Dialogue as a Way of Being: Three Fundamental Considerations for Transforming Conflict from Adversarial to Dialogic relation

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Action without vision is only passing time, vision without action is merely day dreaming, but vision with action can change the world.   Nelson Mandela

ABSTRACT

The rapidly changing world we live in is fraught with increasing divisions and destructive conflict. Consequently, a resilient social fabric becomes crucial for people to feel included and empowered by their differences. The quality of relationships and the social environments, within which they are constantly being formed, are critical for successfully addressing divisive challenges and the destructive conflicts they might spawn. This chapter proposes a framework of three considerations for transforming conflict: 1. The mode of relationship- how the Self relates to the Other, 2. The perception of conflict, and 3. The social environment and the role of leadership in constructing dialogic environments. Revisiting assumptions pertaining to these considerations can support a shift from the unit of the individual (typically characterizes Western cultural and scientific traditions) to a relational unit. This shift is proposed as a premise for long-term transformation from adversarial interactions into dialogic relations. The latter is suggested as a constructive mode of relationship: a way of being with one another in which self and the other actively and equally co-create reality and relating to one another in their own terms. The chapter concludes with an example from an educational environment within which a relational transformation took place by integrating both micro efforts- consciousness raising to relational forms and dynamics, and macro work of restructuring the social context.

Introduction: **From an Individual to a Relational Orientation**

The speedily changing volatile world we inhabit, tense with rifts and destructive conflicts, poses a significant challenge: how to thrive with differences. While human connections have expanded and amplified with the promise of the information age, new technologies, and the explosion of social media, quality relationship in a more profound and authentic sense lingers behind. Regardless of abundant opportunities to connect, modernity gave rise to alienation and isolation.

More than ever, people are eager to be included, express their voice, and partake in decision-making. They crave to shape their own reality. Quality relationships are critical for constructively engage, and furthermore, for benefiting from diverse perspectives. The quality of relationship profoundly determines whether these aspirations to effectively participate could be realized.

The Importance of a Relational Emphasis

The Individual is at the Center. Despite the relational nature of human existence (e.g., Gergen, 2009; Sampson, 2008), Western cultural and the scientific framework of thinking it encouraged, has been individualistic and hegemonic in emphasizing the person rather than relationship (e.g., Burr, 2015; Sampson, 2008). While particular forms of relationship could support beneficial engagement in diverse viewpoints and cultural backgrounds, Western culture, with its emphasis on the individual and hierarchical social structures, might be inadequate for it.

With the perception of the individual at the forefront, explanations about the human experience are typically sought within the individual mind rather than in interactions between individuals (Gergen, 2009). Behavioral sciences have looked mainly on the individual's internal realm-- character, mind, and personality in order to explain social phenomena. It remained the guiding principle even in developmental psychology theories and interpersonal approaches. The Self continues to be at the center while the Other is peripheral and exists mostly to serve the Self (Sampson, 2008).

Defensive Interactions and Their Risk. The individualist stance sustains an essentialist, rigid view of a person and ranked social infrastructure. The positioning of the individual as independent of having a pre-existing character reinforces the separation between Self and Other. Struggling to sustain a positive image, the person is often being thrust into a defensive mode to protect self-boundaries while the Other is left invaluable and excluded (Sampson, 2008). Moreover, to further boost a positive Self, the Other is often negatively positioned by being undermined or downgraded. In so doing, the Other is often diminished and left voiceless. When the Self is extolled on the expense of the Other, the delicate relational fabric is compromised. The Other is not an equal contributor to the relationship and relationship is likely to be distorted (Peleg-Baker, 2019).

Although defensive responses are adaptive as they protect or enhance an individual's identity, they are also maladaptive to the extent they prevent learning from new and important information (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Furthermore, the wearing efforts to protect identity may threaten the integrity of relationships and the flow of collaboration (Cohen, et al., 2007; Murray, et al., 1998; Sherman & Cohen, 2006), and

prevent conflict resolution (Ross & Ward, 1995).

Being constantly occupied with protecting personal identity poses formidable barriers to benefiting and learning from differences and diversity. In a climate where the individual is superior to relationship, conflict is debilitating. The potential opportunities for growth a conflict carries are shunned by adversarial interactions fraught with destructive relational-emotional dynamics. The prevalent tendency of rejecting conflict seems to be deeply rooted in an individualistic understanding of Self and Other (Peleg-Baker, 2019).

The Dominance of an Individualist Approach in Conflict Resolution. An individualist understanding is also well-established in theories and practices of conflict resolution (e.g., Bush & Folger, 2005; Putnam, 1994). It is manifested in the tenets of the individual as the prime driver of conflict, a neutral intervener in mediation and alternative dispute resolution methods, instrumental goals, and an emphasis on problem-solving and agreements. The individual as the main protagonist is predominantly responsible for conflict's motivations, dynamics and consequences. The conflict resolution process is a means used to achieve substantive ends. The attention on the Self produces terminology around it, such as self-determination and self-interest (Putnam, 1994). Along these lines, conflict is typically handled as a single and isolated event.

Moreover, with modernism cherishing individual rationality, human actions are typically justified by a person's reasoning. Consequently, tangible outcomes such as facts, rational calculations, agreements, and numbers are underlined in the study and practice of conflict and negotiation (Curhan, Elfenbein, & Xu, 2006). Conflicts are seen as economically motivated processes led by rational parties. However, such emphases eclipse a myriad of emotional and socio-psychological issues, which galvanize and sustain destructive conflict when they are overlooked.

Even when negotiators and mediators are highly interested in addressing social-psychological concerns related to identity--parties' feelings about themselves, relationship , and process, they take a back seat within an individualistic context they operate in (Curhan et al., 2006; Elfenbein, Curhan & Anger, 2010; Peleg-Baker, 2012a; 2014). Opting for overt, tangible, and short-term goals such as monetary issues and products, deeper emotions and latent psychological aspects that simmer and fester and thereby escalate the initial conflict, are neglected.

Despite the negative ramifications of emotional self-protective mechanisms on wellbeing and on prospects for collaboration, decades of scholarly work on conflict have granted scant attention to emotions (e.g., Coleman, Goldman, & Kugler, 2009; Curhan, Elfenbein, & Xu, 2006; Fisher & Shapiro, 2006). Frustration, depression, anger, fear, and anxiety are a few of the strong emotions that fuel conflicts. If not addressed, they are likely to turn relationship toxic and bring about rejection, defensive interactions, even violence. Furthermore, a common tendency is to locate the simplest explanation for a phenomenon. Yet, it is impossible to understand conflict with a single principal explanation. A deeper understanding of hidden emotional and social psychological drivers is critical.

