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CONTEXTUAL-RELATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR TRANSFORMING CONFLICT

From Adversarial Interactions to Dialogic Relations
From Division to Co-Creation to Inclusion

Tzofnat Peleg-Baker

"*The most important meditation is critical thinking followed by action. Discern what your world is. know the scenario of this human drama, and then figure out where your talents might fit in to make a better world.*" The Dalai Lama

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"You see things; and you say, 'Why?' But I dream things that never were; and I say 'Why not?"
George Bernard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah*, 1921, Part 1, Act 1

ABSTRACT

This study presents a hybrid exploration of theory and practice to deepen the understanding and practice of conflict transformation. Conflict is examined from a human developmental perspective as an opportunity for learning and growth and within the context of relationships where it is instigated, evolves, and potentially transforms. Three lenses are used to gain a complex, nuanced comprehension of conflict, and its transformation. Conflict transformation entails a shift from adversarial, hostile interactions to inclusive, dialogic relations. The first lens is a social constructionist perspective that offers a critical analysis of the negative ramifications of a Western, individualist ethos wherein the *Self* is dominant, and the *Other* is positioned as secondary, thus reinforcing interpersonal separation, social divisiveness, inequality, and destructive conflicts. These effects are confirmed by an enormous body of studies on prevalent defensive reactions and biases in encountering differences and conflicts and is used as the second lens. These undercurrents pose barriers to inclusive, dialogic relations. A third lens emphasizes the significant impact of social environments on the quality of relationships. Based on these lenses that uncover underlying cultural, social-psychological considerations, a contextual-relational perspective that considerably differs from the typical individualist narrative emerges and can shed light on transforming relationships and conflict. Innovative, constructive forms of relationships wherein both *Self* and *Other* are equally valued are vital for a higher human developmental complexity needed for jointly addressing today's challenges. The study advocates for the combination of *Insight*—increased consciousness to relational dynamics and *Action*-revised behaviors and practices for sustainable transformation of relationships. Contextual-relational practical considerations and models for transforming relationships are discussed in the last chapter.

Key Words: conflict; defensiveness; implicit biases; dialogue; dialogic being; human development; relationships; transformation; learning; education; collaboration; leadership; individualism; democracy; social construction; diversity & inclusion.

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This dissertation was created in relationships. It concludes one phase of many years of exploring the nature of our connections. This project's seeds were planted many years ago at my grandparents' tiny apartment wherein manifold and complex connections were embroidered among ten brothers and sisters, their adult children, and many grandchildren who had gathered every weekend and over the holidays. These seeds were nurtured later by the democratic and dialogic experimental projects I was involved in later in life as an adult.

I thank many people for the life experiences, insights, and inspiring thoughts they shared with me. First, I thank you, Noga Bar, who became a mentor, a close friend, and a partner to my dialogic journey. Little did I realize the impact you would have on my personal and professional life when we first met twenty years ago. In many ways, you are responsible for the inception of my dialogic project. Your enquiring questions and extensive knowledge triggered my curiosity and set the foundation for my long pursuit for distinctive forms of relationships. I appreciate our numerous inspiring conversations all those years about the meaning of dialogic relationships and their operationalization in our life and the life of those we served. By embodying a dialogic state of being, unconditionally loving, and embracing everyone around, you have been my role model. Whenever I feel my behavior gets off the dialogic track, you are there as a lighthouse to guide me back. I am deeply grateful to you.

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I also thank Ken Gergen, though you were not part of my committee. Your captivating writing and listening to your relational view at the June workshops with Mary Gergen in your lovely house at Swarthmore were sources of inspiration. These experiences pushed me to keep questioning the meaning of relational being for me. It also helped me recognize that my curiosity is about conditions for quality human connections and what that quality means for me, not merely understanding the nature of our being from a relational lens. Furthermore, it helped me scrutinize the gap between the relationships I *want* and the relational "reality"—the *is*. A relational being is not merely a theory or an intellectual playground for me. It is a *way of being* I aspire to realize in everything I do. My encounters with colleagues who do work around dialogue and conflict significantly helped me sharpening my distinct perspective about human relations. Trying to practice a dialogic way of being daily (see *A Dialogic Mode of Relationship* in Chapter Two) within a Western individualist context, wherein monologic and hegemonic practices dominant our daily interactions, has been a continuous uphill battle.

I have paid heavy prices for my struggle for equal participation. I see the task of balancing power as a precondition for quality, human connections—relations with fewer power manipulations and more genuine interactions. A particular challenge has been with colleagues in the dialogue and conflict field. I recently served on a committee of a nonprofit dedicated to dialogue where our task was to produce a document in a team of four, three women, and a man. Ron, a lawyer in his profession, was one of the committee members. It seemed from the beginning that he was trying to control the committee's work. Ron and I had an earlier private zoom conversation about another project. I noticed that soon after that private conversation, he stopped responding to my emails, including my greetings on his newborn grandchild's birth. I emailed him privately to ask very delicately (with no judging or blaming) whether something had happened between us in that earlier zoom conversation. His response was, "*I have never received an email like that before…Life is*

too short for us not to care for one another in honesty and commitment to the tasks we have before us… I'll see you later and trust we'll have a successful meeting." He referred to the committee meeting scheduled for that afternoon. Ron did not ask why I raised the issue of our relationships, nor did he inquire about my concern. The task seemed to be more important than our relationship.

I do not believe we could develop optimal solutions without a solid relational foundation, particularly addressing today's current complex challenges. I often raise a conversation about our interdependence and the importance of investing in relationships with my students. Corona, global warming, immigration, uprisings, and destructive conflicts are examples of the complex responsibilities in front of us. Furthermore, more than ever before, we also aspire for a tolerant, vibrant, and inclusive democracy. These challenges are not technical or straightforward and cannot rely only on a single person—improving cognitive abilities, individual skills, or a single leader, as traditionally assumed in Western culture. It is the structure of our connections that has to change. We must develop new capabilities to incorporate our differences. Our sustainability depends on our ability to coordinate differences and turn them into a source of learning and growth. Building resilient relationships is not a 'soft skill,' as traditionally termed, but the foundation of a thriving society. It takes intentionality and efforts to redirect divisive relational habits and fragmentation into more productive ways of being. The prerequisite for benefiting from our differences is our recognition of the *value* of the *other*. Only when we value our differences are we motivated to co-create, embrace diverse perspectives and reconstruct our connections. It starts with daily actions and goes all the way to collaboratively addressing significant societal challenges like the Pandemic. It is worth our time to question our relationships' quality, whether they are good enough to hold the tasks ahead of us.

I am grateful to you, my spouse, Dr. Muli Peleg, for staying with me in my rebellious journey. I thank your continuous support. For years, you patiently listened to my endless questions as they have formed and devoted considerable time to considering and reconsidering bizarre ideas. I recognize that my adventures and long hours of writing and reading took a toll on our relationship over many years. Still, you were there to support my curiosity; you believed in me and trusted my choice. Living and working across continents, our family provided a safe haven for my ceaseless explorations and space, where we have built a rich and meaningful relationship. I do remember our twelve years old daughter's Adelle, naïve question when I first

told her I am going back to school: "why do you want to do that?" she asked with some criticism. I did not have a coherent answer. I hope, Adelle, you do have a clearer idea as to why I did that now. Thank you, both my beautiful girls, Efrat and Adelle, for enduring my long hours of studying and researching while trying to be my best as a parent. Thank you, Oreo, our cat, for occasionally jumping on my laps when you needed attention and inviting me to watch you cuddling on the mat, submitting yourself to the sunbeams penetrating my study room. These scenes helped me in processing my thoughts and get clearer in my writing.

Thank you, participants of democratic schools and the Dialogic Experience, for sharing your stories and unique experiences. Your input was invaluable and considerably shaped my understanding of the power of these social experiments. Buber's insightful *I-Thou* relation has been a guiding principle in my work for many years and signifies the ideal way of being with one another. My pursuit of the meaning of this relational positioning is present throughout this dissertation. I cannot thank Buber enough for his vision and for leaving his idea vague in terms of practice. His thoughts became a source of aspiration for my experiments with put *I-Thou* into action.

This dissertation would have been considerably lacking without Sampson's critical eye on Western, individualist culture and its obsession with a contained monologic *self.* The preoccupation with self-protection detaches the self from all that is other—a dynamic that creates *serviceable others*—constructors and those being constructed. By silencing the other, we distort our connections and deprive ourselves of opportunities for growth and prosperity. I found his writing liberating and reassuring of my increasing sense of relational alienation and social fragmentation. Buber's and Sampson's enlightening perspectives deepened my understanding of human connection and what stands in the way of inclusive communities. They continue to inspire the lives of my students and participants in my workshops across the globe. I thank my students and clients, too, for sharing your conflictual experiences and genuinely teaching me the meaning and significance of practicing peaceful connections.

PREFACE

We live in a reality of complex challenges fraught with divisions and destructive conflicts. The proliferation of new technologies that offer infinite opportunities to connect does not guarantee quality connectedness and inclusivity, wherein learning and improvement take place. This reality is nourished by an enduring, salient feature of the established Western thinking and the scientific traditions it spawned: an individualistic-hegemonic ethos. This prevailing spirit has preserved a dominant individual, monologic relations, and a hierarchical social infrastructure. The positioning of the individual at the forefront, independent, and pre-existing, deepens separation between self and other. In a struggle to sustain a positive self-image, the person is often thrust to protect self-boundaries. The other may be undermined to boost the self. In so doing, the structure of the relationship is distorted, and a marginalized, deprived other is likely to be left voiceless and excluded. The ability to deal with challenges is marred by strong identity-relational concerns clouded by emotional defensive interactions. These ways of relating that become habitual stand in the way of learning from differences and collectively creating something more extensive than the sides.

Developing a profound understanding of underlying cultural, social-psychological biases as barriers to flowing, constructive interactions is essential if we are to build high-order types of inclusive and supportive connections that support better decisions and mutual learning founded in diverse perspectives. This study offers lenses through which our relationships could be reexamined and potentially transformed. This study's seeds were planted in the author's sense of disconnect and social fragmentation earlier in her career in the corporate world. Her experience in alternative environments-democratic and dialogic schools in Israel, a movement that grew to tens of schools today in less than thirty years, reinforces the critical role of social environments in shaping the quality of human interactions. However, while less violence has been experienced in these democratic, participative contexts than in conventional schools, a sense of division prevailed. It may be partially attributed to them being still powerfully guided by an individualist ethos.

Similarly, in the field of conflict resolution, the traditional approach to conflict is also rooted in an individualist philosophy, which perceives the individual as both the driving force in conflict and as accountable for problem-solving and reaching agreements (Bush & Folger, 2005; Putnam, 1994). Accordingly, conflict resolution processes such as negotiation and mediation focus on the task and

substantive issues to the exclusion of critical relational psychological nuances and contextual, systemic considerations. Social-psychological dynamics that fuel conflict are often overlooked.

Aiming at developing a complicated understanding of the relational foundation of conflict, this inquiry offers a nuanced, contextual-relational examination through two conceptual frameworks: 1) A social constructionist orientation to set the relational foundation of our existence as well critically look at the negative complications of the individualist ethos we live by; and 2) A vast body of research on social-psychological barriers to beneficial relationship and conflict transformation (Ross & Ward, 1995; Sherman & Cohen, 2006), specifically defensive reactions. Affirmative processes to alleviate these typical reactions are discussed. Different from the individualist psychological perspective of defensive behaviors, they are viewed here as relationally constructed, emerging from relational exchanges rather than from an internal, mental state, or fixed personality. Additionally, the essential role of the social environment for transforming the quality of relations is presented. These three lenses may be helpful for reexamining the nature of self-other relations and their transformation into a more constructive and inclusive experience.

The question at the center of my study is: ***Can a social constructionist orientation along with knowledge on social-psychological barriers deepen the understanding of the contextual-relational nature of conflict and conflict transformation and what are the implications of this understanding on practice?*** Shifting from an individualist toward a more relational understanding allows not only to address immediate, substantive conflictual issues but also to advance long-term change in positions of power. A combination of reflective processes along with participative organizational practices are proposed to sustain such transformation: 1) ***Insight***—Reflective work on the prevalent understanding of self-other and the phenomenon of conflict, and 2) ***Action***—Structural, organizational practices to support the new understanding of self and other and their relation. Examples of models and organizational practices from the democratic and dialogic practice are presented in Chapters One and Five.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"Theory and practice are the two sides of transformation. They complement one another for advancing a real, lasting change in patterns and habits that act as stubborn barriers to healthy connections."
Tzofnat Peleg-Baker

My Relational Story- The Seeds of My Interest in Relationship

I grew up in a war zone. I vividly remember rushing down the stairs to the shelter located in the basement of our building in the middle of the night. I just turned seven. My blanket and bear squeezed in one hand and the other tightly holding my mother's nightgown. She was carrying my baby sister. My father was recruited to the army a day earlier. Twelve wars and numerous violent events took place around me since I was born in Israel. I lost my best friend to a violent act when I was twenty-years-old.

Surprisingly though, I became interested in conflict only as a young adult when I worked for international corporations as a marketing and advertising executive. Hostile interactions, prompt rejections to another perspective, avoidance, gossiping, backbiting, and power struggles, were daily experiences in my office. It was then when I started pondering whether there are more effective ways for our being together.

After a decade in toxic organizational environments, I decided to pursue this option of being differently together. One day, I left behind my car keys, top salary, and a bundle of perks. Years later, I realized that day I started a journey, searching for alternative ways of being.

Tension at the time was skyrocketing in Israel. These were the years after the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin in November 1995—an event I witnessed firsthand and left a lasting scar on me. Exploding buses, suicide bombers, body parts scattered in the streets, and bleeding children were daily sights. To this day, the loud sound of an explosion I heard at noon in Purim (Festive Jewish holiday) on March 4th, 1996 from my apartment at the heart of Tel Aviv is still pounding in my ears. This sound was familiar. Later I found out that a young student, my spouse teaching assistant lost her life there.

At that time, I joined a few non-profit organizations that began organizing intergroup dialogues between different sectors, including secular and religious people, Israeli Jews and Arabs, and Israelis and Palestinians. While we meant to conduct 'dialogues,' these gatherings ended up being contentious encounters clouded by defensive reactions, anger, and hatred. Firmly holding to their views, participants promptly

argued and rejected other perspectives. In many cases, these dialogues were a once in a lifetime opportunity to meet and listen to the other firsthand, as a Jew or an Arab, a secular or religious person. However, curiosity was hard to find, and the opportunity was often missed.

Continuing my search for more authentic, constructive ways of interacting, I joined the Institute for Democratic Education, an institution advancing democratic educational environments. I became a consultant after two years of training and was involved in both starting democratic schools as well as incorporating democratic values into public schools. It was there in these settings that I saw firsthand that social interactions could be less adversarial and more meaningful. It made me wonder whether we could learn more from these experiences and use this knowledge to promote better ways of living with differences.

Wearing the marketing hat at the Institute, in addition to serving as a consultant, I presented the Institute's work to diverse populations, including principals, teachers, parents, and potential contributors. This role allowed me to conceptualize and communicate our unique approach to educational environments continuously. The work was informed by various philosophical and educational ideas and critical pedagogy. Martin Buber (1923), Paulo Freire (1970), and Janusz Korczak's (1988) work significantly inspired us. School systems and practices were restructured to enable living by these ideas in everyday life.

Following this experience, I partnered with my mentor at the Institute, Noga Bar, who was already a senior consultant at the Institute when I joined, in order to develop more constructive ways of being further. We developed the Dialogic Experience (see later in this chapter), which was initially implemented in public schools. While human rights and democratic principles were kept as in democratic schools, we added a reflective component on self-other-relation dynamics to create more dialogic environments. Using a broad range of conceptual frameworks, participants engaged in examining their ways of interacting and experimenting with new ways of relating to one another. This dissertation builds upon this early experimentation.

I offer a theoretical exploration of two broader frameworks. The first, social construction proposes a relational understanding and a critical eye on the division and destructive conflicts being accelerated by a dominant individualist thinking that places the individual at the front. This positioning of the self, according to social constructionists, overshadows the other and deepens separation between self and other. Both are

thrust into ongoing destructive dynamics, which intensify division and accelerates polarization. Research on defensive behavior illuminates relational and psychological dynamics that act as barriers to constructive relating.

While a social constructionist orientation lays the ground for a broad cultural and relational understanding of self-other and conflict situations, knowledge on psychological biases, particularly defense mechanisms, highlights formidable obstacles to beneficial relationships, cooperation, and positive conflict. The feeling of self-threat by the action of others triggers automatic reactions, such as rejection, denial, projection, and avoidance.

While these reactions are automatic and unconscious, they are not explained as originated from a fixed, inborn mental state. Instead, these automatic reactions are perceived here as being reinforced by adversarial cultural norms and relational histories that shape a person's psychological state. Together, these conceptual frameworks offer contextual-relational considerations to reflect on habits of interacting with one another.

Living in a culture that focuses on the self compels the person to constantly protect a positive identity (e.g., Burr, 2015; Gergen, 2009, Sampson, 2008). When the person feels as her identity is being threatened, it triggers emotional psychological reaction. These emotional social-psychological dynamics are rooted in one's cultural and relational experiences and they became habitual over the years (e.g., Gergen, 2009). I further discuss these dynamics and their relational underpinning in Chapter Three (see sections: A Relatively Stable Component of Self and An Invisible Component of Self). Ways to address these reactions, such as affirmation through self as well as social efforts, are discussed later. Findings on defensive behaviors, as shown by traditional psychologists, actually confirm social constructionists' concern of the negative consequences of an individualistic structure of thinking (e.g., Gergen, 2009a; Sampson, 2008). The individualist spirit seems to operate as a catalyst for self-threat feeling. Together these two frameworks help illuminate the relational foundation of conflict and its dynamics as well as possible interventions for transforming them into valuable experiences.

Inspired by our practice that created experimental forms of social environments, I also explore the role of the social context as a holder for sustainable relational transformation. Whenever I encounter

adversarial connections, my early practice brings hope. I know that it is possible to create different relations if we take it as a goal and invest in it.

Conflict as an Integral Component within Relationships

As part of my journey in search of means to create more constructive formulas of relating, I was among the first professionals trained as a mediator in Israel. I mediated commercial and community cases. I also served as the Head of the Strategic Department at the Conflict Resolution and Mediation Center in the Israeli Ministry of Justice and joined the national team whose task was to introduce Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and Mediation in Israel. Together, we established the foundation for ADR and mediation across the country in diverse domains, including government, family, business, and restorative justice.

The definition of conflict is provided later in this chapter (see the section *Conflict and Conflict Transformation*) and its relational nature and parties' perception are at the core of the conflictual experience. The transformative approach offered by John Paul Lederach (1995; 1997; 2003; 2014)--a renowned scholar of conflict resolution and mediation, particularly informed my view of conflict transformation. He offers a conflict transformation lens for making sense of conflict and a strategy for approaching it. Lederach views conflict as normal within relationships. A peaceful existence, he claims, originates in the quality of relationships—they are the motor of change and constructive relations can be achieved by an understanding, equality, and respect in relationships.

I found interest in the proposition of Bush and Folger (1994; 2005), the founders of transformative mediation, on the importance of changing parties' mindset for transforming adversarial interactions. Transformation occurs, they claim, when the view of self is being shifted from an individualist to a relational one. Parties must take on a complex, relational understanding of self. These ideas are guiding principles in this study. Bush and Folger's transformative mediation reminds us of the significance of delving deeper into the relational context of conflict.

The Case for Moving from the Individual to a Contextual-Relational Space. Being dissatisfied with prevalent confrontational connections, my pursuit for alternative ways led me to scholars who criticized an individualistic understanding (e.g., Buber, 1923; Fromm, 1941; Kelly, 1999; Wheatly & Kellner-Rogers, 1996).

Rooted in a Western culture that led to the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century (Seidman, 1994), the idea of the individual mind has taken priority while relationships became secondary or optional (e.g., Gergen, 2009a; Sampson, 2008). The individualistic viewpoint searches for explanations about the human experience *within* the individual rather than *between* the individuals (e.g., Burr, 2015; Gergen, 2009a/ 2009b; Sampson, 2008). Embedded in this thinking, the discipline of psychology has also looked to explain social phenomena by looking at what is going on inside a person. From Freud's work on biological drives to the study of interpersonal relations of how early relationships with significant others get us in trouble later, the self is positioned at the center. In contrast, the other is often perceived as an obstacle.

When the self is celebrated to the exclusion of the other, relational quality is compromised. The other is not an equal co-creator in the relationships (e.g., Sampson, 2008). Even interpersonal theories and Relational Psychoanalysis that stress the impact of early relationships (e.g., Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983; Mitchell, 1988) still maintain an individualistic outlook. Many of these approaches insist on the lasting characteristics of the individual personality (see Sampson, 2008, for an extensive analysis of the four major traditions in psychology: psychoanalysis, behaviorism, humanistic psychology, and cognitive psychology).

A person as fixed leaves little room for change and improvement (see also Dweck's *Fixed* and *Growth* mindsets below). Moreover, the focus on the individual overlooks the value of the other for mutual development and realizing an envisioned existence. Thus, this attention to the self may discourage us from investing in understanding the other and building relationships.

Sampson (2008) summarizes:

> In both the original Freudian drive theories and in the revisionist interpersonal theories of psychoanalysis, we find a continuation of the self-celebratory themes that have become the hallmark of Western understanding…both cast a mighty suspicious eye at the other and its role in our lives. (pp. 51-52)

Despite the substantial difference between biological and relational positions, both approaches continue searching inside the person for the understanding of human nature. This predominant placement of the individual as fundamentally independent and distinct from others fosters division between many isolated

containers as described by Sampson (2008), "each individual must become a coherent, integrated, singular entity whose clear-cut boundaries define its limits and separate it from other similarly bounded entities" (p. 17). People experience a deep sense of separation.

In the context of a culture of bounded selves where the individual takes priority, the other and relationships have no intrinsic value (Sampson, 2008). Macpherson's (1962) *Possessive Individualism*—the individual being the owner of her own capacities and self, Sampson's (2008) *Self-Contained* person, and Green's *Bounded Being*- "The ideal of internally integrated, harmonious, and coherent mind" (2009a, p. 135), all express the challenge of the prevalent Western viewpoint of a person as essential and distinct from what is outside.

This individualistic stance of personhood has come under critique at the beginning of the past century by prominent thinkers and philosophers like Buber (1923), Fromm (1941), and Kant (1998). Fromm (1941), for example, warned about our rampant state of alienation and division already in the late 1930s and early 1940s. He called for paying more attention to human relationships, and social structures within which relationships are formed. Later, scholars in different areas have also cautioned about the negative consequences of individualistic understanding and advised the development of a deeper understanding of the nature of self, the other, and the link between them (e.g., Bush & Folger, 1995/ 2005; Gergen, 2009a; Kelly, 1999; Wheatly & Kellner-Rogers, 1996).

The Problem with Focusing on the Individual. The individualistic philosophical framework is also well established in the theories and practices of conflict resolution. Central concepts in the field are based on Western modernist thinking such as the individual as leading conflict processes, the expectations of a neutral intervener, the value of self-determination, the primacy of instrumental goals, and the dominance of a problem-solving and agreements.

In the Mid-1990s a few conflict resolution scholars started calling for more attention to the invisible psychological, emotional, and relational complexities involved in conflict (e.g., Bush & Folger, 1994/2005; Cobb, 2001/2006; Putnam, 1994; Winslade & Monk, 2001/2008). Putnam (1994) claims that negotiation models:

> Cast the process as an individualistic enterprise. Individualistic models emphasize the

> autonomy, strategic choice, self-determination, and self-interest of negotiators. Individuals manipulate strategies and tactics to attain instrumental ends. They have motivations and aspirations; make decisions and make errors in judgment. Individuals also have power, manage face, and handle bargainer-constituent relationships. (p. 341)

The focus on the individual blinds us to important aspects of relational subtleties and their perplexing dynamics. The necessity to develop a more complex relational understanding is augmented by a world characterized by rapid change and innovative technology. However, the proliferation of new technologies that create endless opportunities to connect does not guarantee quality connections or connectedness. The individualistic self-other structure in which the self is underscored is still sustained despite a few voices calling for a more nuanced perspective. The other is left in the background in the service of a confined self who takes priority in the relationship.

Human relationships could become either beneficial or harmful, depending on the way self, other, and relationship are understood. Prevalent understanding versus alternative ones is discussed in Chapter Two.

The Role of Relationship. Numerous studies show that people who are more socially integrated and who experience supportive and rewarding relationships with others have better mental health, higher levels of well-being, and lower rates of morbidity and mortality (see review Feeney & Collins, 2015 and meta-analysis by Holt-Lunstad & Smith, 2012). Being socially integrated in a network of meaningful relationships predicts mortality more strongly than other lifestyle behaviors such as smoking or physical activity.

While research on relationships and health has focused almost exclusively on the importance of supportive relationships in situations of stress or adversity, there is growing evidence that close relationships are also linked to well-being even in the absence of specific stressors (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). Research shows that others can play a crucial role in encouraging individuals to fully participate in life's opportunities in the absence of adversity. Still, decades of research on social support have not sufficiently studied the specific mechanisms and contexts in which relationships can enhance well-being in situations without stress or adversity. Specific behaviors or interaction patterns that underlie the effects of social relations on health

and well-being and the mechanisms through which these effects occur call for further investigation(see Uchino, Bowen, Carlisle, & Birmingham, 2012).

Consequently, little is understood about the type of relationships and the ways relationships promote or hinder positive outcomes or thriving (Feeney & Collins, 2015). The contexts and mechanisms linking relationships to health and other positive outcomes like learning, thriving, and growth, and the specific features of relationships that should be nurtured, are not well-understood. Hopefully, this study sheds more light on the mindset and practices that can promote or hinder effective forms of relationships that encourage learning from differences and conflicts.

A Contextual-Relational Perspective to Conflict. Developing theoretical models of quality forms of relationship is important for transforming hostile interactions into relationships that nurture learning and development. To contribute to this effort, I take a preventive approach to conflict by shedding light on both alternative understanding of self-other connection, particularly dialogic mode of relation and organizational practices. Since less defensive behaviors were experienced in the environments we created in my early practice, particularly in dialogic environments, we may probe into these experiences to understand the mechanisms that promote less adversarial interactions.

As suggested by Bush and Folger (1994; 2005), a change in the mindset from an individualist to a relational one is essential for transformation. In this inquiry, I focus on such a shift—the way we perceive self-other and conflict. Though this shift could be applied aftermath--after destruction and violence took place, my primary purpose in this study is preventive--to generate a discussion about our perceptions and the social environments we build that could either accelerate destruction or promote healthy connections. Dialogic social formulations can serve as containers for long-lasting, productive interactions within which conflict can become a learning experience.

The goal is not only to increase the attention to relationships and the context within which they are formed but also to offer an alternative--a particular constructive form of a relationship to help reducing defensive behavior. In this inquiry, I suggest a *Dialogic* mode of relation. *Dialogic Relation* stands in stark contrast to the adversarial mode of connection. It signifies a genuine encounter between the self and the other in which both actively and equally co-create reality, relating to one another in their own terms. Contextual

considerations that help in translating this mode of a relationship into daily life are discussed (see Chapters Two and Six).

By exploring the contextual-relational domain, largely rendered invisible in mainstream models, I will make a case for identifying new possibilities for thinking about and practicing conflict. I will argue for a contextual-relational understanding and practice of conflict transformation that hopefully adds to traditional approaches that are often individualistically and instrumentally oriented. Gergen (2009a) adds: "If human connection can become as real to us as the traditional sense of individual separation, so do we enrich our potentials for living" (p. xvi).

Though my goal may sound like an idealist, unattainable mission, my early practice that triggered this inquiry showed that we could do better concerning the interactions we generate. We can promote alternative, more sustainable, and inclusive ways of being together. The aim is a prosperous future rather than a "good enough" reality. I hope that the two lenses along with my emphasis on the social environment, will provide a more complex, nuanced understanding of the dynamics involved in the emergence of conflict, its evolvement, and potential transformation.

My study is founded in my concern with the loss of the opportunity as soon as a conflict appears. Through the two abovementioned conceptual lenses, I illuminate how the view of self and other could either foster or inhibit the destructiveness of conflict and how the emotional dynamics underlying conflict in our culture impede beneficial conflict. I do not claim to know the answer to solving conflicts, instead, I offer more considerations that can help improve the quality of our relationship. Accordingly, my inquiry question is: ***Can a social constructionist orientation along with knowledge on relational-psychological barriers deepen the understanding of the relational nature of conflict and conflict transformation and what are the implications of this understanding on practice?***

The Social Constructionist Framework

Social constructionism emerged from postmodernism (Hollinger, 1994). Burr (1995/2015), Gergen (2009a; 2009b), and colleagues (e.g., McNamee, 2004; McNamee, 2007; McNamee & Gergen, 1999), and Sampson (2008) contributed considerably to my understanding of the social constructionist view and its relevance to the conflict phenomenon. This relational-based orientation offers a valuable set of principles to

explore the relational underpinning of conflict. Social constructionists not only propose a fresh relational scaffold for understanding conflict but also help to critically look at the discipline of psychology that fundamentally searches for explanations of social phenomena by concentrating on what is happening inside a person.

Social constructionists put the modernist thinking and its manifestation in mainstream psychology under scrutiny. They offer a critical view of the omnipresent Western individualistic stance of the self, the role of the other, and relationships. The cradle of relationships is rocked by shifting the focus on the individual, as prevalent in Western thinking, to the context and social interactions (e.g., Burr, 2015; Gergen, 2009a/2009b). Social constructionists alert individualist theorists and practitioners about the distortion of the quality of human relations resulting from the positioning of a person as prioritized (e.g., Burr, 2015; Gergen, 1985/2009a/2009b; Gergen et al., 2001; Sampson, 2008). Their goal is not to eradicate traditional thinking but to demonstrate that our way of being is not necessarily a reflection of interior, fixed human nature, but a tradition that has become so widespread that we forget it is a human creation.

The focus on the individual mind, according to social constructionists, brings about built-in dichotomies such as subject versus object, inner versus outer, and self versus other that result in inherent competition and divisions (Gergen, 2009a). Whether people see the social environment as threatening or safe indicates a dichotomy that runs through research on many psychological experiences, including attachment, stress, coping, and self-affirmation (Worthman et al., 2010). An encounter with an opposing view turns into a threat to a person's sense of self and arouses vigilance and protective behaviors. The other poses a danger to one's sense of self. The stronger the need to maintain a positive self, the more a person gets defensive, and the more the other is rejected (Gergen, 2009a).

The relationships generated are monologic in their nature. The self plays a primary role in shaping the other person's life. Hegemony is held by the privileged few who have dominated the discourse while others struggle to be heard. The individual in such social structures is preoccupied with building firm boundaries of self. Furthermore, to boost a positive image of self, people often undermine or downgrade the other. The way a person understands self and other shapes the way one relates to the other as well as the quality of their relationships. An individualist formulation where the self is dominant does not encourage

parties to see each other as equals, collaborate, or jointly define the terms of their existence (Sampson, 2008). Within an individualist cultural understanding, defensiveness is inseparable from human interaction. The constructionist conceptual framework will be presented in Chapter Two.

Barriers to a Constructive Relationship Framework and Overcoming Them

Defensive reactions stand in the way of constructive relations. Research on relational psychological dynamics such as biases and defensive behaviors illuminates behaviors instigated from identity-relational concerns (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). They include a host of actions termed by social psychologists as implicit cognitive biases, psychological motivators, and emotions underlying relationships in diverse situations (e.g., Baumeister, 1997; review by Ross & Ward, 1995). Defense mechanisms (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1998, Cramer, 2000; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988) are fundamental to understanding interactions in conflictual situations. They refer to a range of reactions such as avoiding conflict, rejection of opposite perspectives, denying accountability, projecting unwanted qualities on others, and other manipulative defense patterns that are often triggered unconsciously.

Vast research on defensive biases attests to their pervasiveness. Although these defensive responses are an attempt to protect a person's identity and sense of self-integrity—an individual concept of a self as good and moral—they prevent learning from important, though threatening, experiences and information (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). Furthermore, these protective actions may threaten the integrity of relationships and the flow of collaboration (Cohen et al., 2005; Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998) and prevent conflict resolution (Ross & Ward, 1995). These findings on defensive behaviors confirm social constructionists' critical view of the negative consequences of an individualistic focus (e.g., Gergen, 2009a; Sampson, 2008). With an outlook of a self as bounded and isolated, a person is thrust into a constant protective mode to ensure a 'good' Self, which impedes healthy connections.

The idea of affirmation and studies on self-affirmation are reviewed as an effective method to reduce social-psychological defenses. Affirming alternative sources of self-integrity, unrelated to a present aggravating threat, have been found to reduce and even eliminate self-protective behaviors (Aronson, Cohen & Nail, 1999; Cohen et al., 2000; Steele, 1988).

These behaviors have been studied within the psychology discipline where the individual mind is

considered as the primary cause for such practices (e.g., Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sapolsky, 2010; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Worthman et al., 2010). While I criticize the focus on an inborn, internal state of mind, I use concepts that were developed within these modernist traditions because they help understand the extent and formation of defensive behaviors, what evokes them and persistent nature in our culture. This massive body of research can shed light on potential interventions for changing these behaviors. However, as was introduced earlier in this chapter, these social-psychological dynamics, triggered by the behavior of others, is viewed here as more relational than cognitively originated. Gergen (2009a), for example, criticizes cognitivism while proposing to focus instead on the discourse and the relational experience. At the same time, he advises that "this does not mean abandoning the rich vocabulary of the mind inherited from past generations" (p. 397). Instead of deserting the study of cognition and mental representations, he recommends to "reconfigure our understanding of this vocabulary" (p. 397) and use them for envisioning and creating more promising worlds: "Our traditions do have value; they are worth sustaining. However, such traditions should be treated as optional as opposed to defining the limits of our world" (Gergen, 2009a, p. xvi).

These findings on defensive behaviors are incorporated to illuminate hard to get at and stubborn obstacles for creating quality relationships that become strained in the face of conflict. However, to present their relational nature rather than their "intrinsic origin," I build upon the critical view of social constructionism (SC) and discursive psychology (DP).

DP criticizes traditional psychology's fixation on 'cognition' and looks at what is traditionally conceptualized as 'cognitive' understanding from a relational perspective (e.g., Billig, 1999; Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 2005; Gergen, 1973, 1989; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1987; Willig, 2013). Similarly, I propose that defense responses and biases can be seen from a relational perspective. They are emerging from a person's social world rather than from an internal, fixed mental state as often assumed. Moreover, to better understand conflict dynamics, I propose to take a critical and broader view of the conflict from a cultural perspective. It could extend the common individualist perspective of the phenomenon of conflict.

At the same time, while DP's performative focus is significant for illuminating how meanings are generated in the interaction and inseparable of a relational perspective, the mechanism generating a person's

unique individual nature in a situation remains unclear (e.g., Burr, 2015; Langdridge, 2004). Langdridge (2004, p. 345) terms the DP descriptive emphasis on interactions as 'the lack of a person'. DP assumes motivation and goals in the interaction but do not theorize about the persons forming them. The concern with public discourse and what is only observable is that it does not provide any direction as to how we may understand the "internalized, or private, manifestations of discourse such as thought or self-awareness" (Willig, 2013, p. 124). DP does not include an analysis of the process of the individual coming into being within the interaction. Burr (2015) claims that consequently, we are left with a limited understanding of the individual who is engaged in the interaction, their particular reactions, and why they are generated.

DP and social constructionism do not see the internalized person as a relevant construct. However, in the context of a study that is dedicated to investigating the reaction to conflict and the possibility to transform it, it is significant to include a discussion on the individual who embodies past and present relationships. Gergen: "over time the actions of the participants (TPB-in the co-action process) typically become patterned, anticipated, and dependable" (Gergen, 2009a, p. 40). Though created through relationship and not viewed here as internal or inborn, behavioral patterns become part of "who we are." They can be stubborn habits that could be counterproductive to a person wellbeing and the flow of cooperation. As I further discuss these issues in Chapter Three, the particular relationships a person experiences over the course of life result in a somewhat internalized self. The *relational internalized* self (in contrast to the internalized self) is not inherited or fixed, but an outcome of historical relationships. Because of habitual ways of thinking shaped through relationships, the defensive reaction is still likely to arise in the encounter with a disagreement or an opposing view.

Including the person who is being formed through relationship and not merely focusing on explicit, discursive interactions enables the incorporation of the psychology of a person within the interaction. As in the case of an individualist understanding, this psychology may be outside of awareness.

Incorporating Both Frameworks

Together the two frameworks can provide a profound account for the social-psychological dynamics underpinning conflict. While the first lens (social constructionism) proposes a cultural relational viewpoint, the second lens of defensive reactions offers both an analysis of the nuances of defensive psychological

reactions that characterize conflict situations and ways to reduce such reactive habits for the benefit of constructive relationships.

Traditional psychologists suggest the identity protection explanation for the tendency to firmly adhere to a belief even in the face of disconfirming evidence to the point of giving up opportunities to expand our mind and learn new things. While it is a compelling explanation for defensiveness, the critical eye offered by social constructionists adds a broader cultural-philosophical consideration—the individualist ethos that explains the intense, threatening sense a person experiences in the encounter with differences in an individualist culture and the obsessiveness triggered to protect her identity.

Bringing a social constructionist perspective and studies on defense mechanisms under the same roof may seem as inapt as these approaches are rooted in different philosophical traditions and do not neatly work together. However, together they offer a more complex understanding of the obstacles standing in the way of constructive relationships in a culture oriented toward the individual as well as potential actions for transformation. It is not my aim to degrade the research conducted within a modernist, traditional thinking, or on the other hand, to glorify social constructionism. Both traditions rely on certain taken-for-granted assumptions, as discussed in the following chapters. These lenses are used here as a heuristic apparatus meant to elucidate aspects of our worlds in our everyday experiences. We can make use of them in various ways. Along the same line, Burr (2003, p. 32) proposes: "We can neither prove nor disprove the existence of personality traits, and similarly we cannot demonstrate the truth of a social constructionist view simply by an appeal to the evidence."

Furthermore, jointly they are used to expand our understanding of underlying social-psychological dynamics and to improve our ways of being rather than merely observing them. Likewise, Gergen (2016) justifies such an understanding of theory:

> Theory becomes important not in terms of its representing or illuminating *"reality as it is*," but in generating useful intelligibilities for future action. In the practitioner realm, the focus shifts from fixing and validating ideal forms of therapy, to the continuous development of culturally and historically sensitive practices. (p. 13)

My early practice inspired this theoretical study, and its primary goal is to help improve practice.

Inspired by this initial practice where I incorporated conceptual frameworks to both identify behavioral habits that do not work anymore and changing them, theoretical frames are suggested as critical for transforming our being together for the better. In my practice, theory and practice helped participants make sense of the world and sustain the desired change.

The Link Between Perspective and Behavior

The link between perspective and behavior runs as a thread throughout this inquiry. Transformation in our actions requires a shift on the mindset level, as suggested by Bush and Folger (1995/2005). Based on an extensive body of research, my assumption here is that how we think of the world around us dictates our actions. The psychologist Carol Dweck (1986, 2006; Dweck et al., 1995, 2012) dedicated her research of several decades to the link between how people think and their behavior. She specifically examined the consequences of what people believe about the flexibility of their capabilities. Her studies show that a belief that a person is essentially born with a fixed mindset- core qualities are fixed by nature, makes change difficult. She distinguishes between a *Fixed Mindset* and *Growth Mindset*. A *Fixed Mindset* is when people believe that their qualities are simply fixed traits and unchangeable or that they hold a certain personality or moral character and cannot do anything about it, for example, their intelligence. A *Growth Mindset* is when people view their abilities as a potential to be developed. For example, they believe that all people can become considerably more intelligent through efforts and learning, or that people can develop their personality or moral character over time. Her research indicates that the belief in the changeability of capabilities is an essential condition for changing them. People who think about attributes as permanent tend to avoid challenges and have less motivation to learn and improve.

Furthermore, Dweck (2012) showed that a growth mindset not only increases intellectual achievement but can also advance conflict resolution between longstanding adversaries, decrease chronic aggression, foster cross-race relations, and enhance willpower. Thus, appreciating a capacity for change and growth carries a wide array of benefits.

Dweck's research opens new possibilities for both research and thinking about practice. If human nature is understood as relatively fixed, research focuses on identifying people's fixed qualities and categorizing people based on these qualities, such as the study of personality and style. However, when

human nature is, instead, portrayed in terms of people's potential for learning and change, then our mission, as scholars and practitioners, is to understand how this learning takes place and how to maximize it. "The task becomes to understand the dynamics of how people work, how they change, and how they can best fulfill their potential" (Dweck, 2012, p. 620). My inquiry is conducted with this very intention in mind— to gain a better understanding of relational psychological dynamics and practical ways to improve or transform their quality.

Timothy Wilson and his colleagues' (2011) work reinforce the stron link between perception and action. They assert that although changing behavior is challenging, people can change. Wilson has accumulated three decades of empirical evidence indicating that our experience of the world is founded in our interpretations of it and the stories we tell ourselves. These stories, for example--about the other, relationship, or conflict, are the narratives by which we live our lives, and they can become so distorted they impede our ability to live meaningful, happy lives together. The question then becomes how to help people change the negative stories they tell themselves and their interpretation of the world. It is difficult, as our interpretations are often unknown to us. Changing them calls for reflection to be able to see them.

Offering a different way of interpreting a situation or positive ways of looking at things was found to redirect people's interpretations and change their behavior. Wilson and Linville (1982) already showed three decades ago that even a short intervention of thirty minutes had a long-lasting impact. They provided freshman students who did not do well in school with information about students who did poorly in the first year but then became excellent students later. The freshmen who were in the group receiving this information did significantly better in their performance and did not drop out of college, compared to the control group. Wilson and Linville explain that change took place by redirecting people to a positive interpretation of things, and it becomes self-sustaining.

Similarly, in our dialogic environments, we added reflective work. Participants were continuously engaged in reflection by using theoretical frameworks that helped them reexamine their self and their connection with the world around them. I provide examples of our reflective models in the next and the last chapters.

Conflict and Conflict Transformation

So far, I presented the rationale for shifting the attention to the context and relationship within which conflict emerges, evolves, and potentially transforms. Conflict is defined in this inquiry as an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, limited resources, and interference from others to achieve their goals (Hocker &Wilmot, 2017). Thus, perception is at the heart of the conflict experience. Being a relational experience, generated by the parties involved, it is a mutual activity--each person's choice affects the other. A person who is not dependent on the other or have no interest in what the other does, has no conflict with that person. For example, a scholar who aggressively writes about another scholar's work in the field of education has a conflict with that person. In conflict, there are elements of both cooperation and disagreement. While they both chose the same field to study and perhaps publish in the same journals, they are also in a state of disagreement. If one conducts research in physics while the other is doing research in education and their topic do not relate to one another, they probably do not have conflict. They fact that one chooses to criticize the other shows that they have things in common, they share interests and rely on each other.

The conflict experience has been given a bad name in Western culture by its association with disturbance, violence, and war (e.g., Deutsch, 2003; Hocker &Wilmot, 2017). Prompted and fueled by negative emotions, conflict is viewed as something that is not working right rather than a natural byproduct of human interactions. It is perceived as a diminishing force on relationships and outcomes and an ill that only causes problems. A common perception is that conflict needs to be removed if people and organizations are to achieve their goals. Dealing with conflict is often viewed as synonymous with eliminating it.

However, these are not the characteristics of conflict but the damaging potentials of conflict when it takes a destructive path. Conflict can also bring enormous potential for growth and positive change. It could open opportunities to learn about new ways of thinking and acting (Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973/2003; Lederach, 2003; Simmel, 1955). Conflict prevents stagnation, stimulates interest and curiosity, and is a process through which problems can be raised and creative solutions developed (e.g., Deutsch, 2003). It is the motor of personal and social change. When conflict takes a constructive course, it is potentially of substantial personal and social importance.

While conflict carries these potentials to expand our mind, positive change is often difficult to realize

because the reaction to conflict is powerfully shaped by painful, negative emotions and defensive behaviors. I observed these destructive dynamics firsthand in my work with participants in intergroup dialogues, where contentious interactions clouded by strong emotions developed immediately. A negative perception of conflict that immediately triggers negative emotions, prevent gaining from the opportunity hidden in conflict. Despite its potential for learning and growth, the opportunity is often missed.

It is this problem that is at the core of this dissertation. Whether conflict becomes a beneficial experience or not relies on the perception of conflict and the ability to manage difficult emotions. Therefore, awareness of the way conflict is understood, and evolves is vital for changing its trajectory. However, awareness is insufficient, as I present throughout this study. The social environment—the nature of the relationship, power structure, and the social context within which the connections are formed—is essential for transforming the experience of conflict. I hope that by being more mindful of the perceptions and relational subtleties underpinning conflict, the reader will be better equipped to overcome automatic, immediate rejections and be more open to engaging meaningfully with those who think differently or have opposing views.

Conflict Transformation. Different terminologies and approaches are used for understanding and practice conflict, such as *conflict management* that covers a range of ways to handle conflict and *conflict resolution* that is an umbrella term aiming at resolving conflicts. My focal point is on *conflict transformation*, which takes a step further, beyond conflict resolution, to addressing the deep-rooted sources of conflict (e.g., Bush & Folger, 1994/ 2005; Lederach, 2003; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2011).

In this study, conflict transformation denotes the transformation from a pervasive adversarial to a dialogic mode of relation. *Dialogic Relations* stands in stark contrast to adversarial interactions. It signifies a genuine encounter between the self and the other in which both actively and equally relate to one another and communicate differences in their own terms. This type of a relation refers to a particular way of being with one another, an authentic and open ongoing connection in which parties co-construct a true meeting where they are fully present and accept each other's differences and commonalities. This stance is discussed in the A Dialogic Mode of Relationship section in Chapter Two. A dialogic understanding allows us not only to look at immediate solutions but also to examine and transform positions of power and relational patterns

within which conflict arises and evolves into interactions that maximize growth for the long-term on both levels personal and relational.

A conflict transformation approach represents a preventive and an expansive view of the conflict within relationships and the social context. It addresses immediate solutions, ongoing changes, and possible ways to minimize destruction. As I discuss in Chapter Two, theorists of conflict transformation emphasize transformation at the level of worldviews (e.g., Bush & Folger, 1994; 2005). They propose a dynamic view of a conflict rather than static (e.g., Vayrynen, 1991), emphasize long-term goals (e.g., Lederach, 1995; 1997; 2003; 2014), the importance of the social environment, and societal structural changes (e.g., Galtung, 1996; Krippendorf 1973). The issue of power is at the core of transforming relationships, as discussed in Chapter Two. Lederach's (1995; 1997; 2003; 2014) transformative model significantly informed my view of transformation and the relational model I propose here.

Envisioning a long-term transformation of social and power structures places great responsibility in the hands of leadership. Leaders 'choices about the social environment of the institutions they lead—organizational structures and practices are critical. It is in their hands to increase awareness of underlying issues and implicit biases, promote a positive approach to conflict, and practices that ensure the inclusivity of diverse voices. These activities shape the extent to which differences and conflicts become a source of learning and growth. Employees depend on their leaders to acquire proper skills and improve their management of disagreements and disputes. If they are empowered by their leaders and acquire skills, employees should be less hesitant of staying at the heat of conflict and deal with it productively. When leaders ignore relational issues and conflicts, these matters might go underground and the whole environment is likely to get more toxic (Curseu, 2011). I elaborate on the importance of supportive environments and the role of leaders in constructing them in Chapter Five.

