in early childhood development. He saw reasoning as emerging through practical activity in a social environment. Vygotsky said, "Learning is an achievement not of independent effort but of social collaboration... This learning makes it possible for children to move from 'what is known and familiar to them' to 'what is possible for them to know'... The concept of the 'zone of proximal development' is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 86).

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is an area of learning that occurs when a person is assisted by a teacher or peer with a skill set higher than that of the subject. It is impossible to learn a skill set without the assistance of teachers or peers. The teacher, then, helps the student attain the skill the student is trying to master in hopes that the teacher will no longer be needed for that task.

The current educational system is influenced by modernist/individualistic discourses that view self as a bounded being. The individualistic discourse places success and failure in the hands of a student. It perceives the student as being solely responsible for his/her own life. It dismisses the contribution of others and students' relationships. It overlooks the contribution of others in the construction of an action(s) that a student takes. Vygotsky and his ideas regarding ZPD encourages us to consider others' contribution and participation in the formation of success or failure in students' lives. Vygotsky (1978) argued that nothing is formed in isolation. One makes progress in the ZPD in collaboration with others. I illustrate how the Individualist discourse has a negative impact on students' lives; particularly, when an educational system is heavily influenced by the dominant discourse, unaware of its unintended consequences on children's learning processes.

**My Approach to Collaboration.**

In the past few years, I have been working with families and children within the educational system/schools. I am interested in looking at multiple relationships that a student develops in his/her educational setting. I am curious to learn how a student coordinates his/her actions with others (e.g. peers, teachers, administrators, and professionals) at school and, then, at home with his/her siblings, friends, parents, and other extended family members. I explore actions taken and exchanges made between home and school when a problem presents itself in a student's life.

Because students are engaged in multiple relationships -the relationship between home and school, between students, between students and teachers, between the administration and the staff, and between the administration and parents -I pay attention to the contribution of each in the formation and maintenance of problems in students' lives. Monitoring how these multiple relationships are established and how they become dis/harmonized enables us to respond better to the needs of students and facilitate their growth and development more effectively. Monitoring our daily interactions including our 'way of talk' with one another is stepping into the reflective practice. The reflective practice modifies our 'way of talk' to construct a co-learning environment for students. Otherwise, students would face multiple problems, which negatively affect students' relationships at home and school.

Collaborative conversations begin with a student and his parents when they come for consultation regarding their child's behavioral, emotional, and relational problems at school or home. In my sessions with a family, I identify how parents work with the school staff, and I explore barriers

in relationships between home and school to achieve desired outcomes. During this talk, I propose engaging with the school staff to address the child's problems in a relational and dialogical manner.

Here are initial steps to make an inquiry about the problem affecting a child at school/home:

a)  The first step is to identify stakeholders who care about the child and want to help the child to stand up to the problem in his/her life.

b)  The second step is to invite stakeholders to participate in a meeting. The main stakeholders are usually the parents of the student, his/her primary teachers, and the school principal/VP. In these meetings, a student is not present, as the problem talk (Zimmerman, 1996) may harm and reduce the child's ability to stand up against the problem.

c)  The third step is to discuss what actions each participant takes in relation to the identified problem. I often find the absence of coordination and collaboration among adults prolongs students' experiences of problems and leads to the deterioration of student's situation at school.

d)  The fourth step is to get to know a student through participants' eyes. The process of getting to know is centered on a student's abilities and qualities. It brings forward a student's preferred self overlooked due to the dominance of the problem talk/story. In this conversation, each stakeholder shares his/her knowledge of the student. This may make new possibilities available to all parties; possibilities help participants and the student have new views, ideas, and solutions about the identified problem. The talk about strengths and abilities of a student will open up a healing space for repairing and reconnecting with the student who is facing the problem. These conversations continue until all participants' actions and talks become further aligned with one another in supporting the student against the problem.

Because of the presence of modernist/individualist discourses in educational systems, most interventions relating to conflict at school have been narrowed down to students' individual responsibilities and their performance in a classroom. In such cases, students solely are seen as responsible for having behavioral and academic problems. My collaborative approach, inspired by social constructionist ideas, offers a new way to support students in their struggles against the problem.

In my meetings with school staff and parents, I work on mapping the problem story by asking the key participants to pay attention to students' difficulties in social/relational contexts within the school system. I invite them to reflect on the dominant institutional discourses that circulate within that system. My conversations with parents and school staff create a platform for parents and teachers to critically view and re-view their own internalized individualist/modernist beliefs about the relationships between parents and their children, parents and teachers, as well as the relationships between teachers and students.

Stepping outside of the dominant individualistic discourse of viewing self as a bounded and separate unit is not easy as the individualistic discourse prevalent in our educational system continues to influence our views on matters that affect students at school. Individualistic discourses frame people as problems and consequently disallow us to view problems as relational by-products. This way of viewing leads to experiences of conflict between home and school as each party locates the problem in the other.

The paradigm shift here is critical to my work with parents and school staff. The paradigm shift is about having an understanding of the relational origin of issues in students' lives. When the

relational aspects of issues- including values, beliefs, and problems in students' lives are acknowledged and accepted as an alternative discourse, our work begins. This paradigm shift allows key players in a student's life to be part of the process of change in a more constructive, dialogical, and transformative fashion.

**Case Vignette: Richard's Story.**

I would like to share with you my experience of working with a family and their son, Richard, in the context of a family/school relationship. This story illustrates how I worked with others to bring about change in Richard's life. All names used in this narrative are pseudonyms to protect the identity and confidentiality of participants in this work.

### *Description of Concerns.*

Richard is a 12-year-old boy who came with his parents for therapy. The parents, Mary and John, said Richard has been experiencing "fears, anxiety and peer interactional difficulties at school." Mary and John talked about their experiences of 'conflict' with the school staff when they tried to help Richard with his problems at school. In the past couple of years, Richard has become less interested in going to school because of what he experiences there. Richard said, "I have been 'bullied' at school. There are a few students that don't like me and keep teasing me until I get 'angry' and hit them. Then I am in trouble, I am sent to the principal's office. I tell the principal that the other students started first but the principal doesn't believe me and says, I should not be hitting anyone". Richard's mother talked about the zero tolerance policy. Mary said she contacted the school staff to inform the school about what is happening between Richard and his classmates, but the school put the blame on Richard and said that Richard shouldn't be practicing 'hitting' and he is as responsible as others. The school staff informed the parents about the 'zero tolerance to violence' and wanted Richard to attend counselling to deal with his 'anger'. Mary said she and her husband accept this logic but Richard is not the only one involved in 'hitting.' Mary felt that the school had to do something about it, but the school disagreed. John said he anticipated that the school would say the same thing to other parents. He felt this way of handling the problem would not bring the necessary changes that Richard and his classmates required. It would not make the 'bullying' stop.

The parents shared that they took the school's recommendations and registered Richard for 'behavioral management' counselling with a CBT therapist. Richard said the 10-week program was useful and he learned alternative ways of responding to his classmates, but his problems at school did not stop. Mary and John said the school continued to call them every day due to ongoing incidents between Richard and his classmates.

The parents said that they contemplated changing Richard's school and talked to different alternative schools, as the problem between Richard and his classmates escalated. Mary said the conflict between home and school became further intensified, as the school continued addressing Richard's problem individually -locating the problem within Richard. John said that they never found out what the school told other parents and what reactions the other parents had about bullying. They felt 'left in dark.'

As the conflict heightened, Mary and John said they decided to withdraw further and become less involved with the school, but they found their stress increased and permeated their work.

The school recommended that the parents take anger management courses and parenting classes. John felt annoyed that the school put 'the blame' on them for the problems. John described himself as a good father who knew how to raise his son. John described the problem as being located within the others- Richard's classmates and his teacher, who were not adequately responding to bullying. Therefore, as their frustration intensified, the parents took their concern to the school trustee, as they did not see any actions taken by the school staff, with the exception of being referred to the school's zero tolerance policy.

We began our work at the point when the parents initiated a formal complaint against the school staff. At that time, Richard was suspended from the school. The dominant discourses of individualism promoted the location of the problem in an individual. The school system operating within the individualistic discourse made Richard, and then, his parents, responsible for the problem- bullying. What was overlooked was that bullying does not happen in a vacuum; it happened within interactions between Richard and his classmates, and also with the school system, and the family system.

### Naming the problems -Conversations to separate Richard from 'the problem.

Mary and John named Richard's problems as social problems. To them, Richard's problems consisted of experiences of "bullying, lack of voice, isolation, fear, anxiety and negative reputation at school." We characterized each problem that Richard and his parents named in our conversation. We explored the impact of these problems on Richard and on his interactions with his parents, as well as with his peers and teachers at school. Richard said his problems with his classmates had created a 'negative reputation' for him at school. Richard, along with his parents, said he was not able to make friends because his peers did not speak highly of him and put him down. Richard said his classmates did not include him in their activities and play. Mary and John were concerned about Richard becoming further isolated. His negative reputation could further silence his voice. Mary and John named their own problems as "the school not listening to their concerns and making Richard solely responsible for his actions such as hitting." The parents felt that our meetings with the school staff would help both sides see the problems as relational and not within Richard.

### Descriptions of the family members' resources, qualities and abilities.

Mary and John described Richard as a very fun, energetic, and smart child who loves helping and caring for others. Richard is very good with sport activities such as soccer, hockey and baseball. He is interested in playing music and watching movies.  The parents linked Richard's interests to their own. John and Mary described themselves as a couple who value education, children's issues, and parents' involvement with school activities.  John, as a police officer who has been working for the city for almost a decade, described himself as having a strong work ethic. Mary works as a manager at an insurance company where she offers psych-educational workshops for the staff on stress management and organizational skills.

### A possibility for change through co-construction of meanings and actions.

As Mary and John began to file their complaint with the school trustee, they talked to other parents with whom they trusted and felt comfortable. During this time, they received confirmation from other parents concerning how the bullying was being addressed at school. They found that other parents were experiencing the same treatment from the school and all cases were dealt with individually.

This new alliance between Mary and John and some other parents boosted Mary and John's energy to address the issue differently. As Mary and John were waiting to talk to the school trustee, they found that the principal was about to retire and consequently the school management team had changed.

The parents didn't see any change in Richard's problems at school. The summer passed and the new school year began. Now the new school management team was in power. The parents felt the new management might have a better understanding, novel ideas, and strategies to reduce bullying at school. Mary and John became more involved with the new management and wanted to address Richard's problems more effectively. They felt more energized by the responses they received from the new principal. This hoped that things could change; things could be reconstructed in a more responsive way.

After listening to the family's story and their challenges in constructing new positive realities for Richard and themselves, we planned to have two series of meetings focusing on Richard's problems and Richard's resources at home and school. We agreed to have a) therapy sessions with Richard and his family on a regular basis, and b) regular consultation meetings at school where Richard's parents and the school administrators would be present.

The parallel meetings enabled me, as a practitioner, to work on the problem from different angles. At a micro level, our talk was to assist Richard to regain his preferred position in relation to the problem and, at a macro level, our talk with the parents and the school staff was to highlight the importance of separating Richard from the problem and to continue working together to explore ideas that would affect the dynamic of classroom as a whole, rather than just Richard. This helped us collectively to erode problematic discourses that locate problems within one person or a family- Richard or his family.

### *Collaborative work through Family sessions.*

In our family sessions, Richard provided thick descriptions of bullying, fear, anxiety, and reputation. He drew pictures of these problems. He began to see when and how the fear and anxiety haunted him in his interactions with others. He saw when and what actions made fear and anxiety less apparent in his daily interactions with his classmates. Richard's parents shared their stories of fear and anxiety and shared with Richard what actions they took to reduce fear and anxiety in their interactions with others. Richard learned from his parents how to reduce the impact of fear and anxiety on his life.

Mary and John witnessed how Richard learned to separate himself from the problem. Richard utilized his abilities and became less influenced by reputation, fear and isolation. The school staff became aware of their educational role in addressing bullying more effectively with Richard and his classmates. This shift in everyone's focus, attention, and language helped Richard develop a new language to describe and verbalize his problems at school. Using externalizing language in our talk about Richard's problem helped all parties learn to work together to take different actions in relation to those who bully and those who are being bullied. This shift supported Richard in addressing his experiences of being bullied, fear, anxiety, reputation and lack of voice when interacting with peers.

### Collaborative work through meetings with school staff & the parents.

In this exploration, both parents and teachers attended our regular meetings. As our conversation continued, they became more aware of Richard's struggle at school. As we know, the school has a long history of locating students' problems in the students' mental dis/abilities. In conversations with both parents and teachers, we used externalizing language to help them locate Richard's problems in his relationships with his peers and teachers. The parents and the school staff became more familiar with externalizing language and began to incorporate it into their talk with each other and then, consequently, with Richard.

During the course of our meetings, we acknowledged that Richard wasn't the problem and identified the source of problems as the interactions among the students. We also realized that the staff believed that "Richard was the sole responsible troublemaker who cannot get along with others." We discussed the impact of this belief on the staff's relationships with Richard and also with other classmates. We detected that this belief caused the school staff to talk to Mary and John negatively, leading them to believe that they were responsible for not following the school policy -zero tolerance policy to violence. The parents expressed their concerns for Richard and other students differently in our meetings, as they realized that the zero tolerance policy did not help children get along with one another but instead perpetuated the culture of punishment with limited learning opportunities for students.

We used externalizing conversations to re-view Richard's problems in relation to his peers and teachers.  This helped the parents and teachers become further engaged in understanding the construction of 'the bullying problem' in his interactional patterns with peers. It created a new platform for the parents and teachers to view Richard differently.

As Richard's struggles were externalized and placed in his relationships, the parents and teachers learned that they might be contributing unintentionally to the construction of the problem as well. In this exploration, we all became more sensitive in analyzing, labeling, and treating Richard differently. We stopped labeling Richard as a problem. This way of talk helped the parents and teachers view each other differently as well. They became each other's supporters and shared their ideas and wisdom. The school staff began to view Mary and John not as 'difficult parents' but as active and caring parents. Through our conversations, the school staff became aware of and in tune with challenges that both Mary and John had in supporting their son, Richard, with respect to his daily experiences at school.

This way of talking made visible the role that Richard's classmates played in the construction of bullying. It came to light that his classmates would need to become more aware of their un/intended participation in Richard's experience of fear and anxiety. Our conversations extended to an understanding that Richard's problems were not just his. When his problems were viewed as relational concerns, the parents and teachers became more curious to explore ways of tackling the problem from other domains to assist Richard in gaining voice and pushing fear and anxiety out of his life. Teachers came up with brilliant ideas to tackle issues such as bullying and negative reputations. They introduced group activities for the students, during which they worked together in mapping out the impact of bullying on their fellow classmates. The teachers started to imagine new ways to engage students in talking about these notions and in becoming aware of their impact on other students. They used visual

aids, drew, and wrote poetry and letters in their group projects. This was a step towards reconstruction of Richard's self-narrative as a student.

All stakeholders examined the discourse affecting Richard negatively and began to make visible the connection between Richard's problems and the school's cultural/social contexts. I will explain in the next section how our conversations helped Richard's teachers deconstruct the dominant cultural narratives and discourses in their classrooms that had limited students' lives.

### *Challenges during the collaborative process[2].*

Working with this family and school staff was delightful, energizing, and insightful. However, to remain collaborative, I constantly needed to remind of the main principle of collaborative practices - *Maintaining a not-knowing stance and suspending my pre-knowledge.* This principle helped me remain a member of the team. It allowed me to become aware of the intention behind my questions. It assisted me to tune into clients' stories by listening to multiple and often contradictory narratives exchanged in the meetings. Listening to the multiple narratives about Richard allowed me to hold each story tentatively and not marry any particular narrative defining who Richard was or should be. This principle helps tap into participants' local knowledge and negotiate multiple realities and meanings about the problem. In our conversations, the multiplicity of references and ideas were highlighted, as we became more engaged in deliberate and intentional conversations to co-create suitable conditions for the relationships between Richard, his peers, and his teachers.

We, practitioners, are professionally trained to find discrepancies in clients' narratives and construct our questions to identify gaps in people's life stories. Practitioners learned to seek truth in clients' narratives. This learning must be unlearned for practitioners to engage in collaborative conversations. Engaging with what is shared in the here and now, being radically present (McNamee, 2015) to what is exchanged, and listening doubly to better identify stories of resiliency are critical elements of re-authoring conversations (White, 2007).

Paying attention to and shedding light on the influence of the disciplinary discursive regimes was a challenge. Maintaining inclusivity of all voices in conversation was difficult. Silencing voices of blame and elevating voices of cooperation invite participants to work together, and join in a shared inquiry. What helped me was to name the problem as 'bullying' and locate it in the context of this particular school. Naming the problem and characterizing it as bullying allowed us, including family members and school staff, to brainstorm creatively and respond to bullying collectively and sensibly.

**The Ripple Effects.**

Our regular meetings at school and home continued for a few consecutive months. The meetings gathered the involved parties' collective wisdom and channeled it in a direction supported Richard to strengthen his abilities to have voice and push the negative reputation out of his life. Our collaborative work reshaped the discourse that traditionally clouded this school system.

Our conversations with the stakeholders in Richard's life helped to create conditions for Richard to learn and develop new skills with the guidance and assistance of his teachers and parents.

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[2] This section was not included in the publication version.

According to Lev Vygotsky (1986), ZPD is not a task that children can achieve anything alone; ZPD cannot be achieved at once. ZPD cannot be traversed quickly and individually. The zone needed to be broken into manageable portions; it had to be supported by adults and functioning peers and gradually achieved over time. Therefore, all participants-parents and teachers- come to conversations prepared and engage with this purpose. Talking and collaborating in this way helped teachers and parents develop an intentional understanding of the process and become actively involved with one another to take actions to reduce Richard's challenges at school.

This participation created a safety net outside of dichotomous beliefs and attitudes towards one another. The attitude of us versus them dismantled in the relationships between Richard's parents and the teachers. They united in efforts to achieve common objectives. Both parents and teachers became part of Richard's team to help the school address bullying and negative reputation in a creative, effective fashion.

This relational approach of addressing students' challenges became a template for both parents and teachers to practice this in the classroom for other students. Richard wasn't the only recipient of the collective wisdom; it affected the whole classroom.

This realization led to more in-depth conversations on the importance of the safety of children at school, and highlighted our relational responsibility to teach our children to stop the practice of bullying and aggression in their interactions with one another. The school staff (teachers/VP and the principal) and Richard's parents decided to take active roles and invited other parents to join their team to a) separate students from bullying, b) educate students about the effects of bullying on their social relations, and c) teach their children how to respond to bullying without violence.

The parents and teachers became active participants in separating reactions to bullying from practices of bullying. They co-created many creative ways of educating children about bullying and creative responses to bullying in a non-violent way and developed new initiatives at the school. One of the teachers created a campaign to teach students to express themselves in a non-violent way. The campaign was invitational, non-punitive, and educational. Older students served as role models for the younger ones, exhibiting non-violent and respectful behaviours in social situations. The teachers assigned the older functioning peers new tasks: to be supportive and patient with those who practice bullying and respond to them in non-violent ways to break the cycle of bullying. Teachers hoped to train younger students to learn and internalize ways of expressing themselves in a non-violent manner.

These outcomes rest on the notion of relational being (Gergen, 2009), the core principal of my work with parents and school staff. Sheila McNamee (2011) puts it beautifully. "It is in the active engagement, the situated joint action, that meaning is constructed with others and realized (literally, made real) in the collaborative performances of people in relation. Meaning is doing" (p. 3). Richard, Mary, John, and the teachers, along with the school staff, created new meanings for their engagement at school, and pooled their resources to tackle the issues that mattered to the safety of all students.

The excitement and enthusiasm that this way of working generated inspired me to write and share this experience with you. I am not able to capture the full ripple effects of this approach of relational recovery in this article, as described by the school staff and Richard's parents. However, I invite you to imagine the kind of world we would co-create if our approach to viewing and describing problems became more relational and collaborative and if our difficulties and conflicts were not seen as individually-based phenomena, but as relational and social constructs.

**Summary.**

In this article, I attempt to highlight how 'old' issues can be viewed with new lenses. I discuss how traditionally we view problems as being located within an individual. The traditional view positions a person as solely responsible for problems that one encounters in life. The social constructionist ideas offer us another framework to view self; it suggests we view self as a relational being. This framework assesses one's actions in coordination with others. One, alone, cannot make a story and one's story is intertwined with the stories of others.

It is liberating to view problems as being socially constructed. The discourse of construction enables us to revise and reconstruct what is not working. Relational discourses encourage us to question and step outside of restricted frames such as language, self, and knowledge. The constructionist ideas help us erase the boundaries constructed between us and them and extend the applicability of the pronoun 'we' to include everything that is capable of suffering.

Viewing the other, as another human, and becoming we is the first step to collaboration with the other. The dichotomy of us versus them is located in individualistic discourses that prevent us from developing empathy and building inclusive communities. Only by accommodating the plurality of individual values will we be able to achieve genuine solidarity (Rorty, 1979). Schools, as small communities with the intention of fostering autonomy, sociability, and growth in children, are more than ever in need of inclusive and collaborative conversations to address children's problems relationally.