An individualist framework of thinking obscures important aspects of the relational and emotional complexity of conflict (e.g., Bush & Folger, 2005; Putnam, 1994). Traditional, individualistic models fail to capture invisible emotional dimensions and the relational ambiguity underlying conflict. Essential features of conflict are pushed into the background and left unnoticed. A more nuanced approach is required to bring about positive outcomes of conflict, which entails a sophisticated understanding of multiple, hidden relational dynamics, biases, and defenses (e.g., Pondy, 1992; Tjosvold, 2008). Leaders and those who determine how conflict is handled, practitioners, and scholars of conflict management should not ignore emotional, social-psychological powers affecting the reaction to conflict (e.g., Shapiro, 2010).

This chapter advocates for shifting the focal point away from an individualistic toward a more nuanced and relational understanding of conflict. It could be helpful in illuminating the relational complexities involved in the emergence of conflict, its evolvement, and potential transformation. Conflict transformation refers here to shifting relationship from adversarial to dialogic. Dialogic relation stands in stark contrast to the common adversarial mode. It denotes a genuine encounter between the Self and the Other in which both actively and equally relate to one another and communicate differences on their own terms. Instead of searching for explanations and solutions for the human experience within the individual, it is advised to pay more attention to the relational space: what takes place *between* individuals. This perspective yields a more complex relational vision.

To more effectively address conflict requires a combination of complexity and simplicity: alongside an understanding of the emotional relational dynamics fueling destructive conflict, a clear set of actions must

be set. Accordingly, this chapter advances a clear-cut framework that elucidates conflict in a complex yet a practical and straightforward manner. The framework introduces three critical considerations for transforming relationship: 1. A *Dialogic* mode of relationship 2. A positive approach to conflict, and 3. A social environment and leadership conducive to *Dialogic* relations.

1. A Dialogic mode of Relationship

The centrality of communication in the contemporary world is reflected in the ability to connect everyone anywhere through an exponential growth of social networks. However, proliferating social media do not guarantee quality relations wherein genuine human connectedness, collaboration, and learning from conflicting perspectives are encouraged. Social networks still maintain argumentative, acrimonious, and vindictive interactions. Furthermore, internet trolls purposely try to disrupt online conversations by posting threaths, malicious comments, photos, videos, and other forms of online tools used to attack opposing views.

Deeply grounded in individualist traditions, these habitual ways of relating are prevalent and challenging to uproot. The question remains: how can confrontational or adversarial relational patterns be transformed into more collaborative, dialogic relations, where learning from differences can materialize?

Exploring the Invisible. Considering that the nature of relationship is shaped within a particular cultural and discourse traditions (e.g., Gergen, 2009; Sampson, 2008), and that conflict is a natural phenomenon within relationship (e.g., Bush and Folger, 2005; Putnam, 1994), it would be valuable to take a closer look at the invisible--the norms and assumptions underlying how Self, Other, and relations are viewed. Bush and Folger (1994; 2005) call for developing a deeper understanding worldviews as they relate to Self and Other in order to transform conflicts. Similarly, this chapter focuses on hidden elements underpinning human interactions. Namely, how the world, the Other, and interactions are viewed. The perception of Self, Other, and relationship directly impact the quality of relations and whether conflict is seen positively or negatively, embraced or rejected, or used as a source of learning.

The Challenge an Individualist Understanding Poses to Dialogue. In Western culture within which

a dominant individual is constantly pushed into defensive struggles to preserve a positive image, the Other is often undermined and objectified to satisfy the governing Self. Self and Other are not perceived as equal co-creators of a reality, resulting in adversarial interactions and a intensified chasm between them.

Revealing these dynamics within the Monologic reality we live in is critical for understanding the challenge of establishing dialogue. Monologism echoes many centuries of power and privilege of few over many who have not been heard (e.g., Sampson, 2008). Within such context, only the governing party plays a primary role and defines its existence while the other is just a tool to satisfy the principal party. The monolithic conceptualization sustains a particular form of power in which "dominant groups create serviceable others whose creation gives both Self and Other the very qualities that define their human nature" (Sampson, 2008 p. 19). Martin Buber (1987[1923]) terms this mode of relation between the overriding Self and the exploitable Other and as *I-It* relation. It characterizes instrumental, subject-object relationship within which the Oher is an object utilized to satisfy one's self-interest.

In a context in which the individual takes priority, the Other and relationships become secondary. Relationships have no intrinsic value. The Other is out there to either contribute to or reduce from one's pleasure. People become a commodity for others and relationships are always subject to suspicion. Expressions of concern, commitment and feelings are suspected as false, generating a sense of distrust (Gergen, 2009). Relationship is sustained as long as a person's needs are fulfilled.

A Dialogic Alternative. A dialogic relation is difficult, if not impossible, within a Monologic reality. Social construction is often distorted when parties do not share equal power. The Other might be offered an inferior position in the interchange. As Sampson (2008) explains, a dialogue between "two separable speaking and acting parties involve, cannot occur unless and until that other emerges from under the yoke of domination and gains her and his own voice" (p. 14).

Relationships generated within an individualist setting starkly contrast the form of dialogic relations proposed here. The distinction between a dialogic and monologic relation locates the issue of the quality of human connection within the context of power. Power relations are being constructed in every human interaction by the way Self and Other are positioned in the relationship (e.g., Davies & Harré's, 1990; Harré, 1987; Harré & Gillett, 1994). Power is displayed in the choices made by the parties such as embracing,

including, rejecting, or ignoring a person, or the language used to communicate. These interactions are reflected in how the term dialogue is applied in this chapter. Traditionally, the term is used as a *noun* to describe a conversation or discussion. Gergen and colleauges (2001), for example, describe dialogue as "simply a conversation between two or more persons." (p. 681). In contrast, the term is used here as an *adjective*--dialogic, to connote a quality of relating to one another or a way of being in a relation. The shift from noun to adjective suggests an emphasis on the *how* rather than the *what*: how people relate to one another; how they are being together or to one another rather than what they do together. Being dialogic represents an ongoing quality of relationship in mundane life rather than a single occasion of interaction.

The dialogic alternative to a distorted, unequal social formulation is based on an understanding of relationship within which all participants are equal co-creators of the relationship. Self and Other are both equally valuable and jointly determine the terms of their existence rather than the Self dictating the interaction. Parties express themselves, co-influence and co-create the connection. A dialogic mode of relation can take place only when the social exchange is not governed by one party and parties have equal power in the construction of the Self and Other (Sampson, 2008). The "silenced" Other is heard on its own terms.

