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Reconstructing Therapy in a Postmodern World: Relational Resources

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I would like to begin by problematizing the term "psychotherapy" and inviting you into an exploration and reconstruction of the work of psychotherapists. As our attention turns toward our increasing interdependence as cultures that are both diverse and similar in multiple ways and as technology provides evermore means of connection, the idea of treating an individual, a couple, or a family is vulnerable to critiques of insignificance or triviality.

What good is accomplished by providing counselling for a delinquent teenager if the community and school contexts remain unchanged? Why work to improve a woman's self esteem if her husband's competent self assurance can only be achieved in contrast to her deficit? I, in fact, do not believe that psychotherapy is either insignificant or trivial in its mission but I do feel we must respond to these now vocal critiques.

There is at least one option available. This option is a consideration of relational forms of intelligibility. Specifically, I would like to introduce the notion of relational responsibility (McNamee and Gergen, 1998). It is in this possibility that the professional work of the therapist might be revitalized. This option focuses on micro-social processes -- the interchange of persons in relation -- as they embody broad networks of relations. When described in relational terms, a person's problems are not his or hers alone. Similarly, world crises are not divorced from the ways in which we raise our children, participate in our communities, and conduct our work. With a relational intelligibility in place we can shift our attention to, as Sampson (1993) says, what transpires between people, not what is contained within them. This shift revitalizes our sense of community, lends broad social and cultural significance to our very local actions, and provides discursive options that centralize our relational engagement. With this precis in place we must ask: what different kinds of social worlds are possible if we move from an individualist tradition to a relational intelligibility?

In answering this question, many agree that the individualist tradition from which most research and therapy comes is limited. While able to claim several "advances" and "successes," it is only one voice among many. True it has created a world where people feel able to predict their own behavior and that of others. It has created a series of cures or treatments for social problems that trouble many. Yet the dominant voice of individualism has also generated many of today's problems. Attention on my success or failure, on my thoughts or feelings, on America's competitive edge have created a world of isolation. Gone is the sense of community and civility that was so celebrated in earlier centuries. With our efforts focused on proper analysis of a problem and cook-book treatment (a direct outcome of traditional, modernist discourse), there is no need to explore the contours of how we actually relate to one another. What we need simply, according to the individualist tradition, is a plan of action that will carry us through the ever-increasing challenges of tomorrow.

Limits of the Individualist Tradition

The individualist tradition champions the self as an originary source of thought and action. It is our private consciousness that registers our experience of the world and it is from the interior that the individual understands, problems solves, plans, and intends. Consequently, we education individual minds, reward and punish individuals at work, conduct psychotherapy, and hold individuals responsible. In sum, the individual is the source of good and evil in society.

Philosophers such as Rorty (1979) have argued that the idea of an interior mind reflecting an exterior nature is not a simple reflection of human existence but a historically situated **convention**. Historical studies document the shifting conceptions of mind. We no longer, for example, talk of "hysteria" or "soul" as manifestations of mind and we continually add new mental realities to the ledger (cf, Kutchins and Kirk, 1997; Harre, 1979; Graumann and Gergen, 1996). Anthropological work demonstrates different conceptions of mind in different cultures (cf, Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990; Heelas and Lock, 1981; Shweder, 1991). To the Buddist, unity is significant, selfhood is not. And literary theorists call into question the long accepted belief that the task of the reader is to locate the author behind the text -- to ferret out the true meaning of a text. In contrast, deconstructionists such a Derrida (1976) and Fish (1980) illustrate how writing is not a manifestation of the author's mind but of systems of language that entail genres and traditions of writing. To them, writing is a culturally and historically contingent practice of effective language use. Thus, to read is to participate in culturally embedded practices of interpretation.

The implications of these critiques are significant for our discussion. One can not constitute meaning alone, nor engage in a rational choice among competing goods without having absorbed the intelligibilities of a community. And yet, individualist discourse is our dominating tradition (convention). It affects cultural life by valorizing the self as the origin of action. The result is that the self is prioritized. We value one's own goals, needs, wants, and rights. Our chief concern is how we win or lose. And, we only examine other's actions as they affect our own.

Individualist discourse generates a sense of fundamental independence or isolation. I'm never certain if I am being understood or not. Why should I pursue investments that might curtail my individual freedom? The byproduct of this way of talking is that relationships become artificial. Relationships "need to be worked on." And, when working on a relationship becomes burdensome, we simply retreat to the self (what is best for *me*?).