Toward a Model of Conflict Transformation-The Link Between Theory and Practice. This inquiry that was inspired by my early practice in democratic and dialogic schools aims at exploring contextual-relational factors underlying conflict. Theory and practice are viewed here as two sides of the same coin, as suggested: "Experience without theory is blind, but theory without experience is mere

intellectual play."[1] Theory and practice are the two sides of transformation. They complement one another in advancing a real, lasting change in patterns and habits that act as stubborn barriers to valuable connections. Gergen (2009b) advises that theories "generate understanding that may open new paths to action." In my practice, the combination of working on the mindset level along with supportive activities advanced relational transformation. Next, I introduce my practice in democratic schools and dialogic schools, where I started developing these ideas of relational transformation. The section following this part sets the ground for understanding the components of relational transformation.

The Case of Democratic and Dialogic Schools

As introduced, my interest in exploring effective forms of relationships was sparked after experiencing destructive interactions in international corporations I worked for. Political games, power struggles, and toxicity were part of the daily routine. I left my last position as a National Director of an international food chain in search of an alternative. My first stop was the Institute for Democratic Education in Israel. Our work there inspired me to dig deeper into the possibility of constructing innovative and safe social environments as containers for beneficial relationships. Although I later tested and kept developing these ideas in other organizations, I present my work in democratic and later in dialogic educational settings because they were the foundation of my work and also provide a full account of structured organizational environments. I believe that these ideas can be further developed in other organizations, communities, nonprofit agencies, and private companies.

Recently, in discussions with colleagues who are still involved in this work, I learned that the Institute, now titled "The Institute of Democracy-Education and Society," expanded its work to many additional projects, beyond the education domain. With the vision of a democratic society, democratic processes are currently implemented in private and not-for-profit organizations, municipalities, colleges and universities, and schools. From having a few employees in the year of 2000, the Institute grew to one hundred and fifty employees who lead numerous democratic programs across the country.

[1] Declared to be "an old Kantian maxim" in *General Systems Vol. 7-8* (1962), p. 11, by the Society for the Advancement of General Systems Theory, but may be a paraphrase of Kantian ideas. Kant, advising that both reason and the senses are critical to the formation of understanding of the world, writes: "Without sensibility no object would be given to us, and without understanding none would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."

Democratic Education builds participative learning environments founded on values of human rights and equality. An underlying assumption is that a child who experiences democracy when growing up is more likely to continue to do the same as an adult. The school environment is not a place where students only learn *about* democratic values theoretically but *live by* them daily in whatever they do. In a genuinely democratic system, all members contribute to the understanding and action and take part in a discovery journey of possibilities. Daniel Greenberg (2000), the founder of the first democratic school in the US describes:

> The root ideas of a democratic education are as simple as they are radical: children should be accorded the same human rights and freedoms as adults; they should be granted responsibility for the conduct of their affairs, and they should be full participants in the life of their community. Democratic schools provide an environment where children can live their formative years in the same manner as they will live out their mature years—as free citizens of a society devoted to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The world these children will inhabit as adults will be a familiar one, a world that has been part and parcel of their childhood. http://www.educationfutures.org/Respect.htm

Two central projects have been developed at the Institute for Democratic Education in Israel: new democratic schools as well as transformative processes in public schools where democratic values and principles were incorporated. Since the establishment of the first democratic school in 1987, the movement grew to thirty democratic schools across Israel today and more than two hundred around the world.

I was more involved in consulting to public schools where we applied democratic ideas in daily life—a challenging task considering the deeply rooted hierarchical, traditional educational system. Based on my own experience and descriptions I found in various democratic schools' websites, the variation between democratic schools is great as each reflects the particular community it serves. Still, most of them share the following elements:

- **Joint and equal decision-making** of all stakeholders: staff, students, and high involvement of parents.
- **Pluralistic Learning**

- **Autonomy**. Under the assumptions that young people are naturally curious, able to take responsibility for their own learning, and learn best when they are self-motivated, students have the autonomy to choose the subjects they want to learn and how they want to pursue them. They are constantly empowered by adults to reveal their interests. Classes and learning groups are based on students' interests.
- **Learning in groups**. Students learn in mixed-age groups or classes that are heterogeneous, typically in the range of 2–3 age levels. There is no grouping based on ability or age. Some learning activities in groups are organized spontaneously. Teams of students and teachers may organize a learning group around a mutual topic of interest that allows all to enjoy each other's unique contributions.

- **Adults' mentorship**. This is an integral component of democratic school life. Adults, as both mentors and teachers, chaperone students on their journeys. They help students in the process of discovering their interests and goals, acquiring the skills needed, and in outlining a path to realizing these goals through meaningful dialogue. Each mentor has about fifteen kids he or she meets regularly. The role of adults in democratic schools shifts from teaching to mentorship emphasis. It creates more intimate and meaningful relationships and less alienation between adults and young persons compared to typical hierarchical public schools.

The essence of democratic schooling is preparation for democratic life through daily action. Democratic schools are self-governing. The principal, teachers, children, and parents run the school as partners. Because democratic educational environments come into being not through authority but out of a personal and communal commitment to the equality and well-being of each member, stakeholders must develop personal and social responsibility. All stakeholders are involved in making and applying all decisions affecting their community regardless of age, sex, religion, or race.

Decisions are made in institutions, committees, and meetings, where students, like staff members, have an equal vote. The range of decisions and rules is broad, from maintenance and littering, school events, to the content of learning. Children learn to weigh multiple considerations on these matters responsibly. Structured and run as a democratic state, everyday functioning is based on

the principle of separation of powers manifested in three governing branches—legislative, judicial, and executive—where all stakeholders participate and make decisions as equal members.

- **The Legislative branch** is the Parliament, where all participants convene once a month or bi-weekly, depending on the school, to collaboratively make decisions about a wide range of school issues. It requires a majority vote of those attending a parliament session to pass laws. All the school's laws are decided in the Parliament—from maintenance, through playing and organizing events, determining the content of learning, accepting students and hiring teachers, to financial decisions and budget allocation.
- **The Judicial branch** is comprised of committees such as a Conflict Resolution and Mediation where complaints and conflicts are addressed. This committee typically assists parties in solving their dispute. The mediators take a mediation course before functioning as mediators. The Appeals Committee, which functions as the school's Supreme Court is where the sides to the conflict can appeal a decision.
- **The Executive branch** is where the ongoing everyday life is managed. There are various ad-hoc and long-term committees responsible for implementing and executing the decisions made in Parliament. Committee members are students, teachers, and parents elected by the community. A few examples of committees are: Curriculum Committee that makes decisions about the school's learning content and various subject matters, their priority, and implementation; Budget Committee that is responsible for planning, prioritizing and allocating the budget; Travel Committee that organizes school trips; and Events Committee that is responsible for school events including scheduling, designing, and all other operational aspects. Some of the issues are delegated to subgroups to carry out certain responsibilities like sports activities, public relations, or bookkeeping.

Students, teachers, and parents are equal members in democratic schools. Every member, regardless of age or position, is allowed to bring up a case for discussion in these committees, and all can be democratically elected to serve on the committees. Participating in decision-making processes is an integral part of the learning processes that take place at the school. Additional school practices include Morning

Gathering—a daily small group meeting where students meet every morning to discuss current affairs, and various learning groups composed of adults, students, and combined groups.

A Challenge—A Still Individualist Premise of the Democratic Endeavor. Throughout my experience in democratic schools, I had felt a sense of *discomfort* with the strong weight given to the individual even in environments that are guided by democratic values. Adults, including teachers in these educational environments, are primarily oriented toward the student and their journey as autonomous units to reveal an *internal* self and their process of learning and the pursuit of aspirations.

While individualist ideas are indeed central to a democratic way of life, a strong capability to collaborate is as crucial for a better, more complete, and engaging democracy (https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=FWw-it1Vs2oC&rdid=book-FWw-it1Vs2oC&rdot=1&source=gbs_vpt_read&pcampaignid=books_booksearch_viewport). This inquiry offers lenses to scrutinize current ways of being with one another, particularly in democratic societies. The social constructionist framework can be used to examine the current positioning of the individual, who is placed at the forefront and the other who is often objectified to satisfy the needs of a self. The social constructionist perspective also inspires ideas about alternatives to a positioning of a dominant self and a shift to relationships that embrace the other as an equal and valuable, co-creator of reality.

Relational perspectives as social constructionism can help transforming prevalent, laissez-faire ways of being of "live and let live" that risks separation and polarization, into more meaningful connections. It may be possible to move beyond living peacefully next to one another to be more engaged, co-create, and support one another compassionately. The other lens, knowledge on psychological biases and defensive behaviors can shed light on dynamics that stand in the way of healthy connections, some of which can be traced to an individualist way of thinking.

These lenses can stimulate thought and offer considerations for envisioning more dialogic, collaborative, and democratic ways of life. They may be helpful for reexamining underlying cultural and social-psychological factors shaping human interactions and direct us at what works well and what does not for a more complete, tolerant, and vibrate democracy that better serve all its constituents. They may

illuminate forms of self-other connections that get us closer to the desired link between the individual and society, and the mechanisms that enable both individual and collective ideas to live together harmoniously.

Collaborative, democratic way of life cannot be taken for granted, particularly within the context of Western, individualist culture. It requires efforts and it is a constant work in progress. The lenses can point out at the imperfections of our connections and help challenge the status que collectively. It is in our power to reconstruct our connections until it closely aligned with our highest ideas of more collaborative forms of co-existence. We owe future generations continuous scrutiny and redesign of our discourse, norms, relational practices, and institutions to ensure better solutions to emerging social challenges.

Here are a few examples to illuminate the concern regarding the over-emphasis on the individual in these contexts. These issues may be relevant to other democratic cultures.

Autonomy. Autonomy is a core principle in these democratic schools as expressed in the following. Students on the website of the first democratic school in Hadera are described as free to choose and pursue their interests (http://www.democratics.org.il/125189/About-the-School-1-1)**:**

> The Democratic School seeks to foster an environment that supports the liberty of its students, respects their sovereignty, and allows them to act autonomously while building a supportive, mutually binding social framework.

While the individual is at the center, the environment is secondary, mostly in support of the individual autonomy and freedom. This emphasis is also expressed in the following statement:

> It is freedom of choice that enables students to experience a deep sense of autonomy, sovereignty, and self-worth, and these intensify the child's inner strengths…The fundamental belief that every child can excel at something helps us to accompany each one on a journey of self-discovery while trying, at the same time, to ascertain the child's talents and aspirations. http://www.democratics.org.il/125189/History---Vision

Whereas the attention to the individual is prominent, a discussion of both the mechanisms that allow meaningful co-existence of diverse voices and the link between the individual and community is not as present. Though the community is often described as important, it seems to exists mostly to support the individual- a unidirectional view between the individual and society as a contributor to society and vice

versa. The social realm seems to be more instrumental to support individual growth rather than a space wherein multidirectional interactions take place among people and groups that act to secure both an individual and collective well being.

As characteristic of Western culture, the individual is the unit of analysis. Adults in these educational environments help students to discover their unique, "existing" inner self. The assumption is that students already have everything within. Ideas exist, waiting to be "discovered." This traditional way of thinking is different from the relational perspective explored in this inquiry. The latter will explore an approach of continuous evolvement and joint exploration. Individuals are seen as co-constructing knowledge instead of helping one another revealing knowledge that already resides inside themselves.

Interestingly, while learning is essential and encouraged in these contexts, it is pretty much perceived as an individual undertaking, supported by mentors and the collective. The other is not seen as an equal, valuable partner for expanding the mind. Society and its nature is not the emphasis. Instead, individual's sovereignty, autonomy, inner strengths, and the process of self-discovery are at the center of attention.

The Role of the Adult. Adults, then—educational staff and parents in democratic and dialogic schools are there to support students in their self-exploration, to set them free from any impediments, including the suppression of society. Adults are "obligated…to the autonomy and independence of the child, and to the child's physical and emotional well-being..." http://www.democratics.org.il/125189/The-Role-of-the-Adult. The teacher in democratic education, who is the closest person to the child, "aspire to give the children the freedom to be themselves, to create worlds for themselves, and to organize them without interference…the mentor shows interest, pays attention, listens, talks, accompanies, advises, plays, assists, and is available for the child." http://www.democratics.org.il/125189/The-Age-Groups-and-Learning-Centers. Adults' role is "to offer assistance to the children with whatever they need—to accompany them on their chosen path" (http://www.democratics.org.il/125189/The-Age-Groups-and-Learning-Centers). A student's independency, autonomy, and self-realization are the foundational values. Ideas concerning the context within which learning takes place, the value of the other, relationships, and differences and conflicts for learning or the well-being of the self and the community are not discussed.

Relationship. Though the idea of participative life is practically in the making every day in democratic education, the quality of relationship is not addressed on democratic websites, nor there is a discussion about acquiring skills suitable for dialogic or inclusive forms of relationships. The environment serves as a means to caring for the student. A discourse on human interdependence and the mechanisms that promote or inhibit collaboration, or the significance of relationships for learning, are not topics being regularly deliberated. The implications of focusing on the individual unit is a unidirectional way of thinking and acting. For example, when the issue of the community was raised in my conversation with a scholar and teacher in a democratic schools for thirty years, he was talking about the student is as a *contributor* to the community and ways to encourage it. He did not use a language of mutual engage or co-creation with community stakeholders. Human communication or interactions are not regarded as co-construction and the nature of these interactions is not the focus.

The lenses offered in this inquiry will hopefully expand the mind regarding desired versus existing forms of self-other connection, the nature of relating to the other, the meaning of co-constituting reality. Deliberation around these matters could be helpful for forming relationships between people of different perspectives without canceling one another and establishing meaningful participation in decision-making.

I could not find a discussion of the value of relationships or the other on the websites. The values of differences and conflicts and the importance of inclusivity are also not discussed. Conflicts are traditionally perceived as a problem to solve or eliminate to ensure harmony. Although democratic life requires daily engagement and it is inevitable students will encounter differences and conflicts, they are not sufficiently work toward understanding conflict dynamics, nor equipped with proper skills to interact with them effectively. Students are more encouraged to look internally at their own interests than at improving their relational capabilities that may allow more learning and advancement through productive engagement with one another. I could not find on the Institute and schools' websites ideas relating to being fundamentally interconnected, relationships as a source for learning or ideas about construction of realty and joint co-creating it.

Learning. While learning, particularly *pluralistic learning*, as termed in democratic schooling, is a central idea, I did not see discussions on websites of the Institute for Democratic Education or democratic schools on

the positive link between relationships and learning. Nor to be found was a discussion about the benefits of differences and conflicts to learning.

The importance of learning is typically expressed as follows: "keeping with the idea that learning takes place at all times, everywhere, lessons take place in the school buildings, in the schoolyard, and off school premises." http://www.democratics.org.il/125189/The-Age-Groups-and-Learning-Centers. Despite the prominence given to learning and its manifestation everywhere in whatever we do, I did not find a discussion on the benefits of diverse perspectives or the opportunity in differences and conflicts for learning. Pluralistic education in these contexts refers more to the various styles and needs of different learners. However, how to contain and benefit from a plurality of perspectives is not discussed.

In a presentation, Yaacov Hecht, the founder of the first Democratic school in Israel and the Institute for Democratic Education said about pluralistic learning: "This type of learning acknowledges the uniqueness of the student and is based on the equal right of every person to express this uniqueness" (http://www.adec.edu.au/documents/pluralistic.pdf). The student's uniqueness of the individual learner is the focus and discussed unidirectionally while the flow of meaning among multiple perspectives and their value is rarely deliberated, if at all.

Freedom *from* versus Freedom *with*— In democratic schooling, freedom relies on autonomy, as customarily perceived in individualist cultures. As Sampson (2008) describes, this is the traditional, individualist way of understanding freedom. People's ownership of their own capacities and characteristics allows them their autonomy. This interpretation of freedom that leans on self-containment stands in contrast to relational ideas expressed in this inquiry that see people as constantly co-constructing reality. Freedom *with* others rather than Freedom *From* may be more suitable for actualizing collaboration. In Freedom *with*, people are free because of the other with whom they are engaged with (see a discussion of freedom in Sampson, 2008).

Conflict as a Negative Experience Approached Punitively. Understanding and addressing conflicts in democratic settings is also seems to be rooted in an individualist formulation. The committee responsible for conflict is labeled as *The Disciplinary Committee*. Its role is to "discuss complaints (TPB emphasis) brought by members of the school community with regard to disputes or violations of school

laws." http://www.democratics.org.il/125189/Democratic-Principles-at-Work. A traditional negative view of a conflict is also reflected in the following statement: "The Disciplinary Committee has the authority to judge disputes and dictate punishment. If the sentence passed by the Disciplinary Committee is unacceptable to one of the parties, that party can appeal before the appeals committee" http://www.democratics.org.il/125189/Democratic-Principles-at-Work. The language used to describe conflicts and disagreements is punitive. Conflict is still perceived negatively as a problem to be solved, not as an opportunity to learn and grow from or engage with.

While violence and bullying in democratic schools are not frequent and seems to be lower than in conventional schools, the explanation provided for it still preserve an individualist framework of thinking. "Despite (TPB emphasis) the broad range of activities in the schoolyard and other areas, the atmosphere among the children is pleasant and the students manage to solve conflicts and take responsibility for them" (http://www.democratics.org.il/125189/Democratic-Principles-at-Work).

This description of conflicts reveals underlying individualist assumptions. Conflict is viewed as a problem to be solved and even better to eliminate. A pleasant atmosphere is assumed to be free of conflict. The value of relationships and conflicts for growth are left unrecognized. Furthermore, the school is proud of a pleasant atmosphere and students' ability to solve conflicts "despite" the broad range of activities." The pleasant atmosphere is not suggested as a result of students' engagement in many activities but *despite of* these *multiple* activities.

If we look at the pleasant atmosphere from a relational perspective, we can understand it as a result, not despite, students absorption in meaningful activities. Because they are so positively engaged, they do not have the time nor the incentive to bully or act violently. The lively and bustling context of multiple activities fosters a pleasant atmosphere. This engaging experience may be richer and even more rewarding if stakeholders recognize its value for each one and their well-being as a community. Instead of thinking of conflicts as necessitating solution or elimination, appreciation of diverse perspectives may stimulate the acquisition of better skills to engage with it. Being able to contain and learn from differences and conflicts may deepen the experience of democratic communal life and collaborative spirit.

The democratic projects demonstrate how an individualist notion is so deeply rooted in how we understand our world. Even in contexts where community life, engagement, participation, and equality are principal principles, the value of the other, relationships, and developing skills to grow from differences do not receive appropriate attention. While members engage and participate equally, and community life is considered important, the framework of thinking is still of bounded, separated units. Members are not viewed as jointly defining the terms of their existence and co-constructing their reality. The self-other traditional formulation endures.

Gergen (2009) warns us about the negative outcomes of a bounded, individualist view on the community level: "Communities are also bounded entities and create the same kinds of conflicts that attend our viewing persons as fundamentally separated. In the case of communal commitments-including the religious and political- the consequences can be disastrous" (p. xxiv). The negative outcomes of an individualist, bounded view is even harsher between bounded communities. Us versus Them is intensified by internal group cohesion and separation deepens.

Dialogic Educational Environments in Public Schools. The democratic experience was my first practice of nontraditional social spaces. Despite its limitations, as specified above, the democratic experience, I believe, is an inspiring social model for participatory environments. It also shows how powerfully the environment shapes individual behaviors. As noted, as the Head of Strategy at the Institute for Democratic Education, I constantly conceptualized and presented our work. The more I processed and developed ideas and models to practice democracy, the more I recognized the importance of deliberating the nature of the link between self and other. Raising awareness to the nature of our relationships and dynamics that stand in the way of constructive connections and acquiring proper skills to address them effectively may help us build more inclusive and vibrant democratic spaces.

To address this need, I partnered with my mentor at the Institute, Noga Bar, who was a Senior Consultant at the Institute and started developing the idea and practice of the *Dialogic Experience*. Because we felt that the democratic experience was not practicing enough reflective work, we developed reflective models to help participants engage with one another more positively. Buber's (1987[1923]) I-Thou formulation that focusses on the relationships between two equal people (see Chapter Two) and Schlanger's

(2000) three-dimensional framework of respect – differentiating between honor based, appreciation based and dignity based respect (see Chapter Five) – powerfully inspired our work. Both offer lenses to examine the quality of relationships and the positioning of self-other in the interactions. As I show in the last chapter, we translated their relationship formulas into conceptual frameworks that were used as analytical models for participants to reflect on and improve their connections in everyday life. We helped forming dialogic interactions based on dignity and respect. A significant portion of our work was conducted in public schools, although dialogic experiences were also applied in municipalities, local communities, and organizations. These dialogic programs offered less hierarchical structures than typically practiced in schools. Staff and children participated in everyday decision-making and practices.

Figure 1 demonstrates central elements in these dialogic environments where reflective work around the mode of relating and treating the other was added to practices applied in democratic schools. All staff participated in training programs and workshops where they reflected on forms of relationships and together they created more dialogic relational practices. Consciousness-raising/reflective work (at the center- green circles) was supported by new or revised organizational structures (red pastels).

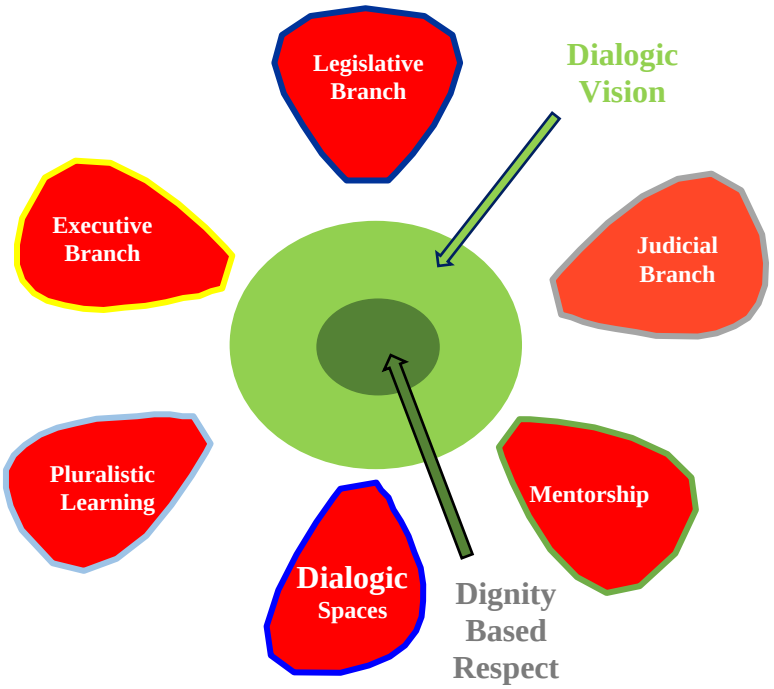

Figure 1: Institutional Branches and Central Elements in Dialogic Environments

Petals in red represent organizational structures that hold a new dialogic vision and being.
Circles in green represent ideas around dialogic being: consciousness-raising processes

Dialogic transformative processes began with reflective workshops where participants thoughtfully examined their perception of self, the other, and the nature of their connections and the implications of these understandings on daily life. Buber's (1987[1923]) I-Thou form of relation and Schlanger's (2000) three-dimensional framework of respect (honor, appreciation, and dignity) inspired *conceptual models* that we created and used with participants to help them revisit their existing perceptions and actions. They later compared the latter to their desired relational understandings to stimulate change. Reflective work also addressed social-psychological barriers to dialogic relationship. Conceptual models helped participants to identify habitual behaviors that they want to keep and practices they wish to change.

The next step was the construction of a relational vision by all members. Dignity-based respect, one type of Schlanger's (2000) framework was the foundation of a shared vision. The idea of dignity-based respect replaced a prior emphasis in democratic schools on human rights. A written covenant agreed by all helped stakeholders helped to translate their new understandings into daily actions. Structured practices and processes were formed to anchor these types of relations in everyday life (red petals).

Typically, it took a maverick principal, who felt weary about the traditional educational system, to invite us to lead this journey. A typical process took a period of one to three years, depending on the school. The work started with having conversations with the principal to evaluate the school and then we formed a school leadership team. Gradually, school staff joined the process, then children, and parents. Stakeholders progressively took ownership of the process based on a new vision they created. In the second year, stakeholders started designing and implementing organizational practices and structures that served as holders for their new vision. Over the years, our goals and methods have been crystallized and better defined. The program became more sophisticated and better-grounded. The two components of consciousness-raising and organizational structural change are illustrated in Figure 2. Consciousness raising and organizational practices kept stakeholders "walking their talk" by practicing their new understandings daily. These collaborative practices kept stakeholders from reverting to old habits of destructive interactions.

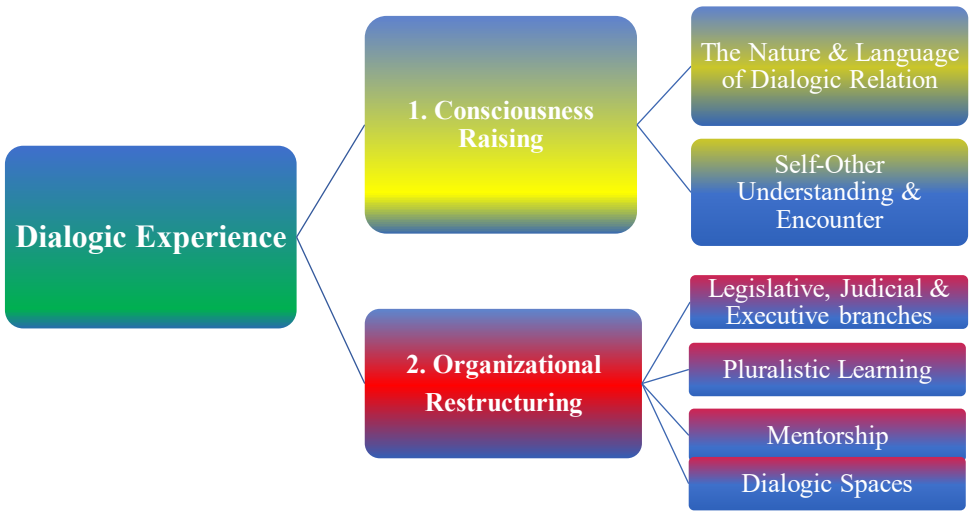

Figure 2: Practice components

Practice Components

Dialogic Experience. The operationalization of the idea of a dignity based or I-Thou mode of relation. The goal of the Dialogic Experience is to apply Buber's (1987[1923]) idea of I-Thou relation and Schlanger's (2000) three-dimensional framework of respect in everyday life.

1. **Consciousness-raising**. This reflective work refers to the development of a deeper understanding of assumptions, values, and beliefs underlying the understanding of the self and the ways others are treated or positioned in the interaction. Participants examin their understandings of ideas like I-Thou relational mode, dignity, respect, tolerance, democracy, and equality by using conceptual frameworks and developing a dialogic language (see a few examples in Chapter Five). Participants reflect on relational and psychological habits that may have become counterproductive to one's goals, the positioning of one another in relationship, the link between the understanding of self and the quality of relationships, and perspectives and behaviors that obstruct genuine and meaningful relation.

   This work raises participants' awareness of their habitual ways of relating where they jointly explored alternative ways of being together. Everyday life is the field where participants experiment with the application of their new understandings and transform their behavior supported by their work with others. participants bring their daily experience back to the workshops to get feedback and process it with colleagues. An important principle is collaborative work wherein participants support each other in identifying behaviors and daily intersections that call for improvement and reconstruction.

Reflective work is different in democratic compared to dialogic environments. The focus of deliberation in democratic schools is on topics related to the roots, philosophy, and evolvement of modern education. For example, stakeholders discuss how educational ideas of modern schools that started during the industrial era when preparing children for automated work was the primary goal, have not changed much over the years to fit changing societal needs. Schooling initial goals are reexamined in democratic schools in light of changing societal needs in post-modern times. The ideas of democracy and human rights, the changing role of a teacher, and the future of education are also at the center of the conversation in these schools. In comparison, stakeholders in dialogic schools are also engaged in deliberations on psychological-relational dynamics. The goal is to create a shared dialogic language to improve the quality of relations (the meaning and application of a dialogic way of being).

Participants in dialogic environments examine ways to implement their new understandings of self and the other. For example: once an I-Thou framework is introduced, participants experiment with behaviors to practice this type of connection. They experiment with the operationalization of this type of relation. Similarly, when participants work with the framework of respect, they examine their experiences in light of three types of respect and ways to apply new behaviors in daily life--at school, family, and community (see also Chapter Five).

Participants explore the tension between what *is* and what is *desired*. For example: their vision of respect in relationships versus their actual behaviors. Conceptual models are used to screen and improve relationships between students and teachers, teachers and teachers, and teachers and parents, as well as to examine social junctures and settings across school, like intermissions, students' evaluations, grading, events, trips, etc. This work helps to identify what was termed *Natashot*[2]. These examples for the operational translations of conceptual understandings are an excellent segue to the second major component of our program discussed next.

[2] The use of Natashot here is like a word game in Hebrew. First, Natashot is plural for Natasha. Natasha in Hebrew is what was abandoned or neglected. Second, Natashot is also an acronym for issues that were neglected and need improvement. By Natashot we pointed at junctures that alerted stakeholders to reconsider their interactions and improve them.

2. **Organizational Restructuring.** To anchor new understandings into daily actions, the social environment is restructured by new or revised organizational platforms. The *Doing* (daily behaviors and actions) is continuously attuned to new ways of *Being.* The new vision of dialogic being is constantly translated into new behaviors and organizational practices. All actions are examined through new understandings gained vis conceptual models. First, we use practices that we designed, and later, we apply ideas of participants who gradually gain control of the process and continue developing practices to fit their particular needs. A variety of organizational practices, structures and processes are implemented such as Parliament, Executive and Judicial practices, and Mentorship.

Because our focus shifted toward developing a new understanding of self and other as a *subject* rather than an *object* in the relationship, training programs included the examination of self-other relation, such as self-realization processes with the support of others and *White Nights* in which a group of learners supported each other in accomplishing individual and collective objectives. These activities are conducted in addition to activities implemented in democratic schools, such as *Hot Chocolate* meetings of teachers and students in the mornings to discuss current events, and Pluralistic Learning groups. A few are presented in Chapter Five.

Figure 3 presents an example of a process in traditional public schools where democratic and dialogic principles were incorporated, from the first stage where we worked with the principal, then with a leading team—Steering Committee including teachers, through guiding leadership on working with staff and students, and later involving parents.

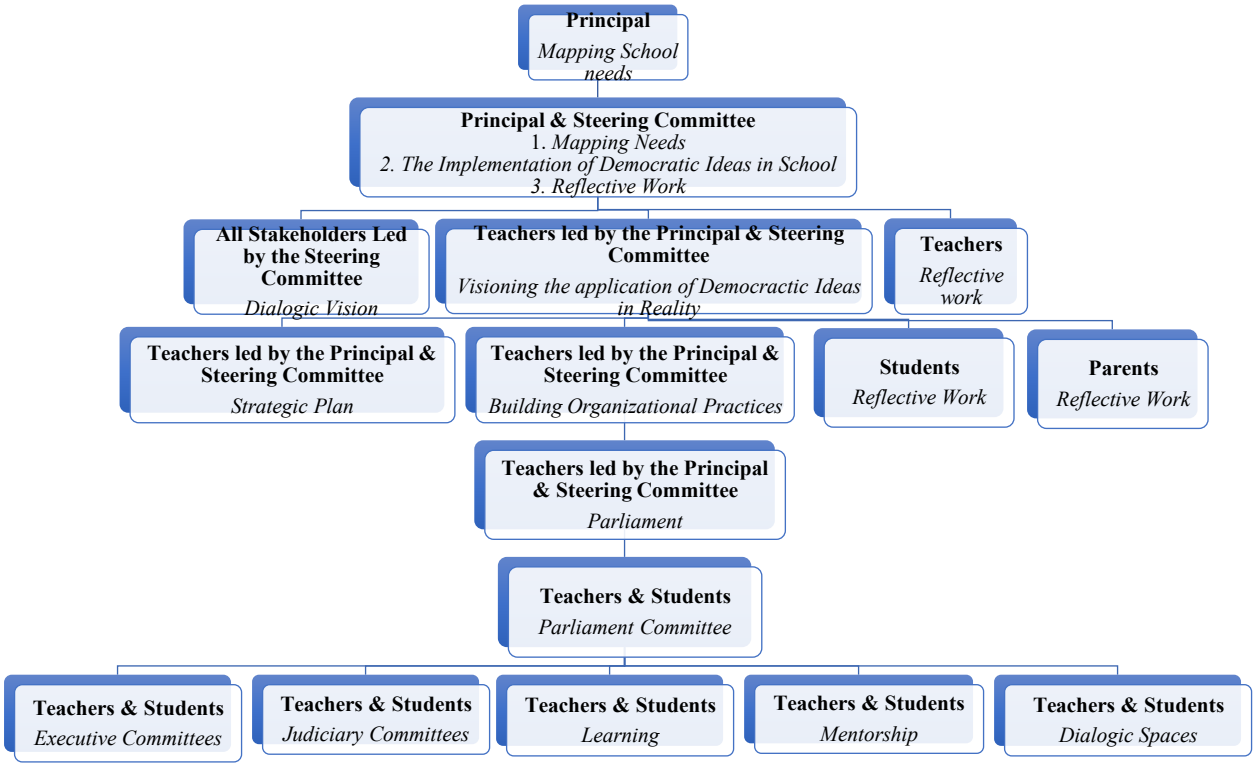

Figure 3: The Democratic Process

The Parliament is processed in a similar way as demonstrated in the above chart. First, the vision for the Parliament and its structure is deliberated and planned with the principal and the Steering Committee. Then a Steering Committee forms a Parliament Committee composed of teachers at the first stage, and later students' representatives are added.

To conclude, I briefly presented two projects as examples of alternative social systems. One takes place in democratic schools and the other offers a dialogic experience. The democratic endeavor offers participative models for children to internalize and practice the values of democracy, not just learn about democracy in theory. Every student is encouraged to reveal and create their own personal world, in partnership with others, while taking responsibility for establishing a society where human rights are maintained. The freedom of choice underlined in these contexts allows children to experience a profound sense of autonomy, sovereignty, and self-determination. Students are encouraged to believe in their ability to shape their lives and to shape the personal and social reality in which they live.

Considering the powerful orientation toward the individual in these contexts and recognizing the importance of being more dialogic with one another, the Dialogic Experience project was created. While in democratic schools, the individual is at the front, more attention is given to relationships in dialogic projects, some of which that take place in public schools. In both environments stakeholders engage equally in daily decision makings within organizational structures and practices, such as the Parliament.

However, as I presented earlier in this chapter, I had a sense of incompletion in the fit between the democratic or relational intend of these projects and the emphasis on the individual. The individual is still powerfully positioned at the front while communal democratic aspirations seem to be secondary. While there is a significant shift toward the relational space in dialogic spaces and the other is treated as a subject rather than an object, the individual unit is still at the center and being held very much accountable for its actions.

To give this discrepancy more thought and improve habitual formulas of being, I offer a few lenses through which we could re-examine self-other connection and its potential transformation in the next few chapters. If we are to foster more collaborative relations, making cultural nuances and social-psychological undercurrents visible is promising for shifting adversarial patterns of thinking and acting into more dialogic forms of connections.

Methodology- From Practice to Theory and Back

While this study provides theoretical discussion, it was instigated by practice, and it concludes with practical contextual-relational considerations informed by both my practice and this theoretical study. Thus, theory and practice are intertwined throughout this dissertation. Theory is not perceived as separated from real life, but as a necessary tool to improve practice. Both are tightly interconnected for the purpose of a profounder understanding of transformation and its execution. The discussion of theory is critical for revisiting patterns of thinking and behaviors and opening up innovative options for better actions. Both are required to promote a genuine, long-term change.

This tight link between theory and practice is displayed in this inquiry in both the *What*—subject that proposes theory and practice as complementing one another to promote transformation, and in the *How*—the structure this inquiry is presented by introducing my practice first, then move to the theoretical part, and end with practical implications. As I discuss later, behaviors originate in held concepts and theories (e.g., Dweck,

2012; Wilson, 2011). Theories help us make sense of the world and guide our actions whether they are explicit or implicit. I see this investigation as a hybrid of theory and practice.

Initially, my practice was informed by a variety of sources from disciplines, such as education, philosophy, and psychology. Social constructionist and relational ideas I explored later pointed to the prominence of individualist principles that powerfully affect our thinking and actions, even in democratic and dialogic environments where communal values are fundamental. Furthermore, after gaining more understanding of biases and defensive behaviors during my advanced studies of psychology, I thought that both bodies of knowledge--social construction and defensive behaviors, could add new considerations to scholars and practitioners of conflict transformation. My democratic and dialogic practice along with many discussions I had with practitioners of these environments show the importance of both components for transformation: shifting the perception of self and other as well as changing the structure of the social environment wherein the interactions take place. I discuss these components throughout this inquiry through the lenses of social construction, defensive mechanisms, and the role of relational and social support for transformation. Based on these discussions, I offer practical contextual-relational considerations for transforming relationships and conflicts.

The purpose of this dissertation is twofold: to reflect on mostly hidden factors underlying self-other connection and relational dynamic by applying the above lenses. The leading research question in this inquiry is: ***Can a social constructionist orientation along with knowledge on relational-psychological barriers deepen the understanding of the relational nature of conflict and conflict transformation and what are the implications of this understanding on practice?***

Social constructionist perspective and its backdrop is deliberated to address the first part of the question. Since this perspective powerfully stresses the environment and relationships, it might overlook the uniqueness of the individual and her role in leading the trajectory of conflict. The individual is traditionally perceived in the literature on conflict as playing a primary role in instigating and maneuvering conflict. In efforts to settle between the person individuality and relationship, I review some internal criticism made by a few social constructionists on the relational emphasis. They claim that focusing on relationship preserves the very same dichotomies such as subject versus object, inner versus outer, and self versus other, they reject.

Based on their hybrid view of the dynamics between the individual and collective, a more complex outlook is suggested here.

To illuminate the second part of the question on barriers to a constructive relationships, research on relational psychological dynamics, mainly studies that investigate defensive reactions and ways to address them, is reviewed. These dynamics stand in the way of dialogic or inclusive connections. Though these studies reflect an individualist thinking in their design and conclusions, taking place within the relational space, they could also be understood as driven by social-psychological factors, not merely by cognitive processing, as typically understood. To present the importance of social contexts for long term transformation, as suggested by the experience of democratic and dialogic undertakings, I review literature on relational and social support. These studies show the significance of relationships in adversity as well as non-adversity life situations.

The theoretical study is multidisciplinary to gain a comprehensive understanding of underlying relational dynamics and promising ways to transform them. Knowledge from various areas, such as psychology, education and learning, philosophy, communications, organizational theory, and conflict resolution, is incorporated in this study. The review is based on research and published work, including articles in academic journals and books. This literature review brings us back to practice and how it may be improved in the last chapter with a few practical considerations offered based on this study and democratic and dialogic experience. I include conceptual frameworks I designed and have applied over the years with participants in workshops, students, and stakeholders.

The dissertation is organized as follows. This chapter presents the context to my inquiry: my own relational story. I also discuss the relational context of conflict and two frameworks I use in this inquiry to deepen a relational view. I propose to view the conflict from a contextual- relational perspective rather than a typical individualist outlook and present my first practice as a case study for transforming the quality of a relationship.

In Chapter Two, I present a broader context to a relational view, from a human development perspective. The first framework—a social constructionist orientation is also presented. This framework provides a relational foundation for understanding conflict and an alternative conception of self and other.

The idea of conflict transformation is discussed, and it's meaning in this study as a shift from adversarial to dialogic relation. The latter form of relations is presented.

In Chapter Three, the second framework of barriers to constructive relationship, specifically defensive behaviors, is examined. Since this knowledge is different epistemologically from social constructionism, I make a case for incorporating these studies in this dissertation. These barriers are seen as relationally originated rather than taking place within the individual mind. Affirmation as an essential method to constructively address defensive reactions is also reviewed.

In Chapter Four, I examine ways to generate lasting transformation through supportive relationships and social environments. A consideration of *social*-affirmation rather than *self-affirmation* is proposed, and a hybrid possibility of viewing social support is introduced. The groundwork for restructuring the social environment as a necessity for transformation is reviewed as well as the role of leadership in guiding such revitalized social environments.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I offer a few practical actions to consider for fostering relational transformation. Hopefully, the cultural, contextual-relational approach to the understanding and practice of conflict will inspire third-party interveners and leaders in their work to transform conflict and relationships.

CHAPTER TWO

FIRST FRAMEWORK: A RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON CONFLICT

Tzofnat Peleg-Baker

"If human connection can become as real to us as the traditional sense of individual separation, so do we enrich our potentials for living." Gergen, 2009, p. xvi

A Broader Context of a Relational Perspective

In Chapter One, I laid the groundwork for approaching differences and conflicts from a more complex relational-contextual understanding. Even in democratic environments--democratic schools and dialogic projects that are strongly aspired to be dialogical, the individualist ethos is dominant. The relational-psychological mechanisms that encourage or inhibit genuine, meaningful relationship and constructive conflict, are less understood. While the dialogic projects take us a step forward toward the relational space with its reflective practice on self-other connection, the individual is still the unit of analysis. This inquiry offers to consider a shift toward a more contextual-relational unit to understand relationships and conflicts and transform them.

In this chapter, I explore social construction as a relational lens. It also offers a critical eye on the individualist ethos that dominant our discourse in Western culture and its consequences on human interactions. As introduced, differences and conflicts can be an opportunity for learning, but in the individualist culture we inhabit, the opportunity is often missed. A social constructionist perspective may shed light on the cultural considerations that profoundly, yet unintentionally shape how we view self and other. Social constructionists show that centering on the individual is divisive and fosters destructive conflicts.

Before proceeding to this perspective, I place the transformation of relationship in the context of human development. Human development and ongoing learning rely on improving the quality of our relations, not merely on individual efforts to improve skills. I propose that learning to overcome tendencies to avoid or reject different or opposing perspectives and embrace them is critical for a higher developmental complexity as expanding the mind depends on the input of others.

Human Development. The complex and unsettling environment we live in of rapid change, new technologies, and growing conflicts commands complex understanding of challenges, improved social

capabilities, and innovative solutions. Kegan (1994), a developmental psychologist, argues that these challenges require a higher developmental complexity. According to Kegan, they call for: “something more than mere behavior, the acquisition of specific skills or the mastery of particular knowledge. They make demands on our minds, on how we know, on the complexity of our consciousness” (p. 5).

Kegan maintains that we are over our heads as the demands of the social environment are increasing faster than the complexity of our thinking and learning. In the first half of the last century, Erich Fromm (1941) also warned about the growing gap between complex social challenges and human underdeveloped ability to deal with them successfully. Both psychologists identified that the challenges we face outpace our ability to make sense of them in a beneficial way.

One way to decrease the gap between current challenges and human capabilities to deal with them successfully is to advance the evolution of complex human ability to deal with complex challenges. Kegan and later, in collaboration with his colleague, Lahey (Kegan & Lahey, 2001; 2009), address this challenge. Based on his initial constructive-developmental theory (Kegan, 1982), Kegan extended Piaget's developmental model to adulthood, beyond adolescence as typically described by other developmental theorists. With Lisa Lahey (Kegan & Lahey, 2001), they present an *immunity map,* a practical method to help people overcome an immunity to change-processes of dynamic equilibrium that are like an immune system, powerfully preserves people habitual behaviors. In *Immunity to Change* (Kegan & Lahey**,** 2009**)**, they connect the immunity method to a dialectic of three mindsets: the socialized mind, self-authoring mind, and self-transforming mind (corresponds to three of the "evolutionary truces" or "orders of consciousness" in Kegan's earlier books).

The first—the *Socialized* mind—is when a person is a subject to other people’s opinions, and therefore, they claim, is insufficiently self-directed and self-motivated. In the second plateau of *Self-Authoring* mind, a person develops self-authority and an ability to evaluate and make choices about external expectations, take a stand, and be self-directed. The development process concludes with the final plateau of the *Self-transforming* mind when a person can see her limits and incompleteness and have an ability to contain contradiction and opposites and maintain her perspective.

The development of self-regulation and mental world are the primary sources of action. Each stage is described as more complex in terms of the ability of meaning making. The individual in the second phase—the *Self-Authoring* mind—is more developed because of the capability to step back from the social environment to generate an internal seat of judgment—the person becomes self-directed and skillful of setting an agenda and self-stance. Thus, an advanced developmental stage means the emancipation from the influence of others. Others or relationship are understood more as restricting the development of self not as valuable components for improving life or increasing the ability to deal with life complexities.

While Kegan ends the book *In Over Our Heads* (1994) with a praise to a passionate human engagement, his models do not actively explore the development of complex formulas of relations to support learning and creative solutions to complex problems. Absent is the recognition in the value of the other and the ability to generate complex forms of relationship necessary for growth—from being a subject to others to the complex capabilities of creating more meaningful, equal, and supportive forms of interdependence within which people jointly co-construct meaning and creative solutions to address complex challenges. Kegan maintains the individual as the unit of analysis while relationships are perceived more negatively. They are seen more as an interference than a valuable resource worth developing for advancing human learning and development. The focus on private mentation prevents an active improvement of forms of relating that support human development.

Though these developmental models significantly contribute to the understanding of adult development, they are not objective or value free. They were instigated within a modernist, individualist culture and strongly echo this thinking. While Kegan's theory incorporates external factors such as environment and social connections as shaping adult development, they are cognitively based, mainly focusing on the individual's growing mental complexity. According to Brooks (2000), Kegan falls victim to a cultural "myopia" that "perfectly reflects the rationalist values of modern academia" **(**p. 161). "The possibility of a developmental trajectory aimed at increased connection with others…" (p. 162) is excluded. She says (p. 162):

> Kegan's theory provides a synchronous fit with the current cognitively-based theories of transformation which represent a specific (not universal) set of cultural values and

> expectations about what transformation is or should be. Even though theorists may claim their models make no assumption about an optimal direction for growth, all theories are history and culture laden. We rarely think and act outside of these context, but we should.

And Paz (1978) says:

> What sets worlds in motion is the interplay of differences, their attractions and repulsions. Life is plurality, death is uniformity. By suppressing differences and peculiarities, by eliminating different civilizations and cultures, progress weakens life and favors death. The ideal of a single civilization for everyone, implicit in the cult of progress and technique, impoverishes and mutilates us. Every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life. (p. 6)

Multiplicity in perspectives and pluralism are necessary for growth and learning. Our learning, development, and well-being rely on the quality of our social interactions. Therefore, it is essential to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms that foster beneficial relational capabilities.

The Importance of Relationship for Growth. Relationship can provide support not only in buffering and containing the negative emotions instigated by conflict (Coleman, 2011; Coleman et al., 2012; Gottman et al., 2002), but also in participating with the party and helping to engage, reframe, rethink, and redirect conflict to a productive route where learning and growth could happen. If relationships are weak, not only is there no container to hold the painful, immediate emotional reaction to a conflict, but there is no support for positive engagement and learning. Developing more collaborative forms of relationships could support effective and innovative processing of today's complex challenges.

