

Narrative Practice and Conflict Dissolution in Couples Therapy

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Published online: 12 March 2009
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Abstract This paper presents an approach to conflict dissolution through the story development of the lives of the partners. This activity includes the interruption of efforts to resolve difficulties through recourse to culturally venerated communicational processes; the erosion of exclusivity in couple relationships; and the adoption of other relational forms in ways that contributes to diversity of response in couple relationships. A case example with transcript excerpts illustrates this process.

Keywords Conflict dissolution · Narrative therapy · Negative identity conclusions

Time and again I have met with couples that are highly conflicted, where there is minimal overlap in terms of how the partners construct each other's actions and identities, where mutual understanding of the events of life seems slim, and where there is very little sense of shared responsibility for addressing the conflicts and frustrations

of their relationships. Frequently, in these circumstances, these patterns of conflict are reproduced from the outset of the first consultation. On these occasions it is common for therapists to find that things start off badly, then get worse, and then deteriorate yet further.

I believe that there is a context to the development of this impasse; and that, to a significant extent, this impasse is the outcome of social and relational forces. The difficulties experienced by couples in high and longstanding conflict and the difficulties often experienced by therapists in their consultations with these couples have a common genesis. This genesis is to be found in assumptions that privilege a style of communication that came to be cherished in the post-World War II era of information technology, and in the development of expectations for exclusivity in couple relationships in contemporary western culture. With a perspective that acknowledges these social and relational forces, I have been able to do what I would routinely do in my consultations—that is, to establish therapy as a context for rich story development.

This article is adapted from White, M. (2004). Narrative practice, couple therapy and conflict dissolution. In White, M. Narrative practice and exotic lives: Resurrecting diversity in everyday life pp. 1–41. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications and is included here with the original publisher's permission. This article is a shortened and slightly revised version of the original chapter, whose author, Michael White, is deceased. The adaptation was made by Judith P. Siegel, Ph.D. L.C.S.W. Associate Professor. Michael White was the co-director of the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, South Australia, and Director of the Adelaide Narrative Therapy Centre. Please visit (www.dulwichcentre.com.au) for additional information.

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Communication Theory

Relationship counselling in western culture is a relatively recent phenomenon and was developed during the post World War II era of *information* technology. The value placed on information and communication represented a paradigm shift in relation to pre World War II technology, which was predominantly a *mechanical* technology. During the era of mechanical technology, there was a focus on developing increasingly sophisticated and efficient machines. These principles were extended to human beings, with an assumption that people would respond to mechanical principles. For example, it was assumed that this

sophisticated human machine could be reversed or re-wound back so that whatever it was that was broken could found and fixed. Levenson's review of neurosis points out the dominant images of these mechanical psychologies, and observes that "Fixation and regression are images of time stoppage and reversal. It is as though the gears of the machine have come to a stop, or spun hopelessly, without traction." (1972, p. 59).

Following World War II, information became the primary focus of technology. As the emphasis on processing information displaced the emphasis on processing energy, many of the metaphors taken up in the post World War II human sciences mirrored that shift in paradigm. Human beings were now viewed as information processing machines and the emphasis in inquiry turned to how humans compute information.

In adopting the metaphors from information technology, communication was accorded a high status. The development of specific communication skills was now considered a panacea for many of the difficulties of human life. This idea was nowhere more vigorously applied than to couple relationships, where problems were newly understood to be the outcome of absent, insufficient, poor or inadequate communication. As the resolution of relationship difficulties was to be found in the development of more functional communication styles, relationship counsellors became 'technicians' in the repair and restoration of communication. They were aided by the development of schemes for measurement along a continuum that placed 'masked', 'indirect', 'inaccurate', and 'dishonest' communication at one end, and 'open', 'direct', 'accurate' and 'honest' communication at the other. It was this open, direct, accurate and honest communication that was to be aspired to, as evidence of health.

Narrowing of Legitimate Relational Forms

In the recent history of western culture, the heterosexual married couple has been privileged over all other relational forms. While the heterosexual couples has been held as the ideal, other relational forms have been downgraded, discouraged, marginalised, disqualified and punished. According to Foucault (1994), life in the pre-Christian Hellenistic and Roman worlds recognized other modes of relationship, such as friendship. These were modes in which not only the benefits and rewards of relationship were acknowledged, but in which a range of obligations, tasks, and reciprocal duties were to be observed:

Take, for example, notions of friendship. They played an important part, but there was a supple institutionalised framework for them—even if it was

sometimes constraining—with a system of obligations, tasks, reciprocal duties, a hierarchy between friends, and so on. I do not think we should reproduce that model. But you can see how a system of supple and relatively codified relations could exist for a long time and support a certain number of important and stable relations, which we now have great difficulty defining. When you read an account of two friends for the period, you always wonder what it really is... (p. 159).

The narrowing of sanctioned, institutionally authorised, and acknowledged relational forms, has led to a simplification and scarcity of meaningful forms of relating. As a consequence, partners in institutionally approved relationships are increasingly expected to be everything to each other. The exclusion or diminishment of other significance relational forms in the development of one's life and identity forces partners to look solely to each other to satisfy every desire and longing. They must turn to each other exclusively in their search for communion of values, beliefs and purpose of life.

Consequences for Couple Life

The beliefs embedded in communication theory and the narrowing of authorised relational forms has significant effects on couple life.

The Promotion of Healthy Communication

What are the consequences, to couple life, of the adoption of these metaphors from information technology? What are the consequences of understanding difficulties in couple relationships to be the outcome of absent, insufficient, poor, or inadequate communication? And what are the consequences of the notion that more or better communication would be a panacea for the difficulties experienced in couple relationships?

The consequences of these developments are manifold. These developments encourage couples to persist in efforts to principally achieve conflict resolution and problem negotiation through communication. Upon the occasion of these efforts bearing little fruit, or even causing further deterioration, couples are inspired to further renew their efforts at conflict resolution and problem negotiation through communication—to engage in doing more of the same. Invariably the consequence of this is misery, and a conclusion that the relationship is a failure and/or that the partners are incompetent.