There are also deleterious effects on society. If everyone is self-absorbed, who cares about the environment? In this realm, individual gain is impoverishment for the community. Little attention is given in higher education to cooperative modes of learning. Business training emphasizes individual performance and workshops abound in leadership and management training. Courts seek to allocate individual blame and remain blind to the broader social processes in which crime is embedded. And on both local and global levels, individualism promotes interminable conflict among incommensurate moral or ideological commitments. *Is this a useful path for the future?*

In the global world of today, cultures are thrown into ever increasing contact. There is both pragmatic and theoretical demand for communal forms of practice. In this world, individualist ideology can often be a disaster. In what follows I attempt to lay out relational alternatives that might supplement our individualist traditions. Are there ways of relating – of talking and doing – that privilege relations over individuals and in so doing provide opportunities for transformative dialogue? Afterall, psychotherapy is focused on transformation. How can a relational sensitibility provide resources for acting in the psychotherapeutic context – resources

that are generative and transformative? And, simultaneously significant is the need to recognize psychotherapy's role in perpetuating and/or transforming more global social practices.

Intelligibilities of Relationship

We confront in daily life myriad instances of agonizing action - cases of failure, stupidity, hostility, dishonesty, injustice, brutality, and so on. We inherit from our tradition a strong tendency to locate the source of such failings within individual minds - acting either individually or collectively. Yet, we find not only that we are without the conceptual resources to sustain such a tradition (noted above), but that the presumption of individual responsibility lends support to a variety of destructive practices within the culture. *What alternatives confront us?*

If our discourse both sustains and constitutes cultural life, it is essential to develop new forms of intelligibility -- ones that invite, encourage, or suggest alternative forms of action. These serve simply to augment the already established individualist tradition, not to replace it. Out of relationships we develop meaning, rationalities, the sense of values, moral interest, motivation, and more. Can we develop from this sensibility (of relationship) discursive resources that shift attention away from individual sources of action to the sphere of relationship? Can we lend to the language of relationship a palpability that grants to it the same pragmatic leverage as the intelligibility of individual minds? My goal is not to set out one language of relationship but to draw on already existing attempts and to move toward a range of dialogic processes in which multiple discourses of relatedness are employed. There are four suggestions.

Dialogic Resources for Intelligibilities of Relationship:

Internal Others

We carry others with us. We are each constituted by others. We are always already related by virtue of our partial identities we others.

To accept these views is to accept that what we typically index as another's autonomous action is misleading. One's words and deeds are related to those to whom they are directed. When the other speaks to us we are in some way included in the utterance. Additionally, if others' words and actions are remnants of myriad relations, then defense when attacked, correction when mistaken, or punishment when rude are denaturalized. An attack, a mistake, or rudeness are all coherent moves within some relational discourse. We are encouraged instead to ask: "who is speaking and acting here?" "who is listening?" "what voices are not being heard?" "what selves within are suffering?" "why is this voice dominant and not some other?" "how can we help these suppressed potentials into being?"

Speaking the Internal Others in Psychotherapeutic Practice. Here, the critical element is the opening to the individual's capacity for multiple voicing. There is a recognition of the extent to which the person carries the imprint of alterior relations. There are noteworthy explorations of multiplicity.

David Epston (1992) has devised a therapeutic practice that draws on Karl Tomm's idea of "internalized other questioning." Here, participants are asked to explore the voices that inhabit the interior. This line of inquiry enables participants to recognize and legitimate the often competing intelligibilities available in confronting problem situations. As is frequently the case, a person caught in a problem situation often describes a cast of central characters who serve deleterious functions in the problem's resolution. These internalized others are seldom absent from the therapeutic conversation. Yet there are additional voices that may be invited to join the conversation. The individual may, for example, find inner support for his or her feelings or actions in the voice of another such as a close friend, relative, or colleague. The same person

might locate a second voice representing "self doubts" about that position (again, perhaps a friend or relative as well as a competitor). A third voice might suggest an alternative option that could be explored. Such a suggestion, when credited to some internalized other, provides the means for entertaining the idea before accepting it as viable because it is in some way viewed as "depersonalized." It is the voice of self-criticism that is frequently most harsh and so to give voice to those who might praise, admire, respect, or emulate expands the range of resources for problem solving.

From both Epston's and Tomm's standpoints, giving voice to these various intelligibilities aids participants in creating a sense of their own multiplicity. It also recognizes this multiplicity as a useful resource rather than some form of character flaw. Participants find new ways of moving in and out of various identities and new ways of acting in a relationship because they have created a sense that each of these selves is legitimate in some relational context. How might Epston and Tomm's ideas be put to the practice of relational responsibility?