In their investigation of human thriving, Feeney and Collins (2015) present an integrative and broader model of thriving (includes life satisfaction, meaning and growth in life, and psychological, social, and physical well-being) through relationships. They conceptualize social support as an interpersonal process that functions to promote thriving not only in contexts of adversity but also in the absence of adversity. In the first context—coping successfully with adversities—being buffered by others from potentially severe consequences of adversity has been the focus of the majority of social support literature. But they offer a

broader perspective on support in times of adversity. They expand it to supporting growth from an adversity in which people emerge as stronger or more knowledgeable, as in cases of post-traumatic growth.

Additionally, others, according to Feeney and Collins (2015), not only help people to cope successfully with adversities, absence of adversity is as important for thriving. People thrive when they fully engage in each other's life opportunities. Relationship could support personal growth through work, socializing, learning, creating, pursuing hobbies, and making meaningful contribution to society (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Thus, relationships, according to Feeney and Collins (2015), are significant in facilitating or hindering thriving. It is a source of strength not only by helping to cope with the negative effects of stress, but also in helping to emerge from the stressor in ways that enables flourishing from the circumstance, to reach new heights or exceed what was prior to the adversity. Equally important is when others support one another through participation in opportunities for growth and fulfillment that enhance positive well-being, building resources, and finding purpose and meaning in life. Relationships are integral in human development as active catalysts for thriving and development.

Although relationship is essential for growth, insufficient emphasis is placed on understanding its nature and value for learning. McNamee (2006) provides an example she often experiences in the academic setting with honor students who, she says, often reject collaboration when given a team assignment. She thinks that her students act in isolation unintentionally. The problem, she explains, is not in students' rejection to collaboration, but a system that encourages individual achievements and accordingly evaluates learning by the ability to memorize facts. This focus, she says, poses an obstacle for collaboration. Since students do not see the value of the other, they lack the motivation and ability to go beyond the text to fully engage in joint learning:

> Solo performance is rewarded while group activities are ignored at best…The complexity of corporate life, global interests, and community investments today demand the ability to work with others to be responsive to the moment-by-moment interruptions and changes in plan, and to collaborate in working toward an unspecified future. (McNamee, 2006, p. 13)

While from an individualist perspective, development entails increasing self-reliance and less dependance on others —being more independent (e.g., Kegan & Lahey**,** 2009), from a relational perspective, there are a wide-ranging possibilities of relational formulations that could support human development. If relationship is recognized as an important source of strength and learning, a broad array of questions arise and need to be studied.

The shift toward relationship in this study raises questions such as: What forms or modes of relationship contribute to or hinder meaningful and purposeful life or which of them support constructive connections and benefiting from conflict? What are the conditions for building beneficial relational forms? And what mechanisms (e.g., processes, activities, actions, social conditions) of support benefit constructive relationship or conflict?

The ability to beneficially coordinate multiple, sometimes conflicting, perspectives is increasingly vital for quality decisions and effective operation in a complex and dynamic world of relational confluence. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that under specific circumstances, certain types of conflicts can be beneficial for learning and performance, group decision quality, innovation, and reaching quality decisions (see review at Schulz-Hardt, Mojzisch, & Vogelgesang, 2008). Identifying and improving the specific circumstances that can reduce the negative effects of conflicts and foster positive results become increasingly important in today's complex environment. It has been revealed that cooperative, in comparison to competitive, management of differences and conflicts is a significant condition for ensuring conflicts' positive outcomes (e.g., Brodbeck, Guillaume, & Lee, 2011; De Dreu, 2008; Guillaume, Brodbeck, & Riketta, 2012; Tjosvold, 2008; Tjosvold, Hui, Ding, & Hu, 2003). Being more mindful of the conditions for cooperative relations becomes ever more critical.

Collaboration is likely to expand the horizon of new possibilities for dealing with today's complexity. Most critical, new forms of thinking, creativity and innovative decisions arise from the capability to collaborate and beneficially coordinate diverse perspectives (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; John-Steiner, 2000). Gergen (2009a) points out that rational thought, intentions, experience, memory, and creativity "are instigated within relationships. They are not 'in the mind'—separated from the world and from others—but embodied actions that are fashioned and sustained within relationships" (p. 95). Mead

(1934, p. 226) stresses that "The social process, then, does not depend for its origin or initial existence upon the existence and interactions of selves; though it does depend upon the latter for the higher stages of complexity and organization which it reaches after selves have arisen within it."

It becomes apparent that in the context of a growing complexity, volatile environment, the spike of conflicts, and violent extremism, quality human connections become critical. To expand the notion of a relational perspective, I introduce next the social constructionist orientation and its backdrop.

A Social Constructionist Orientation

The individualistic perspective of an isolated, cognitive, and rational decision-maker, as reflected in the study of human development, conflict, and other disciplines, has dominated Western thought for several hundred years. Geertz (1979, p. 59) described the traditional view of the individual as a "Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment and action organized into a distinctive whole."

The individual is assumed as a fundamentally distinct, fixed, and independent entity. Gergen (2009a, p. xvi) portrayed the connection between such entities as "the collision of billiard balls." In other words, though people interact, they mostly stay intact, molded by their own thoughts and internal traits. The individualist perspective holds an essentialist view of a person as self-contained and isolated. The goal is usually to reveal the 'true' nature of things and universal rules that apply to all people.

In contrast, social constructionists, place knowledge and the generation of it within the process of the social interchange (Gergen, 1985; 2009a). Relationship is viewed as the principal unit, "there is no isolated self or fully private experience, Gergen (2009a, p. xv) says. "we exist in a world of co-constitution. We are always already emerging from relationships; we cannot step out of relationships…" (p. xv). Social constructionists shift the focus from the individual to the context and social interactions. Being situated within a particular cultural context, our thinking and behavior echo that social environment. While continuously interacting with others, self and relationships are in a constant process of reconstruction, shaping one another.

Social constructionism embodies a few alternative approaches to the understanding and the study of human beings. It confronts the view of modernist knowledge as based on objective and unbiased observation

and encourages a doubtful position toward the view of the omnipresent Western individualistic stance of the self, the other, and relationships. Social constructionists suspect the choices of questions traditional psychologists make, the methods used to study these questions, and the answers they have traditionally offered.

The goal of social constructionists is not to eradicate tradition, but to demonstrate that our way of being is not a reflection of inborn human nature, but a tradition that has become so dominant we forget it is a human creation. By shifting the focal point from an inner, pre-existing person as presumed by mainstream psychologists, to locating it outside, in the social realm, social constructionists defy mainstream psychology.

A major problem social constructionists identify is the ramifications of focusing on the individual mind of built-in dichotomies such as subject versus object, inner versus outer, and self versus other that lead to competition and divisions (Gergen, 2009a). Whether people see the social environment as threatening or safe indicates a dichotomy that runs through research on many psychological experiences including attachment, stress, coping, and self-affirmation (Worthman et al., 2010). Social constructionists try to move beyond these dichotomies. By shifting to the relational-contextual unit, a social constructionist orientation may serve as a powerful theoretical and practical approach to examining and improving relational dynamics. Paying more attention to the nature of relationship could be valuable for constructing positive modes of relationship. I first describe the four broad tenets of social constructionism (Burr, 2015; Gergen, 1985), and later, I discuss a few implications of these ideas on transforming engagement with differences, particularly with opposing views.

1. **A critical position toward taken-for-granted knowledge.** Social constructionists invite us to be critical of common taken-for-granted ways of categorizing and understanding the world shaped by individualist ideas such as objective, unbiased observation, positivism, and empiricism. It critically suggests considering alternative conceptualizations of psychological concepts such as emotions, motivation, identity, and self. The idea that these concepts represent objective knowledge becomes questionable.
2. **Historical and culturally specific.** Social constructionists claim that these concepts do not reflect the objective nature of the entity, but rather they should be examined within historically and culturally contingent factors. What we understand, all norms and concepts are determined by location and time.

Perspectives on education and children that have dramatically changed over time are a couple of examples among many. Up to recent times children were perceived as small adults but with no legal rights. Only relatively recently, childhood started to be seen as a unique stage in life wherein children need adults' support. Western education today is less authoritative, and obedience is less expected of children. There is more openness toward children's needs of protection and autonomy.

Accepting local cultures and legitimizing their particular standpoint opens up new ways of looking at diverse cultures like indigenous and non-Western cultures. They are seen as equal to Western cultures and interactions with them may change based on these new understandings (e.g., Burr, 2015). One culture can no longer impose its rules on the other, as Western traditions of thinking and science often enforce on other systems and cultures.

3. **Knowledge is created through social processes.** Everyday interactions are at the center-stage. All we understand is being formed by us. There is no single truth "out there," but current accepted ways of understanding the world. Versions of knowledge are continuously created through constant social interaction, particularly the use of language.

Some mental health conditions such as depression, bi-polar and hysteria are social constructs created by doctors or therapists and their patients together (Borch-Jacobsen, 2009). There are illnesses that have no organic foundation. They are historically located and come and go. Thus, what we often regard as truth may be thought of current discourse—current accepted, normative ways of understanding the world. They are the outcomes of social dynamics rather than objective observation.

4. **The link between knowledge and social action.** Our understanding brings about a specific action. An acceptable understanding excludes other understandings, therefore sustaining patterns of social action and creating power relations. If conflict is understood as caused by wrong-doing of a person, we will blame a person for her actions, and we are likely to punish or exclude that person. However, if conflict is understood as a natural component in relationship, then we will look at the dynamics created within certain habitual patterns of relationship. Each understanding will result in a different action. While an individualist understanding will lead to fixing the person, a relational-contextual understanding will lead to restructuring relationship, how we treat one another, and organizational practices.

These ideas stand in stark contrast to the characteristics of traditional psychology of a universalist, essentialist, and realistic person (Burr, 2015). The following are particular dimensions of the social constructionist point-of-view.

5. **Focus on Interaction and Social Context.** As traditional psychology looks for explanations of social phenomena inside the person, it holds individuals accountable for what they do, their condition and what happens around them. Sociology traditionally has focused on structures and institutions such as family, and government. Social constructionists, on the other hand, focus on people's engagement and interactions. These interactions are embedded within available discourses. A discourse here refers to all representations, meanings, stories, perspectives, images and the like that together form a particular understanding of the world (Burr, 2015). Discourses construct our world through what is said, written and represented. They are constantly interacting and are mostly operating behind the scenes.

Social constructionists contend that people's behaviors are the product of existing discourses and social processes. Therefore, there is no internal essence or predetermined nature of behaviors or people. As Gergen explains:

> In all that we say and do, we manifest conditions of relationships. In whatever we think, remember, create and feel-in all that is meaningful to us—we participate in relationship. The word "I" does not index an origin of action, but a relational achievement. (2009a, p. 133), and also "Behind the façade of unity, coherence, and wholeness lies another world. It is a world rich in resources and incipient conflict, born in relationships and daily gaining dimension" (2009a, p. 135).

Holding such a perspective, social constructionists deny the existence of an inside permanent personality with a definable or discoverable nature. It stands in contrast with the traditional vision of *Bounded Being*— "The ideal of internally integrated, harmonious, and coherent mind" (Gergen, 2009a, p. 135). Because a person is viewed as inconsistent with no fixed traits, human 'nature' can be understood as much more malleable than what is assumed by traditional psychology.

6. **Focus on Process.** Complementary to the focus on connections and interactions, social constructionists emphasize the dynamics between people and what they construct together rather than something that a particular person has or does not have.

7. **Knowledge is Perspective Contingent.** All knowledge is derived from a perspective and is in the service of certain interests. For the social constructionists there is no truth or objective fact. All our knowledge is partial as it is constructed within a context and from a particular standpoint, and it is one way of viewing the world among many potential ways.
8. **The Constitutive Function of Language.**

   Language as a Precondition for Thought-Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953), who significantly influenced social constructionists' thinking, rationalized that since all concepts and categories used come from our interactions and language, language precedes thought. Conceptualized in many ways, there has been an ongoing debate in psychology about the link between thought and language. The prevalent claim is that language is the expression of thought rather than what is suggested by social constructionists that language is a pre-condition of thought. Social constructionists look at the formation of discourses to understand the human subjective experience.

   Language is Not Passive-Not only does language precede thought, according to social constructionists, words are not just a passive tool to describe a reality—they construct the reality. The world is being constructed in the interaction. What is being said and the representation of things are critical to the way people think. Rather than merely descriptive of our thinking and ideas, as commonly assumed, language is functional, creating our thought (Burr, 2015).

The Backdrop of Social Construction. Social construction has drawn its ideas from multiple sources in the humanities and literary criticism (e.g., Burr, 2015; Gergen, 2009a; 2009b; Hollinger, 1994; McNamee, 2004; McNamee & Gergen, 1999; Sampson, 2008), particularly those of the French philosophers, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. The postmodernism movement was its major source of influence. Postmodernism challenges values such as reason, scientific truth and objectivity that characterize modernist thinking. In contrast to modernism, it signifies a rejection of a definitive truth and underlines, instead, the multiplicity of thoughts, contexts, and actions. According to social constructionists, our complex world today can no longer be understood by a single all-encompassing system of knowledge. Rather than a single truth or reality, postmodernism thinking recognizes the diversity in how we understand our life and construct meaning. It is inevitable that this abundant diversity will produce differences and conflicts. Yet, an important implication of

this thinking is that there is no point in searching for the Truth, in trying to discover an underlying single and fixed grand theory, but rather to explore and coordinate a variety of viewpoints.

Social constructionists question widespread assumptions particularly the core principles of traditional psychology. Psychologists' interpretations, according to social constructionists, should not be seen as human natures but rather within the context of culture and time. There are no internal essences or predetermined nature of things or people given that all is human construction in which language is key for understanding processes and outcomes.

> It is within coordinated action that we find the source of all that we take to be real, rational, or good… all faculties traditionally attributed to the internal world of the agent—reason, emotion, motivation, memory, experience, and the like—are essentially performances within relationship. (Gergen, 2009a, p. 397)

Destructive Conflict as Inherent within an Individualist Stance. Social constructionism provides both a critical approach of Western thought and a useful set of principles on which to base a contextual-relational perspective on the emergence and transformation of conflict. Examining the positioning of a self as an ideal, distinct and independent with clear boundaries shed light on the understanding of the nature of the relationship generated. This positioning of the self has generated constant competition and destructive conflict: "We act on the belief that our own integrity and autonomy as individuals requires that we be vigilant lest we become overwhelmed by the ever-threatening otherness around us" (Sampson, 2008, p. 50). If the self is a bounded container, what is within the container must be protected while everything that is located outside is potentially threatening and dangerous (e.g., Gergen, 2009a, Sampson, 2008). Relationships have no intrinsic value. They became secondary or optional and others present a constant threat to a person's autonomy and a coherence of self. As discussed in the last chapter, the pursuit of a perfect self puts us constantly in a protection mode of a positive self and an action by the other that differs from or contradicts our desired image is jeopardizing our perfect, coherent self. The higher the desire for a coherent or solid self, the more threatening is the other.

A distinction between the self as a whole and the traditional view of a self as *perfect* may further illuminate the problem of a perfect self. The expectation of perfection in Western traditions (Gergen, 2009a)

may *imprison* us in a condition of an infinite pursuit of a positive image. Driven to be seen as perfect, people may present to the outside only what they view as positive while hiding or repressing what the self or others perceive as *negative* (e.g., unknown, rejected). More problematic is that "we do not only hide these aspects from others but also from ourselves," Noga Bar, the founder of the Dialogic Experience, emphasizes. Hiding these dimensions from ourselves drives rejection and other defensive reactions and distorts our relationships (see Yin and Yang model in Chapter Five).

People are drawn to a continuous struggle to maintain a sense of personal adequacy and the integrity of the self and, especially when the self comes under threat (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). They are continually urged to present their self in a positive light and constantly seek approval of others. The encounter with a potentially threatening other is fraught with rejection, defensive behaviors, and destructive conflicts. In this context of a constant need to protect a positive self, defensiveness is inseparable of the of relational process within an individualist tradition.

Sampson (2008) explains that social construction is distorted whenever one party to the interaction plays a principal role, as it does in Western culture, in "determining the qualities and life changes of its dialogic partner, thereby transforming a dialogue into a monologue" (p. 24). The relationship generated in such culture is monologic in its nature. Furthermore, being always on guard for not losing the self to the other and protecting boundaries, the other is also undermined or downgraded to boost the self:

> I do not simply protect my integrity by erecting a firm boundary to separate me from the other, I also work to construct an other whose qualities ensure that my own integrity will remain unscathed and intact." (Sampson, 2008, p. 37)

The other is downgraded and positioned negatively to secure a superior stance of the self and the interaction is distorted. Gergen (2009a) warns that we "construct worlds in which others are irrational, unthinking, sinful, and so on" (Gergen, 2009, p. 13). Suspicion, distrust, derogation, and dishonesty are daily hostile behaviors people experience (Gergen, 2009a).

Gergen claims that there is a tight link between the self-bounded individual and the quality of the relationships generated. This Self-Other formulation does not allow parties to collaborate and jointly "determine the terms of their existence" (Sampson, 2008, p. 24). Rather than equally participating, one side

dominates the relational process and that side plays a primary role in determining the life of the Other.

Serviceable other. Sampson (2008) claims that the distortion of human connection is intensified by monologism that privileges a few over others. Monologism echoes many centuries of power held by the fortunate few who have dominated the discourse while others struggle to be heard. A few, mostly white men, have had the power and privilege over many who have not been heard. Images of others by the governing few have dictated attitudes and feelings toward them. Immigrants, refugees, minorities or deprived constituencies on the basis of gender, religion or race have become the image bestowed on them by the dominant group (Sampson, 2008). The result is an instrumental relationship: "dominant groups create serviceable others whose creation gives both self and other the very qualities that define their human nature" (Sampson, 2008, p. 19). When one takes priority as bounded, the other becomes merely an object to satisfy one's own needs.

Martin Buber (1987[1923]) termed this mode of relation between an overriding self and an exploitable other as *I-It* relation. He believed that social relation in our culture is predominated by I-It relations—a subject-object relationship in which the other is an object utilized to satisfy one's self-interest. The other is out there to either contribute to or reduce one's pleasure. People become a commodity and relationships are always subject to suspicion. Relationship is maintained as long as a person's needs are fulfilled. Expressions of concern, commitment and feelings are suspected as false, generating a sense of distrust (Gergen, 2009a). Individualism, says Gergen (2009a), is the root of an instrumental, exploitative attitude towards others.

The monolithic conceptualization brings forth the element of power, which is crucial to understanding prevalent, unequal modes of relation. In a monologic context, self and other are not equal co-creators of a reality. Only the dominant party plays a primary role and determines its existence while the other is just a mean for its satisfaction. In such a reality, destructive conflict is catalyzed.

Since power is fundamental for understanding the nature of relationship and conflict, I discuss this factor next, before exploring an alternative to the instrumental relational type. As presented next, if power is shifted, the quality of relationship and the nature of conflict change.

Power Defines the Quality of Relationship

Power is the crux of conflict, therefore, a key for understanding relational dynamics and the possibility of shifting them. Gaps in power within a culture that privileges a few over others distort human connection (Sampson, 2008). A few, mostly white men, have had the power and privilege for many decades over many who have not been heard, preserving instrumental relationship. This form of relationship develops oppression and deepens division, and so catalyzes destructive conflict. Furthermore, an individualist, monologic formulation is fundamentally undemocratic for it creates and sustains inequality (e.g., Bowers, 1991; Fabian, 2002; Sampson, 1991, 2008). The negotiation of diversity from a singular, dominant perspective implies a hierarchically higher position asserted by the privileged, a condition that results in distorted structure of relationship, a marginalized, deprived other, and destructive conflicts.

Power is Relational. Excluding the use of force, power is a property of relationships rather than a quality of the individual. Based on Dunbar's (2015) definition, Hocker and Wilmot, 2018) propose a relational definition of power: "the ability to produce intended effects, and particularly the ability to influence the behavior of another person, and to resist the influence attempts of others" (p. 110). A person has power over another to the extent that the other depends on that person and vice versa. This perspective is meaningful from a relational outlook that recognizes that an expression is meaningless if left unnoticed by the other person.

Power is Perceived Negatively and Denied. The perception of power is at the heart of conflict theory and analysis (Lasswell, 2009). However, while forces of power determine the nature of our relationships, they are often exercised covertly (Dunbar, 2015). Recall the language and tone your supervisor used when asking you to do something or when you were not invited to an event your friends were. Such actions determine the positioning of self and other in the relationship. One of my coachees shared how her supervisor conducted a meeting with her employees without informing her or consulting with her beforehand. Later, when my coachee raised her concern with her supervisor, his response was that he is informing her now (aftermath), ignoring the fact that he did not consult with her ahead of time. In another case, when a manager was not invited to a meeting, her supervisor justified her action by claiming that she was under pressure and expected the secretary to inform her.

As in the case of conflict, power is perceived negatively, and therefore, difficult, if not impossible, for people to discuss. The use of power is typically denied. Refusing to cooperate when people rely on you is one way to exercise power. Sometimes passive aggression is used when people feel they have low power, but they lack the skills to directly express their anger or build balanced power to avoid destructive relationship. An employee who repeatedly did not show up for scheduled meetings with her new supervisor or was late kept giving various excuses, such as: "a customer stepped into my office" or "a crisis happened and I had to take care of it" or "it has been a rough day today." Applying power is often denied and covered by other explanations. In another case, a supervisor was trying to build genuine relationships with his team. When he talked with them about the importance of team collaboration, all members responded positively and agreed about its importance, but when he asked them to raise power issues, there was silence.

The Importance of Balancing Power. Imbalanced power brings strong feelings to both those with low as well as those with high power. It also distorts the view of oneself, other, and relationship. Whether power is perceived as high or low, it leads to patterns of destructive interactions, such as corruption, emotional withdrawal, aggression, revenge, sabotage, cheating, and other destructive behaviors, which are likely to end relationships. When power become unbalanced, it creates paradoxes. For example, from the outside, one might assume that a quiet person in an interaction has less power than the loud one, but the person who is loud may build her arguments around the estimation of the reaction of the silent one. Without understanding the nature of the relationship, it is impossible to estimate the power of each party. Thus, analyzing power is essential for understanding the nature of relationships and the possibilities for their transformation.

More balanced and collaborative relationships hinge upon forms of balanced power. Realigning power for our benefits can be learned and exercised daily. However, collaboration is not sufficiently valued in an individualistic culture that prizes individual achievement and maintains a win-lose structure. In a culture where the individual is constantly pushed to protect a positive self, competition and behaviors such as patronizing and undermining the other are commonplace. The result is distorted connections and destructive conflict.

Balanced power can move us beyond interfering with each other. Through effective communication, better coordination, and higher synergy, more power can be generated for each than what each could have

gained separately. For a balanced power to materialize, we must recognize that power imbalances do not support best outcomes. When accepting our interdependency, the task of balancing power becomes a mutual responsibility. In the next section I propose a *Dialogic Mode of Relationship* as a constructive mode I aspired to build in our practice. This mode relies on balanced power. I discuss the challenge in establishing balanced power within an individualist culture. Conceptual models presented in Chapter Five can be helpful for practicing relational transformation to more dialogic forms of connection.

A Dialogic Mode of Relationship

As understood throughout this inquiry, conflict is viewed as instigated and evolving within relationship. Conflict transformation, as presented earlier and further discussed in the next section, concerns a change in the quality of the relationship—from adversarial to dialogic. After presenting the destructive nature of relationship that are typically formed within an individualist context, I discuss a dialogic mode of relationship—a constructive and inclusive form of relation, its beneficial qualities for learning and development, and philosophical inspirations.

Though we live in a world that enables us to connect everyone anywhere through an exponential growth of social networks and new technologies, this ability does not guarantee quality relations--genuine connectedness that encourages collaboration and the ability to learn from our differences. The conventional monolithic conceptualization sustains what Buber termed I-It relation and adversarial, argumentative interactions. Deeply rooted in individualist discourse, these habitual ways of relating have become prevalent. The question stays: how can these confrontational patterns transform into more collaborative, inclusive, dialogic relations wherein diversity in perspectives becomes beneficial? Addressing this question requires reconsidering the issue of power and its distribution. Therefore, the form of dialogic relation proposed in this dissertation is discussed within the context of power.

According to Bhabha (1990), Heath and colleagues (2006), most conceptions of dialogue include a relatively weak discussion of power. Bhabha (1990) adds that many dialogue projects unintentionally reproduce subtle but dominant and hegemonic power relations. Heath and colleagues (2006) suggest that dialogue programs that focus on joint decision making are of much greater value than those that simply aim at greater understanding among participants. Furthermore, dialogues with the actual presence of people who

represent a diversity of interests and perspectives in the discussion are of a greater value than dialogues among members that represent other groups and are committed to the groups they represent.

The distinction between a dialogic and monologic relation places 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, 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. These actions reflect a way of being with one another. In the same way, I use the term dialogue in this inquiry as a way of being rather than doing. Dialogic relation refer to a certain way of being with one another, not to conducting a discussion or a conversation, as dialogue is typically viewed.

Traditionally, dialogue is used as a *noun* to describe a conversation or discussion. Gergen and colleagues (2001), for example, describe dialogue as "simply a conversation between two or more persons" (p. 681). In contrast, the concept of dialogue is used here as an *adjective*—dialogic, to connote a certain quality of relating or a way of being in a relation. The shift from noun to adjective suggests a shift to the *How* rather from the *What*—how people relate to one another, how they are together or to one another rather than what they *Do* together. Being dialogic suggests a particular quality of relationship in mundane life, not a single event or occasion of interaction.

The dialogic alternative to a distorted, unequal social formulation is based on an understanding of the value of the other and relationship within which participants equally co-construct of their reality. Self and other are both valuable and determine the terms of their existence rather than a self who controls the other. All parties equally express themselves, co-influence and co-create the connection. A dialogic mode of relation can take place only when one party does not dominate the other or the social exchange. Power is shared by all participants in the construction of the self and other (Sampson, 2008). The "silenced" other is heard on their own terms. By actively and equally relating to one another across differences, in their own terms, this inclusive formula of engagement rely on balanced power and allows for an expanded understanding of one another, with the aim of transforming underlying issues, not towards agreement, but in a direction that promotes a greater mutual understanding. Inclusion, the act of including someone as part of a

group (Cambridge dictionary), happens when both are being valued differences—the uniqueness each individual brings and the commonalities- the shared sense of belonging (Catalyst).

The idea of dialogue has evolved over the years by many distinguished thinkers in many disciplines, who probed beyond the tradition of our separate beingness and shifted toward the social realm in shaping individual selves. The dialogue concept derives from the old Greek word *Dialogos* in which *Dia* is through, and logos means word or meaning (Bohm, 1996; Bohm et al., 1991). Literally, the ancient understanding of the term logos was to gather together. Dialogue, accordingly, is understood in this inquiry, as a flow of meaning created conjointly. 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 offers 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.

Martin Heidegger (1968) attempted to transcend the traditional subject/object distinction--a subject surrounded by others bounded objects. It is visually illustrated by his concept *dasein* of the self always being situated—*Being-in-the-world*, always in interdependent relations with others. Yet, it is unclear how separated and bounded are the others. For Gergen (2009a), he did not go far enough, beyond the private space of consciousness. The human connection might remain fundamentally I-It form of relation.

While scholars and practitioners make distinctions between dialogue and other forms of communication, such as debate, discussion, and conversation, there are also many ways of understanding and practicing dialogue. Significant to how dialogue is approached here, prominent scholars such as Buber (1923), Bakhtin (1984), Bohm (1996), Levinas (1969; 1985), Parker-Follett (1942), Gergen et al. (1999; 2001), Pearce, (Pearce & Pearce, 2000), and Taylor (1989), saw dialogue as a relational practice. This approach reflects a shift from the traditional individualistic perspective in which a person is observed as a separate, autonomous and inward-oriented, to viewing the self and relations as interdependent, emerging, and constantly evolving. Dialogic relating is suggested as an alternative possibility for being together, one that hopefully fosters reciprocal ongoing growth.

Buber's relational work (1987[1923]) 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 complement 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 (1981) analyzed *expressions*—"utterances" within a context of exchange formed through a speaker's relation to *Otherness*, and later Bohm (1996) stressed free flowing conversation within which participants experience each point-of-view equally and nonjudgmentally bring about new and deeper understanding. These scholars offer ways to transcend the self-other divide by underscoring the ongoing dialectic interaction. Dissatisfied with the monologic account of human experience 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.

Social constructionists, including Kenneth Gergen (e.g., 2009a, 2009b), Sheila McNamee (e.g., 2004), and John Shotter (1993), move on beyond the individualistic perspective to the dialogic space between individuals. Shotter's (2011) focus is on the ways in which we respond to others and othernesses and how the response is always created between us. He revels in the inner qualities of life as it is lived moment by moment. Gergen's proposition to remove "the reality of a distinctly inner or mental world… to eliminate the very distinction between inner and outer, and to replace it with a view of relationally embodied action" (Gergen, 2009a p. xx) resonates the dialogic approach proposed here.

Martin Buber's (1987[1923]) game-changer I-Thou relation—*Subject-Subject* alternative of relation to *I-It* relation—*Subject-Object* mode has powerfully inspired my practice. We took upon ourselves the objective to operationalize I-Thou relations in daily acts in the dialogic projects in schools and other institutions. First published in 1923, Buber's thought was groundbreaking in a world predominantly

characterized by I-It relation. In his suggestion of I-Thou mode of relation, the other is viewed as valuable on its own terms and equally active in the relation. What seems at first glance as a relationship between two separate, autonomous individuals, offers a significant step forward toward the relational space generated by them. In that space, the boundaries between self and other become blurred and reveal mutuality.

While I-It relation denotes communication between separated and isolated selves wherein things take place in each person's mind, I-Thou indicates a generative reciprocal relation with a focus on the space created between two equal Thou's (Buber, 1923, 1965). The self in I-Thou is not distinguished from the other but is transformed through an evolving connection between self and other. Akin to Buber's vision of relation, the form of dialogic relation proposed here, is a genuine encounter between the self and the other in which both actively and equally relate to one another and communicate differences in their own terms (see also in Chapter One). Both the self and other are active partners in co-constituting their relationship. The positioning of the other is transformed from being an object to self to being an equal, active partner. Similarly, Sampson (2008) suggests celebrating the other:

> 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)

Buber's I-Thou relation, denotes a *dialogical* principle (Buber, 1965) wherein a genuine meeting is enabled through openness to the other's whole way of being. Because Thou is a whole subject as I, the I of I-Thou is different from the I of I-It. Through Thou, a person becomes I and vice versa. Buber described a genuine dialogue, which he believed was rare, as follows: "whether spoken or silent – where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them" (Buber, 1965, p. 19).

In the introduction to *Between Man and Man* (1965 [1947]), Maurice Friedman, who dedicated most of his academic work to Martin Buber's work, highlights the I-Thou *Dialogical* principle. In I and Thou, Buber contrasts man's two primary attitudes—the two ways in which we approach existence… the difference

between these two relationships is not in the nature of the object to which one relates… the difference, rather, is in the relationship itself (Buber, 1965). I-Thou is a relationship of openness, directness, mutuality, and presence. Conversely, I-It, is a relationship in which one knows and uses other persons or things without allowing them to exist for oneself in their uniqueness. The relational twofold principle Buber offered for being in the world—I-Thou and I-It suggests a relation in which neither part is complete without the other. The pairs signify how people address one another. Buber's two modes of relation do not indicate entities but refer to relations.

A dialogical relational stance, as proposed by Buber (1923, 1967), and further theorized by other prominent scholars, such as Anderson and Cissna (1997; Cissna & Anderson, 1998, 2002), Friedman (2002), and Pearce and Pearce (2000), has significantly shaped the understanding I propose in this inquiry. A dialogical stance is not about each party's expression of an opinion, as it is often the goal of dialogues as conversations. Rather, it is about experiencing a genuine connection between equal human beings. By dialogic relating, I refer to a special way of being with one another, an authentic and open ongoing connection in which parties co-construct a true meeting where they are fully present and accept each other's differences and commonalities. A true meeting occurs, according to Friedman (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8WUMBNAZPI), when parties fully confirm and affirm each other. He explains:

> I-Thou is not the sum of two individuals, but a third reality that comes into being only when there is a true meeting. A real meeting is where we are living, healing, and confirmation occurs… a confirmation has to do not just with accepting the other but affirming the other… and it even includes times of wrestling with the other… genuine inter-human interaction.

It is this emphasis on the ontological reality of the "between" and the possibility of truly experiencing the other "that distinguishes Buber from other existentialists as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, and even Tillich."[3] For example, Kierkegaard turned to god, escaping from the angst of life where an individual is being overwhelmed by an enormous amount of decisions she has to make with little understanding. For him,

[3] Introduction by Friedman to Buber's, *Between Man and Man*, 1967, p. xvi.

the connection between man and man becomes secondary to the exclusive connection with god—the only way to live life full of meaning.

In a later work, three essential aspects of Buber's dialogue were identified by Cissna and Anderson (1998): 1. Recognizing others as unique and whole, and being able to see their reality; 2. Genuine relation without pretense or reservation of sharing what is important; and 3. Respect for the other wherein the other is being supported to fully unfold.

While some social constructionists might see Buber's work as a residue of the individualist tradition, I believe that the I-Thou relational principle powerfully pushes the boundaries of the understanding of separated selves toward the space created in-between them. While individualism may create a fundamental condition of isolation and distrust between self-contained individuals and constantly push people into a competition stance (Gergen, 2009b), I-Thou offers an alternative way of thinking about the human connection that is expressed by social constructionists when speaking about the co-construction process.

Buber's I-Thou has stimulated not only the development of a theory of the possible dialogic nature of our being together, but also has been a source of inspiration of my practice. The major goal of this dissertation, as of many social constructionists, is to advance the practice of change (Gergen, 2009a). Shifting to a dialogic mode carries significant practical implications.

As experienced in democratic and dialogic spaces, it is essential to revisit invisible, old habits of understanding to change our being together. Our perspective on self and others has a bearing on our actions. As Gergen (2009a, p. 2) puts it "What we take to be the world importantly depends on how we approach it." Our perspective arises within an existing discourse we are embedded in. Therefore, identifying and reconsidering underlying, implicit assumptions about the way we construct our reality, and position the self and other are necessary for changing how we are with one another. For this reason, the broader underlying cultural, social, and psychological backdrop of our understanding of self-other-relation is explored throughout this inquiry.

The Challenge of Cultivating a Dialogic Relationship. A dialogic mode of relating is proposed here as a constructive alternative to adversarial habits of connections. However, building constructive, more balanced modes of relationship, where self and other are equal co-creators of reality is difficult to achieve, if not

impossible in a Western setting (Sampson, 2008). 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" (Sampson, 2008, p. 14). The type of relationships generated within an individualist environment starkly contrast with the form of dialogic relations proposed here.

Should Leadership Change to Create more Balanced and Inclusive Organizations? As presented, unequal power dictates hierarchical structures, fosters separation and disparaging behaviors. Transforming relations is contingent on the redistribution of power equally. The more equal the distribution of power; the more constructive forms of relation, such as dialogic relation and inclusion could materialize.

Reconstructing relationships and rendering them more inclusive and dialogic requires to challenge power and authority structures. However, in an unequal society, not everyone is equally interested in equality. Those who enjoy power and privilege often do not see an incentive to interact on the same plane with those with less power. The inclusive environments we hope to build might be perceived by leaders as ultimately breaching their authority. To protect their privileged status, leaders might reject collaboration, at least implicitly. Their personal, immediate prerogative might overshadow long-term considerations even if changes could be for the betterment of themselves. Thus, they might be unwilling to reconstruct organizations in the spirit of equal power.

At the same time, paradoxically we rely on those with power to change the structure of power. Their actions are critical for balancing power and transforming the ways conflict is approached. The actions of those who are perceived as powerful prove to be more influential than the actions of the less powerful (Sampson, 2008). What they do is far more impactful than the actions of those who are less powerful. Therefore, the highest effect on the way differences and conflicts is approached will be if the more powerful take action. If leaders and the powerful recognize the benefits of balanced connections and transformed conflicts, not only for the organizations or the communities they lead, but also for themselves, in the long-run, they might be motivated to drive change.

What could prompt leaders to build more dialogic environments? This is a significant matter to keep examining. Balanced power can benefit all, including those who are perceived with having high power. Given that those in power positions are dependent on others, balancing power could help them to achieve

their own goals and accomplish optimal results for the organizations they lead. Balanced power fosters productive and long term relation with their subordinates, who can in turn achieve their managers' valued outcomes. As most successful teams and organizations rely on shared power (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018), balancing power is not an option, but a necessity.

The discussion about the motivation of the powerful to promote more balanced connections and diverse perspectives should go beyond moral or philosophical considerations. Research shows that the most creative solutions, optimal, and sustainable outcomes depend on cooperation and the incorporation of diverse perspectives. Diversity positively affects strategy and company performance (https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/za/Documents/technology-media-telecommunications/za_Wome_in_the_boardroom_a_global_perspective_fifth_edition.pdf). Diversity can be a vibrant resource for groups and organizations to catalyze innovation under the right conditions.

If an environment is inclusive—characterized by openness to and appreciation of difference, diversity is beneficial. Inclusion requires acknowledgement and acceptance of every voice, which advances a sense of belonging and encourages participation of all so that no one feels the need to hide their difference. When people experience inclusion, they feel safe and valued, which encourage them to engage and contribute back to the community. On the other hand, when social asymmetries are preserved, it hurts the overall performance as many perspectives are silenced and the contribution of low power stakeholders is constrained.

After presenting the desired form of relation I advocate for, next, I examine approaches to the phenomenon of conflict and conflict transformation and the call for a more relational, nuanced perspective of conflict. Following this section, I provide a few examples of the principles underlying social constructionism that could benefit the idea of conflict transformation.

Conflict and Conflict Transformation

The Problem and Definition. Conflict is defined here as an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, limited resources, and interference from others to achieve their goals (Hocker &Wilmot, 2017). The expressed struggle and interference components are what differentiates conflicts from differences. People who have differences in views or goals do not necessarily

struggle against or interfere with one another.

If people are not interdependent, conflict does not take place. Conflict is a mutual activity between people who rely on one another. It evolves through moving from episode to episode in an ongoing unfolding pattern of interaction between the parties. The interpretations and reactions of each party shape those of the others. As with power, perception – the way conflict is viewed – is at the heart of the conflict experience and greatly determines the initial reaction to it and the conflict trajectory. Though they may not be aware of the origin of their decisions, parties react to one another assuming there are differences in their goals or that there are not enough resources, or that the other person is getting in the way of something on purpose.

Some suggest that for a conflict to exist, at least one party must behave in interference with the other (Deutsch, 1973). In this study, the emphasis is on perception—whether one perceives the other person as interfering with something that is valuable for a person. Therefore, a careful attention to underlying relational dynamics and assumptions shaping the experience is necessary to transform conflict. Focusing on the cultural context and interactions—how we treat one another or position each other in the interaction—should shed light on the possibility for transformation.

Negative Perception of Conflict is Widespread Despite its Potential Benefits. Conflict is typically perceived negatively—an ill that causes problems, and therefore, efforts made to eliminate it. However, this negative attitude toward conflict and the frequent association of the experience with psychopathology, disruption, violence, and war are some of the damaging potentials of conflict when it takes a destructive course (Deutsch, 2003). In contrast, when conflict takes a constructive course, it is potentially of a considerable personal and social value. Loaded with energy, conflicts are likely to become a generator of positive change and bring an enormous potential for learning and growth (e.g., Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973; Lederach, 2003, Simmel, 1955). It is through conflicts that a person could gain new perspectives and help in generating innovative ideas and solutions (e.g., Coleman, 2011; Deutsch, 1973).

Research consistently shows that conflicts carry opportunities for development, positive change, going beyond what is already known, and learning more about others and ourselves (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012). If positively approached and in certain circumstances, conflicts can be quite beneficial. If handled constructively, conflict it could produce substantial benefits.

The benefits of conflict, Deutsch (2003) proposes, include stimulating interest and curiosity, improving solutions, preventing stagnation and generating individual and social change. Coser (1956) suggests conflict has integrative potential for relationships, contributing to revitalizing norms and developing new ones. The "point is not how to eliminate or prevent conflict but rather, how to make it productive" (Deutsch, 1973, p. 17). In other words, conflict is not inherently good or bad, what is important is how conflict is perceived and handled. Our reactions and the social conditions determine whether a conflict will be a constructive process and will carry positive outcomes. Furthermore, the number of conflicts experienced does not seem to predict poor wellbeing as much as whether people perceive the conflict to be positive or handle the conflict constructively (Malis & Roloff, 2006).

Despite the tremendous potential hidden in conflict, the opportunity is often instantly missed due to strong negative emotions that promptly arise at the emergence of conflict. Actions that typically follow, such as defensiveness, power struggles, retaliation, loss of interest, distance, hostility, lack of joy, and blaming, generates social contamination. Interactions turn into a painful battle with no learning or advancement.

It is this point of becoming defensive and shutting off that intrigues me and motivated this inquiry with the goal of better understanding these dynamics to enable a change in their trajectory. My interest is in the conditions that can alleviate these emotionally charged situations to enable a constructive experience. Learning to feel more comfortable with the experience, to respond in a way that does not come naturally, and changing habitual behaviors, requires reflection to increase awareness to most deeply held, invisible values, assumptions and biases. Transforming these prevalent reactions to conflict requires more than a set of skills or techniques. It calls for a shift in how conflict is viewed.

Conflict can become productive or destructive depending on a number of factors, such as perception, the context in which it occurs, and forms of communication. Defensive reactions impede constructive conflict. Conflict is categorized as destructive if all participants are dissatisfied with the outcomes of a conflict and think they have lost as a result. The experience can get very costly if its potential benefits are not materialized (Deutsch, 2003).

Deutsch (2000) suggests that constructive processes of conflict resolution are similar to cooperative processes and destructive processes of conflict resolution are similar to competitive processes. His response

to the question on how to foster cooperative relationships is based on his eponymous *Crude Law of Social Relations* theory: "The characteristic processes and effects elicited by a given type of social relationship also tend to elicit that type of social relationship"(p. 29). For example, cooperative responses induce and are induced by readiness to be helpful; openness in communication; trusting and friendly attitudes; sensitivity to common interests and de-emphasis of opposed interests; an orientation toward enhancing mutual power rather than power differences. Competition induces and is induced by the use of tactics of coercion, threat, or deception; attempts to enhance the power differences between oneself and the other; poor communication; minimization of the awareness of similarities in values and increased sensitivity to opposed interests; suspicious and hostile attitudes.

Some of the implications of his theory are that a cooperative orientation of the parties will facilitate constructive conflict. Social support is critical to creating and maintaining a cooperative orientation. Constructive conflict is more likely when the parties reframe their understanding of their goals and conflict, coming to see their respective goals as positively interdependent and the conflict as a joint problem. This process should be based on norms such as fairness, respect, responsiveness, acknowledging responsibility and forgiveness, emphasizing the positive and seeking common ground. Constructive conflict resolution relies on fundamental values of reciprocity, human equality, human fallibility, shared community, and nonviolence. These values are widely shared and can provide common ground between otherwise harshly conflicting parties.

The Social Environment Shapes Conflict. A prevalent view of conflict often carries an assumption that human nature is inherently aggressive. Yet, several conflict scholars and practitioners suggest different explanations about destructive conflict and echo the approach suggested in my inquiry. For example, leading scientists from across the globe released a statement that violence is not human nature but a social construct (Seville Manifesto, 1986- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seville_Statement_on_Violence). Galtung (1969) has long emphasized the role the environment plays in fostering adversarial interactions and destructive conflicts. Galtung's structural violence concept describes a condition in which certain social structures or institutions deny the access of certain people, often minorities or lower-class members, to powerful resources typically enjoyed by others, leaving them deprived of basic needs.

Burton (1984; 1996) also views the social environment as a key player in shaping human behavior. Human aggressiveness, he claims, is structural rather than individual-centered. His assertion is that the systemic and institutional conditions rather than aggressive human attributes are culpable of aggression and violent conflict. Depriving human needs such as recognition, participation, and security, according to Burton, results in violent conflict.

Furthermore, while a common view is that aggressiveness is attributed primarily to the quest of material gain (Burton, 1996, p. 7), theory and practice point out that material reasons are rarely a primary source of conflict. Burton (1996) offers alternative explanations as unfulfilled non-material and intangible omissions as sources for various types of conflicts. For example, identity, cultural and ethnic issues are at the heart of many international disputes, labor struggles revolve around relationships between workers and management rather than merely salaries, and marital conflicts are frequently about non-material issues, such as recognition and appreciation. Research has indicated that nonfinancial motivators are more effective than extra cash in building long-term employee engagement (e.g., Gibbons, 2006). This study that emphasizes the critical role of the social environment (see also Chapter Four) for transforming conflict relies on the work of these scholars.

The Problem-Solving Approach to Conflict. As introduced in Chapter One, the individualistic philosophical framework is well established in the theories and practices of conflict resolution.

The problem-solving approach has dominated the field of conflict resolution and mediation since its outset. Tangible outcomes as solutions, settlements, and agreements have been a central focus in the field. Typically, Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) methods, such as mediation, are designed to assist parties with perceived opposing interests in finding solutions to their interests and objectives (Bush & Folger, 1994; Charkoudian et al., 2009; Fisher & Ury, 1981; Picard, 2000; Winslade & Monk, 2001).

The individual is assumed to act independently and fully accountable for her decisions. Self-determination is a fundamental principle of mediation. The mediation process relies upon the ability of the parties to reach voluntary and uncoerced agreements. In negotiation, instrumental goals privilege substantive issues over relational and identity management goals. Emphasis on instrumental goals drives attention away from invisible relational and identity drivers for the purpose of reaching settlements. Even when relational

and identity goals are recognized, they are treated through an instrumental lens (e.g., Curhan et al., 2006; 2010; Putnam, 1994; Wilson & Putnam, 1990)—parties need to build trust so that they can reach their desired settlement. Relational issues become a tactic to achieve negotiator needs.

Though it was acknowledged that addressing conflicts calls for diverse perspectives, managing relationships, and encouraging parties' joint efforts, the focus on the individual as a driving force of conflict and negotiation persisted (e.g., Fisher et al., 1991; Kolb & Putnam, 1997; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). Although dominant approaches to conflict and negotiation have built an abundant field of study with powerful descriptive and explanatory ability, new perspectives must provide a nuanced, richer approach (Putnam, 1994). As she claimed:

> Traditional orientations, for the most part, fail to see, explain, or understand what is hidden or "invisible" … Traditional approaches highlight key elements of the process, shove many features of negotiation into the background and conceal other elements that are rarely noticed. (p. 337)

The focus on the individual blinds us to important aspects of the complex negotiation process. The study of conflict ignores critical aspects that could be used to better understand the complexity and dynamics of conflict. The fluidity and ambiguity that characterize conflictual conditions including relational, emotional, and identity issues are not quite captured. Relying on a traditional set of principles including the individual at the forefront, instrumental goals, and rationality as a favored way of knowing might offer a somewhat limited account of conflict.

Furthermore, relational considerations are important for conflict resolution experts as well as the parties involved in conflicts. Mediators often describe their approach as eclectic and express interest in pursuing relational goals (e.g., Charkoudian et al., 2009; Picard, 2000). Also, negotiators frequently express concern about relational goals, beyond tangible ones, and rate both as equally important (Curhan et al., 2006; 2010). They wish to pursue a range of social psychological goals, such as identity-positive feelings about themselves, relational, and process related interests (Curhan et al., 2006).

