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## MAKING SOCIAL WORLDS BETTER: TOWARD A GRAMMAR OF WAYS OF WORKING THAT IMPROVE SITUATIONS

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A friend exclaimed, “What a wonderful world! Water falls out of the sky; food grows right out of the ground; and we get to keep all the love that we can make!”<sup>1</sup> In less exuberant terms, Richard Rorty described our social worlds as largely “contingent” and the quality of our lives determined by the consequences of our collective actions.<sup>2</sup> And so the question is, what kind of world are we making? What kind of world can we make?

Perhaps there was a time in which predators (the cave bear?), competitors (Neanderthals?) or cataclysms (the Flood?) threatened humankind (the species, not just an individual), but we have become the dominant life form on the planet and – within some broad limits – the collective authors of our own fate. The greatest threats we face, as well as our greatest opportunities, are the products of our own ingenuity, initiatives and actions. Among other things, this implies a dramatic shift from the technical question of “will we survive?” to the aesthetic and moral questions of “how well can we live?” and “how can we live well?”

Dennis Rivers’ comment about keeping all the love that we can make can be expanded. Not only do we get to keep “love,” we also get to keep honor, trust, respect, joy, beauty, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and goodness. But if we make something else, we have to keep it and live within it as well. History is -- sadly, perplexingly -- filled with the social construction of violence, hatred, deception, abuse, meanness, self-centeredness, and evil. Just to make the point:

- The most dangerous animal that virtually any one of us will confront in our lives is another human being. And to make matters worse, we will probably know them. On the basis of statistics, if we are murdered, beaten, or threatened, it will probably be by a member of our family or someone we know, not the stranger that we fear and mistrust. If we are, collectively, the artists who “make” our social worlds, what does this say about our artistry?
- Millions of people, most of them children, will go to sleep tonight malnourished and hungry. This fact moves us from one moral category to another when we realize that there is plenty of food

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Rivers, personal conversation. Ironically, Dennis did not remember making this statement when I quoted it back to him, but it fits his commitment to improving the world in which he lives. He has founded the Institute for Cooperative Communication Skills (<http://www.coopcomm.org>).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Note: I think Rorty’s treatment of “contingency” is great, but as the rest of this paper shows, I do not follow his lead on “irony” and “solidarity.”

available even though the world's human population has increased tremendously in the past half century. What kind of social world are we making when the government of the United States pays farmers not to produce food when there are hungry children?

- It is possible (or even highly probable, if you expand the time frame by millions of years) that an object from space will hit the earth and bring about the same kind of cataclysm that we are beginning to believe ended the dinosaurs' existence. But the far more immediate threat is from the consequences of human action: war, climatic change (global warming), class war between the have's and have not's,<sup>3</sup> and disease related to social behavior (AIDS; drug abuse and its consequences). What implications should we draw from this?

I just finished writing a paper titled "Making Better Social Worlds" in which I posed some questions and offered some ideas about the abilities involved in the making of "better" social worlds.<sup>4</sup> But we do not usually (or perhaps ever) get to start making our social worlds from "scratch." We are not like an artist poised before a blank canvass; our condition is more like that of a member of an athletic team (I'm thinking of soccer at the moment) who has to decided what to do in conditions created by the position of the ball, the movements of all the other players, and the state of play in the game at the moment. Moving from the analogy: We are all born into roles we did not choose, we live in social institutions we did not create and we – though we may influence them – we cannot control, and we interact with others who – similarly shaped by their own histories – may have quite different motives and worldviews than ours. Often we find ourselves in situations far from "wonderful" and our task is not that of creating the best imaginable social world but that of repairing or doing "damage-control" in situations far from what we would desire. That is, our task is often making the social worlds that we find ourselves in better than they are.

I'm excited by the amount of creativity that has been focused on just this task. One of the accomplishments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been the development of whole new professions and ways of working designed to intervene constructively in situations confronting individuals, organizations, and society at large. I'm thinking of the many schools of therapy; the practices of mediation, arbitration and reconciliation; negotiation; consultation; Organizational Development; and both large and small group leadership and facilitation. Using the period from the year 1900 to 2000 as an interval, we have come a very long way.

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<sup>3</sup> This is one of the scenarios based on current trends. See Allen Hammond, Which World? Scenarios for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Washington, D. C.: Island Press, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> W. Barnett Pearce, "Making Better Social Worlds," unpublished paper, 2001. That paper focused on viewing the events and objects of the social world as "made," incorporating the notion that instrumental and aesthetic dimensions of life are intricately intertwined, and reflecting on the abilities needed to make social worlds in which we would want to live. This paper is available on request from the author ([wbpearce@worldnet.att.net](mailto:wbpearce@worldnet.att.net)) or online in the "documents" section of the CMM intranet site (visitors welcome!) at <http://www.cmm-commtheory.intranets.com>.

Using Wittgenstein's notion that there are "grammars" within the language-games and forms of life of various groups, I believe that there are discernable grammars among the various ways that people have developed to intervene in social situations that need to be improved. If we are to make our social worlds better, we should applaud any efforts that increase and enhance our collective virtuosity in doing this kind of work.

Kim Pearce and I wrestled with the notion of what "virtuosity" in these ways of working would look like. We suggested that virtuosos in any field of practice (1) have a "grand passion" for their work; (2) are able to make perspicacious distinctions among the events and objects within the field (including seeing things that are invisible to the untrained eye); and (3) are able to engaged in skilled performances. Two of the examples we used were of sailing (a virtuoso sailor doesn't just point the boat; a skilled hand on the helm distinguishes among tacking, jibing, heading up, falling off, and standing on course) and music (by hearing just a few bars, those who know music discern the genres – swing, hip-hop, country, classical, etc. – and perhaps the artist, composer, or both).<sup>5</sup> We believe that virtuosos in therapy, consultation, mediation, organizational development, and peacemaking display the same abilities – and that the "grammars" of their ways of working differ in ways that various dialects of English differ.