The idea of dialogic mode of relationship has evolved and nurtured over the years by a slew of distinguished thinkers in various disciplines, who searched for a more dialogic understanding of the human experience. Due to space limitations, the richness of their ideas cannot be explored here in full, but a brief review should be useful. George Herbert Mead (1934) was a precursor of a relational understanding with his path breaking work on *Symbolic Interactionism* that was later developed by Blumer (1962) and others. It offeres a frame of reference to better understand how Self and Other are interconnected. Based on his approach, worlds and meanings are created through interactions and shape individual behavior.

Buber's relational work (1987[1923]), discussed further below, studied the human experience as grounded in the encounter between individuals. Habermas (1971; 1987) focus was on how situations might be structured procedurally for dialogic interactions. Wittgenstein's (1953) studied dialogue as a rhetorical technique. Foss and Griffin (1995) proposes an invitational approach to rhetoric to compliment persuasive approaches wherein a rhetor seeks to change her audience and force them to see situations in a new light.

Conversely, an invitational rhetoric invites as many perspectives as possible aimed at learning more about each other's ideas.

Parker-Follett's (1942) investigation of the "situation" as a whole complex, evolving, reciprocally related interactions, gave both the occasion and the opportunity for sustaining integration-- a healthy process of bringing differences together. Bakhtin's (1981) analyzed *expressions*- "utterances" within a context of exchange formed through a speaker's relation to Otherness, and later Bohm's (1996) stressed free flowing conversation within which participants experience each point of view equally and nonjudgmentally that bring about new and deeper understanding. These scholars offer ways to transcend Self-Other divide by underscoring the ongoing dialectic interaction. Dissatisfied with the Monologic account of human experience (Sampson,1993; 2008), they turned toward a dialogic formulation of relation. Many of them explored a dialogic alternative, like Buber (1923), Bakhtin (1981), and Bohm (1996), who emphasized the shift from the Self as represented by the dominant group toward the celebration of the Other and relationship--the space between Self and Other.

Martin Buber's (1987[1923]) contribution in particular, was a game-changer in this regard. His innovative alternative framework of relationships *I-Thou* to *I-It* relation, has been an inspiration to the dialogic relation proposed in this chapter. *I-Thou* with its *Subject-Subject* relation is distinguished from *I-It* relation that represents *Subject-Object* relationship. The Other in I-Thou mode of relation is valuable on its own terms and an active part in the relation. What seems at first glance a relationship between two separate, autonomous individuals, offers a significant step forward towards an increased emphasis on the relational space. In that space, the boundaries between Self and Other who jointly construct meaning, become blurred. Such boundaries reveal mutuality (Gergen, 2009a). Akin to Buber's vision of relation based on equality and respect, a dialogic relation is a genuine mode of relation, in which the Other is an active part in initiating and constituting the relationship. The position of the Other is transformed from being an object to an equal partner (Sampson, 2008):

> To celebrate the other is not merely to find a place for her or him within a theoretical model. Nor is it simply to analyze the role that conversations and talk play in all aspects of human endeavor. Instead, celebrating the other is also to recognize the degree to which the dialogic turn is a genuinely revolutionary transformation in the relationships of power and privilege that still mark Western civilization. (p. 15)

This idea of dialogic relation is not merely theoretical. It carries significant practical implications for daily relational experiences. Since worldviews profoundly guide behaviors, images of others dictate attitudes and feelings toward them. Immigrants, refugees, minorities or deprived constituencies on the basis of gender, religion or race become the image bestowed on them by the dominant group (Sampson, 2008).

The issue of power is crucial to constructing dialogic connections. Reconstructing relationships and rendering them dialogic means challenging power and authority structures. Since assumptions greatly shape the quality of interactions, reexamining frameworks of thinking about personhood and relation is essential for social transformation. Identifying and reconsidering underlying assumptions of the positioning of Self and Other in the relationship is a significant step for changing how we are with one another. Such change is instrumental in forming a more promising and meaningful relationship as well as diminishing the destructive dimension of conflict as is discussed next.

2. Reconsidering the View of Conflict

While conflict is inevitable--a natural byproduct of relationships, it has been given a bad name due to its association with disturbance, disruption, and violence. The feeling of threat that accompany the experience of conflict typically yields defensive reactions such as denial, suppression, aggression, postponement, and even premature compromise. The hidden opportunities in conflict are overshadowed by immediate painful emotions and the negative perception of conflict.

Conflict is frequently understood as a debilitating force on relationships- a malaise that breeds problems, and as an impediment that must be removed for people to thrive and achieve their goals. Seen as a corollary of processes gone astray, conflict triggers emotional, defensive reactions. Dealing with conflict has become synonymous with eliminating it. This depiction of conflict as damaging and an experience that needs to be eliminated is shared by amateurs and pundits alike, including many conflict resolution experts and peacemaking practitioners (e.g., Rahim, 2011). Written and electronic sources often portray conflict as a problem to solve and underline prevention as the strategy to confront conflict, thereby identifying conflict as a menacing and destabilizing experience. Deutsch's (1973) seminal distinction between constructive and

destructive conflict, took some time to gain traction and challenge the leading attitude toward conflict.

This chapter wishes to supplement the conflict resolution perspective rather than discredit it. While it the conflict-as-problem approach mainly focused on substantive matters needed to be settled, the conflict-as-opportunity approach, taken here, elicits a broader lens of the relational and emotional setting in which the conflict resides and where the opportunity for learning and transforming could be materialized.

Conflict as a Positive Experience. Laden with energy, conflict can be an engine for personal and social change as well as nurturing the prosperity of communities. Research consistently highlights conflict as an opportunity to develop, change, and go beyond what is already known (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012). Conflict supplies a propitious and cultivating environment for potential personal and social growth. It can prevent stagnation, stimulate interest and curiosity, and encourage a climate in which problems can be raised and creative solutions developed (Deutsch, 2003). In the corporate world, for example, organizations' capability to carry out their business goals and sustain themselves increasingly rely on meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships where disparities are transformed into opportunities.

If harnessed properly, conflict can stimulate learning from important and new information (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988) and acquire new ways of thinking and acting (e.g., Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973). In Deutsch's (1973) words the "point is not how to eliminate or prevent conflict but rather how to make it productive" (p.17). Since handling conflicts productively is likely to yield positive outcomes or at least reduce their adverse effects, the question then becomes how can conflict turn into a positive, learning force?

