

Conflict, Chaos, and Change: A Dynamic-Holistic Exploration

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B.A., University of Victoria, 1995
M.A., University of Victoria, 1999

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirement for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in the Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies

We accept this dissertation as conforming
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ABSTRACT

Traditional and contemporary views of conflict argue that conflict holds the potential for positive change and growth. What is not well understood is the relationship between ongoing human change processes and conflict experiences. This study assumes that change is a given constant, that development is ongoing, and that conflict occurs as part of such processes. Chaos theory, self-organizing systems theory, and constructivism form the theoretical foundation for an emergent, qualitative research design that focuses on intra- and interpersonal levels of human change processes. In-depth interviews were conducted with three participants from three different conflicts (workplace, business, and divorce) that had taken place at least 18 months prior. Holistic descriptions of participants' lives before, during, and after the conflict were obtained, as well as rich accounts of the conflicts, including cultural references, metaphors, emotions, and shifts in identity. Using these change theories as an analytic tool, it was found that the relationship between conflict and change is much more dynamic and complex than the current conflict literature suggests. Participants in a conflict may be more focused on identity and developmental processes than on 'resolving' the conflict per se. It is suggested that by using a dynamic systems lens, a broader range of options can be generated for conflict resolution by capitalizing on ongoing developmental processes.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	v
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	1
Research Objectives.....	6
Theoretical Foundations.....	11
Constructivism.....	13
Chaos and Complexity Theory.....	15
Evolution and Emergence: Complex Adaptive Systems.....	20
Attractors.....	22
Bifurcation.....	23
Self-organizing Systems.....	24
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.....	32
Chaos, Complexity, and Autopoiesis in Human and Social Systems.....	32
Review of the Conflict Literature.....	43
CHAPTER THREE: Methodology.....	52
Methodological Foundations.....	52
The Place of the Researcher.....	65
Validity.....	68
CHAPTER FOUR: Method.....	76
Participants.....	76
Stages of Research.....	77
First Interview.....	78
Reflective Process.....	79
Second Interview.....	80
Analysis.....	80
CHAPTER FIVE: The ‘Makings’ of a Conflict Study.....	88
Narrative 1: Like A Call To The Fire.....	91
Global and Local Coherence.....	92
Content Analysis (Elements).....	96
Pre-crisis.....	98
Crisis.....	105
Post-crisis.....	112
Narrative 2: We Are All Former Children.....	119
Global and Local Coherence.....	120
Content Analysis (Elements).....	127
Pre-crisis.....	127
Crisis.....	133
Post-crisis.....	136

Narrative 3: There Will Be A Tomorrow.....	145
Global and Local Coherence.....	146
Content Analysis (Elements).....	149
Pre-crisis.....	150
Crisis.....	156
Post-crisis.....	158
 CHAPTER SIX: Discussion.....	 167
Cross-narrative Comparisons.....	167
Discussion of Change Theories.....	170
Constructivism.....	172
Chaos, Complexity, and Self-organizing Systems Theory.....	181
 CHAPTER SEVEN: Conclusion.....	 192
The Research Objectives Revisited.....	192
Limitations of the Study and Further Research.....	200
Concluding Comments.....	203
 References.....	 207
 Appendix A (Research Questions/ListeningGuide).....	 218
Appendix B (Changes associated with conflict for Kate).....	219
Appendix C (Changes associated with conflict for Paul).....	223
Appendix D (Changes associated with conflict for Barbara).....	226

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Levels of Context and Elements, Kate.....	97
Figure 5: Levels of Context and Elements, Paul.....	128
Figure 9: Levels of Context and Elements, Barbara.....	151
Figure 14: The Path of Change, Paul.....	189-190

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the three participants whose stories are central to this study. The depth to which you were willing to share has truly enriched the field of conflict studies, and I thank you for your generosity.

Dr. Max Uhlemann, thank you for keeping me on track and for all your support during two degrees. I am greatly appreciative. Dr. Anne Marshall, thank you for asking the tough questions and for pushing me to be clear. Dr. Norah Trace, my thanks, as always, for your inspiration, and Dr. Marie Hoskins, thank you for the extra time you gave to reading and guiding. My gratitude goes to the four of you for being a wonderful committee and for allowing me to explore new territory.