Challenging the Problem-Solving Approach. In the middle of the 1990s, this set of ideas that had dominated the field of conflict came under scrutiny (e.g., Bush & Folger, 1994/2005; Cobb, 2001/2006;

Curhan et al., 2006; 2010; Greenhalgh & Lewicki 2003; Putnam, 1994; Winslade & Monk 2001). Putnam (1994) suggested that:

> Even though negotiation scholars recognize that bargaining is a complex dyadic and team-based activity, they continue to house the authority for negotiation in the individual. Basically, the individual is the driving force of negotiation, even though the process may entail multiparty endeavors. (p. 341)

New approaches to mediation that emerged in the mid and the end of the 1990's disputed the problem-solving approach. Advocating the promise of mediation, beyond reaching settlements, Bush and Folger (1994) introduced a transformative approach to mediation. Their goal is to assist parties to change the quality of their interaction. Bush and Folger saw a great potential in mediation to improve relationships through increased self-awareness toward oneself and the other. They view the relational aspect as key to understanding the possibilities of transforming adversarial interactions (e.g., Bush & Folger, 1994). To accomplish transformation, they argue, it is essential to develop a more complex understanding of self and relation. Bush and Folger (1994; 2005) propose that transformation occurs when the view of self is being shifted from an individualist to a relational one.

Challenging the assumptions of traditional approaches to negotiation, Putnam (1994) argues that negotiation models ignore significant aspects of conflict management and that they can be improved by developing a variety of alternative theories. Viewing negotiation as a problem-solving tool, it is used as an instrument for achieving substantive objectives. As an alternative, Putnam (1994) suggests viewing negotiation as a transformative process for producing fundamental change in the way parties understand themselves, the conflict, their relationship, and their situation.

She criticizes the view of individuals as the driving force in negotiations. Instead of emphasizing individual agency, autonomy, and self-interest, she suggests focusing on relations as a driving force in negotiation and changing them as a primary objective. Finally, Putnam (1994) claims that privileging substantive issues undermines relational and identity objectives and pulls negotiators' attention away from relational dynamics and fluctuating concerns. A dialogic view, in her opinion, offers an alternative that

promotes a better process and mutual understanding. With this emphasis, feelings are recognized as important sources of knowledge and help to transform relations and promoting mutual learning.

Winslade and Monk (2001) propose a narrative approach to mediation that focuses on creating a relational climate. Mediators, they suggest, "are not merely in the business of problem solving" (Winslade & Monk, 2001, p. 71). They explain that in most cases "the need for a mediator to assist with resolution of the conflict is the result of a breakdown in the relationship between the disputing parties. Had there been sufficient trust and volition to address the initial problem, of course there would have been no need for a mediator to be involved" (Winslade & Monk, 2001, p. 72).

More than a decade after the critiques on the individualist, problem-solving approach were first introduced, negotiators and mediators have been repeatedly observed focusing on settlements and agreement-making while relatively neglecting identity and relational objectives (e.g., Charkoudian et al., 2009; Curhan et al., 2006; 2010; Picard, 2000). The persistent gap between conflict experts and negotiators' aspirations and their actual management of conflicts point to a need to further understand alternative relational models on which to base the practice of conflict.

Conflict Transformation. Various terms and approaches are used for studying and practicing conflict. *Conflict management* refers to a range of positive ways to handle conflict and *conflict resolution* is a more inclusive term used for resolving conflicts. My focal point is on *conflict transformation*. It is considered by conflict scholars to represent the most profound level of tackling the deep-rooted sources of conflict (Lederach, 2003; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2011).

A transformative approach represents a preventive and an extended view of the conflict within relationships and the social context. Bush and Folger (1994; 2005), the founders of transformative mediation, advise that transformation happens at the level of worldviews. Parties must develop a complex, relational understanding of Self. They call for a shift from an individualistic to a relational worldview. This shift, they argue, is the foundation for transforming adversarial patterns into more dialogical interaction.

Correspondingly, in this study, conflict transformation denotes the transformation from a prevalent adversarial interaction to a *Dialogic Relation*. Dialogic Relation (defined in Chapter 1, p. 15), stands in stark contrast to the adversarial mode. This signifies a genuine encounter between the Self and the Other in which

both actively and equally relate to one another and communicate differences in their own terms. This view encourages both looking at immediate solutions as well as understanding and transforming positions of power and relational patterns within which conflict arises, evolves, and potentially transforms. Theorists of conflict transformation emphasize long-term goals, beyond immediate actions such as reframing and creating win-win outcomes.

Conflict theorists maintain that for conflict transformation to take place, it is necessary to shift from reframing positions and tackling immediate, explicit issues to addressing hidden relational and structures factors underpinning conflict (see review in Miall, 2004). Miall (2004) describes conflict transformation as a long-term process of engaging with and transforming relationships, attitudes, interests, discourses, and the constitution of society within which a conflict takes place.

Vayrynen (1991) underscores a dynamic view of a conflict. The emphasis on a conflict as a problem to be solved and even to be eliminated assumes a static state of a conflict. However, Vayrynen (1991) explains, as social reality constantly changes, conflict is in a continuous state of fluctuation. While he claims that change occurs on the level of the actors, issues, rules, and structures, the latter is the most important for changing the distribution of power. Similarly, the issue of power is at the core of how I see the transformation of adversarial interactions into dialogic relations as discussed in Chapter Five.

Vayrynen's approach can be used to guide intervention efforts. He suggests considering the transformation of actors, issues, rules, and structural transformation. Actor transformation refers to changes within the parties or the emergence of new actors. Issue transformation shifts the agenda of conflict topics. Rules transformation changes the norms of the parties' interactions. Structural transformation, he claims, is the most significant level, because the complete structure of relationships and power distribution in the conflict is transformed.

The link between local singular conflicts and societal structural conflicts is emphasized by many scholars such as Galtung (1996), and Krippendorf (1973). Azar (1990) underlines the importance of structure and particularly the social environment where conflict appears and develops. He suggests that conflict surfaces from structural economic or political conditions and from the denial of human needs of access, identity, and security. He underscores the need for a supportive environment for fostering genuine decision-

making capacity, autonomous development, constructive conflict, and civil rather than military politics.

Azar's view reinforces Burton's explanation of unfulfilled non-material and intangible issues as sources of various types of destructive conflicts. Issues of identity, culture and ethnicity, and limited accessibility of the underrepresented or marginalized groups to resources are at the heart of many local and international disputes. All are founded in unequal distribution of material goods that originate in underlying unequal power distribution. Gaps in power perpetuated within social structures that are designed and controlled by dominant groups deny the access of minorities or lower-class people to resources typically enjoyed by others, leaving them deprived of basic needs. Human aggressiveness, as Burton (1984; 1996) claims, is structural. Systemic and institutional conditions rather than aggressive human attributes are culpable of aggression and violent conflict. Depriving human needs such as recognition, participation, and security, according to Burton, results in violent conflict.

Transformation, according to Burton (1984; 1996), can happen if invisible social structures and conditions that generate destructive conflict are recognized. It entails making intentional efforts to construct social environments that nurture increased awareness of individuals to relationship.

These perspectives that reinforce power inequality and structural economic or political conditions are reflected in my model that emphasizes the significance of shifting power patterns and constructing supportive inclusive environments that ensure equal accessibility and the inclusion of diversity. As was suggested earlier and will be further discussed in Chapters Four and Five, an emphasis on the environment places a great responsibility in the hands of leaders—the model of addressing conflict they offer and the quality of the institutional environments they create.

John Paul Lederach's Transformative Work. The work of Lederach (1995; 1997; 2003; 2014), a prominent scholar of conflict resolution, significantly resonates with the view of conflict transformation proposed in this inquiry. Since the late 1980s, he has been using the term conflict transformation to describe his approach to conflict. He offers a most extensive work of conflict transformation, which is particularly valuable for practitioners. Conflict transformation, according to Lederach, is accomplished through a long-term process that helps parties to engage in constructive change initiatives that go beyond the resolution of a specific problem. I present his approach more extensively as many ideas that inform his work strongly

resonate with my practice and this inquiry as reflected in his approach to conflict transformation: “Building right relationships and social structures through a radical respect for human rights, and nonviolence as way of life” (Lederach, 2003, p. 4), and: “A fundamental way to promote constructive change on all these levels is dialogue. Dialogue is essential to justice and peace on both an interpersonal and structural level. It is not the only mechanism, but it is an essential one” (Lederach, 2003, p. 21).

The primary task of conflict transformation, Lederach maintains, is not merely to generate quick solutions to immediate problems, but rather to build innovative platforms that can simultaneously address surface issues as well as underlying social structures and relational patterns. To increase justice, Lederach advises to allow accessibility to political procedures and decision-making that affect people’s lives.

A transformative standpoint, he suggests, provides a set of lenses through which we can make sense of a conflict and a strategy for approaching it. While typically parties focus on substantive, immediate issues, conflict transformation provides a set of lenses to look more broadly at the situation. To elucidate the process of conflict transformation, Lederach (2003) uses progressive eyeglasses with its three types of lenses for long distance, mid-range, and close-up, to show how each brings a particular aspect of a reality into focus.

Similarly, conflict transformation applies multiple lenses to explore multiplicity of goals and perspectives, most of which are invisible. It encourages considering short and long term multidimensions including what requires immediate solutions as well as the need to change long term power structures and relational patterns. Relying solely on a single lens is insufficient for changing habitual behaviors. Furthermore, as in the case of progressive eyeglasses in which the three lenses are set in a single frame, if the goal is to transform conflict, all aspects should be integrated to make sense of the conflictual situation as I propose next.

Conflict presents a disruption in the "normal" flow of relationships. Upon its emergence, things feel as though they are not right. Relationships become complicated and difficult. As communication becomes hard, it is more challenging to express ourselves directly and listen to the other side. Greater time and energy are spent in making assumptions, interpretations, and creating stories. We find ourselves in the dark as to understanding the intentions and actions of others. Discomfort and anxiety are growing as the conflict evolves.

The tendency is to make sense of the situation by focusing on substantive issues—the specific, immediate issues the parties experience. Here is an example from an organization I worked with. Two team members stepped out of a room a couple of minutes after their new director started presenting a new training program. To understand this action, it is essential to consider its context. These two members were part of a small team, which its performance had been declining in the past three years. The new manager who was recently hired by upper management as a change agent was concerned about the lack of strategic direction and clear and defined responsibilities of each employee. He was a third manager in a raw in recent years who was hired to improve the function of the division. Sensing a threat, employees jointly began challenging the new manager authority.

When the two employees stepped out, it was an additional sign, in the eyes of the director, of rejection and unprofessionalism. He found this behavior disrespectful and later openly and angerly expressed his feelings. He thought that stepping out of the training a couple of minutes after he started a presentation was an explicit act that reflected underlying issues, he planned to address when back from vacation. While away, the employees got together and complained to upper management about him.

Upon his return, upper management called for an immediate meeting with him and the employees without consulting with him first or even informing him. Tension grew between the new manager and the employees. At the meeting, led by upper management, employees were encouraged to complain about the manager while the director was instructed by upper management to sit silently and listen to the complaints. Underlying relational issues were not allowed to be raised. Though upper management repeatedly promised to support the new director with redefining employee roles, setting expectations, and pushing toward necessary changes, these processes kept being delayed by them without allowing the new director to make any changes and setting expectations with employees on his own. The situation deteriorated and relationships grew to be toxic.

As I present next, a transformative approach addresses such situations rather differently. It would have provided a set of lenses through which to make sense of the conflict by addressing immediate problems while considering longer term changes in role definitions, expectations, and decision-making processes. The purpose of a transformative approach is to establish healthy relational foundations for collaborative working

habits through addressing implicit issues that typically are not explicitly discussed. Underlying relational patterns between the director and the employees must be explored to clarify expectations and positions. Such a conversation will not only tackle substantive issues, but will also address working norms and principles that do not work anymore and call for clarification and alignment.

As in progressive lenses, a single lens is insufficient for bringing all matters into focus. Rather, multiple lenses are needed to see the multiple layers of a conflict; the immediate along with deeper relational patterns that place the context of the particular conflict. We also need a lens to help envision a structure that holds all these dimensions together for parties to creatively address the content, the context, and the future relationship. All lenses are integrated and support tackling the issues involved in the situation as well as building a framework that holds everything together to allow viewing the conflict as a whole. Next are Lederach's (2003) seven principles of conflict transformation and their link to the example above:

Envision and Respond. Transforming conflicts calls for two proactive actions: a) a positive orientation toward conflict, and b) a willingness to engage in the conflict in efforts to produce constructive change and growth. Although strong negative emotions such as frustration and pain accompany the initial stage of a conflict, it is critical to envision the potential for positive change and make efforts to change its trajectory. Back to the example I provided, rather than avoiding the conflict or looking for quick solutions that focus on immediate problems as people typically do, we are invited to see the experience positively and invest efforts in learning from it for our own benefit as well as for the betterment of future working relationships.

Ebb and Flow: Conflict is a natural part of relational dynamics. While relationships are sometimes calm and peaceful, at other times people experience tensions and instability. A transformational stance views conflictual episodes as natural part of a greater pattern of human relationships rather than isolated events. The mere recognition in the inevitability of conflict is more likely to create acceptance of the situation and compassion towards the other party when a conflict is experienced.

Life-Giving Opportunities: Being a natural part of the relational human experience, conflict should not be viewed as a threat, but as a valuable opportunity to expand the understanding of oneself and others. Conflict offers time to pause, reflect and reconsider. By doing so, the situation can be leveraged to a learning

experience. In the example described above, the underlying perception of conflict was negative. Thus, it came as a surprise and an unwanted experience. Being perceived as a threat, the employees just sought to get rid of their uncomfortable feeling. Consequently, the situation was not leveraged to a personal and organizational learning experience. To attain the goal of learning and better outcomes efforts to empower employees and encourage short term discomfort for the purpose of long term improvement in outcomes and relationship must have been made.

Constructive Change Processes: A transformational approach encourages using the energy that is generated by the conflict for generating a positive change. It could happen by directing that energy to underlying relational issues and social structures. Moving conflict away from destruction and toward constructive connections is central to conflict transformation. In the example I provided, employees' energy went to promptly reaching out to upper management, and later, to deepening divisiveness by intensely engaging in gossiping and backbiting. The manager was excluded by both employees and upper management, all pointing a finger at the new manager as if he was the cause of the problems. All sought to end the uncomfortable situation instead of investing time and energy in growing from the conflict—clarifying expectations and reconstructing relationship.

Reduce Violence and Increase Justice: Conflict should be intentionally addressed in ways that reduce destruction and violence while increasing justice in human relationships through attending to both the immediate issues and underlying patterns and causes. A peaceful existence is founded in the quality of relationships. Healthy relationships rely on understanding, equality, and respect. Therefore, it is significant to look at:

a. How social, political, economic, and cultural relationships are structured.
b. The adaptive and changing nature of building peaceful relations. As relationships are dynamic and constantly changing, so are peaceful relations, which are achieved through an ongoing process.

Again, as conflict was implicitly considered a negative experience in the example above and employees felt threatened by the new manager, the focus was not on building a healthy, dynamic relationship.

Direct Interaction and Social Structures: To ensure constructive interactions, it is necessary to develop capacities to engage in change processes on the interpersonal, inter-group, and also social-structural levels. It is applicable in all contexts: family, complex bureaucracies and organizations, and globally. This requires an ability to appreciate and maintain dialogue as a necessary way to pursue constructive change. Constructive communication is crucial for exchanging and benefiting from multiple perspectives as well as for sustaining and improving social structures. In my example, interactions were indirect. Employees continued backbiting and avidly looking for any possible opportunity to blame the new manager for the problems and upper management did not invest the necessary time and energy to establish direct dialogue where constructive change could have been pursued.

Human Relationships: Relationships are at the heart of conflict transformation. The nature of the relationships is the broader context within which conflict arises. Thus, rather than focusing on substantive issues, a transformational approach implies that the key to understanding conflict and promoting positive change lies in the consideration of invisible aspects.

In our example, the focus was the substantive issue, which evolved into months of blaming the manager as a source of bad interactions. Although the new manager was ardently trying, for months, to shift the attention to legitimizing conflict and creating new organizational practices and structures where expectations can be discussed in a constructive way and conflicts can be contained and learned from, these attempts were unsuccessful. One executive accused the manager after a few months: "Your interactions at all levels did not create productive relationships."

It is impossible for a single manager, particularly a new manager, to change an organizational culture. Upper management needed to change. Their support was crucial for establishing a different attitude toward conflict. A genuine recognition in the value of conflict and a focus on relationship where conflict arises and evolves, must be established in the organization. However, as typically in such situations, the energy goes to substantive, immediate issues and to finding someone to blame. The result is destructive conflict.

As Lederach underlines, peaceful existence is contingent on the quality of a relationship, and quality relationship is achieved by mutual understanding, equality, and respect. Importantly, these qualities that

Lederach suggests are not formed at the moment conflict strikes. A transformative approach is preventive. Communities and organizations must be effortful and constantly invested in building trust through legitimizing the experience of conflict and constructing healthy relationship. When relationships are based on understanding, equality, and respect, the reaction to conflict is likely to be constructive. With more understanding and acceptance, parties are likely to get out of stagnation and pass the prompt negative emotions and make progress.

Relationship is not static. It is dynamic and constantly changing as relationships. Conflict and change are inseparable and interdependent aspects of human life. To benefit from conflict, changing current ways of relating is a necessity. Lederach suggests personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions of change that could be examined from both a descriptive view of the dynamics of conflict and from a prescriptive standpoint of what is sought to be changed. His descriptive and prescriptive model echoes the dimensions characterizing the theoretical and practical approach advocated in this thesis, as described in more detail in the last chapter. The approach for transforming conflicts into beneficial learning experiences, suggested here is twofold, reflective practice for better understanding conflictual dynamics combined with actions to practice ahead of time.

This chapter began with presenting the broader relational context of conflict. A social constructionist orientation provided the foundation for looking at conflict from a contextual-relational perspective. I proposed and discussed a dialogic form of relation as a constructive practice of relationship we can consider to replace adversarial, hostile connections. I presented how an individualist thought is manifested in the research and practice of conflict and discussed approaches to conflict transformation that recognize conflict as evolving within relationship and how the social structure is an essential element that determines the trajectory of conflict. I conclude with examining several aspects of social construction and the way they may be related to the understanding of conflict and its transformation.

How do Social Constructionist Principles Help to Understand Conflict and its Transformation?

A Focus on the Relationship and the Social Process. Recognizing the relational backdrop of conflict, where it emerges and evolves, our best option may be to examine conflict within the context of relationships. The set of principles offered by social constructionists and their relational emphasis is valuable not only for

understanding the dynamics that take place at the encounter with opposing views, but also for transforming them into constructive forms of connections.

Instead of trying to change individuals, singling out an individual and blaming her for holding 'faulty' (and fixed) personalities, as typically done in our culture, we may consider shifting our attention to the relational space people co-construct together where conflictual dynamics are generated. Attending to the context and the relationship can encourage a shift from blaming and excluding to taking mutual responsibility for the connections we created and for improving their quality. While this shift may sound simple or obvious, it is extremely challenging in a culture wherein the unit of thinking is individualist as it goes against our habits. It requires a significant change in the way our energy is invested. The recognition that meaning is created together, commit us to reconstructing a mutual existence rather than taking the easy way of singling out someone.

A social constructionist orientation also invites a new understanding of communication. Instead of looking ***through*** the communication, focusing on the content or substantive matters, we look ***at*** the communication-the process of communicating. Typically, communication is understood as unilaterally delivering messages from one party to the other. Consequently, the focus is on the person and the content being conveyed. The person tries to produce and deliver coherent messages. By shifting to the relational space, communication is seen as an ongoing, mutual co-constitutive process of meaning-making rather than transporting messages. What becomes most significant is the nature of engagement, forms of relating, and the conditions within which conflict becomes destructive or a beneficial learning experience. Creating social spaces where healthy relational patterns are encouraged can open up new possibilities for transformation. As was experienced by stakeholders in dialogic environments, increasing awareness to current relational patterns and comparing them to desired forms of relationship can help changing their quality and revised social structures and practices advance desired forms of relationships.

A Constitutive Function of Language. If language is used to construct reality and is a meaning-making activity rather than a passive tool for conveying messages, as social constructionists believe, then it is important to look at how language is used and constructed when experiencing conflict, and whether the language used supports or inhibits a positive processing of disagreements. What is being said and the

representation of things shape the trajectory of conflict. The language we use could change and transform the quality of our interactions. When addressing conflict, we do not merely solve disagreements but generate a different relational future.

Knowledge is Contingent. The social constructionist principle of knowledge as a derivative of one's *perspective*, and as situated within *time* and *context* is significant for understanding conflict and its potential transformation. How we view self and its relation to the other determines the ways we relate to one another—how we position others in the interaction and treat them. Whether the other is respected or demeaned, accepted or rejected, empowered or being intimidated—all are contingent on the view of self and other. If others are viewed as equals, then they are taken into account and are treated with respect and dignity while if they are seen as inferior, as often viewed in individualist contexts, they are ignored, disrespected, or belittled.

Further, knowledge is partial as it is constructed within a context and time, and from a particular position. Behavior is derived from a particular perspective and is in the service of certain interests. That perspective is one way of viewing the world among many potential ways. Typically a conflict leads to an argumentative communication in Western culture on who's opinion is 'right' or 'wrong,' what is the truth or not,' and a focus on 'facts' that people then try to settle. Instead, from a relational stance, diverse perspectives are embraced. There is no single truth and there is no point in arguing over who is 'right.' This outlook pulls the rug out from 'blaming' the other or searching the 'truth,' and shifts the attention to transforming relationships—reconstructing them in ways that appreciate and benefit from different views.

Another angle of this principle is the perspective on conflict. The perspective of conflict controls whether the experience becomes a beneficial or destructive experience, as becomes evident in the above example. Perspective shapes behavior (Thomas, 1992). Conflict is typically viewed negatively in Western culture and defined in relation to fights, wars, debates, and violence (Coleman, 2011). Accompanied by strong negative emotions, it is followed by adverse reactions. Common reactions to conflicts include ignoring or rejecting of conflict or defensiveness. Avoiding or disengaging with conflict could be counter-productive to one's own goals and learning from the experience. Moreover, a negative view of conflict does not help in containing the initial emotional distress that arises upon the experience of conflict.

If ignored or rejected, conflicts are likely to persist and simmer and become a major interference to generating cooperative and healthy connections. The more a conflict is denied or refused, the higher the likelihood to destruct the relations and hamper collaboration (Coleman, 2011). Conversely, when opposing views are appreciated as an opportunity, it could be used for learning, improving relations, and generating innovative ideas. As discussed earlier, these conditions of a positive perception of conflict are established over time. A positive view of conflict does not happen in the moment of the conflict event. Rather, transformation is a result of a preventive approach that is being build up and encouraged by leadership as well as practices that support an ongoing constructive engagement with conflict. As Lederach (2003) underlines, such efforts transform the engagement with others of opposing understandings into meaningful and significant interactions.

This chapter began with the broader context of a relational perspective. Because conflict is viewed here from its learning and growth potential, human development and its conventional emphasis on the individual provided a broader context to understand the benefits of looking more at the relational dimension and the value of our relations for learning and development. I presented the social constructionist orientation and its backdrop in postmodernism ideas. Social constructionism advances a relational, critical viewpoint on the individualist logic and warns us about its negative repercussions on relationship and adverse view of disagreements and conflicts. Social construction ideas can serve as a solid foundation for understanding the relational underpinning of social life and particularly situations of conflicts.

I proceeded to discuss a constructive form of relationship—dialogic, inclusive relation, and then to conflict and the limitation of a prevalent individualist stance toward conflict in traditional research and practice of conflict. Approaches to conflict transformation that underline the relational and structural context were also presented. I provided examples to show how these relational ideas are likely to result in a positive engagement with conflict. In the next chapter, I explore the second framework, which provides a window to barriers to constructive ways of being. By gaining knowledge on both the relational foundation of our being as well as barriers to constructive relations, we may be better equipped to create more collaborative relations and benefit from conflicts.

CHAPTER THREE

SECOND FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS TO CONSTRUCTIVE RELATIONSHIP AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Tzofnat Peleg-Baker

"It may be more useful to determine what impediments or barriers stand in the way of achieving change, and then eliminate or at least reduce them." Ross, L., Lepper, M., & Ward, A. (2010), p. 39

In my previous chapter, I presented the first framework—social construction that offers a relational perspective to human interactions. By shifting more toward the relational space—the context parties share—the focus is on the "dance," not the "dancers." The context of power within which relationship evolve and determines the trajectory of a conflict, was discussed. Prevalent I-It versus desired I-Thou forms of relationships were presented. The latter inspired the form of dialogic relation that are proposed here as an alternative to I-It, instrumental relation. Dialogic relation offer a more inclusive and collaborative formula of relationship that rely on more balanced power. Once the context of conflict was introduced, I presented the definitions of conflict and the possibility of conflict transformation.

Again, the guiding question of my study is: *Can a social constructionist orientation along with knowledge on relational-psychological barriers deepen the understanding of the relational nature of conflict and conflict transformation and what are the implications of this understanding on practice.* In this chapter, I continue addressing the second part of the question with the second framework—social-psychological barriers to constructive connections. My focus is on defensive interactions and possible ways to overcome them. Before presenting these barriers and how to reduce such behaviors, I present the case for incorporating studies on defensive behavior in this inquiry. These studies have been conducted within traditional psychology that focuses on the individual mind, which I criticized earlier and it has different implications from the contextual-relational orientation I advocate.

To support the importance of including these studies here, I discuss current limitations of a social constructionist perspective in explaining the complex connection between society and the subjective psychological experience. I suggest that the two frameworks a relational orientation together with knowledge about barriers to constructive relationship could offer a more complex understanding of conflict and its

transformative potential. Together they could provide a multifaceted, hybrid view of a person and human interaction.

Social constructionism, as discussed earlier, offers a more *descriptive* account of relationship by attending the discourse, language, and society as key factors. Issues of *quality*—what improves or inhibits quality relationship in our culture are not the focus of social constructionists. While there is no one way to define quality relationship, I refer to constructive or dialogic relationship, as defined in the previous chapter and examined throughout my work. The second framework of defensive actions that obstruct constructive connections offers both a descriptive account of interactions and an understanding of particular dynamics concerning the *quality* of interactions—what mechanisms or conditions or activities promote or hinder constructive relationship. While the second framework suggests a more universal outlook of such relational dynamics, they are viewed here as more local—dynamics that take place within an individualist culture.

Studies on barriers to constructive relation describe the psychological and relational dynamics involved in situations of differences and opposing views, how barriers to constructive connections are formed and protracted and what might alleviate these defensive behaviors. A deeper understanding of both these barriers and possibilities to rise above them may lay the groundwork for a more *prescriptive* account to conflict transformation. This second framework sheds light on what can promote or prevent dialogic relation, and what could be done to transform damaging actions into constructive ones.

The Relational Process Generates Barriers

While constructive relationships are fundamental for our prosperity, the process of building relationship often creates barriers separating us from one another. The flow of cooperation is hindered at times as described by Gergen (2009a):

> While these bonded relations are vital to our well-being, the process of bonding often generates barricades separating us from them. And because of these barricades, the flow of collaborative action is obstructed. Most unfortunately, these artificial separations often bring with them animosity and a slide into mutual elimination. (p. 396)

Gergen and colleagues (2001) warn that conflicts become a problem with inclinations to reject those who appear different and have opposite ways of thinking. The urge, in our culture, to protect a positive image

of self at any cost is a sturdy psychological motivator, which results in defensiveness and rejection of opposing views. When a crisis in self-view or a threat to the view of one's identity occurs, as in situations of conflict, the reaction is most likely defensive. The need for preserving a positive sense of self is not understood here as originated in a person's mind or intrinsic, inborn nature, but as instigated within an individualist social realm within which the individual constantly struggles to present a positive self-image.

People bring "to the dinner table not only the residues from long and numerous histories of relationship, but also the more immediate residues of their relations with friends, family, and various media" Gergen (2009a, pp. 159-160). When multiple voices from past experiences

> are imported into the immediate relationship that this shared world stands subject to reflection and rejection. One sees that things could be otherwise, this isn't good as we thought, it could be better, it is offensive. When living in multiple relationships, disharmony lurks around every corner. (Gergen, 2009a, p. 160)

Though striving for harmony—a meeting of multiple relational histories and self-identities a person embodies, the human encounter generates numerous conflicting potentials (Gergen, 2009a). Multiplicity clashes, for example, in the meeting between what is considered logical and reasonable by one person and as ridiculous by another. Whereas the complexity of the human condition is a fertilizing ground for meaningful and vital relationships, it also jeopardizes healthy relations in any moment, if relationship is not well-coordinated.

How can these hurdles be transformed into beneficial relationships? How can situations of contradicting views be conducted in ways where less antagonism, rejection, and destruction are generated? How can these adversarial tendencies be reduced so that conflict becomes more beneficial? A primary task is not that of creating conflict less communities. Rather, the challenge is to form effective modes of relating and conducive social contexts that help reduce the obstructing dimensions of conflicts and support the fulfilment of their potential for learning and improved relationship.

Interactions could take different forms of relationships. They can evolve to constructive forms such as dialogic relation—a form of genuine encounter between self and other in which both actively and equally communicate their differences, as defined in the previous chapter. On the other hand, they could develop into

more destructive forms as in the case of adversarial interactions and the use of defensive reactions that hinder flowing, beneficial connections. Therefore, it is essential to increase awareness of relational psychological dynamics that take place implicitly. Such underlying forces relating to identity and relationship concerns fuel destructive interactions. The higher our awareness to both desired forms of bonding as well as destructive actions that are often invisible and jeopardize healthy bonding, the more we can understand conflict and what enables its growth potential.

Defensive Behaviors. Vast research that has investigated forces that hinder healthy connections such as defensive mechanisms (e.g., Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sapolsky, 2010; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Worthman et al., 2010) attests to their robustness and to the frequency with which people apply them. Defensive behaviors include a host of behaviors termed by social psychologists as implicit cognitive biases and psychological motivators (e.g., Baumeister, 1997; Baumeister et al., 1998; Cramer, 2000; review by Ross & Ward, 1995; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). These behaviors, based on traditional psychology research include a range of reactions such as avoiding conflict, rejection of opposite perspectives, denying accountability, projecting unwanted qualities on others, and other relational manipulations and protective patterns that are often triggered unconsciously.

Social psychologists (e.g., Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988) claim that although defensive responses protect a person's identity and sense of self-integrity—an individualist concept of a person as good and moral—they are also maladaptive to the extent they prevent learning from valuable, though threatening, experiences and information. Furthermore, these protective reactions may threaten the integrity of relationships and the flow of collaboration (Cohen et al., 2005; Murray et al., 1998) and prevent constructive conflict and resolution (Ross & Ward, 1995).

Research on Defensive Behaviors -An Individualist Perspective. Studies on defensiveness have mostly been conducted within traditional psychology where the individual mind is considered as a primary consideration. From the perspective of an individualist framework of thinking, behaviors are attributed to an inner, somewhat stable character. The person is portrayed as relatively static, distinct and coherent. Gergen (2009a) describes the relation between individuals from that perspective as "the collision of billiard balls" (p. xvi)—though interacting, individuals are seen as if they stay intact, confined by their own thoughts and

internal traits. The person is regarded as a key force in the world, assumed to be fully responsible for her choices and fundamentally distinct. The assumption is that the individual is relatively isolated and her behavior could be predicted and measured. It is questionable that humans react perfectly according to physical laws like billiard balls do.

Criticizing the attention traditional psychology places on the individual as a *bounded being*—a distinct and isolated self—Gergen (e.g., 2009a; 2009b) proposed the *relational being* of the self as a product of the interdependency between individuals. Drawing on the work known as *symbolic interactionism* (e.g., Blumer, 1962; James, 1890; Mead, 1934), he suggested the concept *co-action* to define an active and collaborative action from which meaning is created. As he describes: "All that we take for real, true, valuable, or good finds its origin in coordinated action" (Gergen, 2009a, p. 31).

Defensive Behaviors as Relationally Originated. Building on Gergen's perspective of a generative and active nature of our being, research on defensive behavior is reviewed here with a critical eye on its traditional, underlying assumptions. Instead, defensive behavior is seen as relationally instigated and interpreted. While defensive behavior has been historically conducted within a modernist perspective that centers on an individual's internal mental state, that behavior, as social constructionists suggest, is not assumed to be a result of a private, fixed mind. Rather, it is seen as constantly emerging from the social realm—from a particular social-relational context and a person's multiple relational histories.

As introduced, conflicts and relationships are inseparable. Conflicts emerge and develop within a broader context of relationships and relationships are complex, continuously changing and evolving (Lederach, 2003). How we react to conflict is shaped by one's understanding of self, relation, and others. From a social constructionist perspective, the self is emanating and developing from myriad, evolving relationships rather than from an isolated world. As Gergen (2009a) describes:

> It is through relational process that whatever we come to view as independent beings are given birth… Whatever value we place upon ourselves or others, and whatever hope we may have for the future depends on the welfare of relationships. (p. 396)

Congruent with his approach, the self in this dissertation is relationally defined and assumed to develop through a person's relational experiences over the course of life.

The Case for Incorporating Studies on Defensiveness. Since a shift to a relational perspective is proposed here, the incorporation of traditional psychology research that centers on the individual mind, calls for an explanation. While social construction principles offer a strong theoretical base for a relational understanding of our being, more traditional studies on barriers to flowing relationships, like those on biases and defensive mechanisms, shed light on underlying relational undercurrents of the encounter with differences and opposing views. Defensiveness poses a significant obstacle to healthy relations. Acting defensively is not merely psychological, it is relational--always in reaction to the other. Defensiveness cannot exist alone—it is not a character trait, but a social construction. One person cannot be defensive in the absence of another.

Though traditionally studied with an understanding of an inner origination of self, these studies contribute a profound description of the defensive dynamics as understood within Western cultural traditions—how they are formed, what evokes them, their persistent nature, and most importantly, how we can overcome these hurdles. This research illuminates both upon hard to get at and stubborn barriers to quality relationships that become strained in the face of conflict as well as potential ways to reduce them and transform interactions, all within our cultural understandings.

Additionally, these descriptions of defensive behaviors confirm the warnings of social constructionists about the destructive outcomes of the individualistic ethos (e.g., Gergen, 2009a; Sampson, 2008). As discussed in Chapter Two, with an outlook of a self as bounded and isolated, a person is continually in a struggle to ensure a 'good' self while the other becomes peripheral. Finally, this massive body of research on defensiveness illuminates potential interventions for changing interactions that either become or develop into mutually defensive interactions. Increasing awareness to these negative dynamics is essential for navigating them to constructive relationships and collaboration.

Furthermore, in addition to the rationale of incorporating lessons from multiple scholarly approaches and disciplines, whether relational or individualist, goes hand-in-hand with a current pursuit for novel ways of approaching ongoing debates in psychological inquiry, such as the realism–constructivism impasse, and differences regarding linear and non-linear models of causality. As Price-Robertson and Duff (2016) advise:

> Most innovative contributions have focused on conceptual mélanges of the material and the

> discursive whereby texts, discourses, bodies, affects, technologies, non-human "things," and physical and social contexts combine to create hybrid entities and novel conceptions of subjectivity, identity, and agency. (p. 61)

It is surprising, they observe, that the analysis of heterogeneous entities such as hybrids, cyborgs or assemblages, has not been more embraced by philosophically inclined psychologists, especially at a time when:

> Psychologists and social scientists concerned with the psychological dimensions are once again coming to recognize the need to reflect deeply on their epistemological and ontological commitments [in their search for] modes of thought that do not bifurcate nature into irreconcilable subjective and objective components. (Brown & Stenner, 2009, p. 12)

By the same token, I suggest a multidimensional approach based on both mainstream psychology and social constructionism to help reframing and gaining a broader picture of conflict and its potential transformation.

Finally, as discussed next, integrating social constructionism with traditional psychology knowledge may benefit a complex, hybrid understanding of the subjective experience or personhood. Next, I briefly discuss the subjective experience from a social constructionist perspective, and following this section, I will present barriers to constructive relationship and studies on defensive reactions and how these reactions could be diminished.

The Nature of the Subjective in Social Constructionism

The question about the subjective experience stems from a broader set of questions such as: what is the nature of a person's identity and agency, and change from a constructionist perspective? Is there a somewhat stable component of self or whether a self is completely unstable—a short-lived product of shifting social interactions? Is there an implicit or unconscious and persistent residual element of a person arising from past relationships? Are psychological, motivational and emotional imprints left on a person, and how are relational histories embodied in the self over time? These are a few examples of questions some social constructionists have addressed.

Due to the limitations of this inquiry, I discuss a few aspects that are most relevant to conflict

dynamics. This discussion will prepare the ground for incorporating knowledge that has been generated in traditional psychology. Together, I believe, social constructionism and traditional psychology provide a more multi-layered view of a person and relationship.

Social constructionist psychology rejects the atomistic, bounded, coherent, rational psychological subject as it is portrayed by mainstream psychological approaches. The replacement of the individual mind with discourse, language, and a view of society as the principal driver and the origin of experience poses critical questions about the psychology of the individual (Burr, 2015).

Issues about the embodied experience and the nature of self—whether the self represents a somewhat permanent component, or whether it is a short-lived, transitory unit arising and changing from discourses and cultures, are not fully addressed in social constructionism. The emphasis on discursive forms and representations leaves the complex juncture between the person and the social realm relatively unclear—a restricted account of the manner in which the social and relational histories shape the psychology of a person (Burr, 2015).

With interactions as a focal point and a person who is viewed as constantly evolving within relationships (Gergen, 2009b), the self might seem as temporary, fleeting, and contingent upon external factors, ongoing interactions, social structure, and the language used. Social constructionism may overly constraint itself by relying too heavily on the social context. Its work is similar to empiricists' work, Morawski (1998) claims. "They take what is immediately seen and named as what exists and ignore possibilities of deeper meanings, symbolism, and the indeterminacy of actions" (p. 217).

Experiences understood by mainstream psychology as private, distinct, and bounded are seen in social constructionism as societally constituted, inter-subjectively shared and fragmented. Cromby (2004) claims that constructionist psychology is suspicious of explanations that suggest embodied or cognitive processes, and consequently, ambivalent towards subjectivity. Many constructionists do not theorize or study subjectivity, focusing instead on the discursive practices and processes that serve functional goals. As Cromby (2004) describes:

> Even where subjectivity is theorized, it is often somewhat disembodied, in that the particularities of the body are disregarded, downplayed, added in later, or made adjunctive to

> other supposed mental-linguistic entities or processes. Hence the body tends either to be omitted from constructionism, or only to appear as surface of inscription, metaphor or text—rather than as a fleshy organ bearing both enablements and constraints. Consequently, the embodiment of subjectivity is not adequately addressed. (p. 798)

The notion of a relatively stable, subjective personality with attitudes and beliefs or unconscious qualities, as typically assumed by traditional psychology, is often denied by social constructionists because traditionally these issues have been seen as internal features originated in the mind (Burr, 2015; Gergen, 2009a). With an assumption that a psychological mental state is totally interior, created by inherent features, social constructionists have rejected psychology by linking it to essentialism and determinism (e.g., Burr, 2015; Gergen, 2009a; Sampson, 2008). Gergen asks: "If mental language is not a reflection of inner states, why do we use it at all?" (Gergen, 2009a, p. 71). However, one key question remains whether a somewhat stable psychological state could be an outcome of repetitive behavioral habits and patterns of interactions enacted by a person over a long period of time?

As it is important for psychology, as the study of the mind and behavior, to give more emphasis to the significant role of the social realm in shaping a person's mental state (e.g., Burr, 2015), social constructionists are invited to contemplate individual continuity and inner narrative and how this narrative constitutes a person's identity without returning to a troublesome essentialism. The critique of essentialism should not be made synonymous with ignoring an ongoing, complex process of the formation of self through interactions.

According to Burr (2015), on both levels of social constructionists' explorations—the one that investigates the micro everyday use of language in interactions and the other that highlights macro social structures and institutional practices—personal agency is either minimal or becomes absent, correspondingly. Personal agency, she claims, is slightly preserved when the focus is on individual micro interactions while it almost diminishes when the focus is on macro social structures. Yet, I had a different experience in democratic schools where macro social structures have shown to support individual agency when they were built with the intention of nurturing individual qualities. In these environments, in my experience, stakeholders were encouraged to express their unique perspectives and emotions and practice their agency.

Failing to include subjectivity within a constructionist oriented psychology creates:

> devoid of much that is significantly and recognizably human. The concrete particulars of actual human lives are systematically downplayed, diluted or disallowed, in favor of a superficially social perspective that actually omits the interplay of structure, culture and subjectivity that must be fundamental to any properly social psychology" (Cromby, 2004, p. 799).

Sampson (1998) accuses social constructionism of an 'ocularcentrism' that denies the role of embodied experience. He calls for a 'politics of embodiment'—to sustain "identity serving human differences rather than seeking their meltdown on behalf of some universalistic appeal for oneness that in itself must of necessity be built upon a preliminary duality and hierarchy (e.g., of mind or spirit over body)" (p. 31).

The focus on discourse and the flexibility of identities might have also overlooked the diversity in subjective perspectives and experiences (Burr, 2015). She claims that social constructionists hardly discuss diversity in emotional reactions of different people, difficulties some people encounter while others do not in particular situations, a preference of certain positions over others, motivations for rejecting or accepting others' perspectives, and the choice of behaviors that might act against people's own goals.

Since so much of our world is centered on individual lives, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, social constructionists try to avoid the language of individualism deliberately. The question is how to include diversity and the subjective experience without resorting back to the individual in our thinking and behaving. Diversity of opinions and decisions cannot be ignored. Some people react emotionally to certain situations or invest energy in particular issues while others do not. Individual reactions and behaviors are contingent upon people's unique relational background and experiences.

As proposed by a few social constructionists (later in this section), social constructionism might consider better incorporating the diverse manners in which people experience and embody past and present relationships, the different positions they have taken within discourses, and the variation of their expressions, emotions and motivations, some of which become invisible over the years. When an extensive emphasis is put on the social context, and little assumed, if at all, about the difference of personal features formed

through a myriad of social interchanges, implicit relational residues from the past are not acknowledged, and individuals might not be considered accountable at all for their behavior and engendering change.

By seeing the subject only in terms of performance or representation we might fall into a model of subjectivity that is based on rational consciousness and it could mirror the very same dichotomic model held by traditional psychologists. Ironically, the same dichotomies held by a Western philosophy that social constructionists wish to overcome such as subject versus object, inner versus outer, and self versus other are sustained.

To transcend these dichotomies, it is necessary to examine the somewhat blurred boundaries between self and other and inner and outer in a more multidimensional way. Rather than seeing people as either being driven by inner fixed personality or by relationship and the social context, perhaps a more multifaceted understanding is needed. Later in this section, I present a relational viewpoint to how the self evolves and how a few social constructionists integrate the agency of a self along with the effect of social structure, discourses, and relationship.

The Challenge-Integrating the Self Within a Relational Perspective. Burr (2015) stresses the importance of creative solutions to include the psychology of the person within social constructionism. With the emphasis on the social structure, discourses and relations, she claims, the person is abandoned. To incorporate the subjective experience of the individual, she suggests, social constructionism needs to transcend the traditional dualism of individual versus society. Social constructionist psychology calls for a suitable notion of embodied subjectivity to further its progression.

To understand what it means to be a subject—the conceptualization of subjectivity, agency and ability to change, from a relational perspective, it is imperative to look at how the individual is depicted within a social context. If human behavior is portrayed only as the display of the discourse within which people operate, then they are merely marionettes controlled by discourses, which are mostly outside of their awareness (Burr, 2015). However, a few social constructionists interested in change and the role of the person in advancing it, as presented next, predominantly disagree with this extreme standpoint of a person. They offer a hybrid view of the subjective experience of a person who has an ability to reflect and change the trajectory of their life within a relational outlook.

The problems of subjectivity are not unique to psychology according to Morawski (1998). In many disciplines, from history, sociology, to feminist studies, failures to theorize subjectivity adequately is acknowledged. These shortcomings are not to claim that social constructionism fails, but rather that as presently articulated, it is unfinished (Morawski, 1998). Social construction can go beyond a body that is just an adaptive perceptual apparatus, an inscriptive surface or an undifferentiated biological potential (Malone, 1998).

The subjective experience is at the heart of conflict. However, as previously suggested, conflict arises and evolves within relationships. The context of power and the positioning of a person significantly shape the quality of relationship. Exploring the encounter between the person and the social could contribute to the understanding of reactions to conflict and possible actions to transform that experience. In the context of my inquiry wherein the aim is to illuminate the possibilities of relational transformation, the question whether an individual has some agency or control and capable of navigating relationship toward a desired form is critical. Some scholars emphasize the significance of including the formation of self and the sense of oneself as a more stable unit beyond the fleeting outcome of discourse (Freeman, 1993).

Burr (2015) does not think that social constructionists assert, even implicitly, that a person has no content. But she invites further clarification of the subjective nature of that content and how it is formed. Dodds and colleagues (1997) say that it becomes important to describe how the social becomes personal without rejecting the actions and contribution of either social or personal domains.

Integrating the Subject—A Hybrid Outlook of Subjectivity within a Relational View. Troubled with an overemphasis on the social and discourse and unanswered psychological questions, several social constructionists have been keenly searching for new ways of thinking, conceptualizing, and integrating insights from both traditional psychology and discursive thinking (e.g., Billig, 1996; Burr, 2015; Cromby, 2004; Davies & Harré, 1990; Sampson, 1998; Willig, 2013).

They think that a synthesis is not only possible but also desirable. The goal is to begin defining a notion of embodied subjectivity that is neither individualist, essentialist nor disembodied. The individual is not entirely a free actor but has some agency and ability to shape the trajectory of events. To transcend traditional dichotomies, they explore the somewhat vague boundaries between self and society. A person is

not seen as mere manifestation of discourse, but also as capable of reflecting and critically analyzing discourses and practices that shape their lives. People, they believe, make their social and cultural worlds at the same time these worlds make them (e.g., Berger & Luckman, 1966; Burr, 2015; Crotty, 1998; Davis & Harré, 1990; Gergen, 2009; Hacking, 1999; Potter, 1996; Shotter, 1993). Their perspective brings to the fore that social processes are both created and destroyed by people's activities.

Social constructionism has roots in symbolic interactionism developed by the early social psychologists Mead (1934) and Blumer (1962) where the self is suggested as emerging from society and social interactions:

> The individual possesses a self only in relation to the selves of the other members of his social group; and the structure of his self expresses or reflects the general behavior pattern of his social group to which he belongs, just as does the structure of the self of every other individual belonging to this social group. (Mead, 1934, p. 164).

The mind, according to Mead, cannot come into existence at all:

> Except in terms of a social environment; that an organized set of patterns of social relations and interactions (especially those of communication by means of gestures functioning as significant symbols and thus creating a universal discourse) is necessarily presupposed by it and involved in its nature. (Mead, 1934, p. 223).

Symbolic interactionism is a frame of reference to better understand how individuals come into existence within the social context and how their interaction creates symbolic worlds, and in return, these worlds shape their behavior. It is an ongoing process in which social reality and the person are preserved and created.

From a Foucauldian perspective (Foucault, 1972), behaviors and expressions are not outcomes of a person's private world, but the manifestations of the discursive culture where the person resides. Discourses, according to Foucault, govern the way issues and ideas are meaningfully discussed, reasoned and practiced (Hall, 2001). Expressions represent a system of conceptual options that control the boundaries of thought and language used, and that system might be outside of the consciousness.