The implications of collaboration for the educational system are many. Based on my experiences in working with schools, we make a difference in students' lives by practicing collaboration and collaborative approaches when working with students and their families.

I would like to share with you some reflections I received from school staff and Richard's parents at the end of our collaborative work. Our reflective talk generated the following points. These could be used as guidelines for explorations when implementing 'collaborative practices' in addressing conflicts between home and school:

Collaborative work:
➢ Allows new policies to be developed that view problems relationally not individually
➢ Encourages all parties in conflict to get together and talk in a safe environment
➢ Supports collaborative conversations/dialogues and discourages top-down talk among different sections at school
➢ Allows us to adopt a constructive language focused not on deficit but on strength.
➢ Supports listening and talking as a constructive feedback loop platform for further exploration.
➢ Invites us to externalize and separate people from their problems.
➢ Creates new coalitions/alliances between home and school to tackle 'problems' together.
➢ Targets 'problems' not students, families, and/or school staff.

My hope is that we, together, move toward the development of inclusive communities that nurture our relational beings and connect us to one another as humans.

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# CHAPTER III

## Prologue

The following principles guided me in the writing of this article:

- "Moving from the individual's mind to the relationships constituted by the narrative in action" (Gergen, 1994, p. 248). My intention is not to go to the mind of the client and figure out what is suitable for him/her. My intention and work locates problems outside of individuals' biological frame and in between people. The traditional approaches suggest therapists should locate illness and destroy it. This medical model of disease remains robust in modernist approaches (Gergen, 1994). In contrast, constructionist ideas suggest that therapists engage in setting a stage for conversations that elevate marginalized voices and support others in listening to the unheard voices.

- "Moving away from singularity in narrative" (Gergen, 1994, p. 248). Viewing the client's story as "only a single means of making the self intelligible is constraining. This limits "the range of relationships or situations in which one can function satisfactorily" (p. 248). Clients' life experiences are multi-storied, constructed, and reconstructed in relationships with others.

- Adopting a "multiplicity of accounts of reality": this principle suggests that we recognize the historically and culturally situated contingency of each account of reality. "Multiplicity of self-accounts is invited but no commitment needs to be made to any of them. The narrative construction remains fluid, open to the shifting tides of relationship" (p. 248). This goes hand in hand with taking a 'not-knowing' position, remaining curious and open to what is exchanged in the network of relationships. This principle questions fixed subjectivity and suggests that interactions between people are fluid and subject to change as realities are negotiated.

- Recognizing that "every utterance must be regarded as primarily a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere. Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies upon the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account. Therefore, each kind of utterance is filled with various kinds of responsive reactions to other utterances of the given sphere of speech communication" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 91).

- Keeping in mind that "an utterance is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing and outside it that is given and final. It always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable, and moreover, it always has some relation to value (the true, the good, the beautiful, and so forth). But something created is always created out of something given (language, an observed phenomenon of reality, an experienced feeling, the speaking subject himself, something finalized in his world view, and so forth). What is given is completely transformed in what is created" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 120).

- Recognizing that "acceptable responses must quite often be negotiated within a context of argumentation. Be not just *responsive*, and *relational*, but also *rhetorical*" (Shotter, 2008, p. 53).

# ARTICLE II: Reconstructing Conflict Narratives[3]

## Abstract

*Conflict is part of our daily interactions with others. We re-narrate our experiences of conflict with others. Through this narration, we deconstruct and reconstruct conflict narratives that define others and ourselves. These conflict narratives shape our relational realities and place us in relationship with others. The first part of this article introduces a particular philosophical stance and linguistic theory, followed by a series of critiques in the second part that shows how current individualistic views of conflict are morally and ethically problematic for humanity. The article illustrates a conflict narrative where conflict is understood as an inevitable part of life. In this illustration, conflict pushes a couple to search for alternative ways of deliberating and sets a stage for talking in a way that generates new meanings and co-creates new possibilities. In this story, I highlight how cultural, gender-based conflict needs to be addressed in a particular way. Reconnecting with local knowledge and collective wisdom is another way of allowing different ideas and perspectives to co-mingle.*

Key Words: Conflict Narratives, Language, Multiplicity, Rhizome, Deconstruction, Social Construction, and Relational Ethics

## Introduction.

Conflict has been viewed and addressed in multiple ways. In our current social climate, we are taught and encouraged to use individualist approaches to view and deal with conflict in relationship with others. Our common discourse about conflict positions it as a negative, problematic, and bad phenomenon, which should be avoided and feared. This description doesn't allow us to view conflict as an opportunity to meet, get to know, and grow with the other. Language and conflict are interconnected. How we use language is critical in the formation of conflict in relationship. The individualist discourse influences us to use deficit-language in describing others and ourselves. The deficit-language is dichotomous. A dichotomous description of the other makes us oppositional to the other and vice versa. When we trace back the history of dichotomous language, we see it originated from religious and scientific tradition, which divide the world into good/bad, inferior/superior, male/not male, health/unhealthy, us/them, and so forth. Religion and science have contributed to the perpetuation and dominance of the dichotomous language in our interactions with one another. Derrida, like Nietzsche, argues that "as long as we continue to believe absolutely in grammar, in essence, in the metaphysical presuppositions of language," (Newman, 2001, p. 6) we continue to fall into binaries and dichotomies.

Language is a backdrop for our interactions. Stepping outside of the dominant discourse of conflict requires re-thinking language and conflict. "Dichotomies are created out of continuous fields, defining the master term (e.g. self, male, reason) as possessing x, y, z properties whereas its 'opposites' are negatively defined. Not-A becomes defined by the fact that it lacks the properties of x, y, z, rather than being defined in its own right" (Gaten, 1991, p. 93).

Once we realize this, then the challenge becomes one of *appreciating and recognizing* the categories/dichotomies developed in our interactions with one another. The recognition of this limitation invites us to (1) recognize multiplicity, (2) search for the "local coherence" of what we see as dichotomous views, and (3) attempt, then, to coordinate multiplicity so that new understandings might emerge.

The purpose of this article is to rethink, re-view, and re-assign meanings to the notion of conflict that shift focus to its utility and potential for creating new meanings. The emergence of new meaning frees us from being stuck in a particular point of view. Meaning-making is linked to our ability to tap into each other's inside/local knowledge through facing and working with the other in a non-threatening way. This engagement and collaboration leads to generating new relational knowledge.

In this article, I achieve these aims in the following ways: a) describing a tapestry of philosophical frameworks that view conflict in constructive ways b) highlighting the downsides of the dominant individualistic views on conflict while redefining conflict as an inevitable feature of human relationships that cannot be eliminated, and finally c) sharing a specific conflict narrative that illustrates how this particular participant reached a shared point to work and sustain her marital relationship. These three parts are intertwined and I weave them together to allow us to see conflict as an inevitable feature of relationship, and language as an ethical exchange to generate and cultivate new ideas to live in the paradoxical world. This article is an invitation to the responsibility where we develop relational ethics and respond to one another in a humane way.

## Philosophical Frameworks for Conflict Narratives.

### *Moving beyond the dominant discourse.*

We live in an individualistic society that emphasizes the self as a bounded container separated from the other (Gergen, 1991, 1994, 1999). This view mandates the self to protect itself and be aware of its inside/outside when interacting with the other. The person is viewed as a bounded being in charge of its capacities and abilities (Gergen, 2009; Sampson, 2008). This perspective constructs linguistic traditions that separate between self and the other. This view teaches the person that whatever lies outside his or her boundaries is potentially threatening and might be dangerous to the integrity/ sovereignty of self and therefore, whatever lies inside of self is worthy of protecting (Sampson, 2008).

Under the influence of this individualist ideology and its linguistic tradition, the self's ability to cultivate knowledge through interactions is minimized as the self seeks answers from within and is preoccupied with technologies and approaches to protect itself in relationship. If we suspend this belief, what do you think might be possible for the self? And what other opportunities might be possible for the relationship between the self and the other?

The suspension of this belief is possible when we allow ourselves to view and talk about conflict differently; when we put aside the lens of threat and danger to the self's sovereignty we are open to see the self and the other differently. Stepping outside of the dominant discourse may seem a tall order as we are drowned in the individualistic ideologies that have governed our lives for centuries.

*Linguistic traditions*
Our experience of conflict is informed by our linguistic traditions. As Wittgenstein says, "The limits of my language are the limits of my world" (1953). The way of talking -our language- has been implicitly and explicitly influential in defining our relationships with one another. Thus, as we describe conflict/disagreement as a negative, bad, problematic phenomenon in human relations, it takes on that

reality. What would happen if we began to re-create language and attach new meanings to conflict? Would it allow us to talk about conflict in a new way? Will this re-description bring forward a change to our views towards conflict in human relations? Will it change the way we respond to the other?

When talking about linguistic traditions, we should be aware of intrinsic limitations that exist within language. Ernesto Laclau, a political thinker, says, "Hegemony is inherent to language" (quoted by Zizek, 2008, p. 68). Language can be used in multiple ways; for instance, it can destroy, rehabilitate, energize, or stagnate relationships. Language constitutes our realities. We think in language; we make our life with language and frame our experiences within linguistic traditions.

Language has its own set of rules. We cannot escape the complexity of linguistic rules. We learn to follow them and make our experiences known to others. "Without sharing certain attitudes towards the things around us, without sharing a sense of relevance and responding in similar ways, communication would be impossible. It is important that nearly all of us agree nearly all the time; for instance, what colour things are. Such agreement is part of our concept of colour, Wittgenstein suggests. We cannot separate the life in which there is such agreement from our concept of colour. Imagine a different form or way of life, you imagine a different language with different concepts, different rules, and a different logic" (Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 1995).

Different discourses promote a different set of rules in language. Wittgenstein says, "If we want to understand a notion of pain, we should not think of a pain as a private object referred to somehow by the public word pain. What counts as a rule is not determined somehow by the rule itself but by what the relevant linguistic community accepts as following the rules; the rules have to be defined and reinforced by the people we appoint as experts" (IEP, 1995). However, stepping outside of the realm of experts who form dominant discourses may allow us to not follow its linguistic traditions and begin to deconstruct what is taken for granted as truth. This may lead to reconstruction and re-introducing a new linguistic tradition for that discourse. Through deliberate conscious deconstruction, we become aware of limitations of linguistic traditions in every particular discourse. This awareness suspends the current dominant discourse and questions its effects on our relationships with one another.

Deconstruction allows us to tell and re-tell our stories. When we tell and re-tell a conflict narrative, we re-evaluate, re-edit, and re-story our experiences of conflict with the other. Retelling is an invitation to view multiple sides of a conflict narrative. The more we deconstruct, the more we see utility in a conflict/dispute and the more comfortable we become to reflect on a conflict/dispute.

We cannot get rid of language of subjectivity and agency. Subjectivity and agency leads to self-identity. We come to certain identity conclusions in language. Identity seems to have fixed totalizing ideas about self and the other. Derrida (1981) insists that no identity is ever complete or pure; each identity is constituted by what threatens it. He encourages us to question unity and purity of every belief including identity and ask us to ponder upon whether identity establishes a series of hierarchical binary relationships in life. The social constructionist ideas also expand our horizon to see that everything is in constant motion; nothing is fixed, complete, or static. This brings the connection between fixed identities and ongoing conflicts to our attention. Perhaps changing our attitudes/views on fixed identities might lighten the grip of our conflict narratives.

In conflict, we tend to totalize the other as the sole problem. Totalization is a direct result of binary/dichotomous thinking when we place the other at the far end of relational continuum as if there are no commonalities between self and the other. In conflict, we develop fixed ideas about ourselves and the other's intentions, views, and visions in life. We learn to totalize others within the individualistic discourses when our action is to protect our self-sovereignty.

Deconstruction enables us to take a listening position to the other, which enables us to update parts of our conflict narratives about the other that otherwise would be invisible to us due to our totalizing conflict narratives. This allows us not to take our conflict narratives as more real than the others'.

When our totalizing view about *the other* is modified, we understand our own conflict narratives and avoid the trap of seeing the other as a threat and danger to the self's sovereignty. Levinas (1999) introduces us to the asymmetrical nature of the relationship between the self and the other as a base for interpersonal encounters. In asymmetrical relationships, conflicts arise over our visible and invisible differences, cultural, and social makeups. When we enter into a relationship with this understanding that conflict is part of our exchanges, we may attend and respond to misunderstanding and disagreements on views, ideas, and beliefs in a more prepared way. Not responding effectively may lead to further escalation and polarization of positions (Runde & Flangaga, 2010). The high intensity of conflicts (escalation and polarization) in human relations is fuelled by historically and socially supported ideas in our society.

We are aware of how polarization on social and relational issues leads to locked positions for parties in political and marital disputes. We are aware of detrimental effects of socially constructed *otherness* in our daily interactions with one another. We, sadly, see how much money is spent on marital disputes, organizational disagreements and political campaigns to highlight, magnify and humiliate the otherness of the other and to protect the self's interests. These actions have divided and brought unnecessary suffering to people.

Maturana (1980) encourages us to think of language as our responsibility for what we say and how we say it. He implies that we are not responsible for what the other hears; words evoke something in the listener. However, how we say- our way of talking- is critical in creating conflicts. Monitoring the way we talk and challenging our own totalizing conflict narratives are crucial steps in thinking relationally and stepping outside of an individualistic framework of addressing conflicts. Language needs to be crystalized in its usage, which it is impossible unless we become more intentional in how we use it in our daily interactions with others. This is the step to view language as an ethical process in human relationships.

**Rhizomatic Language.**

When we advocate for language as a moral, ethical, and political backdrop, we move away from its *representation* to protect *the sovereignty of self* and join other post-scientific linguistic discourses to view language as rhizomatic. Rhizome is a term used by Gilles Deleuze (1993). It means assemblage - weaving together and forming an inter-subjective tapestry. As Deleuze (1993) puts it, a rhizome has multiple points like what is seen in the root of a strawberry bush. A rhizome creates maps and traces them; it has no single point of entry nor it is never finished. A rhizome is flexible; it does not get destroyed but reforms itself. A rhizome has multiple connections; it interweaves and creates a new territory. This new territory is subjected to re-territorialisation and de-territorialisation. For instance, in human biology, we think of a hand as a de-territorialized paw.

I invite you to view language as rhizomatic; language has its dynamic, hegemonic nature with its multiple interpretations, entries, and transformations. I propose that we see conflict as a rupture between the self and the other; a rupture that creates a new line of flight (Deleuze, 1993) and shifts attention to a new direction, a possibility for re-territorialisation or de-territorialisation of our conflict narratives about the other. The re-territorialisation of conflict moves from a negative, threatening, and

problematic view of conflict to an ethical, responsive, and generative view of conflict. Conflict is a possibility for us to revise our narrative about *the other* and respond to *the other* ethically. We have learned to see conflict as a rupture that harms us, what if we view conflict as a rupture that wakes us up (Levinas, 1982) and makes us responsible to the other?

This way of viewing conflict is an opportunity for re-territorialisation of our understanding of *the other;* it is an invitation to re-adjust, clarify and mediate our responses to *the other* in a non-threatening, responsive, ethical, and humanizing way.

We are constantly changing; we evolve, so why not let our definition of conflict change and evolve? We live in a world in flux. We are more than ever connected with the rest of the world, which communicates in continuous motion. What is the point of mirroring conflict as it has been prescribed for centuries? Why not re-view conflicts as a useful rupture that connects us to relational ethics? Why not allow ourselves to move away from the fixed worldview on conflict that tries to predict *the other's* next move, locks us into a win/lose dichotomy, and sees *the other* in a static and threatening way? Why not allow ourselves to acknowledge that we are in flux and that our negative description of conflict is not working? We need to change the negative connotations associated with conflict to match with our continuous emergence. Through this re-territorialisation of conflict, we become more attentive to multiple ways of re-narrating conflict in relationships between genders, classes, races, and so forth. The re-territorialisation of conflict narratives invites the other to be part of conversations instead of being excluded or being viewed as a hostile, scary person.

When we see language as rhizomatic, we implicitly admit that language is not foundational, it is not fixed and static, and changes, re-territorializes, and reconstructs the way people connect and interact with one another. Rhizomatic language means having a nomadic base for language transforms itself in every particular condition to serve people. Viewing language as rhizomatic allows us to challenge and deconstruct the dominant discourses that seem permanent and fixed. The dominant discourses embedded in linguistic traditions perpetuate and fuel conflict in relationships between self and the other. This invitation becomes part of a movement to re-create linguistic ethical processes with potential to re-territorialize our conflict narratives.

When we apply this concept -the nomadic transformation- to language, we suspend the politics of *representation*, which have been historically embedded in language; politics that historically divided people due to differences in gender, race and ethnic backgrounds and politics that placed minority groups (e.g. women, blacks, aboriginals, gays, so forth) in fixed social locations. Language as a way of *representing realities* has fueled and perpetuated current structural social positioning and engulfed the division between self and the other. Therefore, the practice of othering has become a social norm. Through the practice of othering, people become excluded from social settings and less engaged with one another. Therefore, they accept their social locations as their fixed realities.
As Hare Hustin (1998) says,

To understand the importance of language in making meaning, we first need to be aware that we not only use language, it uses us. Language is recursive. Language provides categories in which we think. The terms we use do not simply mirror reality or constitute a neutral tool, but are the very means by which social reality is structured. Once a term or way of speaking becomes accepted in common use, it influences how we perceive the world and reflects and reinforces dominant cultural themes, ideologies, and preoccupations of our times (p. 9).

Language as rhizomatic directs us to non-foundational attitudes towards what we experience within linguistic traditions and frees us up to reconstruct relationships through retelling practices. We

are better in control of constructing our social realities relationally when viewing language as a backdrop to our daily communication with one another.

Sharing stories of remembrance invites the other to connect and appreciate stories of skills in survival, stories of our hopes and dreams for humanity. Talking and re-telling narratives support people in finding common ground with one another and in resonating with the other and their conflict narratives. It also provides an opportunity to get together to take actions to dismantle systemic barriers that perpetuate negative interpretations and presentations of conflict in human relations. This way of talking about conflict narratives enables anguish to be transformed into social contribution and transforms our conflict narratives in some way.

**Transformation of Conflict Narrative.**

I am going to illustrate a gender-based conflict in couple relationships. All names used in this narrative are pseudonyms to protect the identity and confidentiality of participants in this work. I am going to call the couple, May and John, and share their story to support my argument that conflict can be re-territorialized through deliberate and responsive language. The dominant territory of May's conflict story centers on May's cultural learning about gender politics and traditional role differentiation. The conflict between May and John allowed May to question and view critically John's cultural learning as well as her own. Locating our responses to particular contexts co-creates new understandings and defines what is acceptable for specific people in a particular relationship. Everything has a context and everything needs to be placed in its cultural relational contexts.

In the following story, the client, May, shared how the cultural discourse concerning couple relationships invited May to become aware of her beliefs and invited both persons to seize opportunities to unpack their cultural learnings and make necessary changes to create a new platform for their relationship. This challenge led them to learn to work together, and use language to define differences as leverage to cultivate strengths and solutions.

*May's story*

May talked about her relationship with her boyfriend, John, who became her husband after a six- month separation/breakup. May is 40 years old, she was born into a Christian Middle Eastern family, and she has worked as a nurse in a hospital for 15 years. She participated in conversations about narrative conflicts did not tear a relationship apart, but made it grow. Her story indicates how much we can do to re-territorialize our conflicts in relationships.

May began her story by reflecting back on her breakup with John before the marriage in 2014. May said she didn't know what she wanted from a marital relationship when first she heard John's marriage proposal. To her, a marital relationship was a contract to limit women's freedom and liberty. She said the institution of marriage was patriarchal and subjugated women. She shared how hard she had been fighting against the historic rules defined for women in relationships with men. She called herself a feminist who had been questioning patriarchy and its adversarial effects on couples' relationships for a long time. She didn't want to perpetuate what she condemned. The word 'wife' triggered her. When John proposed marriage, she felt disturbed and needed time to develop and co-construct a new definition of this new self -as a wife- before accepting it.

May said she invited John to talk about her dilemma but John didn't take her concern seriously. She reflected on John's reactions to her. John had been raised in South American culture, where the

cultural expectations of man and woman seemed to be defined by culture not by couples. She engaged him further into a conversation that did not resolve the problem.

In response to my question of how she made sense of John's disengagement on an issue important to her, she said John was accustomed to traditional gender expectations and entitlements, but was aware that her expectations would be different. When she engaged him in a talk about differences between his position and his cultural beliefs, she said he was not entirely intentional about the core differences, but he reassured her that he would respond to situations as they arose. These responses helped May not totalize John as a traditional man, but still did not solve her predicament.

She said her responses assisted her in locating the problem as separate from John and not allowing the issue to take over their relationship. In response to my question concerning how she protected her relationship with him, she said she challenged herself to avoid deficit-language to describe John as a patriarchal man. May said she did not want to see him as someone who contradicted her views but she struggled to reconcile with him in how she defined her character, not his culture. May said, "I learned soon that the problem wasn't with John. The conflict between John and myself was related to our cultural differences and definitions of gender roles". To develop a new conclusion about marriage and its associated beliefs, she proposed that John consider a six-month break to re-create a new definition for herself in the relationship. John did not like this proposal and expressed his disapproval with anger and frustration.