To my friends Jim, Thomas, Katherine, Paul, Diane, Eileen, Morris; my siblings Rob, Jan, Lorraine, Caroline, and Rick; and my Aunt Madeleine—thank you for your support, for listening, and for keeping in touch. And thank you Tara, for the many delightful, caffeine-inspired conversations on theory.

A very special appreciation goes to David Ford— editor, confidante, guide. Thank you for making me a better writer so late in the game. Thank you for helping me find my voice.

And finally, to my children—Rebecca, Luke, and Dylan. Thank you for being interested in my work and for being proud of your mom. Curious, lively beings that you are, you exemplify the principles of learning and growth in this study.

DEDICATION

For Jackie, who would have read it

And for my children
Rebecca, Luke, and Dylan—
who are much more important to me than this

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“The understanding of life begins with the understanding of pattern”
(Capra, 1996)

The purpose of this research is to explore conflict as a process of change from the contextualized perspective of people’s lived experience. The study uses a holistic, dynamic approach, departing from traditional conflict studies that view conflicts as “static, individual events” (Northrup, 1989) isolated from the ongoing processes of people’s lives. Conflict studies have been firmly grounded in a positivist tradition: conflict is assumed to be static, inert, and knowable from an objective position, using reductionist forms of analysis. In contrast, the assumptions on which this research is based emerge from the areas of quantum physics, complexity theory, and biology.

Using the current work in systems theory¹ as a theoretical framework, the research assumes that change is a constant for humans and the systems we occupy, and that conflict often emerges as a property or sub-system of larger dynamic systems. Common views of conflict, however, focus mainly on the *potential for change* that conflict holds. For example, functionalism asserts that conflict serves the purpose of challenging outworn social norms, paving the way for progressive reform (Coser, 1964). The conflict management perspective, typified by (Constantino & Merchant, 1996), draws from a medical model analogy: it assumes that conflict (like bacteria) is always present below the surface and that its manifestation signals an unhealthy or dysfunctional system. From this view, the presence of conflict again indicates the potential for change and growth.

¹ Systems here refers to intrapersonal systems involving values, beliefs, and behaviours, as well as larger social, cultural, and political systems.

The transformative view (Bush & Folger, 1994) is more aligned with the perspective of this study. It holds that, regardless of whether substantive agreements are reached in mediation, the more important goal is “engendering moral growth and transforming human character, toward both greater strength and greater compassion” (p. 27). Here again is the implication that conflict holds the potential for transformation in individuals, and a communication-based model of mediation is promoted to encourage transformation through mutual empowerment and recognition.

The piece missing from these approaches to conflict is an understanding of how conflict is situated within ongoing processes of change within peoples’ lives. Despite the *potential* for change that conflict holds, how does it fit, and more importantly, how is it experienced as part of larger moving, evolving, holistic systems of human development and growth?

Current models of conflict resolution tend to isolate conflict from the context of other, ongoing processes of life and development. In this research, conflict is viewed as a dynamic, changing process constituted by a multiplicity of relationships within a specific context. As Kincheloe (2001) asserts:

Any social, cultural, psychological, or pedagogical object of inquiry is inseparable from its context, the language used to describe it, its historical situatedness in a larger ongoing process, and the socially and culturally constructed interpretations of its meaning(s) as an entity in the world. (p. 682)

Drawing again on a medical analogy, traditional models approach conflict the way traditional western medicine approaches sickness: symptoms are often isolated from the context of the whole person, and the overall response to sickness is reactive rather than proactive. Thus, traditional approaches to conflict resolution are inherently reductionistic.

Current models also assume the stability of peoples' conflict styles, values, interests, beliefs, and cultural references. What science reminds us, however, is that although systems often appear stable, they undergo constant shifts within the changing environment in order to survive. All life is engaged in movement of some kind. Systems survive *because* they shift and adapt to their environment—even dysfunctional or harmful systems find ways to maintain themselves based on fundamental, universal principles of perpetuation and survival. The challenge then, is to modify and develop traditional views of conflict and conflict resolution to fit current understandings of the way systems are known to operate throughout the natural and social world.