Validating Conflict. Since perceptions shape behavior (e.g., Dweck, 1986; 2006, Thomas, 1992), a negative view of conflict generates adverse reactions that are counter-productive to gaining from the experience. Perceived as a problem to resolve or curb, people ignore or reject conflict to avoid unwanted consequences. However, the initial disagreement that spawned the conflict is likely to persist and simmer until it grows to a significant interference. The more conflict is denied or refused, the higher its potential to ruin relations and

impede collaboration. Conversely, if validated, conflict can ignite curiosity and prompt necessary actions for transformation and meaningful relationships (Coleman, 2011).

Transforming Conflict. Although conflict management, resolution, and transformation are close in meaning**,** they are not identical. **C**onflict management relates to a range of positive ways to handle conflict while conflict resolution is a more comprehensive term aiming at resolving conflicts. Conflict transformation- the focus in this chapter, attends the deep-rooted sources of conflict (e.g., Bush & Folger, 1994;2005; Lederach, 2003; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2011). While problem-solving orientation addresses immediate issues, conflict transformation requires an in-depth exploration of non-tangible contextual and emotional-relational nuances. By so doing, lasting relational restoration can be accomplished. The term also suits the theme mentioned earlier--the change from a prevalent adversarial to a dialogic mode of relation. Conflict transformation ventures further than immediate solutions to examine and transform positions of power and relational patterns within which conflict arises and evolves. Eventually, it allows for growth-maximizing long-term interactions on both the personal and social levels.

A hands-on approach of conflict transformation is offered by Lederach (2003). He advances a *prescriptive* view to conflict by offering practitioners tools to alter the path of conflicts towards preferred results. In his view, the primary task of conflict transformation is to introduce creative platforms that can simultaneously address surface issues as well as changing underlying social structures and relationship patterns. Peaceful existence hinges on the quality of relationship and therefore, a successful transformation of conflict changes people's ways of relating, that is relations based on understanding, equality, and respect. Lederach notes the dynamic rather than static nature of relations where conflicts not merely evolve, but also continually forge relationships.

Lederach's analysis of change is on four levels: personal, relational, structural, and cultural. He points at two proactive actions to transform conflict into a constructive change: 1) *Envision-* a positive orientation toward conflict, and 2) *Response-* willingness to directly engage in conflict. The change of orientation towards conflict coupled with intentional efforts to reveal its underlying dynamics concurs with the transformative perspective presented here. This active orientation toward the presence of conflict permits

the containment of the initial anxiety and moving on to a constructive stage.

Constructive Relationship Conducive to Benefiting from Conflict. A conflict-as-opportunity approach views conflict is as a natural byproduct of human interactions, not as the "fault" of any single person. Since relationship is where conflicts arise and evolve, supportive relationship is essential for the ability to contain the initial intense emotions arising at the encounter with conflict. Healthy relationships empower people in the challenging emotional moments of contention. They buffer the negative reaction and can facilitate the shift to a positive interaction (Coleman, 2011; Coleman, et. al., 2012; Gottman et al. 2002). While weak relationship might not sufficiently contain intense, negative emotions, constructive relation can serve as a suitable vessel for benefiting from conflict.

Studies have demonstrated that under particular circumstances, certain types of conflict can be beneficial for learning and performance, innovation, and reaching quality decisions (see review at Schulz-Hardt, Mojzisch, & Vogelgesang, 2008). Cooperative in comparison to competitive conflict management is an important condition for ensuring conflict's positive outcomes (e.g., Brodbeck, Guillaume, & Lee, 2011; De Dreu, 2008; Deutsch, 2003; Guillaume, Brodbeck, & Riketta, 2012; Tjosvold, 2008; Tjosvold, Hui, Ding, & Hu, 2003). Thus, detection of potential opportunities for collaboration is important.

The Implications of Viewing Conflict within the Context of Relationship. In a culture within which the individual is at the forefront, conflict is typically handled as as a discrete, separate event. Approaching it as a single occasion fails to capture conflict's continuous state of evolvement and fluctuation within unfolding relational dynamics. While relationships are easily managed when the situation is calm and relaxed, they can be unexpected and unstable at other times. Relationship can be closed or open, intimate or distant, contented or concerned. Treating conflict as a one-step event does not adequately consider the context of changing, relational dynamics that can be helpful for undertsading a reaction to a conflict. Conflict brings an opportunity to pause, reflect, and adjust the relational movement to fit changing needs. When viewed within the context of an ongoing, shifting relationship, efforts can focus on improving relational patterns for the long term rather than finding someone to blame at a particular incident.

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Next, I discuss the role of the social environment in building sustainable relationships and validating the conflict experience. Vayrynen (1991) advises that changes on the structural level are essential for shifting the distribution of power and as discussed earlier, power is a pertinent consideration for transforming interactions. Similarly, Azar (1990) suggests that conflict surfaces from structural, economic or political conditions and the denial of human needs of access, identity, and security. A nurturing environment conducive to needs such as belonging, appreciation, and meaningful connections is crucial for transformation.

Moreover, because the social environment is so important, a great responsibility is placed in the hands of leaders: the choices they make and the institutions they construct. Those holding influential positions can change the environment and reconstruct it in a way that is beneficial for learning from differences and conflicts. Leaders are in the position to empower employees, create inclusive organizational practices and processes that can diminish defensive behaviors and encourage all stakeholders to participate in decision-making processes.

3. The Role of Social Environment and Leadership

The Social Environment Restructured. The social environment-the setting where relationships are born and develop, is a decisive factor in transforming relationships. Gergen (2009a), a leading scholar who searches for alternatives to an individualist understanding, offers a relational orientation to understanding social life. He questions the prevailing individualist assumption about "bad" behaviors as the liability of individuals' internal functioning:

Does anyone's action entirely originate within the self, independent of any history or circumstance? If I am prejudiced, did this prejudice spring naturally from within? … if we are deeply immersed in the world, in relationship, jobs, physical circumstances and the like, why do we select the individual mind as the source of problematic behavior? If my job is boring and my boss a tyrant, why should I be treated for my feelings of depression? Why not change the workplace? In broader terms the individualist presumption operates like a blinder. It is a crude and simplistic way of reacting to

problems. We fail to explore the broader circumstances in which actions are enmeshed and focus all too intensely on the single body before our eyes (p. 87).

Giving too much credit to the individual mind as the initiator of conflict breeds blaming, isolation, distrust, narcissism, and competition. If the broader context is not addressed, Gergen explains, it is harmful. The social environment or social context here refers to the set of beliefs, customs, practices, and behaviors of a group of people (based on the definition of Barnett & Casper, 2001). Since the quality of relationship is contingent upon the social context, the nature of that context constructed must be carefully examined and constructed.