To summarize: in the preceding paragraphs, I've taken the position that our social worlds – for good or ill – are made, and that we live in them, enjoying and/or suffering the consequences of our collective actions. From this position, I've suggested that our actions ought to be viewed in terms of their artistry – the extent to which they make beautiful worlds in which to live or the extent to which they have the contrary effect. Since we don't start with blank slates, one important aspect of the artistry of making social worlds is that of intervening in "bad" events and objects in ways that make them "better." During the past century, traditions of practice in making social worlds better have developed, and some people have become virtuosos in them. The grammars of these traditions or ways of working are not mutually incomprehensible but they are not exactly the same.

Having made these points, I want now to focus on the desirability of developing a language that permits perspicacious comparisons among these ways of working that make social worlds better. This is an attempt to become a virtuoso of virtuosity; to be able to discern, name and act skillfully with respect to various ways of working. I think such a language will enable us to continue the development of the various grammars of ways of working – and thus equip us to make our social worlds better.

In Part One of this paper, I review four types of social situations that, in my humble judgment, call for intervention. In the context of each type, I provide a brief

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<sup>5</sup> W. Barnett Pearce and Kimberly A. Pearce, "Combining Passions and Abilities: Toward Dialogic Virtuosity," *Southern Communication Journal*, 65 (2000), 161-175.

description of one or more ways of working by intervention agents.<sup>6</sup> Sorting them out this way – that is, “negotiation” fits with this type of situation while “dialogue” fits with that one – is already as way of tracing out some of the grammatical features. I invite discussion about whether I’ve sorted them out in the best way – that discussion is a discussion about the grammars of making social worlds better.

<u>Situations:</u>	<u>Ways of Working:</u>
Intractable conflict:	Working systemically; Working appreciatively
Moral conflict:	Working dialogically
Bargaining:	Interest-based negotiation; Problem-solving mediation; Transformational mediation; Deliberation
Crisis management:	Reducing emotional intensity; Making emotions rational

In Part Two, I try my hand at beginning to describe the grammars of intervention. Compared to the description of any natural language, my description is laughably simplistic. I’ve identified only two features: “elements” and “moods.”

Elements:	self/role; others; situation; goal(s); relationship to the client
Moods:	letting/helping the client tell their own stories; co-constructing new stories with the clients; co-constructing a particular kind of new story; facilitating transformational learning by the client; coming to an agreement with the clients

You can use this apparatus in two ways. If you want to describe the grammar of a particular way of working, take each element in turn and articulate how the self or role of the intervention agent is construed, how the client and other involved people are socially constructed, etc., working through all the “elements.” This identifies the “nouns” in the grammar. To get at the “action words” or “verbs,” take each of the phrases in the “moods” and answer the question “How important is it to do this?”<sup>7</sup>

Take this as a beginning; a first cut at a more complex analysis. At this point I’m more interested in testing whether this is an effective way of moving forward than I am in presenting a completed work.

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<sup>6</sup> Note: I realize that my thumbnail descriptions leave much to be desired. My purpose here is to make perspicacious distinctions rather than to produce complete descriptions. In addition, we recognize that these ways of working are, like natural languages, “living” and always changing. As Kim Pearce and I noted in the work cited in the above footnote (p. 164), whenever we try to describe one of these ways of working, “We are confronted by a profound conundrum. The more accurately we represent the current state of practice, the more we have produced a description with a short lifespan. Usually, an attempt to describe ‘current’ practices is obsolete before it is published.”

<sup>7</sup> I was tempted to follow formal grammar more closely, but I can’t decide if that is too easy or too hard! Anyway, I’m leery of being seduced by such a well-developed model for something that may not parallel. Anyway, the notion of “mood” comes from grammar, and there is something of “indicative, subjunctive, and imperative” in the sense of “how important is it to do this?” One might play with this a bit more and talk about “manner” as well as accomplishment. I’ve not pursued “voice” and “tense.”

## PART ONE: SOCIAL SITUATIONS AND WAYS OF WORKING

This description of four types of social situations and is not intended as a complete taxonomy of social situations, of course; nor do I harbor the slightest notion that any situation only fits a single category. I suspect that there may be elements of all four in every social situation that we might set ourselves to improve. However, I am enough of a realist<sup>8</sup> to believe that actions that are effective in one situation are not effective in another, and that part of the practical wisdom that an intervention agent needs is the ability to discern and adapt to differing and changing circumstances.

Reading a book on crisis negotiation stimulated my work in this section. McMains and Mullins noted that the law enforcement officers on the scene of a “critical incident” (a deliberately neutral term) have to make some important judgments very quickly. First, is the incident “negotiable” or should a Hostage Rescue Team or Special Weapons and Tactics team bring a forced end to the incident as quickly as possible? For example, if a hostage-taker shows no interest in living and is in a position to kill or injure others, the incident might be deemed non-negotiable. An intention to commit “suicide-by-cop” is not unknown, and the appropriate response is a swift, forceful intervention. On the other hand, if the incident is negotiable, the officers need to determine if it is a “bargaining” situation (that is, the hostage-taker has “instrumental” motivations and is capable of acting rationally) or if it is a “crisis” that needs to be managed (that is, the hostage-taker is panic-stricken or otherwise incapable of acting responsibly in the situation).<sup>9</sup> Among other things, I’m struck by the virtuosity required to discern – almost always without full information – between a non-negotiable incident and a crisis incident, and I’m struck by the enormity of the consequences, since SWAT or HRT intervention almost always results in fatalities among the perpetrator, hostages, and intervention team.

Two of the categories identified by McMains and Mullins worked pretty well for me: bargaining and crisis management. However, for my purposes, it was useful to describe two additional contexts: moral conflict and intractable conflict. In addition, it was useful for me to think of bargaining and crisis management more broadly than McMains and Mullins, including but not limited to law enforcement and corrections officers. Finally, with the model of four types of conflicts that can occur in a wide variety of social settings, I was able to identify more ways of working with these conflicts than presented by McMains and Mullins.

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<sup>8</sup>Ohmygosh, I’ve used the “R-word”! The concept of the reality of the events and objects of our social worlds is a difficult topic for many people with whom I share intellectual commitments and ways of working. In my view, social situations are “real” in the sense of “eddies” in a fast-moving stream, “standing waves” at the intersection of the flows of tides, or “attractors” in a chaotic system. Like my social constructionist colleagues, I do not think of them as “real” in the sense of having a “substance.” I think of social situations as having configurations in the continuing process by which we collectively make and re-make the events and objects of our social worlds.