The universe is constantly changing and dynamic (Capra, 1976), and in fact, can more accurately be described as a dynamic *process* rather than a place (Kelso, 1995). Elements within the universe are connected over time and distance, and it is the patterns created by these connections that comprise the basic workings of the universe (Capra, 1976). The principle of connectivity is becoming accepted across social science disciplines, including psychology. For example, research suggests that it would be more accurate to locate consciousness itself not in the physical brain, but in the “cooperativity or coordination between places” in the brain (Kelso, 1995). As Kelso states:

The classic dichotomy between structure and function fades, and we begin to sense the intimate relation between them. Ultimately, all we are left with is dynamics, self-sustaining and persisting on several space-time scales, at all levels from the single cell up. (p. 15)

A holistic, dynamic, connected universe demands different modes of inquiry than those based on Newtonian physics. As Margaret Wheatley (1999) bluntly states in her work on leadership and organizational development: “We need to stop seeking after the universe of the seventeenth century and begin to explore what has become known to us

during the twentieth century” (p. 8). According to the laws of Newtonian physics, all things move toward equilibrium (the law of entropy) (Masterpasqua, 1997). However, the inadequacy of this law for explaining change in living (including human and social) systems was recognized when the connection to *context* was considered. While movement toward equilibrium does take place in systems that can be insulated from their context², the law of entropy does not hold for systems that are integrally embedded within an environmental or contextual matrix. Living systems necessarily exchange energy or information with their contexts, and out of that exchange comes spontaneous “reorganization, reintegration, and complexity” (p. 31). Further, new developments in systems thinking (Maturana & Varela, 1987) show us that the objective view of a system as a discrete entity embedded within and responding to changes emanating from an outside environment is erroneous. Living systems are, in fact, self-referential, meaning that from the point of view of the system, the environment is an extension of itself. With this in mind, the study of any living system (e.g., the self-system, interpersonal relationships, families, organizations, states) must acknowledge the arbitrary boundaries we create around them, and that context is an integral aspect of the system itself.

The positivist paradigm has driven much of the work to date in conflict and conflict resolution, resulting in descriptions and models that view people as stable and resistant to change, conflict as static unless shifted by a third party intervener, and conflict resolution models as reified tools that can be toted about and superimposed on conflict after conflict, regardless of context. As a phenomenon, conflict is understood by

² However, Wheatley (1999) points out that some physicists argue that there is no such thing as a closed system, because all systems exist in a context of some kind—except perhaps the universe itself. Therefore, all systems should be considered open because they interact to some degree with their environment.

breaking down and analysing component parts (e.g., communication processes, underlying needs and values, personal style, scarcity of resources, etc.), as is consistent with a mechanistic worldview. But as Lather (1992) asserts:

Science is in crisis in *both* the natural and the human sciences. Quantum physics and chaos science have created a physics very different from the one the social sciences have aspired toward in their quest for legitimate scientific status.... (but) positivism is not dead... what is dead is its theoretical dominance and its 'one best way' claims over empirical work in the human sciences. Philosophy of science, sociology of knowledge, the various voices of the marginalized, and movement in science itself [e.g., quantum physics] all have combined to make positivism's dominance increasingly shaky. (pp. 88, 90)

Also consistent with a mechanistic worldview, the goal of reductionist analysis is control—control of the conflict, of people, of the processes between people—and a return to stability. The new worldview, based on the new science (Capra, 1976) tells us that prediction is a myth and control is ultimately impossible (Eve, Horsfall, & Lee, 1997; Gleick, 1987). What we are challenged to find instead is the *order* inherent in the universe, revealed as patterns that repeat over time in endless iterations, each one different from the others but contributing to an orderly whole (Kelso, 1995; Wheatley, 1999). Finding order is different from reductionism however, and involves stepping back to view the big picture and making room for the unexpected. This process is the opposite of simplification: it allows the enlarged 'picture' to become more complex, and to hold more of what would have been discarded under a reductionist agenda³. Pedersen (1995) calls for a shift from the traditional goal of dissonance reduction in psychology to a "tolerance of ambiguity" and even "celebrating complexity" (p. 388). He points out that non-western cultures are more inclined to accept and tolerate paradox and contradiction

³ Statistical outliers are an example.

than western cultures, whose efforts to explain and account for the parts of things detracts from our understanding of the whole.