May said, "I was aware that I should not be feeding off his anger. I tried to reassure him that I have feelings for him, but needed some time to become clear about my definitions and purposes in life; I needed some time to come to terms with some cultural definitions before considering marriage as my next step". She said, "I was aware of my limitation; I couldn't separate what my role would be as a wife. I didn't like the way this role was prescribed for me as a woman, and I didn't know how to negotiate my ideas with him. I needed to take some time off to figure it out".

In response to my question concerning how she could negotiate the roles when she was not in the relationship, she said, "I needed to sort out my internal conflict about the idea of taking a role as a wife of someone. This idea by itself gives me a step down position in the relationship. What I have learned about a relationship between a man and woman in North American culture guides me not to accept this step down position. I want to be equal/level with him but this is not part of his dominant culture".

May acknowledged that as much as he was affected by his culture, she was too. She said, "It was not fair to question his cultural belief without questioning my own. Moreover, he hadn't limited me to any particular role but my experiences of what his culture/community thinks of me as a wife and what I wanted to be as a spouse in the relationship with John were in conflict. I needed to do some soul searching to figure it out".

I asked how she figured it out. She said, "I went to India for a few weeks; I talked to my parents about their ways of negotiating their positions and roles in relationship. I was ill for a couple of months and my illness taught me a lot about people and their places in my life. I visited friends who had recently broken up with their partners and had a talk with them about their reasons for their break-ups. All of these events gave me a new perspective about how I see my relationship with John and my future as a wife. After six months, I called him up and we decided to get married. I do not think he ever understood what I had to do to reach to this agreement".

A few factors helped May to sustain her relationship with John despite the presence of conflict. They were the following: her ability to identify the problem, her intention to separate John from the cultural expectations and cultural discrepancy, her deliberate use of language not to practice the othering but respond ethically to clarify her position on cultural differences; her consciousness of using language deliberately and responsibly allowed John to feel accepted, respected, and trusted.

Reassurance of feelings and emotions for each other were pivotal in the sustainability of this relationship as she began to unpack her cultural assumptions and expectations of herself in relationship to create space to discuss and reconcile different views about their roles as a man and woman.

In the article, *Towards Transformative Dialogue*, Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett (2011) say,

In deliberating on our stand, we must necessarily adopt a different voice, one that calls the dominant voice into question. Thus, in self-questioning, we relinquish the 'stand fast and firm' posture of conflict, and open possibilities for other conversations to take place. Such self-reflection is made possible by the fact that we are seldom participants in only a single, reality-making nucleus. We participate in multiple relationships -in the community, on the job, at leisure, vicariously with television figures- and we carry with us myriad traces of these relationships. In a Bakhtinian sense we are poly-vocal; we can speak with many voices. If these suppressed voices can be located and brought forth within the conversation of differences, we move toward transformation (p. 697).

**Summary.**

In the end, potential for a division in relationships is a part of life. Adopting this perspective assists us in entering into a conversation with conscious use of language to express ourselves in a way that doesn't totalize the other in an absolute dichotomous way.

Our fearful or trusting attitude towards the other makes a difference in how we set a stage for a conversation with the other. The deliberate responsive language is a language not deficit based, not dichotomous, and separates the person from the problem to better maintain our relationship with the other and tackle the problems together. Rhizomatic language invites us to be open to ruptures and accept them as part of life but utilize ruptures to reach our relational potential. Rhizomatic language is a common ground to engage with multiple perspectives and co-create ideas more effectively.

**Further Reflection on May's Conflict Narrative[4].**

During the course of my conversations with May, I was challenged by her emphasis on the word "I" and viewing herself as a sole responsible for this transformation. Inspired by social constructionist ideas, I share this view that the self and the other become part of each other when they develop relationships with one another. I feel uncomfortable reducing human meanings and understanding to either the biological structure of a person or to the psychological process called the self. Conceptualizing self as a relational being makes me delve further into my uneasiness. I discover that multiple narratives, experiences, and relationships do not constitute a self. "Rather self (and the other) is a created concept, a created narrative, linguistically constructed and existing in dialogue and in

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[4] This part was not included in the published article.

relationship" (Anderson, 1997, p. 220).  Self like other notions such as *God* "is a mastery of discourse-a 'knowing how' rather than a 'knowing that'" (Gergen, 1989, p. 75).

I understand May's efforts to illustrate her movement from one discourse to another by using the subjective pronoun that exists in language. According to Emile Benveniste (1971), language without personal pronouns is inconceivable. The self is constructed and understood in language. Its movement back and forth within multiple discourses are described and articulated through the use of its pronounce.  Hermans (1992) says, "the multiplicity of *the self* does not result in fragmentation, because it is the same I that is moving back and forth between several positions" (p. 28)

Paying attention to the process of retelling narrative rather than its content helped me sustain my 'not-knowing' position and suspend my pre-knowledge. I did not want to correct or change May's way of retelling her narrative. Correcting and editing clients' narratives have been a long-term practice in the field of psychotherapy. Critically viewing and questioning traditional modalities in therapy encourage me to stand my ground and not feel entrapped in dominant discourses of the field of psychotherapy. Embracing collaborative relational approaches in therapy invite practitioners to further develop "double listening" (White, 1997) and embrace the emergence of local coherence and meanings.

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# CHAPTER IV

## Prologue

There are critical points in therapy highlighted in constructionist ideas. These guiding principles contradict underpinning principles of modernist approaches in therapy. The following principles guided the writing of the next article, as well as the conversations with the clients:

- Taking a philosophical stance (Anderson, 1997) encourages collaborative, relational approaches as opposed to the directive, authoritative, and expert position we find in modernist approaches. Therapists listen to clients' stories differently. 'Listening doubly' (White, 2007) to clients' stories allows therapists to be present and in tune with what clients share in a particular time and place. Conflict narratives do not only entail stories of conflict, but also include stories of resourcefulness and resiliency. Modernist/individualistic approaches encourage the focus on the problem story, as the assigned primary responsibility of the therapist is to define problems/illness and find solutions to the presenting problem. The dichotomy of problem/solution dissolves when therapists use relational and constructionist ideas in therapy, and when they practice a not-knowing position and suspend their expert knowledge prior to meetings with clients. Therapists learn to attend to alternative stories and arrest sparkling moments in clients' stories. Sparkling moments are seen as points of entry to alternative narratives that lead to the reconstruction of conflict narratives.

- Constructionists offer an important challenge to the modernist approaches that seek diagnosis and cure in clients' stories. Constructionist ideas challenge the ontological privileges given to problem/illness by modernist discourses. "Illnesses and problems cease to be 'there' as constituents of an independent reality and take their place among the array of cultural construction. Thus, one may speak of problems, suffering, and alleviation, but such terms are always considered to index reality only from a particular perspective. There are no problems beyond a culture's way of constituting them as such" (Gergen, 1994, p. 245).

- The utilization of a reflecting team as a professional practice was founded by Tom Anderson (1987, 1991) and colleagues in Norway. Anderson was influenced by the Milan Associates' use of an observing team who viewed the therapy session from behind a one-way mirror (Madsen, 2007). In the early 1980s, Tom Anderson and colleagues "challenged the anonymous nature of these teams and began making their deliberation more public and transparent" (Madsen, 2007, p. 263). Michael White (1997) borrowed the idea of an Outsider Witness Group from Barbara Meyerhoff (1985) to introduce a transparent version of the reflecting team. "Professionals in this group were encouraged to respond as appreciative witnesses rather than experts who knew what might be best for families. This shift suspends the imposition of wisdom/knowledge in this context (Madsen, 2007, p. 263). Anderson (1999) described this as a movement from an ethic of control toward a more 'democratic therapeutic relationship.' Freeman and Combs (1996) have suggested "literally changing places with clients and talking openly about multiple ideas may be the most dramatic examples so far of the difference it makes to bring a postmodern worldview into the therapy room" (p. 171).

- Moving away from the role of advocacy and reconnecting with the idea of *cultural responsibility*. The therapist's positioning and posture is critical in a relational and constructionist framework. The more the therapist takes part in conversations on negotiating realities and meanings, the more participants become motivated to pay attention to resonances and come up with ideas to take

actions aligned with their preferred ways of relating/being. The practice of 'outside witness group' supported my conversations with participants to become better equipped to listen to clients' stories of hardship and trauma. Through these retellings, new initiatives are constructed to change the course of trauma in the client's life.

- Creating possibilities for joint actions. As Shotter (2008) states, "joint action comes into being when, in their meetings with each other, people's activities become spontaneously and responsively intertwined or entangled with those of the others around them. In such an intertwining, strange events occur -when after a time of mutual influence, the participants separate again, they can no longer be simply described as before. Although they may still retain their identity, they can no longer be thought of as unchanged in their being, their way of being in the world. They will have come to embody different ways of perceiving, thinking, talking, acting, and valuing; they will now have changed in their *ontological skills* (Shotter, 1984), (i.e. in how they now experience and respond to their surroundings in a spontaneous and unproblematic fashion). They will have learnt how to be certain kinds of persons" (p. 37-8).

- Maintaining a dialogical, uncertain, and curious stance. "Instead of certainty (as accuracy of representation), we can concern with *adequacy*, with doing justice to the being of what we are studying (Shotter, 2008, p. 68). According to Bakhtin (1984), "the single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human life is the *open-ended* dialogue. Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds" (p. 293).

# ARTICLE III: Dichotomy and Subjectivity Obstacles to Social Justice-An Application for Conflict Dissolution[5]

Abstract

*This article examines how subjectivity and dichotomy become embedded in our belief systems and create conflict. Informed by Deleuze's ideas, we bring justice to people's lives when we disengage from the divisiveness and subjectivity rooted in modernist individualist discourses. Trauma, as a systematic social phenomenon in one's life, appears as a miscarriage of justice in human relations. Justice becomes possible through our responsiveness and consideration of what has been overlooked, ignored, and neglected. Given voice to those who have not been heard historically provides one form of justice. These voices have been dismissed within current artificial social divisions, including culture, race, gender, constructed within individualist discourses. This article examine how to "do" justice by separating 'voice from subject.' It introduces a collaborative approach to re-narrating people's trauma stories to open new possibilities for appropriate ethical actions to alleviate suffering. An illustration of a client story conveys experiences of trauma constructed in one's life in collaboration with others. I deconstruct these experiences through collaborative conversations.*

## Introduction

We are born in relationship with others and define others and ourselves through our interactions with one another. We develop conclusions about who we are through our experiences with other people. Language forms our ideas about the world around us. Language and our views on 'self' construct our identities and positions in relationships, as well as creates pathways to connect or disconnect with others.

I examine the discourse of construction to argue that we must challenge the dominant dichotomous language and critically question the idea of the centrality of self in our everyday interactions. The discourse of construction informs us that nothing is fixed in life. Our stories, our world, and our lives are in constant flux (Gergen, 2009; Sampson 2008). The discourse of construction interrogates the notion of subjectivity or fixed identity, allowing us to be in sync with constant changes. It proposes that the construction of knowledge is communal (Anderson, 1992). Everything is subjected to de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation (Deleuze, 1993), a state of deconstruction and reconstruction (Deleuze, 1993; Foucault, 1991) for people to become, function, and survive. Through deconstruction and reconstruction, we make and re-make ourselves. Self is constructed through different relationships with others, not fixed and singular, but multiple. This constant assembly and re-assembly of self exposes us to new possibilities of becomings (Deleuze, 1993). Each encounter invites us to select and perform parts of our multiple selves, bring forward our preferred selves, and inter-course with the other's preferred selves presented in relationship.

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[5] This article is accepted for publication in the *Journal of Systemic Therapies*.

This article aims a) to demonstrate how dichotomous language embedded in individualistic discourses contributes to conflict, b) to illustrate how fixed subjectivity reproduces negative conclusions in people's lives and sustains conflict in human relations, and c) to show how suspension of dichotomous language and subjectivity functions as prerequisites to becoming voice and becoming beings.

I begin with the problems presented by the dichotomous view of personhood offered by individualistic orientations, followed by the problems with subjectivity and how they influence the way we talk and relate to one another. I then move into unfolding ideas regarding humans as becoming beings (Deleuze, 1993). I highlight the necessity of thinking differently about subjectivity to better develop unbounded subjects and constellation of assemblages (Deleuze, 1993) to make a difference, mobilize resources, act in a just manner, and end human suffering. I conclude with a client trauma story that shows how a pathway does not require one's subjectivity and dichotomous language, but instead requires our responsiveness and presence.

## Problems with Dichotomous Language

Others teach us how to talk and use words. We rely on them to interpret signs, pictures, words, expressions, idioms, and other means of communication and in return, develop our own interpretations. We cannot learn language alone, but instead must be part of a community of people to learn language. Language is taught and practiced within rigid linguistic traditions. Language, by its very nature, is divisive; we cannot avoid chopping the world into categories. Once you say "black", you have not said "white."

Dichotomous, divisive, and deficit-based language fuels divisions in society. Language "gives us numerous possibilities for representing ourselves as divided or conflict ridden" (Burr, 1995, p. 126). For instance, who belongs to what group and who does not? Who has what and who does not? Who is rational or emotional? What race does one belong to? What gender does one have/not have? What culture does one have/ not have? Socially established categories and divisions push us to develop sustainable fixed positions and become loyal to our defined identities.

What do constructionists say about this? When we recognize that language is limiting, we begin to deconstruct one dominant discourse and reconstruct another. Language is potentiating, constraining, and expanding categories in life. For instance, instead of talking of dichotomy of black and white, we talk about the category of colour. Speaking about colour expands our range of possible categories to describe the world. I illustrate and explain in the next section how avoiding dichotomous and deficit-based language opens space for both parties to talk with each other and search for appropriate responses to one another.

We need to change our assumptions about language and its impact on our lives. We must step outside of its realm of repetition and view language as a constantly evolving phenomenon, a backdrop to our daily interactions. Moving beyond its traditions means seeing language not as a neutral phenomenon, but as a social phenomenon that shapes our actions towards self and others. As practitioners, we view and use language as a neutral phenomenon, which prevents us from seeing the paradoxical effects of language in relationships between therapists and clients. When we view language as neutral, the power differential between clients and therapists increases. Language can hurt, damage, and destroy people's lives, as well as subjugating them and caging people in their random selection of life stories. Some clients think of themselves as bad and unworthy because of their life experiences, yet, their conclusions do not reflect their lives. Instead, conclusions of unworthiness exclude parts of their life story that speak to their resilience and resourcefulness. We remember unintentional and

arbitrary selections of stories based on our memories and what others have told us about our past experiences. Since we do not remember all events in life, memory remains incomplete and dichotomous. Our inability to fully reconcile the paradoxical parts of narratives about self and others creates fragmented understandings. In the following case study, I explain how people reach thin conclusions (White, 2005) about themselves when they do not have audience in their lives.

Constructionist ideas suggest that life is comprised of multi-stories rather than a single story (White, 2005; Adichie, 2015). This belief encourages us to *make* our narratives through interactions. The discourse of construction introduces us to a new definition of self as multi-storied and narrative. Thinking of personhood as a series of stories unfolding over time and space places self in its relational, social, and historical contexts and see self as an evolving phenomenon. Seeing self this way territorializes and re-territorializes our lives in any given moment. Any opportunity for re-telling is a venue to participate and re-create a new story, accessing parts of stories that had not been visible. Excluding others' contributions to the formation of one's story limits our understanding of the problems and solutions we experience in life. This exclusion encourages dichotomous thinking/language and generates fear in our lives. I will explain later how inviting the other into conversations allows parties in conflict an opportunity to listen and be present to 'old' wounds and respond in a way that leads to healing and bridging gaps between self and the other. The presence of audiences and the use of deliberate language allow us to integrate and reconcile with the other.

Dichotomous language underestimates the contribution of others in one's life. It leads to new alliances among some people, but not others. Dichotomous language habituates us to view life from a single position and social location. It makes us use a one-size-fits-all approach to deal with differences and predicaments in life. Socially constructed categories, such as male/female, black/white, and healthy/unhealthy engage us in power relations. With the help of binary language, we fear of the other and think of the other as fixed and unchangeable. When we take fixed positions about stories of race, gender, or culture, we deny possibilities for re-examining our socially constructed views on the other. We forget that people created linguistic traditions and that they can be reconstructed. Every word we use, every position we take, and every approach we choose to solve our problems is socially constructed. We must develop a deliberate and non-binary language as an answer to social injustice.

Developing a deliberate language requires that we acknowledge limitations of our assumptions about self, others, and life. This acknowledgment brings forward multiple sides of our social, racial, cultural, and relational stories, left unspoken for centuries. We must first suspend our fixed views and positions that form our fixed subjectivities. Second, we must listen to the other as another being worthy of attention and in the process of becoming. In the following sections, I will explain further how suspending fixed subjectivity and using deliberate language allow us to become fluid and rhizomatic in human relationships.

Dichotomous divisive language is formed by fixed subjectivity of a self, a group, and a nation in relation to 'the other.' Subjectivity and dichotomous language divides the self and the other, which denies the connectivity of self and the other. Instead, they enter into conversation on unequal footing and practice othering each other.

## Problems with Subjectivity

Language forms subjectivity, which positions us to view ourselves as subjects of events and experiences. Subjectivity and the notion of 'free will' assume each person thinks and acts of their own will, and furthermore, that each person remains conscious of their actions and expressions about the self and others. Both religious and scientific doctrines support the concept of free will. Self is perceived

as the center of the universe and believed to be responsible for his/her actions. The belief in the centrality of self does not allow a person to consider how a chain of events, truths, and ethics forms actions. We need to revise assumptions about the totality of responsibility and the idea that we are innately conscious beings.

People do not act in isolation, but instead operate within their relational contexts. People are not conscious inherently; they become aware of their actions through interactional and linguistic encounters with others. We define who we are and who we want to be in conversations with others. No one can create anything alone. We co-create and orchestrate everything through negotiation with others.

Fixed subjectivity is formed when a person cannot perform among his/her multiple selves, instead operating from a single description of self. The unified self excludes and dismisses multiple layers of self. Self is not static, but fluid and evolving. Identity, then, is ability to performing among multiple selves. Fixed subjectivity requires repeating actions and thoughts about self and others, which promotes dichotomous and divisive language.

We are caught in habitual and repetitive ways of expressing and defending self as attacking the other. Repetition and habits allow people to hold on to conflict for a long time instead of resolving it. Breaking habits is impossible without crossing boundaries and reaching out to the other (Levinas, 1999). Habits, for Deleuze, are acquired through passive acquisition (William, 2010). They are so "natural and real that we have forgotten they are fictions" (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 623). Repetitive actions and habits create tensions and impasses in relationships and make it difficult to cross boundaries to reach *the other*. When impasses are not dealt with relationally, they permeate into the future and make our future a repetition of the past, as if the past had never occurred. This cycle limits the possibility of a better tomorrow.

Talking about truth from a fixed position fuses truth and subject, which creates conflict. This oneness suggests opportunities to misuse power and subjugate of the voice of others. Foucault (1982) explores the relation between the subject and truth; when combined the act of truth telling expresses power relations. He alerts us to how we, practitioners, as subjects who speak the truth risk becoming entangled in power relations. "In Foucault's account, the institutions that produce knowledge are the main tool for the extension and consolidation of power relations in the modern period and cannot be positively invested as external to these relations" (Ross, 2008, p. 64).

Foucault argues power resides in discourse and becomes part of social exchanges. "The manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body... cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth, which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (Ross, 2008, p. 64-5). Foucault (1982) encourages us to view truth telling as an agnostic activity.

When we separate voice from a subject, we enter the relational realm of voice. "Voice as present, stable, authentic, and self-reflective is laden with humanist properties and thus attached to an individual. This is not a voice that 'breaks habits' in relation to subjectivity. This is a voice of a subject, still there to search for, retrieve and liberate" (Mazzei, 2016, p. 152). We can re-narrate our life experiences without being fixed in a particular moment in time and space. Decoupling voice from a subject invites people to listen and retell stories in a different way. "To retrieve and liberate voice

requires a repudiation of the humanist voice -'decoupling voice from a subject who knows who she/he is, says what she means and means what she says' (MacLure, 2009, p. 104). Such a disarticulation of the humanist voice opens up thinking voice not as a 'thing', nor as fixed, but voice as a process of couplings and connections, voice as becoming, or becoming-voice" (Mazzei, 2016, p. 152).

The separation of voice from a subject is necessary to listen to a subject differently. The distinction between voice and subject is similar to what Deleuze and Guattari (1983) call as body without organ. Like body without organ, the thinking voice is "a process of couplings and connections and of differentiation in a shift way from the ontological unit of the individual to the forces at work producing voice as an entanglement" (Mazzei, 2016, p. 153). Thinking voice addresses social issues in new ways without being trapped into a particular truth associated with particular, often fixed, subjectivities.

These forces and rules maintain the establishment of an organism. For Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987), organs are not the enemies. Instead, "The enemy is the organism. The body without organ is opposed not to the organs but to that organization of the organs called the organism" (p.176). These philosophers suggest deconstructing organism and viewing subjects as assemblages of forces, desires, and intensities (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, 1987). The voice without a subject is an "assemblage of conjunctions, levels, passages, and distributions of intensity" (Deleuze, 1987, p. 177). Separating voice from subject allows subjectivity to emerge that evolves, transforms, and changes, as it has never appeared before.