Second, this investment in communication per se as a remedy for relationship difficulties obscures the extent to

which communication is associated with the making of meaning. The act of communication is not a neutral act—in the act of communicating with each other about relationship difficulties partners are constructing each other's identity, and the identity of their relationships. For example, in the context of efforts to resolve difficulties through direct communication, partners can be not only confirming the negative conclusions that they hold about each other's identity and about the identity of the relationship, but further constructing these negative identity conclusions. The further development of these negative conclusions has significant shaping effects on relationships, contributing to complications that can become increasingly insurmountable over time. However, because this making of meaning is obscured by the notion of communication as remedy, and because the consequences of this meaning-making remains relatively invisible to couples in these contexts, it becomes very difficult for partners to assume any responsibility for these negative developments in their relationship.

Third, this emphasis on communication as a panacea for relationship difficulties neglects the fact that couple relationships are rarely level playing fields. There are many imbalances of power in couple relationships. In heterosexual relationships, many of these imbalances are of the politics of gender. On account of this power differential, it can be quite unsafe for women partners to speak openly of what they think and feel; as an outcome of open, direct and honest communication some people can find themselves being subject to acts of retribution from their partners that are further subjugating of them.¹

Fourth, because the style of communication fostered by these metaphors from information technology is adopted as the norm for healthy communication, the ethno/cultural-, socio-economic-, class- and era-centred location of this norm is masked. This formula for appropriate communication is held to be universally relevant to all peoples, in all places, in all cultures, in all classes, in all socio-economic circumstances, and in all times. However, all proposals for living are historical and cultural products, and the particular relational style that is championed in this assertion about what constitutes healthy communication reflects the ideals of the privileged middle/upper middle-class western white culture of the modern era. As a result, partners are encouraged to more closely emulate the cherished mainstream lifestyle norms of modern contemporary culture, and to discount a diversity of practices of conflict resolution and problem negotiation that are more culture-, class- and location-specific.

In describing some of the potential hazards of modern notions about communication as a panacea for the difficulties experienced in relationships, it has not been my intention to suggest that communication is a bad idea, or that the relational style promoted by modern notions about healthy communication is wrong. No doubt there are many couples who will find this relational style to be in harmony with their cultural, socio-economic and class location, and for whom this version of addressing relational difficulties will be effective. However, communication as a panacea for health should not be taken-for-granted.

Narrowing of Relational Forms

What are the consequences of the narrowing of the legitimated, authorised and acknowledged relational forms? What are the consequences of the privileging of the heterosexual marriage as the ideal relational form? And what is the outcome of the exclusivity that is fostered in this development?

This exclusivity that incites partners to look solely to each other in their efforts to find solidarity in regard to the range of intentions and purposes of one's life, in their search for a sense of communion in all of one's values and beliefs, and in one's endeavour to satisfy every desire and longing, is profoundly isolating. Any initiatives to engage with other relational forms draw negative sanctions that lead to the deferment of much that is precious to each partner, or the development of covert avenues in the pursuit of this quest.

In these circumstances, relationships can so easily be failed. Actions such as sharing a confidence with a person outside of the relationship may be constructed as betrayal that is considered to reflect negatively on the relationship itself. In the context of exclusivity, where any measures that a partner may take in order to hold something private is negatively construed as an act of secrecy, the spectre of the failing relationship is ever-present. For many couples, the idea that partners can expect to find in each other the totality of whatever it is that is to provide the foundation for their existence, furnishes a sense of ongoing distress and desperation, and frequently leads to a personal experience that is commonly referred to as jealousy.

It is also apparent that the high privilege that is allocated to the ideal of the modern couple relationship, and particularly to the heterosexual marriage, causes a narrowing of this very relational form. In that this exclusivity insulates partners from other relational forms, it restricts their opportunity to incorporate aspects of these other relational forms in their couple relationships. It is in this way that this exclusivity contributes not just to an erosion of diversity in relational forms, but to an erosion of diversity within the couple relationship itself.

¹ Many feminist scholars, for example, O'Brien (1981) and McNay (1992), have linked the development of this phenomenon to the privatisation of marriage and the family in the interests of patriarchy.

In drawing out some of the consequences of the modern exclusivity of couple relationships, it has not been my intention to suggest that this exclusivity does not work for some couples at some times, or that this should not be aspired to. Rather, I have described some of the consequences of this modern exclusivity that have been so clearly apparent in the relationships of a great many of the couples who have consulted me over the years.

Consequences for Therapy

The context of couple counselling is not exempt from these cultural assumptions about the cause of relationship difficulties, about the solution to these difficulties, and about the part that the counsellor will play in this. Couples frequently enter this context expecting to renew their efforts to address relationship difficulties through the performance of the revered communicational style of contemporary western culture, and with the expectation that they can be safe in the knowledge that the therapist will be able to mediate these efforts—I cannot count the number of times over the years that I have heard, when meeting with couples, various renditions of: ‘We have come here to vent and for you to fix what is broken’.

Therapists are not just vulnerable to the expectations that couples bring into counselling contexts, but they can also be powerfully influenced by the weight of parallel expectations that have their genesis in the history of relationship counselling. This is especially so when therapists join couples in their efforts to do more of the same: and address relationship difficulties through the revered communicational style. In joining with couples in this way, therapists often become unwitting accomplices in the further construction of negative identity conclusions and limit the possibility for couples to recognise the consequences of negative constructions in the shaping of their relationships.

The assumption of exclusivity further influences what is done in the name of relationship counselling. Counselling can be perceived by couples as a context in which they will intensify their efforts to achieve solidarity in regard to the range of intentions and purposes of their lives. Therapists are not just vulnerable to these expectations of couples, but also to a time-honoured tradition in couple counselling that focuses all initiatives to address relationship difficulties entirely on the couple itself. When this happens, the therapist becomes an unwitting accomplice in the exacerbation of modern exclusivity; in limiting options for the partners to explore alternative relational forms in the pursuit of their quests, and in further restricting the opportunity for couples to take up and incorporate other relational styles that might contribute to the development of diversity of response within the couple relationship itself. This sets the scene for renewed experiences of betrayal and desperation.

Alternative Practices

An alternative approach involves a focus on *definitional ceremony practices* and the *repositioning* of the partner who is to assume the outsider-witness position in the context of these definitional ceremony practices. As these definitional ceremony practices and this repositioning are critical to working with couples in high and longstanding conflict, I will review both of these subjects before turning to the illustration of this approach.

