Toward an Ethic of Curiosity:
The Beginnings of a Theory of Dialogic Negotiations based on Narrative Analysis and the Construction of Meaning

By Philip Thomas
July, 2002

Table of Contents

Introduction

Traditional notions of analysis within the sciences seek to discover and describe the world "as it is." This knowledge then allows us to act on it from the outside to make it become as we would have it to be. The assumption underlying this idea of analysis is that there exists a world "out there" that can be observed with objectivity and named for what it is. Within this paradigm, the quest of the sciences is to endow us with the appropriate instruments with which we can access and gain accurate and precise information about the true essence of reality and make it known. Objective truth exists independent of the observer and can be discovered and made known through careful unbiased observation.

Within this paradigm, to the extent that we are successful in our effort to be objective, we can trust what we see as a mirror of *true* reality. When I can say, "I saw it with my own eyes," the truth of what is observed becomes undeniable, it's meaning unquestionable. Jealousy rips at the relational bond between two people as one accuses the other of *blatantly flirtatious* behavior that she *saw with her own eyes*. Political negotiations breakdown because of *obvious manipulation and bad faith* so *easily evidenced* in the failure of one party to fulfill previous agreements. In these two examples, that which is observed and experienced is assumed to have only one possible explanation, one possible and irrefutable truth. Conflict arises and relationships break down when parties cling to what they believe to be self-evident truths and are unable or unwilling to consider the possibility of experiences having meanings or explanations other than the one they have attached to it.

In this paper, I draw from social constructionist theory to show that no event in our social worlds demand only one way of being explained and understood. I argue that meaning does not emerge as an inherent property of experience, but rather is socially constructed through the stories we tell and the language we use to talk about our experiences. I will first discuss how language and narratives create and shape reality and the way we make sense of the social worlds in which we live and interact. I then explore some of the implications of these ideas for what I refer to as dialogic negotiation. Specifically, I offer some conceptual tools that emerge from social constructionist theory that are useful for analysis and intervention in situations of conflict. I then offer some beginning thoughts about how social constructionism might inform the design of a concrete process aimed at promoting dialogue in contexts of high polarization. I conclude by suggesting that in situations of conflict, whether interpersonal or international in scope, dialogue and negotiation processes in which parties reach deeper mutual understanding will be more successful to the extent that parties understand that the way each "sees" and construes reality is not necessarily the only way of "seeing" and understanding reality. In realizing that the meaning attributed to an event or happening is only one of many possible meanings, rather than insisting that reality is as "I see it," one is moved towards an "ethic of curiosity" – an initial inclination, when confronted with a conflictive situation, to become *curious* about other possible meanings that could be constructed and attributed to a given experience.

Current literature on conflict theory and negotiation recognize the importance of focusing not only on the substantive content of a dispute but on the relationship dynamics as well. Emphasis is placed on moving beyond positions to exploring the deeper interests and needs underlying the positions. I believe that social constructionist theory moves us one step beyond interest-based or needs-based negotiation to what I am calling "dialogic or meaning-based negotiation." Negotiation processes become dialogic in nature when inspired by an ethic of curiosity, a quest for deeper mutual understanding and a spirit of genuine openness to explore the socially constructed nature of reality as each experiences it. In dialogic, meaning-based negotiation, parties in conflict begin to negotiate not only the content of the dispute and the nature of their relationship, but also how, at the deepest level, they make sense of their world and how together they can begin to construct, or "co-author" a new desired social world.

Words Create Worlds / Meaning Constructed Through Stories

Perhaps one of the more significant contributions of social constructionism and the new sciences in general is the realization that there is no such thing as immaculate perception. The possibility of pure observation from an objective, unbiased position, of things, events and phenomenon *as they are* is dubious at best. Thus the search for absolute, unquestionable truths or attempts to make ontological affirmations become futile since there is no way of accessing the "isness" or "true meaning" of things "out there" and making it known that is not already embedded within the confines of language and discourse. Things, events and happenings do not *speak for themselves* as though their meaning were self-evident. But rather, in our use of language and the stories we tell, we "make" sense or construct the meaning that is then attributed to happenings and experiences in life. Put in the form of a formula, I might suggest E + LN = M (Experience + Language and Narratives used to talk about the experience yields the Meaning the given experience comes to have). This formula suggests that rather than being objective, absolute, and static, meaning is itself dynamic, changeable and always unfinished. As we change our language and the way we talk about a given experience, our understanding of that same experience also changes

Can I not trust what I see with my own eyes?

All observation is necessarily shaped and informed by predetermined categories and ideas about what is to be observed. The very act of observation requires that distinctions be made. Light can only be observed once it is distinguished from darkness. Cold only exists to the extent it is distinguished from hot. A sunset can only be observed to the extent that we are able to make distinctions between the sun, horizon, sky and earth. Language is the tool we have to make these distinctions. In this sense, language, to a large extent, determines and shapes what we can observe. Much like a thermostat both controls the temperature of a room and is at the same time controlled by the temperature of the room, language and the stories we tell both shape and are shaped by the social worlds in which we live.

To see how observation is dependent upon language, let us explore an example that may seem trite. Consider the instruments that have been developed to detect dangerous levels of radon gases in our homes. It would not have been possible to develop these instruments without some predetermined ideas about what is to be detected. These predetermined ideas guided the development of instruments to find what they are designed to look for, namely radon gas. In other words, even the most scientific of instruments can not achieve immaculate or pure observation, but rather will observe what they are configured to observe. The most advanced scientific measuring devices in existence are not yet able to detect the existence of *arythian* gases in the air since to date no observed phenomena has been given the name arythian gas. To be able to observe the presence of arythian gas, it would first be necessary to isolate an observed phenomena that does not appear to fit extant categories, choose language to describe the anomaly being observed, and then coin this anomaly with the term "arythian gas." Note, however, that all attempts to "objectively describe" the observed

anomaly also will necessarily depend upon the use of language since language is the only tool we have to be able to communicate with each other and all language is composed of predetermined categories. The weightlessness of this new gas could not be observed if the concept of weight did not already exist. Any "objective" scientific description of these newly discovered phenomena now called arythian gas could not include details about its *gyrytheramun* qualities. Why? Because it is not possible to observe that which is not yet included in our vocabulary of predetermined concepts. The word "gyrytheramun" does not yet exist; the concept has not yet been constructed. Perhaps someday a concept will be invented, called "gyrytheramun" and classified as one of many now observable qualities of certain gases. When that happens, it will become possible to observe these qualities and use them to describe the newly "discovered" arythian gas.

My point with the above example is to illustrate the impossibility of immaculate or pure observation where we as observers claim to simply observe and describe things as they are. Rather, things are as we observe them to be. Social constructionism's emphasis on the central role of language and discourse in the process of making sense of our world and the realities in which we live would suggest that things are, or become, as we talk them into being. Put another way, rather than finding or discovering the true essence of the world looking from the outside in, through language and discourse we often end up creating the very world we later come to discover.

I have already suggested that meaning is not embedded as an inherent part of experience itself. Rather, meaning is constructed as we "make" sense of an experience by locating it within a story, by saying something about it. For example, the simple motion of moving the hand up and down carries within it no inherent meaning. Folks familiar with Central American culture would see that motion and understand it as a call to "come here." People in the United States might see the same motion and understand it as waving and saying "hello." The stories we tell have been shaped by the accumulation of experiences we have had and at the same time are the shapers of those experiences. In a recent walk downtown, a friend of mine was alarmed when he saw a large man assault a woman, pinning her against the car and holding a knife to her throat. In his "making sense" out of what he observed, he concluded a rape was happening and immediately wanted to intervene. I witnessed the exact same event but because of my prior experience and the context in which this was happening, the story I told as I made sense out of what was being observed was very different. I saw my martial arts instructor teaching one of his students advanced self-defense techniques. Though the example is again trite, the implications are profound. Meaning is not found in the experience, but constructed as we attempt to make sense out of what we observe and experience. In certain contexts, failure to look the other in the eye as you talk means a lack of respect, while in other contexts looking the other square in the eye is provocative and disrespectful. The gesture of looking into or away from the eye carries no meaning. Meaning is constructed once this gesture is located within a specific context that calls forth one story and not another. In a negotiation process when a person agrees to do something he or she has no intention of doing, is that not an example of clear dishonesty and possibly manipulation? That is one story that can be told. Yet, another story grounded in the importance of saving face and avoiding direct

confrontation might "see" this experience differently and would not explain this reality in terms of dishonesty and manipulation. In order to make sense, we must locate the experience within a determined context. It is the stories we choose to tell that grant coherence and meaning to our experiences. Meaning is malleable and always unfinished to the extent that different stories can be told about the same experience.