Imagine if you will the provocation supplied by introducing various intelligibilities into an on-going conflict. A partner who is trying to move forward in a discussion concerning relational commitment might bring to life the voice of another who sees virtue in prolonged discussion for purposes of greater understanding. Others brought into the dialogue might include one whose voice respects the questioning or cautious partner and thereby prolongs an immediate decision. In considering these additional voices the dominant voice with which one typically speaks is identified as one among many rather than the only one. To that end, the broader relational web within which intelligibilities are crafted are brought into the present conflict.

Similarly, in their work with client narratives, Penn and Frankfurt (1994) encourage the use of multiple voices, particularly through writing. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1981) dialogism, they argue that the construction of self *requires* other. "Voice . . . is generative; it is unfinished and awaits a reply . . . it invites the other into what one might call a *dialogic space*" (p. 222). Using these ideas, Penn and Frankfurt have found that different voices can be invited into the therapeutic conversation via writing. Because writing takes place at a different pace than talk, they claim it makes room for the "thickening" or "layering" of perceptions and reactions and thereby enhances the creation of various readings for a given situation. It also invites clients to consider typically silent voices as possible resources or as voices with something to contribute. As they work inside *and* outside of the therapeutic context, clients can review their writing. They are even invited to re-examine, edit, elaborate, and retain their prose. Penn and Frankfurt claim that writing "encourages us to develop many different readings of our experience" (p.230).

What we glean from the creative work of Penn and Frankfurt is another possible way in which to invite absent or silent partners into a seemingly fixed narrative. One could imagine assigning feuding spouses to script conversations with or letters to a host of significant partners whose participation is generally marginalized (e.g., parents, mentors, neighbors, heroes, and so forth). In so doing, those others are brought into the current situation thereby expanding the responsibility among a host of relational traditions and trajectories.

Yet, persons need not engage in actual writing. They can simply pause to consider how they might draft such a conversation or letter. Consider how a couple locked in argument might respond to each other if each were to project him or herself into the future or back to the past in conversation with another -- perhaps a close friend, relative, or work associate -- about the current disagreement. Just a momentary consideration of these potentially fictive conversations or writings could introduce a new or different voice, description of events, or set of actions. Here we have momentary "hearings" for a host of relevant relations.

In related practices of organizational development, which I see as easily translated into the therapeutic domain, Cooperrider (1990) has generated ways of inviting clients to expand their vocabularies of description. He argues that most organizational development (like most therapy) takes a problem solving approach which privileges conversation focused on discovering causes for problems, and planning remedial action. As Cooperrider proposes, organizational participants also harbor voices of appreciation, that is, ways of describing affairs which create a positive sense of affiliation. Cooperrider's work helps to elicit these voices of appreciation, in which participants are invited to describe positive practices. Often these voicings offer concrete positive images to which they and others might aspire. As a result, "the problem" often dissolves.

In our own daily problem situations we generally attend to causes and solutions for problems. By shifting our focus to explorations of appreciation we invite a host of different voices into the conversation. Consider how the range of relationships is expanded when a frustrated therapist asks herself what her most effective and generative therapeutic skills are or what creative possibilities her strengths as a therapist might allow for the future. On a different front, what could be altered if a working mother wrought with guilt imagined a series of conversations focused on how her work enabled the construction of a child who centralized communities of care and support as natural extensions of nuclear families? Again, momentary reflections on such dialogues could contribute significantly to an extended sense of relational responsibility by broadening the range of our self-talk.

Related is the therapeutic work of Mony Elkaim (1990) who suggests practices that can also be effectively incorporated into daily life. In therapy, the client describes him or herself, or the problem at hand. As the client does so, Elkaim suggests that the therapist listen internally to his or her own voice of reply. The therapist listens by asking him or herself a series of questions: What is this description inviting in the way of a response?; Is this description asking me to be a father, a combatant, an admirer, and so on? Elkaim explains that, if the longstanding pattern is to be broken, it is important that the therapist avoid responding in the invited way. Rather, as therapist, he explores alternative voices available to him which would also be intelligible as reactions but would not fortify or sustain the well rehearsed patterns of self-presentation. Consider the implications for daily life.