Definitional Ceremony

The definitional ceremony structure is a characteristic feature of narrative practice. I borrowed the metaphor ‘definitional ceremony’ from the work of cultural anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff (1982, 1986) who employed this metaphor in her efforts to describe the identity projects of a community of elderly Jews in Venice, Los Angeles. I have written extensively on the relevance of this metaphor, and on the relevance of the structure of these identity projects, to therapeutic practice (White 1995, 1997, 1999). I will only provide a brief account of this here, and will begin by quoting from ‘Reflecting-team work as definitional ceremony revisited’ (White 1999).

The definitional ceremony metaphor guides the structuring of forums in which certain persons have the opportunity to engage in a telling of some of the significant stories of their lives—stories that, in one way or another, are relevant to matters of personal and relational identity. Also present in this forum is an audience or ‘outsider-witness group’. The members of this group listen carefully to the stories told, and ready themselves to engage in a retelling of what they have heard. When the time is right, positions are switched—the persons whose lives are at the centre of the definitional ceremony form an audience to the retellings of the outsider-witness group. These retellings encapsulate aspects of the original telling. But more than this—these retellings of the outsider-witness group routinely exceed the boundaries of the original telling in significant ways, in ways that contribute to the rich description of the personal and relational identities of the persons whose lives are at the centre of the ceremony. In part, these retellings achieve this through the linking of the stories of the lives of these persons with the stories of the lives of others, around shared themes, values, purposes and commitments.

After these retellings, the members of the outsider-witness group step back into the audience position,

and the persons whose lives are at the centre of the ceremony have the opportunity to speak of what they have heard. At this time these persons are engaged in the second of the retellings; that is, in retellings of retellings of the outsider-witness group. In these forums, there can be other levels of outsider-witness participation, and further retellings of retellings.

The definitional ceremony metaphor guides the structuring of tellings and retellings of the stories of people's lives in uniquely convened social arenas. Within the context of these ceremonies, these tellings, retellings, and retellings of retellings are distinct. The achievement of these distinct tellings and retellings requires a disruption of dialogue across the interface between those in the audience position and those who are engaged in the tellings and retellings; that is, when the outsider-witness group is in the audience position, they are strictly in that position, and when the persons whose lives are at the centre of definitional ceremonies are in the audience position, they are strictly in that position. (pp. 63, 64).

The retellings of these definitional ceremonies are shaped by a specific tradition of acknowledgement. These retellings do not constitute a reproduction of the entire content of the telling that went before. Rather, in this tradition of acknowledgement, it is those aspects of the telling that outsider witnesses were most strongly drawn to that provide the foundation for this retelling.

When the people who are in the outsider-witness position are unfamiliar with this tradition of acknowledgement, the therapist has a responsibility for the structuring of these retellings. In assuming this responsibility, the therapist usually conducts an interview of the outsider witnesses, one that is informed by specific categories of inquiry. This interview provides a scaffold that assists outsider witnesses to:

1. Identify and speak of the expressions of the telling that they were most drawn to. These are the expressions that most caught the attention of the outsider witnesses, that most captured their imagination, and that provided the outsider witnesses with a sense of what it is that the person accords value to in life. These expressions may be specific words or phrases, or particular moods and sentiments. In first speaking of the expressions that they were most drawn to, outsider witnesses signal that their interest in the person's life is particular interest, not general interest; defined interest, not global interest.
2. Describe the images that were evoked for them by these expressions. These images might take the form of certain metaphors about the person's life, or might

take the form of mental pictures of the person's identity or of the identity of the person's relationships. At this time, outsider witnesses are encouraged to speculate about what these metaphors and mental pictures might reflect about the person's purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams and commitments. Outsider witnesses are encouraged to express these reflections in the subjunctive mood of 'as if, may be, possibly, etc.'

3. Embody their responses to the telling by providing an account of why they were so drawn to these expressions. This is achieved by inviting the outsider witnesses to provide some account of why they were drawn to particular expressions of the telling, of what these expressions struck a chord with in their own personal history. In situating their interest in the person's expressions in the history of their own experiences of life, the interest of the outsider witnesses becomes embodied interest, not disembodied interest; personal interest, not academic interest; engaged and vital interest, not 'armchair' interest.
4. Acknowledge the ways in which they have been moved on account of being present to witness these expressions of life. 'Moved' here is employed in the broad sense of this word. For example, outsider witnesses might speak about where this experience has taken them in regard to their own thoughts, including their reflections on their own existence, their understandings of their own lives, or their perspectives on life more generally. Or they might speak about where this experience has taken them in regard to speculation about conversations they might have with figures of their own life, or about options for action in regard to predicaments in their own lives and relationships. This acknowledgement provides an account of how the outsider witnesses have been touched in ways that have contributed to them becoming other than who they were on account of witnessing the person's expressions, and on account of having the opportunity to respond to the person's story by way of this retelling.

Following the retelling of the outsider witnesses, the therapist interviews the person whose life is at the centre of the ceremony. This interview asks about the metaphors or mental pictures of their *own* life that were evoked by the retellings of the outsider witnesses. There is a resonance created by the definitional ceremony that is very powerful. It is this resonance that contributes to rich story development, to a stronger familiarity with what one accords value to in life, and to the erosion and displacement of various negative conclusions about one's life and identity. This provides a foundation for people to know how to proceed

in their efforts to address the dilemmas and predicaments of their lives.

Repositioning

When interviews with couples are structured by definitional ceremony practices, the therapist interviews one partner (partner A) in the presence of the other partner (partner B) who is positioned as an outsider witness. In a subsequent meeting, the roles are reversed—the partner who was first interviewed (partner A) is positioned as an outsider witness to an interview of the other partner (partner B).

It can be extraordinarily difficult for partners who are in significant dispute to reproduce the tradition of outsider-witness responses. It requires them to disengage from their routine and habitual ways of responding to each other. These routine and habitual responses seem almost hard-wired, and these can be very captivating of the partners in the midst of their efforts to respond to the stories of each other's lives. I believe that disengagement from these routine and habitual responses can be best achieved by inviting the partner who is to be the outsider witness to separate from a sense of being in his/her relationship for the duration of our meeting. This can be done by assisting this partner to adopt an alternative position, one from which they will find it easier to reproduce the tradition of outsider-witness response that is characteristic of definitional ceremony.