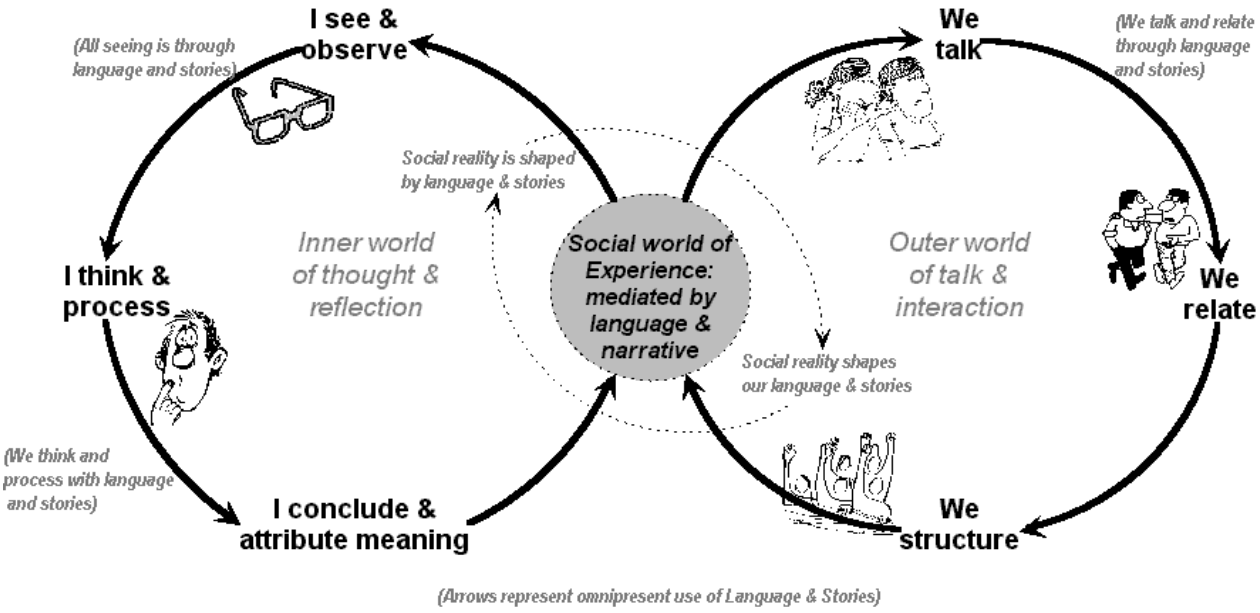
Since stories play a crucial role in how sense is made of our social worlds, let us look more closely at the qualities or characteristics of a story. In reading the simple phrase, "boy meets girl," immediately a story is conjured up in which a goal or end state is imagined and all that follows is somehow connected and will move the story towards or away from that end state. For instance, boy likes girl, they go out, they fall in love, they get engaged, they get married, and hopefully they live happily ever after. It is unlikely that the telling of this story would include information about the boy's uncle who works as a mechanic in a small town outside of a major city, unless this information was somehow relevant to the main plot and direction of the story. All events and happenings included in the story must be linked in some logical way in order to maintain coherence and show movement in the story. The relationships or linkages formed between the separate events and happenings are what give them their meaning. Thus, a relationship would have to be formed between the piece about the boy's uncle and the general story to establish its relevance and grant it meaning. To the contrary, this information would not fit, and would have to be discarded. Or the story would have to be changed to encompass and make relevant this information.

In a situation of high social polarization, stories are told which tend to create and reinforce an image of Other as enemy. In order to maintain coherence in this story of conflict, all that Other does must somehow be understood as acts of malice and treated with tremendous suspicion since it would not make sense for Other, constructed as the enemy, to do an act of goodness or kindness. Consider the stories being told in the aftermath of September 11th about the terrorists who are ruthless and vicious animals with no regard to human life, and who must be "smoked out of the caves" and eliminated. In order for this story to maintain coherence, all actions of Other (Osama Bin Laden) must be seen as ruthless acts of vicious violence and all actions of the United States must be seen as necessary and positive moves towards regaining order in the world. Thus, a misguided bomb that kills innocent civilians, "makes sense" and is an unfortunate consequence of necessary action to eliminate the enemy. At the same time, should news of Taliban efforts to tend to the wounded and offer assistance to innocent victims be received, it would have to be understood and explained as manipulative campaigns to seduce others into joining them. Common in situations of polarization is the tendency to assume the best of intentions concerning one's own group, and the worst of intentions concerning the actions of Other. Otherwise, the story would lose its coherence and simply not make sense. The polarization is deepened as each party becomes convinced of the absoluteness of their story and its ability to mirror true reality.

Consider the following model as a way of illustrating how language (pre-determined ideas and categories) and stories both shape and become shaped by social reality and the meaning we attribute to experience. The left loop of the infinity symbol illustrates

the "inner" dimension of thought where we observe, process and attribute meaning to what is observed while the right loop shows the "outer" social world of interaction with others where we talk about and act upon the meanings we give to experience. Note that there is no entry to the private world except through the portal of language, thus showing how even what happens in the "inner world" of thought and reflection is in fact shaped and constructed by the language we use and the stories we tell. In the same vein, there is no exit from the "inner" to the outer world of social interaction except through the same portal of language and story. My hope is that this model of infinity allows me to refer to the inner world of thought and reflection and the outer world of talk and relating without at the same time perpetuating the dualistic notion of "inner" and "outer" worlds. The boundary between inner and outer in this model is fictional and seeks only to provide one way of articulating the socially constructed nature of reality.

I choose to use active verbs to emphasize our role as agents and to suggest that not only do the stories we tell shape us, but we also have the ability to shape the stories that give meaning to experience. Thus, as individual agents, we can, and in fact do—whether we realize it or not—contribute shaping our social world. The key is to become cognizant of how we are – like it or not – constantly engaging in the construction and reconstruction process so that we might begin to act in more intentional ways to begin calling into being our preferred social worlds.



The symbol for infinity used here is intentional as a way of avoiding a more linear model since the construction process has no obvious beginning point. I offer several examples to illustrate how this construction process works. With each example, I begin in the middle of the diagram by presenting a specific "speech act" which refers to any action (something said, or something done) to which meaning is given. I then follow the arrows around to the left showing how differences in language and stories told by observers yield different meanings ascribed to the specific speech act being experienced or observed. Continuing around to the right of the diagram, I illustrate how

different meanings ascribed to the speech act influence social interaction and often end up reinforcing the very stories through which the speech act was initially observed. These examples help to illustrate how a concrete situation experienced by two or more people can end up having very different meanings about "what was really going on." Again, I emphasize that nothing is seen or experienced with virgin eyes. All that is observed and experienced is shaped by the language and stories that precede any given speech act. Hopefully, the examples will show how language itself is not static and immutable but rather is influenced (usually reinforced and consolidated) by the very way we talk, the relationships we have formed and the structures we have created. And so the iterative process of social construction goes on. The model can be seen as a recursive system in which the way the social world has been structured reinforces discourse and stories told, and the stories told reinforce the way the world is ordered. The proverbial "self-fulfilling prophecy" is presented here as the self-fulfilling narrative. It is less about being able to see into the future in some prophetic way, and more about how the stories told create the futures we experience.

In each of the following examples, I construct two different meanings for each of the speech acts presented by foregrounding two different stories. I do not claim that these are the only two stories that could be told, or that these were the stories foregrounded in these real examples. Other stories could be told that would offer other meanings as well. Here, I seek to keep the examples as simple as possible for the purposes of illustration.

Example 1: Negotiations without a table

Speech act: In preparation for a negotiation session between high-level government officials and representatives of a rural indigenous organization, the government officials opt for a more informal seating arrangement placing comfortable chairs in a circle rather than sitting around a table.

One possible story told from an indigenous voice:

> "Indigenous people have been discriminated against, marginalized and oppressed for centuries by governments of other non-indigenous people. These governments have consistently proven themselves to be self-serving, corrupt, and manipulative. They view indigenous people as ignorant and unsophisticated and have treated us as pawns to be conquered and controlled. The indigenous struggle has been successful in mobilizing international pressure on the government to follow through on the peace accords. Because of this international pressure, the government can no longer explicitly ignore dealing with the indigenous people on key issues identified in the peace accords. They think that by participating in negotiations with us they can improve their image, even though they have no real interest in taking these negotiations seriously and following through on agreements."

The social world constructed in this story is a binary world of "us" against "them." The language accentuated in this story places emphasis on a relationship of struggle

between “us” and “them” and relies upon categories such as manipulation, corruption and oppression as a way of interpreting and making sense of experiences with “Other.”

As indigenous representatives choosing to foreground the above story enter the room to begin negotiations, what they “see and observe,” how they “think and process,” and the “conclusions they reach” and the “meaning they ascribe” to this speech act are shaped by this story. In this case, an indigenous representative may conclude saying, “choosing to sit informally in a circle rather than at a table “clearly” reflects the government’s lack of seriousness in this negotiation process. They are simply going through the gestures with no intention of taking seriously anything agreed upon in this meeting. Once again, they take us for ignorant and assume we know nothing about formal negotiations.” This meaning then shapes the social interaction that takes place between the indigenous and the government representatives. As they talk, the binary categories of “us” and “them” will permeate conversation. Their way of relating will likely create more distance and polarization, thus reinforcing the social structure of “us” against “them.” Even before conversations begin, this negotiation session is fraught with difficulties due to one of the meanings that could be ascribed to this speech act.

One possible story told from the voice of a government official:

> “Relationships between the government and the indigenous organizations remain highly polarized. The indigenous people see the government and those of us that work for it as corrupt, manipulative and unwilling to follow through on many of the issues identified in the peace accords. Though the peace accords have been signed, in many ways the spirit of battle continues. We are often accused of being culturally insensitive and unwilling to take seriously negotiations with indigenous representatives. Because of these strong perceptions and stereotypes that continue to exist, it will be important for us to make unilateral gestures that clearly reflect our interest in being culturally sensitive and avoiding imposing our own style of negotiation in contexts involving indigenous sectors. By adapting our way of negotiating, they will see that we are thinking about them and taking negotiations with them very seriously. For instance, we can arrange for a warmer and more inviting room by sitting in a circle, rather than sitting in a more formal and intimidating arrangement around a table.”

The social world constructed in this story is also a binary world of “us” and “them,” though emphasis is placed on “us ***and*** them” rather than “us ***against*** them.” The language accentuated in this story relies upon categories such as cultural sensitivity, formality and informality, negotiation techniques to improve relationships and break down stereotypes, etc. as a way of interpreting and making sense of experiences with “Other.”

By foregrounding this story and logic, the government affirms that “the act of removing a table and arranging chairs in a circle “clearly” demonstrates our flexibility and interest in showing sensitivity to their culture. Hopefully gestures such as this will reflect also our

willingness to take seriously the negotiations and find good viable solutions that satisfy their needs and interests."