Drawing from newer, post-positivist theories of constructivism, complexity theory, chaos theory, and self-organizing systems theory, I propose to challenge the way conflict is viewed and understood. This involves seeing conflict and change from a holistic perspective, where the basic unit of analysis becomes relationship (between people, between people and their environment, and within people themselves) and the exploration of patterns linked with conflict, that emerge over time. The alternative approach offered here is to see both foreground (conflict) and background (context) in constant motion, and to allow the picture to shift so that the conflict becomes background for other, evolving processes. The goal of the research is to broaden the picture to include and take seriously the connections between conflict and context—including the often tenuous, illogical, and coincidental events that happen while conflict plays itself out in people's lives—and secondly, to explore change by adding the dimension of time. It is these two themes of context and change that are central to the research, and will provide depth to current understandings of what conflict is and how it works (see also Hoskins & Stoltz, 2003).

Research Objectives

The overall goal of the study is to look at conflict as part of a holistic change process, taking into account both context and time (temporality, change). The theoretical orientation of the project presupposes that individuals are constantly reorganizing conflict via transactions with context (others, environment) within a history of relationship. In

simple terms, the research looks at conflict in terms of the equation: individual plus context plus time.

There are five specific objectives of the study, and the first focuses on context. Notions of causality and non-linearity are drawn from chaos theory (Capra, 1996; Gleick, 1987; Kelso, 1995), which assumes that any event, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant can be causally related to any other event. Thus, the research casts a wide net in search for a sense of how conflict relates to the whole of people's lives. From a systems perspective, the central questions regarding context become⁴: What is the lived context or environment in which the conflict is situated? How many levels of context can be identified in relation to a given conflict (e.g., personal, familial, social, cultural, political)? How is the conflict affected by context, and how does it affect the context in return?

The second research objective was to go beyond the immediate context of the conflict and explore the relationship between the conflict and other (seemingly unrelated) life events across the lifespan. The questions that reflect this objective are: What is the relationship between conflict and other events in people's lives? What sense do participants make of the particular conflict experience they are describing in relation to other aspects of their lives? What sense do participants make of particular conflict experiences when viewed from a lifespan perspective? How do participants describe the role of conflict in their ongoing development?

In devising this objective, I drew from a former research study of workplace conflict (Hoskins & Stoltz, 2003). Participants, who were interviewed six months after

⁴ The research questions are listed together in Appendix A, which also served as the listening guide for interviews.

mediation, talked about how the mediation experience had prompted a process of change in other parts of their lives, or how the insights gained were consistent with changes and growth in other areas. I was also struck by how some participants, due to an absence of ongoing support from the mediator and/or management, were still struggling months later to integrate the insights gained from the mediation and live up to the agreement that had been reached.

The third objective was to deepen our understanding of conflict by exploring the viability of the change theories chosen for the study. The questions for this area of the research are: What is the process of change within a conflict dynamic or experience? What role does conflict play in the course of human change processes? How well do people's descriptions of the conflict fit with chaos/complexity theory, self-organizing systems, and constructivist theory? What change theory(s) might best describe the lived experience of conflict, especially in the context of participants' ongoing lives after the crisis of conflict has passed? What theoretical perspectives are suggested by participants' descriptions?

The fourth objective was to explore conflict from the point of view of the participant, as studies that give validity to the voices of those experiencing conflict are sorely lacking in the literature. A set of research questions that captures this objective is: How do participants describe their experience of conflict? How do people make sense and meaning of a given conflict? How is the conflict storied by participants? Are conflict stories or narratives coherently integrated into participants' lives, or are they contradictory and partial (e.g., unfinished business)? This objective aligns with the constructivist notion that people are active meaning-makers (Mahoney, 1991).

In tracing the line of thinking that led to this objective, I am aware of two thoughts: first, that it is a matter of epistemological congruence that the subjective view be given validity in a research project that has its theoretical foundations in the new tradition of relativistic, contextualized knowledges. To be consistent with the new science paradigm is to shift to a subjective position where participants can describe the sense they make of the conflict, from their particular position in place and time, and to explore the way context also shapes and constitutes individual experience. The second thought is connected to interventions: if participant's detailed, lived stories of conflict and the place it has in the totality of their lives are listened to carefully, we may discover ways of facilitating shifts that current models overlook. There may be insights gained for dealing with conflict that come from viewing it as part of a holistic, patterned order of events.