Thus, ahead of interviewing the partner who is to be at the centre of the definitional ceremony, the partner who is to undertake the outsider-witness role (partner B) is interviewed in ways that will allow a repositioning in relation to their partner. Partner B is invited to share stories about experiences in which they have known acknowledgement, understanding, compassion or acceptance, and to speak about the figures who extended this acknowledgement, understanding, compassion, or acceptance. These stories provide a foundation for partner B. to become repositioned as one of these figures when listening to the interview of partner A. Both partners are informed that partner A is not a possible candidate, in order to avoid a situation where the partner will feel slighted if not chosen.

When asked about experiences of being given acknowledgement, understanding, love, compassion and/or acceptance, many people simply define these expressions as essentialist phenomena; that is, as being part of a figure's inherent qualities or attributes (for example: 'Uncle X was a very compassionate sort of person'), or as quantitative phenomena (for example: 'Mrs. Smith was so full of love'). However, the therapist must draw out the identities of the figures so that the ways of expressing

acknowledgement, understanding, love, compassion and/or acceptance can become more richly known. In the context of this repositioning interview, partner B is assisted to define these expressions as specific and highly honed relationship skills; as time-honoured practices of living that can be known in their particularities; as a specialised know-how about building a sense of affiliation in relationships. As partner B becomes more familiar with the specifics of these skills in the repositioning interview, she/he can be invited to reflect upon what these suggested about the figure's sentiments of living; about this figure's perspective on life, and about their purposes, values and beliefs, etc.

The repositioning interview is drawn to a close when partner B believes that she/he has a strong familiarity with these relational skills and the sentiments of living associated with these, and is ready to step into the outsider-witness position for the interview with partner A. At this time partner A has power of veto over any of these skills and sentiments of life that she/he might have discomfort about. The therapist then informs partner B that she/he will do what they can to assist them maintain the position they have chosen (this might be friendship, brotherhood, sisterhood, uncle-hood, aunt-hood, parenthood, colleagueship, etc.) The therapist also reaches an agreement with partner B about how the therapist might interject should she/he believe that partner B is falling out of the outsider-witness position during any phase of the definitional ceremony.

Point of Entry

When consulted by couples in high and longstanding conflict, it is my usual practice to invoke definitional ceremony as a structure for our conversations. In regard to the question about which partner is first invited to place their life at the centre of the definitional ceremony, when there is a significant imbalance in the relationship in terms of power, this is usually the partner who is more in the subject position in the power relationship. When there is not this apparent imbalance, it is the opportunities for rich personal story development that first become visible to the therapist that determines which partner will be initially invited to occupy the centre of the definitional ceremony.

Usually, the opportunities for rich story development arise from expressions of conflict. Conversations about these discontents, dissatisfactions, ultimatums and repudiations, can become entry points to rich stories of the lives and identities of both partners. For example, when a partner is giving voice to conclusions about what is no longer acceptable, what is no longer satisfactory, or about the 'inappropriate' role expectations of the other, or the negative effect of the other's actions, there is an opportunity to interview this partner about the foundation of these

conclusions. For example, it can be assumed that these conclusions are the outcome of certain realisations that this partner has had about his/her life; perhaps about one's purposes in life, or about what sort of lifestyle one would find more suitable, or about one's preferred ways of being in life, or about one's personal worth, or about one's unrecognised capabilities, and so on. Further, it can be assumed that these realisations are the outcome of specific experiences of life, experiences that have contributed discoveries about and clarifications of what the partner accords value to in life. It is assumptions like these that provide a foundation for the sort of therapeutic inquiry that contributes to the rich development of the stories of people's lives. Narrative conversations quickly drift away from conflict, and instead provide the opportunity for rich description about what partners hold precious about their lives.

Couple Therapy as Definitional Ceremony: An Illustration

I entered the waiting room and introduced myself to a newly referred couple. The partners were not sitting together, and I sensed a degree of tension between them. Their introductions were perfunctory; they were clearly ill at ease. There seemed an awkwardness with which we negotiated the passageways to the interviewing room and, when seated, my efforts to make this couple feel more at home fell flat. I then noticed that each partner had pulled their chair a little further apart from each other; it was my guess that this couple had argued ahead of arriving at my office, possibly about their attendance for this interview. Under these circumstances I thought it wise to inquire about the context of making the appointment to meet with me, and about the events leading up to our meeting in the waiting room.

*Barry*²: Well, to be honest, this is something that I have been wanting for a long time now. But I kept putting it off because I did not think that my partner would agree to come with me to see you about our relationship. But in the end I just took the plunge and called to make a time, just hoping against hope that my partner would see the wisdom in such a meeting. But I am apprehensive about this, and things have been pretty rough between us this morning before coming here. Pearce says I did not consult him about the time of this meeting but you will find that he always tends to be a bit antagonistic when ...

Pearce: Barry, I cannot believe that you are saying this! Michael, I do not believe Barry is saying this! Of all the things that... This just drives me nuts! Barry always does

this. He is always taking credit for ideas that are not his in the first place. This is a serious problem. For ages I have been working behind the scenes in my efforts to make this meeting happen, and Barry knows this. You know this Barry! Michael, he is such a contrary person that I just knew that I had to encourage him to take this initiative, to make this appointment, or he would never come. Sure, I left it to him to make the actual appointment, but I really did not see any choice in this. But then this is the way that I have to work at most things in our relationship, or nothing would ever happen. Barry's the sort of person who ...

Barry: You cannot believe what I am saying!! I can believe what you are saying! I am glad to see that you are being true to form Pearce. You are going to ruin this, aren't you. Michael, Pearce is just like his sister. She will not co-operate with anyone unless it is on her terms. Everything always has to be on her terms. Pearce, you know it, you are just like you sister. And I ...

Pearce: Hang on a minute. Just hang on! Cannot we ever talk about our relationship without your dragging my family into it? Cannot we just once, just once, have a simple discussion without you doing this? You are making it impossible. Michael, see, Barry has this thing about my family. This is the other big problem that we have. Barry, just why are you so preoccupied with my family!! It is not as if ...

Barry: That is not fair! And you know it! At least I relate to your family. I cannot say that you return the favour. You know how hard I have tried with them, and how accepting I have been of your family even when you have not even put an iota into ...

Pearce: Look, if this is how it is going to be, if this is how you are going to be, then I do not see the point of us going through this exercise. If this is how it is going to be, then I am out of here. It is not going to do anything ...

Barry: That is wild! Michael, I predicted that Pearce would do this. Pearce, you are just looking for an excuse. You want to pull the plug on this just because things are not working out in the way that you want them to. I cannot accept this. Michael, I used to just put up with this sort of petulance, and just back off when the going got difficult like this. But I cannot do it anymore, I just cannot, and I do not know if ...