Example 2: Collaborating with "Other"

Speech act: A government known for its atrocities committed during the worse years of the civil war is returns to power. This new government is characterized as a government of the extreme right. Several high profile individuals who have historically exercised key leadership roles in the "Left" or opposition have accepted invitations to assume high-level leadership positions within this newly elected government.

One possible story told from the voice of one who sees the decision to assume a position within the government as clear betrayal:

> The world is split between those who are on the Right and those on the Left. Those on the Right have demonstrated throughout history their commitment to perpetuate social injustice for self gain. Those on the Left are committed to and remain loyal to the struggle for social justice and wellbeing for those who have historically been downtrodden, marginalized and oppressed. This commitment to the struggle for social justice is manifested in loyalty to the "Left," or the "cause." Such loyalty excludes any possibility of working collaboratively with the Right. The only way for true change to happen is to overthrow the Right and assume leadership of the Government. Any effort to contribute to the success of the current "right-wing" Government will only serve to improve its own image and thus longevity, undermining the longer term interests of the Opposition to assume leadership.

The social world constructed in this narrative is a binary world of "Left" against "Right" – "us" against "them." Reality is filtered through and made to fit into the language and categories of left/right, justice/oppression, Government/Opposition, loyalty/betrayal.

With this story foregrounded, the clear meaning of this speech act is one of ideological betrayal. These individuals have been manipulated and seduced into selling out "the cause" and climbing into bed with the devil. They are "obviously" no longer part of "us" but have now "crossed over" and are with "them."

Moving around to the left of the diagram, this meaning then shapes how these individuals and groups talk and interact. The language of betrayal, and "us/them" polarizes the relationships and results in a new restructuring where they are no longer "one of us" but are forced into being "one of them." To the extent that talk is limited to the binary language and categories of government/opposition, Left/Right, Justice/Injustice, relationships continue to be defined by how each person located in one of these two groups. Communication breaks down, direct contact is minimized and distance between them expands as they are marginalized from spaces where they formally exercised leadership. This results in maintaining the binary world of "us" and "them" and thus reinforcing the narrative that gave rise to this meaning.

One possible story told from the voice of one of the individuals accepting the invitation to work with the government:

> "We live in a world characterized by situations of social injustice in which many have been oppressed and marginalized from political spaces where decisions are made about how society is to be structured and how resources are to be distributed. This has led to an imbalance of political and economic power that continues to sustain and perpetuate structures in which a few possess and maintain control over the vast majority of resources and decision-making power. Throughout history, groups have united around their concern for and identity with the marginalized and oppressed and have developed strategies for social change aimed at promoting a more just world in which all peoples enjoy equal opportunities for development and self-realization. Ultimately, achieving social change in a sustainable way depends upon gaining access to, and participating in the decision-making structures that influence public policy and legislation regarding education, health care, security, distribution of resources, etc. Such decision-making structures should consist of effective communication, collaboration and negotiation between the government institutions and organized expressions of civil society."
>
> "For years those of us committed to social justice have been marginalized and have had to work at change from outside the government. My commitment to the principles of social justice is clearly demonstrated in the leadership I assumed during the civil war when we felt obliged to engage in a confrontational relationship with the government in order to create space for our political participation. The newly elected government is the same government that years back we fought against in a bitter war in order to realize fundamental social change. Now, however, some of us are offered the opportunity to assume key positions of leadership within this government, precisely the kind of space we were fighting for years back. Loyalty to the cause of social justice is seen in the principles we espouse and actions we undertake. Loyalty is not defined by party affiliation, and one's identification with the oppressed and marginalized is not compromised by acts of collaboration, but by failure to do all one can, given the possibilities presented to bring about change, whether from within or outside government structure. How the world is arranged is ultimately political, thus working at change requires taking advantage of political space provided and does not exclude the possibility of continuing the struggle for change outside of the government."

The social world created in this narrative is a political world in which power must be shared by all in order to achieve equity and justice for all. To the extent imbalance exists, the struggle for social change becomes a struggle to balance power and open up opportunities for all to participate actively in decisions that affect them. Key language and categories used to articulate and understand reality tend to place more emphasis on methods, strategies and pragmatics rather than on identity and ideology. Core

categories include the concepts of government and civil society rather than ideological divisions of Right/Left. Change is ultimately political, not ideological.

Based on this narrative, the decision to accept leadership positions within the government is clearly a strategic move that reflects a continued deep commitment to the work of social change and is clearly congruent with actions of the past and one's sense of solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed. Moving into the left side of the diagram representing social interaction, it is possible that the way conversations develop may lead to a vision of ongoing collaboration as strategies are developed jointly to bring about social change both from within government as well as from outside expressions of civil society. The language and categories used in this narrative have the potential to bring people together and restructure the social world in a way that deconstructs the polarized reality of "us" against "them." It may hopefully foster a spirit of solidarity as each seeks to work in his/her respective way at dismantling systems of injustice and oppression and bringing about a new more desirable social world.

Example 3: Hiring a new Director

Speech act: In a transition process of nationalizing what has previously been a program of an international organization that works closely with government as well as civil society, a search process is designed to replace the international director with a national director. The selection process considered candidates from within the organization as well as outside the organization. The decision was made to hire a person from outside of the organization to become the new director.

One possible story told from the voice of an internal candidate not selected:

> From day one when I came into this organization, my efforts to show initiative and the contributions I have made have gone unrecognized. Decisions are made in closed circles and rewards given based more on relationships of friendship and being a part of the "inner social circle" rather than on initiative and true competence. Though the principles of a democratic culture within this organization are supposedly espoused by all, any efforts to show initiative or propose new thinking that is not aligned with the thinking of those in power is rewarded only with further marginalization. Advancement and recognition is only possible to the extent one is able to gain entry into the "inner circle" constituting the true power center of the organization.

The social world of this narrative is an unfair world characterized by those who are privileged by virtue of their membership in the "inner circle" and the rest who remain unjustly marginalized and unrecognized. It is an unfair world in which the marginalized enjoy little sense of agency or control, but rather are simply acted upon but others of privilege. It is a world in which one is victimized over and over again, in spite of all efforts to rise up.

Based on this narrative of victimization, the decision to hire another person from outside of the organization is yet another clear example of decisions based on preferential

treatment rather than on experience and competence. It is another clear indication that efforts within this organization to show initiative will remain unrecognized and undervalued. Talk in the hallways will focus on how unfair the decision-making processes are within this organization and will perpetuate the idea of "those who are privileged" and "the rest of us" who remain marginalized. This individual may loose interest in showing initiative and become more passive in the job. Communication with "those in power" (especially the new director who does not deserve this job according to this narrative) will become more passive-aggressive because of the perception of unfairness and the feeling of being a victim. Decrease in initiative and output in the job will result in even more likelihood of being "passed over" in future decisions, once again reinforcing the victimization narrative of the privileged and the marginalized.

Another possible story told from the voice of an internal candidate not selected:
Because of the nature of this organization and the political context in which it works, many decisions that need to be made must be treated with a high level of complexity. Any organization the seeks to serve both the interests of government and civil society must achieve and maintain a minimum level of credibility and enjoy a certain amount of trust in order to be seen as a legitimate service provider to the publics it serves. While I believe I have demonstrated the qualities and competencies necessary for the position of Director, I recognize that the image an organization has is largely influenced by who is at the helm. The credibility we have worked hard to gain with both the government as well as civil society sectors must not be sacrificed. While an argument can be made for hiring someone from within who understands fully and has contributed to the conceptual orientation of the organization, I can also understand that interests and needs of other national and international stakeholders outside the organization must also be considered. The social world portrayed in this narrative is a complex world that can not be reduced to simplistic divisions of fair and unfair, right and wrong decisions.

The meaning attributed to this speech act of hiring from the outside is a necessary decision based on careful analysis of all factors involved. While this person would have liked to have been chosen, this narrative allows him/her to assimilate and support the decision. Conversations would reflect a multiplicity of categories reflecting the complexity of living and working in what is ultimately a highly political context warranting the consideration of many different variables. Avoiding a dualistic narrative based on victimization, conversations in the hallways of this organization will probably foster positive relationships and a spirit of collaboration leading to more productive work environment. Perhaps, in the future his/her own productivity will be recognized and rewarded, thus reinforcing this narrative.

Having illustrated with the above examples how meaning is constructed in the stories we tell, I now turn to an exploration of some conceptual tools for analysis useful for exploring the construction of meaning.

Conceptual tools

Deconstruction: Examining our stories

If all meaning is constructed socially through the stories we tell, and not simply found as an essential property of experience, then the willingness, discipline and skill of identifying, explicating and deconstructing our own stories and the meanings we have come to take for granted becomes an important first step. Deconstruction consists of identifying many of the underlying assumptions in the meanings we ascribe to persons, things and happenings in the world. This tool consists of explicitly asking and reflecting on specific questions as a way of beginning to surface the narrative being foregrounded in the meanings ascribed to a specific speech act as well as then considering other narratives that might lead to other possible meanings. Some generic questions might include:

- How do I see, understand and characterize the world in which I live? How does the story I tell about the world shape the meaning I give to this speech act?
    - Identify the primary language and categories used in the telling of the story
- Why do I assume the world is the way I see it? What experiences have I chosen to foreground in my understanding of the world?
    - Identify key experiences that have shaped this view of the world
    - Identify and explore the way in which linkages drawn between these experiences have constituted one story and not another.
- How is the language and categories used shaping what is seen and unseen? How might changes in language and categories permit other things to be seen?
- What events and happenings have had to be excluded and forgotten because they didn't fit into the story being told?
    - Statistical analysis often involves connecting data points in a way that tells a story. Often, in the telling of this story, certain data points, referred to as "outliers" must be sacrificed in order to not corrupt or distort the predominant story. This question is a specific invitation to pay attention to the "outliers" that have had to be excluded in order to preserve coherence in the story being told.
- What other stories might be told?
    - How might past experiences (those emphasized in our story as well as the excluded or forgotten "outlier" experiences) be reconstructed in their linkages to form different stories?
- Which of the possible stories that can be told most favor the desired world into which we would like to move?