Sometimes we are faced with a person who - through rudeness, blame, or hostility - draws us into confrontation. We feel a strong urge, abetted by the joy of righteous indignation, to counter-attack. The result is reasonably predictable: the counter-attack only incites the other's antagonism. Drawing on the multitude of inner voices, however, "the attack" could be given new meaning by virtue of our response. Could we imagine responding with a comment that constructs an image of the other as important, loved, respected, valued? Could we invite the other to work with us in creating an opportunity for his or her "success" in the present situation? Can we invite him or her to collaborate with us in a construction of *ourselves* as helpful, kind, concerned and *him or herself* as important, respected, and so forth?

These rich resources, already well established in various professional domains, sustain the efforts here to put relational responsibility in practical form. The case I am making is not so much for a particular list of techniques but rather for a range of "tendencies" or "provocative conversational moves" that draw on a relational discourse. In addition to these conversational resources, I often find that asking different questions helps to enlist other intelligibilities. We could, for example, ask "whose voice is not being heard here?" or "how is it that this voice is most dominant?" or "who else might have an opinion about what is happening?" or "who else

could I tell this story to and how would I tell it?" All add to the exploration of our relational lives by calling on our internal others.

Conjoint Relations

Here the focus shifts to the domain of public interchange or joint action. My concern is not with action-reaction cycles but with patterns where each action depends on another for its intelligibility. Focus is on the way in which meanings are generated, sustained, and disrupted in relationships. Actions, in themselves, have no meaning. There is no means of extricating self from other. One's actions are never independent. They acquire intelligibility as actions by virtue of others. For example, a hostile action is scarcely hostile but for the treatment of it as such by another. Additionally, when problematic meanings and associated practices become ritualized in a relationship, the suggestion here would be to engage in modes of denaturalization. By this I mean a disruption of the rituals with alternative moves. This requires an exploration of alternative forms of supplementation (response) or interpretation. Finally, when we identify problems in relationships we can consider that it is not only those involved who are at play but what each person does or says gains its coherence from some other relational domain. Can we inquire into those other relationships?

Crafting Conjoint Relations in Psychotherapeutic Practice. Basically, I am concerned here with peoples' patterns of interdependence, their joint construction of themselves and the world. For purposes of relational responsibility, let us lay aside the question of why I act this way or that, or why he acts the way he does, and begin to ask how *we* accomplish the creation of a particular scenario in which these actions are favored. Concentration is on the joint achievement of outcomes.

As for professional practices, there are again precedents available. Woven throughout the therapeutic conversations of the Milan Team (Boscolo, Cecchin, Hoffman, and Penn, 1987) are statements that underscore the reality of relatedness. In their work, actions traditionally viewed as individual possessions, are reconstructed as relational accomplishments. Quite often the vehicle for such reconstruction is circular questioning. This technique draws on the language of relationship. Rather than accept participants' comments as statements of fact or simple description (e.g., "My husband is always rejecting me."), the Milan Associates devises questions that require participants to explore how they work together to create identities for each other (e.g. "When is your husband most likely to reject you? Are there times when he doesn't reject you? What are you most likely to be doing at those times? If you knew he was going to reject you, do you think you would be able to prevent him?, etc.). In so doing, individual beliefs are described as a byproduct of interchange with among partners.

The Milan Associates's conversational and questioning style encourages participants to see their conflicts or problems in terms of relational accomplishments. Because comparison and contrast require a relational positioning, participants' stories are transformed into stories concerning relations among each other. Drawing on the Milan Associate's ideas, we can explore how participants in conflict might vocalize their joint success in constructing undesired identities. A therapist might express how well he plays the psychic healer and applaud his client's outstanding performance of mental pathology as a logical complement. A married couple might discuss how each is able to adorn his or her assigned role in their repeated conflicts (nagger, perfectionist, hysteric, critic) only with the other's anticipated performance. The critic's actions would be useless attempts if not for the enactment of the other's fragile ego and vice versa. For those ready to play with this form of interchange, recognition of the complementarity of actions in unwanted patterns is required. Thus a tendency toward talking in terms of

complementarities becomes a useful practice.

In related work, Pearce and Cronen (1980) illustrate the relational nature of unwanted, yet repetitive patterns of interaction. They explore how participants get tangled in these undesired interchanges. Their research describes how individually, each participant can attest to his or her desire for a different kind of interaction and can equally document his or her attempts to bring such a performance to fruition. However, despite their attempts, the same, unwanted pattern ensues. All participants in Pearce and Cronen's studies report that the logical conclusion to draw under such circumstances is that the further enactment of the undesired episode is the fault of their conversational partner.