Pearce: So it is all about what is acceptable to you now, is it! Just in case you forgot, I am in this relationship too you know!

M: (tentatively) Would it be okay for me to make a comment. Or would this be a bad time?

Barry: Sure! Sure!

Pearce: Sure, anything but this. I cannot stand this.

M: I have appreciated your openness and your frankness. You have both been quite candid. I am not just a stranger to the two of you, but I am also a stranger to your relationship.

² All names are pseudonyms.

But you have done a great job of catching me up with how things sometimes go for you in this relationship, and about what I guess you have come to consult me about. In circumstances like this, one picture has to be worth a thousand words. Or is it one performance is worth a thousand words?

Pearce: Okay, okay, I get it.

Barry: What? Oh, yeah.

M: In saying this, I am not trying to bring about premature closure to this conversation that you are having, and I had be prepared to keep listening to further developments in this if you thought that this would be instructive for me, and if you thought you were making some headway. But there is another option. If you think that you have given me at least a partial understanding of what you wanted to consult me about, if you think that you have achieved this, I have an idea about something else that we could try. This would be a different way of going about things. What do you think?

Pearce: Anything. Anything but more of this.

Barry: Yeah, I agree.

M: Okay then. Here is my proposal. I suggest that I interview you both separately, but in each other's company. If this idea appeals to you, we could do this in three parts. First, one of you would be an audience to my conversation with the other. Then, let us say about half-way through the interview, I could interview whichever of you who had been in the listening position. I had interview you about what you had heard. I often refer to this as a 'retelling'. Towards the end of our meeting I would be asking whoever was first interviewed about their response to this retelling. Then, for our next meeting, I would start by interviewing whoever was in the audience position today, and the other partner would have a turn at listening. Now I know that this is not what you had expected in making this appointment to meet with me, but I have a sense that doing things in this way might assist us all to find a way forward in attending to what is so important to both of you. What do you think? Would you like to give this a try?

Pearce: Okay. It sounds interesting. I will give it a go.

Barry: Yeah. When you think about it we have got nothing to lose. We will be guided by you.

M: Okay, but it might not be all that easy to do this. So, we will have to make some preparations for it, because it is important for you to separate from your relationship for the duration of this exercise.

Pearce: What! But we came here to ...

M: I am not suggesting that you separate from each other. I am just suggesting that you separate from your relationship with each other for the duration of each meeting that we have. There are many things that can be achieved in relationships that might not be achieved

outside of them. But there are also things that can be achieved in friendship, in acquaintanceship, in cousinship, or whatever, that might not be achieved in the context of a relationship. If we are successful in finding another place for you to stand in relation to each other in the course of our conversations, there will be less chance that your responses to each other will be determined by how things usually go between the two of you. And there will be more chance that you will be free to respond to each other in ways that are not so predictable, in ways that might provide you with a way forward in your relationship with each other.

Barry: Okay, so how are we going to do that? Where do we start?

M: I have heard some things that have given me some ideas about where to start. Pearce, would it be okay by you if I was to interview Barry first, with you in the listening position? Then, at our next meeting, we could shift this arrangement around?

Pearce: That is fine with me.

M: Is that okay with you, Barry?

Barry: Fine with me.

M: Alright, but before we proceed with this it is going to be important for me to interview Pearce in a way that will help him find another position in relation to you Barry. Pearce, I would like to ask you some questions about any experiences that you might have had in which you felt strongly acknowledged by someone, or profoundly heard, or significantly accepted—about anything like this. And in this, I would appreciate it if you would exclude experiences of acknowledge-ment and acceptance from Barry, as it raises extra complications if you are positioned as Barry as you are listening to my conversation with Barry.

Pearce: Okay. But I am not sure about what you are asking me to talk about. You could may be ask me some questions.

M: Alright. Could you think of a time when ...

In response to my questions, Pearce chose to speak of his 'coming out' story. He was 19 years of age, and the double life that he had been living had become impossible for him to sustain any longer; he felt that he was breaking under the pressure of this double life, totally anguished over the contradictions in his existence, and now desperate to bring the worlds of his existence together. And yet Pearce was also anguished about this prospect of bringing these worlds together, and did not know where to start in his efforts to achieve this. He loved the members of his family dearly, but found himself 'rocked' by their occasional expressions of homophobia, and constantly confronted by their heterosexist assumptions that were expressed in a 'thousand' ways in his every contact with them ('Who are you dating? At least tell us her name'). He just knew that he was not up to handling their immediate

responses to the news that he was gay, or to educating them about the multiplicity of ways that their taken-for-granted assumptions about life and about his identity rendered him invisible.

Not knowing what else to do at this point of personal crisis, Pearce turned to his Uncle David, his mother's brother. Pearce had little contact with this uncle in recent years, but had many fond memories of the visits of this uncle when he was a small boy. At that time, Uncle David regularly visited Pearce's mother, and on these occasions would always bring Pearce a chocolate, and would always take time out to play cricket or football with him. Pearce called this uncle and told him that he urgently needed his help, and that he had not known who else he could turn to. Uncle David was immediately responsive, saying that he would cancel his golf on Saturday so that they could meet. However, it was a Thursday morning, and Pearce said that he just could not wait until Saturday. His uncle responded by cancelling his work appointments for that Thursday afternoon.

When Pearce sat down in his uncle's office, the 'flood gates opened'. He just 'blurted' everything out. He could not stop himself. He just 'talked at' his uncle non-stop for over an hour. What was his uncle's response? At the end of this time he simply stood up. Pearce's heart was in his mouth. He then went to Pearce, lifted him up, and held him firmly in his embrace. Pearce felt himself going limp in his uncle's arms, and then he began to cry, and cry, and cry yet more the tears of many years. When Pearce was 'all cried out', he stepped back to see that his uncle's clothes were saturated through with his tears. But his uncle appeared not to notice. Instead his uncle talked about how incredibly touched he had been by Pearce's story, and about how honoured he had felt in being the family member chosen by Pearce to share this story of his life. Further, this uncle said that, if it was okay by Pearce, he could pave the way for Pearce's coming out to his family. He asserted that the responsibility of handling the preliminary responses of his family members should not be on Pearce's shoulders, and that this was something he could assist them with. He also suggested that he follow this up with some conversations that might help them to become more aware of their many implicit assumptions that were disqualifying of Pearce's life and rendering his identity invisible. This triggered off a new round of crying—in regard to this, Pearce said 'Again I just could not help myself, and was so glad that I did not have to'—and by the time he met with the members of his family they had had the opportunity to 'process their reactions with Uncle David' and had prepared an apology for the ways that they had all played a part in his marginalisation.