Serpentine model: Constructing the story

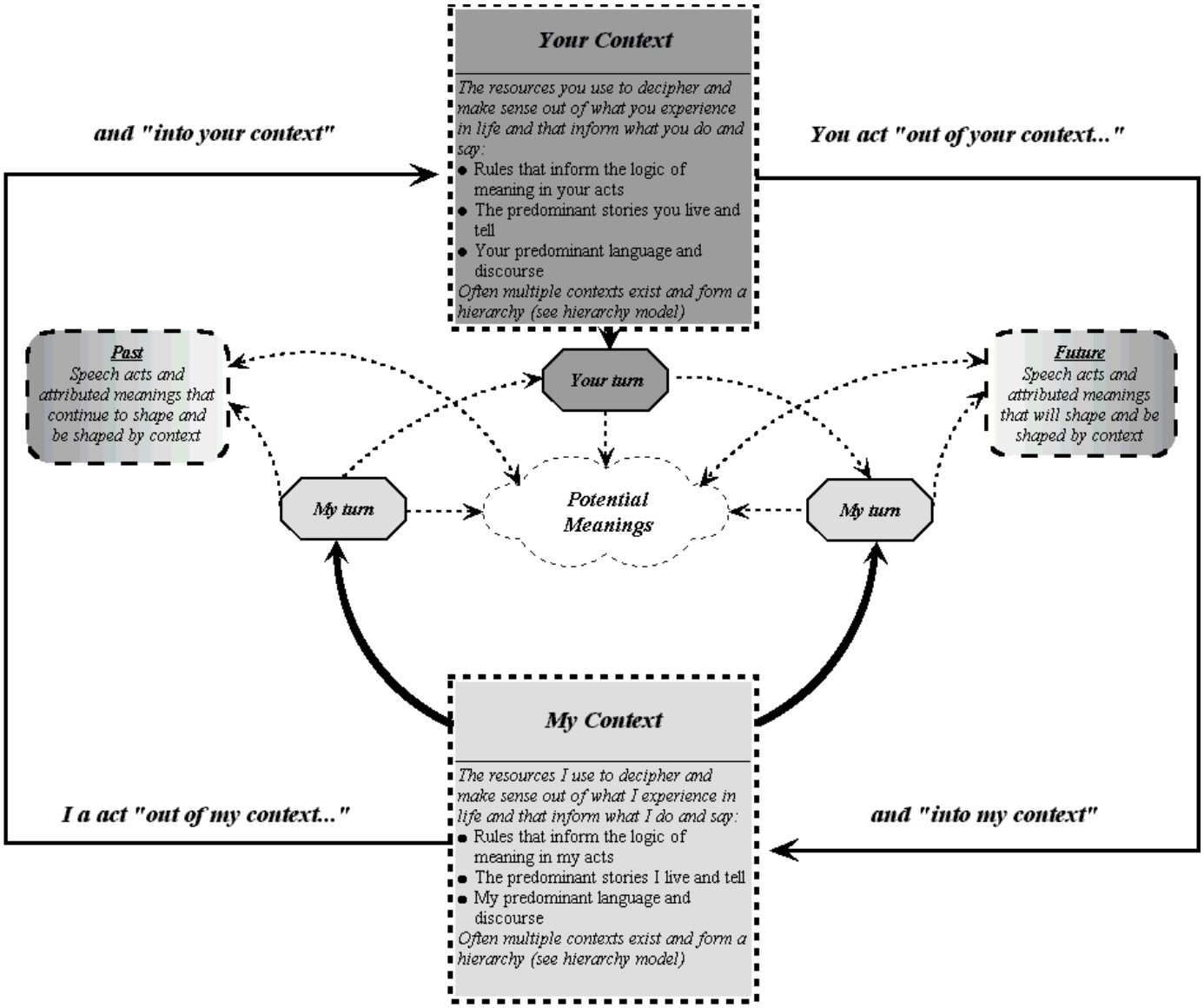
Because meaning is not embedded in acts themselves, it is never possible to fully control the meaning of what one does or says. The serpentine model, a tool emerging from the Coordinated Management of Meaning[1] communication theory, is one way of exploring the construction of meaning through the analysis of what is referred to as "conversational triplets." One acts or takes a "conversational turn" (does or says something) with a specific intention in mind. The meaning of that act is undetermined until the next conversational turn occurs in which a response is given to the first act. Thus, meaning is always a process of co-construction between those participating in the conversation[2]. For instance, in a first conversational turn, a man opens the car door for a woman with the intent of showing courtesy. In the second turn in the conversation, the woman responds by saying that she can open the door herself. In the next turn closing this conversational triplet, the man realizes that what for him was an act of courtesy was for her an act of machismo. He apologizes for the meaning constructed between those acts and will most likely no longer open the door for her. Let's modify this simple example to illustrate the challenge of coordinating meanings through the next conversational triplet. Rather than apologizing, the man explains to the woman that due to a problem in the door, it can only be opened from the outside. At this point, the woman's initial response to what for her indicated machismo is modified with an apology and she now gratefully allows him to open the door for her.

As the following diagram shows, all speech acts or "turns" in a conversation "come out of" a specific context and "enter into" another context. It is in this coming and going between contexts that meaning is constructed and re-constructed and the challenge of coordination is experienced. Context refers to the resources (narratives, dominant language and categories) one uses to organize and "make sense" out of what is experienced in life that then inform what one says and does. In the above example, the first act or conversational turn of opening the door for a woman comes from a context in which such an act is a sign of courtesy. The context of this woman into which this act enters ascribes to it a different meaning.

In the following diagram, the solid arrows refer to that which we control, namely what we do and what we say. The dotted arrows then illustrate that the meaning of what we do and said is not entirely under our control and never finished, but is always underdetermined due to the dynamic on-going process of turn-taking in the conversation.

[1] Pearce

[2] The concept of conversation here refers to any sequence of interactions between people, whether words spoken or actions taken.



Speech Act: ***Anything thing I say or do.***

The meaning of a speech act is never controlled by one party, but rather is co-constructed in the turn-taking process.

An Example

Negotiations without a table: A possible scenario

Conversational turn A

Representatives of the government arranges for a negotiation session with indigenous leaders by placing chairs in a circle without a table.

Context of Government Negotiators:
Government intentionally creates informal environment as a way to show cultural sensitivity and interest in fostering a comfortable environment in which to work collaborative to find good solutions.

Conversational turn B

Indigenous leaders ask why government decision-makers sent lower level representatives rather than participating directly in the negotiation

Context of Indigenous Leaders:
Physical arrangements of negotiation setting suggest lack of seriousness on the part of the Government. Thus, indigenous leaders seek to elevate seriousness of this negotiation by insisting in having the maximum decision-makers present before continuing

Conversational turn C

Government representatives quickly explain the decision-making structure and that they have been delegated and given authority to carry out these negotiations. They then move on to propose an agenda for the meeting and ask for feedback

Context of Government Negotiators:
The representatives choose to ignore the "antagonistic spirit" with which the indigenous leaders "typically" begin conversations and try to continue fostering a collaborative spirit by suggesting an agenda and asking for feedback.

Conversational turn D

The indigenous ignore the request for feedback on the agenda and instead ask what guaranties they have that agreements made will be taken seriously and implemented.

Context of Indigenous Leaders:
Indigenous leaders continue to perceive a paternalistic spirit on behalf of the Government by sending lower level representatives rather than those who had previously been in contact with these leaders and by arranging for such an informal environment, thus minimizing the seriousness of this negotiation. The quick explanation offered on behalf of the Government and then presuming to move on by proposing an agenda seems manipulative and takes us as naïve.

Conversational turn E

The very start of this negotiation will possibly be fraught with problems related to the difficulty of coordinating meanings of the actions of each party. While the Government representatives act "out of" a context which defines their actions as indicative of cultural sensitivity, goodwill and a collaborative spirit, these actions "enter into" a context that reads them as paternalistic gestures suggesting informality and a lack of seriousness given to the negotiation process on the part of the Government. The narratives of each party underlying the meanings ascribed to these conversational turns are beginning to construct a story about this negotiation for each party in which success is not possible due to a perceived lack of goodwill and seriousness on behalf of the other. Each operates with distinct "logics of meaning3" or rules used to decipher or make

[3] Pearce

sense out of the actions of other and inform how one is to respond. Like two individuals with different traditions and understandings of how to play Gin Rummy will struggle together until they successfully negotiate a common set of rules by which the card game is to be played, conversational turns in this negotiation will most likely yield frustration for both parties until they are able to understand the different contexts and logics of meaning out of which each is operating. This serpentine model is one tool that may help them pay closer attention to meanings being co-constructed in this coming and going between different contexts. This tool helps to visualize in an explicit way not only the intentions of each party but more importantly what is being constructed as a result of their interactions. Recognizing that one does not unilaterally control the meaning of his/her acts at first glance may seem disempowering. However, recognizing one's power to influence and shape the meaning of another's actions can be very empowering. For instance, an outburst of anger charged with toxic language may receive a counterattack thus joining with the first act to construct a bitter argument characterized be an exchange of insults. However, recognizing that the meaning of this initial outburst of anger remains undetermined until a response is given, one may choose to "listen to the wisdom in the whining4" and see this potential attack or insult as an invitation to explore more deeply the experience of other. A conversational turn in which one shows authentic "curiosity" of what Other is experiencing and responds to the outburst by employing deep listening skills has the potential of redirecting the energy of the first act and creating with Other an opportunity for deeper dialogue, rather than a bitter argument.