At the same time, Foucault's view of a person allows the person some agency. The person has the ability to change their life circumstances. So, prevalent discourses are constantly emerging and unstable and always subject to rejection and resistance. To take advantage of this possibility, in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault (1972) encourages people to increase awareness to the nature of discourses they inhabit and the knowledge they produce. I will come back to the importance of reflection later.

In the classic book (1966), *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann proposed that the relationship between the individual and society takes place in both directions: individuals continuously construct the world while the reality constructed constrains the way people live their lives. They identified a circular process of externalization, objectivation and internalization. Human beings create meaningful symbols of things, beyond their present use. They make them accessible to other people (externalize) through the use of language. These things become an objectification of a symbol and that symbol is used in other contexts. By internalizing these meanings, people become part of society and able to engage meaningfully in interactions.

Shotter (1993) defines subjectivity in terms of both the discursive and the embodied. Though the two are analytically distinguishable they are actually unitary, co-occurring in the exchange and creation of meaning. Participants interact and fit their responses to an evolving context. This context determines for them the meaning of what is interchanged. Furthermore, this context is constantly fluid, to be constructed and reconstructed, so utterances are not just *responsive* but also reflective and attempting to restructure relationship in a particular direction. An utterance is not just verbal, grammar, or a vocabulary act, but it is also an embodied paralinguistic communication that involves emotional interchange. The studies on defensive reactions reviewed in the next section describe and analyze such interactions and examine ways to reduce relational utterances and responses that impede healthy connections.

Subjectivity evolves through the course of continual interactions, and a person's behavior reflects patterns of previous interactions, habitual ways, emotions, and a whole way of feeling about situation and self. As Cromby (2004) suggests:

> These affective flows, like the words they accompany, have their origins in social relationships. Thus, our ways of being and relating, our inner lives, come to cumulatively

> mirror in transmuted form our previous transactions with others, in both their verbalized and affective aspects. (p. 804)

I discuss a possible permanent component of self in the next section. Shotter's (1993) understanding of subjectivity is embodied:

> . . . one's task in developing into a morally autonomous adult in one's own society is not just that of learning to direct one's own mental processes with the aid of words or signs, but of doing so in a way that makes sense and is considered legitimate by others. In this view, then, our 'inner' lives are structured by us living 'into' and 'through', so to speak, the opportunities or enablements offered us by the 'others' and 'otherness' both around us and within us. Thus, our mental life is never wholly our own. (pp. 44-45)

These embodiment processes call for illumination. Davies, Harré, and colleagues (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 2007) propose an organizing concept of subject *positioning* that implies an active mode of an individual who is dynamically located within a discourse. Both existing discourses that set the boundaries of a person's experience and the active engagement of a person work concurrently. As they describe:

> An individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate. Accordingly, who one is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices and within those practices, the stories within which we make sense of our own and others' lives. (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 5)

Behavior is not mere outcome of social forces, beyond the control of the individual, according to Davies and Harré, but a person chooses courses of action and carries out intentions. One's position, being in a state of fluctuation, means that an identity is always open to change. Individuality is constantly negotiated and maintained through one's particular life experiences. A person's relational history shapes a particular position and that position is being continuously negotiated:

> With positioning, the focus is on the way in which the discursive practices constitute the speakers and hearers in certain ways and yet at the same time is a resource through which speakers and hearers can negotiate new positions. (Davies & Harre', 1990, p. 27)

It is also a person's choice to accept or reject a position. Furthermore, different understandings of a situation produce diverse subject positions and they might be intentional or unintentional, within consciousness or outside of consciousness.

Multiple realities compete for truth and legitimacy. These realties are constructed through social processes within which meanings are negotiated, agreements are formed, and contestation is possible. Such an outlook recognizes meanings that are constructed and reconstructed continually and processes that create structures that are both stable while at the same time open to change as interactions evolve over time (Giddens, 1984). Gioia (2003) claims that we act as if these structures are real, "but none of that changes the *fact* that they are (inter) subjectively produced enterprises" (p. 290).

The notion of positioning takes into account both the power of the social context as well as a person's ability to navigate and engage with existing discourses. A person is simultaneously shaped by the discourses and reinstitute it. A similar conceptual framework as alternative to the duality of the individual versus society is Sampson's (1989) conceptualization that draws on Bateson's (1972) *ecosystem* concept. Sampson suggests that the system should be the proper unit of analysis as there is no logic in separating the individual and society that shape each other. They are components of the same phenomenon. His systemic option assumes that discourses or social structures do not merely determine the individual, but that they all shape each other in all directions.

I presented theoretical frameworks where scholars offer conceptualizations that transcend self/other and individual/social dichotomies and integrate the individual subjective experience within the discourse. Identity is always in the process of making through interactions and within existing discourses. One's perspective and actions are the display of these discourses.

To transcend the dichotomy of the individual versus the other and to explain the interconnection between the social and the other, reconfiguring the knowledge psychology provides us can be valuable. The goal is to incorporate a person's subjectivity within the theoretical framework of social constructionism

without getting caught in the presupposition that it is originated internally, within the person. The combination of reconfigured psychology and social constructionist principles could provide a more comprehensive picture of the self, its interconnectedness with the other, agency and ability to choose and change. Focusing on social context as if it is the only factor shaping a person's behavior is could revert us to the very dichotomies we try to avoid.

By presenting social processes as ongoing dialectic processes between the person and the social context, these scholars move us forward towards transcending an individual/society binary. The person actively constructs the social world as well as being constructed and restricted by it at the same time—she is both a product and manipulator of the discursive environment and themselves. If people are seen not only as the product of the social environment but also as having the capability of analysis and reflection, then they can negotiate their position and have influence over the course of events given their goals and what they desire to accomplish. This offers a more complex understanding of the evolvement and agency of a personal within the social context. It allows both a constantly changing self, emanating and evolving within relationships along with a somewhat stable personal characteristic resulting from patterns of relationships as discussed next.

A Relatively Stable Component of Self. As Shotter (1993) posits, subjectivity is thoroughly informed by its character that is being formed through past interactions while constantly being responsive to unfolding interpersonal dynamics. How best to express and respond to others around us and our circumstances is shaped by an inner conversation and one's own embodied feelings and being.

An embodied subjectivity, according to Shotter (1993), is continuously in the making, and an emergent outcome of past and continual social acts. A person's character, at any given time, is a property of the interaction between its previous state of being and the connections just experienced. Cromby (2004) stresses its *morphogenetic* nature:

> Existing features lend form to future development in an unfolding trajectory, where each successive interaction is potentially transformative and might itself contribute to the shaping of future actions. But because interactions are always to-be-determined, new trajectories might always emerge: morphogenetic causation is probabilistic, not deterministic. (p. 810)

Current interactions are spatiotemporally situated in a person's history and culture. They proceed according to normative expectations offered by specific current cultures. All is societally conditioned: "somatic markers by individuals' accumulated history of ethical-moral interactions; the 'interpreter' by the language, narrative forms and discursive habits acquired" (Cromby, 2004, p. 811).

While symbolic and linguistic aspects of subjectivity that are socioculturally influenced and acquired through relationships are expected from a social constructionist lens, it is also important to recognize corporeal, embodied aspects as enculturated. Patterns of social interactions become embodied, habitual characteristics. The notion of embodied subjectivity offered here is neither essentialist nor individualized, but thoroughly societal.

Residues of long and numerous histories of relationship might manifest in interactions as stubborn behaviors (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2015; Gergen, 2009). These patterns imply a relatively stable component of a person that is formed over the years. Early childhood and long-term relationships leave a distinct imprint and shape the way the world is understood, and how others are treated. Some behaviors are being adopted and internalized, as proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1966), and develop into persistent behavioral and emotional habits.

Gergen describes that "over time the actions of the participants (TPB-in the co-action process) typically become patterned, anticipated, and dependable" (Gergen, 2009a, p. 40). Some patterns become part of "who we are" and may develop into stubborn habits. Deeply entrenched, they are hard to change even when counterproductive to one's wellbeing and the flow of cooperation. They might ostensibly be seen as the biological, innate nature of a person. Alternatively, these behavioral footprints that arise from local social norms and expectations could be understood as a *relational inner self*—a relatively constant part of self, originated in past relational histories rather than an inborn, fixed psyche. From this perspective, motivations, emotions, and behaviors are local and originated in particular discourses and norms.

An Invisible Component of Self. Furthermore, habitual, relatively stable patterns of relationship and ways of being that have been formed over time and their origination are not fully visible. As Foucault (1972) suggested, the discourses we inhabit and the nature of the interaction between the individual and society are mostly out of sight.

Behavioral habits carry different meanings for different people and they are not always consciously understood. It is the encounter with others who bring their own relational histories and behavioral patterns that invites all parties to see diverse perspectives (Gergen, 2009a). As in the case of conflict, while this meeting is filled with potential for reflection, transformation, and growth, tenacious habits of thinking and behaving might hold people back. Learning and advancement might be replaced with emotional rejection and offensive interactions.

The *Psychosocial* Approach**.** The field of psychosocial studies, as it is captured by its name, offers a deconstruction of the traditional dichotomy between individual psyche and social by integrating the psychological with the social realm. Attempting to conceptualize the psychology of a person within a social constructionist approach, Frosh and his colleagues (2003; 2003a; Frosh & Baraitser, 2008) view the person as concurrently the subject to discourse and a center of change and agency. Their point of departure is that there is no such thing as an individual standing outside the social while at the same time, they embrace personal subjectivity.

Their 'psychosocial approach' applies psychoanalytic interpretative strategies in order to 'thicken' the discursive reading (Willig, 2013). Biographical information (e.g., about the participant's early life experiences, sibling relationships, etc.) is used as data to provide insights into people's emotional investments in particular discourses and subject positions.

Their turn to psychoanalytic concepts to explore and explain the trajectory of individual behavior is incompatible with social constructionism principles that ss 'top-down' psychoanalysis with its seeming confidence about the 'true' nature of the person and their knowledge of individuals better than they know themselves. However, to go beyond the separation of internal psychic structure and external social realm, psychosocial researchers believe psychoanalysis offers substantial explanations of how the ''out-there'' gets ''in-here'' and vice versa, especially through concepts such as projection, internalization and identification" (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008, p. 347). Moreover, although psychoanalysis has a central conceptual role in psychosocial studies, it is also troubling for some because of the risks of distorting psychoanalytic ideas to make them applicable in another field. The debate over the appropriate way to use psychoanalysis from a social construction perspective still goes on.

One way of looking at the effective use of psychoanalysis within social constructionism could be not for revealing and explaining the interior psychological space or a deep unknown truth about human nature, but rather for exploring the broader social-psychological ongoing interactional dynamics by reflecting systemically. Frosh and Baraitser (2008) suggest that:

> Cherished psychoanalytic ideas have to be rethought for the different context of investigation and expression: transference and countertransference, for example, are simply not the same in and out of the consulting room. But it also holds onto an important psychoanalytic insight that helps significantly with the task of thinking ‘‘psychosocially’’. This is the claim that psychological and social, inner and outer, are only artificially separated, and are constituted by something else that runs through them, sometimes emerging in surprising ways that psychoanalysts code as the ‘‘unconscious’’ in its signifying, ‘‘non-sensical’’ materialization. (p. 363)

Psychoanalysis tries to offer a set of insights and principles to illuminate the inseparable, interrelated ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ dimensions of the self and its interconnectedness with the other. However, for a richer exploration of the relational dynamics involved in the connection between self and other, individual and society, psychological concepts, such as defense mechanisms must be reconfigured as socially originated and driven. As Billig (1997) suggests both the unconscious as well as the conscious are constituted in interaction.

Social constructionists’ principles are likely to resist the notion of a definite separation between the social and the psychic. Accordingly, the many voices within are regarded here as a reflection of social interactions. As Vygotsky (1978) noted, we can conceive thought as talk or conversation “turned inwards” (see also in Edley, 2006). Billig (1996; 1997) reinforces this idea by proposing that as a form of inner speech, thought preserves the dialogic character of social discourses. He also says that it seems to indicate that the complex, multiple voices within the mind echo social discourse rather than being the product of an unconscious.

Thus, the formation of unconsciousness could be seen from a social context angle—as an implicit residual of past social connections rather than as originated in personality. Patterns of thinking and behaviors that were created socially become habitual wherein some of which turn invisible over the years. These habitual, unseen patterns cannot be ignored, as they are being continuously active in shaping a person’s

thinking and interactions. In situations of conflict, these patterns of thinking that reside mostly outside of awareness, could generate rejection and other defensive behaviors that hinder conflict transformation. The hidden component should not be overlooked. It seems to play a substantial role in shaping the relational mind and social realities and therefore, essential for understanding the potential of transforming relationships.

Such an understanding of implicit behavioral habits as originated in the social realm rather than in the mind of a person is promising as it carries a transformative potential, which is at the heart of this study. A social perspective on the source of patterns of thinking and behaviors contains a paradox—the habits we have adopted over the years are simultaneously stable and relatively flexible. Considering behaviors from a variety of angles or perspectives—implicit along with explicit as well as destructive patterns of thinking and behaving is a necessary step for changing the trajectory of unwanted reactions and navigate them toward valuable connections.

An Invisible Component Calls for Reflection. Reflection is powerful for illuminating how people are being subject to discourses and to what extent this subjectivity is negotiated throughout the interactions. The ability of a person to be aware and understand their positioning and manage it competently is critical for forming a desired identity and changing the situation for the better.

If we are also capable of reflecting and critically analyzing discourses and our behaviors, as advised by Foucault (1972), Sawicki (1991), Davies and Harre (1990), and Mead (1934), then we are able to question the positions we are offered and make a choice—either take or resist them, to exercise agency. We can reconstruct our positioning within a society and also make a choice as to how to treat the other. For example, people are capable of choosing whether to relate to the other as an equal—as a fellow human being while at the same time, acknowledging the other's uniqueness, or we can position the other or relate to her as inferior.

Furthermore, we can reconstruct organizational and social structures to fit desired discourses and mode of relations we wish to establish as we did in democratic and dialogic schools. A whole system can initiate and develop practices that validates a person's distinctiveness while at the same time encourages constructive and beneficial engagement in differences.

To be able to exercise agency and initiate change within a restricting discourse, mindfulness of the nature of existing interactions and habitual patterns of actions becomes essential. Reflection is key for

learning and development (e.g., Argyris & Schön, 1978; Kolb & Fry, 1974; Schön, 1983). The capacity to reflect on action, Schön (1983) claims, is necessary for the purpose of learning and developing. It is significant for understanding available positions, making decisions as to whether to take or resist a position, and explore alternative identities and modes of relationship. Increasing consciousness allows reexamination of habitual ways of being, identifying destructive behavioral habits, and helps in navigating them to a beneficial path. Reflection is a tool for changing and realizing objectives. The repercussions of our actions on others and ourselves can be imagined and deliberated so that a choice can be made. Increased awareness expands the ability to choose. It is a first step toward having more agency and a capability to change. Thus, to navigate present and future interactions requires the consideration of our unique "personhood" that has originated and developed within particular relational histories.

So far, in this chapter, I laid the context and backdrop for the second framework of my study—barriers to constructive relationship, which are discussed next. To underline the importance of using traditional research for understanding the negative dynamics that arise in conflict and ways to overcome them, I presented the challenge of social constructionism with the issue of the subjective experience from a relational perspective and the complex intersection between the subjective psychological experience and the social realm. I also presented the work of constructionist scholars who offer hybrid conceptualizations of a person who is simultaneously shaped by discourses and reinstitute them. Their work is a step forward for settling the duality of the individual versus society.

I proposed the possibility of a relational inner self rather than an inborn self. While originating in social interactions, a relational inner self also encompasses a somewhat constant component of a person that signifies residues from past relational histories and enduring behavioral patterns. These relational pasts, as Gergen (2009a) suggested, turn into persistent behavioral patterns and become part of who we are. They significantly shape how a person understands the world and treats others. Behaviors that have been adopted and developed into stubborn behavioral and emotional habits can be implicit and call for reflection.

While the encounter with others who bring their own relational patterns potentially brings about new ways of thinking, transformation, and growth, some tenacious habits might impede a beneficial human

encounter. Improvement might be replaced with emotional rejection and offensive interactions. Increasing consciousness and identifying destructive habits can help navigate them to a beneficial path.

While I suggest learning from both lenses—social constructionist orientation and traditional psychology—to enrich our understanding of both the complex link between the subject and the social as well as the possibility of conflict transformation, it must be emphasized that my work here is merely suggestive of the potentials that might arise from the integration of constructionism and studies on barriers to constructive relationship.

If this direction is acceptable, further work is needed to deepen and refine the interchange between the subject experience and the social. I hope that this thinking would facilitate future inquiries and practices around the integration of cognitive and relational processes and prescriptive rather than descriptive ways to foster transformation. Issues of subjectivity, emotions, and power that are central to the experience of conflict but typically studied and practiced with the individual at the center, can be further explored and enriched by integrating traditional and the constructionist knowledge.

Next, I discuss the dynamics of defensive behaviors followed by studies that offer ways to decrease these barriers to flowing interactions. Following Gergen's (2009a) advice, these studies have value and worth considering. As he proposed, they can be used for envisioning and creating more promising worlds rather than as representing a single truth. In this study, traditions of studying social- psychological dynamics are "treated as optional as opposed to defining the limits of our world" (Gergen, 2009a, p. xvi). Their assumptions, explanations, and conclusions are reconsidered in my study with the recognition of the critical role of discourse and the relationships in shaping a person's experience.

These studies might complement social constructionists' relational understanding by shedding light on the psychological barricades and the dynamics of human interactions in situations of conflict within a cultural context of an individualist thinking. They help clarify the encounter between the person and social and the subjective experience in situations of conflict.

A Relational Perspective to Defensive behaviors

Social and cognitive psychology studies on biases and defensive behaviors illuminate upon hard to get stubborn obstacles in the face of conflict. Following Gergen's (2009a) criticism on cognitivism, these social psychological dynamics are viewed here as relationally rather than cognitively originated.

To appreciate their relational nature rather than focusing on their intrinsic origin, the critical view of social constructionism and discursive psychology is valuable. Discursive psychology criticizes traditional psychology's fixation on 'cognition' and looks at what is traditionally conceptualized as 'cognitive' understanding from a relational perspective (Billig, 1999; Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 2005; Gergen, 1973, 1989; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1987; Willig, 2013). Similarly, defense responses are understood as relationally constructed—emerging from a person's social world rather than from an inborn, fixed mental state. A broader view of conflict within a cultural context extends the common perspective of conflict as an exclusively individualistic phenomenon. Increasing awareness to relational defensive dynamics can be helpful for changing their destructive trajectory.

In the context of this inquiry, these studies and the interpretations, assumptions, and conclusions made in these studies are reconsidered historically and culturally contingent. As Gergen (2009a) advised, rather than abandoning the knowledge gained in these studies, the interpretations and individualist assumptions made in these studies should be reconstituted. Individuals are not considered here as the cause of actions, as Gergen (2009a, p. 397) describes: "Others are not the causes nor we their effects. Rather, in whatever we think, remember, create, and feel, we participate in relationship."

Traditional Research on Defensive Behaviors

Research on defensive reactions illuminates actions instigated in identity-relational concerns (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). They include a host of behaviors termed by social psychologists as implicit cognitive biases, psychological motivators and emotions underlying relationships in diverse situations (e.g., Baumeister, 1997; review by Ross & Ward, 1995).

A major assumption made in these studies is the endeavor to feel good about oneself and be positively perceived by others. Furthermore, that these needs are a product of an intrinsic nature or a person's mental state. Accordingly, *self*-constructed concepts are being used to describe and understand a person's

motivation and behavior. They include constructs as *self-esteem*—a person's broadest self-evaluation (Baumeister, 1997), *self-integrity*—seeing oneself as good, virtuous, and efficacious person (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988), and *self-worth*—a sense of one's own value or worth as a person (http://www.dictionary.com/browse/self-worth)

Since self-constructed concepts are often used for understanding and interpreting behaviors in traditional research, I do present them as they are originally presented in the literature. At the same time, I suggest alternative understandings from a relational, social constructionist perspective. Behaviors and psychological reactions do not automatically mean that mental states cause them. Social psychology does not have to necessarily equal essentialism, determinism or possessive individualism (Sampson, 1993). Accordingly, psychological reactions and behaviors are assumed to emerge from the social realm in this study.

Instead of using self-constructed notions, social constructionists prefer the concept of identity (Burr, 2015), which is conveniently used as a social concept. Identity has to do with one's purpose rather than an inherent nature of things. Middle and upper class, masculine and feminine, and right and left are examples for socially defined identities rather than the essence of a person. That way, social constructionists avoid the essentialist nature of a person. The concept of identity also encompasses a developmental dimension—it is within discursive contexts that identities are being constituted rather than determined by stable structures dwelling internally.

A person's identity is generated through ongoing interactions and numerous social association echelons like occupation, gender, and education. Yet, according to the concept of positioning, people negotiate, accept or resist available identities through constant interactions held within multiple discourses **(**Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 2007). A person still maintains influence on the identity being constructed.

Research on defensive behavior is conducted in the context of the study of a wide range of biases. Daniel Kahneman received the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economics for his work with Amos Tversky on the systematic ways in which human behavior diverges from *rational* decisions. Rationality is a construct typically referring to people's ability to make reasonable decisions—a conscious capacity of making sense of

things. Embedded in modernist thinking it celebrates the remarkable ability of the human mind. Rationality symbolizes the very basic belief about human nature on which economics is built that human are capable of making the right decisions for themselves (Ariely, 2009).

For economists and decision theorists the term rationality refers more to the extent a decision is internally consistent rather than reasonable (Kahneman, 2011). A rational person can believe in ghosts as long as her other beliefs are consistent with the existence of ghosts, explains Kahneman (2011). Rationality is a logical coherence whether it is reasonable or not. It implies that to be rational is to behave consistently, regardless of whether the choice taken stems from intuition or thought out reason – what Kahneman terms system 1 and system 2, respectively. Rationality is making choices that are consistent with one's preferences, given the constraints one faces. A rational choice is one which the individual perceives as not being inferior to any other feasible alternative.

Fundamental to rational behavior is maximizing utility—individuals do cost-benefit analyses before making a choice. People weigh the gained benefit of a choice compared to the cost of it. To make such an analysis, the individual must be cognitively aware of the choice. However, there is overwhelming evidence that humans cannot be rational. The definition of rationality as coherence is impossibly restrictive (Kahneman, 2011); it demands adherence to rules of logic that a limited mind is not able to implement.

In their work, known as *behavioral decision* research, Kahneman and Tversky (1972, 1973, 1982) repeatedly showed that humans' behavior is not well described by the rational model. Commonly, and often mistakenly, according to Kahneman, their behavior is termed as *irrational* behavior. The term, Kahneman (2011) claims, is too strong as it implies impulsivity, emotionality, and a stubborn resistance to a reasonable argument. Their work, he corrects, only shows that a rational model is insufficient to describe human judgment.

Though rationality is typically considered an individualistic construct, the term is presented here as a byproduct of communal relations rather than an individual possession. As Gergen and colleagues (2001, p. 684) describe: "Rationality, from a social constructionist orientation, recognizes the conventions as constructions that do not necessarily apply to all persons in all relationships in all situations or historical moments. Thus, the conversation is left open to alternative possibilities." Accordingly, rationality is viewed

here as emerging from conventions of "good reason" about which many people in Western society agree and that promotes people's well-being and cooperation rather than fixed standard or requirement.

Kahneman and Tversky's work has profoundly influenced research and understandings in many fields, including psychology, economics, finance, marketing law, and medicine. It has also encouraged pertinent work in the field of conflict resolution. Deepak Malhotra and Max Bazerman (2008), for example, who study conflict and negotiation, posit that we can no longer simply approach conflicts and negotiation from a rational standpoint, as it was initially implied, but must develop a deeper understanding of *irrational* human behaviors. They warn negotiators that while rationality is necessary for leading negotiations successfully, it is far from sufficient. Negotiators, they advise, must be made aware of psychological and habits originated in people's motivation to feel good about themselves that could lead to counterproductive actions and negative interactions.

Substantial evidence indicates how people's concern about others' perception of them drives how they relate to others (Baumeister et al., 1998). People hold a favorable view of self, and often more favorable than how others view them (Baumeister et al., 1998). A major purpose is to sustain *self-integrity* or personal worth (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). Although studies typically assume cognitive, internal driven motivations, from a relational perspective, the motivations to maintain a good sense of self are socially and locally determined.

When the self is under threat, people engage defensive adaptations to ameliorate the threat. To maintain positive self-worth or identity, a *psychological immune system* is activated against a threat (Gilbert et al., 1998). People apply a wide ranging of defensive responses when a crisis in self-view arises (Cramer, 2000). It has been shown in numerous studies that when identity or *self-worth* are jeopardized, people react in various manners to defend the self against the painful experience (Newman et al., 1997; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Williams & Nida, 2011). It includes a range of *cognitive strategies* and even distortions whereby people construe a situation in a way that reduces threat to personal worth, such as dismissal or rejection to another opinion, denial of accountability, avoidance of recognizing the source of the threat in a self-view and linking the threat to other people's behaviors (Newman et al., 1997).

The self-integrity motive is so strong that even mundane events can threaten the self and activate

defensive responses to protect it (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). When people experience minor offences, they sometimes turn to violence and even homicide to restate an image of personal strength and honor in the eyes of others (Cohen et al., 1996; see also Baumeister et al., 1996). Although the risks of many of these situations seem low, the subjective risk for the self can be high. That everyday events can bring about feelings of threat and trigger extreme responses attests to the power and pervasiveness of the self-integrity motive (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

Williams and Nida (2011) describe the persistent endeavors people apply to maintain social inclusion—how people go to great lengths to avoid exclusion and ostracism pain by trying harder to be included through cooperating, complying, and obeying orders. Belonging and self-worth are associated with maintaining and developing social connections (Williams & Nida, 2011). Accepting perspectives that are believed to reinforce a positive self-image, and rejecting opposing views are among most useful means to sustain a positive view of self and preferred identity (Baumeister et al., 1998).

Research on defensiveness has revealed people's tendency to attach to their cherished beliefs and attitudes even when confronted with scientific, contradictory evidence (Cohen et al., 2000; Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956; Ross & Lepper, 1980; Steele, 1988). People tend to automatically disprove or new contradicting information (Cohen et al., 2000, 2007). Ambiguous information is also evaluated in a manner that bolsters preexisting views (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). Beliefs are strongly held even when they face contradicting scientific reports. Capital punishment advocates, for example, were found to cling to their beliefs in the death penalty's preventive value in the face of negating scientific information. The reason might be that it reinforces their identity as political conservatives (Ellsworth & Ross, 1983).

The explanation for sturdily sticking to preexisting beliefs and attitudes is that evidence challenging the validity of cherished views presents a self-threat (Cohen et al., 2000). People defend their identity—"who they are." Because beliefs can constitute significant sources of identity, people resist evidence that challenges the validity of their strongly held beliefs. Giving a belief up would mean losing a source of esteem or identity. To neutralize that threat and protect their belief and the identity, people are prone to respond defensively (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Dunning et al., 1995; Munro & Ditto, 1997).

For a reaction to qualify to a full-fledged defense, it must do more than merely make people feel

better: it must actually turn-off some threat to their identity (Baumeister et al., 1998). Purely conscious actions are not considered full-fledged defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms must involve some motivated action that is not consciously identified, resulting in a favorable view of self that is conscious. A crisis in self-view might happen in situations of differences and contradictions in beliefs or perspectives, in which others' views contravene a preferred view of identity, implying that a person is not "good" or successful.

Conflicting understandings are often perceived and experienced as a threat to a person's identity and stability in the world (Cohen et al., 2000). Values, beliefs, and attitudes are considered building blocks of identity, and giving them up means losing a source of identity. If cherished beliefs are challenged, a person's identity is perceived as being endangered. In such situations, people typically adhere to their preexisting notions to defend their sense of identity (Cohen et al., 2000; Ellsworth & Ross, 1983). They are reluctant to give up beliefs even when confronted with strong contradictory evidence (Cohen et al., 2000; Ross & Lepper, 1980).

The Risk of Defensive Behaviors. 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., 2005; Murray et al., 1998; Sherman & Cohen, 2006) and prevent conflict resolution (Ross & Ward, 1995).

People focus on the short-term goal of defending themselves, often at the cost of long-term learning. Psychological threat can also consume mental resources that could otherwise be assembled for improving performance and problem solving. Thus, while the encounter with others who experience life differently brings an opportunity for reflection, new understandings, transformation, and growth, being perceived as a threat and loaded with an emotional burden, it raises a barrier to adaptive change. The potential for progress is likely to be replaced with rejection and offensive reactions.

These reactions become formidable barriers to engaging constructively with others and reciprocally gain and learn from differences and conflicts. If relational and emotional undercurrents are unrecognized, they could quickly escalate into resentment, toxic relations, power struggles, aggression, and even violence.

Within such social atmosphere, it becomes impossible to stay open toward new information and engage in a composed deliberation of opposite opinions.

These defensive inclinations can result in behaviors that might ostensibly seem as enhancing social cohesion, such as conformity, the formation of cliques and alliances, or settling on compromises or common ground. However, they could also inhibit social resilience by shunning genuine communication, joint exploration and learning. Defensiveness, relational distortion, denial, and avoidance are among the typical reactions applied to protect one's identity. The cost of so doing, as Sherman and Cohen (2006) emphasize, is missing potential opportunities for learning and growth that, if acted upon, could otherwise increase people's adaptiveness in the long term. An important question, then, concerns the circumstances under which people are less defensive and more open-minded in their relationship with others.

The Ability to Minimize Defenses and Transform Relationship. Greenwald (1980) linked the self to a totalitarian regime that suppresses and distorts information to project an image of itself as good, powerful, and stable. Conversely, unlike a totalitarian regime, people are capable of being critical of their selves. Although they can hold idealized illusions of themselves, they can also provide accurate self-appraisals at moments of truth (Armor & Sackett, 2006). Though the person has a strong need to see itself as having integrity, it also must be within the constraints of reality (Adler, 2012; Kunda, 1990; Pennebaker & Chung 2011; Wilson, 2011). People's goals are:

> not to appraise every threat in a self-flattering way but rather to maintain an overarching narrative of the self 's adequacy. A healthy narrative gives people enough optimism to "stay in the game" in the face of the daily onslaught of threats, slights, challenges, aggravations, and setbacks. (Cohen & Sherman, 2014, pp. 335-336)

Successful social psychological interventions help individuals access defensive processes through two ways (Wilson, 2011). One way is to encourage people to evaluate a difficult circumstance in a positive way-in a hopeful and nondefensively manner that maintains the perceived adequacy of the self, which will be further discussed in Chapter Four. For example, helping trauma victims to make sense of their experiences promotes health (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011) or helping students to see mistakes as a growth opportunity rather than evidence of inability improves their academic performance (Dweck, 2008, Walton & Cohen

2011). Another way for intervention focuses not on people's assessment of a specific challenge-how they see the challenge, but their assessment of themselves-as a whole through self-affirmation. This second option is discussed next.

Minimizing Defenses and Transforming Relationship through Self-Affirmation

It has been shown that affirmation is an important way to reduce stress and defensive biases (for a review, see Sherman & Cohen, 2006). The impact of affirmation is studied through a process of self-affirmation in which people typically write about their core (TPB—core in traditional language or "organizing" in social constructionist term) personal values. The process creates a broader view of the self and its resources, diminishing the implications of a threat for personal integrity. Affirmations of alternative sources of self-integrity unrelated to a current provoking threat have been found to reduce and even eliminate self-protective behaviors and improve education, health, and relationship outcomes, with benefits that sometimes endure for months and years (Aronson, Cohen & Nail, 1999; Cohen et al., 2000; Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steele, 1988).

Since studies on self-affirmation are individualistically oriented, focusing on the self in every aspect including their assumptions, hypotheses, design, manipulations, interpretations, and conclusions, I will offer a relational consideration to the discussion. It should provide a supplementary perspective to understanding defensive dynamics and potential interventions to transform them.

How does the Process of Affirmation Work? Key to understanding the effects of affirmation is a feeling of a threat—the perception of an environmental challenge to the adequacy of the self and people's defensive reactions when they feel threatened and stressed, as in the case of conflict. Psychological threat sets up an alarm that provokes vigilance and a drive to reaffirm the self (Steele, 1988). Self-affirmation that was first proposed by Claude Steele (1988) asserts that the overall motivation of an individual is to protect a perceived integrity and worth of self. Integrity can be defined as the sense that, on the whole, a person is a good and appropriate (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). People are driven by a motivation to be perceived in a positive light. When that image is threatened, as in the case of conflict, people immediately try to reinstate or repair their self-worth (TPB--in Western cultures). Such defensive reactions are automatic and unconscious. Their promptness speaks to the importance of self-integrity maintenance.

One typical way to protect the self is direct, through swift defensive responses that reduce the threat. The tendency is to narrow the attention on an immediate threat such as what is perceived as a mistake or a failure. Another way is through self-affirmation—an indirect way of dealing with the threat through the affirmation of alternative, valued sources of self-integrity. Because global self-worth derives from multiple sources, it is suggested that people are flexible in their capability of coping with a particular self-threat. They maintain an overall worth and integrity of the self, through compensating for challenges or failures in one aspect of their lives by emphasizing successes in other domains.

In many circumstances, indirect "self-affirmation" enables people to see the many everyday stressors in the context of the big picture (Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009; Wakslak & Trope, 2009), which result in a few beneficial effects. First, the threat and its implications on the self results in less vigilance and an ability to evaluate threatening information in a less biased and defensive manner (e.g., Cohen et al., 2000; Reed & Aspinwall, 1998). Compared with this expanded view of self, a particular threat that confronts a person at the moment feels less threatening.

Second, because a threat is seen in the context of a wide view of the self, it has less influence on psychological well-being (Cook et al., 2012; Koole et al., 1999; Sherman et al., 2013). Third, affirmations promote attending to the threat rather than avoiding it. If a threat is seen as important and addressable, affirmations reduce avoidance or denial of its importance to the self (Vohs et al., 2013). People can better handle the threat in a constructive manner, rather than obsessively spend energy on defenses (Taylor & Walton, 2011).

Fourth, self-affirmation has also been indicated to increase openness to information that threatens self-interests or motives (Cohen et al., 2007). When affirmed, people have less need to distort or reconstrue the frustrating threat and can respond to the threatening information in a more open and composed manner. Finally, greater engagement was found among affirmed individuals in learning from their mistakes (Legault et al., 2012).

To conclude, affirmation enables people to deal with threatening situations without resorting to defensive biases. It enables both the restoration of self-integrity as well as adaptive behavior change (Allport, 1961; Cohen et al., 2000; Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Affirmation lifts

psychological barriers to change through two routes: lessening psychological threat and reducing defensive behaviors (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Stressors are not eliminated but placing them in a larger context of things that truly matter for one's adequacy, it can reassure people that they have integrity and that life is fine despite of the current adversity before them. Abilities that would otherwise be blocked by a psychological threat such as cognitive capabilities and balanced reactions are released.

Overcoming the Tendency to Cling to Beliefs by Self-Affirmation. Cohen and colleagues (2000) conducted a set of studies that is relevant to this inquiry on people's inclination to cling to beliefs and attitudes even in the face of disconfirming evidence and ambiguous information. They presented that if you make people feel better about who they are, they become less defensive of their major beliefs—less clinging to their preexisting beliefs and more open to differences of opinions. In their studies, social-political advocates responded to highly persuasive evidence. When capital punishment followers were exposed to a counter-attitudinal scientific report regarding the death penalty, those who were self-affirmed became more positively influenced by that report than those who were not self-affirmed. In another study where prochoice and prolife advocates had a debate on abortion, self-affirmation reduced biased evaluation of the debate, meaning, the tendency to rate the concurring debater more favorably than the debater from the other side.

As usually done, self-affirmation was created by having participants reflect on their own alternative positive source of identity through simply writing something about another important trait or value unrelated to their views on the present topic such as capital punishment. Self-affirmations through another, unrelated source, Cohen and colleagues (2000) argue, depreciates the attitude as a source of self-worth and thus make it easier to change. The effectiveness of such self-affirmation through an unrelated self-quality or a trait lies in its capacity to remind people that their self-worth originates in many sources other than their present topic.

The Potential Powerful Impact of *Social Affirmation*. Although it has received little attention and has not been the center of the discussion and conclusions of the above studies, the finding of the second study indicates that affirmation from others is more effective than self-affirmation (Cohen et al., 2000). While self-affirmation (done through a simple self-reflection on another positive personal trait of self) was effective for reducing defensiveness, it was not effective for changing attitudes. In other words, self-affirmed participants responded more favorably to the disconfirming evidence but did not give up their general attitude.

What was more effective for ameliorating not only immediate defensive reactions, but also an attitude, was an affirmation given externally, by other people, rather than an affirmation done by the self. Put differently, receiving positive feedback from others regarding a person's valued skill or trait was more effective than self-evaluation. Despite this finding, most studies on affirmation use self-affirmation experimental manipulations. External, social manipulations are less explored.

Even when trying to accomplish long term effect, situational cues are used to remind individuals of the change in attitude and identity rather than social affirmation. For example, Dal Cin and colleagues (2006) showed that an information campaign to reduce unsafe sexual practices could have long-term effects on condom use if participants are given an "identity cue" (a bracelet) to wear that would remind them both of the "safe sex" persuasive video they had previously viewed, and to their commitment to the cause of promoting safe sexual practices. The effect of the safer sex message was significantly increased if participants were given a "friendship bracelet" that served as an affirmation of their personal concern for people suffering from sexually transmitted diseases. According to Sherman and Cohen (2006), pairing such identity cues with self-affirmation establishes a promising direction for future research.

From a relational perspective and in the context of this study that proposes alternative, more constructive forms of relationship combined with a nurturing social environment for generating lasting rather than short-lived change in the quality of relationship, this finding is significant. It invites exploration of the particular functions of social environment in fostering less adversarial interactions and improving human connection. I will return to the role of the social support and social environment in Chapters Four and Five.

Implications of Affirmations on Conflict. Studies on self-affirmation carry pertinent implications for negotiation, education, and therapeutic and conflict interventions. The strong motivation to protect identity is especially significant in the context of this study. Parties in conflict often reject even mutually beneficial settlements and instead continue adversarial exchanges (Ross & Ward, 1995). This is a barrier to any progress, originates in part, from a motivation to defend one's identity—a motivation that can result in stubbornness and stalemate (De Dreu & Carnevale, 2003). To listen to the other side and be open to new ways of thinking require acting in a way that could be unpleasant and entail changes in one's set of beliefs and identity.

A study where pro-choice participants negotiated with a pro-life advocate about appropriate state abortion policy (Cohen et al., 2005) found that affirmation increased the number of concessions that pro-choice participants made to their pro-life adversary—they were more likely to agree to the idea of parental notification. Furthermore, affirmation also led participants to evaluate their adversary as less influenced by self-interest and ideology. In another study on negotiation over abortion rights, it was found that participants whose commitment to their political views had been made salient were responsive to affirmation. When affirmed, they made more compromises in a negotiation over abortion legislation and left the negotiation with stronger trust of the advocate on the other side (Cohen et al. 2007).

This is important because cultivation of trust is imperative in the resolution of conflict. Affirmation does not lead to change through marginal routes like raising mood and thus fostering agreeableness but through the more fundamental route of more balanced information processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty & Wegener, 1998). Self-affirmed participants exhibited more balanced cognitive and affective responses to a counter-attitudinal report than did their non-affirmed peers (Cohen et al., 2005).

Among people in conflict zones in Israel and Bosnia, self-affirmed participants were more likely to admit wrongdoings caused by their group on the other side and to support reparations to people affected (Cehajic´-Clancy et al., 2011). After viewing presidential debates on the eve of the 2008 election, affirmed Democrats and Republicans expressed less partisanship in their appraisals of Barack Obama's debate performance, and 10 days after the election, previously affirmed Republicans said that Obama would govern in a more balanced and objective manner (Binning et al. 2010).

Affirmation was found to lessen the bias of escalation of commitment often observed as partisans' identity in negotiation becomes bound to the positions they advocate (Sivanathan et al., 2008). Parties in a negotiation are less likely to devalue concessions offered by opponents when affirmed (Ward et al., 2011). Affirmation seems to provide reassurance that a social or political identity, one that would otherwise fix people's evaluations and negotiation positions, is only one of many valued identities. In conflicts where downward spirals of accusation and counteraccusation can escalate into aggression (Kennedy & Pronin, 2008), the improved trust and open-mindedness brought about by affirmation can be a good foundation for better relations.

The idea that people are motivated to portray themselves as adequate lays out the core of effective intervention. The stress to maintain a valued self-image obstruct balanced consideration of contradicting evidence. If not affirmed, participants are engaged in defensive maneuvers aimed at protecting their identity at the expense of a lost opportunity to learn.

The role of self-affirmation in conflict and negotiations in the real-world and its long term impact still needs to be explored. Affirmation of alternative sources of identity, and particularly by others seems important for parties to conflict and negotiators. Affirmation might help conflicted parties to be more open to the merits of the other side's arguments and more readily accept their own biases. People may prove more critical of their long-held views and more open to information that challenges their preconceptions. Similarly, clients in therapy may better accept and change flawed beliefs that cause them psychological distress if affirmed.

Interestingly, both an individualist as well as constructionist thinking view the drive to maintain self-image as a significant factor shaping the quality of human interactions, but each approach it from a different perspective. While the individualist tradition accept this drive as a given universally, social constructionists see it as local, cultural relating it to the individualist ethos.

The attempt to portray an overarching picture of a self as good, moral, and valued is central to understanding how people react to and treat others in Western culture. The motivation for identity maintenance mediates a wide range of social psychological phenomena (Aronson, Cohen, & Nail, 1999). Research findings in traditional psychology suggest that persistent biases in social judgment arise from identity-maintenance incentives as framed by Cohen and colleagues (2000):

> Such motivations pressure cognitive processes to a desired end. People search for an interpretation of the evidence that best supports the conclusion they hope to draw, much as a lawyer spins courtroom evidence to present the strongest case. Relieving these pressures fosters a more rational and even-handed evaluation of evidence. (p. 1163)

Social constructionists also pay considerable attention to defensive behavior (e.g., Gergen, 2009; Sampson, 2008), but from a different perspective. They point at the modernist, individualist ethos as the

catalyst of a prevalent self-protective mode wherein people are extremely vigilant of others' behaviors that call their identity into question (Sampson, 2008).

The goal of protecting self-integrity or identity, is particularly strong when the integrity of a person is threatened, as in the case of conflict. Whatever the perspective is and whether the internal motivation to protect oneself is the focus, as proposed by traditional psychologists, or the external- distorted relationship resulting from an overemphasis on the individual in Western culture, as argued by social constructionists, affirmation of alternative sources of identity is promising. It might help a positive change in the quality of relationship and in effective handling of conflicts.

To conclude, affirmation helps both to lessen resistance to contradicting views and to create a more balanced evaluation of different views and counterevidence. Strengthening global self-worth, as termed by traditional psychologists, or supporting one's multiple identities, as conceptualized by social constructionists, make new ideas less painful and can pave the way to openness and more acceptance of opposing views. As numerous studies by Sherman, Cohen, and others (e.g., Cohen et al., 2000; Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988), affirming people by reflecting on core positive issues or values, not related to the current threat (the present conflict), reminds people that they are generally good and capable and reassures them that they can cope with the conflictual situation they face with less manipulations and resistance.

Defensive biases originate in people's desire to maintain a sense of worthiness when experiencing stress and a threat. Affirmations lift people's self-evaluative concerns in the current situation, and allow other motivations, such as a desire to be fair, make sense, and other perceived positive qualities, to predominate. Being mindful of the origin of this behavior and the processing of affirmation inform potential interventions when the goal is to help people move in a positive direction—to enable them to overcome the initial intense sense of anxiety and threat that inhibits them from performing up to their potential and being able to learn from situations of conflict. Understanding these dynamics offers practitioners, conflict professionals and mediators, educators, and other interventionists theory-based approaches for fostering behavioral change and leading transformative processes.

CHAPTER FOUR

LASTING TRANSFORMATION THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Tzofnat Peleg-Baker

"The first step in designing a program to produce change is to analyze the sources of individual and/or collective resistance to such change; and this analysis should include not just "social" and "psychological" barriers, but also situational and structural factors." Ross, L., Lepper, M., & Ward, A. (2010), p. 39

The Negative Consequences of the Inclination to Protect a Positive Self Image. In Chapter Three, I discussed how the powerful driver to maintain the integrity of the self (in modernist psychology term) or one's identity (constructionist term) strongly determines a person's behavior and interactions. When one's self-integrity or identity is questioned, such as in a situation of conflict, it is typically followed by stress and protective defenses. While people want to learn, grow, and have satisfying relationships, the sense of threat that arises with conflict, can impede the ability to do so. Though it is desirable to address conflicts constructively, it is compromised by a competing motive to preserve self-integrity or identity. Thus, barriers to a healthy relationship and conflict transformation stem, in part, from such defensive reactions to feelings of self-threat.

Disagreements and conflicts, even benign, daily ones, trigger powerful, emotional protective reactions such as ignoring, rejecting, and denigrating others. They are so dominant in our life to a point people may persevere behaviors that prevent them from accomplishing their goals and harm their own well-being. The tendency to defensively rationalize our thinking and decisions (Steele et al., 1993) and refute evidence that challenges our perspective, such as political views (Cohen et al., 2000), sustain adversarial interactions. Everyday events and petty incidents can bring about these feelings of threat and spark extreme responses, all of which perpetuate polarization and destructive conflict.

The motivation to defend the self holds negative implications on significant domains of functioning, such as decision-making, learning, conflict management, education, and relationships (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Relationships are distorted and meaningful opportunities for learning are missed. If not being distracted by a defensive mode, these opportunities for growth could have otherwise improved well-being for the long term.

Further, an attachment to preconceived beliefs and attitudes can be highly dangerous when people play down critical new information as in the case of health issues, such as early signs of skin cancer or dangerous behaviors such as drunken driving (see review in Sherman & Cohen, 2006). People may pay with their lives for rejecting and avoiding pertinent information.

The more we know about these protective dynamics and possible activities to offset them, the more it will be possible to 1) help an individual overcome these biases, and therefore, benefit from differences, and 2) build social environments within which such quality relationships are nurtured.

Changing behaviors and interactions carry the self-evaluative burden of admitting that we have engaged in dysfunctional behavior. However, reflective efforts on the micro, individual level are insufficient, as discussed later in this chapter and Five. A lasting change in the quality of our interactions call for additional efforts on the macro, systemic level.

Self-affirmation Theory Offers a Frame to Understand and Curb Defensive Biases. As discussed in the previous chapter, one way to reduce the feeling of threat and the need for immediate protection can be done through the affirmation of alternative values or sources of identity. Self-affirmation theory proposes that affirmations of global self-worth, often attained by reflecting on self core values that broaden the perspective of the person under threat and reduce defensiveness (e.g., Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2006).

Central to understanding the effects of affirmation is a person's perception of an environmental challenge to the adequacy of the self. Psychological threat represents an alarm that stimulates alertness and a need to reaffirm the self (Steele, 1988). In such occasions, people are likely to focus on the short-term goal of self-defense, often at the cost of long-term learning. These emotional psychological dynamics consume much energy that could otherwise be applied for progress and better functioning.

Through affirmation, people place the threat within an understanding of total or global self-worth or adequacy, and consequently, the alarm of danger is lessened along with the stress and self-protective defenses (e.g., Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Feeling more comfortable with their self, people can make better use of the resources for learning and growth in their relationships and themselves.