<sup>9</sup> Michael J. McMains and Wayman C. Mullins, Crisis Negotiations: Managing Critical Incidents and Hostage Situations in Law Enforcement and Corrections. Anderson, 2001, Second Edition.

## **Intractable Conflict**

### ***Description***

The conflict resolution literature already includes the term “intractable conflict.”<sup>10</sup> There are two aspects to “intractability:” one is that such conflicts seem to go on forever; the other is that attempts to resolve the conflict do not seem to gain any “traction” on them. Whatever any participation might do to “resolve” the conflict is transmuted into just another “move” within the conflict that continues or intensifies it. In addition to these characteristics, I’d like to add a third notion: however intractable conflicts started, as they progress, they don’t seem to be “about” anything other than themselves. That is, they are fully self-sustaining without requiring any additional energy.

### ***Examples:***

The “troubles” in Northern Ireland, the conflict between Iran and Iraq, and the Palestinian-Israeli fighting might be cited as high-intensity intractable conflicts. The prototype in my learning history was the feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys: rival clans of Celtic settlers in the Appalachian Mountains who fought for generations. Although no one could remember how the feud started, it was kept alive by successive iterations of violence.

An example of low-intensity intractable conflict<sup>11</sup> might be an organization in which negativity has become the norm. Symptoms might include low morale, low collective ambition, distrust of other departments, tension in the dealings between supervisors and those they supervise, a rhetoric of victimage, and stories about how “this place” has either fallen from what it once was or has failed to reach its promise.

Bickering in a family or in a relationship is another form of intractable conflict. This occurs when spouses or siblings continually find fault with each other or assume that the other is incompetent, or when nothing a parent or a child does satisfies the other. Such bickering is not “about” anything; it is a pattern into which almost anything can be brought. Other family dynamics create stresses that may be displayed as neurotic or psychotic symptoms in one or more family members. The connections between the symptoms and the family’s stories may be very obscure.

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<sup>10</sup> L. Kriesberg, T. A. Northrup, & S. J. Thorson (Eds.), Intractable Conflicts and their Transformation. Syracuse University Press, 1989.

<sup>11</sup> To say that it is of low intensity is not to say that it is not “bad” or deserving of intervention. As Carlos Sluzki noted of the “dirty war” in Argentina, long-term low-intensity conflict can have debilitating effects equivalent to higher intensity conflicts, and spread over a longer time period.

### *Keys to recognition*

Here are some keys to recognizing “intractable conflict.”

1. If an analyst stays within the vocabulary and grammar of the participants’ discourse, there are no logical reasons for continuing the conflict (that is, the cost of continuing the conflict exceeds or contradicts the stated goals, such as “fighting for peace” and “to save the village it was necessary to destroy it”)
2. The reasons the participants offer about the conflict refer to the conflict itself (for example, atrocities that the other side have committed) rather than to reasons for the conflict per se
3. Attempts to resolve or transform the conflict are powerfully reframed as “moves” that continue or intensify the

### *Working systemically*

Practitioners working in this way seek to join with clients in a process of co-constructing new stories that enable them to move forward with less suffering. Systemic practitioners start with the assumption that the client wants to change but probably does not know what needs to change. As a result, they carefully mark the client’s reason for seeking the help of a consultant or therapist as the “presenting problem.” While systemic practitioners treat their own ideas about what is going on with the client as “hypotheses” and value having many of them (rather than treating them as “diagnoses” and value having the “right” one), the client’s presenting problem is treated as the hypothesis least likely to be useful.

Consistent with this treatment of the presenting problem, systemic practitioners have a principled aversion to hearing the client’s own stories. It is just these stories that have brought the client to their current state; by providing an attentive listener to these stories, the consultant or therapist is enabling the client to “practice” and develop just what brought them to their unwanted present condition. By using techniques such as circular questioning, reflecting teams, positively connoting the system, treating the “problem” as a “symptom” of a systemic pattern and offering stories of strange loops, or of unintended consequences that reverse the “causality” in the client’s stories, or that invite the client to join in a systemic, social constructionist epistemology,<sup>12</sup> systemic practitioners intend to help the clients develop new and better stories.

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<sup>12</sup> Vernon E. Cronen and W. Barnett Pearce, “Toward an Explanation of How the Milan Method Works: An Invitation to a Systemic Epistemology and the Evolution of Family Systems,” in David Campbell and Rosalind Draper (Eds.), *Applications of Systemic Family Therapy: The Milan Approach*. Grune and Stratton, 1985, pp. 69-84.

Many systemic practitioners are uncomfortable admitting that they have predetermined ideas about what counts as “better” stories. The orthodox position is that they cannot and do not want to control the nature of the new stories.<sup>13</sup> However, it is not hard to detect their grammar of “better” stories. Such stories should move “from blame and labeling to positive connotation and contextualization, from linearity to circularity;” they should be future-oriented, dreaming, imagining, and appreciative; and they usually feature directional shifts in time, space, causality, interactions, values and telling.<sup>14</sup>

Particularly in the early days of systemic practice, consultants felt empowered to be very clever and tricky in order to help clients: routines were prescribed and counterparadoxical interventions were made. However, systemic practitioners realized that certain kinds of questioning were a sufficient intervention. One of the great inventions of the Milan team of systemic family therapists was the technique of circular questioning, in which clients were invited to look at the multiple connections among the elements in their social worlds, to explore alternative descriptions of the connections among them, and to join the therapists in a process of co-constructing new stories that helped them move forward.<sup>15</sup> According to Cecchin, systemic practice has developed along three trajectories: from conceptualizing energy to information, from thinking of entities to social constructions, and from a focus on the family to the therapist.<sup>16</sup>

### *A Case Study*

The following example of working systemically came from a workshop for organizational consulting. Although other systemic practitioners might have handled the situation differently, I believe that this story is coherent within the grammar of systemic practice, and the fact that there was disagreement about what “works” helps to set off some of the distinctive features of this way of working.