Further, by focusing on participants of the conflict and not third-party interveners (such as mediators), I am hoping to reveal folk knowledges for dealing with conflict. Echoing John McKnight (1995) in *The Careless Society*, my concern is that as the tide of professional conflict interveners grows, the confidence, common sense wisdom, and skills people commonly rely on will diminish, to the detriment of community. This concern stems from a current process of reflection in my own life about what it means to be a professional counsellor, and how I can best use my knowledge to help others. The theoretical element connecting these last two objectives is the way in which people make sense or meaning of a given conflict experience. The other half of the dialectic, however, is to look at how larger, collective socio-cultural discourses and narratives shape how people enact, perform, or do conflict. This fifth and final objective is captured by the questions: What are the dominant and alternative narratives about conflict (how

conflict should be resolved, norms about how one conducts oneself during conflict, etc.) that emerge from participants' descriptions? What are the dominant collective cultural messages and symbols that constrict people's responses and how they make sense of a given conflict situation?

It is important to note that, in keeping with a holistic systems view, the above individual and collective views cannot be separated. Although the stated objectives appear to separate the two perspectives, an attempt was made to hold them both in focus at the same time, so that what emerged was a deeper understanding of the spaces between the two (Hoskins, 2002). There is a theoretical link here between the notion of structural coupling from self-organizing systems theory (Capra, 1996; Maturana & Varela, 1987), and the idea of exploring the relationship between the system (person, conflict event) and the environment (other persons, cultural discourses about conflict). Similarly, the focus of this research is relationship—between individuals and their context, between individuals and larger, collective understandings, and between individuals and their own personal meaning-making processes.

Finally, I have included here an excerpt from my research journal that addresses my own motivations for undertaking the research. As part of the process of maintaining transparency about my views and biases and revealing what I bring to the study, I have interspersed my personal reflections throughout the dissertation.

What are my motivations for doing this research? One of the most common questions I am asked by peers in the field of conflict resolution right now is why I am not including mediators in the study. Their puzzled expressions as I labour to explain why I am only interested in those who experience conflict and not those who work as professionals to 'resolve' it, emphasizes the feeling that my relationship to the field is tenuous and distant. I am an outsider, peering over the shoulders of those busy doing the work of conflict resolution, pointing into the middle and saying 'what's that?' By "that," of course, I mean, what is it that

we're all looking at? What is the thing, in and of itself, apart from what we do to it and how we respond to it? That is what I am interested in. A friend recently gave me a delightful book that validated my curiosity, called The Tao of Pooh (Hoff, 1982). In part, it teaches us to see things as they are, in and of themselves, and to recognize the importance and usefulness of circumstances without struggling to change them:

"Whether heavy or light, wet or dry, fast or slow, everything had its own inner nature already within it, which could not be violated without causing difficulties. When abstract and arbitrary rules were imposed from the outside, struggle was inevitable" (p. 4).

Part of what I am trying to discover with this study, then, is the inner nature of conflict, based on the assumption that the patterns and laws involved may be the same as those found throughout nature, including human and social systems. My training in counselling, where the client is assumed to be the expert on his or her problems and life experiences, further fuels this natural curiosity. I am admittedly sceptical about the extent to which the humanist approach has been adopted by mediators, despite recent trends in that direction. I don't believe there is a thorough, theoretical understanding of what it really means to interact with clients, to the best of our ability, from within their own lifespace, and yet I believe that makes a significant difference to our choices of intervention.

So what are my biases, then? I am biased toward lay-understandings and experiences of conflict, and away from professional understandings. I am biased toward the assumption that there are inherent patterns and processes involved in conflict (as articulated by chaos/complexity theory and self-organizing systems theory), and that there is more to the experience than deficits in needs fulfillment, skills, and empathy, and clashes of values. And finally, I am biased by my own fear of and discomfort with conflict. There have been many times in my own life when I created problems for myself by avoiding rather than facing conflict straight on, or by approaching it ineffectually. As a natural peacemaker, I engage this project with the hope of making peace with conflict within my self.

The following section provides a detailed theoretical foundation for a systems approach to conflict.