Accordingly, studies on affirmation focus on the self-processing of additional, unrelated core values of self through experimental manipulation in which people write about their other, positive core personal values. Doing so enables a more expansive view of the self and its resources, diminishing the negative consequences of a threat for personal integrity. Regaining perspective on what "really matters" enables more openness to information that, although threatening, carries essential lessons for positive change and growth (e.g., Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2006).

Affirmations clear the initial emotional, psychological burden that prevents people to advance and perform up to their potential. When affirmed, people feel less stressful and become more open to ideas that would otherwise be too painful to accept, which enables productive participation in the interaction (e.g., Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). This openness can allow gaining from the resources around them and share their own. Affirmation helps people be more flexible and seize opportunities, which is difficult under the initial stress. Timely affirmations have been shown to improve education, health, and relationship outcomes, with benefits that sometimes persist for months and years (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). I discuss the long-term effects of affirmation later in this chapter.

As in the case of many interventions, nuances are important when it comes to human interaction. Research already demonstrated that subtlety in the application of affirmation is critical to maintain its effectiveness of (e.g., Robinson, 2010; Yeager & Walton, 2011). It has been shown that affirmation is more effective when people are unaware of the purpose of writing about their important values (Cohen & Garcia, 2006; Sherman et al., 2005). For example, students are not being told that the writing exercises that teachers assign them are intended to reduce stress or threat to their social identity. In other words, they are not informed about the purpose of writing the exercises. If they were aware of the purpose, they might have felt like they are singled out or in need of special help, which could reduce the effectiveness of the affirmation. When participants are told that the affirmation is expected to benefit them, or they become aware of a connection between their exercises and the outcome measured, its impact decreases (Sherman et al., 2009, Silverman et al., 2012).

However, the benefits of self-affirmation can be restored even when people are aware of its expected impact if they are given a choice about whether to engage in exercises used for affirmation or not (Silverman

et al., 2012). When given a choice, people may perceive the writing exercise not as stigmatization of them or as an act of exclusion but rather as a tool for them to achieve agency over their well-being. In that case, they may experience belonging and not feeling as being singled out of the group or in need for special care by being affirmed.

The reason for affirmation to be effective could be that people may rarely instinctively affirm themselves at moments of threat such as conflict. Instead, they typically apply a narrow focus on the threat itself and lose sight of the big picture and what really matters. Furthermore, intuitively people may affirm themselves in the same domain as the threat, which can increase defensiveness (e.g., Sivanathan et al., 2008), or seek external affirmation such as success or high status rather than in the intrinsic values affirmations (Schimel et al., 2004; see also Nickerson et al., 2003) that risk increased defensiveness.

Thus, affirmations are not only subtle but also indirect (e.g., Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). The affirmation is on values different from the threatening event rather than directly related to it. As self-affirmation theory suggests, a threat stems from the challenge it poses to global self-worth (Steele, 1988). Therefore, affirmation does not aim at resolving the particular threat but help people to find other sources for self-integrity in areas different from the threat.

To conclude, studies on affirmation repeatedly show that affirmation helps people to see the bigger picture. In other words, people are being reminded of other, positive aspects of themselves, and it helps them see themselves as adequate even in the face of a threatening circumstance. It, thus, buffers them against the current threat and reduces defensive responses. The effect is catalytic. Psychological strengths and positive forces that would otherwise be blocked by the feeling of threat can be released and are likely to be used positively.

Social Support is Powerful. So far, in this chapter and the previous one, I have focused on the perception of a threat to self. This defense mechanism is highly prevalent in Western culture with its focus on the individual. However, as discussed, it could be reduced through affirmation. While most studies focus on self-affirmation (the person affirms herself) rather than on what I term, *social affirmation*, it seems, according to studies conducted by Cohen and colleagues (2000), that being affirmed and supported by others could be even more powerful than self-affirmation for generating long-term changes in attitudes and beliefs.

Since the potential of social affirmation has not been carefully studied, this chapter raises the potential of social affirmation through presenting studies on the significance of social support for promoting constructive relationships and well-being. Relationships may be helpful in reducing defensiveness and supporting learning from differences and conflicts. Social support includes in this inquiry both positive relationships as well as nurturing social environments.

As was proposed by Wilson (2011), there are two ways to produce successful social psychological interventions to help individuals reduce defensive processes. One way is by helping to maintain and enhance self-worth, as done by the above affirmation processes (either by self or by others), and another is to focus on people's appraisal of the specific challenge and to encourage a positive way of viewing the challenge. Putting the latter differently, to assist people in evaluating difficult circumstances in a positive way. While the first one focuses on a person's perception of self, the latter focuses on the perception of the challenge.

As I discuss next, social support, either through healthy relationships or supportive social environments, can enhance both of these proposed ways: self-worth as well as a positive view of a threatening current challenge. The social realm, then, can serve as a strong affirmative resource of the various positive values of a person as well as encourage a person to view conflict as a useful experience. Each can alleviate defensive reactions to conflict and increase ability to beneficially engage with others and be more open to new information and learning from conflict. Before I move on to the social realm and studies that take a unidirectional outlook of the ways social support affect the individual, it is important to emphasize the complex, hybrid outlook taken in this study.

A Complex, Hybrid View. While the central role of the social environment where relationships are being constructed is the focus of this chapter, worth highlighting is that this study calls for a complex, hybrid view of the encounter between a person and the social environment. The proposed focus is not on the discourse, language, or society (social constructionists' emphasis), nor on the individual (modernist, individualist emphasis). I propose multidirectional connection wherein all factors continuously shape one another. Considering the attention given to the individual in all disciplines, more attention is given here to the formation of relationship. However, social support is seen as multidimensional, co-constitution of reality rather than a unidirectional view of the social environment as supporting the individual.

A complex view of the interdependence among all elements in a social system rather than a linear can contribute to the understanding of social interactions. Dynamic systems theory (DST) proposes that social processes represent patterns of interactions among individuals within a social system, developing over time (e.g., Coleman, 2011; Vallacher, Coleman, Nowak, & Bui-Wrzosinska, 2010; Vallacher et al., 2013). This theoretical framework acknowledges that social contexts and processes evolve through the interactions between elements. All elements interdependently act and react, responding to changes in other elements. As the individual changes, other elements in the system change, altering context and vice versa.

While it is accepted that the social environment does support the individual to offset defensive behavior, it is viewed here as an open social system where opportunities are mutually explored and multiple perspectives are encouraged. In other words, social support is a dynamic system, flexible, wherein all interact and support one another. I recognize that an emphasis on either the atomistic, bounded psychological subject, as stressed by mainstream psychological approaches, or discursive forms and representations as underlined by social constructionists, will not capture the complex juncture between the person and the social realm.

While relationships call for more attention than they have been traditionally given in many social disciplines, including the field of conflict, at the same time, a somewhat subjective experience of a person is recognized. The person embodies habits and patterns of behavior--a residual from past relationships. The individual is viewed here as constantly being shaped by relationships and, at the same time, shapes relationships and the social environment. Interactions are complex, multidirectional, and evolving.

The orientation proposed here is complex in the way that all parts are seen as shaping and complementing one another. The individual arises from relationship, yet still develops uniqueness that reflects a distinctive history of experiences and interactions while simultaneously forms relationships and the social context. Back to the dancing metaphor, the goal is to improve the quality of the "dance"—the interaction. To accomplish this goal, we have to ensure that both the floor (the social environment) is of a good quality and that the dancers (people) have the proper skills. All components are essential for a good dance.

In the next section, I suggest to explore *social affirmation* in addition to self-affirmation. Afterwards, I will analyze literature on social support that may be helpful for recognizing the importance of social

affirmation. Conducted by traditional psychologists, the language in both fields is individualist, but lessons could be still learned about relational approaches to transformation.

Translating Self Affirmation to Social Affirmation. The use of self-affirmation (mostly through writing a personal essay about self values and experiences), as typically applied in laboratory studies, offers one way of providing support in stressful conflictual situations that enables the person to rise above an initial stress and negative emotions and seize growth opportunities.

The self-affirmation method focuses on the individual and accordingly offers an individualist remedy. However, *self-affirmation* may be social in its core (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Most people choose to affirm themselves within the context of relationships—how others provide them with a source of strength (e.g., Creswell et al., 2007). It seems as they feel better shielded when writing about their connections with others (e.g., "If I didn't have my family, I [wouldn't] be raised right and if I didn't have my friends I would be a boring person" or "My family and friends are so important to me, even more than dance. My family, I can't live without them. My friends, I am my real self around them … I can be silly, goofy, and weird and they don't care, they accept me for who I am") (Cohen & Sherman, 2014, p. 7). Thus, interestingly, the self draws its integrity and protection from relationships and the social world (Leary, 2005).

Furthermore, while the action of writing an essay on important self-values can indeed produce a long time source of strength in certain conditions (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Ross & Nisbett, 2011; Sherman et al., 2013; Yeager & Walton, 2011), the effect of a positive feedback and affirmation provided by others, was found to be even stronger than affirmation done by the self. As mentioned earlier, the second study conducted by Cohen and colleagues (2000) indicated that the effect of a positive feedback and affirmation from others helped change not only immediate defensiveness but also preexisting attitudes. This result may foreshadow a greater impact of affirmation if done on a social scale.

How can the idea of self-affirmation, which focuses on efforts done by the individual, be extended to social affirmation? How can social environments within which relationships are being formed, and their quality determined, encourage quality interactions? The idea of self-affirmation inspires interventions and the creation of systemic practices to reduce defensiveness and generating constructive interactions. Lessons from self-affirmation literature may apply to social-psychological interventions and change processes. Thus,

although research on affirmation focus on self-affirmation, social affirmation is promising. More research is needed on the possibility of a social orientation for the purpose of reducing defensive reactions and destructive conflict.

As shown by Cohen and colleagues (2000), social affirmation may generate even more powerful, lasting effects on the reaction to threatening situations, such as conflict, through reassuring people of their value as a whole regardless of a momentary failure or a flaw. Just as self-affirmation can lead to a greater acceptance and less defensiveness across a wide range of threatening situations, affirmation by others and social environments that orient its practices at affirming stakeholders are not only themselves positive interactions, but they also may be even more promising for the long-term effect on the quality of relationship.

Interventions on the social level such as organizational practices and processes can encourage constructive interactions as has been anecdotally demonstrated in democratic and dialogic schools where social support and affirmation strategies are applied daily, though they are not theoretically informed and not framed this way. Students in these schools experience social support daily through partaking in social activities, such as, morning gatherings, meetings with mentors and learning groups where they are being affirmed and supported constantly.

Translating self-affirmative to social affirmation processes could benefit organizational interventions. Research on social affirmation, particularly field studies and its possible effective mechanisms such as particular practices, their timing of application, by who and how, hidden processes affecting its effectiveness, and so on would contribute to the understanding the application of social affirmation and similar social psychological interventions.

Stakeholders could be educated about the dynamics of defensiveness and affirmative actions so that they are able to properly offer affirmation in times of threat. Thus, as an example, in the context of school, teachers' positive appraisal of students or students' affirmation of other students (social support) can be a systemic option of affirmation. When all stakeholders are familiar with these relational subtleties, all can empower one another via personal and social affirmation.

Routine support groups, as practiced in democratic and dialogic schools, serve the function of bringing people together and engage them in various positive activities such as open discussions around

topics that concern them, sharing positive experiences or hobbies, doing meditation together, dancing, or engaging in volunteer work. Although these activities do not directly address a difficulty or conflict they face, they establish a solid relational foundation and indirect support that is likely to reduce defensiveness by offering opportunities to participate in enjoyable activities and conversations. Similar to self-affirmation, although these activities do not directly address a specific stressor, these actions may strengthen people's sense of global adequacy and accordingly their well-being and resiliency, as shown in studies on resiliency (e.g., Carver, 1998; Helgeson & Lopez, 2010).

As was discussed in the prior section, maintaining agency is important for the effectiveness of self-affirmation, and it probably should be maintained in the case of social affirmation. People can have a choice to join support or learning groups that convene on a regular basis, similar to what was implemented in democratic and dialogic schools. These groups could be supportive in dealing with life experiences such as situations of threat. Such practices can be beneficial not only for supporting people in a particular threatening event, but also cumulatively. With time, people may build awareness of defensive dynamics, which can improve their resiliency and interpersonal skills for the long-term. They may be better prepared to address threatening events, such as conflict, in a less defensive manner.

For social affirmation to be effective, it should be carefully studied and planned (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Subtlety is essential for the effectiveness of affirmation (e.g., Robinson 2010; Sherman et al., 2009; Yeager & Walton 2011). Affirmation should not be freely adapted without planning or evaluation of the proper conditions for its implementation. Improper implementation could miss the intended effect of the affirmation and negatively affect relationships. For example, awareness should be treated carefully. Participants should be unaware that the purpose of the "writing exercises" that teachers give them to reduce stress & social identity threat. If they are aware of the purpose, it might not work. Furthermore, affirmation is also effective if it does not suggest to the beneficiaries that they are being singled out as if they need help, (Cohen et al. 1999, Steele 2010; Yeager et al., 2014). Deciding whether, how, and when to use affirmation is important to best induce the intentional experience.

Resembling to the work in dialogic schools and the model suggested here of combining conscious raising and practices (discussed in Chapter One and Two), Yeager and Walton (2011) in their analysis of

scaling social-psychological interventions effectively, propose to acquire both theoretical and contextual understandings for a successful change. The implications for reducing defensiveness and encouraging beneficial relationship is acquiring a profound theoretical understanding both of the social psychological dynamics and the end result of the intervention, which is similar to the *Insight* efforts (See Chapters Two and Six). Second, it is as important to develop a contextual understanding of the particular organization where change processes are pursued.

Thus, it may be best to promote collaborations among researchers with the theoretical understanding of social psychological processes and experts who lead change or transformative processes. In the case of education, teachers and educational practitioners have knowledge of the context and can use theoretical understanding of social-psychological dynamics to improve the school context and relationships. In the case of business organizations, it could be executives and managers who are familiar with running organizations and know their constraints and cultures. Nuances could shift the effectiveness of interventions in different ways. Therefore, scholarly-practice collaboration could bring about most effective change processes when carefully planned and evaluated (Yeager & Walton, 2011). As processes are implemented and their effects assessed, theories may be refined, leading to better interventions and change processes. Ineffective actions or conditions can be identified and altered to accomplish improved results. Theory and practice feed one another for generating best outcomes. Next, I turn to research on social support that reinforces the significance of the social realm for transformation.

The Link with Knowledge on Social Support. Research on self-affirmation and research on resilience, social support, and relationship inform each other. According to Cohen and Sherman (2014), affirmation promotes adaptive processes that resemble the strategies of the resilient. With time, adaptive tendencies may give rise to interpersonal assets as also suggested by research on the resilient. With negative emotions kept in check, the resilient tend to be "good-natured rather than ill-tempered and defensive" (Cohen & Sherman, 2014, p. 360), which helps retaining the support of family, friends, and colleagues. Rather than being preoccupied with defensiveness, the resilient had built assets that echo the effects of self-affirmation (Elder 1974) such as a sense of personal worth, security, an active engagement with others, an ability to control

stress and sustain relationships, even in the face of obstacles, and flexibility in the ability to learn and grow from errors. In encountering adversity, resilient individuals became better prepared for new challenges.

Affirmation, as shown in these studies, is not simply a technique of a writing exercise but an act that enhances one's adequacy. This principle is critical for constructive engagement with one another and changing the quality of interactions. Organizations may focus on enhancing employees sense of adequacy. Activities as suggested above that involve attending to people's emotional state and offering indirect opportunities for sharing their life experiences and providing encouragement may establish safe spaces that help people better confront challenges. While such practices might seem unimportant, considering life challenges and threating situations, it is important to note that even when experiencing mundane conflicts, affirming acts can be significant for transforming destructive habits in situations of opposing views.

Organizations with a greater awareness to the dynamics of defensive inclinations and the application of mechanisms to reduce them may develop theory-driven strategies and activities to support a person's sense of adequacy and healthy social connections. There are times when threats to the self may be especially high. Times of high need can be identified in organizations and well-timed self-affirmation interventions can be applied. Conflicts, for example, indicate such timely moments. Affirmations given at these times can help people navigate difficulties to set them on a beneficial path. Confidence in the ability to overcome future difficulties may grow and thus strengthen coping and resilience for the next conflict or adversity, in a self-reinforcing narrative (e.g., Cohen et al. 2009; Steele, 1988). The potential of social affirmation is tightly linked to and supported by numerous studies on social support, which are presented next.

Social Support: *Moving Beyond Buffering Stress*. Social support is critical for alleviating stressful situations in many conditions (e.g., Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Feeney & Collins, 2015; Harber et al., 2011; Master et al., 2009). Studies repeatedly demonstrate that those who feel they have social support experience less fear, threat, and pain and are more likely to thrive.

Typically, research on social support suggests a single important function of relationship as buffering individuals from the negative effects of stress in situations of adversity. However, supportive relationships can also help people to emerge from the stressor in a way that enables them to learn and flourish either because of, or despite, their circumstances (see review in Feeney & Collins, 2015). Put another way,

relationships are important not simply for helping people alleviate stress and return to baseline, but also for helping them to grow and thrive by exceeding prior baseline levels of functioning.

Feeney and Collins (2015) expand the attachment theory's notion of a *safe haven* (Bowlby, 1988) and refer to the relational support function as both a Source of Strength (SOS) and as a Relational Catalyst (RC). To present how people serve as an SOS, they propose a broader support function beyond merely providing emotional comfort and facilitation of problem resolution in order to restore one's security in stressful events. They emphasize the role of others in advancing thriving through adversity as the core purpose of this broader social support function. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines thriving as flourishing (growing or developing vigorously), prospering (being successful; gaining in wealth or possessions), and progressing toward or realizing a goal despite or because of circumstances (www.merriam-webster.com). Theoretical perspectives on thriving connects thriving with growth, development, and prosperity (e.g., Bundick, Yeager, King, & Damon, 2010; Ryff & Singer, 2000).

The idea of flourishing through adversity is consistent with work on post-traumatic growth (see review in Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). However, these processes are not typically studied from a relational perspective and they are not the focus of theoretical or empirical work in the field of social support. In the same way thriving can be supported through adversity, learning and growth—important components of thriving—can be fostered through conflict.

Feeney and Collins (2015) suggest a few ways for thriving through adversity, which are helpful for understanding situations of conflict and their transformation. Their extended view of Bowlby's idea of a safe haven includes more functions of close others. These behaviors include providing emotional comfort, reassurance and expressing understanding and acceptance, assisting in bolstering strengths and abilities a person already has but may not recognize (similar to social affirmation), assisting in putting the experience in perspective, and helping in reconstructing or reframing/redefining the situation through applying the recognized self-strengths for positive coping with adversity instead of staying entrenched in negative perceptions of the situation as an impossible one to change.

In contrast to traditional research, social support can provide much more than buffering stress or helping return to previous levels of functioning. When support-providers offer SOS, they also assist in

helping recipients to learn, grow, flourish, or prosper through the adversity. Helping to recognize the recipient's own skills may not only stop the adverse event, but also enable using the current event for new explorations and redefining the situation may motivate the recipient to use the experience as a new path for positive change.

Relationship can serve beyond being available or functioning as a *secure base* from which people can explore and make excursions into the world knowing that they can return for comfort, reassurance, or assistance should they encounter difficulties (e.g., Feeney, 2004, 2007). According to Bowlby (1988), a secure base is the place where support-providers create the conditions that enable significant others to explore the world in a confident way.

Rather than passive support, Feeney and Collins (2015) propose that support-providers can be more active in helping others learn and thrive. People can serve as a RC for growing and thriving through nurturing a mindset with a desire to create and enthusiasm about seizing life opportunities. As in the case of transforming conflict that requires change in the mindset to be able to see a conflictual event as an opportunity, RC relationship involves a perceptual change—providing people with assistance in shifting their view of life occasions—from being paralyzed by difficulties to focusing on their underlying opportunities.

Support can be done through helping others to change their perception of challenges—by recognizing opportunities that might otherwise be missed. Furthermore, others can help create a vision of future possibilities, which is the first step to attaining them and preparing to achieve goals through developing strategy, skills, and resources. Others are helpful in identifying a person's unique abilities and encourage developing them.

Although most research in the social support literature addresses support in times of stress or adversity, Feeney and Collins (2015) emphasize that support as RC, in the absence of adversity, is equally important for well-being and growing. This type of active support through participation with others in life occurrences can promote productive engagement in opportunities, broaden and build resources, and having purpose and meaning in life (Ryff & Singer, 1998). Feeney and Collins (2015) outline many simple behaviors that maintain connectedness and encourage persistence and continued engagement in opportunities for growth through the connection with others.

Sharing a positive event with responsive others amplify the event by making it more memorable and creating a lasting impact on positive well-being. When close others are perceived to respond actively and constructively to good news (e.g., expressing honest pride and excitement), the disclosers experience increased positive affect and well-being, above and beyond the impact of the positive event itself. Others encourage full engagement in life by sharing experiences with others (often related to goal pursuits and personal growth such as performing well at work or school, or other highpoints such as marriage or the birth of a child).

People can also assist others in improving skills and strategies and in providing reassurance in situations of setbacks. Thriving can be supported by encouraging the pursuit of passions in a balanced manner and ensuring that opportunities are not neglected by inspiring self-expansion (e.g., Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) and also by perceiving and behaving toward others in ways consistent with their ideal self through affirmation. A series of longitudinal studies (Drigotas, 2002; Drigotas et al., 1999; Rusbult et al., 2005) has shown that when individuals perceive and behave toward their partner in ways that are consistent with the partner's ideal self, this treatment leads to actual progress toward the ideal self, which in turn predicts better relational functioning and well-being. Research indicates that small acts of care (e.g., words of encouragement, an exciting response to good news, being physically present) can have a great effect on personal and relationship well-being (e.g., Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006; Collins, Jaremka, & Kane, 2014; Eisenberger et al., 2007, 2011; Feeney 2004, Feeney & Lemay, 2012; Feeney & Thrush, 2010).

People will be most likely to thrive when they are embedded in a network of responsive relationships (e.g., with friends, colleagues, siblings, intimate partners, parents) that together serve these important support functions (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Importantly, by detailing all these specific support functions that relationships serve, Feeney and Collins (2015) highlight the importance of support quality. It is not just whether others provide support, they emphasize, but it is *how* they do it that determines the outcome of that support. Their emphasis on active and participative support reinforces my proposal in this study to generate forms of relationship, in this case dialogic relationships, that promote constructive interactions and beneficial conflict.

According to Feeney and Collins (2015), any of these behaviors in the service of providing SOS and RC support must be delivered both responsively and sensitively in order to promote thriving. Being responsive involves providing the type and amount of support that is determined by the situation and by a person's needs. Being sensitive involves responding to others' needs in such a way that a recipient feels understood, validated, and cared for. Thus, the degree to which support behavior is responsive depends on the type and amount of support given, and the degree to which it is sensitive depends on the way in which the support is provided. Therefore, it is important to recognize that relationships can be both a source of stress or support (e.g., Brooks & Dunkel Schetter, 2011; Newsom, Mahan, Rook, & Krause, 2008; Rook, 1984) and it is up to us to create desired, beneficial forms of relationship.

Relational Quality

As noted, the relational functions described as SOS and RC can support people in turning adversity like conflicts to opportunities for growth. These relational functions are particularly relevant in the current study as conflict presents both: an adversity, which is the way a conflict is typically perceived in our culture, as well as an important opportunity for growth. Quality forms of relationship can help people in both ways, as Wilson (2011) proposed in expanding how they see and act upon their many self abilities as well as in how they view the challenge they are facing.

In emphasizing quality in the notion of relational support, I do not intend to undermine the importance of developing personal capabilities and skills. My proposal is that while a great emphasis has been typically placed on the individual by helping people to develop personal skills, not enough attention has been given to relationship, particularly, promoting quality relationships. The factors that shape quality relationship have been missing in many disciplines, not only in the research and theory of social support as thoroughly discussed by Feeney and Collins (2015) and briefly presented here, but also in the study of conflict, as presented in previous chapters. Since the particular mechanisms linking SOS and RC support to thriving have received so little attention in the social support literature, Feeney and Collins's (2015) comprehensive portrayal of potential linkages of SOS and RC support to thriving is pertinent for understanding how thriving and growth through relationships takes place.

Along these lines, increasing awareness to social psychological dynamics underpinning conflict can illuminate possible ways of shifting adversarial interactions to quality relationships. Thus, improving personal skills of dealing with conflict, which has been the focus of conflict literature and practice and was reviewed earlier in this inquiry, can be complemented by: 1. Extending the understanding of the nuances of social psychological dynamics that stand in the way of beneficial conflict; 2. Exploring desired forms of relationships; and 3. Building supportive social contexts for relationships to thrive.

In previous chapters, I focused on the first two issues—nuances of social psychological dynamics and dialogic relationship as a desired form of quality relationships. Next, I move to exploring the social environment within which relationships are being formed and conflicts arise and may be transformed.

The Social Environment as a Pertinent Component Shaping Human Behavior

A social environment in this study refers to the set of beliefs, customs, practices, and behaviors of a group of people (based on the definition of Barnett & Casper, 2001). Similarly, an organizational culture is defined as the shared values, beliefs, or perceptions held by employees within an organization (Robbins & Coulter, 2016). Coleman and Voronov (2003) define organizational cultures as monolithic and uniform systems of values, beliefs, attitudes, and practices.

As these definitions so close in their meaning, and for the purpose of describing a social holder or container where relationships are being constructed, I will use social environment or context or system as well as organizational culture interchangeably in this inquiry.

Tsai (2011) describes an organizational culture as “the social glue holding an organization together” (p. 2) and Schein (1990) adds that organizational culture consists of the underlying assumptions and beliefs that the members of an organization share and that operate unconsciously. Mission, strategy, structure, and other organizational practices are important factors of organizational culture (Strasser et al., 2002). Strasser and colleagues advise that organizational culture is “an important explanatory variable for behavior and performance in the workplace” (p. 115) and influences the quality of teamwork and outcomes.

According to Deutsch’s (e.g., 1994; 2003; 2011) “crude law of social relations" of constructive versus destructive conflict:

> Cooperation induces and is induced by particular perceived similarity in beliefs and attitudes, a readiness to be helpful, openness in communication, trusting and friendly attitudes, sensitivity to common interests and deemphasis of opposed interests, an orientation toward enhancing mutual power rather than power differences, and so on. Similarly, competition induces and is induced by the use of tactics of coercion, threat, or deception; attempts to enhance the power differences between oneself and the other; poor communication; minimization of the awareness of similarities in values and increased sensitivity to opposed interests; suspicious and hostile attitudes; the importance, rigidity, and size of the issues in conflict; and so on. (p. 112)

Understanding cooperative and competitive qualities of relationship is basic for developing a systematic knowledge of the conditions which give rise to such connections on the organization or system level, and, by extension, to the conditions which affect whether a conflict will take a constructive or destructive course.

Kugler and Brodbeck (2014) found support to the link between an organizational culture and the conflict styles of organizational leaders. Their study reveals 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. In other words, complex understanding of multidimensional issues was found to be reflected in a culture or a normative way of viewing differences and conflict.

As the nature of relationship is determined by the social environment or culture, the goal is to create social systems where opportunities are explored, and cooperation and multiple views are encouraged. Destructive conflict is not something organizations should accept as an inevitable in organizations. If organizations invest in building the awareness of the equal value of self and others on which the quality of relationships depends, they will see the energy that could be created by interpersonal friction generates sparks of creativity, rather than tension and anger (Global Human Capital Report CPP 2008. http://humaninterop.com/hiwp/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Conflict_report.pdf).

Though building quality relationships and supportive social environments are effortful, the yields can

be valuable and transformative. As discussed in prior chapters, in certain contexts, differences and conflict can become drivers of learning and improved outcomes. Relationships that encourage people to open up to new ideas and collaborate, people may not merely survive, but thrive. Next, I discuss the importance of social environments for transformation, and later in the following section, the role of leaders in generating environments that bring about transformation.

Based on the complex, multidirectional approach presented earlier, quality relationships are not only for the purpose of advancing the individual but also for the betterment of the collective as a whole so that less toxic relationships are experienced, people jointly learn and develop, and outcomes are maximized on all levels individual, relational, and organizational.

As previously discussed, approaching conflict as a single occasion or as an individual endeavor, as typically done, fails to capture conflict's continuous state of evolvement and fluctuation within unfolding, changing relationships (e.g., Bush & Folger, 1994/2015; DeDreu, 2010; DeDrue & Gelfand, 2008; Peleg-Baker, 2015; Pondy, 1967; Putnam, 1994). 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 its backdrop of changing relational interactions.

Reflecting on these undercurrents may offer an extensive, more sustainable reaction to a conflict. Conflict brings an opportunity to pause, reflect, and adjust the relational movement to fit changing needs (e.g., Putnam, 1994). When viewed within the context of an ongoing, shifting relationship, efforts focus on improving relational patterns rather than blaming a particular individual-the former focus is more likely to have a positive long-term impact.

As discussed, changes on the structural level are essential for shifting the distribution of power (Vayrynen, 1991) and power is a pertinent consideration for transforming the quality of human interactions. Conflict surfaces from structural social conditions. A nurturing environment conducive to needs such as belonging and meaningful connections is crucial for transformation.

Gergen (2009a), a leading scholar who searches for alternatives to an individualist understanding, offers a relational perspective 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 breeds blaming, isolation, distrust, narcissism, and destructive conflict. If the broader context is not addressed, Gergen explains, it is harmful.

Since the quality of relationship is contingent upon the social context, the nature of that context must be carefully examined. While certain environments promote healthy relationships, others provoke toxic ones where destructive conflict is a frequent experience. The advantage of attending to the social environment can be considered first within the context cultural and discourse traditions. As discussed, an individualist culture bolsters defensiveness, but being embedded within a certain culture, does not help the awareness of the sources of defensiveness.

Sampson (1999) provides many examples for the critical role of the environment in generating awareness and transformation of hatred reactions to differences and prejudice. The problem, he claims, is that raising people's awareness to biases and prejudice 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 actions, they would deny the need for therapy and introspection in the first place. Therefore, granting the social environment more weight in changing relational habits and reactions to conflict is warranted. It is the social context where these hurtful interactions emerged from in the first place and which is capable of modifying them.

Transforming Behavior through Changing the Environment. 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. Here are three such examples: 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:

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 approach to practice that implies the separation between bullies and victims as well as punitive interventions. In contrast, practices that aim at changing the cultural context and improving social processes and practices in school and home carry a transformative potential (Haslebo & Lund, 2015; Søndergaard, 2009; Winslade & Williams, 2011).

Studies on bullying reveal 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 and suggests 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).

Olweus's pioneering thinking led him to experiments with interventions at the level of school that show to be much more effective than trying to change students' personality. Furthermore, Olweus reinforces his new approach by moral arguments such as the 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 programs create 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 also show that his school interventions reduce antisocial behavior, such as vandalism, fighting, pilfering, drunkenness, and truancy, and that bully-victim problems are reduced by 50%. In schools where his programs are implemented, remarkable changes such as better order and discipline, more positive social relationships, and a more positive attitude to school work and the school were found. Most importantly, there is an increase in student satisfaction with school life. Olweus's intervention programs not only affect existing victimization problems but also have a significant preventive effect in that it considerably reduces the number and percentage of new victims.

Nazi Atrocities. Sampson (1999) uses a similar rationale for placing 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 comrades.

Sampson suggests that in order to understand Himmler's code of behavior and the unspeakable atrocities he ordered, explanations should not be sought in individual psychotherapy and probing Himmler's personality. Rather, it is the sociopolitical and cultural surroundings that gave birth to Himmler's monstrosity, which indeed needs 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)

Organizational Decision-Making. An illustrative example of the role of the environment for potentially transforming behaviors is also advanced by scholars who research decision-making. The

cognitive psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2013), a prominent scholar notable for his work on the psychology of judgment and decision-making, stresses the environment as a principal vehicle for transforming behavioral patterns. Restructuring the social environment, he suggests, is essential for reducing biases that result in weak decisions.

In an interview, in his response to a question about individuals' ability to become less biased in their judgments, Kahneman said: "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" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=maog6rAOI78&feature=youtu.be). 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' 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 more deliberation and processing of quality decisions.

These settings admits several benefits: a) Managers can be encouraged within organizational structures and procedures to plan ahead and apply discipline in how they analyze problems and 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 formed and practiced.

To motivate managers to cooperate with new organizational procedures, Kahneman stresses the importance of making sure managers recognize the value of the revised practices for themselves, for their own development and growth. They should be encouraged to see how changes in systemic procedures and practices benefit the quality of their work and decisions and their own learning rather than viewing changes as constraining them. Recognition in their own benefit, would advance managers' cooperation in the efforts to reduce biases. The role of organizational environments in improving decisions is therefore "a huge and unexplored field and getting into that is an enormous challenge," Kahneman proposes (www.youtube.com/watch?v=maog6rAOI78&feature=youtu.be).

Though his expertise is the cognitive basis for human errors that arise from biases, Kahneman particularly emphasizes the crucial role of organizational practices for generating less faulty human judgement.

Restructuring the Social Environment is a Necessity for Transformation. These three examples show the significant role of the social environment for transforming behaviors. Being a *holder* within which relationships are formed and where undesirable actions like prejudice, biases, bullying, and destructive conflict take place, social environments can and should be made unreceptive to undesired actions. Making changes on the systemic level is a good alternative to blaming and excluding a 'troubling' person, removing a 'bad seed,' or trying to alter one's personality. Supportive social settings where destructive conduct is approved systemically could be effective for establishing contexts where differences and conflicts are legitimized and are turned beneficial. When people are compelled to change their behavior to fit their social habitats, transformation has more bearing.

Recognizing or validating conflict as a natural component in relationship, as is emphasized throughout this dissertation, is a first step for seizing the opportunity hidden in conflict. It is likely to encourage open communication, which could turn it into a positive experience and a source of learning. Many organizations today realize that conflicts are significant and dealing with them fruitfully is a worthy cause for organizational bottom line. However, conflict is still typically ill-perceived. It is viewed negatively. Second, conflict is addressed on the individual level either by identifying a person to blame or excluded, or in better cases, sending employees to be trained in new skills. When individuals are blamed, they become defensive. That individual who is to blame will identify allies, which is likely to create inner cliques and camps. These dynamics deepen chasm between employees, conflicts are likely to spread throughout the organization and generate toxic organizational environments. A conflict in an organization does not stay local.

Over the past two decades it has become a trend to send executives to training programs in conflict and mediation. A growing number of executives attend these trainings where they learn and practice productive conflict management strategies. Training is a good step forward for learning to deal with conflict constructively. But it proves to be insufficient. These executives become stimulated and energized to apply

the new skills they learned in their workplace. Yet, the enthusiasm quickly fades away when they face the same organizational reality upon their return to their office from tarining. Conventional hierarchical structures and norms are ill-equipped and reluctant to have structures that accommodate positive conflict. Putting so much emphasis on individual skills does not create the best conditions for a lasting change. Within traditional organizational contexts that focus on the individual, conflict is still not openly or positively approached, resulting in missed opportunities for growth.

These managers' invigorated outlook and enthusiasm are necessary, but it is insufficient. It is only a precondition for a genuine, long term change in how conflict is approached and handled. Managers succumb to the embedded conservative code of bureaucratic politics that prefers 'not rocking the boat.' Sticking to individualist solutions is lacking if the purpose is generating long-term transformation. As was discussed in Chapter Two, behaviors are subject to particular discourse and the culture within which they are generated—the patterns of thinking and norms within which they arise. Thus, organizational structures can either promote long-term positive change or perpetuate existing, undesired behaviors. For the former to occur both micro-individual efforts and macro-structural organizational are required.

A single conflict handled poorly negatively influences not only the individual but also the delicate social fabric within which it emerged. Studies of conflict in organizations indicate that it is pertinent 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 shown that a cooperative, in comparison to competitive conflict management is an essential condition for guaranteeing positive outcomes of conflict. The specific conditions to foster cooperative conflict management in organizations were also given scholarly attention. But although it was found that systemic changes are critical, in reality, the focus has mostly remained on the micro level-on individual and small group training, not on macro, structural organizational level, such as restructuring subsystems and modification of organizational practices, communication or culture (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Gelfand et al., 2012). As I proposed and will further discuss in Chapter Five, an integration of both is

key for lasting transformation.

The Link between a Self-System and a Social System. Though most the work on affirmation to diminish defensive reactions center on individual self-affirmation, and the conceptual framework of thinking is individualist. Cohen, Sherman and colleagues (e.g., Cohen et al., 2009; Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman et al., 2013) show in field experiments that proper social environments reinforce affirmation and bring about lasting change. Long term change is exhibited on multiple levels such as improving achievements, better performance and changing negative behaviors like bullying and aggression, all of which significantly impact the quality of relationship.

Research on self-affirmation shows that like other interventions, self-affirmations can yield long lasting benefits when they activate what they term a *cycle of adaptive potential*. In such a cycle, they refer to a series of reciprocally reinforcing interactions between the self-system and a social system that carry the intervention's effects through time and improve adaptive outcomes. Any experience, Cohen and Sherman (2014) assert, can have persistent effects if it ties a person to broader reinforcing processes that propel outcomes through time. This kind of thinking provides an additional reinforcement for systemic efforts—replacing traditional structures and processes with those that are designed as containers for a changing mindset toward conflict to a more positive one.

A positive feedback loop between the self-system and the social system, they suggest, has been presented in interventions in education, health, and interpersonal and intergroup relationships. Timely and well-situated, they can channel people into a cycle of adaptive potential—the self-acts, the social system reacts and the cycle repeats in a feedback loop.

Again, their terminology and use of the concept *adaptive potential*, for example, reflects an individualist perspective with a focus on changing the individual. However, it is essential to appreciate their work for a couple of reasons: 1. We live within an individualist ethos where the individual frequently finds herself in a defensive mode to protect its identity from a potential threat. This condition hampers quality relationship and calls for correction. Relationships become destructive and less productive. To reduce defensiveness that would positively impact relational quality, affirmation processes are significant. 2. While affirmation processes studied by Cohen, Sherman and colleagues are mostly conducted by the person, the

actions taken by the social environment, as they also mention in their studies, are critical for long lasting change. It is through social support that the quality of interactions can be transformed.

The impact of self-affirmation is versatile and has shown to be long-term in certain conditions: it improve grades for students in a lasting way; open people up to threatening health information; increase patients' compliance with treatment schedules; reduce sympathetic nervous system activation during stressors; lead overweight people to lose weight; and improve intergroup and interpersonal relations (see review in Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Brief writing exercises could have extensive and lasting benefits though may seem nonintuitive. Most importantly, in the context of powerful social systems such educational contexts, designed to reinforce positive change, even affirmation on the individual level can push change even further.

For example, field experiments tested the effectiveness of affirmation in lifting the achievement of African Americans (Cohen et al. 2006, 2009) and Latino American (Sherman et al. 2013) in schools located in middle-class neighborhoods where most minority students come from socioeconomically disadvantaged families. These schools provided material and human resources to help students succeed and some had undertaken initiatives to advance the progress of underrepresented students. Hence, the social system was "ready" to respond and reinforce better student performance once it occurred. In these studies, students were randomly assigned to complete either values affirmation exercises or control exercises (unrelated exercises) two to five times over the year. Interventions started early in the year, typically the fourth week of school. Exercises were given right before an exam so that their effects could be immediately channeled into better performance rather than decay before they could affect an outcome. The values affirmation intervention significantly improved students' GPA of identity-threatened groups, African American students in one school (Cohen et al. 2006, 2009) and Latino American students in two others (Sherman et al. 2013).

The impact of these interventions endured and improved students' achievements through the rest of middle school. Two years later, affirmed African Americans and Latino Americans continued to earn higher GPAs than their non affirmed peers (Cohen et al., 2009, Sherman et al., 2013). At one site where high school records were available, the intervention effect persisted into a third year, when most students progressed into high school (Sherman et al., 2013, study 1). Students seem to carry the benefits with them into a new

environment. Affirmations did not boost GPA but rather slowed its decline. The downward trend common among middle school students (Eccles et al., 1991) was less steep among affirmed minorities.

For the effects of self-affirmation to last, Cohen and Sherman (2014) recommend, three components must be involved: recursion, interaction, and subjective construal. As an example for a recursive process, they discuss that when a student who feels affirmed, the student may perform better on the next test, and performing better, the student may feel more affirmed, in a recursive process that lifts the student's trajectory and eventually becomes a continual source of affirmation. Further, a cycle of adaptive potential is also, by definition, interactive. Educational systems, for example, are filled with processes that recognize, reinforce, and provide resources for student success. A student who excels early in the year may be seen by teachers as having greater potential. The positive effects of high teacher expectations from student performance may propel more involvement and greater performance over time. Beyond recursion and interaction, what they term subjective construal—the way people see themselves and their social world—can fuel a cycle of adaptive potential. Feeling affirmed and achieving more, students may become more hopeful. They may see adversity in a more optimistic light.

As discussed previously in this chapter, an optimistic outlook, openness to challenge, and confidence in being able to succeed in new challenges are critical for long term change. Otherwise, the impact of interventions may fade as people return to their old habits, stay within their comfortable zone, and avoid challenges that could bring about growth (see many examples in Ross & Nisbett 2011). As discussed previously, relational support that functions as both a source of strength and a relational catalyst can help people in all these aspects: to adopt an optimistic outlook, be more open to new challenges and see them as opportunities and gaining confidence in their ability to successfully address them.

To conclude, the social environment is a holder for recursion, interactions, and changes in subjective construal. It significantly impacts the trajectory of transformation. Because these processes take time to develop, a full understanding of them requires longitudinal research, not just a single study or an immediate assessment. A longitudinal research can provide more details on the specific mechanisms that enable these processes to work, such as timing for effective interventions. For example, even affirmation on the individual level is most significant if timed at the onset of key developmental transitions in schools. Transitions

represent both points of vulnerability and windows of opportunity (Anderson, 2003). Again, coordinating efforts on both levels individual and organizational will yield best outcomes, and will benefit not only the individual but also the quality of interactions and the organization as a whole.

It is easier to create long lasting impact in its earliest stage. Once a process is established, it may have a momentum that is difficult to reverse. Longitudinal research could help identify the time and place a problem emerges and thus when and with whom to intervene. Such research is also important because the effect of interventions may take time to occur. Furthermore, field studies provide a necessary supplement to lab studies because social systems contain multiple factors that interact with any intervention and shape its expression.

Affirmation without resources for growth may be ineffective and even trigger disengagement (see Vohs & Schmeichel 2013). Therefore, interventions that combine affirmation with programs to enhance motivation and skills may yield the greatest benefit (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Benefits are likely to endure more in contexts that reinforce the change.

Self-affirmation theory inspires a more general account of the role of social environments in alleviating defensiveness and generating long term change in the quality of human connection. The abundant research on affirmation is a firm basis for further inquiries on its application for *social* affirmation rather than *self* affirmation—the particular actions, proper situations, and timing considerations of systemic actions that may produce a lasting change. Less anxious and distracted, people can make better use of the resources for learning and growth.

It is time to expand individual affirmative interventions to social affirmative processes. In addition to self-affirmation efforts that are found effective and executed by the individual, supportive environments can affirm people through helping them to decrease the inner alarm of the threat and diminish stress and defenses. Small improvements can carry significant consequences if the environment repeatedly reinforces a desired behavior. Further, without supportive partners like a caring teacher, a concerned colleague, or a supportive manager, an initial improvement will be like a "spark without kindling" (Cohen & Sherman, 2014, p. 358).

Because the social environment is where relationships are born and develop, and potentially

transform, a great responsibility falls in the hands of the leadership: the choices leaders make, and the institutions they construct. Those holding influential positions have the power to make a meaningful change, and lead environments wherein conflict is perceived positively, biases and defensive mechanisms are openly discussed, and relationships support ongoing learning from differences. Leadership is in the position to empower employees, establish inclusive organizational practices and processes that encourage stakeholders' active participation in decision-making.

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

Though acquiring new skills to cope with conflict is essential, it is insufficient for sustainable, constructive relationships wherein conflict is legitimized and being channeled into a positive route. To build such relationships, as experienced by stakeholders in democratic and dialogic environments, organizational structures and practices that nurture collaboration are essential. Leadership has the leverage and authority to modify or build new organizational practices to reflect a new understanding of self-other relation and a positive view of conflict. Collaborative organizational platforms can help replace adversarial interactions with cooperative practices. Innovative, inclusive organizational spaces where all stakeholders are invited to express their views and participate in decision making are promising for transforming relationship, and the ways conflict is approached. The combination of a positive outlook of conflict with practices that offer daily opportunities to practice a revised perspective is promising for decreasing the adverse effects of conflict.

The role of leadership to induce and maintain change cannot be overstated. The conflict management style of those in power impacts not only local interactions but also the collective-organizational communication style and the entire culture (Kugler & Brodbeck, 2014). However, leaders not only serve as role-models by the way 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 work.

The Role of Leadership is changing. Given the significance of constructive environments for organizational growth and the best outcomes, leadership's role is rapidly changing. Fostering collaborative environments and coordinating relationships in more meaningful and productive ways seems to gradually replace the traditional 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 leadership faces in changing social environments. In an unequal, hegemonic society, not everyone is equally interested in transforming the environment into a 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 have Incentive to Change? here is an inherent paradox in the suggested collaborative responsibility of leadership. The relational environments leaders are encouraged here to promote might be perceived as infringing upon their authority. Leaders might reject collaborative or more dialogic environments to protect their status. If they adhere to an individualistic mindset, their own personal prerogative might loom larger than the long-term good for their employees, organization, and even themselves. Therefore, they might be reluctant to delegate decision-making opportunities to lower-ranked employees and hesitant to change the working environment altogether.

However, actions of those with power prove to be more potent than the actions of the less powerful (Sampson, 2008; Wood, 2004). Their efforts are more far-reaching than those who are less powerful. Therefore, the overall impact on conflict engagement will be the uppermost if they act to lead the desired change. The highest responsibility for changing human interactions rests with those with relative privilege. If they look beyond their immediate comfort zone to consider the long-term benefits of dialogic environments, not only for them but for all, their organizational culture is more likely to be dialogic and inclusive.

When deep-rooted social asymmetries are replicated and perpetuated, it hurts the overall performance since many are voiceless, and their contribution is restricted. A supportive, more dialogic culture is better for both the organizations they lead and also for themselves. As shown in the examples above, by restructuring social environments with diversified representations and inclusive practices within which all stakeholders participate in decision-making, is more likely to diminish destructive behaviors. If the

latter becomes unacceptable and counter-productive within the new 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 combination of competent individuals who together exhibit a blend of skills, experiences, and backgrounds[5] Organizations with inclusive cultures are two times as likely to meet or exceed financial goals, three times more likely to be high-performing, six times more likely to be innovative and agile, and eight times more likely to achieve better business outcomes.[6]

The Meaning of Leadership is changing. Along with the change of leadership role, the` understanding of leadership is shifting within collaborative, inclusive 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 seen as both leaders and followers, depending on the situation, and participate in the construction of decisions and spaces where they learn from each other's differences. In more dialogic and inclusive organizations, all employees are leaders—all can inspire and empower one another while also following the initiatives of others at times.

[4] https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/za/Documents/technology-media-telecommunications/za_Wome_in_the_boardroom_a_global_perspective_fifth_edition.pdf
[5] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/31480/11-745-women-on-boards.pdf
[6] https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/us/articles/4209_Diversity-and-inclusion-revolution/DI_Diversity-and-inclusion-revolution.pdf

In summation, a simultaneous reform on both a micro--(individual perception and skills, and macro--systemic/structural levels is essential for transforming the quality of a relationship, the trajectory of conflict, and achieving best outcomes. The role of leadership is critical for creating social environments where these changes are effectively integrated and synchronized.