Fixed subjectivity prevents us from seeing the other as another being. It isolates us and excludes untold stories of self and the other. Subjectivity reduces our responsibilities to face, listen to, and be present with others. Fixed subjectivity denies the wholeness of a subject. As Mazzei (2016) says, a subject exists as a "complex network of human and non-human forces" (p. 153). Therefore, people should engage with others to capture all forces, intentions, and desires to create a better life for self and others. Without this engagement, people remain entrapped in their arbitrary and incomplete selections of their stories of self and the other. These selections lead to destructive and negative conclusions about self and others. We develop an ideology that advocates for a single truth, yet creates 'isms' that form bonds, alliances, dominance, imposition, hierarchy and order that change the rules of engagement in social interactions.

**The Process of Becoming**

Separating voice from a subject breaks us from habits and offers us a new way to attend to and address long-lasting social issues. Freedom from repetition and fixation repackages ideas, and reconfigures new ethical commitments. As practitioners, we influence how clients shape and reshape their self-narratives. We take influential but de-centered (White, 2005) positions to support clients in their process of becoming, which supports and elevates clients' voices. It is de-centered to decouple voice from subject. The therapeutic inquiry is a process of becoming, no "longer concerned with capturing events and erasing enduring moments in attempts to preserve them" (Williams, 2010, p. 27). The therapeutic conversation is a process of arresting moments (White, 2005; Shotter, 1999). It also renews our commitments to social justice. In therapeutic conversations, we look for new lines of flights (Deleuze, 1993) in clients' stories to make new meanings and connect them with their surroundings.

Becoming voice re-examines social practices that sustain divisiveness and fixed subjectivity in clients' lives. Becoming voice is not about a voice of a particular subject in a particular time and location; it is instead about becoming the voice of all beings in the global network of people who suffer from similar unjust experiences. Experiences, time, and space do not belong to an individual but rather

to "different bodies, places, spaces, utterances, and becomings" (Mazzei, 2016, p. 154). The voice that belongs to all being is the voice that makes a difference in our world.

When we think of self without sovereignty, of a subject without fixed subjectivity, and of a "voice without organs" (Mazzei, 2016, p. 155), we ask what it means to be human. To be human is to move away from claiming and centering things as one and viewing them as belonging to all. It means seeing things as mobile, transferable, and plastic. Every interaction with others ruptures and frees us from habits to connect us with the other.

In therapeutic conversations with clients who experienced trauma and abuse, we do not re-tell their events and experiences in their past, but instead re-tell their stories in the past. The events and experiences do not belong to clients as subjects, but they are part of the history of human relations. One's story of trauma belongs to all beings, and we must respond to stories of trauma collectively and ethically. "Her words become an encounter in which my own and others' voices flow into. Her words are entangled with other materials, which in humanism, are referred to as 'lived experiences' but it is called as body without organ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983) to resist an essentializing of experience and voice or a fixing of time as a series of instants" (Mazzei, 2016, p. 155).

## Definitional Ceremonies Approach

In working with clients who have experienced childhood trauma and abuse, I use the definitional ceremonies approach as a platform for disentangle and reassemble multiple voices to reconstruct suitable actions. Michael White (1991) introduced the definitional ceremonies approach to Narrative Therapy Practice and the field of psychotherapy. He borrowed the definitional ceremonies approach from cultural anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff (1982). Myerhoff (1982, 1986) coined this term in her "work on people's identity project. She described the definitional ceremony when providing an account of the identity projects of a community of elderly Jews in Venice, Los Angeles. This community was the focus of her anthropological fieldwork in the mid-1970s" (White, 2007, p. 180).

Definitional ceremonies allow people to tell or perform stories of their lives. In this approach, the audience members are outsider witnesses. The audience listens and responds to people's stories in a new way, which ruptures the traditional and dominant way of listening to clients' stories in the field of psychotherapy. Audience/outsider witnesses pay attention to resonances and remain curious about clients' stories, seeking commonalities to connect with and share clients' experiences. Michael White (2007) says,

> The responses of outsider witnesses are not shaped by contemporary practices of applause (giving affirmations, pointing out positives, congratulatory responses and so on) or by practices of professional evaluation and interpretation. It is not the place of outsider witnesses to form opinions, give advice, make declarations, or introduce moral stories or homilies (p. 165).

In the following narrative, I describe Rima's voice not as that of a separate individual, but as a voice within an entanglement. Rima's voice "becomes immediately and continues to become, as it joins other enactments, other assemblages and other times, as 'it coexists with the present whose past it is'" (Mazzei, 2016, p. 155). Deleuze and Guattari (1983) argue that 'thinking voice' is a "surface for the recording of the entire process of production" (p. 11). This is the process of "folding, enfolding and refolding; it is a unity of past, present, and future" (May, 2005, p. 61). In the case vignette, we step outside of our fixed subjectivity and tell stories not as fixed, pure, and complete, but as fragmented and incomplete. Therapeutic questions explore new territories to enable clients to develop and become voice.

<center>**Rima's Story**</center>

Rima, a 34-year-old woman, was born into an indigenous Canadian family. She had been married for ten years and had a six-year-old son.  She had worked for ten years in a legal firm. She left her husband when her son was two years old. She talked about the depression as a by-product of her childhood trauma.

**Rima's Childhood Story**

Rima's childhood story began with multiple moves from one home to another. She shared stories of multiple places, of multiple foster parents, of disconnection from her biological parents, and of sexual and physical abuses. She believed that these events caused her current chronic depression. Rima stated, "All began when I was four years old and I was moved away from home. My mother was an alcoholic and my father was away. Since the day, I have had nightmares every night."

Rima talked about her experiences of psychiatric treatments after attempting suicide several times. She said, "I didn't find medication useful with this kind of depression I have. I have gone to therapy before but discontinued." She sounded committed to getting 'depression' out of her life. She said, "The only way to 'get depression out of my life' was to have access to the file written by child welfare workers. I want to understand why I was subjected to ongoing abuse and why it was allowed. I want to know what Children's Aid Society[6] did or did not do to protect me as a child."

She had previously requested her file, but was denied access. She refused to take legal actions against the child welfare agency without knowing what information the file contained. She wanted me to help her access her childhood records kept at the Children's Aid Society office. She felt the information in her file would explain her depression and nightmares.

To help Rima reconstruct her narrative, we planned to invite her current child welfare worker, Leslie, to our sessions to discuss the matter. I learned that Leslie and Rima had known each other since Rima's son was born. They had developed a good relationship.

**Setting a Stage for Conversations**

**Rima's challenges.** We explored Rima's negative conclusions about herself and her use of dichotomous language in several individual sessions. She had learned to see herself through the eyes of several previous therapists. In these relationships, Rima's self was defined and framed as that of a wounded individual who needed long-term therapy to heal her depression. She had felt there was something wrong with her to have had so much hardship in life. She felt her problems would have solved earlier if professionals and other adults in her life had responded to her in appropriate and ethical ways that shed light on events that took place in her life and on the responsibilities of adults and the child welfare agency for those events.

In our individual sessions, we discussed how Rima arrived at negative conclusions about herself. We identified and explored her responses to ongoing abuses. She then inscribed new meanings to those actions. I saw her new self emerge, one that reflected her values and beliefs. We discussed how

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[6] Children's Aid of Society is a Canadian agency that its mandate is to protect children at risk of abuse, neglect and physical harm.

<center>55</center>

her action, requesting her file, could help her rearrange and reassemble her life. She responded that this action represented her commitment to her son.

We talked about the visible and invisible subjugated stories she was carrying in her life. What identified what hindered her from detaching from dominant descriptions of self. Through our collaborative conversations, she detached herself from others' descriptions of self and attached to alternative stories of being, using deliberate language to create meaning and describe her life experiences in her preferred way.

**My challenges.** Viewing therapy as social construction and as "dialogically-structured activity" (Anderson, 2012, p. 142) allows me to provide an environment that supports people to express subjugated/subordinated voices. I allow responses to emerge that promote justice and respond to clients' requests responsibly. To do justice, in this context, was to acknowledge Rima's childhood experiences without increasing or deepening her negative conclusions of self. My challenge was to become present to Rima's story, yet not fuel her fixed subjectivity and divisive language. I aimed to make the process as fluid as possible for her to display and become the person she wanted to be.

Working with a trauma survivor, such as Rima, has made me cognizant of how divisive dichotomous language portrays the parties in conflict in an extreme fashion. My challenge was to not reproduce unnecessary suffering for Rima or blame the child welfare worker for Rima's childhood trauma story. Rima's multiple stories of abuse were perpetuated by those who abused her directly and by those who failed to offer her a safe place. I centered my attention on Rima's trauma stories by having her child welfare worker witness Rima re-telling her experiences.

I am aware that therapy could be a place for recurrence of injustice and re-traumatization. Therapy sessions with Rima highlighted my desire to disallow any recurrence of trauma and injustice in the therapy room and nurtured my passion to work with clients to prevent re-injury to those who carry those voices. To make my conversations with Rima useful, responsive, just, and ethical, I invited the participants to listen to the retelling of stories with a great deal of consideration.

In working with clients who have experienced trauma and violence, practitioners often forget that no one is a passive recipient of trauma (White, 2006). People take actions to respond to, modify, preserve, and hold precious what is important to them. Re-authoring therapeutic conversations (White, 2006) allow clients' responses to be heard and acknowledged, which reconstruct their relational identities. "Therapists have a foundation for the development of rich conversations that trace to personal history, and that provide an account of how these knowledges of life and practices of living were generated. This establishes a fertile ground for the recovery and reinvigoration of the person" (White, 2006, p. 29-30).

Viewing everyone as a conversational partner also challenged me. This view suspends subjectivities and encourages the practice of a not-knowing stance (Anderson, 1997). Engaging all participants to co-create conditions for constructive dialogues addresses this challenge. I disengaged myself from the role of advocacy and addressed power relations through exploration and dialogue. The danger of taking an advocacy role seemed clear to me, as this role could steer conversations towards an outcome that did not resonate with the client's intention, goal, and interest. This process as "inter-subjective, a dialogue in which all participants can make room for one another's creativity and consciousness. Thus the newness emerges and is co-created within the dialogue between therapist and clients, rather than being developed, introduced, or offered by the therapist" (Braten,1984, cited by Anderson, 1997, p. 157). This shift stopped me from rescuing Rima and instead invited me to create a reflective surface for Rima's story to be heard and witnessed by the child welfare worker.

**The process and its steps.** The process was introduced to the both Rima and Leslie. Rima and I talked as Leslie listened. The listening position invited Leslie to set aside her assumptions about the other (Rima) and fostered her respect for Rima as she listened to her story unfolding. The purpose was to generate understanding and resonance between the participants.

The steps (White, 2005) involved in the definitional ceremonies conversation are the following: The first step is the telling, when an outsider witness witnesses (Leslie) and listens to a client's story (Rima's). The second step is called retelling of telling, when the outsider person (Leslie) retells the story she heard from the client (Rima). The last step is retelling of retelling of telling when the therapist invites the client (Rima) back into the conversation and engages her (Rima) to reflect on the retelling of telling.

**The first 4 Sessions.** After the initial introduction talk with Rima and Leslie, Leslie took the listening position, as Rima shared her experiences of childhood abuse and trauma. Rima narrated her responses to these hardships. Then, I invited Rima to take a listening position and hear Leslie talking about her story. Leslie cried as she reflected upon my conversation with Rima. Leslie's expressions of resonance with Rima's story were richly described in our discussion. Leslie viewed Rima as a human and from a distinct perspective. She felt connected to Rima as a person who suffered for many years under the child welfare agency's watch. Rima's story reignited Leslie's commitment to working for children because she wanted to end the experiences that Rima had endured.

I invited Rima back to the foreground to share her experiences of retelling of retelling. Rima said she wanted protection from the child welfare agency. She understood why her parents were unable to protect her at that time, but remained puzzled by the child welfare agency's failure to protect her from abuse in several foster homes. Rima connected her identity as a native Canadian with the way she was treated by the child welfare agency, wondering if the agency would have done the same if she weren't native Canadian. Rima challenged a series of pre-existing assumptions about others who were not part of the dominant, white, Canadian culture. She asked about the agency's ethics and wanted assurance that the child welfare agency teaches its employees to respond to clients' needs regardless of their ethnic, religious, and racial backgrounds. In our conversations, we stepped further into rich and deep conversations about the agency's ethics and deconstructed its policies and actions towards people.

Our conversations led to an exploration of our integral responsibility, individually and collectively, in doing justice. None of us in the therapy room were solely responsible for the acts of injustice that had taken place in Rima's life, but we are all responsible for our own ethical principles that guide our actions today to end her suffering. Our actions are expressions of our principles, not of our motives or free will. "Principles do not operate from within the self" (Arendt 1954, p. 151), but people create principles when they interact with one another. Principles shape our positions towards issues that matter to us. When people construct and then connect with their relational ethics, they take a stance to act responsibly and ethically.

During the fourth session, we explored Rima's idea of looking into her childhood records kept at the child welfare agency. Leslie and Rima felt the records might help Rima understand why the child welfare agency had neglected her after she was removed from her childhood home. Leslie planned to talk with her supervisor and make this possible for our next meeting.

*The Following Sessions.* In the fifth session, Leslie gave Rima a summary of her childhood file. Rima cried as she read the summary. She nodded to confirm the accuracy of the written words in her file. Rima and Leslie engaged in conversations about the summary. Rima asked questions, which Leslie answered to the best of her knowledge. Rima told her, "Leslie, reading my file gave me a better

picture of my past." Reading her file helped her connect the missing parts of stories absent from her dominant story of self. Rima sighed and said, "So it wasn't me who was imagining all this. It did happen to me. Many people had told me that I had imagined it, but those things were all documented. That is a relief."

In the sixth session, Leslie came with further reflections, and she acknowledged how our previous sessions had affected her. Leslie said she shared her experiences of the last meetings with her supervisor at the child welfare agency. Leslie and her supervisor concluded that the agency owed Rima an apology. Leslie apologized on behalf of the child welfare agency for not protecting Rima when she was a child, when she needed their support and protection. She apologized for the hardship and suffering that Rima endured. Rima took the apology as a positive gesture. Leslie's apology on behalf of the child welfare agency created space for Rima to articulate her stories in a new way, as not solely responsible for her current problems.

## Further reflection on the process

Narrative Therapy Practice is grounded in the understanding that healing does not happen individually. The definitional ceremonies approach introduces us to the deliberate construction of language; stages of retelling facilitate change and becoming. The stages of retelling conversations represent scaffolding and richly developing subordinated alternative stories in clients' lives. Narrative therapy supports clients to adopt different views and attitudes towards their past experiences. People can shift their attitudes and take a respectful, philosophical stance towards those viewed as enemies when the right conditions are provided. When we step outside of dichotomous and divisive language such as us versus them or foe versus friend, we hear the other, work with the other, and explore ideas to address systemic problems.

Conversations between Rima and Leslie could have gone in less helpful directions. As described in the section titled, "My Challenges," one of the challenges was to avoid the trap of advocacy. An advocacy trap is when we "believe that people who disagree with us are wrongdoers. This judgment causes us to become locked into such a foe stance and lose sight of the bigger picture. People cannot work together to solve problems when they perceive each other as enemies. We have to avoid territories that would exacerbate divisions, dichotomy, and subjectivities.

If I had taken an advocacy approach before listening to each party's stories, Rima would not have become voice and Leslie would not have responded ethically to Rima's request. Narrative Therapy Practice reconstructed Rima's narrative, allowing the shortcomings of the child welfare agency to become visible to its staff without losing voice of the participants. To help Leslie take ethical actions, she first had to be exposed to thinking voice. This became possible by her taking the listening position and avoiding divisive and dichotomous language.

Social constructionists see power as a generative force produced and constructed in a relationship between the self and the other. Bracketing the definition of self and its tradition as a bounded being shifts the aim of therapy beyond the notion of curing the mind of the individual client; the therapist does not act upon the client to produce change. "Rather we are invited to view the therapist and client as engaged in a subtle and complex dance of co-action, a dance in which meaning is continuously in motion, and the outcomes of which may transform the relational life of the client" (Gergen, 2009, p.282).

Self and the other have unlimited capacities for generating ideas to create a better social world for themselves. However, dominant discourses of individualism emphasizing the centrality of self

along with divisive dichotomous language have muted and robbed them; they are taught to suppress voices of differences in views, ideas, and perspectives. Challenging traditions attached to dichotomous language and subjectivity can open space for further exploration of their muted resources and abilities. Drawing from the past experiences leads them in a new life direction when they engage in conversations that center on client strengths, solutions, and positive prospects (De Shazer, 1985). For instance, the voice and rights of indigenous people as human beings were denied, dismissed, and compromised over the centuries in the relationships between Canadian indigenous people and the Canadian governments. The long history of the practice of othering combined with subjugation have incapacitated and impoverished their cultures, traditions, and languages and prevented healing of their historical wounds. To equalize power relations in such unequal relationships, we must change language, positioning, and attitude towards the other. This shift will push services to become accessible and available to people and encourage us to treat others as a part of ourselves in the history of humankind.

Definitional ceremony practice remains sensitive to how meaning is moulded in relationship. This practice invites parties to come and engage in a process of repair, reconciliation, and re-creation of new social worlds, as well as listening to the other and resonating with untold suppressed stories. Listening opens space for the co-existence of multiple of ideas and views. These practices forge new-formed realities and support them in "relational recovery outside the therapy room" (Gergen, 2009, p. 300). When we become aware of old patterns and positioning towards the other, our understanding of self and the other shifts; we refuse to do in the present what we did in the past. This is the critical step towards responsiveness and justice.

When we talk about justice, we speak of a series of actions or steps that collectively influence people's wellbeing in relationships. Justice requires efforts, actions, intentions, and desires to become multi-voiced. It requires collaboration of all participants to destabilize dominant discourses governing people's lives. The contribution of all participants is critical in this process. When we work together to locate events in a client's particular history, we respond to those events and experiences with our present knowledge and understanding of relational ethics. We recognize that voice without a subject does not belong to a specific time and place. We respond ethically to the timeless voice independent of any particular space, groups, or privileges. The voice without a subject crosses the border of past, present, and future, which collapse on each other when we think of justice.

## Summary

In the end, justice can easily become part of our daily lives when we restrain and mute subjectivity and dichotomous language. When we address subjectivity differently and discern between subject and voice, we respond better to immediate concerns. Promoting justice requires deliberate rhizomatic language rather than the dichotomous and divisive language that escalates conflict. Justice aligns our ethical principles and responses, which develops the thinking voice.

When relationships become harmful, people acknowledge and process the harm together to generate proper ethical and responsive actions to regain voice no longer subjugated or caged in one's story. Stories of abuse, misplacement, neglect, and trauma are not stories of a person, but rather these stories belong to all humans. Regardless of one's cultural, racial, and linguistic differences, I believe sorties of abuse and trauma are better understood when people listen to untold stories with great consideration and attention. When people witness and honour retelling stories of hardship, they revise and reconstruct their responses to trauma stories and to those who carry those stories. To effectively respond to stories of trauma and suffering, we separate voice from subject and allow ourselves to take the place of a subject and develop empathic responses to connect with marginalized voice. The

empathic response integrated with the experiences of interconnectedness leads to social justice. When we create space to listen to voice separated from subject, we are socially in tune with the other; the self becomes the other and vice versa.

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# CHAPTER V
## Prologue

The following article illuminates dominant discourses and how they construct our daily interactions with one another. The following principles were used as backdrops to relationally contextualize conflict in relationships:

- "Moving towards equalization and co-construction: the modernist view of the therapist as superior knower has been challenged by writings (Mahoney 1991). Yet for most constructivists, the therapist remains independent of the clients' subjectivity; and from this remote and implicitly superior standpoint attempts to 'perturb the system' of the client. From the constructionist standpoint, however, the therapist's loss of authority is primary; the traditional hierarchy is dismantled. Instead, the therapist enters the arena not with superior truth about the world, but with various modes of being- including a range of languages. None of these modes of being are inherently superior to the client. They are forms of life that, together with the clients' actions, may engender useful alternatives" (Gergen, 1994, p. 247).

- Self as narrative: A story is not simply a story. "A story is itself a situated action; a performance with illocutionary effects. It acts to create, sustain, or alter worlds of social relationship. It is insufficient that the client and the therapist negotiate a new form of self-understanding that seems realistic, aesthetic, and uplifting within the dyad. A story is not the dance of meaning within the therapeutic context that is primarily at stake but whether the new shape of meaning is serviceable in the social arena outside the confines" (Gergen, 1994, p. 247). When clients share their conflict narratives, they articulate stories that are culturally and socially situated. These stories form their sense of self. They nurture interactional patterns that one has with oneself, others, and the larger contexts. Questions such as whether the story of Jesse, who perceives himself as a man, a 'hero, or helper of the family group' affect his siblings' lives, or how Jesse's story influences his sisters who define themselves as self-made women with independence. Or, how does Jesse's story of 'acting as if he is a father to siblings' undermine the abilities that Mona and Mina have cultivated over their life experiences? What forms of actions are engendered, facilitated, or sustained as a result?