The serpentine model is a tool that helps make explicit how meaning is the dynamic result of a co-construction process. It's usefulness consists in helping parties be mindful not only of their own intentions but of other possible meanings that could be constructed and then develop strategies to more effectively coordinate with Other the management of these multiple meanings.

[4] Taken from an article written by Pearce….

Episodes[5]: Framing the story

The term "episode" refers a set of conversational turns or social exchanges of behavior (things said or things done) delimited in time with a clear beginning and end point. The meaning attributed to an episode depends upon the time frame used to establish its beginning and ending point. As the time frame expands or contracts, how one makes sense of "what is really going on" or the stories one tells about an episode also change. An episode could refer to a specific conversation around the dinner table, a phone call, or a single negotiation session. A marriage of 20 years, a negotiation process lasting ten years, or a war of 36 years can also be framed as a single episode. The use of episodes as an analytic tool is helpful in exploring different stories that can be told and how the meaning of social experience is shaped by time. The following diagram illustrates different ways of framing episodes, or as Barnett Pearce says "punctuating experience" and the different stories that may emerge. A couple examples are offered to illustrate the use of this tool.

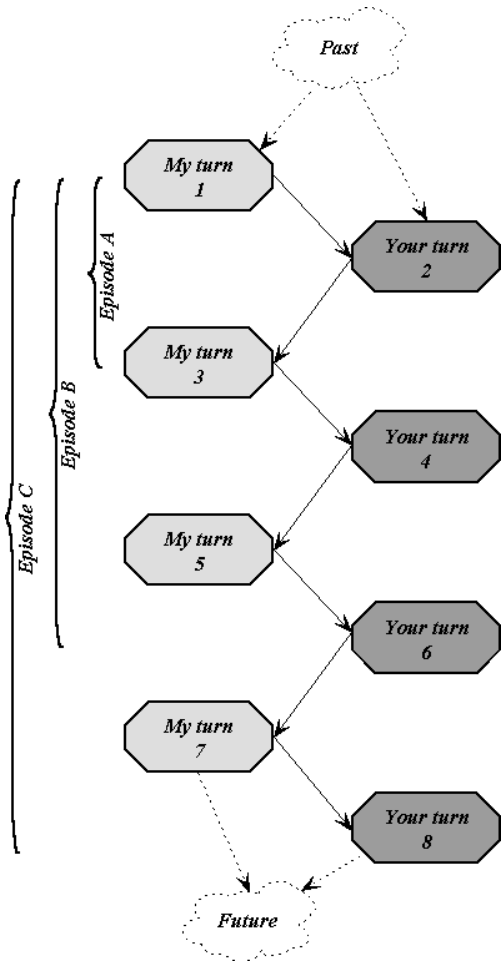
Example 1: The growth of a relationship

Episode "A" A couple frames a set of conversational turns in a recent conversation as an episode that constitutes a story of a bitter argument in which both stubbornly cling to their self-interests and show little concern for the needs and interests of the other, suggesting little hope for an on-going relationship.

Episode "B" The frame of this episode is enlarged to include future conversational turns in which apologies are offered and interest is expressed in listening more deeply to each other. Enlarging the episode to include these additional turns in conversation redefines what was previously marked as a bitter argument between two selfish individuals as a difficult discussion which led to deeper dialogue and mutual understanding around issues important to each of them.

Episode "C" Framing their last eight months together as an episode yields a story in which two people have endured moments of growing pains as their lives have continued to merge together. Locating future arguments within the larger episode of their relationship together may help this couple embrace these arguments as opportunities for new learning and growth, and prevent them from escalating into destructive conflicts.

[5] The concept of episodes as an analytic tool comes from the CMM theory of communication and is developed by Barnett Pearce Pearce, W. B. (1994). Interpersonal communication : making social worlds. New York NY, HarperCollinsCollegePublishers..



Example 2: Breaking off talks in order to more easily resume them in the future

Context: After eight months of facilitating delicate conversations back and forth between the high level government officials and representatives of civil society, both parties have agreed to meet and begin a dialogue process around ways in which land conflicts are being handled. The agreement between the parties was to explore in general terms more productive ways of addressing land conflicts that might reduce current levels of violence expressed in “land take-overs” or “invasions” and resulting “evictions.” These talks were not to be conceived of as negotiations in which specific cases would be discussed.

Episode “A” On the morning of the first day of talks, an article appears in the newspaper in which one of the representatives of civil society makes a public statement threatening the Government to either accept their demands regarding a specific high-profile land dispute in today’s negotiation or deal with the consequences. A government official responds by making a phone call to the facilitators and saying that they are unwilling to move ahead with the dialogue under continued conditions of manipulation. The statement in the newspaper constituted a conversational turn that was seen as a clear violation of the agreed upon ground rules and a coercive attempt to use this space created for dialogue to manipulate the Government. A process of eight months of careful facilitation between these parties is now jeopardized with this one

statement to the press. The conversational turns in this episode continues to reinforce the narratives of both parties that the other party is more interested in manipulation and shows no real interest in working collaboratively on these issues.

Episode "B" The facilitators speak with both parties and remind them of the time and energy invested in creating this opportunity for dialogue that both had come to perceive as a necessary and important step towards developing more productive ways of dealing with the issue of ongoing violence related to land conflicts. The facilitators learn that the statement released to the press was the sole act of one leader, and that the other representatives of civil society knew nothing about it. They express regret about this action and realize its possible consequences. The Government explains that the statement made public in the newspapers changes the meaning of what was agreed upon regarding the dialogue. While they remain interested in the dialogue, they must show publicly that they are unwilling to subject themselves to such manipulation. The decision to break off talks is a conversational turn that for them completes the meaning of episode A showing publicly their unwillingness to talk under conditions of manipulation. The facilitators help both parties "manage the meaning" of episode A as they negotiate how to break off dialogue in a way that communicates publicly the government's refusal to be manipulated while at the same time avoiding a complete rupture of all that had been accomplished over the past eight months. The parties agree to suspend talks for a period of one month and issue a press release on behalf of both parties explaining their mutual interest in taking more time to clarify the nature of the talks before moving forward. The conversational turns in episode A could have resulted in a complete rupture in a dialogue process that took eight months of negotiations between the parties to arrive at a design acceptable to all involved. The government could have easily interpreted the statement in the press as yet one more attempt to manipulate and sabotage positive efforts of the government. In contexts of high polarization, this would have fit well into the narrative the government tells about the opposition. In breaking off dialogue, the representatives of civil society (opposition) would have seen one more sign of the government's lack of goodwill and maneuvering to avoid dealing responsibly with key issues facing society. However, both parties were willing to think about the story they wanted to construct together and by locating the conversational turns in episode A within a larger episode that reflected on the past and anticipated the future, they were able to find an adequate response that dealt with the problem of the press and at the same time preserved the necessary conditions to resume talks in the near future.

Episode "C" After a month, another effort is made to bring the parties together to begin the dialogue. The session is successful and there is agreement to continue the dialogue process indefinitely as a way of promoting deeper mutual understanding between the parties and developing viable alternatives together for addressing these conflictive situations plaguing the country. Framed within this larger episode, the conversational turns of episode A are now remembered as an unfortunate mistake due to a problem of coordination among civil society leadership and a procedural failure of having not adequately defined rules regarding the parties' relationships and use of the press. The language of manipulation is no longer foregrounded.

Example 3: "9/11"

A conversational turn the world will not soon forget took place on September 11, 2001 when an attack was made on the United States that resulted in nearly 3000 deaths and the complete destruction of the "twin towers" in New York as well as significant damage to the Pentagon in Washington D.C. As illustrated with the serpentine model, the meaning of any one conversational turn is largely determined by the conversational turns that precede and follow it. Meaning is not statically embedded in the act but rather dynamically shaped by subsequent acts. Immediately following 9/11 many found themselves in a state of grief and confusion, unable to "make sense" out of what happened. Many waited to see how the Bush administration was going to respond. What the 9/11 attacks would come to mean for United States largely depended upon the response or conversational turn given by the Bush administration. While 9/11 will be remembered as a dark day of absolute tragedy and the evil slaughter of innocent lives, one's understanding of why it happened and how one should respond will depend upon the timeframe used to bracket this episode.

Episode "A" If these attacks are conceived of as entirely unprovoked, constituting a first conversational turn now awaiting a response, then the clear meaning of this event is a ruthless and evil attack by malicious terrorists that must now be "smoked out of the caves" and annihilated. As the episode closes with the United States quick and decisive counterattack against these terrorists, the events of September 11 come to mean a declaration of war against good and evil.