However, Pearce and Cronen are able to illustrate how the conjoint actions of each participant form to create an inescapable tangle. Their analysis points to the constraints imposed when actors explore these unwanted episodes from an individualist orientation. Pearce and Cronen argue for an analysis that positions the actions of one in relation to both the supplementary actions of his or her partner as well as in relation to the meaning each constructs for those actions. Furthermore, Pearce and Cronen situate the stories people tell about these unwanted routines in the context of broader relational scenarios. For example, they explore how one's description of the unwanted episode and their own particular actions fit with one's broader narratives about relationships, identity, and cultural patterns. In so doing, the researchers point to the merging of participants' different relational stories in their joint construction of the present, unwanted pattern. These analyses provide yet another illustration of how social interchange has been viewed as a byproduct of conjoint relations. Some practical applications toward relational responsibility can be gleaned from the work of Pearce and Cronen.

Additionally, participants in dialogue can reflect on how their own actions invite particular responses from their partners. Further, actors can engage in inquiry into those broader life narratives that are tied to their understanding of the current situation. Focusing on what Pearce and Cronen (1980) call "logics of interaction," those caught in undesirable episodes might discuss these episodes with each other as coherent and logical, despite their undesirable dimensions. To frame conflict as coherent (yet not necessarily acceptable) serves as a provocative conversational move when contrasted with the general tendency to frame conflict as illogical or irrational. Such a stance serves as another move toward relational responsibility to the extent that participants turn their focus toward their joint construction of a situation.

More generally, within the arena of *conjoint relations*, it is useful to envision a conversation in which the sense of independent individuals gives way to the dominant discourse of
we. "*We* are attentive." "*We* are caring." "*We* did that argument well." "*We* don't do supportive conversations well." In arguing for just this sort of discourse Shotter (1984) points out that, once talked about in this manner, the possibility for ascertaining individual intentionality, motive, or responsibility is difficult if not impossible to resurrect. Shotter proposes the term *joint action* to more appropriately characterize the manner in which we create meaning. With these descriptions in place, we are well on our way to participating in forms of description where individual agency is substituted by a description of relational accomplishments. However, our focus on conjoint relations is not intended to obliterate voices that identify blame or deficiency either in others or self, for these voices too deserve occasional hearings. The hope is to provide options.

Relations among Groups

We often use the language of individualism to refer to or describe the operations of larger

groups. For example, we say, "the organization decided," or "government controls," or "the family feels." We similarly use this language to talk about relations among groups: "business beliefs about government," or "the Smith family's anger at the Jones." In fact, even disciplinary talk takes this form: political scientists describe nations as struggling or competing, sociologists describe the ambitions of social movements, communication scholars refer to the symmetry of relationships.

By transforming individualist talk to broader social groups we move rituals of individual blame into the relational sphere. We now see the individual's actions as manifestations of larger aggregates. For example, a husband's unprovoked anger is seen as a manifestation of competition in the workplace. Theft becomes an issue of economic class relations. Individuals only serve as exemplars of relationships among groups. Further, we are compelled to understand our construction of another's actions in terms of the larger institutions by which we are constituted. What we define as theft is dependent upon our privileged place in the class structure. Yet, within the framework of those engaged in the action, it is seen as heroism or self preservation. These discourses only temporarily replace individual blame with group blame. The process of relational responsibility is never in principle terminated.

Invoking Group Realities in Psychotherapeutic Practice. In practice we shift focus to relations among relations - to relational responsibility as generated by expanding our scope of concern to other groups or institutions that may impinge on our immediate interchanges.

Let us again consider several precedents. Again the work of Penn and Frankfurt (1994) is a useful illustration of augmenting the broader networks of relations that may enter the conversation. By inviting clients to write to and for others, they introduce a unique innovation that is not far removed from the early role playing techniques. By encouraging clients to write letters or journal entries to persons not present in the immediate life circumstances, those clients are drawing on expansive webs of relations. Their writings do not represent only single voices but entire clusters of relational partners. Such writings become rich resources for constructing ways of talking and acting.

Our consideration now turns to how our involvement with broader groups not present in any given interchange might open the range of possibilities for conflict renegotiation. This can be achieved through actual or imagined role playing or writing. In a marital dispute, for example, if each partner were to imagine writing to his or her family about the on-going conflict, and were additionally to imagine how the extended family might respond, a host of new descriptions might emerge. Consider a husband who, distraught by his negative interchanges with his wife crafts a letter to or an imagined scenario with his family of origin. In this letter or scene, he describes to them what disturbs him about his marital relationship as well as what gives him joy. In so doing, he begins to see parallels in his family of origin. To see his own actions in this context provides first a context of coherence and second the possibility for drawing distinctions between his current marriage and his family context. In such applications, these forms of practice lend rich possibility to our exploration of relational responsibility in that one's very local actions and problems can be linked to broader networks of relations that are significant.