Upon hearing this story I talked with Pearce about how moving I had found it. Barry joined in this with: 'I have

heard this story before, but I still find it very moving. I wish I had had an uncle like this, as it would have made it much easier for me.' I then began to interview Pearce about this story in ways that I hoped would be distilling of his uncle's practices of acknowledgement as an expression of specific skills and of certain sentiments of living. It was my understanding that this distillation would assist Pearce to reposition himself for my interview with Barry. This interview featured questions like:

Of the words that your uncle used, which did you find particularly acknowledging?

What was the tone of his voice when he was speaking these words?

Which of his movements—whether they be of his gestures, his facial expressions, his posture, his demonstrative actions, the rhythm of his breath, or whatever—were particularly congruent with these words and this tone of voice?

What was it about the timing of your uncle's expressions that was so validating of you?

What values were expressed in these words, in this tone, in these movements, and in this timing?

In his responses he was very attuned to what was important to you, and to what would encourage you to speak of what you had not spoken. What do these responses suggest about how he oriented himself to your life? What do these responses suggest about what he had high regard for in the story of your life?

What was it about his responses that conveyed such a strong sense of understanding?

What was it about his responses that provided you with a sense of how touched he had felt by your story, and by the fact that you had chosen him to speak to at this critical time of your life?

What did his responses suggest about what he wanted for you, and about what he hoped for as an outcome of your meeting with him?

Having attended to these preparations for Pearce's repositioning, I inquired about his readiness for the task to follow.³

M: Pearce, do you think that it would now be possible for you to assume a position of uncle-hood as you listen to the conversation that I am about to have with Barry?

Pearce: Sure. I could give it a go. Just spell it out a bit more for me.

M: Okay. The idea is that you will be endeavouring to listen to my conversation with Barry in the way that you imagine your Uncle David might be listening if he could be here. It is an idea about you making efforts to be here in the

³ Fortunately I had managed to find an extended time slot for this first visit, and was able to take the next step of interviewing Barry with Pearce positioned as the outsider witness. However, I don't always have this luxury of time, and there have been occasions upon which this next step has been postponed until the next meeting.

ways that you have been describing—with Uncle David's skills of acknowledging and affirming others available to you. And with the sort of values and beliefs that would be guiding him in this. This would require you to step back from your position as Barry's partner for the duration of our conversation, and it is my guess that it would make it possible for you to hear what you would not otherwise hear, and to respond in ways that you might not otherwise be able to respond. And I believe that this could make it possible for you to achieve some things in your relationship with Barry that might not be possible for you to achieve at this present time from a Pearce position in relation to Barry.

Pearce: Alright. I think I could give this a go. I am prepared to have a try at least.

M: What do you think Barry?

Barry: I like the idea, but I am not sure that Pearce will be able to do it. He too easily gets caught up in ...

Pearce: There he goes again. For the life of me, I just do not get it. You always ...

M: Barry, do you think that was entirely helpful?

Barry: Okay, okay, okay. I will try to be good.

Pearce: Look, it is like I said before Michael, he really just cannot help himself, and ...

M: Uncle-hood!!

Pearce: Okay, okay.

M: If you do have a sense that it is getting too difficult for you to maintain this position, give me some sort of signal, and I will take time out from my conversation with Barry and talk with you about whether it is a good idea to proceed with the exercise, and if so, about what would make it easier for you to be present in Uncle David ways.

Pearce: That is good. That is good.

M: Alright. Now Barry, I would like to pick up on what you were saying earlier about how some things that were acceptable to you in your relationship with Pearce are no longer acceptable.

Pearce: This is alright for Barry to say, but I am in this relationship too. Do you think this is just up to Barry to independently decide? I mean to decide what is acceptable and what is not in our relationship?

Barry: See Michael, I told you that he would not be able to ...

M: Barry, I can attend to this. This is my job. Pearce, you are presently responding to Barry from your position within this relationship. Should we take time out or ...

Pearce: No, no. I will concentrate. I want to do it. I can do it.

M: Okay. Barry, I would like to ask you some questions about this development, about how some things that were acceptable to you are no longer so. And Pearce will be listening as his Uncle David might be listening if he was present. Is that right Pearce?

Pearce: Yeah. That is what I am doing. That is what I am doing.

M: Barry, the fact that there were some things about the relationship that were acceptable to you that are now no longer acceptable suggests to me that you have had some new realisations that have clarified for you how you want to live your life. Or that perhaps that you are valuing yourself in ways that you were not previously. Or that there have been some developments in your sense of personal worth. Or something like this.

Barry: Well, I have not really thought about this. But yeah, I think I am clearer about how I want things to be in our relationship. And yeah, I guess it is true that this is about the fact that I am valuing myself more.

M: Valuing yourself in what sort of terms? Valuing what about yourself?

Barry: Well, just being more aware of some of my talents I guess. It is about my ability to be creative, to make things up as I go along, to find other ways of getting done what I want to get done. You know, getting away from the same old routines. Yeah. That is it. I am clearer about the fact that it does not suit me anymore to stick to lots of routines that I find just so boring, or to accept situations where I am just expected to step aside from what works for me.

M: It is my guess that these realisations did not come out of the blue. Is there anything that you could tell me about recent developments in your life that could have contributed to these realisations. I am thinking of the sort of developments that might have helped you to value yourself more and that might have clarified for you how you want to live your life?

Barry: Hmm ...The main one I think would be my enrolment in Art School.

M: Would you mind telling me about that?

Barry: It was about 8 months ago. I started going to Art School. This is something that I had wanted to do for many years, but I never thought I would be up to it. I did not think that I had have the talent. In the end I took a chance on it, and had a pact with myself that I would pull out if it was not working out after 6 weeks.

M: What happened?

Barry: My work was pretty scrappy, but two of my teachers took an interest in it. I do not know how they saw what they did in my work, and I was not convinced at the beginning, but over several weeks I began to get the idea that they were onto something, that they were not just making it up to make me feel better. I began to get the idea that I might have a bit of artistic talent. This was fantastic for me to see, and I was on such a high then. This was a high that I could not have imagined. Anything I had imagined would not have come close to this. If it had not been for Sarah and Roger's (two of Barry's art teachers)

encouragement and support, I had be out of there now. But things just seem to get better in this part of my life.