Next, in the last chapter, theory and practice meet. I offer practical considerations for transformation—how new understandings of self, other, and relationship can be developed and sustained, and the implications of these new understandings on practice for lasting transformation.

CHAPTER FIVE

PRACTICAL CONTEXTUAL-RELATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR TRANSFORMING CONFLICT

From Adversarial Interactions to Dialogic Relations
From Division to Co-Creation & Inclusion

"Transformation is Effortful but a Challenge Worth Investing." Tzofnat Peleg-Baker

From Insight to Action and Action to Insight

Inspired by Gergen and colleagues' (2001), I use a *bottom up* approach in this inquiry:

> Let us move to the world of action, and specifically to cases in which people seem to be wrestling successfully with problems of multiple and conflicting realities… By examining these cases we may be able to locate conversational actions or conditions that have broad transformative potential. (p. 685)

Democratic and Dialogic Contexts. This inquiry was instigated by the author's adversarial, hostile climate in the workplace. Early practice in democratic and dialogic environments she experienced first-hand and were presented in Chapter One showed less adversarial atmosphere. The dialogic project is unique in its integration of a reflective component around the understanding of self-other with democratic processes and structures. New or revised organizational practices enable people to apply their new understandings daily and change became self-sustaining. Reflection helped participants to increase awareness to the way they perceive self, other, and their relationships, as a first stem for a change in thinking and action.

The purpose of this inquiry was not to investigate democratic or dialogic environments. Rather, these settings were used as examples for the power of the environment in these alternative contexts in shaping less confrontational behaviors. As suggested in the first chapter and is discussed further in this chapter, embedded in Western culture, the imprint of an individualist thinking is still strongly experienced even in democratic, settings that operate as engaging and participative environments. This emphasis may be counterproductive to communal, collective, and inclusive ideas that are also at the core of a democratic society.

The theoretical lenses offered in previous chapters, my practice, and the experience of others in democratic and dialogic contexts may inspire new ideas about forming more dialogic, inclusive connections.

Becoming more mindful of the individualist culture we are embedded in, its values, and the ways they shape our actions, may encourage alternative forms of relationship.

As discussed in previous chapters, how we think of the world around us, shapes our actions. Thus, if we are to transform them, we are called to be mindful of our view of the world. As suggested by Wilson and his colleagues' (2011), although it is difficult, people can change. For that to happen, they advise, we have to change the stories by which we live our lives. Both dialogic and democratic endeavors helped people readdress their interpretations of the world, which redirected their behaviors. When certain actions become unacceptable within a particular social context, they are replaced by the ones encouraged in the community. Organizational practices and structural changes based on equity and equality, such as the ones applied in democratic and dialogic schools, including parliament, pluralistic learning groups, collaborative committees, and conflict resolution systems, offer each member an opportunity to participate daily. These practices invite participation and sharing perspectives, cultivating a sense of belonging, and sustaining transformation.

In both environments critical thinking and some form of reflection is applied. Participants are encouraged to think critically and to increase awareness to their perspective and discuss alternative ways of interpreting the world. However, based on my experience and other members of these communities who shared their experiences, reflection seems to be different in democratic compared dialogic schools. Democratic schools offer unique participative environments wherein conscious raising is about the ***What*** - philosophical and pedagogical backdrop of education--ideas around freedom, equality, and brotherhood; democratic pedagogy and participative mechanisms as Dewey's ideas; democratic principles; human rights, activism; and the link between the person and society. Reflection in these schools stands for the type of critical thinking that is purposeful, reasoned, and directed at improving individual learning. Stakeholders are encouraged to study and experiment with innovative educational and learning ideas.

On the other hand, reflection in dialogic settings (in schools, family, and other contexts that apply dialogic practices) takes the form of self-reflection on the ***How***—how we understand ourselves, the other, and our being together; the multidimensional self; and how one's understanding of the self shapes the way one relates to the other or positioning her in the interaction. This reflective practice also points at the strong link between the way the self and other are understood and the quality of their relation.

This form of reflection focuses on social-psychological notions and dynamics that either promote dialogic relationships (e.g., the meaning of respect) or prevent them (e.g., defensive behaviors). Stakeholders of dialogic environments emphasized the essential role of this form of reflection for transforming the quality of their relationship. As Noga, the founder of the Dialogic Experience, explained, the success of participative, democratic endeavor relies on the ability of participants to profoundly understand themselves and their habitual ways of connecting with others—what promotes and hinders connectedness.

In Chapter Two and Three, I offered two conceptual frameworks to help the reader delve into our relational nature. The first--social construction offers a relational orientation to understanding self and other along with a critical eye on the ramifications of an individualist understanding of relating to one another. The second framework analyzes social-psychological dynamics that stand in the way of constructive relations. These two lenses may expand our understanding of the complex relational psychological subtleties underlying our behaviors and what could be done to create more collaborative spaces that encourage learning and growth from differences. This knowledge may be helpful for an improved version of democratic life--more collaborative and equitable-- the dialogic vision some aspire to realize.

Moving Beyond the Individual. As Gergen (2009a) advocates, all concepts as science, art, and literature develop through relationship. In that sense: "Dewey foreshadows themes central to relational being." (p. 242). Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism strongly influenced democratic and dialogic experiments. The interaction of individuals with their environment is necessary to adapt and continuously learn.

The question of whether the democratic and dialogic projects take us far enough to understand our full relational account and transform our relationship to the better stays an open question. Gergen (2009a):

> The work of John Dewey and Arthur Bentley resonates with Heidegger's binary-breaking innovation … there is a mutually constituting relationship between the person and the object (mind and the world). Thus. They argued for replacing the traditional view of inter-action (independent objects in a casual relationship with experience) with the concept of transaction (p. xxii).

While democratic and dialogic programs are incredibly inspiring, they still hold remnants of the individualist ethos. In projects at the democratic institute, even in its current extended stage, the binaries

between self and other, and self and society are maintained. As Gergen said about traditional systems (2009a, p. 241) that: "The individual mind is still primary; relationship is secondary and optional." Even when there is a coordination of action and synchronized patterns, the focus is on the individual.

In democratic schools, transformation has been taking place through changing the environment structurally and systemically. However, this endeavor is still individually oriented and lacking is a profound understanding of that positioning of the self at the forefront and one another in the interaction. The Dialogic Experience takes us a step forward toward to the relational space and invites reflective work around the triangle of self-other-relation. Stakeholders examine existing understandings and identifying relational patterns that are not productive anymore versus desired forms of connection. Stakeholders who have been participating in dialogic contexts say that transformation in relational quality does take place. However, while now the other is understood as a subject rather than an object, an individualist perspective is still maintained.

It may be beneficial for those who seek to create more inclusive, collaborative, and meaningful communities, even in these alternative participative democratic projects to re-examine their endeavors through the contextual-relational lenses offered in this inquiry. While democratic and dialogic projects are informed by the work of inspirational scholars, philosophers, and educators, relational approaches, such as social construction, are not part of them.

In conversations with the author, stakeholders in democratic projects shared a current challenge they have been deliberating around the desired link between the person and society. The question was framed from a still individualist perspective, as an ethical issue—the extent of which the individual is responsible toward society or the ways a person could or should contribute to society. This framing seems inherently unidirectional and individualist in its nature--the contribution of the individual to society and to what extent the society is accountable for the individual. The link between the individual and society is not multidirectional as individuals partnering in a shared endeavor of co-constructing a particular reality that harmoniously works for all. The view is one side contributing to the other rather than a joint task—the individual unit is dominant the discourse.

Society is also implicitly perceived as a suppressor of individual desires and a disruptor of individual freedom and learning in many conversations. Moreover, while learning is a central concept in democratic projects, it is viewed more as an individualist effort. Others help the individual think and grow, they are more instrumental than equal partners who think together. Others are perceived as either supportive or impeding the individual from learning rather than equal partners to a shared journey of exploration. Ideas promoted by social constructionists as the value of the other, relationships, the context, and co-construction of reality, may push the boundaries of democratic and dialogic experiences and other social environments.

While communality and reciprocal commitment are significant in these projects, individualist orientation is still predominant, and may deepen division and isolation. The point of departure is still the subject, as Noga said in a conversation: "Our purpose is to see the other, not as an object but as a subject …To bring about an encounter between subjects." Though the other is viewed as a subject rather than an object, and relationship is given greater attention in dialogic programs compared to democratic environments, the individual unit is maintained as the center of action. This view sustains the traditional perception of the person as a unified ego, a singular and coherent self.

Although less hostility is experienced of these contexts, a redefinition of self-other positioning in the interaction may take them a step further toward more sustainable forms of relationship. The social constructionist lens along with knowledge on biases and defensive dynamics, discussed in prior chapters, offer a more complex approach to our relational nature, including social-psychological barriers that stand in the way of collaboration and productive relationships.

Hopefully, the social constructionist orientation will be useful for considering the broader cultural backdrop of our interactions and its impact on our behaviors. It could benefit us in both ways revealing the invisible, broader cultural-social context of our interactions as well as envisioning a hopeful relational future. As our discourse, norms, and conventions of an individualist context become habitual, they are likely to remain unnoticed and, consequently, unquestioned unless we raise awareness to them. Knowledge on biases and defensive reactions offer a glance into social-psychological propensities that are particularly prevalent within our culture and distort connection. As discussed, the prioritized and idealized self who is thrust into a perpetual state of alertness to maintain a desirable self often reacts defensively in the face of

differences and opposing views. Clouded by strong negative emotions, relationships become an enduring battle between self and other. These dynamics make progress and cooperation difficult, if not impossible.

Additionally, inspired by the less hostile social environments in democratic and dialogic schools, I added a discussion on the role of the social context for transformation. Together, these three bodies of understanding offer contextual-relational considerations for transforming relationships. They may be valuable for identifying what needs to change and direct us toward desired forms of connections. This inquiry is not only academic but can also serve as lenses through which practice can be examined and improved. Hopefully, it can direct us to bridge the many divisions we experience today that risk personal dignity, healthy relation, and community life.

The practical considerations for conflict transformation that are discussed in this final chapter are presented around the following four foundations grounded in the three lenses discussed in this inquiry:

- **Self**—A perception of self as a complex unit which is being shaped by past and present relationships and is continuously in a state of evolvement and change. This understanding is suggested instead of a fixed outlook of self with an emphasis on the traits or personality in which a person already embodies everything within and awaits to be rescued or revealed. An advantage of viewing a person as evolving, complex, and being shaped through the interactions, is legitimizing change and providing both self and the other multiple chances to learn and improve through their interactions and present itself to the world. Put it differently, a single encounter between self and other is insufficient to judge a person or assuming "knowing" them.
- **Other**--A perception of the other as celebrated and valuable for personal and collective growth. This outlook is offered instead of a prevalent focus on the self--her own interests and her *freedom from* and the centrality of autonomy. Typically, the other is seen as instrumental for the self rather than as an equal partner in the interaction. A celebrated other better fits a dialogic way of being wherein each engaged actively and equally in the relational process.
- **Relationship**--Both self and the other equally and continuously co-create their reality—a multidirectional approach to self-other connection. The individual is not viewed as conveying or transmitting messages, which create an understanding of whether the other either understood it or did

not. Instead, two complex, valuable individuals co-construct an experience, learn from one another, and the outcome is something new that is being created by both.

- **Conflict**-viewed here as an opportunity for learning and growth.

The considerations I present next reflect a shift in the understanding of self, other, relation, and conflict. The way we understand these phenomena greatly shape how we relate to one another. It also may inform the nature of the link between self and society and creating a proper balance between the individual and the collective in democracy. These conversations are far beyond the scope of this inquiry, but a contextual-relational orientation offered here may help to look at these challenges from a new perspective.

Often, conflict professionals focus on improving skills, such as active listening, suspending thought, or effective communication. While these skills are essential for changing the trajectory of conflict, changing our perception of conflict and our understanding of self-other-relation, is essential for long-term transformation. Conceptual models, as tools for reflection on habits of thinking and behaviors, are offered throughout this chapter. A few models have been applied in dialogic programs and others are informed by these programs and were further developed when writing this inquiry. All are practiced in teams or a combination of an individual and team work.

The importance of incorporating both conceptual models and organizational practices was also emphasized in discussions with stakeholders in democratic and dialogic environments. The considerations are organized around the four foundations presented above. They are no definite rules or conclusive principles but intended to be valuable actions for practitioners and scholars to deliberate on how they might be applied to other social groups and in different situations and contexts. I also incorporate a few reflections on cases from my coaching experience and dialogic work in organizations in recent years.

Contextual-Relational Considerations

1. **The Self as a Whole**

Gergen (2009a) warns about the risk of the traditional vision of self as *Bounded Being*— "The ideal of internally integrated, harmonious, and coherent mind" (p. 135) for deepening the division between self and other. As discussed throughout this thesis, an understanding of a bounded self reinforces dichotomies, such as self versus the other, subject versus object, inner versus outer, and us versus them, perpetuating division

and alienation. To transcend such dichotomies, social constructionists replace the focus on the individual with locating knowledge and its generation within the process of the social interchange (Gergen, 1985; 2009a).

Instead of a confined person arising from a fixed, isolated, and intrinsic world, social constructionists propose a self as emanating and developing from myriad past and present relationships. To replace a *unified ego*, assumed by the individualist frame of mind, Gergen (2009b) proposes a view of a *multi-being* self who presents itself differently across many relations and situations.

Similar, yet not identical to this idea, I have developed and practiced the concept of a *self as a whole*, reinforced by this inquiry. This idea is characterized by the understanding of the self as *multi-dimensional* and evolving and changing continuously through the interactions. This understanding significantly challenges the traditional conception of a self as fixed who is in a constant struggle to accomplish perfection and coherence. In contrast, the *self as a whole* renders a person who embodies a range of self-dimensions (e.g., values, beliefs, and opinions) that sometimes contradict one another at times and could be perceived by the self as "negative" or "positive." "Negative" dimensions refer to flaws, ambiguities, contradictions, or inconsistencies, while the "positive" entails the desired, accepted self aspects. The *self as a whole* embraces both qualities as the natural, complex state of being. From this recognition derives a recognition of an imperfect self who embodies it all: mistakes, oversites, contradictions, and incoherence.

The whole self is always in the state of becoming. The manifold self dimensions reverberate one's past and present relational history, some of which are known to us while others may be outside of our consciousness (see below the Ying & Yang conceptual model). Furthermore, how one views their self, whether fixed and internal or multi-dimensional and evolving, powerfully shapes the quality of one's interactions. For example, a destructive conflict might develop at the encounter between a person who grew up in a conservative family that avoided confrontation with one who was raised in an open family where issues were discussed openly. The meeting between a person who acts in ways that the other views as a weakness, often unconsciously, trigger rejection, disapproval, or ridiculing the other, which feeds resentment and hostility. Vehemently trying to protect a positive self, both might reject or project her difficulties on the other. Without an awareness of the sources of these actions, the situation is likely to escalate into heated

conflict wherein both parties get increasingly defensive, undermining and blaming one another. The recognition of a self as embodying multiple sides, "negative" and *"*positive*"; accepted and unaccepted* liberates us to open our mind and heart, try things out, make mistakes, or fail.

When our undesirable dimensions are illuminated, we stop hiding them from ourselves or blame others for them. Instead, we take responsibility for our own share, even if it is perceived negatively. This understanding invites more flowing and genuine interactions that enable learning and growth and redirecting our focus to the future. Moreover, an understandings of the self as a whole creates a deeper connectedness between self and others. Embracing all self dimensions fosters compassion toward the weaknesses *and* flaws of the other. It encourages the exploration of conflicting matters with curiosity and openness. Each party takes responsibility for the exchanges and the space they co-construct. This may advance us toward transforming a subject-object or I-It connection to a subject-subject or I-Thou mode of relation.

Importantly, "*negative"* dimensions are not viewed in this inquiry as universal characteristics or inborn, deep-seated, fixed qualities of a person, as typically discussed by psychoanalysts, such as Carl Jung (1958). Instead, these parts of self are regarded here as a product of a person's past and present relationships. Yet, though understood from a contextual-relational perspective, these aspects may have still become rigid and invisible behavioral patterns over the years.

One important implication of the understanding that we are all the time in the making—in the process of becoming, constantly in a state of flux, is that the person we meet at a particular moment is in a state of incompletion. Therefore, it does not make sense to expect that person to be coherent or consistent. The only stable element in this human condition is change. In a fluctuating state of being, we cannot say, as we often do: "I know Sara," or "Yeah, I know David (because I met him once a couple of years ago). Such statements reflect a fixed mindset of a permanent self. It does not give the other space nor the additional chance they may need to continue developing and improving. Consequently, instead of patiently and attentively listening to the other in the moment, we immediately criticize, look for a reason to judge and blame as if we know the person, or predict what they are about to do, even if we had a single encounter with them.

The recognition in continuous evolvement generates curiosity and openness toward what comes next,

what might be discovered, approach the other with a *beginner's mind*-- Shoshin (初心) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shoshin), as termed by Zen Buddhism, with excitement to listen with no presumptions, even if we met that person before. The other is respected (see the discussion about the meaning of Respect and Respect models below in this chapter) –we look repeatedly to provide the other with multiple chances to express herself and change.

A distinction between the self as a whole and the traditional view of a self as *perfect* may further illuminate the idea of *the self as a whole*. The expectation of perfection in Western traditions may *imprison* us in a condition of an infinite pursuit of a positive image. Driven to be seen as perfect, people may present to the outside only what they view as "positive" while hiding or repressing what is perceived as "*negative"* (e.g., unknown, rejected). More problematic is that "we do not only hide these aspects only from others but also from ourselves," said Noga, the Dialogic Experience founder, discussed earlier. Hiding these dimensions from ourselves drives rejection and defensive reactions and distorts our relationships. In contrast to a whole self, a perfect self is inflexible and in continual denial of its "*negative"* sides. One of the reflective models used that were developed in our dialogic practice to raise awareness of these interactions is the Ying & Yang model of social-psychological (SocPsych) dynamics presented next, in Figure 4.

The Yin & Yang social-psychological model. This model was created as a reflection tool for helping participants visualize a whole, multi-dimensional self that embodies both “accepted” and “unaccepted” or rejected dimensions by the self. The model is used to raise awareness to 1. “Negative” qualities (what is perceived as negative by the self), and 2. The link between our perception of self and our reaction to others. Participants in dialogic projects attested that this model significantly helped them accept their multi-dimensional self and shift typical defensive and blaming reactions to collaborating and being more compassionate with others. They talked about changing from hiding and avoiding or projecting aspects of *negative* self on others to taking responsibility and communicating more genuinely and meaningfully. It helped participants see the direct connection between how they understand their self and their interactions with others.

Bly (1988) advises that although defensive emotional inclinations, such as judging, projecting, or blaming may be hidden, people feel the burden of carrying them, and they shape their behaviors toward

others. People act upon them, and the quality of their relations is impaired. Similarly to Bly's (1988) work and Wilson (2011) research, as presented earlier, the assumption in working with such models is that increasing awareness to the multiple qualities of self— what is perceived as "negative" and "positive," can help participants clearly see their part—what they bring to the interaction that is an outcome of their patterns of thinking and relational history. This realization helped participants embrace "unaccepted" sides of self and take responsibility for their behavior, redirecting what could have turned to be defensive. Being able to see their share, in our experience, encouraged accountability, constructive involvement, and applying less defensive behaviors or manipulative actions, if at all.

In our experience, when people were unaware of their hidden negative aspects, they were more inclined to project and blame other people, and they were subject to or conditioned by others' behaviors. In other words, they were less free to make a choice and were driven by others' actions.

Figure 4 illustrates the situation before the intervention. It shows both the self and the relational space. The Yang is the "positive" self— the known, desired, or accepted self explicitly presented to the outside world, and the Ying is the *dark* or "*negative"* self— the hidden, unaccepted self. In this intervention, participants explore their multiple self dimensions and the link between how they view themselves and their relationships with others by exploring and sharing the stories they tell themselves about how they see themselves. These were found to help them identify biases in how they see others—how they incline to favor others who behave in ways that confirm their own "positive," acceptable (O) self and reject those who remind them of their hidden, "*negative"* self (X).

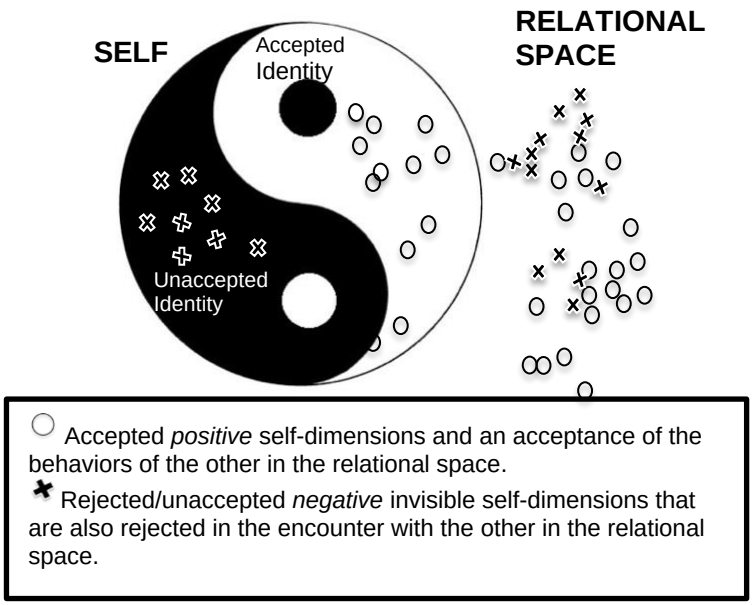

Figure 4: The Initial Stage *Before* increased awareness

Before SocPsych training - Non-Dialogic Relationships

Next, Figure 5 illustrates the situation after a dialogic intervention—after participants used this model to reflect on their understanding of their self and their relationships. As Wilson and his colleagues (2011) suggested, change is possible by redirecting how we see ourselves and the world around us. This model helped participants change the story we tell themselves about self and the other from a person as perfect and fixed to a continually evolving, complex person who embodies multiple dimensions.

By recognizing the person as a whole, multidimensional and developing, a person is more likely to act less defensively and more forgiving and compassionate toward others. The new perspective of self opens the door to more genuine and meaningful relations. This conceptual model offers participants an opportunity to reflect on their underlying assumptions and unspoken stories structurally. Later, I discuss the maintenance of such shifts in perspective.

Figure 5 presents the shift in "negative" dimensions from unacceptable and hidden (x) to acceptable and visible ( ), paving the way to less manipulative and more genuine interactions. The alternative understanding of self and reflecting on the sources of destructive social psychological patterns made participants to feel better about themselves and accept their imperfection.

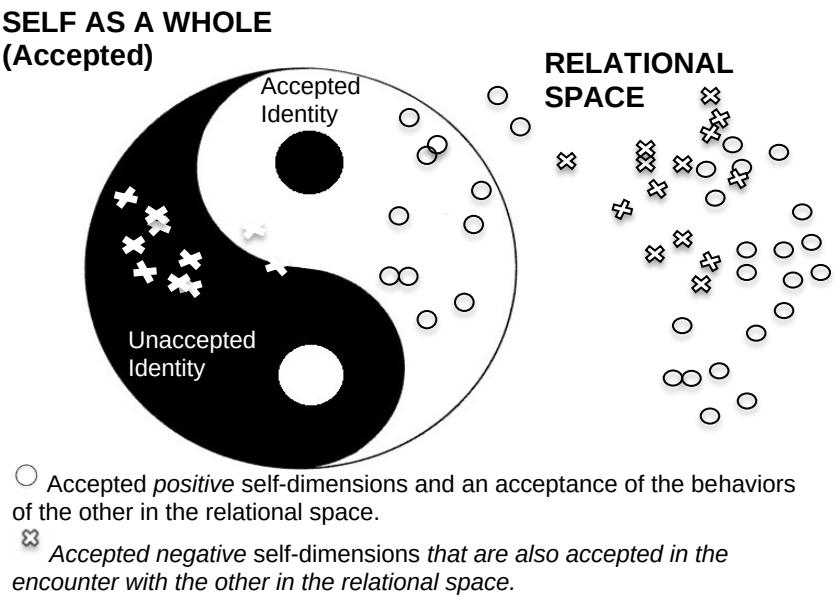

Figure 5: The Advanced Stage *After* increased awareness

After SocPsych training— Dialogic Relationships

The change in the way of interpreting self and the other can be seen as a form of emancipatory learning (Freire, 1970; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Mezirow, 1991). Illuminating the complex qualities of the self powerfully helped participants reduce their defensiveness inclinations. People were emancipated from being controlled by unseen or unintentional perceptions. Put it differently; they were freed from being *subject to* or *conditioned by* external forces—the behaviors of others. Being conditioned by others typically take a significant emotional toll and inhibits people's ability to flow with the interaction and treat one another as co-creators of reality. Understanding these social-psychological dynamics enabled participants to gain agency, make choices, and engage with others flowingly as subjects on their own terms. Conversely, when the imperfect aspects of self are unknown to the self, reactions are predominantly self-protective, especially toward those who act in ways that remind the self of its own undesired self-dimensions.

In conclusion, increased awareness of our multidimensionality, particularly "*negative"* dimensions, can liberate people from being reactive to others' actions—from being subject to others' behavior. This awareness helped participants in dialogic programs become more positively engaged with others. Participants in dialogic training programs who practice this model attested that it helped them to become accountable for

their actions. They gained agency over their actions and improved their capability to participate with others meaningfully. Instead of worrying about *imperfection* and seeking approval from others, they experienced more openness and collaborative efforts. Trainees said this model's use helped them extricate themselves from the chains of the unknown and experience less impulsive reactions that often became counterproductive to their goals. They were able to make more effective choices and be more available to others.

The person as a whole legitimized vulnerability and opened the door to genuine and significant connections. Participants were empowered to be in the uncertainty, were able to be uncomfortable, hold painful experiences, and not shy away from differences or conflicts. Finally, the recognition in a multi-dimensional, evolving self enables one to see the direct link between the way they understand themselves and their relationships with others. Self and the other are inseparable.

2. The Other as Valuable and Embraced

To move toward a constructive form of relation wherein self and other co-constitute reality on equal terms, as proposed in this inquiry, a change in the way the other is viewed is necessary. If the goal is inclusive, dialogic relations, the other becomes an active and equal partner in the interaction.

In contrast, in a reality of a "core," fixed self, the other typically exists for the service of the self. The other is often being quickly judged, even following a brief encounter. The idea of a whole self embraces complexity and a changing self. A single encounter with the other exposes only a single aspect—it is an incomplete window into the other. Therefore, we are invited to give a person multiple chances to express herself. This complex view of self immunizes us against speedy judgements of others and biased reactions.

Similarly, in dialogues of pro-life with pro-choice advocates, at the Public Conversation Project (PCP) (Chasin, Herzig, Roth, Chasin, Becker & Stains, 1996), participants were asked to reflect on what PCP termed "grey areas" – uncertainties and issues participants had doubts about or dilemmas. By so doing, incoherence and uncertainty were normalized as part and parcel of the human experience.

The interpretation of a self as embodying multiple, sometimes hidden dimensions, enables not only to see and accept our own uncertainties and undesired aspects, but also to empathize and accept multiplicity in others. This understanding fosters more compassion towards the other, as was demonstrated in both

dialogic programs as well as the PCP work. Interactions were transformed through the understanding of a complex state of being. With such is lens of self, the other is approached with curiosity instead of as fixed or "known." A complex understandings of self make the boundaries between self and the other blurred. The relational space becomes *boundaryless* (see below in the section on *Relationship as the Unit of Analysis*), and the co-creation of reality by equal partners is more promising.

Respect Models. Another set of conceptual frameworks that have been used in dialogic programs and seems to help establish a solid foundation for different ways of relating, is the work around the concept of *Respect.* Respect comes from the Latin *respectus (respectos)*, and it literally means the act of looking back, from *respicere* – to look back, to regard, to look more. The models are used as lenses to examine the level of respect as practiced in everyday life. participants explore the meaning of respect and whether and how their understanding is applied in everything that they do. Participants are encouraged to look back, reevaluate, and provide one another multiple opportunities to fully express themselves a whole (see also Figures 6 and 7).

It becomes clearer that meeting the other is not a single encounter but a chain of interactions. Furthermore, there is recognition in a process that is intentional and effortful that requires an ability to look beyond what is verbally or behaviorally expressed. It calls for approaching one another with curiosity and trying to understand implicit biases and underlying assumptions that are not always explicit. The respect models help in operationalizing the shift from a relationships in which the other is serviceable—an object, used for self-interest (see Chapter Two) to the other as a subject—a valuable other with whom a reality is co-constructed.

Respect is a relational concept and the models developed around the notion of respect are fundamental vehicles, in our practice, for promoting effective forms of relationship. I present a couple of these models here. They are used for reflecting on or screening the quality of relationships and identifying places and situations for improvement and reconstruction. They serve as primary tools for implementing ideas such as a person as a whole in everyday life.

The work around the concept of respect can start with asking for associations of respect or: "what does respect mean to you?" The answers help generate an inventory of many actual actions like listening, appreciation, relating, giving positive feedback, recognition, hugging, returning emails, talking at eye level,

etc. The inventory of respectful behaviors is created with participants. All practices are presented on the board under three categories of respect: Dignity, Achievement, and Honor. The three types of respect, as shown in Figure 6, are discussed with participants.

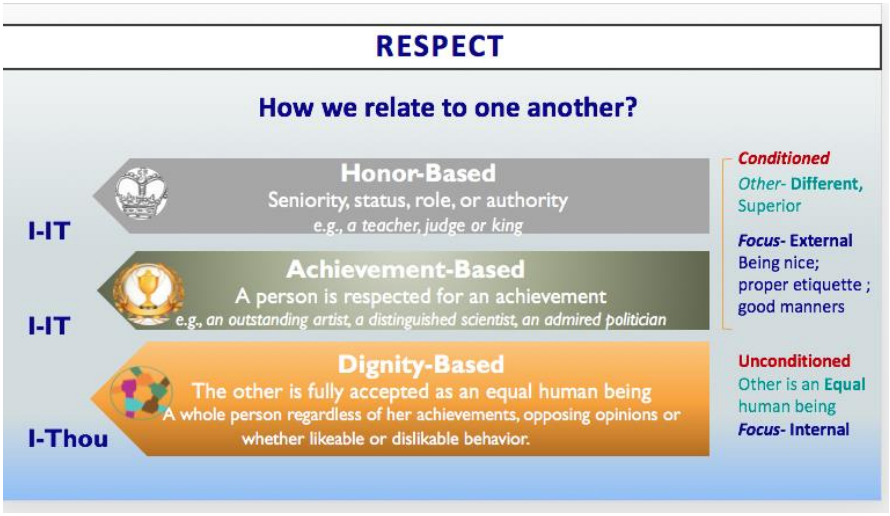

Figure 6: Three Types of Respect

The model was inspired by Schlanger's (2000) three dimensions of Respect (Figure 6): 1. Honor-based; 2. Accomplishment–based, and 3. Dignity-based. Each provides a form of relation we apply daily. The first two notions refer to respect given to the other for being different, and more specifically, being in a higher position. In the case of Honor-based respect, we honor a king or a president or a teacher, as an example. In the case of Accomplishment–based respect, we give respect to a scientist who was awarded a Nobel prize or a high ranking officer. These two types of respect maintain the traditional, hierarchical understanding of Self-Other, and they are the type of respect we use most often, whether in school, at work, and family.

In contrast, the third one – Dignity-based respect is founded in what is common to us all-being humans. We respect the other for being like us, as a human being. Furthermore, dignity-based respect is not contingent by any action, achievement, or status. It is unconditional and non-hierarchical. The janitor and the queen are respected the same way. We relate to the other as a subject, a person who is equal to us. This type of relationship is not utilitarian, while in the first two forms of connection, the other serves our own interests. We respect a celebrity because we hope to benefit from her and it is self-serving. The other is an object used for self-interest.

By suggesting actions that show respect, participants uncover diverse ways people see respect and their expectations. They reflect on ways they treat different people and their motivation. The discussion with others helps them understand their behavioral patterns compared to others.

Another model we use around the concept of respect is "The Tension of Respect," as presented in Figure 7. Participants work first individually and then in groups. In the first stage, they are asked to make an inventory of respectful behaviors. In the second stage, they discuss it in their group, and then, in the third stage, they compose a list of disrespectful actions, such as being arrogant, patronizing, humiliating, undermining, being cynical, ridicule, etc., and discuss it in their group. Next, they are asked to choose one leading behavior of each category (respect and disrespect) and present their discussion and choices made by their group to the class assembly.

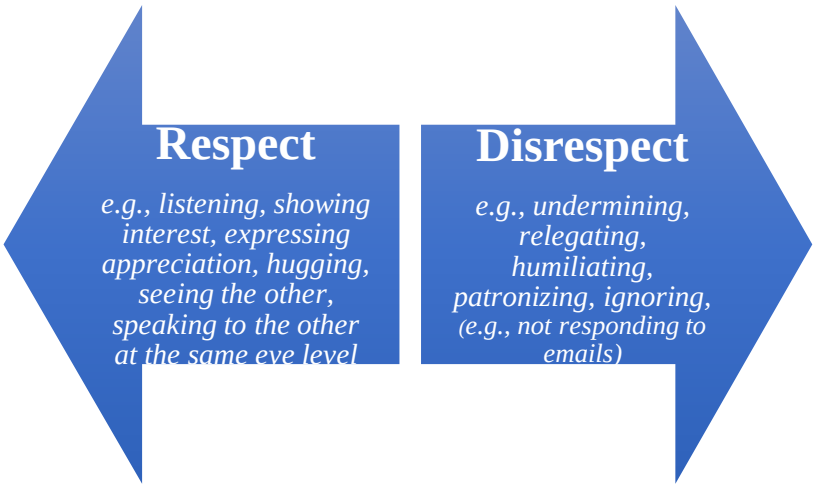

Figure 7: "The Tension of Respect"—The Tension between actions of respect and disrespect

The work around respect reveals actions or behaviors people consider as respectful or disrespectful. It also reinforces again the multidimensional person—people are respectful sometimes while being disrespectful at other times, despite their intentions to be respectful. The model help in displaying the tension generated between desired behaviors (respectful behaviors) and unintentional, disrespectful behaviors. By reflecting on specific actions, we help participants apply respect more often. Participants explore its meaning and the ways respect is being performed in daily life.

People discover diverse interpretations of respect and the differences in people's interpretaions and expectations. Identifying a gap between the *Is* (whether and how respect is practiced) and the *Want* (desired practice of respect) is often stated as by participants as most meaningful. listening to the various ways people

understand and show respect helps participants recognize that there are different ways of understanding the idea, which fosters tolerance and openness toward the other.

The discussion around respect is connected by the facilitator to the issue of *Choice*—whether a is a *Source* versus *Conditioned* by others. This discussion is also connected to the Yin &Yang model. Together, these models help participants illuminate behavioral patterns and the gap between intentions-the *Want* and reality-the *Is*. Through increased awareness, participants become more intentional and accountable for their actions. They can gain more control over their behaviors and orient themselves toward positive connections.

Importantly, these models help identify what needs to be changed. For example, a participant may discover that she is not responsive enough to others, in answering to emails, for example. Participants may discover that some actions or inactions are counterproductive, distort connections, or cause toxicity. These interventions help participants systematically reflect on their actions and reconsider them.

In schools, this model is typically used to analyze and improve situations and interactions in different junctures, such as meetings with parents, evaluating students, teachers' interactions in teachers' lounge, communication between students, and other situations. It discloses relational spaces where people apply honor or achievement-based respect despite intending to relate to others with dignity and equally. The overarching goal is to instigate change in perception and action. In our experience, proposals to change already come up in the first workshop, but their implementation is done over time. The inventory of proposals is kept and shared by all participants.

The models and activities around respect are typically used at the initial stage of an organizational intervention to set the foundation for a shared vision of a dialogic relationship. This work, in our experience, helped building a sense of existence and belonging. Environments were these models were used, did not eliminate conflicts. Principals of schools were these models were applied, attested that they started experiencing less aggression, hostility, or violence in schools. Stakeholders in these environments learn to be in a constant inner and outer dialogue about their actions in a transparent way.

The models are also valuable later in the intervention. Stakeholders engage in questions, such as: "To how many people did I say a good word today?" "Did I see a respectful act during a meeting/ an intermission?" "What respectful act did I do for the first time?" "What is a new respectful act I learned this

week?" A system of incentives, such as posting and awarding respectful acts, has been set in schools to show recognition and foster a respectful organizational culture.

I use the models in organizations in change processes, training programs in conflict, negotiation, and customer service. Customer service employees use the framework to analyze their responses to clients and their colleagues. Often MBA students tell me that they apply the models every day to reflect on their relationship at work and family. The three meanings of respect are also used to analyze the positioning of parties in conflicts and negotiations.

In the following case, I used this model with my coachee, an African American CEO, after he described a situation in which he felt disappointed of his actions. He gave a new female, executive employee, a tour of the building on her first day to introduce her to other employees. On the first floor, he introduced the employee to everyone on the floor, including those who passed by in the hallway. However, he did not introduce the new employee to the janitor (white person) who was standing in the hallway all that time (an immigrant who had been working for the company for twenty years). The CEO realized that he overlooked the janitor only when the new employee greeted the janitor and introduced herself. The CEO told me later in our session that he felt terrible about his behavior. He expected himself to be more sensitive. He hopes, he said, to build respectful relationships, but in reality, he felt, he failed to do so. We used a Respect model to help him reflect on the nature of his behavior and that he can work with in the future.

Conceptual models like the respect framework can help to analyze encounters and orient people toward desired actions. They help set the foundation for a respectful working environment and reduce hostile behaviors. The models can be applied as a preventive tool or after an event occurred.

Identity-Relational Concerns. The strong need for validation or acknowledgment—to be heard, can be traced back to the Western tradition of individualism (Sampson, 2008). In our culture, we go far to ensure that our identity is not questioned, that we are included, and take part in meaning-making. Identity-relational concerns—the need to take part in *Meaning* making, have a sense of *Belonging*, and be *Acknowledged or* to simplify--MBA, powerfully drive our actions and shape how we relate to one another. No understanding of relational quality and their potential transformation is complete without deeply understanding and addressing these behavioral drivers. As ontological, undercurrent factors, they must be attended to transform our

interactions. Failing to do so leaves people disturbed, insecure, and troubled. Being overtaken by confusion, frustration, and negative emotions, we may be less cooperative and engaged, particularly during volatile disparities and conflicts.

Acknowledgement/ Validation. At the heart of these identity-relational concerns is the need for acknowledgment, which seems as a precondition of the other two fundamental concerns: belonging and meaning. Once a person is acknowledged, there is a sense of belonging that is being established and also the door is opened for that person to engage and be part of meaning-making. However, if a person is not being taken into account, the experience is as if she does not exist. A person's existence in our culture is contingent on the validation or recognition by others. if not validated, people can become manipulative and defensive in efforts to ensure they get the attention they need to gain back their feeling of existence. Their behavior is subject to the way others treat or position them in the interaction, and consequently they lose control over the way they are in the world.

Not being acknowledged makes one's identity questionable, which can drive an obsessive concern and can leave people anxious and unavailable to others. Increased awareness to these dynamics and attractors help dealing constructively with them to prevent preoccupation with relational identity concerns. Once awareness is raised, the task is to develop more authentic, less manipulative ways of connecting as well as social spaces wherein these connections are safely generated and contained. Once an identity is no longer questionable, attention is less sought and more openness toward collaboration is created.

Related to these concerns and their consequences when unsatisfied, is the CANDY model inspired by James Redfield and Carol Adrienne's (1995) four archetypal defensive *dramas* or manipulations. These automatic and manipulatively relational dramas captured in CANDY are used to *sweeten* a present uncomfortable situation. People apply them when they feel that their existence is questioned—when they feel they are not being seen or taken into account. In such situations and with no proper communication skills to establish genuine and direct connection, they fall back on defensive behaviors. The term CANDY has a double meaning*:* A. It is an acronym in Hebrew to four archetypal relational manipulations or dramas often applied in relationships, two aggressive and two passive behaviors. Two aggressive *dramas* 1. Excessively interrogating or criticizing, or 2. Attacking or intimidating the other. The two passive *dramas* are: 1. Being

distant or aloof, or 2. feeling like a victim. B. These dramas are used as a CANDY to sweeten an unbearable state of being of the self, experiencing non-existence or feeling irrelevant. By these one or a combination of these four behaviors, people try to draw attention to them manipulatively so that they can experience existence and value. A participant in a dialogic workshop said after learning about these actions:

> It is really amazing how differently I see things now because of what I'm learning here! These dramas made me think about myself and how I communicate and reflect on the dramas I play out in my communications. I find myself in each drama…I have complained just to receive attention, I have been distant to hurt a loved one's feelings, and I have criticized. This revelation brings up the need to change behavioral patterns in my own life.

In efforts to protect their questionable identity, one is narrowly focused on protecting themselves by effortfully and obsessively trying to draw others' attention to them. One gets fixated and anxious and becomes unavailable to others. To shift these dynamics both are necessary increased awareness and acquiring more skills to pave the way to a genuine connection, even when feeling ignored or unappreciated and having a strong urge to create a drama. A genuine connection can replace reactive actions (being conditioned by others) by increasing awareness and acquiring skills. Moreover, understanding these defensive dynamics, leaves us, society members, with a responsibility. We are accountable for ensuring acknowledging and including others. If we ensure others are validated, their being is less questionable, and the more likely interactions will be shifted from a protective actions to meaningful engagement.

While the suggested interventions are preventive, they all could also be applied after a conflict took place. By carefully attending these dynamics, emotional defensive behaviors can be transformed into constructive interactions (e.g., Carnevale & Isen, 1986; Isen, 2000). Whether we agree or disagree, just confirming or validating the other as valuable, can make miracles in terms of making someone feel included and experience a sense of belonging.

Importantly, addressing these concerns is not simply an individual task. As discussed in Chapter Four and later in this chapter, interveners and leaders play a critical role in creating appropriate spaces for relational transformation. Offering reflective training, interventions as well as restructuring organizational practices is in the hands of leadership.

Actions on the macro, organizational level are imperative for a lasting change. As described by democratic and dialogic schools stakeholders, participative structures and processes sustain ongoing meaningful engagement and participation of all stakeholders. While acting on the macro level--building holding spaces systemically, that ensure the inclusion of all stakeholders, is essential, acknowledgment could be done by simple acts. Listening attentively and expressing interest and curiosity toward the other are actually forms of acknowledgment. An affirmative language can be used. For example, by merely saying to Bob in the presence of David (the person we want to acknowledge): "I think David means that" or "David was questioning the issue." David then feels that he is being taken into account. David is included, and his opinion is respected and embraced as an equal partner.

This example provides a simple means to validate others that can promote less hostile and more constructive interactions, particularly in situations of disagreements and conflicts. We can say: "I certainly see your point, David. At the same time, here is how I see it ... what do you think?" (the second part is adding more information, not trying to convince!) David's unique perspective is acknowledged, and his autonomy to choose an opinion is kept.

Including the Other. The concern of the self to be heard and included is also rooted in individualism. The need is so prominent and part and parcel of daily interactions, it calls for our action, as a community, to ensure each one is being heard. However, the purpose of including the other and show empathy is not just to make the other feel better as traditionally understood, from an ethical perspective. Rather, the goal is to include the other in a way that encourages a different kind of interaction wherein all stakeholders equally participate and co-create their reality. Including the other is not seen in this inquiry as merely an altruistic act, the 'right' thing to do ethically, or attempting to be nice. Inclusiveness is viewed here as the foundation for equity and equally co-constituting the interaction. The bonding created that way, reflects all voices and perspectives. In this process, the format of storytelling or sharing narratives could be useful because people are more open to personal stories than to statements presented as truth. Stories invite less resistance and more openness to genuine conversations. The following-- the *Transformative Empathy* (TE) model is one of the models to support the inclusion of the other.

Transformative Empathy—Finding the other within (TE—FOW). A view of multiplicity of one's

identity and behaviors alleviates the pressure to do things perfectly—*the right thing*. It legitimizes differences and openness toward them.

TEFOW (see Figure 8 below) helps realize transformation in everyday life. It starts with deep listening to the other. Following listening is the step of *finding the other within*--connecting to the experience of the other through identifying an *emotional* experience within ourselves similar to the one the other experiences. Importantly, the meaning of *Within* here does not implies a preexisting, inborn state of being. The self, as explained, is viewed in this inquiry as a product of past and present relational experiences.

Finding the other within refers to connecting with the experience of the other through locating a similar emotions. Importantly, it is not about looking for the very same action or the exact situation. Instead, it is to empathize with the emotional experience associated with the event. For example, if Daniel is being hurt because his initiative to discuss an issue in his department was sabotaged by Michael who behaved aggressively. To empathize with Daniel does not mean to look for an experience being sabotaged but more for the emotional experience that accompanies this situation, like feeling hurt, humiliated, alienated, or excluded, for example.

Here is an example wherein the TEFOW process would have helped connecting parties instead of dividing, Sara felt rejected and disappointed when her friends, Naomi and Nora, who she always invites to join her to Broadway shows, did not invite her to a dance performance. When she coincidentally found out, Sara asked each friend why she wasn't invited, and she was told: "you were abroad when we purchased the tickets." This response was upsetting for her as both friends were in touch with her via WhatsApp when she was away, and they also still did not invite her. She asked each to have a conversation. One refused, and the other kept postponing.

Both friends did not apologize or invited Sara despite knowing that she felt sadness and disappointment. The tension grew. Naomi talked about Sara behind her back with other friends in their circle, and camps started to build up, excluding Sara. One of the mutual friends, Erin, got involved after Naomi complained to her about Sara. Erin wrote Sara in an email: "Naomi and I know each other for ten years and have never been upset by one another, and I feel you are!" Sara was blamed for the situation and toxicity spread through the circle of friends. Erin did not empathized with, nor validated Sara's hard feelings. The

conflict was not recognized as a normal event in relationships (see also later in the section From Blaming to Mutual Responsibility).

One way to shift this type of adversarial interaction into a constructive interchange and save the relationship could have been by empathizing with Sara—getting into in her shoes through finding a similar emotional experience of rejection and frustration. This does not mean that the friends agree with Sara's opinion, but it is a tool for connecting with her by locating similar emotions in their own experiences. Again, the idea is not trying to recall an exact situation in which we were not being invited to a performance but instead connect to the emotions relating to the experience of exclusion.

This example also raises the role of bystanders. Criticism and blaming does not support restoration. Once a person is being judged and criticized, defensive exchanges move fast in escalatory spirals that fuel the conflict. Such dynamics bring the relationship to its end by making meaning together impossible, as happened in this case (see more under the section From Blaming to Mutual Responsibility). By going the blaming game, polarization deepens, people take a side and Sara, in this case, was excluded. She was not acknowledged and her hard feelings were not recognized. Could this situation have evolved constructively? Could bystanders respond differently and change the trajectory of the conflict?

In our culture bystanders typically take sides and building cliques and camps. These actions intensify polarization. It is interesting to see how these unhelpful actions are the primary ones adopted. They do not advance healing and repair. Is it possible to turn *bystanders* to *upstanders?* Can bystanders contribute in positive ways to prevent escalation? Can they help pave a way for positive interactions? How about offering assistance in having a conversation? How about reassuring stakeholders in challenging times that the community stays with them at these times instead of taking sides? What would have happened if Erin would have offered Sara, Nora, and Naomi to host a conversation and would have helped them communicate? The role of others is essential for advancing in a constructive route, which is essential to deliberate if we are to change the course of conflict.