Theoretical Foundations

The ontological assumptions associated with complexity and self-organizing systems theory demand a mode of thinking that is open to paradox and the ability to hold both/and at the same time. On one hand, there are assumptions about a dynamic, moving,

highly connected universe, where context becomes important and reality depends on position. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle showed that the observer and the observed are inextricably linked, and that the objective, detached position of the observer is a myth (Capra, 1976; Wheatley, 1999). Further, the uncertain nature of reality reveals itself in contradictory, paradoxical, and sometimes incoherent relationships between things (Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997), where what things *are*, is always in a state of *becoming*.

On the other hand, although these assumptions suggest a relativist ontology, discussions of complexity theory are also rife with the language of universality and absolutism. There is the assumption of universal, fundamental laws that govern growth in living systems and change in nonliving systems, while perception and understanding of those systems depends on position. Thus, both essentialism and relativism are associated with complexity and self-organizing systems theory. This is also seen in the way systems themselves are understood in terms of both the whole and the parts. The whole of a system is something different from the sum of its parts; often there is an essential nature or fundamental quality that defines the system as a whole. This is different from social constructionism, which views the self, for example, as devoid of a unitary entity, but constituted by a multiplicity of relationships (Gergen, 1994). At the same time, systems consist of multiplicities—elements and interactions between elements in constantly changing, fluid process. Systems also engage their environments in a way that suggests relativism, because context plays such an essential role in the ongoing life and growth of a system. But again, complexity and self-organizing systems theory view the whole as something more than the sum of the parts, so the relativist ontology is not a sufficient basis for this perspective.

I found it difficult to resist the pull toward the bipolarity of either relativism or absolutism in thinking and writing from the perspective of complexity theory⁵. The challenge was to move past this duality altogether to an ontology that makes room for both. My strategy in the end was to bring conscious awareness to the way my writing reflected the both/and nature of the topic—drawing from both lexicons of relativism and absolutism to create a work that is intended to be integrative.

Constructivism

In building the theoretical foundation for the study, I chose the conservative relativism of constructivism over the more radical relativism of social constructionism (see Efran & Fauber, 1995) as a basis from which to think and speak about the subjectivities, multiplicities, and relativity associated with complexity and self-organizing systems theory. Constructivism provides a way of speaking about self and identity that acknowledges the stability, coherence, and integrity of these aspects of being, while acknowledging that an individual's sense of self and identity are fundamentally relational. It is important to note, therefore, that the use of constructs such as self and identity are aligned in this study not with traditional psychological schools that are distinctly individualistic (such as psychoanalytic), but with relational and holistic psychologies.

According to the constructivist paradigm, there may be an absolute reality, but our perception of it is multiple and dependant on context (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Perceived reality is co-constructed by participants, yielding truth that is not absolute, but is the

⁵ Ken Wilbur (1998) wrestles with an analogous topic in his book *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*, in which he articulates an integration of modernity and post-modernity. Robert Kegan (1982) also integrates subjectivity and objectivity in his model of evolutionary human development.

commonly accepted construction held by social groups. The term construction is also used to describe the process by which individuals actively engage in their own, ongoing development (Mahoney, 1991). The assertion that both reality and consciousness arise from the active and proactive efforts of individuals is central to the constructivist view. Both types of construction (inter- and intrapersonal) and their associated realities are changeable (versus static and unalterable), although people resist change in an effort to preserve a sense of identity and “system integrity” (Mahoney, 1991, p. 18).

The implication for conceptualizing conflict from a constructivist perspective is that it departs from current ways of thinking. The common views of conflict are to see it as a clash of conflicting needs (Burton, 1986), a clash of conflicting interests (Fisher & Ury, 1981), or deficits in the relationship between parties or within the parties themselves (Bush & Folger, 1994). Common to all these views is the idea that something resides within each party that forms the basis for the conflict, such as interests, needs, or skills in communication and empathic understanding. These are individualist models, and although the transformational approach (exemplified by Bush and Folger’s 1994 work) focuses on transforming the relationship between parties, it still sees individuals as deficient in certain capacities and the mediator as responsible for empowering them. Further, the field in general seems to be following a depth approach to understanding conflict, whereby criticisms of the interest-based approach have been followed by location of the roots of conflict at deeper and deeper levels of individual experiencing (needs, values, and capacity for understanding; see e.g. Cloke, 2001). The current message seems to be that if conflict resolution models do not work, it must be because we

have not mined the depths of the human psyche deeply enough in our efforts to find the root cause.