While certain environments promote healthy connections, others provoke destructive conflict as discussed next. The advantage of attending the social environment can be considered within the context cultural and discourse traditions. As discussed, an individualist culture bolsters defensive interactions that are aothomatic and mostly unconscious. People are often unaware of the sources of their defensiveness. Actions such as rejecting opposing views or acting aggressively towards a person who holds them, and projecting forbidden desires onto others, often occur without awareness of their sources, and they are typically explained by one's personality or individual qualities.

Sampson (1999) emphasizes the critical role of awareness for transforming hatred reactions to differences and prejudice. The problem, he says, is that raising people's awareness is often done through psychotherapy, which is fundamentally individualist. Furthermore, being an expensive and long-term process, it is unlikely that masses of people will use psychotherapy for changing how they deal with differences. Moreover, he admonishes, if people are unaware of these destructive relational dynamics, they would deny the need for therapy and introspection in the first place. Therefore, granting the social environment more weight in conflict transformation is warranted. It is the social context which is capable of modifying hurtful interactions.

This recommended shift of emphasis to the environment as a transformational force has been applied for changing various social phenomena that initially were approached individually. Next, three such examples are provided: school bullying, Nazi atrocities, and organizational decision-making. The seemingly

broad array of cases and their vastly dissimilar nature demonstrate the viability and rigor of the social context reasoning:

a. **School Bullying-** Traditionally, research on bullying has been mostly based on an individualist model of behavior, centering on the personal characteristics of the bully and the victim (Haslebo & Lund, 2015; Olweus,1995). This common understanding endorses a narrow individualist approach to practice that implies the separation between bullies and victims as well as punitive interventions. In contrast, promising transformative practices are those that aim at changing the cultural context and improving social processes and practices in school and home (Haslebo & Lund, 2015; Søndergaard, 2009; Winslade & Williams, 2011).

A pioneering trend in studying bullying shows that children switch roles: at times they are bullying and at other times being bullied or observers of bullying. Studies also indicate that most students find bullying unacceptable (Olweus, 1995). Thus, it is recognized that other factors, beyond personal characteristics, like the social environment, culture and norms underlie this behavior. Olweus, who in his early research on bullying in the late 1960's proposed prototypes of bullies and victims, updated his viewpoint, declaring that "other factors, such as teachers' attitudes, behavior, and routines, play a major role in determining the extent to which the problems will manifest themselves in a classroom or a school" (p. 197).

This development in his thinking and results lead him to a conclusion that intervention at the level of school showed to be much more effective than trying to change students' personality. Furthermore, Olweus claims, it is a fundamental democratic right for a child to feel safe in school - "No student should be afraid of going to school for fear of being harassed or degraded, and no parent should need to worry about such things happening to his or her child!" (p. 198). His intervention program creates a school environment "characterized by warmth, positive interest, and involvement from adults, on the one hand, and firm limits to unacceptable behavior, on the other" (p. 199).

Among other findings, Olweus showed that his school interventions reduced antisocial behavior, such as vandalism, fighting, pilfering, drunkenness, and truancy, and that bully-victim problems were reduced by 50%. In schools that implemented his program, striking changes such as

better order and discipline, more positive social relationships, and a more positive attitude to school work and the school were established. Most importantly, there was an increase in student satisfaction with school life. The intervention program not only affected existing victimization problems, but had a significant preventive effect as well in that it considerably reduced the number and percentage of new victims.

b. **Nazi Atrocities-** Sampson (1999) uses a similar rationale for supporting more weight on the social context when exploring the fascinating case study of SS Supreme commander Heinrich Himmler. As one of the main operatives of the Nazi killing machine, Himmler excelled in his unwavering cruelty. He was feared and decried even among his Nazi elite commrads.

Sampson suggests that in order to understand Himmler's code of behavior and the indispeakable atrocities he ordered, explanations should not be sought in individual psychotherapy probing Himmler's personality. Rather, it is the sociopolitical and cultural surroundings that gave birth to Himmler's monstrosity, which need to be thoroughly investigated. Sampson's conclusion is straight forward and compelling. Following his logic, the challenge then is not changing the personality of the agents, but to attend to the environments around them: the circumstances that disapprove or discourage people who act destructively. In the author's words:

> It is the world, then, the very fabric of society itself, that holds the key whenever we wish to challenge prejudices … I am not saying that we should entirely ignore treatment designed to heal warped personalities. But of even greater importance is to address larger structures and institutions within which such personalities carry out their lives (p. 230).

c. **Organizational Decision-Making-** An illustrative example of the role of the environment for potentially transforming behaviors is also advanced by cognitive psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2013), a prominent scholar notable for his work on the psychology of judgment and decision-making. Kahneman also stresses the environment as a principal vehicle for transforming behavioral patterns. Restructuring the social environment, he suggests, is essential for reducing biases and noises that result in weak decisions.

In responding to a question about individuals' ability to become less biased in their judgments, Kahneman replied: "For individuals, it is pretty hopeless. People can get a bit better, but it is much more tenuous. …working on the level of the organization is more promising."[2] Organizations, he postulates, can construct environments with structures and processes to support better decisions. One of the more salient advantages of organizations as environments, he suggests, is that they can "think more slowly." While individuals's decisions fail due to their nature of being often automatic and biased, organizations can better plan by setting up rules and forming practices and structures ahead of time to foster quality decisions.

This settings admits several benefits: a) Managers can be encouraged by certain organizational structures and procedures to plan ahead and apply discipline in how they make decisions, b) Operation is more systematic compared to individual processing, which is automatic and often flawed when decisions are rapidly made, c) Decisions are more effective and beneficial within a more controlled organizational environment within which standardized rules are practiced.

To motivate managers to cooperate with new organizational procedures, Kahneman stresses the importance of managers' recognition of the value of revised practices for themselves. They should be encouraged to see how changes on the organizational level benefit their own decisions rather than constraining them. It would advance their cooperation and the reduction of biases. The role of organizational environments in improving decisions is therefore "a huge and unexplored field and getting into that is an enormous challenge".[3] Though Kahneman's expertise is the cognitive basis for human errors that arise from biases, he emphasizes the crucial role of organizational practices for generating less faulty human judgement.

Restructuring the Social Environment is a Necessity for Transformation. What these three examples have in common is the critical role social environments have for changing destructive actions and establishing sustainable relationship. Since the environment is the *holder* within which undesirable actions

[2] www.youtube.com/watch?v=maog6rAOI78&feature=youtu.be
[3] www.youtube.com/watch?v=maog6rAOI78&feature=youtu.be

like prejudice, biases, bullying, and destructive conflict take place, it can and should be made unreceptive to undesired actions rather than excluding a 'troubling' person. Instead of removing a 'bad seed', or trying to alter a personality, a transformed social setting that does not condone or allow destructive conduct, would be a much more effective. When people are compelled to change their behavior to fit their social habitats, transformation has more bearing.