- Constructionist writings "deemphasize or bracket concern with an individual construal and focus on language as a micro social process. How life is being framed, what words are selected, and what is their impact?" (Gergen, 1994, p. 243) In therapy or mediation meetings, concerns shift to "the ways in which a plurality of perspectives are coordinated into coherent patterns of interaction, each potentiating and simultaneously constraining particular forms of action" (McNamee, 1992, p. 191).

- "What a constructionist perspective adds are reflexive and creative dimensions -it acknowledges the contingent nature of one's construction, it is sensitive to their possible effects, and it demonstrates an openness to generating alternatives. In a broader sense, this is to acknowledge one's membership in the culture, one's continuing participation in the multiple enclaves of meaning. The ultimate challenge for therapy is to enable clients to participate in the continuous process of creating and transforming meaning" (Gergen, 1994, p. 245).

- Multiplicity of truths and ideas: "We live our daily social lives within an ambience of conversation, discussion, argumentation, negotiation, criticism and justification; much of it to do with problems of intelligibility and the legitimation of claims to truth. Truth is something we

arrive at the constant checking out our claims in the face of challenges from all those around us, not something we depart from" (Shotter, 2008, p. 28).

- Power is in discourse: "discourses are embedded in power relations" (Burr, 1995, p. 63). When self's identity is formed within discourses, each discourse provides power to self as the self reinforces, uses, and perpetuates that discourse. Foucault (1976) connects power with a discourse that impacts self. That discourse will give power to a person to preach his/her knowledge as truth. Foucault refers to power as a "particular construction or version of a phenomenon that has received the stamp of 'truth' in our society. Knowledge, the particular common-sense view of the world prevailing in a culture at any one time, is intimately bound up with power. Power is not some form of possession but is an effect of discourse" (Burr, 1995, p. 64).

- Interconnectivity of discourses: "Given that there are always a number of discourses surrounding an event, each offering an alternative view, each bringing with it different possibilities for action, it follows that the dominant or prevailing discourse (knowledge, common sense) is continually subject to contestation and resistance. For Foucault, power and resistance are two sides of the same coin. The power implicit in one discourses is only apparent from the resistance implicit in another" (Burr, 1995, p. 64).

- Vulnerability of discourses: "'Discourses are not monolithic.' They do not interlock neatly with each other, cleanly sealing off all possible cracks and weakness. There are weak points, places where they may be attacked, and points at which other discourses pose a real threat. The nature of discourses is that they are always implicitly being contested by other discourses; this is Foucault's point about power and resistance always operating together. Where there is power, there is also resistance" (Burr, 1995, p. 76).

# ARTICLE IV: Interpersonal Conflicts & Gift Economy-An Application for Narrative Analysis [7]

## Abstract

*The hidden relationship between money and conflict has not been discussed in family interactions, as it is seen as beyond the discourse of psychotherapy and its limitations. Conflict resulting from disagreement on how money is used, distributed, and shared has often been neglected, ignored, and dismissed in our conversations about conflict. Discourses governing our ideas about money influence our relationships with one another. These discourses create significant turbulences, crises, and challenges in our daily family interactions. This article highlights beliefs learned through dominant discourses about money. This article links dominant discursive regimes and illustrate how they preserve certain discourses in one's life. This article suggests that conflict becomes reinforced and escalated when multiple discursive regimes simultaneously influence human relationships. The article suggests conflict as a social construct resulted in individualistic discourses; multiple discursive regimes reinforce individualism in human relations. The alternative relational discourses are suggested to support people to respond to conflict differently. The clients'conflict narratives illustrate the deforming mirrors of discourses of money on family interactions.*

Key words: Conflict, Discourse, Money, Individualism, Divisiveness, Narrative, Therapy, and Human relationships.

## Introduction

The modern money system plays a significant role in our interactions with one another. We hardly discuss the influence of money on our daily exchanges. Money has not been connected to people's experiences of conflict in life. How money works and what it does to society have been ignored in our scholarly debates and conversations. Money is a "fairly central piece of the puzzle ... it certainly affects everybody" (Kennedy, 1995, p. 41). We exclude money and its alliance with other discursive regimes in our daily conversations. This exclusion has created a myopic view on money and its impact on violent conflict and war between people and among states or nations (Strange, 1998). I wonder what might become possible to us when we give sufficient attention to the interconnectedness among all social, cultural, and economic discursive regimes, and how they construct new realities for us, particularly, at times of conflict.

In this article, I highlight conflict narratives that have resulted from the influence of financial discursive regimes. I trace and dissect the connectivity among dominant discursive regimes. I discuss how money and its impact escalate long-lasting conflicts. This article suggests alternative discourses inspired by constructionist ideas and relational perspectives, and examine how they influence financial disputes among family members.

I respond to the following curiosities and questions: How do the financial discourses contribute to the formation of conflict? What is money? How is it defined? How is it created or circulated in our daily interactions? How are individualistic beliefs constructed within the discourse of money? How are they recycled and reinforced within other social-cultural discourses that impact family interactions?

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[7] This article is under review for publication in the journal of *Narrative and Conflict- Explorations of Theory and Practice*.

Through the illustrations of three conflict narratives, I introduce alternative relational and constructionist discourses to assist parties in conflict make different decisions and reconstruct their connection with one another. In these collaborative conversations, ways of preserving relationships are explored and co-created. These three conflict narratives of people's life experiences show how and when money becomes part of their co-existing realities, it influences family interactions, as it is pushed to the center of people's lives.

This article is not about proposing ways to change the current monetary system, but to invite us to ponder upon it. It highlights the significance of the discourse of money in the formation and maintenance of conflict in people's lives. My therapeutic conversations with people have greatly contributed to this article and the search for alternative financial discourses.

**Money, its meaning & its creation.**

Most of the social science research on money has focused on factors related to money, but not focused on money itself, (Vohs, 2008). Money has evolved over the time. Its meaning and its usage has changed with every economic crisis we experience. What money means today is different from what it meant before. "Money is one of the most ingenious inventions of humankind, as it helps the exchange of goods and services.... Money is the basis of civilization" (Kennedy, 1995, p. 5).

"Economics speaks of three functions of money: medium of exchange, unit of account, and store of value" (Graeber, 2014, p. 22). Money, as a means of exchange, suggests a system of no intrinsic value used to exchange goods/services with goods/services. In this system, interactions between sellers and buyers are designed based on the utility and necessity of goods for each party. Both parties want to trade their goods and must need each other's goods; otherwise the trade won't take place. This arrangement assumes that the trade is neutral, based on one's necessity to have something that the other has. This way of trading has no cultural or political influence in other aspects of human relations. Money is a medium to provide goods to a person who does not have or is not able to produce them.

In a modern society, the nature of trade changes. Money as a credit or debt given to a person, organization, or system helps them to function and to meet their needs. Money becomes a medium with an intrinsic value, although its value changes with other determining factors and with changes in social, political, and economic systems. Changes in political and social systems change the value of money and shift its influence towards free markets; it either makes weaken or strengthen the value of money. When money has value, its absence or presence in people's lives creates a dynamic that either eases or creates tense interactions between people (Graeber, 2014).

*Money as Social Construct.*

Money is a social construct. Money passes from the governments to banks and financial institutions. The topic of money -who handles it and how it is handled- has been kept out of public discussion, as this topic is framed as requiring expertise and knowledge of free markets. Discussions about money seem political, becoming pushed out from public debates.

Governments and banks create money; they then loan us money. Money is created and comes into existence when banks make loans. The Western economic system is based on debt. Consumer debt is the lifeblood of the western economy. All modern nation-states are built on deficit spending

(Graeber, 2011; Rowbotham, 2012). No one has money but everyone borrows money from banks and other financial systems. People compete for money by using available markets and resources. The banks maintain the currency scarcity (Rowbotham, 2012; Lietaer, 2001). We are told about the scarcity of money. We are not aware that the scarcity of money is a result of our monetary systems. When banks make a loan, they create new money. Money loaned by a bank is not a loan of pre-existing money; money loaned by a bank is additional money created (Graeber, 2011; Rowbotham, 2012). "Scarcity is built into money, a direct result of the way money is created and circulated... the omnipresent scarcity we experience is an artifact of our money system, of our politics, and of our perceptions" (Eisenstein, 2011, p. 27).

The following example explains the creation of money: When a bank provides you with a $100,000 mortgage, it creates only the principal, which you spend and circulate in the economy. The bank expects you to pay back $200,000 over the next 20 years, but it does not create the second $100,000, the interest. Instead, the bank sends you out into the tough world to battle against everybody else to bring back the second $100,000. Some people have to lose in order for you to win and get the money to pay off the interest. All banks do the same thing when they lend money into existence (Rowbotham, 2012). They do credit checks to find out whether you are capable of competing and winning against other players. Our credit ratings reflect the banking industry's view of our personal attributes required to repay in this competition.

The discourse of competition, as a social discourse, is reinforced by the economic discourse. People get into competition to prove their worth and their strength and eligibility in comparison to others. Possessing money also showcases one's strengths and worth. To remain equal to others, people borrow money from banks or financial institutions, then pay high interests until the borrowed money is paid off.

We live in a difficult time. We live in a time when everything is perceived as scarcity. Adam Smith brought the discipline of economics into being and created a discourse of justification for modern economies in 1776. Modern economies allocate and monetize scarce resources. Scarcity is directly linked to inadequate supplies of money and the motivations this unnecessary competition engenders; the situation is justified by individualistic discourses. Modern economies have perpetuated isolation from shared common resources.

Under these circumstances, people hoard and consume goods, far more than they need. This has contributed to high inflation and high interest rates on borrowed money. Consumerism, along with competition, has persuaded people to live their lives in debt. The predominance of inequalities and breakdown of communities has been constructed by debt. This is inevitable under the current economic systems (Lietaer, 2001).

### *Money and Individualistic discourses.*

Money plays a significant role in people's lives and yet little experimental attention has been given to the psychological underpinnings of money (Zouh& Vohs, 2009). Money is a "taboo topic and a source of compulsiveness, conflicts, and stress for many people, instead of simply being a tool to achieve some of our goals" (Vajda, 2014).

Money is fuelled by individualistic discourses, perceived as critical to an individual's happiness. Money is a tool to satisfy and fulfill the needs of an individual. Individualistic discourses encourage people to believe in self as a bounded being (Gergen, 2009); self as separated and

independent from the other. Self-interests do not usually align with those of others. Self has to work hard, aim high, focus on progress, and achieve desires at any cost.

Individualism, which defines self as a separate entity, is the backbone of Western civilization. The focus on self and its separation from the other has shaped the identity of Western cultures. Money is a string-attached phenomenon that serves an individual to achieve their objectives. Eisenstein (2011) says, "Money is a system of social agreements, meanings, and symbols that develop over time. Money is a key element of the story of Separation that defines our civilization. Separation takes many forms- the human/nature split, the disintegration of community, the division of reality into material and spiritual realms. Separation is woven into every aspect of our civilization" (p. 12).

Debts are written to people or enterprises owned by groups of individuals. Individuals must repay debts in competition with others. This condition engages each of us against the other for survival. Individualism and the debt-money system, together, privatize commons, push us into an alienating wage labour market, and put us into debt. In the process of coping with debt, we generate discourses and beliefs to justify our actions towards self and others. "Money depersonalizes a relationship. Turning two people into mere 'parties to an exchange' driven by the universal goal of maximizing self-interest. If I seek to maximize self-interest, perhaps at your expense, how can we be friends?" (Eisenstein, 2011, p. 38) Furthermore, "in a fully monetized society, in which nearly everything is a good or a service, money converts the multiplicity of the world into a unity, a single thing that is the measure of and exchangeable with almost everything else" (Seaford, 2004, p. 150)

Individualistic discourses make us believe what we do/have is not enough. They contribute to the creation of dichotomous thinking and language; they make us evaluate each other based on merits of success, not merits of ethics. They give value to materialistic achievements and make us think it is acceptable to use any means to achieve any personal goals. These discourses have created a competitive environment among people that puts us in a binary position. They dictate and promote 'us versus them' attitudes towards others. The impact of this way of thinking on humans has been significant. Binary thinking is driven by consumption, production, and progress. Under the influence of individualistic discourses, self as a bounded being is entitled to anything it desires at any cost.

Individualistic discourses foster individual greed. These discourses have protected one's sovereignty through repayment of debt plus compounding interest. They have taught people to pursue their own interests instead of relational and communal interests.

Modern economic systems are centered on lending money and debt. The self accumulates debt in order to function in competitive relationships with the other (Graeber, 2011; Rowbotham, 2012). The monetary system functions from and within multiple discourses. Consumerism, for instance, is a discourse that directs people to borrow, consume, and compete. Interest rates and consumerism do not allow people to pay off their debts. Those who are entrapped into consumption are not cognizant of how their consumption and desire to compete reduces their ability to pay off the debts. Those debts are subjected to accrued compounding interest. The current money system has been working within the web of social cultural discourses to stabilize itself. These discourses generate certain beliefs that people adopt into their way of living.

### *Beliefs embedded in the Discourse of Money.*

Individualistic discourses (social, cultural, and financial discourses) have brought forward certain beliefs that perpetuate and re-stabilize the current economic system. "These narratives, beliefs,

and ideas are inspired by certain world values, and may have created and maintained a particular attitude in the individual consciousness" (Wolff, 1950, p. 61). "Today's money system rests on a foundation of Separation. It means 'more for you is less for me.' The scarcity of our world is an artefact of our collective beliefs and they are inherently consistent with the monetary system we have today (Eisenstein, p. 90). These narratives and beliefs are the following:

- There is uncertainty in life. Therefore, everyone should accumulate a lot of 'stuff' as protection against future uncertainty. One has to protect and defend their 'piles of stuff' against those of others (Rowbotham, 2012; Graeber, 2011).
- We create scarcity to create value for goods. This belief created the economic principles of supply and demand. To balance and maintain the value of an item, it must remain scarce (Rowbotham, 2012; Graeber, 2011).
- Money frees us from dependency and brings about a state of self-sufficiency (Vohs, Mead & Goode, 2006).
- Money is gained by labour not debts. This belief is a counter-narrative to the current monetary system.
- Money and confidence are interconnected. Money provides a feeling of confidence that one can solve problems independently. One does not need others; one can function and stand-alone. "Confidence reduces the need to depend on others' approval" (Zouh & Vohs, 2009, p. 2).
- "Money operates as a resource that helps buffer the impact of exclusion by making people feel stronger" (Zouh &Vohs, 2009, p. 10).
- Lack of money is associated with one's vulnerability and suffering. One's vulnerability is not encouraged in human relations, as it is a sign of weakness.

Margerit Kennedy, (1995) in her book *Interest and Inflation in Free Money*, highlights common misconceptions with respect to money. They are the following:

The first misconception is that "there is only one type of growth, that is, the growth pattern of nature" (Kennedy, 1995, p. 6). "Everything in nature stops growing once it has reached its optimal size. The nature growth curve of a tree, an animal, or a person starts off with a short period of exponential growth but then slows down and ends when the ideal size has been reached. We assume that it sets the pattern for every type of growth on the planet, observing for example that 'nothing grows forever.' And we assume that this limited growth pattern therefore applies to money as well. The trouble is, under the current money system, it does not. Our interest-based monetary system is not a natural organism. It is an artificial construct designed by human beings" (Kennedy, 2012, p. 12). This misconception guides us to believe that "based on interest and compound interest, our money doubles at regular intervals" (1995, p. 6).

The second misconception is that "we pay interest only if we borrow money. This is not true as interest is included in every price we pay" (1995, p. 6).

The third misconception is "in the present monetary system, we are all equally affected by interest. This is not true. There are indeed huge differences as to who profits and who pays in this system" (Kennedy, 1995, p. 10).

The fourth misconception is "inflation is an integral part of free market economics" (Kennedy, 1995, p. 10).

The fifth misconception is money- as banks say- "should grow, increase, multiply. Most often they try to impress people with the idea that money should 'work' for them. However, nobody has ever seen money working. Work has always been done by people with or without machines" (Kennedy. 1995, p. 24).

These beliefs and misconceptions inform, guide, and encourage people to construct their relationships with money and with each other in a certain way. When resources are controlled and money is required to access these resources, these beliefs are imposed on us. Consuming, hoarding, greed, and scarcity are by-products of these beliefs. These misconceptions embody actions to sustain and survive in the socially constructed world and they create the field for constant borrowing and accruing debt.

Economic discourses are integral parts of maintaining and feeding the belief about self and its centrality. "The story of individualism -the discrete and separate self- needs to change too. Our money system reifies this story by dissolving personal ties, setting us into competition and disconnecting us from both community and nature" (Eisenstein, 2011, 40). The individualistic and economic discourses work together to design a system that leads people to work hard to meet their individualistic needs and convinces them that profits and accumulation of money equals happiness and satisfaction. These beliefs have created unnecessary suffering for people and have changed the quality of human relations. They have contributed to people's mental health problems and have shifted focus from emotional and relational well-being to deficit and insufficiency in people's relationships with one another.

In the experiment that Fiske and Alan conducted (1992), they discovered that when money is not mentioned at all, transactions remain in the social exchange domain; people apply norms of fairness and reciprocity to the exchange (helping a friend move, helping someone to change a flat tire etc.). When money enters the transaction, people use norms and rules that more directly relate to market norms of exchange and cost-benefit analysis. Together, these ideas suggest that when monetary exchanges are not explicitly mentioned, social norms, but not market norms, are invoked. Conversely, when monetary exchanges are explicitly mentioned, market norms, but not social norms, are invoked.

Fiske and Alan's experiment illustrates that the modern money system needs attention and revision. The dominant financial discourses "enhance individualism and diminish communal motivations in today's money focused society" (Vohs, Mead & Good, 2008). As alternative relational discourses have been considered as a response to dominant social cultural discourses, relational discourses may provide an alternative to repair and redesign the current money system.

Social and market exchanges work together at times and against each other at other times. The former includes offers of help, exchange of gifts, collaborations, and community work when immediate reciprocity is not expected, demanded, or even wanted. Market exchanges, in contrast, are based on numerical calculations of wages and prices; exact reciprocity is expected and demanded. The difference between the two spheres, therefore, comes down to how we want to live our lives, what our aspirations and inspirations are, and how we envision a better future for our children and the next generations. I think it is up to us to transform the current monetary system, which perpetuates inequality and unequal distribution of resources. It is not constructive for people.

The current monetary system with its free market has developed policies that decay the foundation of democracy in Western societies. Policies dictated by corporations have diminished the governments' ability to develop policies that benefit their citizens. The idea of redesigning the monetary system comes from a grave concern about the current states of I, Thou, and society as the

discourse of money defines these states. The following conflict narratives further illustrate this concern for human relationships.

**Case Vignettes.**

Evelyn, Jack and Jesse agreed to participate in my investigation on how people avoid dominant discourses of conflict. In this investigation, I define dominant discourses of conflict as the following: conflict emerges a) when people share their different views, opinions, and ideas/beliefs about life and how one should live his/her life and b) when people stay committed to and take a strong position to defend what they have learned from discourses in their daily practices/interactions with others. Different views on matters are related to how we think of and are protective of the resources (human and non-human assets) available to us. People try to own, protect, and fight for money and financial assets, which creates conflict in many relationships, including family interactions.

*Evelyn's story.*

Evelyn shared that she left her marriage when her son, Michael, was twelve years old. She was disconnected from her son due to conflicts with her in-laws. Many factors led her to end her marriage; immigration to Canada, financial constraints, and her husband's close connection with his family of origin.

For seventeen years, Evelyn did not have any contact with her son, Michael. When Michael became twenty- nine years old, he began to look for his mother and finally was able to locate her. One day, Evelyn received a phone call from Michael, saying that he wanted to see her. Evelyn said Michael told her that he was turning thirty and wanted to know who his mother was and develop a relationship with her. They met on a regular basis for about three months. Everything was going well until Michael shared his financial struggle with Evelyn. Evelyn thought that lending money to her son could help them rebuild their relationship faster and make them closer to each other. With the intention of supporting Michael and rebuilding their relationship, Michael received money from his mother on a monthly basis. Michael needed financial aid; he was an unemployed student with debts and without financial support coming from his father.

Evelyn shared how they came to an agreement to make sure the money did not get in the way of their relationship. She outlined that she agreed to give Michael $30,000 as a loan and in return, he would pay interest on the loan on a monthly basis until it was paid off. Evelyn also agreed to pay Michael rent until his graduation from university.

After two months, she discovered that Michael had not deposited the interest that he owed her and furthermore, he was not going to pay it back. Evelyn refused to accept Michael's reasons for defaulting on the loan she made to him. She insisted on the contract and wanted Michael to act fulfill their agreement. This led to constant fights between the two. Evelyn said their relationship became toxic. They were exchanging negative labels and were not able to connect with one another for a while. The interactions became full of tension, anger, and resentment, and continued this way for several years.

Evelyn became ill and hospitalized for health related concerns. During the time that she was in the hospital, Michael did not contact nor visit her. This event escalated mistrust and fuelled Evelyn's

feeling of being used by her son. Evelyn stopped paying Michael's rent after she left the hospital. Michael disappeared for a while.