The leader of the workshop, a highly skilled consultant, did a demonstration, using a group of participants who actually worked together to role-play the client organization. The verisimilitude was enhanced because the participants decided to offer an issue with which they were currently grappling. During the consultation, what might be called a duel occurred between one of the clients whom we will call Mary and the consultant, whom we will call Lisa. Mary

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Gianfranco Cecchin, “Hypothesizing, Circularity and Neutrality Revisited: An Invitation to Curiosity,” *Family Process*, 26 (1987), 405-414

<sup>14</sup> This literature is reviewed in W. Barnett Pearce and Kimberly A. Pearce, “Transcendent Storytelling: Abilities for Systemic Practitioners and their Clients,” *Human Systems* 9, 1998, 167-185. In addition, it is becoming less likely to encounter “pure” forms of systemic practice. Many practitioners have incorporated social constructionist and appreciative techniques into their work, and are more willing to make value-laden preferences in kinds of stories that clients tell.

<sup>15</sup> For an appreciative description, see Karl Tomm, “Circular Interviewing: A Multifaceted Clinical Tool,” in David Campbell and Rosalind Draper (Eds.), *Applications of Systemic Family Therapy: The Milan Approach*, Grune and Stratton, 1985, pp. 33-46.

<sup>16</sup> Gianfranco Cecchin, “Constructing Therapeutic Possibilities,” in Sheila McNamee and Kenneth J. Gergen (Eds.), *Therapy as Social Construction*. Sage, 1992, pp. 86-95.

tried to introduce some stories about the group's history and talk about some of the factors that created the group's current problem. Lisa repeatedly interrupted and directed the conversation toward other topics and called on other participants. It was clear to participants and observers that Lisa and Mary were tugging the conversation in different directions, and that Lisa (the consultant) "won." After several such conversational turns, Mary remained silent.

After the simulation, all participants joined in a discussion about the simulated consultation. Mary was one of the first to speak, and said that she had felt shut out of the consultation, and that she did not trust or feel respected by Lisa. In reply, Lisa explained that she intentionally "shut Mary down" because Mary was using "problem talk" that the group did not need to hear. When Mary insisted that the issue she was raising was important and needed to be included, Lisa replied by saying that, as a systemic consultant, she did not "do" problem talk. She asked Mary if her small group had not worked better because she (Lisa) had prevented her (Mary) from talking about problems. Not agreeing with Lisa's assumption that it had, Mary said that if this had been a real consultation, she would have done everything in her power to sabotage the consultation process. Lisa again claimed that the whole group process had been improved by excluding Mary's description of problems.

***Working appreciatively:***

Like systemic practitioners, those who work appreciatively start with the assumption that the clients need to change and that their current linguistic and story-telling practices are what hold them in undesirable and unproductive conditions. They are even more explicit about what they seek to replace and what they want to replace it with. Appreciative practitioners attempt to take charge of the "process" by which the client chooses topics and discusses them, and they usually seek to do it before the process begins.

Starting with the assumption that we make our social worlds through such seemingly mundane factors as the language we use ("deficit" vs. "appreciative"), the questions we ask ("critical" vs. "unconditionally positive"), the way we structure our inquiry (the "problem-solution" model" vs. the "appreciative inquiry" model), they seek to create new forms of talk, inquiry and interaction as a way of making social worlds better. If we believe that the language we use is "fateful," then certain undesirable consequences accrue from talk that is critical and focuses on things that are wrong. Focusing on critical scholarship, Gergen noted five consequences which destroy or erode human communities and the production of generative knowledge:<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen, "The Limits of Pure Critique," in Herbert W. Simons and Michael Billig (Eds.), *After Postmodernism: Reconstructing Ideology Critique*. Sage, 1994, pp. 58-78.

The discursive structure of critique starts with an assertion, and this creates a linguistic domain in which conversation is constrained to the terms of that assertion, whether “for” or “against.”

1. The critical voice, and those it summons in opposition, silences marginal voices and fragments relationships.
2. Critique erodes community by creating a category of people who are outside or open to attack.
3. The critical impulse maintains patterns of social hierarchy.
4. By focusing on what is wrong, missing, or weak, critique contributes to cultural and organizational enfeeblement.

Appreciative inquiry works by creating contexts in which participants are invited to use “appreciative” language and to focus on what is “right,” that works, that is desirable, and is the stuff of dreams. It is, as Abraham Lincoln put it in his Second Inaugural address, a call to “our higher natures.” “More than a technique, appreciative inquiry is a way of organizational life – an intentional posture of continuous discovery, search and inquiry into conceptions of life, joy, beauty, excellence, innovation and freedom.”<sup>18</sup>

As a standard protocol for organizational development, “Appreciative Inquiry” is a subset of a more free-form stance of working appreciatively. The standard “AI” intervention is a multi-day process following the “4-D” model.<sup>19</sup>

1. Discovery: searching for, highlighting and illuminating those factors that give life to the organization; valuing the best of what is.
2. Dream: envisioning what could be; liberating participants from the constraining power of existing reified constructions and offering positive guiding images of the future.
3. Design: by creating a deliberately inclusive and supportive context for conversation and interaction, permitting participants to come to an agreement about an ideal of vision that they value and aspire to.
4. Destiny: constructing the future through innovation and action.

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<sup>18</sup> James D. Ludema, David L. Cooperrider and Frank J. Barrett, “Appreciative Inquiry: The Power of the Unconditional Positive Question,” in Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (Eds.), Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice. Sage, 2001, p. 191.

<sup>19</sup> Ludema, Cooperrider and Barrett, pp. 191-192.

Within this structure, the “appreciative interview protocol” consists of a sequence of six questions:<sup>20</sup>

1. Think of a time in your entire experience with your organization when you have felt most excited, most engaged and most alive. What were the forces and factors that made it a great experience? What was it about you, others and your organization that made it a peak experience for you?
2. What do you value most about yourself, your work and your organization?
3. What are your organization’s best practices (ways you manage, approaches, traditions)?
4. What are the unique aspects of your culture that most positively affect the spirit, vitality and effectiveness of your organization and its work?
5. What is the core factor that ‘gives life’ to your organization?
6. What are the three most important hopes you have to heighten the health and vitality of your organization for the future?