Changing the environment is essential for transforming the reaction and management of conflict. If an organization legitimizes conflict and promotes genuine and open communication for expressing differences, conflict is more likely to become a positive, learning experience. Many organizations today realize that conflicts are important and that dealing with them in a fruitful way is a worthy cause. However, their solution falls short: conflict is still typically addressed on the individual level, which generates toxic organizational environments.

Many managers attend conflict and mediation trainings, where they learn and practice conflict management skills. They become stimulated and motivated to apply their newly acquired skills in the workplace. Yet, the enthusiasm quickly fades away when they face the same reality upon their return to their office. Conventional hierarchical structures and norms are ill-equipped and reluctant to have structures that accommodate conflict positively. Within these contexts, conflict is not openly approached, resulting in a missed opportunity and wasted new knowledge.

An invigorated outlook and enthusiasm are necessary, but merely a first step for changing how conflict is approached. They succumb to the embedded conservative code of bureaucratic politics that prefers 'not rocking the boat'. Actions on the individual level are insufficient for the generation of genuine long-term transformation. As was demonstrated, behaviors are subject to particular discourse and the culture--the patterns of thinking and norms within which they arise. Thus, organizational structures can either promote long-term positive change or perpetuate undesired behaviors. For the former to occur, both micro-individual efforts and macro-structural organizational changes must take place to achieve a sustainable change.

A single conflict handled poorly, negatively influences not only the individual but also the delicate social fabric in which it emerged from. Studies of conflict in organizations indicate that it is critical to create social circumstances to promote positive outcomes of conflict (e.g., Pondy, 1992; Tjosvold, 2008), on the

levels of learning, performance, innovation, and quality decisions (see reviews in De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012; Schulz-Hardt, Mojzisch, & Vogelgesang, 2008). Conversely, if handled poorly, conflict impedes performance, satisfaction, collaboration, health, and well-being.

Research has repeatedly revealed that a cooperative in comparison to competitive conflict management is an essential condition for guaranteeing conflict's positive outcomes. The specific conditions to foster cooperative conflict management in organizations were also given scholarly attention. But although it was found that systemic changes are essential, in reality, the focus has mostly remained on the micro level-- on individual and small group training rather than on the macro-organizational level, such as changes on the level of the organizational system, structure, communication or culture (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Gelfand, et. al., 2012). The onus of raising awareness to conflict safe environments in organizations befalls on the leadership ranks. The decision-makers and power wielders at the helm enjoy a broader perspective to realize and value a collaborative environment in which incompatible ideas are legitimized, expressed and integrated into the daily operations of the firm (Deutsch, 1973).

Leadership Matters. Gelfand and colleagues (2012) studied the connection between organizational culture and leadership. They showed that distinct conflict cultures exist and that there is a link between the macro and micro levels-- whether the organizational culture is collaborative, dominating, or avoidant, as they categorized them, it is linked to its leaders' conflict management styles as well as to organizational viability (e.g., cohesion, potency, and burnout level) and performance (creativity and customer service).

Kugler & Brodbeck (2014) continued that strand by focusing on the macro-organizational level where they found support to the link between culture and the conflict styles of organizational leaders. Their study revealed that the way organizations communicate at the top is related to employees' perceptions of conflict management. In their study, differentiated and integrated understanding of complex issues, as expressed in organizational messages about its goals, purposes, and means, were found to be positively related to perceptions of cooperative conflict management. Complex understanding of multidimensional issues was found to be reflected in a culture or a normative way of viewing differences and conflict.

Though training and new individual skills to cope with conflict are essential, they show insufficient

for sustainable relationship that contain conflict and channel it into a constructive route. For this reason, organizational structures and practices that foster collaboration are essential to anchor empowering conflict engagement in everyday life. Leaders have the leverage and authority to modify organizational practices to reflect a new understandingof conflict. Within restructured and innovative organizational platforms, typical adversarial interactions can be gradually replaced by cooperative principles on a daily basis, and learning and positive results from conflict are more likely to happen. Innovative, inclusive organizational spaces where all stakeholders express their views and participate in decision making are promising for transforming how conflict is handled. An integrative systemic and systematic approach is more likely to decrease the negative consequences of conflict while directing it to a positive track.

The importance of leaders' capacity to induce change cannot be exaggerated. The conflict management style of those in power not only impacts local interactions but also the collective-organizational communication style and the entire culture (Kugler & Brodbeck, 2014). Leaders not only serve as role-models by how they, themselves, address conflict, but they can also impact the organizational social environment as a whole. By adding or adjusting organizational practices and processes, leaders can challenge typical interactions and lay the groundwork for more collaborative communications.

The Role of Leadership is changing. Given the importance of relational environments for organizational growth and best outcomes, leadership's role is rapidly changing. Fostering collaborative environments and coordinating relationships in more meaningful and effective ways can replace an earlier focus on the aptitudes of the omnipotent top-down leaders. For decades, top-down governance has dictated organizations. At the same time, it is also essential to recognize the challenge in changing social envirnments. In an unequal, hegemonic society, not everyone is equally interested in changing them into more dialogical, particularly, those who enjoy power and privilege. They might not see an incentive to interact dialogically with those who have less power.

The Challenge-Does *Leadership has Insentive to Change*? There is an inherent paradox in this suggested new, collaborative responsibility of leadership. The relational environments leaders are encouraged here to promote might ultimately infringe upon their authority. Leaders might assume that fostering collaborative environments is bound to weaken their status. If they adhere to an individualistic

mindset, their own personal prerogative might loom larger than the long-term good for themselves and others. Therefore, they might be reluctant to delegate decision making opportunities to lower-ranked employees, and hence, more hesitant to change the working environment all together.

However, actions of those with power prove to be more potent than the actions of the less powerful (Sampson, 2008; Wood, 2004). Leaders' actions are far more reaching than those who are less powerful. Therefore, the overall impact on conflict management will be the uppermost if the more powerful act to lead the desired change. The highest responsibility for changing human interactions rests with those with a relative privilege. If they look beyond their immediate comfort zone to consider the long-term benefits of dialogic environments for all, their organizational culture is more likely to be dialogic and diverse.

A dialogic culture is better for both the organizations they lead and also for themselves. When deep-rooted social asymmetries are replicated and perpetuated, it hurts the overall performance since many are voiceless and their contribution is restricted. By restructuring the social environment with diversified representations and more inclusive practices within which all stakeholders participate in decision making, destructive behaviors and adversarial interactions are likely to diminish. If the latter become unacceptable and counter-productive in the restructured culture, they are likely to be replaced by more productive interactions that ultimately positively impact organizational performance.