In our conversations, Evelyn reflected on her relationship with Michael. She realized that her financial assistance did not make her closer to her son, and in fact, it damaged their relationship. Evelyn felt 'money' could restore her relationship with her son; however, she found that money changed her perception of Michael. "Michael came into my life because he needed money not me." Evelyn stated "I tried to bridge the seventeen years gap between myself and Michael by lending him 'money.'" Evelyn tried to decrease her feelings of guilt for not being in Michael's life for seventeen years. Evelyn found that money became the center of their relationship.

### Jack's story.

Jack, the father of two girls, Melanie and Monica, 17 and 5, came to consult with me about his relationship with his teenager, Melanie. Jack shared his concerns for his daughter; she did not take responsibility with her chores and homework. In addition, her relationship with her younger sister, Monica, has been very disrespectful as Melanie constantly makes 'fights' with Monica.

Jack shared how he tried to solve the problem with respect to Melanie's responsibility. He said he had given Melanie money as allowance since she was eight years old. He intended the money to increase Melanie's motivation to take on her responsibilities. Jack thought money would motivate her, as it had for him. Nevertheless, he realized that it had backfired in his relationship with Melanie. Money had made things more complicated. Melanie had learned to ask for money to do any simple task. He felt Melanie's rudeness and disrespectful behaviours resulted from his ideas about money. Jack noticed Melanie became more demanding. She acted like a bully at home as she matured.

I became curious to learn how Jack developed the belief that giving his daughter money would be useful. Jack said he works better when his boss gives him a raise. Money had been a good motivator for Jack since he was a young boy. His father had given him money as reinforcement for his achievements in life. Jack had learned that people work harder when they receive monetary compensation for their efforts.

In response to my question about how money affected his relationship with his daughter, Jack said money had destroyed their relationship. They had not been able to talk to each other for a long time. There had been lots of fights at home. Jack felt Melanie had been viewing him as a bank that provided her with money. There had no respect for each other.

Jack reflected on his relationship with his daughter, Melanie. He said, "I felt I was not her father anymore, I was a bank machine. She treated me badly. She would not listen to me unless I gave her money. It was really bad." Jacked stated that money became the center of their daily family interactions. It permeated the interactions between the two sisters. One day the fights escalated between Melanie and her sister to the point where Jack had to call the police, as Melanie's hostility and aggressiveness towards Monica became out of control. Consequently, Melanie received a restraining order and was removed from the family home. Since then, Jack said there was no communication between Melanie and the family. He noted that he had not been sleeping. Jack shared his feelings of regret regarding the belief that he had developed throughout his life with respect for money and its utility in family dynamics. Jack stated that Melanie has to pay for her behaviours, but I wish I had done things differently."

*Jesse's story.*

Jesse came for consultation, as his father had recently passed away; he was experiencing loss and grief. In one of our sessions, he said his father left him a house, which had shifted his relationships with his siblings. Jesse had two younger sisters -Mina and Mona. He said "we were very close when our father was alive." However, since their father's death, Jesse's sisters had become extremely upset and angry with their father and Jesse. The sisters thought the house was a family inheritance and belonged to them as well.

In my conversations with Jesse, I asked him about his relationship with his father and why he thinks his father had left the house to him. Jesse shared that his father had been ill for several years; Jesse had taken care of him. Jesse was appreciative of his father's gift and thought that his father had good judgment. He felt his marriage was his second priority, as he gave more attention and care to the father. He said his sisters helped with their father's care but Jesse, as a son, was the primary caregiver and decision-maker with every aspect of his father's medical care, financial decisions, family business, and the whole family's well-being.

Jesse shared how his relationships with his sisters had been contrived since their father passed away. He said, they think he owes them money. I asked if this arrangement of property was discussed when his father was alive. He said the arrangement had been made between him and his father when his sisters were absence. Jesse said his sisters discovered it after their father's death.

I asked about his relationships with the sisters before their father's death. Jesse said they had good relationships. His sisters considered him a good brother and consulted with him when they needed. I asked him how important it was for him to keep his relationships with his sisters. He said, "It is important; however, I cannot let go of the house. If they want to have a relationship with me, they have to accept that the house was given to me as financial compensation for the time and energy I spent during my father's illness."

Jesse was invited to review the years of conflict between himself and his sisters because of Jesse's inheritance of the house. Jesse said, "I lost my sisters. I lost my position among the family. I used to be happy. I am nobody now. I do have a house but nothing else. I feel alone."

In response to my questions on his interactions with his mother, he said his relationship with his mother changed too. His mother was upset that Jesse excluded her from the arrangement in relation to the inheritance of the house. Jesse told his mother that the house was now in his name, making it legal for him to take possession of it. He found a smaller apartment for his mother and arranged for her to move into it. Jesse became aware of his mother's feelings of resentment and the deterioration of his relationship with her.

Jesse was invited to reflect on his relationship with money and its impact on his family interactions. Jesse said "I view the house as compensation for my years of hard labour due to the management of my father's affairs during his illness. I can help my sisters the same way when they need it. I do not think the house should be an issue. I deserve to have it."

**Multiple Discursive Regimes & Family Interactions.**

In this section, I unpack how multiple discourses work together and complement each other in times of conflict. The beliefs that these discursive regimes reinforce in one's life are outlined and their influences on these family interactions are discussed.

### Evelyn's story.

In Evelyn's story, the discourse of good mother, who helps her children at any cost, is present. This discourse supports Evelyn in making decisions regarding providing financial aid to her son, Michael. As a good mother, she wanted to rescue the mother-son relationship by offering money to substitute for the years of being absent in Michael's life. She said her feelings of guilt for not being with her son were the key element in deciding to offer him financial help.

The second discourse that influences Evelyn was that of individualism -the importance of being independent and taking responsibility for one's financial matters. Evelyn felt that Michael, as an adult, should sign a financial contract with her and adhere to its conditions (e.g. interest payments). Evelyn said she worked hard to make a living when she got divorced so she could be an independent single woman. She valued 'money' a lot because she accumulated it through hardship.

The third influential discourse for Evelyn was families help each other. We are supposed to be there for each other. When Evelyn experienced Michael's absence in the hospital, she felt she should not have given money to Michael, as he did not appreciate and reciprocate the same care and attention to her.

The fourth discourse shaping Evelyn's thinking was money as protection. We see lack of money and resources as a sign of vulnerability and suffering. This discourse, along with the discourse of good mother, increased Evelyn's sense of responsibility toward her son. She felt it was her duty to alleviate his suffering.

### Jack's story.

The following discourses influenced the interactions between Jack and his daughter, Melanie. The first discourse was money as motivation. This discourse constructed Jack's belief that money would motivate his daughter to take on certain responsibilities. The belief in money as motivation constructed patterns of interaction between Jack and his daughter. Money became the center of their engagement.

Jack shared that he had learned this belief from his father, which became reinforced through his interactions with his boss, and his colleagues. Jack thought the discourse of money as motivation would contribute to the formation of confidence and independence in his children. This discourse overlaps with the discourse of money as independence. Jack thought Melanie's allowance would help her manage money more effectively and gain independence. This second discourse shaped Jack's decision and justified money as useful in their relationship.

The third discourse is that of being a provider. Jack said he had learned to be a good provider from his father. Jack's father experienced the Great Depression and its aftermath; he had experienced hunger and lived in poverty. Jack said that seeing his father struggling to make a living made him committed to not let his children suffer and to provide for them as much as he could. His learning constructed a new definition of fatherhood for him, a father who gives and provides to his children. It influenced, interacted, and taught her about responsibilities. Jack said he had forgotten that his children needed to learn the basic principles of responsibility before 'being showered' with money.

The fourth discourse is money as compensation. This discourse shaped Jack's belief that Melanie was entitled to financial compensation when she completed certain responsibilities.

### Jesse's story.

Four influential discourses affected Jesse's beliefs and constructed his relationships with his family. They are the following:

The first discourse is money as compensation for labour. Jesse believed that he was entitled to his father's inheritance and that his sisters were not because of the time and energy he spent on his father's care. He had taken sole responsibility for his father's affairs.

The second discourse is that the scarcity of resources encourages competition. Competition over the house, a scarce resource, was constructed through the arrangement between Jesse and his father in the absence of other family members. Jesse believed that the house belonged to him. He considered himself as the sole proprietor of this scarce resource. This discourse increased Jesse's sense of entitlement. Jesse took a strong position to not share this resource with his siblings.

The third discourse is money as protection. This discourse encompassed the family's perception that the inherence was an investment. As house appreciates over time; its increased value would help address unforeseen needs. This disclosure encourages the family members to consider this house as protection in light of future uncertainty.

The fourth discourse is that of being a provider. This discourse dictates to Jesse his duties and responsibilities towards his mother and his sisters. Jesse believed keeping the house would enable him to have additional resources to better support his family. Having the house as his asset would benefit all family members in the future. Jesse's father was also influenced by this discourse, which also encompasses gender politics and the discourse of patriarchy.

## The Development of Thin Descriptions of People's Lives under Dominant Discourses.

We are guided by multiple discourses that influence what we do with one another. Sometimes discourses work together and sometimes they work against each other. We hold multiple positions with one another according to multiple discourses. When we become aware of the position that we hold in our interactions with each other, we become aware of the link between our positions and dominant discourses. We become better able to reconstruct our conflict in relationships.

In Evelyn, Jack, and Jesse's stories, we see how their interactions with their family members changed due to dominant discourses about money/financial assets. These social, cultural, and financial discourses create conflicts and paradoxical dynamics in relationships. These discourses are interconnected and fuel each other. At times, they strengthen one's position over another. They transform relationships. For instance, Evelyn and Michael had to undertake new positions due to their financial agreement. Evelyn, as mother, took a moneylender position and her son took the position of the debtor. The mother-son relationship changed to a lender-debtor relationship.

The same transformation happened in the interaction between Jack and Melanie. The father-daughter relationship changed to an employer and employee relationship. In Jesse's story, the brother-sister relationship changed to a parent-child relationship. Jesse took on the position of father figure with

his siblings. His position perpetuated the unequal patriarchal structure that he and his siblings inherited from his father.

## Reconstruction Processes.

Human beings co-create discourses, which become recycled and reinforced by people in human relationships. This creates a feedback loop between the creation of discourses and the active participation of people in utilizing discourses as models of behaviours, thinking, and feelings towards one another. The discourse of construction introduces us to the idea that the construction of knowledge is communal (Anderson, 1982). To reconcile the ideas that influence the formation of self as a person, we need to seek alternative ways of changing dominant discourses that lead to dichotomous language and negative self-narratives. Gergen (1994) sees "our sense of personal history and identity as arising out of culturally available narrative forms" (p. 193), and Burr (1995) claims, "the self in language is given shape and form by our fundamental predisposition to think in terms of stories or narrative" (p. 134).

We are in a constant process of constructing and reconstructing ourselves as guided by dominant and alternative discourses. The alternative relational discourses put emphasis on inclusion, connection, equal distribution and collaboration. Relational constructionist ideas inform us that there is more to people; they can join and work together to reconstruct their lives in preferred ways. The constructionist and relational ideas introduce us to a new set of notions, such as sufficiency, currency flow, cooperation, and sustainability. They center on community engagement and group decision-making. Relational discourses offer us a new way of looking at 'old' issues. They urge us to question we ideas/beliefs we take for granted and to remember that people made those ideas in human history. They inspire us to actively participate and co-create discourses that promote sustainability and equal distribution of resources through dialogue and conversations. The act of participation suggests the re-evaluation of dominant discourses and the construction of alternatives as points of reference for people's narratives.

Examining the dominant discourses that guided Evelyn, Jack and Jesse allowed them to reconstruct their relationships with their family members. During the course of therapeutic conversations, Evelyn, Jack, and Jesse dissected dominant beliefs and discourses about money that they held close. I encouraged them to reconnect with hidden discourses in their belief systems to develop alternative beliefs and loosen their fixed positions.

Relational discourses guided my therapeutic conversations with Evelyn, Jack, and Jesse. Those discourses prioritize connection in relationships and place money at a distance. These conversations helped preserve parts of their relationships with one another.

### *Reconstructing Evelyn's relationship with Michael.*

In Evelyn's interactions with her son, Michael, she acted within the following discourses: 'good mothering,' 'individualism,' 'being independent,' 'families help each other,' and 'money as protection.' Evelyn was guided through these discourses. Operating from and within these discourses, Evelyn experienced conflict and tension in her relationship with her son. These discourses offered contradictory suggestions to solve the conflict between herself and Michael. For instance, when Evelyn was acting from the discourses of good mothering and families help each other, she saw money as a resource to be shared with her son. When she was acting from the discourses of money as protection and individualism, she had to protect herself financially, as well as offering her support to rescue

Michael from significant financial distress. To protect her independence, Evelyn needed Michael to sign the contract. The discourse of independent woman made Evelyn vigilant about the importance of saving money and about how she spent, consumed, or wasted money. In her interactions with Michael, Evelyn was operating from this dominant financial discourse. This perpetuated a cycle of conflict in the mother-son relationship. The act of making a contract with her son made her son feel estranged. Evelyn demanded the interest payments in her encounters with him. This new pattern of interaction changed their relational dynamics and transformed Evelyn's position from mother to banker.

In my conversations with Evelyn, she said she wanted to get back to her position as a mother. The following questions guided us to begin the reconstruction process: How could Evelyn be a mother to Michael without taking on the new imposed position as a banker? What discourses did she need to disconnect herself from to fully embrace the discourse of being a good mother? How did Evelyn need to view money to reconstruct the mother-son relationship in a new way? How would this new preferred position support and bridge the mother-son relationship given the seventeen years of separation?

Evelyn came to realize that money should not be an issue in her relationship with Michael. She felt she had to learn how to view money in a way that did not contradict with her preferred position as a mother. As maintaining the connection with Michael became the priority in her life, Evelyn began to view the loan as a gift to her son, and said "I do not need to get the money back. My money was a resource to help Michael finish his school. If I see money as a resource and focus on how I contributed to Michael's educational success, I can view myself as a good mother." Then she continued, "I am proud of my son for completing his school. He has recently graduated and he is seeking employment."

Through our collaborative conversations, Evelyn found a way to connect with alternative discourses; those of good mother and families help each other. Her reconnection with alternative discourses clarified the gaps in her thinking, which had resulted from being bombarded by multiple dominant discourses, including the financial discourses that focused on interest payments, individualism, and so forth. Evelyn was able to develop a strong relationship with her son, Michael, and reconnect with her preferred self.

### *Reconstructing Jack's relationship with Melanie.*

In Jack's story, we see how Jack reapplied his own financial learnings to his interactions with his daughter Melanie. Jack said his father was a financially conservative person who cared about how he earned and spent money. His father knew the price of reckless financial decisions. Jack said his father was reliable and dependable. His actions were aligned with conventional merits associated with responsibility and fulfilling expectations. Jack said his father's learning was rooted in his experience of the Great Depression; financial hardships had taught him to be vigilant with money and its value.

Jack's learnings from his father, as a role model, invited him to adopt his father's values and apply them in his family interactions including his relationship with Melanie. Jack hoped to pass on this generational knowledge and learning to his children. However, Melanie learned something quite different from her interactions with her father. In these interactions, she learned to expect money for her work. She would refuse to work, if money was not paid or was insufficient. Jack said Melanie had learned to value money more than her family relationships and responsibilities. This is something that he had hoped not to pass on to his daughters. Jack said Melanie's tendency to place and center money in return for labour created a conflict zone for the father-daughter relationship.

Melanie's commitment to self and the fulfillment of her needs positioned the family members as objects. When the presence of money became crucial in Melanie's life, the practice of othering was created in the family interactions. In dominant financial discourses, people learn to use any means to achieve their goals. The centrality of self is highly encouraged for a person to progress and accomplish his/her objectives in life. Melanie began to treat others as a means to satisfying her needs and interests. The practice of othering in Melanie's actions towards others made Jack concerned about the future of their family relationships and also about Melanie's future.

Through my therapeutic conversations with the family, we discussed and identified how Melanie had learned to treat the family members as objects. Jack reflected on the dominant discourses that guided him and contributed to the conflict between him and Melanie.

During the course of therapeutic conversation, we identified the following discourses guiding Jack in his interactions with Melanie: money as motivation, money as compensation for labour, money as independence, money a means to develop independence, and that of good provider/good father. These discourses complemented each other and supported Jack in developing a strong position regarding Melanie's responsibilities at home and school. Together, these dominant discourses made it difficult for Jack to step outside of them to resolve his conflict with Melanie. Jack implemented these dominant discourses in his interactions with Melanie when he introduced and established an allowance system. Through our conversations, Jack became aware of the consequences of adopting the discourses - money as compensation for labour, money as motivation- in his relationship with Melanie.

The following questions were explored with Jack with the purpose of re-evaluating his relationships with dominant financial discourses. What guided you to believe that 'money as motivation' would benefit your daughter at the age of seven? How did you connect the concept of responsibility to money as compensation for labour? Do you think one can develop responsibility and independence through the exchange of money? Why? How did the dominant financial discourses recruit you to implement their ideas in your family? If you were going to raise your daughter again, what would you do differently? How would you prefer to teach your daughter about responsibility and independence? What set of beliefs would you need to defy and what set of beliefs would you need to embrace?

Our collaborative conversations created a platform for Jack to review and reconstruct a new set of beliefs. The preferred constructed beliefs generated in our conversations enabled Jack to stay committed to the preferred discourse of a provider. This alternative discourse placed money outside of the father-daughter relationship. Jack said, "I did not know how much we are bombarded by the discourse of individuation/individualism and how pervasive these ideas are in our society, particularly with respect to parenting." He said, "the extreme attention in North American culture to individualism has played a significant role in the practice of othering." Jack realized how much he had perpetuated these dominant financial discourses and promoted the practice of othering in his family interactions.

### *Re-constructing Jesse's relationships with his family members.*

In Jesse's story, Jesse was impacted by the multiple dominant discourses in his family interactions. The following discourses guided Jesse: money as compensation for labour, time as money, money as scarce, and money as protection. All of these discourses complemented each other and supported Jesse in taking a strong stance in relation to his inheritance of the family home. These discourses made him believe that his siblings did not deserve of any financial compensation, as they did not contribute as much as he did. Jesse had learned through these discourses to view the inheritance as proper compensation for his years of taking care of his father. When Jesse's father left

him the inheritance/the family home, he felt appreciated, honoured, and acknowledged for the actions he had taken in relation to his father's care.

When we dissect these particular financial discourses -money, as compensation for labour, and time as money- we see how embedded these notions are in our educational system, particularly in respect to business training (Wang & Murnighan, 2009), and how prevalent they are in our society.

"We study whether students who are pursuing economics view greed differently from students who are pursuing other majors and taking other courses. Though not conclusive, previous research suggests studying economics might encourage the pursuit of self-interest and inhibit cooperation (Marwell & Ames, 1981; Frank, et al, 1993). Because economic models draw -at best - a fine line between self-interest and greed, we predict that studying economics will lead people to have more positive views of greed and, as a result, might make them more likely to engage in greedy action (Wang & Murnighan, 2009, p. 7). Carter and Irons (1991) also demonstrated, in ultimatum games, that economics students accepted less and kept more than other students; their behavior was more consistently self-interested and came closer to supporting the predictions of economics models than other students" (Wang & Murnighan, 2009, p. 10).

The discourse of scarcity of resources informed Jesse to adopt the discourse of money as protection. These two discourses together constructed a set of beliefs that required Jesse to take a position with his siblings to defend his inheritance. Jesse's siblings -Mina and Mona- were impacted by different discourses, as we discovered through our weekly conversations. The discourses that influenced Mona and Mina's positions were the following: The patriarchal structure of their family with respect to gender roles and responsibilities and the allocation of money/assets. Mina and Mona challenged the arrangement between Jesse and their father. They questioned Jesse's entitlement to the family inheritance. Why should Jesse get the house because of his gender? Why are the women in the family not entitled to a share of the inheritance? Mina and Mona came to a conclusion that Jesse owed them.  They were operating from the discourse of money that when it is borrowed, debt must be paid through interest payments until it is eventually paid off.

Furthermore, Mina and Mona were informed by another discourse: that of money as protection. They shared their concerns about their future and the uncertainty of their financial security. They viewed the house as an investment for all family members. Jesse was also guided by the discourse of money as protection. Jesse's worries and concerns centered on his duties and responsibilities as a male figure in the family. His duties and responsibilities encompassed having the resources to care for his mother and his siblings in the future. The discourse of money as protection complimented and supported the discourse of being a provider/father figure. These discourses informed Jesse's interactions with his siblings and justified his rights to the family inheritance. Ironically, Jesse and his siblings were guided by the same dominant discourse: money as protection. Operating from the same discourse in this family did not lead to shared understandings, but instead, deepened the conflict among siblings.

During the course of therapeutic conversations with Jesse's family, each party was invited to examine the dominant discourses from which each of them operated. During these meetings, the following questions were reflected upon:

Jesse, what do you think guided you in not disclosing to your siblings the private arrangement you had with your father regarding the inheritance/your father's intention to leave the family house to you? How do you think that arrangement contributed to your current conflict with your siblings? Your sisters see this arrangement as a practice of exclusion that has historically been practiced in your

family; what do you think this arrangement expresses? What did you notice about your siblings' ways of caring for your father during his illness? Do you think your siblings spent their time and energy in a different way to strengthen connection in the family? What have you come to appreciate about how they contributed to your father's wellbeing? What do you think care looks like?