In a similar vein, we could invite participants (including ourselves) to think about and identify who has commissioned them. In other words, what other persons have some investment in members' participation in the current scenario? The nature of the conversation that follows is relational in practice because it provides the possibility to explore the views and values of the absent groups and how they relate to the present proceedings. Some consultants achieve a

similar end by having a chair placed in the current setting to represent absent others who have a stake in the issues under discussion.

Also related is the work of Tom Andersen and his colleagues (Andersen, 1991). They ask a team of individuals to observe family therapy proceedings. At a certain juncture, these observers are asked to talk about what they have heard and seen while those in therapy (including the therapist) listen. When the observing group has finished offering their *reflections*, those who have come for therapy are invited to talk about what they have heard. This shifting from what Andersen calls the *listening position* to the *reflecting position* continues throughout the therapy session and frequently one group invites the other group into direct conversation. This style brings fresh voices and otherwise absent perspectives to the therapeutic conversation. It also allows clients to see the constructed character of the realities in which they live by multiplying the range of viewpoints. We can imagine these various but similar procedures serving as practical sources of action in our own move toward relational responsibility.

Andersen's (1993) reflecting groups aids in bringing networks of relations into coordinated activity. Not only with clients in therapy, but among community mental health professionals, the reflecting position can be implemented thereby allowing a structured forum for groups shifting between listening and talking. Specifically, those opposed to a suggested action plan might be asked to listen to those in favor converse about the potentials and constraints of the proposed plan. When finished, the listeners could be invited to reflect on what they have heard in a generative manner -- that is, to address the benefits as well as express their concerns -- while the others assume the listening position. Repeating this procedure several times provides each "side" the opportunity to be heard within the conversational grouping where the position makes sense. In this way, groups that might be otherwise fractionated within a community or work setting may come to appreciate and understand the rationale for each other's position.

We might imagine questioning (or simply considering) the broader groups we represent when we engage in interchange with each other. To consider who has commissioned a therapist to limit his or her services, as well as who has commissioned the professional coalition against such limitations creates a context of rationality for each position. The professionals are invited to think in terms of the larger economic issues facing the therapeutic process while the therapist is invited to think seriously about professional commentary on proposed cuts. How might members of a community exit a meeting where the topic of commissioning became the dominant theme of the conversation?

One of the major difficulties posed by alternative realities is that they fail to be understood on their own terms. The listener interprets them in those terms already available, terms which are often antithetical to the alternative perspectives. How, then, can people "tell their stories" in such a way that they stimulate interest rather than inquisition, and enable alien groups to be more fully coordinated?

One useful example is furnished by the Public Conversation Project (Roth, Chasin, Chasin, Becker, and Herzig, 1992). Here issues of broad social consequence - such as abortion - are discussed by "conflicting" parties in a manner we would consider relationally responsible. To achieve genuine dialogue, rules are pre-established: individuals will not be interrupted, no disparaging commentary is allowed, and each participant will be allowed full opportunity to speak. Further, each speaker is encouraged to make him or herself intelligible through personal stories. Thus, the reasons for one's feelings about the abortion issue are personalized and concretized. A participant who explains her own abortion following a rape is providing far more than an ethical or political position on abortion. She is inviting others into her life experiences in

a way that those others might share.

Yet it is not only the personalized nature of participants' stories that generates dialogue rather than debate on heated topics such as abortion. In the wake of asking about each person's unique relationship to the issue, members of the Public Conversations Project address two additional questions. Each is asked to identify what is at the heart of the matter for them and then, after all have attended to this question, each is invited to comment on the "foggy" or grey areas of this issue. We can imagine that had the conversation started with a request that each participant share their doubts about their own positions on abortion, there would have been little opportunity for dialogue. By locating each person's *rationality* within their own relational stories and by structuring the situation such that each person could be heard, the project creates a conversational context where all are invited to be relationally vulnerable with little risk. It should be added that this project also exemplifies the potential of drawing several different communities together into a specific relationship/conversation. The broader communities of "pro–choice" and "pro–life" move from postures of mutual annihilation to exploring possible coordinations.