To create a different, constructive interchange, both self and the other must be included in the interaction even at challenging times. Inclusion happens when each party is validated for their thoughts and feelings, even in situations of disagreement or when their action is unlikable. Linking between similar

emotional experiences can bridge divides and reconnect. Otherwise, co-creation of meaning becomes impossible. In a continuous process of co-constitution, the process of empathy is transformative--one step informs the next through including the voice of the other. TEFOW is a continuous multidirectional between self and other.

Additionally, TEFOW is not merely a moral act--being "nice," or kind toward the other, showing an understanding, or being altruistic. Empathy, from a contextual-relational perspective and in the context of the generation of dialogic relation in which both self and other equally co-create reality is a transformative process--one voice reverberates the other in a chain of ongoing, evolving interchanges. We include one another, on their own terms so that the interaction keeps developing and advancing wherein each voice informs the other and contributes to the process of co-creation. I find myself in you and you find yourself in me.

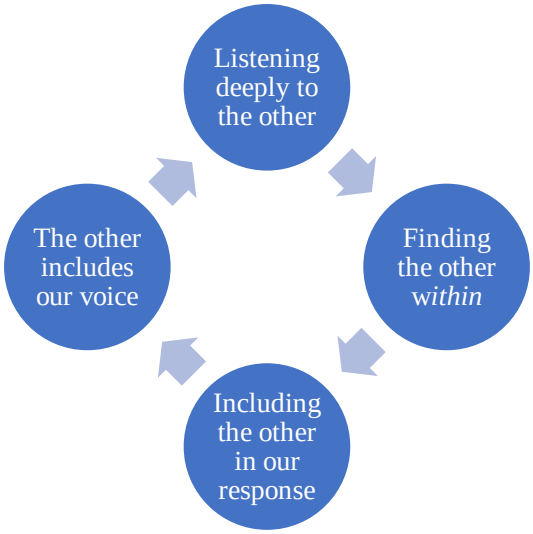

Figure 8: The Circle of TEFOW

TEFOW is cyclic: 1. Self actively and attentively listens to the other person, 2. Self locates the emotional experience of the other *within* through internal dialogue. Internal dialogue sets the ground for a deep connection with the other; 3. This connection enables a profound understanding and the expression of empathy toward the other. 4. The other who now feels understood and included can incorporate the other in her response, and so on.

This outside-inside-outside practice expands the mind toward an authentic and meaningful connectedness among the parties. Each voice adds a layer in the process of meaning-making and advances a

co-creation of meaning. In this continuous process, we do not necessarily agree with one another, but rather, we find the other voice within, contain that voice, and help to re-constitute the interaction. Each voice holds some portion of the other's voice.

Here is another example: Danny sends an email to Bill and also adds a short paragraph he asks Bill to review. In Bill's return email, he does not refer to that paragraph at all. He only writes about his plans for the weekend. By so doing, Bill fails to include Danny in his response. Conversely, if Bill's answer does say something about Danny's paragraph, in addition to sharing his plans for the weekend, then a piece of Danny is within Bill. When Danny replies to Bill, he continues the conversation about the paragraph and also refers to Bill's plans for the weekend. That way, they include one another in the interaction, co-creating their experience. Otherwise, a disconnect may be in the making. Negative feelings could overshadow the connection as Danny may feel excluded, and the process of meaning-making may be stopped altogether.

Here is another example of a disconnect wherein TE may have helped to maintain the relationship. Sharon left a text message with a greeting before Thanksgiving on Tami's voicemail. Tami never got back to Sharon, not with a thank you, nor did she greet Sharon for Thanksgiving.

A few months later, Sharon encountered Tami in the movie theater. After a short chat, Sharon asked Tami if she received a greeting she left her for Thanksgiving a few months ago. Tami said she did, but she was sick. Sharon responded with concern: "I am sorry to hear. What happened? How are you doing now? Tami shared some information and said that she is well now. Then Tami asked: "Are you angry at me?" Sharon said: "I understand it was a difficult time for you. I wish I had known so I could offer help. It would have been nice to hear back from you upon your recovery though." Tami seemed furious and said: "How can you be angry at me? You do not know what I went through… I was hospitalized." Sharon responded: "I am really sorry to hear now. I did not say I am angry at you. I do understand the situation now. I wish I would have heard something from you over the past few months so that I would have been able to offer support. It has been six months." Tami turned her back, and since that exchange, they never spoke again. Meaning-making was terminated.

While Sharon tried to connect to Tami's experience, showed genuine interest by listening, and included Tami's condition in the interaction, it seems as Tami did not relate to Sharon's frustration at all and

did not show interest in Sharon. Sharon felt she cared about her friend, Tami, by first, reaching out to her before the holiday, and later, in their discussion. However, she did not receive recognition for her efforts or interest in her being for six months. TEFOW could have helped here to re-establish the connection. The task is mutual, but when one side perceives it as an individual effort or feels entitled, as it is often experienced within an individualist context, it quickly develops to blaming the other.

One of the exercises that accompany the Ying & Yang model and helps to enhance the understanding of self-other connection is asking participants to think about three people they strongly cannot stand. Participants list three close people (e.g., relatives, friends) they see as unbearable. They share their reflections on these behaviors with the group, and then they are asked to replace the names of these people with their own names. Now their report reads as if they themselves act this way. Their task now is to deliberate first with themselves and then with the group where this behavior meets them or whether this is a place they do not allow themselves to be in.

For example, Danny wrote that he cannot bear Nathan because it seems like Nathan presents things as the truth. Then he Replaced Nathan's name with his name (Danny). At this point, he reflected, first individually, and then with a group, on the place where Nathan's behavior meets him. This is another way to shed light on sides we do not see or refuse to recognize. Danny went through the same process, with another person he listed—Nancy, whom he thinks is always nice, and he feels very irritated about it as it is fake. In their relationship, he constantly feels like he does not really know what she genuinely thinks. These processes help participants to find the other within and deliberate the nature of their connections with others.

3. Relationship as the Unit of Analysis

Throughout this inquiry, I presented how the individualistic ethos with its focus on self, leaving the other secondary in the interaction can negatively affect the quality of our relationships. Because the other like disagreements or conflicts are typically perceived negatively, their trajectory is not promising. The individual is not motivated to invest in their relationships. However, in a world troubled by numerous economic and social complexities and increasing polarization and divisions, alternative ways of relating to each other are critical for a more promising future. Together the lenses offered in this inquiry shed light on relational psychological dynamics typical happening within this Western tradition. They point at alternative

ways of relating to one another and coordinating our differences.

Notably, if all is relationally constructed, as advocated by social constructionists, the self become *Boundaryless*. The sharp division between separate core selves, as traditionally understood, is replaced with a dynamic version of an infinite movement of both boundaryless self and embraced other co-constructing reality. That being said, it does not mean the uniqueness of an individual is ignored or dismissed, as I propose in Chapter Two. Each individual is distinct while all have a sense of collective shaping one another continuously. While the traditional outlook might breed separation, competition, and zero-sum game (see also the classic study by Sherif and Sherif, 1953 on summer campers), a boundaryless view of self-other renders a deep inter-connectedness between self and other. Differences are appreciated and accepted, and at the same time, each person belongs to a bigger whole.

The Role of a Shared Vision. As was experienced in my practice and confirmed in discussions with stakeholders of democratic and dialogic environments, a vision of a shared future and commitment to pursue it jointly is fundamental for being able to hold and benefit from differences and operationalizing or I-Thou relations. As suggested, conflict arises and develops within a relationship and constructive relationships breed positive conflict and beneficial outcomes. In the process of creating a shared vision, supportive relationships are being established and conflict became a source of learning, as stakeholders in dialogic environments attested. Shifting the understanding of the other as valuable and accepted on its own term, not merely an object, may take us another step forward to create relationships that support mutual learning, particularly in situations of disagreement. A shared vision generates a space where all, regardless of their perspective, identity or background, can feel more comfortable, included, and encouraged to accomplish their aspirations.

In contexts where disagreements and conflicts are legitimized and recognized as a natural part of evolving relational dynamics, conflicts may not only be contained but also become a source of inspiration and growth. A shared vision can serve as a reminder of a common good shared by all and that vision underlies disagreements or conflicts that arise. As was stressed by participants of dialogic environments, a shared vision is not only a means but a goal. In other words, it is valuable in itself, not merely because of the outcome it generates. The process of building a vision and engaging with one another strengthens

connections and holds the community together. A better future for all is being built based on an overarching, shared objective of all members. The member of a community learns to recognize that the goals of the other are legitimate aspirations, whether they are different at times. While each person is taken on its own terms and pursues his distinct objectives, all share a commitment to that overarching goal that is being created together.

Stakeholders of dialogic environments said that they handle conflicts, by saying that the way they experience conflicts following their participation in the dialogic experience, completely changed. They said they did not experience conflicts anymore as typically understood. Conflicts did not disappear, they said, but they were not destructive anymore. Participants explained that by their understanding of the complexity of self as a subject, they learned to embrace the other regardless of their different perspective. Their reaction to disagreements became more constructive and understanding.

Sampson (1999) proposes that a shared vision encourages people to see the value of differences and help them recategorize their own and others' identity. Instead of seeing the world in terms of competition, people are in a better position to view themselves as part of a larger, inclusive group in which each one, regardless of disagreements, is a participant in its creation. The shared vision is not a matter of goodwill, moral consideration, or a humane concern. Instead, it is a foundation for a collaborative way of being. It is for everyone's best interests "because unless they do, they may not have anything of value remaining even for themselves" (Sampson, 1999, p. 186). x

Power is the crux of conflict. As discussed in Chapters Two and Four, power is critical for understanding the nature of relationships and the possibility of shifting them into more effective forms. An unbalanced distribution of power challenges a genuine, shared vision. When only a few have the power and privilege over many, Buberian I-It, instrumental form of relationship is preserved. The other is likely to be offered an inferior position in the interchange (Sampson, 2008). Unequal power generates dynamics that deepen division and breed destructive conflict. Such an individualist, monologic formulation is fundamentally undemocratic as it creates and sustains inequality. The negotiation of differences and diversity from a singular, dominant perspective implies a hierarchically higher position asserted by the privileged, a condition that foster tensions, separation, and disparaging behaviors.

Transforming relationships in terms of their power structure, as discussed in Chapter Two, demands a move toward more balanced modes of connection, wherein self and other are equal, which enables equal engagement in the co-creation of meaning. However, a major challenge is with those with power, which may see the aspirations of marginal groups for greater equality as a direct threat to their own safety and security. In their fear, they seek someone to blame, and at the same time, marginalized groups lose trust. Sophisticated new technologies that replace human labor strengthen the few dominant groups and threaten to deepen the economic gap between these groups and underrepresented populations who have no or limited access to economic opportunities. These concerns and many other current global trends, including environmental, trade, and immigration, that are far beyond the scope of this inquiry make the pursuit of common values and a shared vision challenging. The challenge of power calls for a profound deliberation if we are to transform the quality of our interactions and the nature of conflict.

Leaders' personal, immediate privilege might overshadow long-term benefits of an inclusive, power-balanced environment even if a relational shift could be for their advancement in the long-run. Thus, they might be reluctant to reconstruct organizations and communities in the spirit of equal power.

At the same time, relational transformation hinges upon those with power. They are in a position to change the structure of power. Their actions are critical for balancing power and transforming the ways conflict is approached in the communities they lead. Leaders' actions are much more effective than the actions of those who are less powerful (Sampson, 2008). Therefore, the most impactful change in the ways people relate to each other and engage in differences is in their hands. For that to happen, they must recognize the benefits of balanced connections and conflicts for learning and thriving, for both the organizations they lead and themselves. They must recognize the benefits as an incentive to leave the convenience of their position and drive change.

Balanced power can benefit all. Given that leaders are also dependent on others to accomplish their and organizational goals, balancing power could help nurture constructive, long-term relationships with their employees, who will turn valuable for achieving the best outcomes for them and the organizations the head. As research demonstrates, the most successful teams and best performance is a result of shared power (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). Studies have shown that the most creative solutions, optimal and sustainable

outcomes are contingent upon the incorporation of diverse perspectives, and stakeholders' cooperation. Diversity positively impacts strategy and a company bottom line.[7]

Balanced power promotes the inclusion of diversity, which can be a vital source to catalyze creativity and innovation under the right conditions. When people experience inclusion, they feel safe and valued, which encourages them to engage and contribute back to the organization or the community. On the other hand, when social asymmetries are preserved, it hurts the overall performance as perspectives are silenced, and the contribution of stakeholders who currently have low power is constrained.

A balanced power has being promoted in dialogic environments that encourage the expression of different perspectives and equal participation of all in decision-making, as was also confirmed in discussions with stakeholders in these environments. Some of the schools take it further where the voice of a teacher does not hold a privileged position. As Sampson (2008) stresses, an expert voice is valuable to consider but not as the best view or the correct one. The naïve or a layperson point of view is as important, yet they are also not privileged nor correct. Sampson (2008):

> A proper dialogue, however, in which each side benefits from its encounter with its other, requires a democratic and egalitarian context in which to operate. Not only does democracy issue from dialogism, but without a genuinely democratic and egalitarian society, dialogues themselves are not possible. (p. 187).

As presented, creating spaces for stakeholders to participate in democratic and dialogic environments, completely changes the structure of power and the dynamics of relationships. Adults are not considered as holding the truth or the correct view but as providing a valuable point-of-view among others. Each stakeholder, a principal, a teacher, or a child contribute their share and take part in an ongoing discovery journey of possibilities.

As a dialogic school principal, emphasized, sharing diverse perspectives and participating in decision-making ultimately led to best decisions, creative problem solving, and superior performance in her school. Additionally, she said, less destructive behaviors were experienced. These dialogic processes are a

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

result of intentional efforts and recognition in the benefits of the participation of all. Thus, those in powerful positions may be better if empowering and engaging their employees and restructuring organizational practices to include and involve all stakeholders in genuine conversations and decision-making.

4. **Conflict as a Positive Experience**

As examined in Chapter Two, conflict has been given a bad name by its association with disturbance, violence, and war. However, these are not the characteristics of conflict but the damaging potentials of conflict when it takes a destructive route. Perceived negatively and unwelcomed, the experience of conflict activates defensive reactions clouded by negative emotions that obstruct the learning opportunity hidden in conflict. This negative perception of conflict is critical to reconsider. Recognizing the potential value of differences and conflicts can help to shift our adverse reaction.

Both reflective work combined with structural changes can help a shift in reacting to conflict. First, redirecting the stories we tell ourselves about the conflict through both reflecting on the existing stories and learning about new ways of think is important and the lenses discussed in this inquiry can be used for reexamining our perceptions and make the corrections we wish to see; and 2. Organizational structures and processes, such as the practices used in democratic and dialogic spaces (e.g., Parliament, routine group meetings, peer learning, committees, and others) can be established to help translating new ways of understanding into ways of being and prevent conflict from escalating. In these spaces stakeholders are engaged equally and safely and can raise and process their concerns with their partners. Here are a few considerations to reduce destructive conflict:

From Blaming to Mutual Responsibility. Blaming others when things go wrong is prevalent within an individualist tradition. As discussed, with a strong drive to boost and protect the self, the other is often to blame when things go off course while the self keeps a desired image. In our culture, one is held accountable for her deeds, whether being praised for achievements and altruistic behaviors or accused of wrongdoing and crime. As in the example I provided earlier of Sara not being invited to a performance by her friends Naomi and Nora, rather than taking a mutual responsibility on their broken connection they all share, which could have led to a conversation where feelings and thoughts would have been shared, Naomi and Nora, and later,

their friend, Erin, pointed a blaming finger at Sara. While taking responsibility is often translated into blaming, it also opens a door to a genuine engagement with each other.

In blaming the other, the self is positioned as wise and righteous while the other is situated as ignorant and flawed. This widespread, default and habitual reaction intensify tensions and polarization. By holding the other accountable, the self and collective overlook their responsibility for what happened. A divider is lifted between people, language becomes confrontational, and actions are disconnected--all yield hostility and aggression; and eventually, impeding beneficial connections and progress, which could be the end of meaning altogether.

In conflict, people also become so personally ingrained and emotional. Oftentimes, when blaming takes place, the person is attacked as *bad*, not the action. In other words, the action is ascribed to the person as one. This attachment of the person and behavior excludes the person and does not help in making progress toward a solution. While the concept of separating people from the problem is widely known among conflict professionals and negotiators, since Fisher and Ury's (1982) discuss it in their renowned book *Getting to Yes*, in reality it is rarely translated into daily actions. Attacking one another and turning adversarial are the default behaviors, the 'natural' ways to go about disagreements in our culture. Separating people from the problem, looking at the conflict as relational-a co-creation of all parties, is the first step in taking a mutual responsibility. A move from *s/he is* to blame to *we* are responsible for what we have created together- from the individual to the collective when it comes to relationships is key for dealing with relational issues and conflicts for their merits. Instead, the tendency is still, despite the knowledge, is to attack people, not the merit, which becomes an attractor that pulls us all down.

Conflict Does Not Stay Local -- Conflict spreads like wildfire within communities and organizations. If not addressed early, it quickly generates toxicity. In most cases, an employee who encounters a conflict contacts others to recruit them to his side. In an organization that does not legitimize or normalize conflict and do not have a system to contain it, people create camps and cliques by taking a side and the whole environment turns toxic. It was evident in the earlier example with Sara when Naomi immediately shared what happened with all mutual friends while refusing to talk directly with Sara. This action excluded Sara from the group and caused a separation.

One of my coachees recently wrote to me after our session about this topic:

> I had a flashback to my childhood and made it a point to write about it (TPB: recruiting others to take your side) … I always saw it happen, but no one had ever put it in concrete for me. It is TRUE! I remembered gossiping during grammar school, high school, college and even as an adult in my office. My biggest challenge is catching myself before I react. Just two weeks ago I was super upset with a co-worker and immediately went to tell someone else how I felt. When they agreed with me, I felt reassurance. What I took away from this meeting is the awareness that this behavior is not okay if it comes instead of direct communication. I'm sure with enough practice, I will change this habit.

Another executive I work with shared the following example of a conflict she had with her employee. The situation in this case, extended quickly among many employees in upper management, volunteers, and colleagues. An employee, Rebecca, was unresponsive to calls and messages left by her new supervisor (my coachee) for a few days before a significant training program (Thursday-Sunday) that was planned months in advance. That employee was scheduled to be in training on Sunday. The supervisor tried to get a hold of the employee every day since Monday to coordinate her help on Sunday with no success. The employee did not get back to her. She tried for the last time on Saturday evening, after spending a whole day in the training.

All these attempts were in the context of the unresponsiveness of Rebecca on other occasions, being frequently absent, not completing expected tasks, and not offering help to run the training. At the same time, her supervisor was very busy arranging it. Eventually, on Saturday evening, at 8 PM, when the supervisor could not get a hold of Rebecca, she called another employee to cover for the unresponsive employee for the next day. The supervisor texted the unresponsive employee not to come the next day.

Rebecca complained to upper management about the executive texting her on the weekend while the executive left for a vacation. Rebecca also started building an alliance with other employees against the new executive. Upper management called a meeting on the executive's first day back from vacation without consulting or letting her know in advance. The supervisor was asked by management to sit in the meeting and listen to the employees complaining. Pointing fingers at others, either by Rebecca, who did not take

responsibility for being unresponsive, or upper management by putting the new supervisor at the corner, were the ways that the issue was addressed. Top management did not offer a genuine dialogue with the supervisor or to back her in her request to have an honest conversation with her employees directly to clarify expectations and to set a strong groundwork for future teamwork.

Later, the supervisor learned that this behavior had been a pattern in the organization. Typically, employees complain about their supervisor to upper management as their first resort, and it has been accepted by management instead of empowering employees and encourage direct conversations even in difficult situations.

A broader systemic point of view of roles, expectations, and power relations could be helpful for understanding this event. In this case, management intervened before expectations were clarified between the new supervisor and employees, for example, the expectation of responsiveness in a timely manner. Aligning expectations is necessary if the goal is not to only solve immediate issues but also to build long term relationships and trust and avoid similar communication failures in the future. Just discussing the issue of texting over the weekend without conducting an in-depth conversation on expectations regarding the supervisor-employee relationship and an employee role in running trainings, will not establish a solid foundation for the healthy working relationship and constructive conflict.

The Opportunity in Organizational Conflict is at Risk— Situations such as the one described above could become an opportunity for growth. It can be an opportunity for laying down roles of conduct for effective teamwork. However, they are likely to be missed if leadership does not see the opportunity in conflict and ensures conflict is embraced as such in the organization. To realize the opportunity, conflict should be perceived as one. Only then difficult conversations will be encouraged. In the case above, the new supervisor approached these behaviors as normal in the process of building relationships and trust and accordingly, planned to address destructive actions such as non-responsiveness and expectations with his employees. However, his positive approach to conflict contrasted with the upper management approach that promptly backed up employees without consulting with the new supervisor. The employees complained that they feel “uncomfortable” to face the conflict with their new supervisor, and top management blamed the

supervisor for their uncomfortable feelings. This complaint became a cover for genuine, challenging conversations on underlying issues.

Organizational conflict cannot be adequately addressed without considering the broader system within which it is arise. The context for the above situation was a new supervisor who was hired as a change agent after a long history of high turnover of several supervisors in the same position over a short period of time and a declining department. The employees, who did not have supervision for a couple of years, felt 'uncomfortable' with new strategic plans, new requirements, and changes.

They covertly rejected the new supervisor, using various passive-aggressive tactics, such as unresponsiveness, excuses for not completing their jobs, absentees, and other manipulations. It became a pattern of a team complaining to leadership, as the first course of action, and getting its support. The administration delayed its support of constructive conversations for months, where expectations should have been aligned and also refused the supervisor's proposals to use a third-party intervention, such as an organizational consultant or mediator. Upper management and the new supervisor were not aligned in their approach to conflict, and they reached a deadlock. A toxic and polarized atmosphere was in the making and no authentic conversations. That was the end of meaning altogether.

These examples illustrate the interpersonal dynamics that take place when a conflict arises in the context of a collective. It shows how quickly conflict spreads and gets intense if constructive actions are not intentionally taken. When a conflict arises, it is important to pause and carefully consider its roots to uncover underlying sources. Only then, actions could be considered to address the real issues and the consequences of possible actions. Blaming or excluding a person may alleviate the situation for a while but will not transform habitual relational patterns nor the culture of the organization. Furthermore, a single executive or an employee cannot drive lasting transformation within a toxic collective. It takes a collective effort, whether a group of friends, colleagues, or management, to rebuild a better cultural version wherein the hidden opportunity of conflict can be realized. A relational transformation and learning from conflict is possible when the organizational culture and leadership approach to conflict is aligned with the approach of lower management. In the organizational case above, the administration perpetuated the "blaming" tradition, so when a new director tried to change it, he encountered strong rejection from upper management.

Whether upper management refused to collaborate intentionally or not, and even if they had a positive perspective on conflict explicitly, they needed the skills and processes to operationalize a shift from habitual destructive adversarial patterns into open communication behaviors. The lack of a deeper understanding and proper tools resulted in avoiding core underlying issues and freezing habits that have been counterproductive to organizational goals for many years.

It is in this context that we may be able to appreciate a contextual-relational approach to conflict that offers a broader perspective that takes into account cultural and social psychological factors that implicitly shape our behaviors. To ensure we do not fall into reactive behaviors and cultural and social psychological pitfalls that might hold us back, we may develop new capabilities, such as pausing, listening, suspending thoughts, and holding assumptions to allow time to reflect on the events. Considering that disagreements and conflicts are not an individual act, but arise and evolve in the context of relationships, taking responsibility for what *We* created together, beyond our accountability for our own actions, may move us a step forward toward different forms of interactions. Pausing and suspending provide more time to think and avoid a deterioration of the situation so that interactions could be reconstructed for the better. There is no magic or one way for dealing effectively with disagreements. Routine reflection that is structured, as a preventive action, before a crisis takes place, as done in dialogic schools, is critical for opening up to acquiring the proper skills that fostering learning from difficult situations.

In the situation above about Sara and her friends, what if the three friends would have responded to the situation by looking at the center together- at the issue, with curiosity instead of taking sides? Wouldn't that have helped Sara to feel valued and included? Wouldn't such action save their relationship? By so doing, all parties would have taken responsibility for the space created together.

Acting against the person who is assumed to be the cause of a conflict is typical in punitive, hierarchical systems led by a small dominant group. Doesn't it make sense to address conflict from an individual point of view considering conflict is a relational phenomenon? Furthermore, as discussed before, the friends as bystanders, may take a role in connecting instead of dividing. While from a pure individualistic perspective, bystanders take sides and do not help parties reconnect and repair, shifting the

needle toward a more contextual relational understanding entails more actively and positively involved bystanders, as upstanders, helping to heal and make amend.

Preventive actions, such as routine reflections are critical for preventing the escalation of conflict. Having conversations aftermath is better than blaming and judging; however, reconstructing holding environments that foster genuine and direct conversations, before destructive conflicts take happen, is essential for transforming habitual ways of interaction.

The supervisor in the above example recalls the first meeting with her staff when she was suggesting a structure of their future weekly meetings. She proposed two goals for their weekly meetings: 1. To discuss the *What*—the content, substantive issues, employees tasks and projects, and 2. To address the *How*—the quality of the relationships generated among team members, the coordination of projects and responsibilities, what needs to improve, and how. The team responded positively to the first goal but interestingly, looked puzzled at the new supervisor when she was talking about the second purpose.

Although the context was a nonprofit organization dedicated to alternative ways of addressing conflicts, the supervisor had to explain in length why it is essential to look *AT* (rather than through) the relational process and why it is necessary to legitimate and normalize conflict. Discussing the *How* routinely in weekly meetings was not something they experienced before or considered as essential. Interestingly, although their work was to help community members to deal with conflict, they, themselves, did not make a coherent connection between this positive perception of conflict and the ways they lead their own life daily in the workplace.

Normally, conflict is not merely dealt with individually, but also *aftermath,* after the conflict already escalated and became a damaging experience. The contextual-relational preventive approach suggested here does not come instead of dealing with conflict after it happened. What is emphasized in this inquiry is that transforming conflict is a result of a collective and intentional endeavor. It requires careful reflection and planning of positive actions that are based on a new set of skills and a positive outlook of conflict.

Furthermore, just getting together to have a conversation will not suffice. Conversations can be challenging at times of differences and disagreements. Positive results of these discussions are more likely if group members are routinely trained that include a deliberation of their outlook of conflict and acquiring

new skills. Training programs can provide a safe context for reflecting on and deliberating existing participants' perceptions of self, other, relationships, and conflict as well as learning proper skills to interact positively. Learning to be "uncomfortable" in conflictual situations is imperative, as the slogan states, "no pain no gain.". Leadership may want to consider involving a third party for creating the needed safe space for learning.

Moving to a Mutual responsibility. Understanding that conflicts are relational and our interactions evolve in spiral movements between interdependent parties, we are called to consider the *We*, not merely focusing on the *I*. As Mandela (2011) said: "I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom…" (p. 158). Dr. Martin Luther King said:

> All life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied together into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. (Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1963)

As we are all interdependent and part of a context wherein our relationships are born and develop, we may consider taking a mutual responsibility for our differences and disagreements. While a *we* aspiration is very much present and desired in democratic and dialogic systems, particularly in the Dialogic programs, the traditional individualist ethos is still preserved. The individual mind is very much at the forefront, particularly in conflict situations where the habit of blaming the other is still dominants and critically shapes our reactions.

The individualist rationale still stubbornly guides even democratic contexts that are simultaneously founded in communal aspirations. Consequently, the individual is still held accountable and dominant. If a conflict is understood as caused by the wrongdoing of a single person, the result, as discussed, is blaming, punitive, and the exclusion of that person. However, if a conflict is understood as a natural part of fluctuated relationships, then we would scrutinize our relationships and the nature of our interactions. A different understanding of the self, other, and conflict leads to different actions. An emphasis on the individual leads to punitive actions and focusing on the relationships is likely to lead to healing and connecting. Focusing on the individual while aspiring for communal existence may cause dissonance and counterproductive outcomes. Such discord may be felt but left unclear if not reflected on.

The relational-contextual perspective offered is an Source of Strength—SOS (Feeney and Collins, 2015) call for shifting our ways of being. The *Self* is understood as a multidimensional whole, The *Other* is valued and positioned equally in the interaction, and *Spaces* are dialogic and inclusive wherein *power* distribution is shifted. This way of being calls for revisiting taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world that is still strongly guided by individualist principles—to rethink our thinking. Hopefully, ideas of learning, democracy, dialogue, punishment, and conflict can be reconnected in ways that are more beneficial for each one of us and us as a collective. Questioning and reconsidering alternative conceptualizations can support more synchronization between our ideology and its daily practice; between vision and reality. It may be useful for identifying discrepancies and barriers to realizing a desired vision.

A dialogic vision offers an intentional, reflective effort. It is particularly critical within a culture guided by an individualist ethos that aspires for more collaborative forms of democracy, equity and inclusion. When there is insufficient introspection, the ability to contain and gain from differences, is restricted, and we may act in ways that contradict aspirations. Such challenges put much responsibility in the hands of leadership.

Transforming Relationship Relies on Integrating *Insight* and *Action*

As became apparent in my practice and this scholarly work, transformation relies on the combination of *insight* and *action*. By *insight* I refer to reflective practice that has been done by using conceptual models, some of which I provided earlier, individually and collectively with others. Reflective efforts increase consciousness to perceptions and actions to enable learning from them (Gordon & Smith-Hullfish, 1961). It involves engaging new concepts and incorporating them into a person's existing systems of knowledge and experience (Gray, 2007). Reflective work is conducted routinely in dialogic schools. Teachers are engaged continuously in reflecting, learning from their experiences, and reconstructing the school environment based on their new understandings and skills. Reflection is especially critical for managing complex social interactions in organizations. It is vital, as Wilson and colleagues (2011) suggest, to change the way people think and act through redirecting how they see the world around them.

Action refers to organizational practices—new or revised (e.g., structures, processes, mechanisms, platforms), that turn the alternative understandings (the *insight* --e.g., the interpretation of other, relationship,

and conflict) into a daily experience. In order for new understandings to take seed, they must be accompanied by a set of activities and practices that offer the conditions necessary for transformative change. These practices serve as holders for experimenting with and practicing the new understandings to sustain transformation for the long-term. Action and insight complement one another for supporting a relational shift.

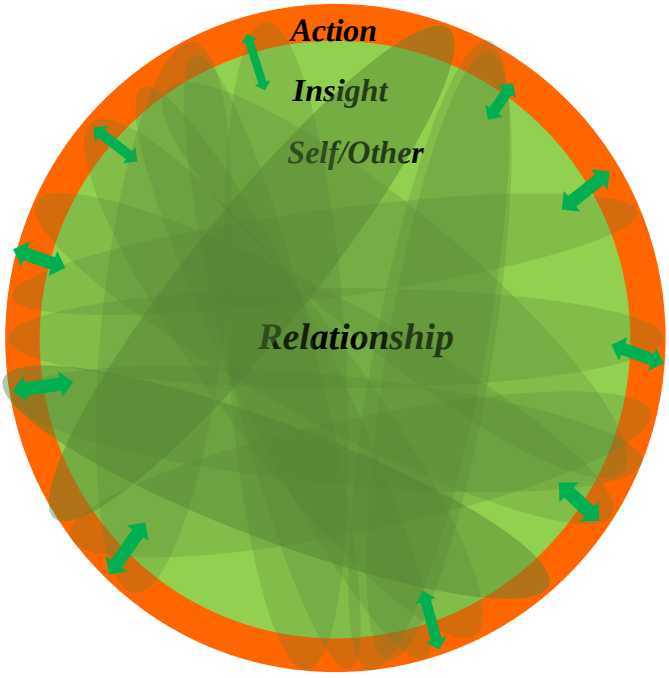

Figure 9: Transformation as a *Multi Directional* effort

Action- Restructured social environment with participative organizational practices

Insight- Consciousness raising to desired forms of relational being and social-psychological barriers

Self/Other

From Action to Insight and back

Insight and *action* also echo the tight connection between perspective and behavior that has been stressed throughout this inquiry and both significant for transformation. As was introduced in Chapter One, how we think of the world around us dictates our behavior (e.g., Dweck, 1986, 2006). Transforming our actions requires a shift in the mindset level (e.g., Bush & Folger, 1995/2005). To change the way we act, we must redirect how we see the world around us (e.g., Wilson et al., 2011). Reflective work is a powerful tool for helping participants make this shift. Linking theory and practice, according to Gergen and colleagues' (2001), encourages an examination of other forms of action that could function similarly or be useful for adopting new practices in different contexts.

Figure 10 presents the cyclical processes of transformation through ongoing learning and execution—changing the way we think and then applying new understandings within new or revised organizational structures, continuously generating new realities.

Once a conceptual model is introduced and deliberated, participants start experimenting with the new notions in various contexts, such as school, their community, workplace, or family, then they bring their experiences and stories back to a reflective learning group, expand their mind, and go back to the field to practice, and so on. We learned that clear definitions of concepts lead to more evolved theories of change, more frameworks, and specific plans for implementation.

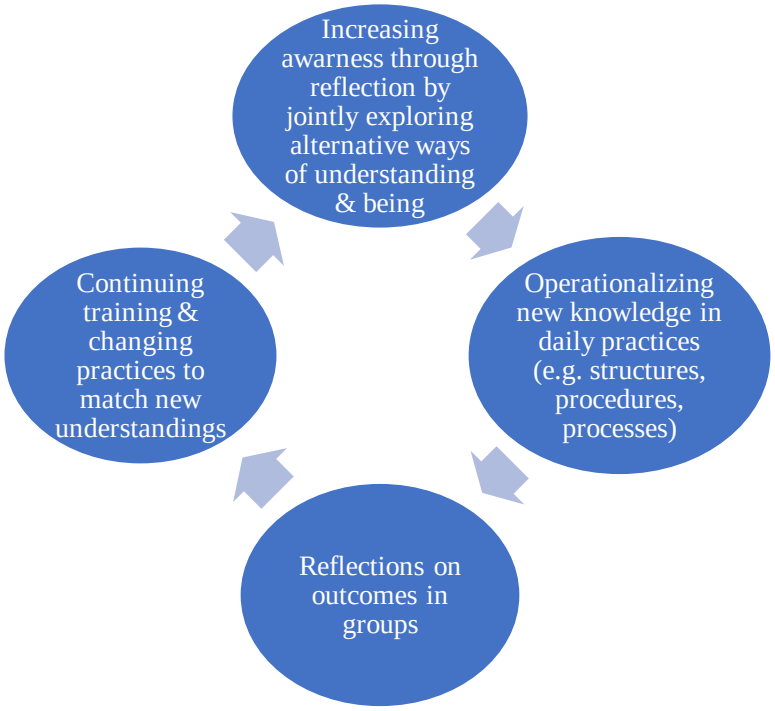

Figure 10: The Circle of Transformation

A primary purpose of reflective models is to help participants gradually diminish the gap between the *Is* (existing reality) and the *Want* (desired reality). In dialogic schools, participants continuously use conceptual models to reexamine junctures in school, such as daily intermissions or parents' school days and relationships between teachers and teachers, principals and teachers, and teachers and students.
Another essential purpose for using conceptual models is to help participants to adopt a habit of addressing both the *What* component—the content or task, and the *How* component—the contextual-relational goal they try to achieve. These components are interdependent and reinforce one another. Optimal results are contingent upon sustaining a resilient relationship and vice versa. Since in today's world, teamwork is a necessity, achieving a task is conditioned by the quality of a relationship.

A shift in perspective (e.g., values, attitudes, or beliefs) is essential yet insufficient. Many participants in mediation courses, for example, are very excited about their new perspective on conflict and their new set of tools to shift relationships. Many of them assume that with the new set of skills they acquired, everything will be different when back in the workplace. However, once they are back in their office, they realize that the organization stayed the same structurally. Practices and processes remained the same, and very quickly, they are back to their old adversarial habits.

Thus, healthy relations and restructured organizational practices are vital for a genuine transformation. Without the support of others like a caring teacher, a concerned colleague, or a supportive manager, and organizational practices, a new perspective will be like a "spark without kindling" (Cohen & Sherman, 2014, p. 358). Therefore, it is essential to build organizational practices and processes, such as incentive systems, recognition and reward programs, and evaluations to nurture new insights and anchor them in daily life.

The question at the center of my study is: ***Can a social constructionist orientation along with knowledge on social-psychological barriers deepen the understanding of the contextual-relational nature of conflict and conflict transformation and what are the implications of this understanding on practice?***

TO CONCLUDE

This inquiry aimed to expand the mind of the reader of underlying sources of habitual, adversarial ways of being and possibly transforming them. I hope that by using three lenses: social construction, biases and defensive behaviors, and the role of the social environment in shaping our connections, we are more educated about the possibilities to transform our relationships into more dialogic ones so that conflicts become a source for learning. Hopefully, these lenses will stimulate thought about the architecture of division we are accustomed to living by and what stands in the way of dialogic relations.

The Pandemic, immigration, uprising, and global warming are not technical challenges. They are complex and cannot depend on a single person. Effectively addressing them relies on the extent to which we genuinely value each other's perspective, embrace diversity, and develop new capacities to learn and collaborate across differences. It is a collective effort, not an individual one. The challenges we face today require a shift in mindset. If organizations and communities are to thrive, they must build new capabilities for transforming prior limitations into novel responsiveness. That calls for courageous leadership.

This inquiry aims not merely to describe *what Is*, but also to offer what *could* be and *how*- what could we do to establish more collaborative, inclusive forms of being. *The notion of dialogue is used here as* an adjective to describe a desired, inclusive form of relation—a hopeful alternative to prevalent hostile, oppositional interactions nurtured by the individualist ethos. Dialogue is perceived as a way of *being*, not as *doing.*

Three lenses inform the proposed contextual-relational perspective and together, they reorient our understanding of self-other-relationships and conflict. The self is suggested as multidimensional and evolving. The other is valued and embraced. Relationships are the co-creation of self and other who participate equally in the interaction. And conflict is viewed as an opportunity to develop and grow. The practical contextual-relational considerations that are discussed in this final chapter are informed by the three lenses along with my experience in pioneering democratic and dialogic projects. My intention is to expand the mind about promising collaborative social environments and their realization and leave the reader with

further thoughts about what is still missing even in spaces that aspire for living by democratic and dialogic principles—what is left for us to do next.

Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis theory refers to the idea that the mere contact between different people is likely to change their beliefs and feelings toward each other. His three proposed parameters described below are echoed in the considerations I propose in this inquiry:

1. **Equality**. The contact involves people whose status is equal. This consideration is demonstrated in the operationalization of *I- Thou* relation, addressing power concerns and co-creation of reality.
2. **Common vision**. A contact must be based on people's shared interests and a sense of shared humanity. I discussed the importance of a shared vision as a desired container for differences and conflicts in the last two chapters.
3. **Focus on the social environment**. The contact is strengthened by an institutional support. I discussed the critical role of the social environment in shaping the quality of relationships.

I offer a holistic contextual-relational approach grounded in these transformative principles that combine insight with action that continuously reinforce one another to sustain positive change. I believe that this approach better serves the needed structural changes.

In the encounter with conflict, we often face the "ugly" side of human relationships. Observing these confrontational reactions, many years ago, in the workplace, and later in dialogues between divergent groups in the Middle-East, triggered my curiosity about underlying factors driving the nature of our connections. I embarked on a journey to explore alternative ways of interacting to help seize the opportunity in our differences.

Conflict crawls everywhere in whatever we do. It may be explicitly expressed, but often, it is implicitly felt. In a world where the experience of conflict can quickly evolve into a harsh interchange and bring about devastating results with no way back, it is critical to explore new ways to understand conflict, not for eliminating conflicts but preventing its destructiveness. We must learn to contain differences and conflicts while maintaining harmony and peaceful existence. Harmony does not pertain here to sameness and agreements but staying in the heat of disagreements with curiosity so we could learn from one another's perspectives and enable the emergence of new ideas that otherwise would not arise.

The practical considerations I discuss in this chapter, such as attending the need for acknowledgment and belongingness and power imbalances, can be attributed to the individualist tradition. The widespread focus on the individual forces us to be alert to other people's perceptions of us. We are powerfully urged to protect ourselves when sensing a threat to our identity. Adverse reaction to someone different and the struggle to defend ourselves became deeply ingrained and counterproductive.

To many, including social scientists, the tendency to think in terms of *us* versus *them* and act defensively seems as "human nature." It has been so deep-seated in our culture that even neuroscientists who observe reactions and changes in brain activity and structure explain it as an inner feature as if the brain is the source of adverse reactions to the other. However, work in neuroscience increasingly attests to the brain's incredible plasticity (see overview in Doidge, 2007). What is considered "human nature" may be culturally-socially originated—habitual ways of thinking, patterns of relationships, and cultural discourse. An individualist understanding seems to reinforce divisiveness and separation. As we are so embedded in habits of the mind, we may consider explaining adversarial and hostile ways of being as a human construction.

Whether the tendency to defensiveness and separation is our construction or an inborn trait matter. It matters if we believe that our core qualities are built-in and fixed by nature or whether we think that our qualities can be developed through efforts and relationships (Dweck, 2012)). The contextual-relational understanding offered in this project brings hope. If humans construct their actions, we can change them. This inquiry is an invitation to reconsider assumptions that guide our actions. They may have become the norm, but some of them do not work for us anymore. If we can see them, we may be able to transform them.

I find the practices I discuss in this chapter useful in my life. They have helped change the trajectory of my interactions and helped me form more productive connections. Still, I do recognize that these actions do not always work. Sometimes, I meet divisiveness and finger pointing when I openly offer a conversation on difficult issues, even with dialogue or conflict professionals. In my experience, for some people, even those who make their living teaching others how to deal with conflicts and doing dialogue, being 'uncomfortable' is not an option; it is not a state they are willing to be in even for a short period of time. Some people curious and cooperate while others want to win. Some people are embracing the intensity of conflict; others insist on avoiding or being right. I learned to accept it.

I also find myself falling into blaming at times. My knowledge helps me, at least, to see it. Although I "know," I can find myself in a turbulent situation, failing to act what I know. Reflective practice helps to experiment with the considerations I provided in this chapter.

It seems as addressing conflict constructively, and growing from it, is still a challenging task, even for those who promote alternative ways of interacting with others and dealing with conflicts. In my experience, appreciating differences and embracing conflict is not the norm in our Western culture. In most cases, people see conflictual situations negatively and reject or avoid conflicts. Engaging in difficult conversations is effortful and requires an open mindset—curiosity, a complex understanding, and appreciation of the other. Intentionally orchestrating them all is an art. These are not 'soft' skills, as they are traditionally termed. Transforming destructive relational habits require intention and carefully attending to what we do, what still works, what does not work anymore, and what needs to be changed and *how*. I hope that these considerations will help you rethink old habits and provide you with tools to go about changing behaviors into more constructive ones.

As David Bohm (1996) commented in his book *on dialogue*, "If it is necessary to share meaning and share truth, then we have to do something different" (p.12). It takes intention and effort to do things differently. And he continues with an example (p.12):

> Bohr and Einstein probably should have had a dialogue. I'm not saying that they could have had one, but in a dialogue they might have listened properly to each other's opinion. And perhaps they both would have suspended their opinions and moved out beyond relativity and beyond quantum theory into something new. They might have done that in principle, but I don't think that this notion of dialogue had occurred to scientists then.

Perception should not be undermined. Intentionally reexamining our understanding is critical for creating new ways of being that can benefit us more.

To establish a mutual language, the first step, as discussed, is to create a shared vision to guides our actions. If all take part in the process of building a shared vision, then we are one step forward to work together toward reality in which differences can be not only contained but also serve as a source of growth. Exploring our differences as sources for learning is quite a meaningful vision to share. If we could

understand relationships and the social environment as we understand the self, we might be able to open new horizons for reducing hostility and paving innovative ways to connect.

Given the individualist cultural context wherein conflict is perceived negatively, a positive response to conflict is atypical. Yet, deliberating the considerations proposed here is a challenge worth investing in because it might help change the perception of self-other-relation, and conflict. Because daily experiences are filled with differences, they are the arena where we could experiment and correct our relationships' trajectory. As discussed in Chapters Two and Four, the implications of this inquiry for leadership are substantial. Leadership matters. Its role in transforming conflict is much more significant than those with less power. The way leadership addresses conflict and the systems it constructs affect many people. Leaders have the power to change our interactions. But what could motivate these people who hold power to share it with others?

I started the conversation about this challenge earlier. It is vital to continue this conversation and examine it beyond moral considerations. It is essential to recognize that both the leaders themselves and their organization can benefit from more egalitarian relationships. The incorporation of diverse perspectives can generate authentic interactions and stimulate innovative ideas and best results. Therefore, for their own interests, those holding power should be motivated to encourage new organizational practices where all stakeholders participate in decision-making.

The field of conflict is in its adolescent stage. While all conflict professionals aspire for more collaboration, inclusiveness, and equality, we are at the initial phase of developing an intellectual foundation for the field (see also an interview conducted by Robert Benjamin with Bernie Mayer (https://www.mediate.com//articles/mayerfull.cfm). Each discipline I have incorporated in this inquiry, including human development, education, learning, cognitive, social, and developmental psychology, organizational studies, relational theories, philosophy, and social construction, adds a unique piece and deepens the understanding of the complexity of our interactions.

The models presented earlier in this chapter are a work in progress. As noted, reflective practice, when done structurally and collaboratively, stimulates deliberation and new understandings and keeps us in check on our role as conflict professionals. Incorporating different conceptual models as the ones presented

in this chapter can be useful for shifting the dichotomy of "right" or "wrong" into a more complex and mature outlook of conflict dynamics, particularly in organizations wherein conflict does not stay local but spreads like wildfire, generating toxicity.

The use of multiple lenses may help third-party interveners like an ombudsperson or organizational consultant detect recurring issues, gaps between aspirations and actions, inequality and fairness concerns, and destructive patterns. This supports the intervener's active role in reframing conflicts in the organization as natural and valuable day-to-day engagements, not merely as problems to be solved and signing agreements. Furthermore, an active intervener can help build less judgmental and more inclusive organizational practices and make systemic changes before the surge of unnecessary tensions and destructive conflicts.

Early detection of systemic issues is a prerequisite for redirecting conflict and preventing their destructiveness. Addressing systemic issues may be considered not only aftermath—in reaction to a conflict or a crisis, but also, they could be proactively pursued by an intervener before destructive conflicts arise. To ensure policies, practices, and the organizational culture do not intensify destructive conflicts, they should be examined in light of whether or not they support employees' and organizational objectives.

Operating within the context of an individualist culture, conflict interveners have typically focused on individual personalities and styles. However, this study invites a different approach. While personal characteristics should be considered, it could help give more attention to contextual-relational aspects underlying the appearance and evolution of conflicts. As previously discussed, conflict emerges within the context of culture and relationships. Therefore, it is essential to attend cultural, social-psychological factors that shape relationships and the trajectory of conflicts.

The ways we react to conflict in day-to-day life are too often destructive and disruptive. They negatively impact our well-being. There is no alternative but to practice better ways of being, even if this challenge calls for moving outside of what we have known and practice for years. Transformation is effortful but is a challenge worth investing in. We are better together. It is possible to transform our connection, and it is in our hands.

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