A constructivist perspective departs from the highly individualized models that permeate conflict studies. Constructivism (and social constructionism, as marked by the emergence of the narrative mediation model of Winslade and Monk, 2000) shifts the focus of attention away from the individuals involved, to the *processes* individuals engage in with themselves, the world, and others. These processes of active participation in the creation of experience, and the reciprocal, dialectic process of being constituted by our experiences, have the potential to change the way conflict is understood. From this view, conflict becomes the *meaning* individuals make of certain experiences, and conflict would persist to the extent that people continue to be constrained by those meanings. In as much as meaning making is a constructive process of knowing (Mahoney & Moes, 1997), the question becomes: how did these people, individually and collectively, come to understand this event as conflict? Discourses, cultural symbols, and metaphors about how conflict is (or ought to be) enacted or performed would be seen as both constraints and opportunities for resolving conflict. Thus, the dialectic of the collective and the individual would be acknowledged as a synergistic process that gives rise to conflict.

Chaos and Complexity Theory

Chaos and complexity theory are rooted in systems thinking, which reaches back historically to the ancient Greeks' notion that a whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Bausch, 2001). The link between chaos and complexity is that chaotic behaviour tends to arise when some of the conditions of a complex system are extant. These conditions include multiple components (part of the basic structure of a complex system), dense

causal connections (multiple relationships among components), and non-linear dynamics (Homer-Dixon, 2001). Given this description, it is easy to conceptualize human systems, both intra and interpersonal, as complex—and to assume that chaotic periods are part of the natural course of human and social development.

Systems thinking is holistic, and with its emphasis on relationships, interactions, and context, it has profoundly challenged Cartesian assumptions of analysis, which holds that by reducing something to analysis of its component parts, we can understand the properties of the whole (Capra, 1996; Wheatley, 1999). Systems thinking reverses this process of understanding, proposing instead that only by studying something in its entirety and in context, can we come to understand its parts.

Early systems thinking drew on organic metaphors such as the human body to describe and explain the world (e.g., the Catholic Church was often referred to as the body of Christ). The organic view enjoyed a revival during the Romantic period in resistance to the mechanistic paradigm that rose to dominance during the Industrial Revolution (Capra, 1996). Isaac Newton's proposal that "the motion of the whole is the sum of the motion of all of the parts" has been countered by complexity theory's dictum that "the motion of the whole is not only greater than, but *different* from the sum of the motions of the parts" (Kelso, 1995, p. 16; emphasis in original). It follows that a central idea of complexity theory is that it is the relationships between elements of a system that reveal the nature of the system.

In addition to systems work in the physical sciences and mathematics, the organic paradigm has been applied to social systems throughout history by thinkers such as Hobbes, Durkheim, Parsons, and Von Bertalanffy. A central figure in current work on

social systems is Luhmann (1982), whose functionalist view describes societies as natural and biological processes.

A basic assumption of the organic view, and later of cybernetics, was that homeostasis was the distinguishing feature of open systems⁶. Sociologists such as Karl Deutsch argued, however, that homeostasis was not a characteristic of social systems, and that the focus in open systems should be on change rather than stability. This focus on change in systems is present in current applications of chaos theory (e.g., Morgan, 1997; Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997), and is captured in the following quotation:

Chaos theory provides an elegant mathematical grounding for a postmodern social science which affirms variety and change as entirely natural attributes of social systems... All theories of social behavior henceforth must be change theories. (Young, 1994)

Two orientations besides the organic model that influenced systems thinking were the mechanical model and the process model (Bausch, 2001). The mechanical model promoted a view of people as elaborate machines. The process model, promoted by thinkers such as George Simmel, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey, described social systems as consisting of “a complex, multifaceted, fluid interplay of widely varying degrees and intensities of association” (Bausch, 2001, p.15).

These three approaches to systems thinking coalesced after the Second World War and gained momentum due to advances in biology, systems engineering, cybernetics, and sociology (Bausch, 2001). Further developments in the process approach to systems theory eventually bridged the distinction between the organic view, with its focus on living systems, and the mechanical view, which focused on non-living systems.

⁶ Open systems are systems that interact with their environment, such as biological and social systems (Bausch, 2001).