In more free-form ways of working appreciatively, the emphasis is on developing event designs that focus on what is working and on collective “dreams” rather than on what is not working and on “problems;” and on specific in-the-moment interventions that reframe deficit language to appreciative language. For example, as a mediator, Stephen Littlejohn says that he is inundated by complaints every day, and has learned to look for what he calls “the wisdom in the whining.”<sup>21</sup> Behind every complaint, if you know how to look, is an image of the world that the client would like to call into reality. By inquiring into the gap between the complaint and the dream, and then focusing on the dream, he works appreciatively.

There are many examples of instances in which working appreciatively has been effective. Thinking that we might learn something useful by examining an example in which it did not work, I submit this story.

I am a member of an organization that set up an “appreciative” organizational development process. At the same time, however, I was able to read the promotional material written by the facilitators to describe this process to potential clients. The promotional material described, in glowing terms, how participants “form teams” and “are motivated to” identify assets and engage in high quality discussions.

Even granted that there is something odd about simultaneously reading about a process (from a third-person perspective) that I was simultaneously involved in (in a first-person perspective), I was struck by the one-dimensionality of these descriptions

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<sup>20</sup> Ludema, Cooperrider and Barrett, p. 193.

<sup>21</sup> Personal conversation.

of the participants' experience. All participants were described as having the same monotone emotions; and all participants were described as whole-heartedly involved in the tasks assigned by the facilitators without any reservations or complexity.

Such one-dimensionality is inconsistent both with my theoretical understanding of the complexity of social life and my experience as a participant in this process. I felt that there were serious issues that were not being addressed in the sanctioned conversations and that my attempts to raise these issues were dismissed. The process, it seemed to me, limited my voice to a single note when I had a multi-octave range of things to say that was, in my judgment, vital to the task. My choices seemed to be to "play along with" the OD process, clearly believing that it was not going to accomplish any good purpose, to sabotage the process, to reconstruct it somehow, or to withdraw from it. Like Mary, I felt shut out and that the contribution that I might have made was unappreciated. If the purpose of the process was to produce a new story or a plan of action, it might have worked – but it was without my participant, ownership, or contribution.

Other appreciative practitioners will likely say that my experience was not the norm, and I would not argue the point. I use this experience because, as an appreciative practitioner myself, I found it very disturbing and it might well function as a means of identifying the limiting conditions of this line of work.

## **Moral Conflict**

### ***Description***

Moral conflicts occur when persons or groups who are deeply enmeshed in incommensurate moral orders clash. Because their social worlds are at odds, what they want, believe, and need differs, and the actions that express or fulfill those wants, beliefs, and needs are alien, incoherent, and/or offensive in the social worlds of the other. Because ways of dealing with conflicts are a part of one's social world, when conflicts occur, the participants lack a common procedure for dealing with them. Actions that one side understands as good, true, or prudent are often perceived by the other as evil, false, or foolish – perhaps even sinister or duplicitous. The intensity of moral conflicts is fueled when such actions are treated as if they are malicious or stupid by the other side. Each participant finds his or her own abilities to act, to think, to feel, and to relate to others reduced by the actions of the other. To move forward together, the participants have to transcend their current abilities and find new ways of relating to others.

As moral conflicts continue, they become intractable because they are morally and rhetorically attenuated.<sup>22</sup> That is, the participants begin to use slogans rather than articulate expressions of their beliefs, perspectives, and interests; they begin to focus on what is wrong with the other rather than on their own position; and, because they demonize the other, they begin to act in ways that are not sanctioned by their own highest moral sensibilities.

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<sup>22</sup> Pearce and Littlejohn, 1997, p. 68.

## Examples

The continuing conflict between traditional and modern societies might be considered a moral conflict, not only as played out in international economics and military clashes, but in the more intimate confines of families and organizations. Whatever the ostensible topics, these conflicts involve incommensurate notions of self, virtue, and authority. The continuing clash about abortion, in which the sides cannot even agree what to call each other, is a clear example of moral conflict.<sup>23</sup>

### *Keys to recognition*

1. The participants are deeply enmeshed in their moral orders. They perceive themselves as defending something important and as acting virtuously.
2. The participants use the same vocabulary but mean different things by it. For example, “honor” means courage in war for one but moral scruples for the other.
3. The participants use different vocabularies for comparable functions. For example, one uses a vocabulary of “rights” and the other of “virtues,” or “freedom” rather than “liberty.” These terms have deeply embedded grammars that comprise incommensurate social worlds.
4. The participants describe themselves as locked into opposition with each other. They deny that they have any choices and claim that ‘in a situation such as this, when they do what they did, a person like me has no alternative. I must...’
5. Actions that one side thinks will defuse the situation or even resolve the conflict are perceived by those on the other side as demonstrating the perfidy of the first and obligating them to respond by continuing or intensifying the conflict.
6. Participants are unable to articulate the logic of the other side’s social world in ways that the other side will accept
7. The discourse between the conflicted groups contains a large number of statements about what is wrong with the other group
8. If asked to imagine a resolution to the conflict, the participants can think only of capitulation or elimination of the other group<sup>24</sup>

*Working Dialogically.* Dialogic practitioners treat clients as having rich and coherent worldviews that mesh with each other in ways that degrade both. The task is to find ways for people with incommensurate social realities to move forward together productively. Dialogic practitioners seek to facilitate the development of new patterns of communication and new relationships among clients. They respect the differences between the beliefs and values of the clients and do not expect them to come to

<sup>23</sup> Other examples are described at length in Pearce and Littlejohn.

<sup>24</sup> See Pearce and Littlejohn, p. 68.

agreement. They do expect clients to transform their role in the conflict, to enter into a qualitatively different relationship with the other participants in the conflict, and to participate in the co-construction of forms of communication in which they remain in the tension between standing their ground and being radically open to the other.