For our purposes, we can transport several practical guides from these creative techniques. When we talk about relations among groups we are broadening the spectrum from which we draw our conversational resources. Foreign as it may seem to our everyday conversations, the introduction of ground rules for conversation may, in some cases, be a useful and creative innovation. Establishing the tone of a conversation (i.e., no name calling, no accusations leveled) as well as rules concerning who speaks, when and to whom, while outlandish at first, might function to assure all participants a hearing. Once one is able to give voice to the context within which one's story is located, it is far easier to grant coherence and sensibility.

Another practice we might develop is that of moving conversation from the personal to the social. Frequently our relations with other groups construct interchanges where those involved believe it only legitimate to discuss issues from a broad, social perspective. A debate about diagnosis is rarely legitimated on grounds of specific patients' needs. However, feminist scholars have long argued for making the "personal political" and for fusing the private and public spheres of our lives. In asking groups in conflict to address their concerns by beginning with a story of their personal involvement we invite just such a blending of the personal and public. And this practice gives voice to those broader relational domains within which our reasoning, our beliefs, and our actions gain significance. It is a form of practice that entertains inquiry into what communities we are speaking to, for, or from at a given moment and consequently to ponder the same for our conversational partners. To extend our conversations to include these arenas is to engage in relational responsibility.

Systemic Process

In many fields (ecology, physics, mysticism, spirituality) there is a presumption that the universe is not comprised of isolated units. Furthermore, any relationship among units themselves are not autonomous. General Systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968) has attempted this sort of argument as has deconstruction theory (Derrida, 1976). The meaning of any integer or event or action is informed by the whole system of language.

Such a position implies that there are no untoward events to which we have not each made a contribution. Another's problem is also our problem. From this position, we are invited to multiply the discourses of exploration. If any recognizable unit can be related to any other, then the landscape of possibilities for understanding any action is without horizon. How are our

problems as a couple related to our parents' relationships, our offsprings' relationships, the state of the economy, increasing crime rates, depletion of the ozone? How can we draw upon and use metaphors, images, technologies from other relational domains? Is there a way in which these might contribute?

Entering the Systemic Swim in Psychotherapeutic Practice. Here we move our concerns outward into the full domain of cultural existence. We explore the full potential for relatedness, the possibilities inherent in the broad array of constructed connections. Let us imagine then, an open space in which we might single out any given configuration as comprising a unit: a couple, a family, an extended family, a family and associated friends, a friendship group, a club, a community, a network, an organization, a region, a country, and so on. Further, let us imagine the possibility of relations among various units (let us say, between the couple and the extended family, the family and the community, the community and the regional government, and so on). As we conceptualize the broader systemic process, for purposes of inquiry, we may 1) isolate any configuration of concern and explore its relationships with any other relevant configuration, and 2) explore the relationship of these various configurations to still others in a theoretically indeterminate expansion.

Perhaps one of the most useful illustrations of broadening the array of participation can be found in the work of Jakko Seikkula (1995) and his colleagues. They challenge the notion that it is the professional who "knows" how to put the pieces together, what to look for, and what counts as "normal." In contrast, Seikkula and his colleagues propose a relational approach to therapeutic conversation where emphasis is placed on what people do together. In their work, they focus on expanding the voices that have “knowledge” of the problem by including patients, family members, and invested others in the conversation. To involve a multitude of voices in the conversation about the "problem" invites each member's "truth" about the situation into discussion. Each "utterance has an equal value in constructing a polyphonic truth; we must not aim at one truth or solution but at generating a dialogue between the different voices" (p 69).

Seikkula and his group describe diagnosis and the therapeutic process as "open dialogue" by which they mean that rather than draw boundaries around the treatment team, all interested and invested parties are invited into the discussion about diagnosis and treatment - including the patient. "By opening the boundaries of discussion, the joint process itself started to determine the treatment, rather than the team itself or the treatment plan of the team" (1995, p. 64). For them, "all participants are in a mutual co-evolving process so that the treatment team is also changing all the time" (p. 64).

One of the most salient features then of the Finnish work is operating "on the boundary." By repositioning the therapeutic conversation away from the "experts" and into the polyphonic arena of all participants, each with a wide array of expertise (both local and professional), the potential resources of all involved are made available and utilized. The "open dialogue" that is created includes "the risk of vulnerability, because one's own utterances are open to the other's comments" (p. 73). In such a conversation, "psychosis is no longer seen as some independent quality in the patient but as one voice of the therapeutic interaction taking place at the moment" (p. 74).