Mina and Mona, how do you see Jesse's contribution to your father's wellbeing? How did he help the family to stay connected during your father's illness? Have you experienced Jesse as a patriarchal man in the family or as a person who stands his ground against patriarchy? What stories do you recall when you think of Jesse's acts of resistance with respect to the patriarchal structure in your family? How do you view Jesse's role in the family? How do you describe Jesse? In your experiences, would you say he protects your interests?  How?

Through our reflective conversations, we acknowledged how Jesse, Mona, and Mina's views and beliefs were embedded in dominant patriarchal financial discourses. "The institution of property is not the root of our present malady, but is a symptom of our disconnection and isolation. Thinkers such as Wilhelm Reich and Genevieve Vaughan link the origin of property to the emergence of male dominance and patriarchal society" (Eisenstein, 2011, p. 45). Each was encouraged to look at the inheritance as a resource that would benefit all family members. Despite the fact of who possessed this inheritance, each of the siblings had responsibilities to care for their mother and each other. The alternative discourse -connection- was introduced and its importance for each family member was examined. They shared their desire to be close with each other, as they used to be, particularly, when their father was alive.

They all acknowledged that much has changed in their relationships due to the inheritance and the years of conflict that followed. They suggested that perhaps each could do something to maintain the family connection. In this exploration, the following alternatives were explored: selling the house and equally distributing the funds, Jesse continuing to be in possession of the house, but proceeding to get the house appraised and sharing the funds accordingly with his siblings, or paying his siblings in installments, which would include additional interest to offset the house's appreciation over the years.

The parties had difficulty disengaging from the dominant discourses of money and moving towards the alternative discourse of connection, given their competing interests. They continued to be significantly influenced by dominant discourses of money. They sought solutions within dominant discourses to resolve their conflict with one another. Dominant discourses (social, cultural, and financial) had strong grips on their belief systems and contributed significantly in taking stances against one another. These discourses continued to operate in their family.

To support families like Jesse's, we need to look into the dominant discourses critically and revise them collectively. Otherwise, shifting people's belief systems into relational discourses appears difficult, especially when people's beliefs systems are embedded within and shaped by dominant discourses.

### *Reconstructing the Monetary System and its Discourses & Beliefs.*

In a search for an alternative discourse to the current dominant discourse of money, I came across Charles Eisenstein and his book, *Sacred Economics* (2011). He introduces us to the gift economy. "Gift exchange is a step toward barter. While gifts can be reciprocal, just as often they flow in circles. I give to you, you give to someone else and eventually someone gives back to me (p. 17). He elaborates on how gifts can rebuild our communities. He says (2011), "Gifts embody the key qualities of sacredness. First, unlike the standardized commodities of today, purchased in closed transactions with money and alienated from their origins, gifts are unique to the extent that they partake of the giver.

Secondly, gifts expand the circle of self to include the entire community. Whereas money today embodies the principle, more for me is less for you, in a gift economy, more for you is also more for me because who gives to those who need gifts cement the mystical realization of participation in something greater than oneself which, yet, is not separate from oneself. The axioms of rational self-interest change because the self has expanded to include something of the other" (p. 18).

Anne Manne (2014), in her book, *The Life of I: The New Culture of Narcissism,* makes a reference to Paul Piff's studies. Paul Piff discovered that as people grow wealthier, they feel more entitled, become meaner, and be more likely to exploit the other, even to cheat. In his experiments, Piff showed that drivers of expensive high status vehicles behave worse than those sputtering in battered Toyota Corollas... he found that the thought of being wealthy can create a feeling of increased entitlement - one feels superior to everyone else and thus more deserving (Piff, 2014). This confirms what Eisenstein (2011) says, "community and intimacy cannot come from joint consumption but only from giving and co-creativity" (p. 62).

In the story of Jack, Melanie's responses turned to hostility, as she matured and felt entitled to receive money for every task assigned to her. "Putting someone in a role where they're more privileged and have more power in a game makes them behave like people who actually do have more power, more money, and more status" (Miller, 2012).

Money drastically changes the quality of relationships people develop with one another. The financial beliefs and discourses dictate how people should take positions/stances in relation to one another. Viewing money as a socially constructed phenomenon allows us to become further aware of how money is 'leading us around' and how it affects our relations significantly. The belief in money, as social construction, enables us to become active participants in re-defining how money should work and in redesigning our monetary system.

The current monetary system contributes to experiences of divisiveness and conflict between people. This system generates ideas and constructs beliefs that intentionally or unintentionally shape human relationships in an unproductive way. "The story that the destiny of mankind is to conquer the universe to bring everything into the human domain, to make the whole world ours is becoming obsolete, and we need to invent a money system aligned with the new story that will replace it" (Eisenstein, 2011, p. 39).

Through scrutiny and critical thinking, we may be able to create and develop a monetary system that serves everyone in a sustainable and equitable way. "By helping to homogenize or standardize all money touches, by serving as a universal means, money has enabled human beings to accomplish wonders. Money has had a role in the rise of technological civilization... but do we want our relationships with the people in our neighborhood to be impersonal? Money, as a universal means enables us to do nearly anything, but do we want it to be an exclusive means so that without it we can do nearly nothing? The time has come to master this tool, and humanity steps into an intentional conscious new role on the earth (Eisenstein, 2011, p. 42).

The current monetary-debt system contributes to conflict between the self and the other-between spouses, siblings, employees and employers, and governments and their citizens; it centers and values money more than human relations. The conflict narratives that Evelyn, Jack, and Jesse experienced showed this. The monetary system generates scarcity by design. It makes us compete for survival, but artificially by its design, rather than by nature. Materialism, for one, has been shown to disrupt interpersonal harmony because people who value materialism value the goods that money can buy more than connection with others (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). Social exchanges do not pose

the same scarcity features. Individuals carry around pressures and stress to repay debts. This is reflected in their interpersonal relationships as we see in Evelyn's relationship with her son.

> "The mature, connected self, the self of inter-being-ness, comes into a balance between giving and receiving. In that state, whether you are a person or an entire species, you give according to your abilities and link with others of like spirit, you receive according to your needs" (Eisenstein, 2011, p. 112).

We need to change our beliefs about the scarcity of money and shift our focus to the abundance of resources and collective work that sustain the livelihood of communities. Conversations that construct new reforms and modify the current money system are paramount.

We need to continue questioning the discourses of debt, competition, comparison, and consumerism. "Zero-waste economy is the economic realization of the interconnectedness of all beings. It embodies the truth that as I do unto the other, so I do unto myself. To the extent that we realize oneness, we desire to pass our fits toward, to do no harm, and to love others as we love ourselves" (Eisenstein, 2011, p. 125). We need to collectively create not just a "new money system, but a new kind of money system, one that has the opposite effects of ours today. Sharing instead of greed, equality instead of polarization, enrichment of the commons instead of its stripping, and sustainability instead of growth. This new system will embody an even deeper shift that we see happening today, a shift in human identity towards a connected self, bound to all being in the circle of the gift" (Eisenstein, 2011, p. 70-71).

In thinking critically about the current monetary system, I invite you to reflect upon the following questions: How can we redesign the money system and our beliefs about money for a mature economy or an ecological civilization? (Rowbotham, 2012; Graeber, 2011; Orrell& Chlupatý, 2016) How can we redesign our monetary system to "spread the bread" and produce a fair society in which the benefits and the hazards of economic prosperity are more equally shared— even when growth is constrained to an extent by environmental factors? (Rowbotham, 2012; Graeber, 2011; Orrell& Chlupatý, 2016) How can we place money in human relationships in a way that does not produce unnecessary suffering for people? Can we redesign the money system into one that "preserves the freedom of private property without allowing its owners to accrue unfair advantages? Can we create economic systems that liberate, celebrate, and reward the innate urge to give? An alternative economic system could be a system that "rewards flow and not accumulation, creating and not owning, and giving and not having" (Eisenstein, 2011, p. 46).

### *Reflection on my challenges during the collaborative work with these families.*

Dissecting actions supported by particular dominant discourse(s) was challenging. Many discourses have enveloped us in a subtle way; we may not be aware of their influence on positions we take and in our interactions with one another. Becoming aware of invisible and visible contributions of dominant discourses on human interactions requires diligent, vigilant, and radical presence in conversation. Otherwise, the link between our actions and dominant discourses could be easily overlooked.

Introducing alternative discourses- the discourse of construction and the discourse of connection- to Jesse's family was difficult. The alternative discourse should emerge from conversations we have with one another.

It was fulfilling to engage in conversations that could de-monetize parent-child relationships. Jack and Evelyn wanted to reflect on their actions about the use of money in interactions with their children. These reflections opened opportunities for bringing about change in these family relationships. Change occurs when we develop an ability to accept that we contribute to the problem. Stepping outside of the binary division of 'us versus them' as well as disengaging from blaming the other for conflict invites both parties to become engaged in tackling an intractable conflict. Becoming accountable to actions we take under the influence of dominant discourses leads us to revise our actions and reconstruct our realities.

**Closing Remarks.**

Reconstructing the money system and its discourses is a collective act. Engaging in conversations about the discourses attached to the money system is the first step to increase our awareness of how money affects our interpersonal relationships. Through collaborative conversations and pondering on the above questions, we can reconstruct and redefine money as a medium of exchange and use it as a tool to satisfy the needs of the self and the other. These ongoing conversations will promote the idea of a gift economy where everyone gives and takes, where resources are distributed equally, and where the separation between the self and the other is eliminated.

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# CHAPTER VI: Conclusion

## Overview

### *What is this dissertation about?*

This dissertation is a philosophical and practical investigation on how to practice collaboration and the relational map in the relationship between therapists and clients, and in the relationship between self and others in interpersonal, collegial, organizational, and social settings. This dissertation is an ontological investigation into who we are and how we do conflict together. I am interested in learning how conflict can be viewed differently and how conflict dissolves when therapists use the relational map to engage with and invite clients to participate in meaning/solution-making processes. This dissertation aims to further circulate constructionist ideas and relational discourses in the field of psychotherapy.

In this dissertation, I highlight the usefulness of viewing self as a relational being/becoming and seeing self/an I as part of the other/another I. I explore what contributes to the process of becomings when we relate and view the world as relational beings and conversational partners. Inspired by the works of philosophers and scholars, including Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, I elaborate on the process of becoming in each of the previous chapters.

In this investigation, I highlight possibilities that become available to relationships between parties in conflict/conversation and how the quality of their relationships becomes enriched when they construct and operate within relational discourses. Conflict emerges in relationships when both parties recognize a multiplicity of ideas, beliefs, and perspectives. When the self becomes relational, the self and the other are inter-related, the self and the other become engaged in a dialogical and collaborative process. This process makes reconciliation of differences and co-existence of contradictions possible.

I refer to dominant individualistic discourses that do not view self as a relational being, but instead as 'bounded being.' Relational discourses suggest a new definition of self. Self is relational, narrative, multi-layered, and multi-storied. Self is a created concept. Self finds its meaning and its descriptions through its interactions with others. Self without the other has no meaning and no existence. The relational definition of self has different ramifications on the relationship between the self and the other. In this dissertation, relational discourses are introduced as preferred discourses that help people construct their relationships with one another based on a relational definition of self. These preferred discourses lead people to view conflict as a rupture that invites new possibilities.

In this investigation, the relational constructionist map is introduced as a pathway to conflict competency. Conflict competency co-constructs the balance between parties' degree of self-expression and their degree of consideration of the other. When conflict is located within a dominant discourse, parties become more easily engaged in a dialogical process to tease out their beliefs. Their participation in this process is critical in co-creating pathways to shared inquiry and local coherence. Conflict emerges when one's emotions, values, and beliefs, supported by discourse, contradict the other's sets of emotions, values, and beliefs supported by another discourse. The parties in conflict cannot respond and consider the other when guided and informed by adversarial discourses. The more we identify and dissect contradictions embedded in dominant discourses, the better equipped we become to dissolve conflict in our interpersonal, collegial, organizational, and social settings.

Our definitions of self (as a relational being) and conflict (as a rupture that brings new possibilities) close or open space for generative dialogues between self and others. Conflict invites us to construct hybrid/multiple views and identities for ourselves or creates an emergence of new encounters that lead to divisiveness and binaries.

In chapter II, titled "Collaboration between Home and School -A Relational/Narrative Approach," I demonstrated how 'old' issues can be viewed relationally and how we can develop new understanding of and new solutions to 'old' issues. It highlights problems embedded in the school/educational discourse. Dominant discourses in psychotherapy guide us to locate problems within an individual and position a person as solely responsible for problems that s/he encounters in life.

This chapter elaborates on the concept of self as a relational being. It invites us to question and step outside of restricted frames such as language, self, and knowledge to erase the boundaries constructed between us and them. This chapter suggests the use of the relational map, as an antidote to conflict that exists in this setting. Inviting parties to be open to each other and to engage in collaborative conversations helped school staff and parents to tap into their relational resources and expertise. This allowed alternative solutions to emerge to address the identified problems.

In chapter III, titled "Reconstructing Conflict Narrative," I centered my argument on the construction of conflict when conflict narratives embedded in dominant discourses are re-narrated in our daily interactions with one another. Our fearful or trusting attitude towards the other changes how we enter into a conversation with the other. It highlights how conflict narratives shape realities and maintain conflict in our relationships with one another. This chapter offers relational ways of addressing gender-based conflict in relationships. This chapter encourages us to view conflict as a rupture between the self and the other, a rupture that creates a new line of flight. This chapter introduces rhizomatic language as a moral, ethical, and political backdrop to the relationship between the self and the other. Rhizomatic language is deliberate and responsive. It is not deficit-based, it is not dichotomous, and it separates the person from the problem to better maintain our relationship with the other and tackle the problems together. When conditions for dialogue are not possible, we need to consider its cultural and historical contexts.

In chapter IV, titled "Dichotomy and Subjectivity: Obstacles to Social Justice," I provided an overview on the possible problems with subjectivity and dichotomy embedded in dominant discourses. This chapter suggests a link between subjectivity and conflict, a link overlooked due to the domination of individualistic discourses. This chapter encourages active participation in promoting justice by questioning fixed identities and subjectivity rooted in modernist/individualist discourses. This chapter suggests a separation between voice and subject for us to do justice. This chapter shed light on relational discourses and their implication in human relationships. Relational discourses suggest that life is comprised of multi-stories. Our stories are *made* in collaboration with others. Any opportunity for re-telling is a venue to participate actively in the re-creation of new stories of self.

Fixation on one's subjectivity denies others' contribution in one's narratives. It does not allow the self to be inclusive and to have its actions coordinated with the other. This chapter focuses on the downsides of subjectivity in the relationship between the self and the other. For instance, subjectivity reduces our responsibilities to be present with others. Fixed subjectivity promotes an unnecessary passion for single truth. Subjectivity fosters the use of binary deficit-language. It prevents us from being engaged in the practices of listening to each other and seeking alternatives together. Insisting on from one's truth divides the self and the other. Dichotomous thinking disconnects and prevents us from

being responsive to what happens around us and from doing social justice. This chapter suggests justice becomes part of our daily lives when subjectivity and divisiveness are restrained and muted.

In chapter V, titled "Interpersonal Conflicts and Gifted Economy," I provided detailed narratives of conflict and the influence of dominant discursive regimes on interpersonal relationships. The narrative analysis identifies paradoxes in the dominant discourse of money. I highlighted how our interpersonal relationships are formed, deformed, and reformed by discourses.

Supporting the disengagement from one destructive discourse and movement into a more sustainable and connecting discourse is the focus of chapter V. Our therapeutic conversations assisted Evelyn and Jack to re-engage with a more connecting discourse. This re-engagement facilitated conditions for family reintegration processes. These families disentangled the family relationships from the influence of the money discourse. They reconstructed and dissolved conflict narratives in a preferred way. The collaborative consultation with Jesse's family shed light on the dominant discourses governing each member of this family.

Alternative discourses were suggested to dismantle the influence of the money discourse on the family. However, the conflict was intractable. The family relationships did not move towards their preferred way of connecting with one another. Jesse's ideas remained deeply rooted in discourses of entitlement and patriarchy, while Mina and Mona's solutions centered on discourses of rights and independence did not allow them to disengage from the discourse of money. Despite multiple attempts, the conflict remained in this family. The parties were unable to shape their relationships outside of the materialistic discourses.

**Implications.**

I wish to highlight possible implications of this investigation on the relationship between clients and therapists, for the field of psychotherapy, and for human relationships. They are the following:

### *Implications for further evolution of therapeutic relationships in school settings.*

The application of this work in schools could open new possibilities for our educational systems. The constructive feedback received from the staff and parents suggests that school counsellors and school staff interested in collaborative work can use the relational map in school settings. It suggests that the relational map can be taught and made accessible to other professionals, particularly, to child welfare practitioners.

Constructionist ideas in therapy and counselling must be more accessible to professionals of different disciplines. How can we incorporate these ideas into educational trainings? What conditions could be suitable for other professionals to engage into therapeutic conversations and address problems in children's lives collaboratively?

For instance, in Richard's story, teachers created class environments that invited students to treat Richard not as an It but as another human being affected by their actions. When teachers constructed activities in the class, Richard and his classmates became active participants in sharing their experiences of bullying. Teachers reported the class activities created positive change in students' quality of relationships and reduced bullying in Richard's interactions with others. In Richard's story, describing and viewing bullying as an individual problem was not a solution that could help the school.

We developed a relational description of bullying and defined it as a construction developed through students relationships at school.

Collaborative practices helped us step outside of individualistic discourses, and embrace relationality of the problem, and work towards its disappearance in Richard's interactions with others. Richard could not do this alone without the help of others. If collaboration becomes the dominant practice at school, what kind of generation will we have in the future? Could this practice support us in raising children in a dialogical collaborative way that allows further flexibility in accepting multiple views and in embracing contradictions and multiplicity? Could collaborative practices at school create a platform for our next generation to experience and benefit from working together rather than insisting on their individualistic way?

### *Implications for multiple settings/situations in which conflict arises.*

This dissertation suggests that the use of relational map and constructionist ideas could be useful in different settings and need not be limited to therapy settings. For instance, relational and constructionist ideas could be useful in organizational conflicts or in international conflict settings, when two groups, such as employers and employees or two nations, with strong oppositional stances against one another meet to negotiate a resolution to a conflict.

Using the relational map and collaborative practices could bridge differences between parties in conflict. When people step outside dominant discourses and move away from fixed identities and the divisiveness present in our political rhetoric, what might become possible in the conflict relationships between employees and employers or international antagonists? Stepping outside of dominant discourses and moving away from fixed identities could have positive and constructive implications on our organizational and international conflicts.

Conflict functions and operates within specific discourses. Different disciplines might be influenced by multiple discourses. When those are identified, we step outside of the identified discourses, which form conflict in our relationship with one another.

We will, therefore, have a better understanding of how to relate to one another in a different way. I wonder what would happen to us if we moved away from fixed identities formed by dominant discourses and towards relational becomings when local coherences are appreciated and cherished. For instance, in the story of May, when she was enveloped by the discourse of gender and its dichotomous nature, she could not make decisions in relation to her marriage. She seemed bombarded by multiple discourses that dictated how to live her life as a wife, as a female worker, as a daughter, and so forth. In our conversations, she evaluated the discourses that pressured her and she redefined herself in the relationship. According to Deleuze's ideas (1994), we become better able to see things from others' points of view and rely less on our truth as a single truth.

Collaboration becomes a path to relational ethics when we question individualistic subjectivity. Relational ethics subvert meanings to individualized interpretations of the other's actions/thinking/ feelings and help re-situate these interpretations in a relational framework in which we see and experience self in relationship.

Another possible impact of the use of relational map will be on deficit-language used in therapeutic interactions between families and therapists. This dissertation suggests we must pay attention to language used in our interactions with one another. In my conversation with Richard's

family, we challenged the use of deficit-language and individualistic framing of problems that Richard had at school. All parties in conflict scrutinized the use of deficit-language in all levels of interactions, between Richard's parents and Richard, between school staff and Richard's parents, and between the therapist and Richard's family. If we minimize the use of deficit-language in our daily interactions, what could be possible in our interpersonal relationships?

Developing rhizomatic and deliberate language is key to collaboration. As described in the chapters II, III, and IV, rhizome does not belong to any place and time. Rhizome moves from one territory to another; it grows and develops in new territories of being. What might be possible if we become rhizomatic and allow rhizomatic improvisation to guide our interactions with one another instead of focusing on manuals/descriptions written by others and not the parties involved?

### *Implications for children caught in the crossfire.*

This dissertation offers the relational map to guide us when and how to include children in conversations. The relational constructionist discourses support the presence of children in therapeutic conversation in a way that does not re-traumatize them. Children/students participate and express their voices in a way that does not put them in the middle of conflict. As we know, children are often caught in the crossfire when differences in views, ideas, and solutions are not shared between home and school or between couples/adults. When we prepare ourselves for conversations on issues that matter to us, we enter into a discussion with preparation and openness, and we become curious to learn more about those in conflict. We enter conversations with the understanding that we are part of this process and that our contribution matters.