As an example, in the past decade, legislation and organizations are more committed to gender diversity on corporate boards. Boards and their leadership, are increasingly responding to the abundance of research showing that diversity positively affects strategy and company performance.[4] There is a fundamental rationale for a strong business case behind having gender diversity. Organizations would perform much better if they utilize all of their talent, not just that of the male or dominant people. It follows that a strong case for diversity is an economic one as well. Corporate boards perform best when they include the best people who represent a variety of perspectives and backgrounds. The boardroom is where strategic decisions are made, governance applied and overseen. It is therefore imperative that boards are made up of a

[4] https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/za/Documents/technology-media-telecommunications/za_Wome_in_the_boardroom_a_global_perspective_fifth_edition.pdf

combination of competent individuals who together exhibit a blend of skills, experiences and backgrounds.5

The Meaning of Leadership is changing. Worth emphasizing is the changing meaning of leadership within a collaborative contexts. Leadership can be viewed not as the undertaking of an exclusive elite, as typically perceived, but as a more inclusive and democratically-oriented enterprise. In other words, all employees can assume leadership responsibilities within collaborative environments. All stakeholders can be positioned as both leaders and followers and participate in the construction of decisions and spaces where they learn from each other's differences. In more dialogic and inclusive organizations, all emploees can inspire and empower one another while following initiatives of others.

In summation, a simultaneous reform on both a micro-- individual and macro—systemic/ structural levels is indispensable for transforming the quality of relationship and positive conflict. The role of leadership is critical. The next section exemplifies the combination of micro and macro efforts in democratic schools where relational transformation was experienced first hand by the author. In these schools, micro efforts--raising consciousness to relational dynamics were obtained along with macro changes—restructuring the environment through systemic organizational practices and processes.

Transforming Relationship in Democratic Schools

This example introduces a two-prong endeavor for initiating and sustaining a relational transformation in educational contexts. Consciousness raising (micro) and structural organizational modifications (macro) were implemented simultaneously. This is the case of Israeli democratic and dialogic schools, where the author has been a member of the team that led transformative processes. It demonstrates how a change of mindset and behavioral norms rendered destructive behavior in the school unacceptable.

These school communities offer an inspirational alternative to traditional education. While some conventional schools attempt to renew and improve, most remain conservative, hierarchical, and authoritarian as they were since the beginning of the previous century. Their worldview, structure, and curriculum have not changed much despite radical social, political, cultural, and technological revolutions

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5 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/31480/11-745-women-on-boards.pdf

that have taken place around them. Founded upon values of human rights, respect, and equality, democratic and dialogic schools encourage all stakeholders--children of all ages, staff members, and parents, to engage and participate in all activities and decisions on a daily basis. The humane and inclusive atmosphere creates a profound sense of togetherness. Treating all students as equal partners, not only maintains their interest and intellectual curiosity but also builds their sense of community and identity with others, who share a common bond and opens new possibilities for personal and collective transformation.

Through a strengthened sense of collective being, stakeholders are engaged in collaborative practices, where they experience transition and transformation. *Insight* and *Action* practices are incorporated to transform positions of power and relational patterns (see diagram in the Appendix). Insight refers to consciousness raising to current versus desired forms of relations as well as to social psychological dynamics that risk constructive relation. A relational versus an individualist understanding of Self, Other, and relationship are deliberated and practiced, particularily in dialogic schools. Stakeholders explore their perception of notions related to Self-Other connection, such as dignity, respect, tolerance, and equality. This consciousness-raising process is conducted in groups of school staff, parents, and students who are invited to reconsider the meanings of these ideas by using new conceptual models.

For example, the notion of *respect*, which is a fundamental principle in dialogic environments, is defined and deliberated, using a three-dimensional model that is based on Schlanger's (2000) dichotomy of respect: *Honor*, *Accomplishment*, and *Dignity*. Each suggests a different mode of relation. The first one refers to the respect to a person of a higher class such as a king or a highly ranked executive, and the second denotes to a person who gains respect due to her accomplishments or superior achievements. These two modes of relation maintain the traditional, hierarchical understanding of Self-Other, in which the individual is respected for her superiority.

In contrast, the third mode of relation-dignity based respect is founded in equality. A person is fully accepted and respected regardless of their status or actions, opposing opinions or contradictions in beliefs and attitudes. Respect comes from Latin *respectus*, from the verb *respicere*- look back at or regard. From that perspective, a person is granted multiple opportunities for expression. One of the implications of this

understanding is that it prevents people from hastily jumping to conclusions about someone, as typically happens. Rather, a person is allowed to continuously express themselves as a whole. Dignity-based respect entails unconditioned and non-hierarchical form of relation. This mode of relation is not characteristic of an individualist undertsanding.

Exhibit 1: Three Types of Respect.
A model developed by Noga Bar and Tzofnat Peleg-Baker and used in the educational system, Based on Schlanger's and Buber's work

Participants in dialogic schools apply this framework to reflect on the nature of the relationship they constract through comparing their existing versus desired forms of relationships. The framework is used for examining relationship among various stakholders, such as among teachers, teachers and principal, teachers and students, and teachers and parents, and within various settings, such as intermissions, evaluations, and school events.

This is one example of many models used for reexamining the extent to which relationships are healthy and whether they correspond with the aspirations of the community. Issues, such as whether the positioning of Self and Other in interactions is desired and what organizational intersections call for a change and how are observed and discussed using this model of respect. As introduced, these consciousness-raising

efforts are applied mostly in groups, as opposed to individual therapy and are encouraged by systemic, structural changes, as discussed next.

The second component- *Action*, refers to macro-level, structural practices such as organizational structures and processes that are reconstructed to incorporate the new insights developed by using conceptual models into daily life. Akin to a ruling system in a democratic system, collaboration on decision-making and their execution transpire within three governing branches in democratic or dialogic envirnments: Legislative, Judicial, and Executive that balance each other. Every member in the school, regardless of age or position, can be engaged in school life through initiating topics for discussion in the Parliament, addressing conflict in the Conflict Resolution committee or Appeals committee, or learning with others in learning groups. Examples of structural practices are provided in the Appendix. These practices serve as organizational holders wherein stakeholders practice new forms of relationship. The new practices and structures anchor the change in perception within daily life and secure a long-term transformation.

