Doctoral dissertation submitted to the faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor in Psychology [Doctoraat in de Psychologie]

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

2019-2020
August 22, 2020

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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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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).

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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.

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