The “opening” to work toward these objectives lies in the form of communication. Moral conflicts quickly become morally and rhetorically attenuated; participants learn not to articulate their most cherished beliefs because they elicit “disconfirmation,” either intentionally (in what might be called “reciprocated diatribe”) or because of profound misinterpretation. Participants protect themselves behind opaque walls of slogans, diatribe, and demonization. For example, in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan’s discourse about the Soviet Union (which he called “the evil empire” as contrasted with the United States, which was a “city set upon a hill” for all to admire) worked effectively to rally domestic support, but was strikingly ineffective when he had to speak to an articulate, friendly, accommodating Soviet leader, particularly at Reykjavik.<sup>25</sup>

Dialogic facilitators create contexts in which participants remember how to or feel safe enough to tell their own stories openly. One technique is for the facilitators to meet privately with each group prior to a meeting where both will be present. In these meetings, the facilitator asks the group for help, explaining that in the joint meeting, they will have the responsibility of ensuring that the group is heard well, and they will be better able to do that if they already know what the group would like to say. Often using systemic and appreciate interview protocols and responses, the facilitators give each group the experience of being heard and understood. Often this is a powerful intervention. Another technique is to design a joint meeting in such a way that each group is put into a third-person listening role while the other is speaking. Absolved of the responsibility for (and of the opportunity to) interrupt or otherwise respond to the other, the opportunity to hear the other is an unusually good way is achieved.

Reflecting the pragmatic notion that, if we make sure that the “process” is correct, then good outcomes will result, dialogic practitioners believe that good things will happen if participants’ conversations are enriched such that they remain in the tension between holding their own ground and being radically open to the other. One good thing that will happen is that the participants’ roles will be transformed. Buber poetically noted that the I of I-Thou is not the same as the I of I-it.<sup>26</sup> More prosaically, Mezirow described transformational learning as the result of increased awareness of and critical reflection on one’s frames of reference, points of view, and habits of mind.<sup>27</sup> My reading of “transformation theory” is not very deep, but it seems to me very useful and excessively individualistic. The transformations that dialogic practitioners seek are in ways-of-being-in-relation-to-others.

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<sup>25</sup> W. Barnett Pearce, Deborah K. Johnson, and Robert J. Branham, “A Rhetorical Ambush at Reykjavik: A Case Study of the Transformation of Discourse,” in Michael Weiler and W. Barnett Pearce (Eds.), Reagan and Public Discourse in America. University of Alabama Press, 1992, pp. 163-182.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Buber, I and Thou.

<sup>27</sup> Jack Mezirow, Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Process. Jossey-Bass, 2000, p. 19.

There have been several lengthy descriptions of this form of work, and because I've got to bring this paper to a close (at least for now), rather than summarize them, I'll reference them.<sup>28</sup>

## **Bargaining**

### ***Description***

Bargaining occurs between interdependent people, none of who can accomplish their goals without the other side. There are costs and rewards for both sides, no matter how they act. The goal is to maximize rewards and minimize costs. Usually, bargaining involves some sort of quid pro quo, although different situations may permit win-win (or lose-lose) outcomes.

### ***Examples***

Many of the current ways of working in bargaining have been developed in international negotiation. Bargaining is the norm in any sort of selling-buying relationship, as well as in many decisions in the corporate world involving labor-management relationships, mergers, and interdepartmental sharing of resources and responsibilities.

### ***Keys to recognition***

1. The participants have identifiable (not necessarily identified) interests that are in conflict
2. The participants are capable of (or can be helped to be capable of) acting rationally in their own self interest

### ***Ways of working***

*Interest-based bargaining.* This way of working has been often and well described, so I will only summarize it here.<sup>29</sup> Fisher and Ury distinguished "interest-based bargaining" from "hard" bargaining (where participants hold on to their position as strongly as possible) and "soft" bargaining (where participants hold on to their relationship with the other as strongly as possible). They propose three principles, each of which has a number of specific recommendations:

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<sup>28</sup> Shawn Spano, Public Dialogue and Participatory Democracy: The Cupertino Community Project. Hampton, 2001; Kimberly A. Pearce and W. Barnett Pearce, "The Public Dialogue Consortium's School-wide Dialogue Process," Communication Theory, 11 (2001): 105-123; Donna Krey, Cupertino Asks, "Can We Talk About Diversity?" Western City, December, 1999 (available online at: <http://www.westerncity.com/CupertinoDec99.htm>)

<sup>29</sup> R. Fisher and W. Ury, Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In. Penguin, 1991, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition; W. Ury, Getting Past No: Negotiating Your Way from Confrontation to Cooperation, Bantam, 1993, Revised edition; William Ury, Getting to Peace: Transforming Conflict at Home, at Work, and in the World. New York: Viking, 1999.

1. Separate the people from the problem
  - 1) Separate the relationship from the substance and deal directly with the relationship
  - 2) Put yourself in their shoes
  - 3) Don't deduce their intention from your fears
  - 4) Don't blame them for your problem
  - 5) Discuss each other's perceptions
  - 6) Look for opportunities to act inconsistently with others' expectations
  - 7) Give them a stake in the outcome by making sure that they participate in the decision making
2. Focus on interests, not positions
  - 1) Ask "Why?"
  - 2) Ask "Why not?"
  - 3) Realize that both sides have multiple interests
  - 4) Realize that the most powerful interests are human needs
3. Invent options for mutual gain

*Problem-solving Mediation.* Many people define mediation as interest-based bargaining facilitated by a third person. As such, this is practically identical to the "bargaining" position described above.

*Transformative Mediation.* Bush and Folger argue that the "promise" of mediation was a transformation in social relations, not just the resolution of specific problems.<sup>30</sup> The mediator's goal is to lead the clients to "empowerment" and "recognition." If specific problems are solved in the process, that is an added benefit.

*Deliberation.* The Kettering Foundation sponsors the National Issues Forums project. The basic idea is to create the opportunity for the public to be involved in doing the "choice-work" in which hard choices are made about what policies to choose.<sup>31</sup>

## **Crisis Management**

### ***Description***

A crisis is a situation in which the participants' abilities to cope are exceeded. A "cataclysm of emotions" occur as people feel that important problems must be

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<sup>30</sup> Robert A. Baruch Bush and Joseph P. Folger, *The Promise of Mediation: Responding to Conflict through Empowerment and Recognition*. Jossey-Bass, 1994.