M: What is your sense of what was reflected about you in your early artistic efforts? In looking at your work back then, what's your guess about what your art teachers caught a glimpse of? And I had be interested in your thoughts about what this told them about your talents, or about how you see life, or about what is important to you.

Barry: I actually know some of the answers to these questions, particularly because Sarah is a very direct person, and does not hold things back. What she said was ...

This account of recent developments in Barry's life unfolded further in the context of this re-authoring conversation. Over this time, Pearce only had difficulty in maintaining an uncle-hood position on two occasions, which seemed a significant achievement in view of the intensity of this couple's conflict at the outset of the interview. It was now time for the outsider-witness retelling. I invited Barry to sit back and listen to me interview Pearce about what he had heard. This interview was structured around the four categories of inquiry that I have discussed in this paper.

M: At this point the plan is for Barry to sit back and be an audience to my conversation with you, Pearce. I will not be asking you for your opinions, or to give advice, or to make any judgements, but will be interviewing you according to a scheme that I have found to be very helpful in these circumstances. It is my responsibility to keep things on course, so, if it is okay with you, I will increase the tempo of my questions if I sense that this is important. Is this okay with you?

Pearce: Yeah. That is fine. I had rather you have this responsibility than me have it.

M: Okay. Let us get going. From an uncle-hood position, as you were listening to Barry's story, what did you hear that most caught your attention Pearce?

Pearce: To be honest, at first it was difficult to hear lots of the things that Barry was saying. I kept falling back into our relationship thing, and feeling indignant, and all sorts of other things. But after a while I found that I could imagine what my Uncle David might be hearing, about what would have interested him, and it did get a whole lot easier.

M: What was it in Barry's story that you were drawn to when you stepped into this uncle-hood position?

Pearce: Actually it was lots of things. But what stood out most was the joy that Barry had when his art teachers confirmed the fact that he had some artistic ability.

M: Do you recall the words that Barry used when he talked about what this was like for him?

Pearce: Yeah. He said that he had not imagined anything that could have even come close to this. But it was not just this. It was also what he said about this connection

that he has with Sarah. That it is honest and that it is supportive and encouraging.

M: You said that you were drawn to lots of things from the position of uncle-hood.

Pearce: Yeah. There were all those things that Barry said about what he had realised about his life. It was about the clarity that he has now got about how he wants his life to be. I am sure that my Uncle David would pick up on this.

M: I am always interested to know what catches people's attention when they are in the listening position and when they are free to hear what they might not otherwise hear. And I am also interested to know about what this sets off in people's minds, about the images that come to them about the person's life, the mental pictures that come to mind at these times. What is your guess about the sort of images that would have come to your uncle's mind had he been present? And how do you think he would speak about these images?

Pearce: What images came to mind about Barry's life?

M: Yes. About what images were evoked by Barry's story. Take what you were drawn to in Barry's story when you were standing in your uncle's shoes. In this position, how did this affect your picture of Barry as a person, or your sense of what his life is about?

Pearce: Yeah. Actually, I do think that I was able to stand in my uncle's shoes for some of this. And I did have a lot of images. Some of these had to do with picturing Barry arriving at some place where he is valuing himself in a different way. At a position in life where some things are falling into place more for him. Yeah. I would say at a place where there is more harmony between his life and how he wants it to be. And the image of his connection with Sarah was very much there as well.

M: You have talked about what you were drawn to in Barry's story from an uncle-hood position, and about some of the images that this set off for you. Do you have any sense of what these words touched on for you? For example, did they strike a chord with something in your own life, with experiences of your own personal history?⁴

Pearce: This is not about uncle-hood?

M: No, it is about Pearce. I am now asking you to be Pearce again, and if it gets too difficult to stay with this development, I could again interview you as Uncle David.

⁴ On account of the richness of Pearce's retelling, at this juncture I thought it appropriate to risk inviting him to 'embody' his interest in Barry's expressions as Pearce, not as Uncle David. If it had turned out that Pearce was not ready for this, I knew that it would be relatively easy for me to assist him to again reposition himself as Uncle David, and to encourage him to speculate about what aspects of Uncle David's personal experiences might have resonated with Barry's expressions, and about the ways in which these expressions might have moved Uncle David had he been present.

Pearce: Okay. What did it touch on for Pearce? Yeah. I am a bit confused about this. May be it is jealousy that I am feeling. Barry is finding more harmony in his life, and he has these wonderful connections with his art teachers, and I think that may be I am just jealous about this.

M: Do you feel jealous right now?

Pearce: No. Not really. I just do not know how to say it. It is something, but right now I do not actually feel at all jealous.

M: Well how would you describe what Barry's story is touching on for you right now? Would you say it is a desire, or a wish, or a longing, or a ...

Pearce: A longing! That is it! That is the word I was looking for. There were things that Barry said about developments in his life that I think touched on a longing in my life.

M: Do you speak of this longing often?

Pearce: Actually, you will not believe this, but I have never talked about this before. It is the sort of longing to arrive at the sort of place that Barry is arriving at in his life. Art is not at all my thing, but I think I have longed for the sort of connection that Barry has with his art teachers.

M: Has this longing been with you for some time?

Pearce: Yeah. Now that I think about it, it has been since I can remember.

M: I had like to ask you a question about this experience. You have listened to this story about recent developments in Barry's life, and you have been responding to what you heard in Barry's story from an uncle-hood position. And you have also been responding from a Pearce position. Would you say a little about where all of this has taken you?

Pearce: Do you mean right now?

M: Yeah. What place are you in now in your thoughts or understanding or feelings or perceptions or whatever, that you would not be in if you had not been present as an audience to Barry's story, and if you had not had this opportunity to respond to Barry's story?

Pearce: Well, I certainly would not be speaking about this longing, that is for sure. And this is something different.

M: What is it like for you to be openly acknowledging this longing?

Pearce: Well, in some ways I am in a bit of a painful place right now. Getting in touch with these longings in this way hurts a bit. I do not know where to go with this right now.

M: Do you regret this? Getting in touch with these longings in this way, I mean, because this is painful.