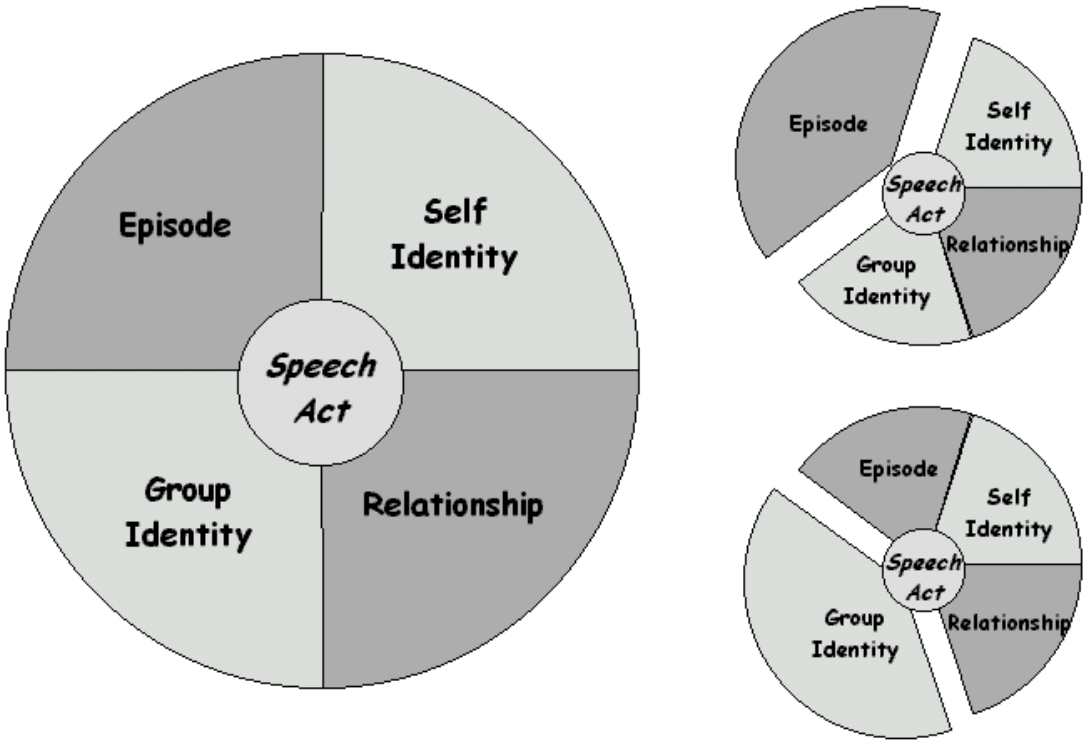
Episode "B" or "C" If the episode within which these attacks are located is enlarged to encompass the last several decades, then it is possible that quite a different understanding of 9/11 may emerge in terms of why it happened and how one should respond. These attacks, ruthless and malicious as they were, would be seen as yet another "turn" in an ongoing conversation or story of tense and hostile relations between the United States and parts of the Arab world. Enlarging the episode allows the possibility of looking for ongoing patterns of behavior rather than simply looking at and responding to isolated events. In this case, the tragic events of 9/11 might be seen as an invitation to carefully review the history and current state of affairs regarding the relationship between the United States and the Arab world and the effects US foreign policy has played in its development. In the aftermath of 9/11, it becomes particularly important to reflect upon the narratives each party has regarding self and other that continue to create and sustain a social world characterized by an ongoing pattern of violence. Hopefully, as each party decides its next turn in this conversation, each first reflects upon the following questions: 1) In what way will our response open up the possibility of breaking this pattern of violence in order to co-author another narrative capable of creating a more desirable social world? 2) In what way will our response follow the well-scripted and predictable narrative and thus serve only to perpetuate the ongoing pattern of violence? Much like the above example where the Government felt obligated to break off talks, but did so in a way that made resuming them easier in the future, the challenge faced by the Bush Administration was finding an adequate response that communicated intolerance for such a reproachable act as 9/11 as well as clear interest and willingness to challenge the core narratives sustaining this undesirable relationship by acting in an unpredictable way capable of changing this conversation of violence into a new kind of conversation.

The meaning of decisions made and events that take place are largely dependent upon the timeframe within which they are located. This tool provides a useful way of exploring different meanings by explicitly "punctuating" or altering how things are framed. No act occurs in a vacuum, but is always preceded and followed by a multitude of other conversations. Being mindful of these other conversations and "looking at the big picture" will often allow one to recognize patterns that remain invisible to the eye focused exclusively on isolated events. Imagining the trajectory of one's actions and reflecting explicitly on what kind of episode is being constructed over time will serve as a helpful guide for anyone seeking to act proactively to improve our social worlds. Consider the wisdom of some indigenous groups where leadership is expected to think in terms of 7 generations prior to making any decision, reflecting both retrospectively as well as into the future. Elise Boulding laments the fact that for many, the temporal concept of "the present" tends to refer to minutes, hours or perhaps a day. She imagines how things might be if we operated on the basis of a "200 year present." Imagine a CNN broadcast covering the 9/11 story, and the meaning that would be attributed to these "current events" if the story was framed within a single episode covering a 200-year period.

Hierarchy: Privileging one context or story over others

I have already suggested that all speech acts come "out of a context" and "enter into" a context and it is these contexts that shape the meanings attributed to these acts. The hierarchy model (Pearce 1994) as a conceptual tool recognizes the multiple contexts that may be present with any speech act, and is useful for analyzing how meaning changes as one context is foregrounded over others. For instance, playing tennis (or any other competitive game) with my older brother has always been an experience causing mixed or ambiguous feelings within me. On a good day when I would win several games back to back (this would happen very rarely) I would begin to feel uncomfortable and decide to apply less effort and allow him to win. He, on the other hand, would show no difficulty or discomfort (certainly no mercy) in "skunking" me in every game. The hierarchy model helps to illustrate how the game of tennis meant different things to each of us. For him, the episode itself (game of tennis) was foregrounded and the goal of winning guiding his actions. My actions, on the other hand, were more determined by my concern for our relationship. Somehow, excessive winning created the fear within me of causing humiliation for my older brother which might then damage our relationship. While my actions were largely informed by the context of our relationship or the story I tell about what it means to be in relationship with him, his actions were rooted in a story about what it means to successfully play the game of tennis. This does not mean that our relationship was unimportant to him or that winning the game was unimportant to me, but rather the contexts from which we played the game were weighted differently.

The following diagram illustrates four different contexts that may be present in a multiparty negotiation process. The meaning of what the parties do and say in the negotiation will depend upon the weight given to each of the different contexts present. The interests and needs a party in the negotiation is trying to satisfy emerge from the context being foregrounded. Consider the example cited previously of a negotiation session between representatives of the government and indigenous leaders where different meanings were attributed to the decision not to use a table. In determining which contexts are being foregrounded, it is helpful to ask the question, what is one trying to "do" or "create" in the speech act taken. The government made the unilateral decision to remove the table thinking that this display of cultural sensitivity and informality would help establish a positive tone for the negotiation session. The context foregrounded for them is the episode itself of the negotiation session. For the indigenous leaders, the informality expressed in the absence of a table seemed to communicate more about how indigenous are treated by the government in general then it did about the negotiation session itself. Group identity is foregrounded and becomes the context into which the speech act is received and understood. In the conversation illustrating the serpentine model, the conversational turns made by the government appear to remain lodged in the episode, making every effort to "get on" with the negotiation. The indigenous continue to privilege the context of their own group identity as they understand and respond to what is going on in the negotiation.



More information about this negotiation might suggest other ways of understanding what is going on between these parties. For instance, it is possible that one of the negotiators sees himself as a long time advocate and leader for the indigenous. He may foreground the story he tells about himself (context of self identity) and act in ways that will preserve this story, even at the expense of jeopardizing the negotiation (episode). Words and actions in a negotiation may be more directed outwards towards one's constituents in order to preserve one's image as leader, than at the parties themselves in the negotiation.

An example of foregrounding the context of relationship is where how one understands what is going on in the negotiation and how one acts is informed by the dynamics of friendship or animosity with another in the table. Privileging this context or the story one tells about the relationship with Other may lead to excessive stubbornness and hostility or excessive concessions, with little regard given to the outcome of the negotiation or episode itself.

Consider the example cited above where a long-time member of the opposition accepted the invitation to assume a leadership position within the newly elected government. Turns in a conversation about whether or not one should accept this invitation may indicate different contexts being foregrounded. Betrayal may make sense if one chooses to foreground the context of group identity and the story told about what it means to remain loyal to the opposition. However, loyalty may take on a different meaning when privileging the context of self identity and the story told about what it means to remain true to one's principles and the cause for which one has fought for many years. Acting antagonistically and marginalizing the one opting to work within the government may mean something different if one is operating primarily from the

context of relationship. Though expressed in terms of loyalty and betrayal to the party, one's acts may be more informed by opportunistic jealousy, or a sense of losing a friendship marked by years of surviving the trenches together. The meaning of what one says and does depends upon the contexts or stories being privileged.

In the example of hiring a new director from outside the organization, the discontentment expressed by an internal candidate for the same position could understood within the story he tells about himself as perpetual victim of marginalization. By foreground the context of self, not being selected serves to reinforce this narrative and justify his belief that this act was less about the episode or selecting the right person, and more about him as person. Work place conflicts often arise as decision-makers struggle between foregrounding the context of self (wanting to maintain an image of effective leader), relationship (wanting to foster healthy and harmonious relationships with others), and episode (making the right decision warranted by the situation). Each of these contexts involve potentially different stories or ways in which one explains or understands the meaning of one's actions.

The hierarchy model is a complementary tool to other conceptual tools discussed here. It is useful for considering the different stories or contexts that may be shaping meaning given to speech acts. Because meaning is ultimately co-constructed in the coming and going between different contexts, achieving tighter coordination in the meaning-making process will require understanding more fully the contexts out of which each is operating.

I have discussed how meaning is constructed through the stories we tell and have offered some conceptual tools that facilitate analysis of this meaning-making process. I end this paper by offering some concrete ideas about how to incorporate these concepts and tools in a process of preparing parties for what I am calling "dialogic negotiation."

From Interest-based to Dialogic Negotiations: Some Beginning thoughts

Over the past several decades, much literature has been produced around what has come to be known as "interest-based negotiation" made popular by the book Getting to Yes (Fisher and Ury 1981). This is a way of working together to negotiate and resolve differences that focuses on identifying and exploring the underlying interests and needs each party has that must be satisfied in order to produce "win/win" solutions. While this is a very useful way of approaching specific negotiations, the techniques and tools of interest-based negotiation may be inadequate in situations characterized by high levels of social polarization. In such situations, understanding and working effectively with the interests and needs of the parties will depend upon the extent in which the one understands the contexts and narratives from which these interests and needs arise.