<sup>31</sup> For more information about the National Issues Forums and the concept of deliberation, visit: <http://www.nifi.org/>.

solved and their repeated unsuccessful attempts to solve it increase the intensity of their emotions: “from fear to panic, from anger to rage, and ... mental confusion.”<sup>32</sup> In a crisis, “plans are interrupted, life seems out of control, emotions are high, and reason is low.”<sup>33</sup>

### ***Examples***

When domestic conflict escalates to violence, one or more participants is often experiencing more stress than they can cope with and acting in ways that they would describe as “out of control.” Unplanned hostage-taking, for example when an attempted robbery does not go as expected, often puts the taker in a crisis.

### ***Keys to recognition***

1. The participants cannot assume that they will bargain in good faith
2. The participants do not have well-thought out positions, goals, and needs
3. The participants are under high degrees of stress which interferes with rational decision-making
4. Some of the participants may well be emotionally-disturbed or incapable of sophisticated reasoning
5. The situation has moved to a point where saving face and/or mitigating the consequences of behaviors is an important issue

### ***Reducing emotional intensity***

When practiced by law enforcement personnel, “crisis management” is understood to be a phase in a longer relationship with the hostage-taker or suicide-threatening person. The negotiators immediate goal is to reduce the intensity of the emotions so that “bargaining” can occur. The negotiators are particularly sensitive to increases and decreases in three indicators of emotion – emotion-laden words, pitch and volume of speech, and use of particular words having to do with “face,” ownership, and autonomy – with the assumption that an increase in emotional content is a signal that the crisis is escalating, and a decrease is a signal that it is moving toward a situation in which the negotiator and perpetrator can bargain.

Intervention in a crisis, whether by law enforcement personnel or other specialists, can be seen as “a short-term helping process.”<sup>34</sup> The negotiator is intent on:

1. Assuring the safety and security of the person in crisis
2. Allowing ventilation of intense feelings and the validation of those feeling to the person in crisis
3. Facilitating prediction and planning by the person in crisis<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> McMains and Mullins, *Crisis Negotiations*, p. 68.

<sup>33</sup> McMains and Mullins, *Crisis Negotiations*, p. 71.

<sup>34</sup> L. E. Hoff. *People in Crisis: Understanding and Helping*. Menlo Park: Addison-Wesley, 1989.

The primary goal in crisis management is to establish a relationship, calm the taker down, and get them talking. Negotiators take control of the means of communicating with the hostage-taker, assure the taker that everything is under control, introduce themselves, invite the taker to describe what's going on, and practice "active listening." Some of the active listening skills include:

1. Minimal Encourages —brief, well-timed responses that let the subject know that the negotiator is paying attention
2. Paraphrasing – saying the subject's meaning in the negotiator's words as a way of showing that the negotiator is listening and understands; this is also a means of clarifying meanings
3. Emotional Labeling – use of emotional words to show that the negotiator knows how the subject is feeling
4. Mirroring – repeating the last word of phrase
5. Open-ended questions – encouraging the subject to talk
6. I-messages – statements that personalize the negotiator without attacking the subject
7. Effective pauses – periods of silence that emphasize a point
8. Reflecting meaning – summarizing understanding

### ***Making emotions rational***

One way of dealing with subjects in crisis is to attempt to reduce the intensity of the emotions they feel. Another is to increase their ability to handle intense emotions by bringing emotions into the realm of the rational. In this way of thinking, subjects' inability to deal with situations is due to their inability to locate them in their moral order. As Wittgenstein would say, they don't know how to go on coherently.

Peter Lang has developed a way of thinking about emotions that opens up a distinctive line of intervention.<sup>35</sup> He thinks of emotions as expressions of moral judgments. For example, anger is the expression of the judgment that my status and/or dignity have been violated, and my expressions of anger may be thought of as a "call" for action that will "give" my status and dignity back. Envy is the expression of the judgment that I have a right to something someone else has but, for some reason, I can't say straightforwardly, "I have a right to it."

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<sup>35</sup> McMains and Mullins, *Crisis Negotiations*, p. 82.

<sup>36</sup> Presentation at the conference, "Change and Development at the Turn of the Millennium: State of the Art of Systemic Practice and Thinking," Rhodes, Greece, October 9-13, 2000.

There is a grammar in our culture that makes it “natural” for us to reply in particular ways to various emotions. For example, the natural response to anger is anger; to aggressiveness is defensiveness. An effective intervention is to treat the display of anger as a call for a response, to avoid the “natural” response (which makes a pattern of social interaction that is likely to escalate emotions rather than increase the abilities of the participants to deal with them), and to bring the moral judgment into discourse in an appreciative way, thus opening the way to develop practical plans for action. This consists of a four-step process:

1. Inquire about the positive state within the subject’s moral order that is evidenced by its absence. That is, if the emotion is anger, inquire about the subject’s sense of the status and/or dignity that he or she desires and feels that is deserved.
2. Identify the abilities the person/group needs to act consistent with this moral order
3. Bring these abilities and the moral order they will construct into language. That is, name the emotions, the moral judgments, and the powers that the person has to realize them.
4. Project these abilities onto the future in terms of practical and effective action plans

### **TOWARD A LANGUAGE FOR MAKING PERSPICACIOUS DISTINCTIONS AMONG WAYS OF WORKING**

The title of this section is a horrible phrase, but please treat it as a descriptive place marker that we can use until something more euphonious comes along. Am I doing a meta-grammar?

I am envisioning each of these ways of working as having a grammar, something like a natural language. Even though we who “speak” the language cannot describe all of its rules and often act in ways that are grammatically “incorrect,” we can easily detect who is a native speaker and who is not, and in most cases, we can discern whether a particular action (or sequence of actions) is coherent and/or naturally-done within “our” way of working.

The major limitation of the claim in the previous paragraph has to do with the discreteness of these ways of working. There is a lot of overlap between systemic, appreciative, and dialogic ways of working, and some actions are coherent and natural within two or all three grammars. And yet there are some significant differences. In the paragraphs that follow, I try to identify some of the “nodes” of these grammars. The success of my effort might be evaluated on the basis of whether

an articulation of the deep texture of these nodes constitutes a description of these ways of working that permit perspicacious distinctions to be made.