In Richard's story, the use of the relational map facilitated our conversations and created a platform for all parties to become aware of the practice of othering. This platform allowed Richard to talk about his experiences of being bullied. His parents talked about their experiences of not being taken seriously. School staff came up with new ways of to tackle bullying in school. We unpacked these experiences in our sessions with teachers and parents. Through our conversations, we realized that these experiences were not just Richard's story, but part of this particular school's narrative. This realization helped all parties plan how to end the practice of othering, as Richard learned to view himself and others differently. I wonder what might be possible to us if we allow ourselves to step outside of the norms designed and constructed by dominant discourses.

### *Implications on dominant discursive narratives in therapy- the knowing paradigm.*

The constructionist relational approaches invite us to be open to uncertainty and to take a not knowing position in relation to others' life stories. Being comfortable with uncertainty encourages us to become uncomfortable with dichotomy and divisiveness embedded in language. This, by itself, could impact our social interactions, considering how conflict manifests more in the knowing paradigm. Deconstruction of the knowing paradigm is critical to the not-knowing stance promoted by relational discourses in the field of psychotherapy. The not-knowing stance is a response to the paradigm of superiority of one truth over another. The 'knowing paradigm' is institutionalized and is expert driven.

Collaboration challenges dominant individualistic discourses in the field of psychotherapy -the paradigm of knowing. This dominant knowing paradigm minimizes local knowledges that people hold precious, gained through their life experiences. The knowing paradigm has watered down our curiosity towards the other and imposed meanings on the experiences of the other. The others' responses "call

upon us" and invite us to respond in return. In Shotter's (2008) becoming-perspective, communication is therefore never-ending, but emerging. He encourages us to engage in '*withness-thinking,'* we would do well to train in empathy and speak 'with' one another rather than 'to' one another (p. 20-21).

Collaborative practices invite us to 'not knowing' stances, critically question expert positions, and engage with a multiplicity of ideas and perspectives. The relational discourses support shape practitioners' relationships with clients outside of the knowing paradigm. The relational map invites questions before concluding, to develop an interest in how clients make sense of their experiences, and to honour clients before offering our knowledge and experiences to them. Relational discourses encourage therapists to be guided by curiosity and wonderment. Reflective questioning sustains curiosity towards others' ways of making sense of the world. Curiosity places practitioners in a dialogical position to participate in a shared relational process.

This dissertation also highlights therapists' responsibility towards clients. Therapists' responsibility is not to cure a client using scientific language and taking an expert position. Their position does not blame the individual for not fulfilling her/his personal developments, nor to presume an empiricist view of clients' mental states. Rather our professional responsibility is to be radically present. "Radical presence" (McNamee, 2015) is when both the therapist and clients work together on issues that matter to clients in the process of deconstruction of clients' dominant stories and the reconstruction of alternative and generative stories. "Listening to the discourse at work in a particular account and to the position calls that are issued within each discourse, ... and 'curious questioning' are ways of disarming the conflict" (Winslade & Monk, 2000, p. 140-141).

Challenging the knowing paradigm allows us to "to unlearn the ways in which we generate and ask questions that drive our inquiry" (Antonacopoulou, 2009, p. 423). We question everything we do with each other, as established dominant discourses have framed our beings with one another. "It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions" (Rorty, 1979, p. 12) and our presence with one another.

This way of seeing self and others in unity introduces us to new considerations that enrich the quality of the relationship between therapists and clients. It invites therapists to switch from the expert stance to the non-expert stance in which therapists and clients share knowledge, expertise and insights. This process of making the therapist and client relationship a platform to generate ideas invites the multiplicity of perspectives, truths, and curiosity. Therefore, a therapeutic relationship becomes a relationship of mutual contribution. Therapists gain expertise when they trust clients' competence and listen for stories of strength and resiliency. This dialogue, listening and talking *with*, increases both parties' understandings of their own stories. The therapist's focus becomes about reaching clients where they are and supporting them to start a new journey to 'places' where new meanings can be constructed (Cecchin, 1992).

The plurality of perspectives co-creates multiple realities in which patterns of interactions construct identities. The multiplicity of ideas does not mean that therapists do not have expertise; it increases therapists' maneuverability and allows therapists to maintain purposeful conversations with clients. "Maneuverability implies the ability to take purposeful actions despite fluctuating obstacles or restrictions" (Fisch, Weakland & Segal, 1982, p. 22). Maneuverability provides flexibility in thinking and gives therapists space to move up or down, scaffold, and introduce alternatives or possibilities to clients' situations. It prevents therapists from becoming fixed on their own constructed ideologies or theories of change.

Gergen (1994) argues, "Therapists' loss of authority is primary; the traditional hierarchy is dismantled. Instead the therapist enters the arena not with superior truth about the world, but with various modes of being including a range of languages" (p. 243). Maintaining a de-centered posture and a not-knowing stance provides a more equal relationship between clients and therapists. It allows therapists and clients to bear witness to one another as each moves from one state of being to another. Moving from one state of being to another requires both therapists and clients to locate their experiences in social and political dimensions.

Shotter (2015) describes this as "knowing from *within* our involvements with each other" (p. 68). Knowing from within highlights that the therapist does not possess knowledge. The knowledge is created with clients who have knowledge and expertise about their situations. This elevates clients' voices and prevents therapists from labeling and using pathological language to interpret clients' stories of hardship. The de-centered position allows therapists to stay present with clients and hear their stories, exploring ideas and solutions together. The not-knowing stance indicates that therapists do not practice imposition of labels. Therapists offer reflecting surfaces to connect clients with their preferred story lines. "Dialogical therapists tend to associate power with processes of authority, domination, control, and hierarchy (Anderson & Goolishian, 1990). Guilfoyle (2013) says, "power in therapy stems from the use of expert language and its imposition on the clients' experience" (p. 3).

The discourse of construction, highlighted in this dissertation, allows us to view problems in a broader context by encompassing geo-political and social issues in the relationship between clients and therapists. It encourages us, practitioners, to connect with the other and talk *with* rather than talk *to* the other. Instead of treating a client -the other- as an object, we approach clients as equal. This is not possible if we are guided by individualistic discourses. Relational discoursers characterized by curiosity define therapy as a "joint action" (Shotter, 2008, p. 64).

### *Implications for further education and training -teaching and supervision.*

One of the implications of this dissertation is to further take initiatives in promoting collaborative teaching and supervision to future graduates. The high rate of burnt-out in the field of psychotherapy is increasing. The increased rate of vicarious trauma and burnout has been worrisome in our field. I speculate that this rate might decrease when therapists are trained and encouraged to use relational and collaborative approaches in therapy. The excessive use and emphasis on expert models in therapy, as well as the connecting funds for services to expert-driven approaches, have pushed many new therapists to use expert-driven approaches to find jobs. This makes new graduates more vulnerable, which compromises their abilities to be helpful to themselves and their clients.

Creating possibilities for new graduates to learn relational approaches in universities and detaching money from the expert-driven approaches would decrease the rate of burnt-out in the field. Training graduates with the relational constructionist approaches would help new therapists not see themselves as experts who know it all. They learn to adopt a philosophical stance (Anderson, 1997) and remain curious and honor clients' expertise throughout therapy sessions. Practitioners who respect clients' expertise and invite their knowledge suspend their own knowledge and work with people effectively. Through training and further education in collaborative relational approaches to therapy, new generations of practitioners become reflective, reflexive, and collaborative. They see their role as creating a platform for further collaboration and dialogue on issues important to clients.

This investigation also promotes ideas on how practitioners and clients could work together towards building inclusive communities. This dissertation invites practitioners to view knowledge

differently. We, practitioners, need to view knowledge as a powerful source to change our communities. Knowledge does not need to be a repressive force. No one "possesses" knowledge. Knowledge belongs to everyone. Knowledge is not a privilege that belongs to those who gain it through formal education. Knowledge is generated through connection and open dialogue between people. Knowledge, then, becomes more productive. Ideas are collected to create and re-create norms that work for communities.

**Limitations.**

As this dissertation ended, I became conscious of what I left unattended in my investigation on the relationship between the self and the other. Here is what I have recognized as limitations:

This investigation does not discuss the conflict resolution approaches born and affirmed within modernist/individualistic discourses. It does not talk about the utility of these approaches. The limitations of traditional conflict resolution approaches are assumed to be known to readers, and not discussed in this dissertation.

This dissertation focused on a literature review on dominant narratives and counter-narratives influencing the relationship between the self and the other. This scope of this investigation centers on the use of philosophical, academic, and scholarly voices.

This investigation does not explore whether relational discourses are more prevalent in one group, community, or nation as opposed to others.

This investigation does not explore pathways to implementing these ideas and getting those in power in any settings -school, organization, community leaders, politicians- to buy into them.

The similarities between this collaborative approach, and other relational approaches, such as Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2010), are not discussed in this investigation.

In this dissertation, limitations of the constructionist approach are not explored, as this manuscript intends to promote constructionist, relational, and collaborative approaches. As Gergen (1994) says, any paradigm has both creative and repressive forces. To avoid its repressive force, and not to be blindsided, limitations exist in the constructionist framework. Constructionist ideas have create doubts on the definition of 'real' and 'critical realism.' "What is real?" is challenged by constructionist ideas. The possible implications of change in our understanding of 'real, reality, and realism' have not been sufficiently discussed by constructionists.

**Reflections.**

The experience of working on this dissertation has had a significant impact on me. It has been a liberating process. This investigation has brought to my attention forward this common dictum, 'existence comes before co-existence.' One must be seen as worthy and equal to the other before collaborating with the other. One must open to the other to receive an open invitation to conversation. One must view oneself as relational to become collaborative. This requires viewing self as a relational being, which means self does not exist without the other. Existence means the development of the "reflective stance and critical analysis of power relations and structural inequality" (Kuttner, 2016, p. 16). Through this awareness and development, the notion of co-existence becomes possible as it leads to becomings.

Through this investigation, I have become further aware of the influence of dominant individualistic discourses on masses, and our collective inability to transform structural inequalities. I learned that engaging one another to develop local coherence may change structural inequalities but its sustainability is fluid and depends on those who remain engaged in the process. I hope this dissertation motivates others to deconstruct dominant discourses, as they create unnecessary suffering in people's lives.

Writing this dissertation has further evolved my understanding of human relations. I am more open and comfortable to twists and turns, to the unknown and uncertainty, and to everyday encounters and mysteries. The ability to suspend professional language, take a philosophical stance (Anderson, 1997) and be radically presence (McNamee, 2015) in every interaction is the pathway to collaboration. The process of writing this dissertation has broadened my horizons with respect to what is happening to us and what could be possible for us as humans. I am more aware of binary and deficit-language embedded in dominant discourses that sneak into daily exchanges with one another.

**Insights from the Case Vignettes.**

Insights generated from these examples created possibilities for further reflection and wonderment. The interactions between clients and therapists are mutual. The parties in conversation shape each other's lives. The objectivity promoted in the modernist approaches has disconnected clients from the therapist and vice versa. Learning to see therapeutic relationships as bidirectional enrich lives of parties in conversation.

Viewing psychotherapy as a construction of modernism opens new avenues for growth and creativity. Through this understanding, I am further encouraged to locate myself in a relational context that could potentially produce problems for clients. Critically viewing the assumptions about our profession and the expert/deficit-language in the field of psychotherapy allows us to recognize incongruences and discrepancies between approaches, language, and positions that practitioners and clients take. Engaging in a shared inquiry and co-creating meanings are not possible until practitioners engage in conversations that align with clients' preferences, language, and position. Anderson (1997) says, "the dialogical creation of meaning is always an inter-subjective process" (p. 134).

Focusing on process questions rather than content questions facilitate dialogue and collaboration (Anderson, 1997) and engagement that transcends and moves clients to view problems from different angles. This movement changes the nature of conflict/problem that a client experiences. Dialogue facilitates coordination of topics and pace. Practitioners become further intentional to adjust their pace with that of the client. They follow clients' chosen topics instead of forcing or pushing their own expert agenda.

Practitioners taking a not-knowing position dissolve the power differential in the relationship between clients and therapists. "Knowing -the delusion of understanding and the security of methodology- decreases the possibility of seeing and increases our deafness to the unexpected, the unsaid, and the not-yet-said" (Anderson, 1997, p. 134). By not guiding a client to tell her/his story in a certain way, not controlling the flow of topics, and going with a client' pace, practitioners engage in reflective and reflexive practices where the client's expertise is honored and welcomed.

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**Future Discussions.**

This dissertation proposes several ideas that could be elaborated on in future investigations.

The impact of relational discourses on specific conflicts settings, such as couple, organizational, and international disputes could be the focus of future research. The use of relational map and collaborative practices can be considered when addressing intimate relationships and organizational encounters.

Future research could collect stories of people's lived experiences of conflict narratives that support the suggested counter-narratives, the relational discourses.

Future investigation needs to explore the application of relational approaches on disciplines, such as medicine, nursing, teaching, etc. This research could be extended to explore how dominant narratives and counter-narratives impact practitioners in all disciplines, particularly, on their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

The prevalence of dominant narratives and counter-narratives, specifically, in respect to disciplines, communities, and nations could be a focus of future investigations. This could extend our understanding of why relational discourses are more prevalent in certain environments.

Future investigations should propose ways of subverting dominant individualistic discourses and offer ways to substitute them with relational discourses. Further investigation on ways of subverting dominant individualistic discourses and substituting them with relational discourses would expand our awareness of dominant discourses and their alliance/collusion with one another.

Future investigations can explore pathways to implement relational discourses and get those in power to buy into them. Extending the ideas proposed in this dissertation is paramount for constructionist ideas to become prevalent in our socio-economic and political systems. The exploration of new pathways may engage and invite people from different disciplines to reflect upon relational discourses. This engagement, hopefully, leads to a social movement that enables people to challenge and subvert the domination of modernist/individualistic discourses. Electing officials and politicians familiar with relational discourses ensures the development of social policies that support of social justice.

Future discussion could focus on intersections where multiple discursive regimes meet and form conflict between people. Further investigations could also explore the influence of discursive regimes on each other; particularly, which would be beneficial to the current approaches to conflict dissolution/resolution.

**Looking Back and Forward.**

When I began this dissertation, I hoped to share a constructionist framework, showcase my practical knowledge and understanding of collaborative approaches, and illustrate case vignettes. Psychotherapy, as a construction of modernism (Anderson, 1997), needs an upgrade to become further responsive to the problems that arise in the postmodern era. This era requires us to question therapeutic approaches constructed in modernism and re-evaluate what had been constructed previously. To

introduce a new paradigm in counselling and therapy, critical thinking and awareness of our current challenges are essential, particularly, in the advent of unpredictable social, global, technological, and scientific changes.

At a time when we experience interconnectedness between everything everywhere, we cannot allow ways of relating that promote monetized, manualized, and medicalized approaches to human relations to expand. These approaches are divisive and actively promote the centrality of self. Creating a new paradigm that challenges the knowing paradigm and single truth open new possibilities to address and perhaps dissolve today's concerns. As Gergen (1991) says, "each paradigm operates simultaneously as a productive and repressive force" (p. 212). Introducing relational constructionist approaches in conflict dissolution presents one approach of many and should not suppress useful utility of others. If you read something that sounded like a miracle cure in my case studies, I did not mean to imply that conflict goes away and never returns. In some of the more difficult predicaments, the resolution can be fragile and require ongoing attention to keep it at bay.

The development of an "alternative narrative involves leaving the problem behind to be stored in the dusty archives of memory. It is the living relationship with the problem that is transformed" (Madsen, 1997, p. 294).  It seems that collaborative relational approaches align with the era in which we live today:

"As we move out of a political world of supposed equals, of people existing as indistinguishable atoms, psychologically, all in competition with one another for *power*, and move into a political world of people possessing psychological characteristics according to their 'positions' in relation to each other, we begin to see a whole different dynamic at work. Instead of a 'politics of power', a new 'politics of identity' is beginning, a politics of access to or exclusion from a political economy of ontological opportunities for different ways of being. If one is to participate in this political economy with equal opportunity, then 'membership' of the community of struggle, the tradition of argumentations, cannot be conditional: one must feel one has a right, unconditionally, to 'belong'. And these claims to 'belong' are now being posed by a whole host of groups previously marginalized by professional academics: not only women, black, and other ethnic movements, ecologists, and so on, but also many others without 'expert' or 'professional' credentials. We are moving into a new world of problems posed by a genuine recognition of the importance of differences rather than similarities, and the importance of that world in influencing the character of the questions we now feel it crucial to pursue" (Shotter, 2008, p. 69-70).

The relational discourses and constructionist ideas respond to what people need; these ideas suggest that practitioners honour people's knowledge and expertise. They promote dialogically responsive approaches that bridge between people in conflict in a creative way. These ideas invite us to view our life stories, as they are always in the making.

In this dissertation, I attempted to assemble a platform to critique the effects of problems, constructed through individualistic orientations to life, and their limiting sociocultural prescriptions. I tried to generate new possibilities through my conversations to encourage clients to co-author preferred stories. Dialogical and collaborative processes appear better equipped to address historical and cultural divisions that have generated many conflicts among people. Further engagements and participation in activities that are "spontaneous, living, bodily, expressive, and responsive" (Shotter, 2008, p. 73) will hopefully lead us to the development of joint actions (Shotter, 2008, p. 64) and "dialogically structured events" (Shotter, 2008, p. 55). Dialogically structured events may lead to the construction of a better future for all humans.

I hope that this dissertation has provoked internal conversations and reflections. I hope it has further stimulated self-questioning and examination of your clinical theories and practices. I continue to reflect upon what is said and what is not said in this dissertation. I aim to further focus my attention on sharing, witnessing/withnessing knowledge as it emerges, and participating further in co-creation and co-construction of new social worlds.

"All I am saying is simply this...
That all life is interrelated, that somehow we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.
For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.
This is the interrelated structure of reality."

Martin Luther King, Jr.
Western Michigan University, December 18, 1963

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## Summary (in Dutch)

Deze studie verkent het nut van het relationele zijn en het relationele overzicht als leidende concepten in de psychotherapie en bemiddelingspraktijken. Het is een verkenning en presentatie van de transformatie van het conflicterend relaas door psychotherapeutische samenwerking en dialoog. Door informatie verkregen uit verhalen, relationele constructiviteit en de ideeën van Deleuze over zgn. rizomatische taal wordt mijn benadering gekenmerkt door: 1) bewuste onwetendheid; 2) eigenaardige uitgangspositie; 3) meervoudig theoretische vertellingen; en 4) de mede-opbouw van betekenissen. Het traditionele psychotherapeutische betoog wordt gevoed door dominante individualistische vertellingen.

Psychotherapie en bemiddeling, beide ontwikkeld binnen het algemeen filosofisch kader van individualistische vertellingen, benadrukken problemen en de centrale rol van een individu. De resultaten geven een gevoel van zowel vastgelopen subjectiviteit (d.w.z. een stabiele en onveranderbaar persoon) als van slagvaardigheid wat heeft geleid tot wat velen benoemen als 'the practice of othering'.

In dit proefschrift worden de fundamentele concepten van individualisme kritisch onder de loep genomen. Alternatieve vertellingen die rijzen binnen de relationele en constructionistische filosofieën worden verkend en gebruikt om de tekortkomingen aan te tonen van de individualistisch georiënteerde verantwoording. Het concept van het zelf als relationeel wezen wordt geïntroduceerd als tegenhanger van het zelf als weinig beïnvloedbaar wezen (Gergen, 2015). Het concept van het 'zelf' wordt in deze studie gebruikt als een theoretisch, praktische en research instrument. Dit proefschrift hanteert een analyserend betoog en een verhalende analyse middels illustraties die ook aandacht schenken aan het onderhandelen over 'discursieve regimes' en hun invloed op menselijke relaties.

De relationele analyse van problemen in menselijke relaties vermijdt de mensen die binnen het betoog zijn gedefinieerd; in plaats daarvan biedt het ondersteuning aan manieren om buiten het dominante betoog om het leven van mensen te vormen en hervormen. Samenwerkende, relationele, vertellende manieren van psychotherapie worden geïllustreerd als effectieve werkwijzen die aandacht schenken aan vele soorten van conflicten, inclusief die conflicten die worden beïnvloed door traditie, machtsverhoudingen, cultuur en economische zaken.

De artikelen in dit proefschrift zijn ook gebaseerd op de veronderstelling dat verandering teweeg kan worden gebracht door een onderlinge interactie tussen therapeuten en cliënten op een op conversatie en dialoog gebaseerde manier. Participatie door en samenwerking tussen beide partijen zijn essentieel voor de ontwikkeling van een onderling acceptabele interactie. Omstandigheden creëren voor dialoog is cruciaal in dit proces opdat individuen dan worden uitgenodigd om zichzelf te ervaren en herervaren op een dialogische wijze. Dit zou de stappen richting verzoening en verbondenheid kunnen faciliteren tussen mensen als relationele wezens. Door mede lering te trekken uit filosofisch georiënteerde therapeuten, onderzoek ik hoe de constructie van gunstige psychotherapeutische samenwerking wordt gerealiseerd. Ik sluit dit proefschrift af met een discussie over de beperkingen en implicaties die ten goede zouden moeten komen aan nieuw toekomstig onderzoek dat in het verlengde ligt van het werk gerapporteerd in dit proefschrift.