I now offer some beginning thoughts about how to move beyond interest-based negotiations to what I am calling "dialogic negotiations" or narrative-based negotiations. This is a form of negotiation rooted in social constructionist theory that seeks to explicitly incorporate and amplify the dimension of dialogue as a prerequisite for understanding the different social worlds out of which the needs and interests of negotiating parties arise. It is a hybrid process drawing from and integrating conceptual tools from what have generally remained two separate bodies of theory and practice, dialogue and negotiation. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to more fully develop this concept of dialogic negotiation, I wanted to at least introduce this term as a way of naming the kind of process I sketch out below that begins to illustrate how social constructionist theory and the conceptual tools presented in this paper might inform the design of a negotiation or dialogue process.

Dialogue refers to a process in which one actively seeks to understand more deeply the world of Other while at the same time, helping Other understand his/her own world. What happens in dialogue has been metaphorically likened to walking along a narrow ridge where care is taken to avoid falling on either side of the ridge, maintaining a balance between embracing one's own perspective[6] and at the same time remaining profoundly open to listen to and understand the perspective of Other. Dialogic negotiation recognizes that in situations of extreme polarization, interdependent parties needing to negotiate substantive matters of mutual concern often live in different social worlds; the language and categories they use and the stories they tell in order to "make sense" of their world are different. Effectively negotiating for social change will depend upon a process that recognizes these differences and helps parties enter into and begin to understand the how each "makes sense" in their respective social worlds. To the extent this is achieved, the parties will be more able to coordinate the meanings of their conversational turns within the negotiation in a way that not only leads more sustainable agreements but more importantly transforms the social worlds of each.

[6] By "perspective" I do not mean to imply the presence of a true external reality which is simply viewed from different angles, since I have discussed how reality is socially constructed. Here, perspective refers to the narratives one tells as a way of making sense of reality.

Let me share an anecdote taken from El Salvador that illustrates in part the kind of transformation brought about by what I am calling dialogic negotiations. During the first half of the 90's, American Friends Service Committee invited my good friend and colleague, Sandra Dunsmore, to offer support to some of the peace-building initiatives in El Salvador. One of the initiatives involved facilitating a process aimed at bringing union leaders (with close ties to the FMLN armed revolutionary forces) and business leaders (tied closely with the Government and military forces) together to talk about labor-management relationships and issues. During this time the relationship between the unions and business sector were extremely polarized, marked by frequent episodes of protests and strikes resulting in violent confrontations between workers and police or military forces. Characteristic of the Quaker way of working, rather than opting for a high-profile formal process made public by involving the press, Sandra worked intentionally at designing an informal and low-profile (behind closed doors) process of bringing these leaders together. She invited these leaders into the privacy of her own home with the hope that this context might create the opportunity for new kinds of conversations to occur between these parties that had not previously existed. In addition to serving food and drink, Sandra would ask questions with the intent of shaping the conversations so that the parties would be willing to tell and listen to stories about how they each experienced their respective realities. Early in the process, the stories told and language used suggested a clear and unambiguous reality in which Other is dehumanized and viewed as the enemy to be defeated at all costs. Later in the process, a specific event happened which seemed to suggest that these conversations had the effect of changing the narrative one of the participants told about Other. One of the prominent business leaders participating in these conversations was watching live coverage on the TV where members of the police force were beating a union leader during a strike. Upon recognizing the union leader as Juan[7] (one of the individuals he had come to know in these conversations) he immediately picked up the phone to call Sandra and expressed his outrage at how the police were beating him, exclaiming that is wrong! As this business leader reflected on this experience, he shared that prior to participating in these conversations with union leaders, he would see leaders such as these being beaten in the process of interrupting a strike and think to himself "that's just what those bastards deserve."

While interest-based negotiations begin with an exploration of the underlying interests and needs of the parties, dialogic negotiation or narrative-based negotiation places emphasis on the importance of exploring the very stories and language that constitute the parties' underlying paradigms or meaning-making structures that give rise to the interests and needs as defined by the parties. It is a process that helps the parties to: 1) become conscious of and make explicit their own stories that shaped their paradigm or way of making sense their experiences in the world; 2) become profoundly open to listening to and understanding other stories, and thus other ways of making sense of experience; and 3) find ways to expand and enrich the stories told in ways that move all parties closer to their desired social worlds. Kuhn (1996) says that as one's paradigm changes, the world in which one lives also changes. Conversations between business and union leaders where opportunity was created to listen and explore the stories of

[7] Name is fictitious

each other affected one business leader in such a way that his own core narrative was changed. While he previously lived in a world where the "bastards got what they deserved" he now lives in a world where such behavior is wrong, regardless of who the perpetrator is. This change gave rise to new interests and needs that for him did not previously exist. For instance, he now expresses an interest in finding ways of humanizing procedures for dealing with conflicts between labor and management.

Application: Tips for action

I offer the following ideas as ways of preparing parties for a process of dialogic negotiation using the concepts and tools presented in this paper. These recommendations assume a context of high social polarization between interdependent parties that perceive a need for change.

Prior to bringing together polarized groups in efforts to promote dialogue and facilitate negotiate, I suggest the importance of working internally in each of the groups to prepare minimum conditions necessary for productive and meaning-ful dialogue between the groups. The aim of this internal work is to begin cultivating what I am calling an ethic of curiosity within the groups where each begins to recognize and open themselves up to the possibility of multiple perspectives.

I began this paper saying that pure, immaculate perception is not a possibility. All observation is necessarily shaped by predetermined concepts and ideas already embedded in the language we use. In a similar fashion, I suggest we do not encounter other people from an entirely neutral position where they start off as "blank slates." In every encounter, the accumulation of our life experiences and the stories we carry within us influence how we come to know others. I have long hair. As people first meet me, the ponytail immediately conjures up in their minds a certain perception as to what kind of person I am. Though often a subconscious process, they already begin telling a story about who I am. Further contact with me may reinforce or modify this original story, but the point of departure for a beginning relationship is never entirely neutral. There is no knowing outside of perception and as shown, perception is never entirely virgin. Who I am to others emerges not as an essential property of myself, but rather is constructed in the stories that are formed about me and the relationship we forge together.

In situations of polarization, the stories groups have about the Other are well developed and tend to become fixed. They come to believe they know very well exactly who Other is and what Other is like. They believe that Other *is* exactly as they see and experience Other. As discussed earlier, in order for the story to remain coherent, all actions and experiences of Other must be made to fit the story, and in so doing the image of Other is continues to be reinforced. So, for instance, in Guatemala following the peace accords, even if the Government made small steps towards honoring the accords, the opposition would always criticize the Government for having no political will to comply with agreements and whatever good it did was simply for utilitarian purposes to manipulate the populations and win support for the next elections. Within the story of the opposition, it simply is not conceivable that the Guatemalan Government would do good. It is driven by the interests of the wealthy and has absolutely no regard for the needs of the Guatemalan people. The meanings attributed to Other become

absolute, the story unquestioned.

In preparing groups for dialogic negotiation, an important goal is to cultivate a spirit of curiosity in which groups become not only curious about their own stories that have shaped their experience of Other, but also become curious as to the stories of Other that have shaped Other's experience of them. Another important goal is simply helping groups realize the degree to which they depend upon Other for achieving their goals. Emphasizing the interdependence that exists between the groups may aid in softening positions and promoting an image of dialogic negotiation as an opportunity or joint venture in which both come together to co-author the future they both desire. Work within the groups could involve the following elements:

1. Education and Awareness-raising

As I said earlier, in highly polarized situations of conflict, parties tend to become convinced that reality is just as they see it. The stories they tell about Other consolidate into what for them becomes absolute truth. Though they lament the situation and desire change, their view of Other often causes them to be reluctant to engage Other in dialogue or negotiation. In fact, conversations with anyone who does not share their same story and view of reality becomes difficult. Third parties desiring to intervene must often first struggle to gain entry and earn sufficient credibility with the parties in order to explore with them ways of addressing the situation and the changes they desire. The use of training workshops can often be an effective way gaining entry with the parties. While they may be reluctant to open up and begin exploring the situation directly with others who do not share their story or vision of how things are, they may be willing to participate in an activity that offers them the opportunity to strengthen their own skills for dealing with the situation. Trainings offer a safe environment where parties can explore new skills and concepts and begin applying them to their own conflicts through case study analysis, simulations and other participatory exercises. Since the purpose of the trainings is to learn new skills and not to deal directly with the conflict, participants are much more willing to use their own realities as a way of practicing and validating the skills learned.
One of the goals of this training is to stimulate a spirit and ethic of curiosity that will create an interest and willingness in the parties to begin exploring how their view of reality has been shaped by the stories they tell. The use of humor, brain-teasers, perception puzzles, magic and other participatory exercises are useful for illustrating how multiple meanings can be constructed and attributed to a single experience. Introducing the participants to the concepts and tools presented in this paper will enable them to begin playing with different ways of understanding their experience with Other and perhaps encourage them to consider the usefulness of engaging Other in a process of dialogic negotiation.

2. Tell our story (make it explicit, become aware of it)

Because parties are often unaware of the stories they tell and the rules and assumptions they have, an important step is helping them become conscious of and make explicit these implicit forces that shape how they understand their experience with Other. Through individual interviews or reflection workshops with groups, one can help parties begin to tell their stories and make explicit how these stories have shaped their

experience with Other. Working with groups in reflection workshops or group interviews offers the advantage of allowing parties to discover unexpected differences in the stories told. The following are some of the questions that might be used help the parties tell and begin to interpret their stories.

- What is going on between us and Other?
- Who are we in this story, what role are we playing?
- Why are we playing this role, what are we trying to accomplish?
- Who is Other in this story, what role is Other playing?
- Why is Other playing this role, what is Other trying to accomplish?
- When did our relationship with Other begin?
- Why are we in conflict with Other?
- Why is Other in conflict with us?

Remember, these groups are homogenous groups who supposedly share a common story about Other. One way of working more intentionally at discovering differences in how the stories are told would be to use these same questions, but within the group ask one participant how another in the group would respond to the questions. For example, ask Mary how John would answer the question "who is Other and what role is Other playing?" with John present and hearing her response. This allows the group to see how their own perceptions of each other and the stories they tell are not as identical as often presumed.