I'm going to distinguish two aspects of this meta-grammar: elements (roughly equivalent to nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. in the grammar of a language) and moods (I'm borrowing this directly from linguistic grammar; I mean something roughly equivalent to the indicative, subjunctive, imperative, etc. moods of action).<sup>37</sup> A coherent description of a way of working would articulate each of these elements and moods; a perspicacious distinction among them would compare two or more ways of working in terms of one or more elements and/or moods.

In my judgment, the elements in a grammar of a way of working include:

- Self: the social construction of the intervention agent.
- Others: how is the client construed? What kind of changes does the client need to make? Is the client presumed to be capable of acting competently? Who are the other stakeholders, and what are their roles?
- Situation: the assumption about what exigency exists in the situation that calls for the services of the intervention agent. What is the "opening" for change? Is there a specified direction of change?
- Goal: the narrative of how the intervention agent found the situation, what he or she did in coordination with what other people, and with what effect
- Relationship to the client: whatever else this relationship might be, it involves the authority, power, and responsibility of the intervention agent in the relationship to the client and to other affected stakeholders

The moods in a grammar of a way of working include:

- The importance of letting/helping the client tell their own story
- The importance of co-constructing a new story with the client
- The importance of co-constructing a particular kind of new story, or a new story with particular features
- The importance of the client experiencing transformational learning (with respect to self, other stakeholders, the situation)
- The importance of coming to an agreement with the client, or facilitating an agreement between clients

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<sup>37</sup> And Kenneth Burke's dramatic pentad keeps running around in my mind as I'm working on this. Please treat this footnote as a string around my finger to remind myself to revisit this idea, and as an invitation for others, more versed than I in Burke, to explore possible connections. I'm particularly intrigued by Burke's notion of the "ratios" among these elements.

I fully expect this first specification of a grammar to evolve. But let's see how it works by trying out just a couple of comparisons.

Self: In all of these forms of intervention (except when the intervention agent is a participant in “bargaining” and not a third-party facilitator or mediator), the intervention agent construes him or her self as possessing a particular kind of expertise such that he or she can and should take control of the language, context-framing, and/or sequences of interactions between him or herself and the client and/or among the clients. There is a peculiar double-mindedness as the intervention agent is fully involved in the interaction with the client and simultaneously taking an observer's expert, critical perspective on it. This perspective feeds forward into the agents' decisions about what to do next.

Other(s): Bargaining differs from the other three situations described here in that it perceives the other as needing to enter into a mutually satisfying agreement but not otherwise needing to change. In all the other situations, the other needs to make some fundamental change in their behavior if the situation is to be improved, and the differences among the ways of working stem from the kind of change felt necessary. Transformational learning (about one's perspective, frame of reference, or habits of mind) is desired in moral conflict; stress reduction or emotion management work is needed in crisis management, and a shift to a new set of stories and/or new language is needed in intractable conflict.

Importance of allowing/helping the client tell their own story. This “mood” seems to differentiate sharply between working dialogically, systemically, and appreciatively. Systemic and appreciative practitioners have a principled commitment to prevent the client from telling their “old” story (systemic grammar) in the prevailing deficit language (appreciative grammar). On the other hand, dialogic practitioners start with the assumption that the telling of the clients' stories, particularly in the presence of others involved in the conflict, has been degraded, and that a first step in making the situation better consists of reclaiming the full humanity and moral richness of their stories. With this in mind, those who work dialogically have a principled commitment to help clients tell their stories better than they ever have – and in helping them hear the stories of the other participants in the conflict better than they have ever done before.

The importance of co-constructing a particular kind of new story, or a new story with particular features. Systemic and appreciative ways of working have a principled commitment to help the client move from talk of problems in deficit language to appreciative, future-oriented story-building, but there are differences among them in the pacing of this process. It's possible to imagine a continuum ranging from “before the client begins” through “as soon as possible after the client starts talking,” to very late in the intervention or not at all.

In some of the appreciative work that I have seen, considerable effort goes into creating a context in which the clients are invited to move immediately to appreciative, future-oriented talk. Those who “resist” are issued increasingly

strong invitations and then... well, in the example of the process that I was involved in, the resisters are allowed to withdraw or just to “go through the motions.” In some systemic work I’ve seen, the intervention agent functions as a conversational counter-puncher, inviting the client to tell his or her story and then, by using a variety of techniques such as interrupting, asking circular and reflexive questions, giving positive connotations of the system, reframing, and reflecting, directing the conversation toward appreciative and future-oriented talk. For example, Peter Lang said that he “loves” problem talk because every “problem” is a description of a perceived gap between what is and what the client would like it to be. For him, problem talk is an open door to move quickly to talk of dreams and visions and the miracles (Peter’s term) that make them real.<sup>38</sup> Allan Holmgren said that problem talk and deficit language should be acknowledged as a way of showing that the client has been heard. He then uses this acknowledgement as a way of co-constructing new stories (systemic grammar) by reflecting about their fascination with stories that prevent them from moving forward productively.<sup>39</sup>

Since the goal of working dialogically is to transform the participants and the method is to involve them in a distinctive form of communication, the intervention agent does not expect the participants to tell a new story. Instead, the dialogic practitioner seeks to lead the clients to a new way of “holding” that story and of relating to the others.

## BIG FINISH

Well, my old drama coach told me that every production needs a “big finish” so I’m going to label this final section accordingly – even though this paper lacks one!

I believe that a vocabulary that permits perspicacious discriminations among ways of working will enhance our collective ability to develop virtuosity as intervention agents as we make social worlds better. This paper is intended to start the development of such a vocabulary. The extent to which it succeeds will be determined by what those of you who read it do with it.

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<sup>38</sup> Presentation at the conference, “Change and Development at the Turn of the Millennium: State of the Art of Systemic Practice and Thinking,” Rhodes, Greece, October 9-13, 2000.

<sup>39</sup> Presentation at the conference, “Change and Development at the Turn of the Millennium: State of the Art of Systemic Practice and Thinking,” Rhodes, Greece, October 9-13, 2000.