Pearce: No. No. This is the first time that I have openly spoken about these longings, and I reckon that this has to be a step forward. This has to be a step in the right direction. And who knows, may be it will encourage me to

take a leaf out of Barry's book. You know, in a way that I will be following up on some of these longings.

M: Okay. It is probably time that we switched things around again. Would it now be okay for you to sit back so that I can interview Barry about what he heard in your retelling of his story?

Pearce: Yeah. It is a good time.

M: Okay. Barry, what did you hear in Pearce's retelling that caught your attention?

Barry: (tearful) Phew! It was all a bit overwhelming really. Where do I start? Phew! How Pearce acknowledged the joy that I was finding in my art work and, let us see, yeah, about my connection with my teachers and about what he said about the harmony that this is bringing to my life. And, yeah, about the longings this touched on in Pearce's life. Everything really! And it was not just what Pearce said you know, but it was also what was in his voice. From this I got the sense that he really was happy about what is happening in my life. I never thought that I would hear this from Pearce, I really did not. Phew!

M: So many things! Earlier I asked Pearce about the mental pictures that your story set off for him. Did Pearce's retelling evoke further images of your own life, or of who you are? Did it contribute to any further realisations about your life?

Barry: Yeah. Somehow it made everything more vivid, even more real. I think it somehow made these realisations I have been having even stronger realisations.

M: Would you like to say something about these realisations?

Barry: There is so much to say about them, and I need more time to think about these. I will say that I am seeing myself as a person who is more connected to what it is important for me to be connected to, to the things that are special to me. And this had me thinking a lot about my mother. She was a single parent. We did not have very much, but she always let me know that I was special to her. I was always special to her. And she always let me know that it was just fine for me to be who I was.

M: You have talked about what you heard from Pearce that stood out for you, and about the images of your life that this evoked. Do you have a sense of what this struck a chord with in your own personal history, that resonated for you in this?

Barry: That is easy to answer. As a little boy I used to dream about my life, about my future. Lots of wonderful scenarios. I remember not wanting to wake from these beautiful dreams. But I lost touch with these dreams when I became an adolescent, and after that felt terribly lonely and desperate. At the time I was just plain bewildered about this, and about virtually everything that was happening around me. Later I could look back and see what happened.

I now realise that I ran headfirst into all of this bigotry, and all of this homophobia. I nearly lost my life to it. Literally, I nearly did. I came close to killing myself many times. It was like I hit this brick wall. It was like a knock-out blow. These dreams, well they got knocked out of my life. Anyway, it is a long answer to your questions, but I would say that as I listened to Pearce I felt some of these dreams stirring again (tearful).

M: One last question before we wind up this conversation. Earlier I asked Pearce where this conversation had taken him. I will ask you the same question.

Barry: You know, it is strange, but I feel that I have come a long way in this. To feel reconnected with mum. And these dreams, to feel them stirring. This is somewhere else, it really is. There is a lot to talk about in all of this. I do not know where it has got me to in my connection with Pearce, but his words have played a big part in this.

This was the first of eight meetings with Pearce and Barry. They went away knowing that at the next meeting Pearce would occupy the centre of the definitional ceremony. Barry had thought ahead about who he might be repositioned as, and he chose Sarah, one of the art teachers who had been so supportive of him. He attended this meeting in drag, wearing some of his 'dress ups' and some items of clothing that Sarah had lent him. Barry had talked with Sarah about the events of our first meeting and had shared his wish to reposition himself as her in the next meeting. Sarah had said that she had felt honoured by this, and thought that some items of her own clothing might contribute to the occasion. As Sarah, Barry's retelling of Pearce's story was quite phenomenal.

What was the subject for the starting-point for my interview with Pearce? It was the longings that he had voiced from the outsider-witness position in our first meeting. I began this interview with some questions that I hoped would assist Pearce to draw out the history of these longings. Since these were longings that he had maintained a connection with through these years, some of these questions were directed to the identification of experiences that may have verified the relevance of these longings to his life. In response to these questions, Pearce began to talk about his father. He was a man who was not physically demonstrative, who worked around the clock 7 days a week in his work as an accountant, and whose life seemed devoid of longings. However, as Pearce had spoken of his father in response to my questions about the history of these longings in his life, I thought that it would be worthwhile to ask a few more questions about their relationship. I specifically asked Pearce about experiences of his father that might have been validating of such longings. It was then that Pearce recalled his high school graduation. His father had been present for this, and this was one of those rare occasions upon which this man had been

demonstrative. After the graduation ceremony, his father had briefly embraced him, and had said, with tears in his eyes: 'Do not do it like I did it son'. He then turned, and was gone.

This account of this father's response to Pearce's high school graduation many years ago provided the point of entry to a re-authoring conversation that was richly describing of Pearce's life and identity. In this conversation there was some speculation about what it would be like for Pearce's father to be present, and to hear about the steps that Pearce was now taking to acknowledge these longings, steps that his father had not had the opportunity to take. This was also a deeply moving interview. Barry's retelling of Pearce's story was phenomenal—but that is another story.

At Pearce and Barry's invitation, Uncle David and Sarah joined our fifth meeting and were positioned as outsider-witnesses as Pearce and Barry talked of developments in their personal lives and in their relationship. These were developments that were very satisfying to both of them. In regard to their relationship, Pearce and Barry were now more at ease with each other; they reported on spontaneous developments in give and take, on a very significant reduction in conflict, and on the growth of fun times together. They were still having some disagreements, but in the context of these they were finding that they could now acknowledge each other's position on the subject of the dispute. Pearce and Barry also talked about the ways in which Uncle David and Sarah's sentiments of living had contributed to these developments. When it was Uncle David and Sarah's turn to speak, amongst other things, they talked about how honoured they felt at being included in Pearce and Barry's relationship in the way that they were.

Conclusion

At the end of our series of meetings, and at follow up, it was clear that the last vestiges of the chronic conflict had dissolved. I use the term dissolved, as at no time in our work was the focus on conflict resolution. I certainly did not assist in the negotiation of any conflicts or act as a mediator in any of our contacts. The approach described in this paper is more accurately, one of conflict dissolution. This conflict dissolution is achieved through: the rich story development of the lives of partners of couple relationships; the interruption of efforts to resolve difficulties through recourse to culturally venerated communicational processes; the erosion of exclusivity in couple relationships; and through the adoption of other relational forms in ways that contributes to diversity of response in couple relationships.

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