3. Deconstruct our story: Become curious!

Once the story (or stories) has been told and made explicit, invite the group to embrace a spirit of curiosity and begin looking at the underlying assumptions as a way of beginning a process of deconstruction. Some guiding questions might include:

- How do we see, understand and characterize the world in which we live?
- Why do we assume the world is the way we see it? What experiences have we chosen to foreground in coming to this assumption?
- What is the primary language and set of categories have we used to make sense of and explain our experience? What other language and categories might be used to produce a different story about our experience?
- How has the story we tell about the world shaped how we understand and explain our experience with Other?
- What experiences with Other we have chosen to foreground in order to tell this story, and not another?
- How has the way in which we have causally linked and framed experiences in time allowed us to tell one story, and not another?
- What events or happenings have had to be excluded and forgotten because they did not fit into the story being told? What are the "outliers?"

The process of analysis and deconstruction of the group's own story can be enriched by asking them to respond to these same questions, but from the perspective of Other. And yet another twist would be asking them to imagine how Other thinks they would respond to these questions. Episodic analysis and the hierarchy model presented earlier are useful tools as parties explore different ways of making sense of their experiences.

4. Enrich our story: How else might the story be told

A final step in preparing the parties to enter into dialogue with Other would be to invite them to consider other possible stories that might be told that offer new ways of enriching how they understand their own experience with Other. The point is not to deny the legitimacy of their own story, but to open themselves up to the possibility of multiple perspectives. As Einstein once said, "it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain new ideas without having to accept them." Again, the idea is to promote a spirit of curiosity within the group that allows them to begin playing with the possibility of multiple meanings. Questions to guide reflection here would include:

- What might be two other stories or possible ways of "reading" or explaining a specific experience with Other?
- How might our understanding of our experience with Other change as we expand or contract the timeframe used to tell the story? (episode analysis)
- What stories might arise if we chose to pay more attention to and foreground the "outliers" or specific experiences that have been discarded as anomalies to our current story?
- Regarding our relationship with Other, what is the story we most desire to live and tell? Is this a story that Other would wish to "co-author" with us? How has the meaning attributed to our actions contributed to or blocked this story? (serpentine model)
- How can we now act in ways that move us towards that story. What do we need and what would Other need in order to work effectively at co-authoring this story?

This process of working internally with each of the parties at understanding the way in which reality is shaped by the stories told will hopefully foster within them an ethic of curiosity and a desire to engage Other dialogically.

Conclusion

I began this paper showing how all perception of reality is shaped by predetermined categories of language and the stories we tell. I offered the formula $E_{xperience} + L_{anguage}$ and $N_{arrative} = M_{eaning}$ suggesting that meaning is not embedded in experience itself, but is socially constructed through our language and stories. A diagram was presented to illustrate this process of social construction and how narratives and language are used to attribute meaning to experience and how meaning attributed to experience circles back to further shape language and stories. Examples were offered illustrating this process and the problems that emerge as experience is filtered through different narratives. Conceptual tools useful for analyzing the way meanings are constructed and the common problem of coordinating these meanings particularly in situations of conflict. Finally, I offered some beginning thoughts about how to use these concepts and tools in a way that moves us beyond interest-based negotiation to what I referred to as dialogic negotiations which focuses on the meaning-making narratives out of which needs and interests arise.

One may ask: If multiple stories can be told, and thus different meanings attributed to specific events and happenings in the world, then how shall we know which story or meaning is closer to the truth? As understandable as this question is, given the degree in which we have been saturated with the positivist paradigm, it is a question that looses relevance as we abandon the old paradigm. The more important question becomes which of all the possible stories that can be told carry the greatest potential of allowing us to "get on" in life?

I entitled this paper "Toward an Ethic of Curiosity" because of the important role curiosity can play in highly polarized contexts where the "truths" that emerge from the stories parties tell tend to become absolute. Though I have used the phrase "spirit of curiosity" and "ethic of curiosity" interchangeably throughout the paper, I want to close by placing greater importance on the idea of curiosity as an ethic to suggest a moral responsibility interdependent parties have to understand that there are multiple ways of understanding and "making" sense of the social worlds in which we live. This does not mean blindly giving the benefit of the doubt to Other and simply accepting situations marked by injustice in which certain narratives and "truths" dominate over others. By suggesting that there are multiple ways of "making" sense and explaining social reality, I do not mean to suggest that all is relative and thus, to each his or her own truth. Unjust worlds have been created and unfortunately abound where some are privileged beyond measure while others remain marginalized, if not directly trampled upon. The call to become curious is a call to first ask how such worlds have been and continue to be created and sustained.

If we assume that all people are born into and grow up in the same social reality, are exposed to and formed by the same narratives, follow the same rules and logics of meaning – if all people "make" sense of their world the same way, then it is easier to conclude that we live in a world of good and evil people. Those who oppress and impose their narrative on others do so knowingly and with malice in order to sustain and increase their status and privilege. They are the bad people and those who seek to change this reality are the good people. Our world remains polarized and shaped by the binary categories used to understand and group ourselves as human beings: just/unjust, oppressed/oppressor, victim/perpetrator, powerless/powerful, poor/rich, good/bad.

If, on the other hand, individuals are born into and grow up in contexts shaped by very different narratives and governed by different rules and logics of meaning, then they will understand and explain the world differently. If we assume this, we must recognize that the world is complex and does not lend itself to the simplistic set of binary categories mentioned above. This paper is based on a vision of the world as complex and consisting of multiple social worlds or ways of understanding and explaining social reality. Often, inequality, discrimination and violence emerge as interdependent social worlds collide and each tries to change the world based on his or her own understanding of it, without endeavoring to understand how others make sense of the same reality. I believe that deep and lasting change is only possible to the extent that interdependent parties are willing to engage in dialogic negotiation where each embraces his or her own understanding of the world while at the same time becoming

profoundly open to understanding the world of Other. Understanding does not mean nor require accepting the social world of Other, but to the extent parties are interdependent, it does mean joining with Other to co-author, or locally negotiate a shared world that is desirable to both. No doubt, joining together in a process of "reauthoring our lives together" will require tremendous humility, tenacity, creativity, patience, hope and courage. For facilitators of dialogue processes it will require remaining vigilant not only to process issues, but to how meaning itself is being created and helping parties develop a prowess for acting and responding in ways that guide the meaning-making process towards the social worlds desired.

Bibliography

Associates, P. (1999). Using CMM: The Coordinated Management of Meaning.

Barrett, F. J., G. F. Thomas, et al. (1995). "The Central Role of Discourse in Large-Scale Change: A Social Construction Perspective." Journal of Applied Behavioral Science **31**(3): 352-372.

Bohm, D. and L. Nichol (1996). On dialogue. London ; New York, Routledge.

Boulding, E. and K. E. Boulding (1995). The future : images and processes. Thousand Oaks Calif, Sage Publications.

Cecchin, G. (1992). Constructing Therapeutic Possibilities. Therapy as Social Construction. S. McNamee and K. J. Gergen. London, Sage**:** 86-95.

Cooperrider, D. L., F. J. Barrett, et al. (1995). Social Construction and Appreciative Inquiry: A Journey in Organizational Theory. Management and Organization: Relational Alternatives to Individualism. D.-M. Hosking, P. Dachler and K. J. Gergen, Avebury Press.

Fisher, R. and W. Ury (1981). Getting to yes : negotiating agreement without giving in. Boston, Houghton Mifflin.

Gergen, K. J. (1994). Realities and relationships : soundings in social construction. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

Gergen, K. J. (1995). Social Construction and the Transformation of Identity Politics. New School for Social Research Symposium.

Gergen, K. J. (1999). An invitation to social construction. London, Sage.

Gergen, K. J., S. McNamee, et al. "Toward Transformative Dialogue." International Journal of Organization Theory and Behavior.

Gergen, K. J. and T. J. Thatchenkery (1996). "Developing dialogue for discerning differences." Journal of Applied Behavioral Science **32**(4): 6.

Glendon, M. A. (1991). Rights talk : the impoverishment of political discourse. New York ; Toronto, Free Press.

Kuhn, T. S. (1996). The structure of scientific revolutions. Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press.

Pearce, W. B. (1989). Communication and the human condition. Carbondale, IL, Southern Illinois University Press.

Pearce, W. B. (1994). Interpersonal communication : making social worlds. New York NY, HarperCollinsCollegePublishers.

Pearce, W. B. and S. W. Littlejohn (1997). Moral conflict : when social worlds collide. Thousand Oaks Calif, Sage Publications.

Pearce, W. B. and K. A. Pearce "Listening for the Wisdom in the Public's Whining or

Working to construct better patterns of public communication: A description and some

reflections on "the cupertino community project: voices and visiones".".

Pearce, W. B. and K. A. Pearce (2000). “Extending the theory of the coordinated management of meaning ("CMM") through a community dialogue process.” Communication Theory **10**: 405-423.

Pearce, W. B. and K. A. Pearce (2001). “The Public Dialogue Consortium's School-Wide Dialogue Process: A Communication Approach to Develop Citizenship Skills and Enhance School Climate.” Communication Theory **11**.

Pearce, W. B. and K. A. Pearce (2002 Unpublished as of yet). Taking a Communication Perspective on Dialogue**:** 15.

Sampson, E. E. (1993). Celebrating the other : a dialogic account of human nature. New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Sarbin, T. R. (1986). Narrative psychology : the storied nature of human conduct. New York, Praeger.

Sarbin, T. R. and K. E. Scheibe (1983). Studies in social identity. New York, N.Y., Praeger.

Spano, S. J. (2001). Public dialogue and participatory democracy : the Cupertino community project. Cresskill NJ, Hampton Press.