Consequently, the therapeutic conversation is less "institutional" and more like human dialogue. Also, the participatory process of the team seems to generate a participatory dialogue among family and involved others. The skill of the team is its ability to generate dialogue among different voices in order to utilize all available resources. In so doing, all voices are seen as resources rather than obstacles. Consequently, meaning is recognized as a byproduct of

communities of persons in relation rather than the sole possession of one individual. Psychosis is not seen as an "obvious quality of the client" but as one way of understanding complex and every shifting patterns of action.

Significantly, this relational orientation has effectively reduced the number of diagnosed schizophrenics, the number of psychopharmacological prescriptions, and the number of hospital beds occupied in this region of Finland from 320 to 63 (1995, p. 65). The "open dialogue" initiated by Seikkula and his colleagues works to establish new relational networks within the community. With these expanded webs of relations, community members now have a multitude of resources to draw upon (collectively) in helping each other help the "mentally ill."

This work offers one way to recognize the "systemic swim." Seikkula and his colleagues acknowledge and actively invite any move within the therapeutic relationship that brings a new or alternative voice into the conversational arena. To them, it is these "more distantly related" voices that increase the relational potential. As voices, opinions, interpretations, values and the like are added to the conversational mix, so opportunities for moving beyond the tyranny of the coherent monologue are increased. And, perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the Finnish work is that by including those who "are not apparently related or concerned" (i.e., by moving beyond the "obvious" network of relations), new resources for *the community* (as well as the person in crisis) are realized. The "problems" of one person *do* have bearing on broader networks of relations and vice versa.

There are myriad efforts initiated by others that move in similar directions. Under the umbrella term of larger systems consultation we have a variety of movements afoot that bring family therapists into consultation with medical organizations, community groups, social service systems, the military, and business (cf., Wynne, McDaniel, Weber, 1986; Fruggeri, et al., 1992). One strand of this work is organized around the idea that treatment of an individual or family, for example, can not be understood apart from the political and economic climate of a community, region, or country. Another focus is on translating our understanding of micro social processes (e.g., dyads, families) to our analysis of larger sites of social life such as business and industry. As most who work in this arena have recognized, it is difficult to explore the complexity of macro social processes without giving voice to the broader ecology within which these organizations reside.

In these cases, inquiry moves out into the broader spectrum of society. At the same time, each is necessarily limited in terms of its delineation of particulars. What we have yet to hone is the fluidity of systemic processes where any reading, any judgement, any conclusion serves as only a temporary marker of on-going social construction.

Conclusions

In a broader sense, each of these single practices operates as a disorienting device. Each of them unsettles one or more ways of explaining who or what is responsible for a given outcome, and suggests an alternative frame. Each brings to the moment an alternative discourse, and thus a new way of moving in conversation and further. We are disoriented in particular from the vocabulary of individual blame and inner subjectivities, and launched into the broader spectrum of potentials.

In effect, my aim here is double-valued. I am first placing a strong value on an immersion in process - not only in the flux of everyday life but in the process of comprehending, adjudicating, and adjusting. I am de-emphasizing final products in favor of continuous engagement in process. Yes, there are momentary resolutions and clearings, but each gives way to further immersion. We achieve then not a harmonious conclusion but the continuous

refurbishment of resources for further relationship.

In this sense, I am also placing a strong value on full resonance with *relational life* itself, that is a condition in which each action is most fully coordinated with the vast surrounds from which it derives its identity. I am suggesting a move beyond formalized, stable identification of responsible action toward a sensibility that keeps the multiple voices in conversation. I believe that the attempt to bring our varying identities, partners, relationships, and communities into an ensuing conversation situates us within an open–ended process of coordination which, in effect, constitutes relational responsibility in its most extended form.

These four intelligibilities - internal others, conjoint relations, relations among groups, and systemic process - stand as alternatives to individualist accounts of responsibility. They provide multiple means of understanding human action as deeply and inextricably embedded within forms of cultural life. In the therapeutic context, they can temporarily destabilize the well-rehearsed narratives of individual problems, conflict, and dysfunction. With these relational resources at hand, both therapist and client can weigh the potential of *using* (i.e., performing) one discourse over another. This emphasis transforms the popular debates concerning modernism vs. postmodernism, individual vs. relational modes, cognition vs. social construction from an issue of which is *True* to a recognition of all theories, perspectives, epistemologies, methodologies, and so forth as potential (and thus optional) discursive possibilities. The question for the psychotherapist is now a question of which discourse will open new forms of relating thereby, in Wittgenstein's terms, allowing participants to "go on together."

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