In these environments, a new relational vision is routinely practiced rather than merely theoretically taught. The underlying assumption is that a child who experiences a respect-based relationship every day will continue to behave the same way as an adult. While variations among these schools exist as each one reflects the unique objectives and needs of particular community members, they all share common characteristics. They include the participation of stakeholders in decision-making, students' autonomy to choose what to learn and how to utilize their time best, pluralistic learning, and personal mentors who provide students with constant support. For more than twenty years, schools that are based on such principles have demonstrated more cooperative behaviors and significantly less violence than other schools. Incorporating both consciousness raising work with structural changes seems to better support a sustainable transformation of adversarial interactions than individual efforts. Through learning more about the meaning Self and Other within an individualist culture as well as altering the social setting, defensive inclinations diminish and "bad" behaviors are not accepted anymore. Stakeholders are encouraged to continually change and adapt their actions to fit a new social habitat.

Conclusion

The significance of focusing on the relationship, highlighted in this chapter, stands in contrast to the individualist ethos, so deeply entrenched within Western and scientific traditions. Despite the relational nature of human existence, the individualist tradition has been governing how we approach conflict. The purpose of this chapter was to underline: 1. A relational orientation to how conflict could be understood as it arises and evolves within relationships, and 2. Practical structural considerations when aiming at transforming the nature of the relationship and the ways conflict is addressed. For transformation to occur, a broader and long-standing view of the structural and relational sources of conflict, beyond solving immediate problems, is required. Intentional efforts would be beneficial to transform relational patterns within which a conflict arises.

The simple and practical framework suggested here captures significant and complex, mostly hidden considerations to be mindful of if conflict is to be a source of learning and growth. It invites reconsidering deep-seated assumptions about Self and Other as well as intentionally making efforts to transform destructive, habitual ways of being. Carefully attending these three considerations--a dialogic mode of relationship, a positive orientation to conflict, and supportive social environments and leadership in educational programs demonstrated a significant shift in how educators and students and their families are engaged with one another.
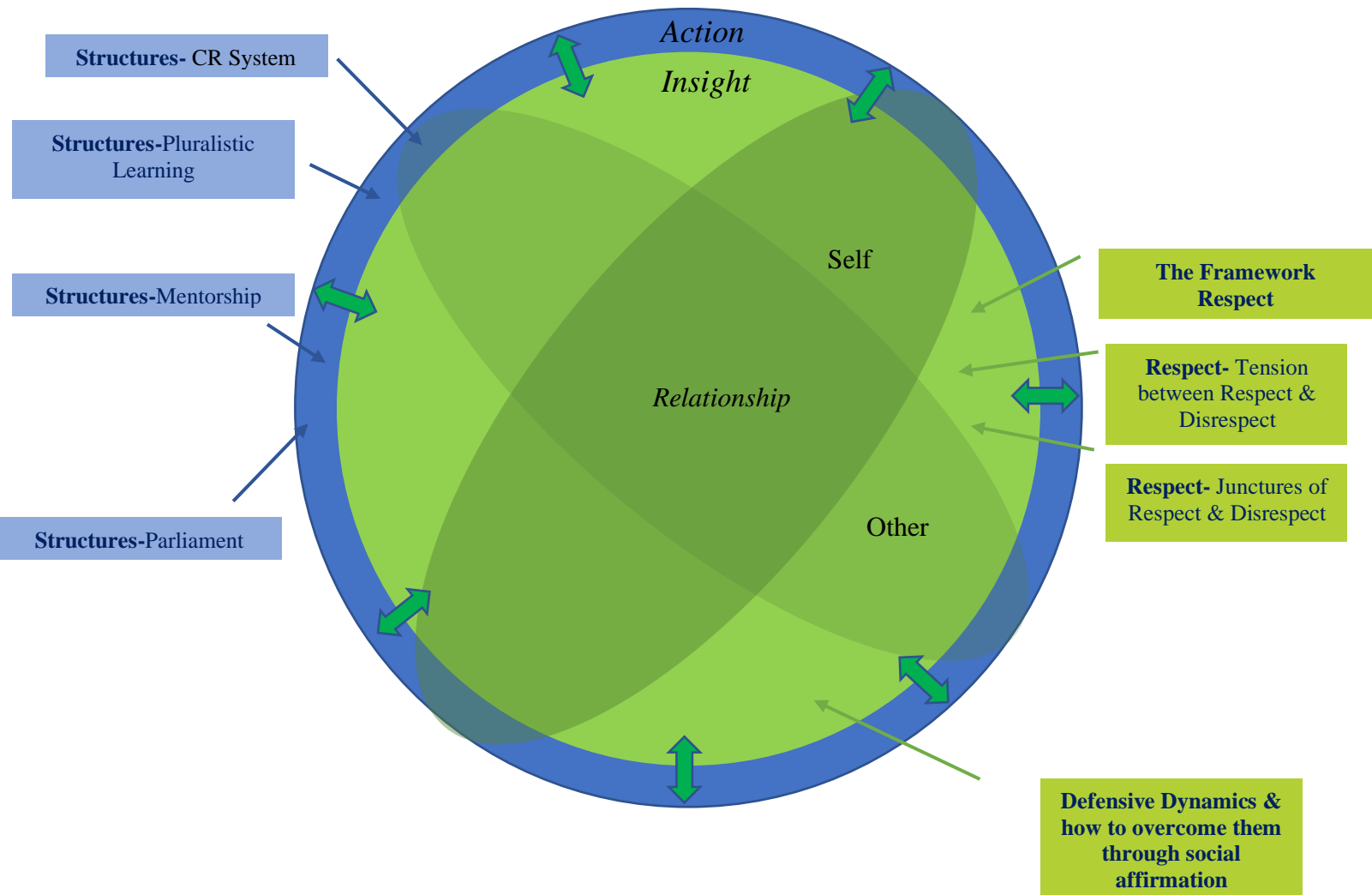
The three considerations can function as a conceptual framework used as an X-ray for probing into our interactions in various social junctures and contexts in life. By reflecting on the aspirations for Self-Other relation versus actual, daily practice, we can transform our connections by attenuating the gap between our intentions and behaviors. Change is possible if people join forces, question the unquestionable, and challenge the present state of affairs. Accepting the world in which we live in as stable and predictable, does not benefit us. Change is inevitable: it is in our hands to realize the desired change.

Appendix

The Implications of a Relational Perspective on Practice
Transforming Adversarial Interactions Within a Social Context

🟢	**Insight.** Consciousness raising efforts- a few examples
🔵	**Action**- Restructured social environment- a few examples

Structures- CR System

Structures-Pluralistic Learning

Structures-Mentorship

Structures-Parliament

Action

Insight

Self

Relationship

Other

The Framework Respect

Respect- Tension between Respect & Disrespect

Respect- Junctures of Respect & Disrespect

Defensive Dynamics & how to overcome them through social affirmation

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