Under the process view, matter is seen as both living and non-living, and it is the way matter *organizes* that is given centrality. In this way, both organicism and mechanicism were fused into a general theory of systems (Bausch, 2001).

By the late 1960's, systems thinking had developed significantly in physics, mathematics, and biology, yielding specialties such as non-linear thermodynamics, complexity/chaos theory, information theory, component-systems, and self-organizing systems theory. Currently, the two "grand unifying theories of present day systems thinking" are chaos theory and self-organizing systems theory. According to Bausch (2001), "these two strands of thinking advance systems theory beyond the bounds of mechanical (closed) models and organic (open) models and move it into the arena of emergent models" (p. 17-18). The following section highlights the main points of these two theories that are salient to discussions of conflict.

Chaotic systems have two major distinguishing features: 1) they are extremely sensitive to initial conditions, and 2) they are non-linear (Bausch, 2001). The first point means that a small change in initial conditions of a process in systems that are capable of chaos, can lead to very large differences in the future. The second point means that the behaviour of a chaotic system never repeats itself. This is because chaotic systems are actually features of larger, non-linear systems, in which the laws of cause and effect do not hold. Therefore, chaotic systems are always non-linear, while non-linear systems may or may not exhibit chaos at any given time. These points will be explicated more fully in the following discussion.

As noted above, the field of mathematics was a key area for significant developments in systems thinking during the twentieth century. Essentially, the field had

been stumped by problems in which extremely simple sets of equations yielded highly disordered solutions (Capra, 1996; Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997). With the development of computers, it was expected that these problems would be overcome—but they were not. Eventually, it was shown that regardless of the calculating power of modern computers and the precision of variables, “there is not enough time or information-processing power in the universe to complete the necessary calculations” (Eve et al., 1997, p. xiv). Out of the acceptance that mathematical solutions are not necessarily linear came development of the field of non-linear dynamics, which challenges notions of simple cause and effect by showing that seemingly random events can be connected to other events in ways that can only be discerned over long periods of time.

The development of non-linear dynamics challenged the very foundations of traditional science, which long held that the universe only appeared to be random and unpredictable, but was actually deterministic. The assumption was that we simply did not yet possess the powers of observation (i.e., technology) for establishing correct deterministic causes. What non-linear dynamics has shown, however, is that the universe is comprised of “unpredictable situations” that arise via deterministic processes.

According to Eve et al. (1997), the “unpredictable situation” is:

A situation unpredictable in itself, not just by virtue of the limits of its observer. We are spared the labor of attempting to predict such situations and thus can devote our efforts to understanding them in different ways, for ‘unpredictable’ does not necessarily mean ‘unintelligible,’ or inaccessible to knowledge and understanding. (p. xiv)

This description of the unpredictable situation captures some basic elements of chaos theory, which was the term adopted by mathematics to explain its new findings. It is important to distinguish that chaos is not simply randomness, but that it is something

between complete randomness and complete order or predictability. Studies from the physical sciences of natural water flow, frequency patterns, and chemical interactions show that systems exhibiting chaotic behaviour also exhibit *patterns* that provide a boundary within which chaos occurs (Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997). Stewart (1989; quoted in Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997) defines chaos as “lawless behavior governed by exact laws” (p. 9). There is a paradox here, in which there are universal rules (e.g., for the way emergence occurs) for describing the system as a whole, but which reveal almost nothing of its contents. Thus, the answer to the question of freedom versus determinism has been defined as “both”: events are completely free and random, within patterns of order. It seems that the only thing that is pre-determined and predictable in the universe is the process of emergent patterns out of chaos (Kelso, 1995).

Currently, chaos is viewed as the very foundation from which more complex and integrated organization emerges. According to Byrne (1998), “chaos is the precursor of order, not its antithesis” (p. 5; see also Kelso, 1995). It may be that changes that occur to the system as a whole are *invariably* preceded by periods of chaos, an idea that has profound implications for those in the helping field. There is ample evidence that unpredictability and qualitative change are core aspects of systems in nature, and an assumption I bring to the study is that human and social systems are natural systems as well, and are subject to the same laws.

Evolution and Emergence: Complex Adaptive Systems

One of the major ideas to emerge from chaos theory pertains to the ability of complex systems to adapt and survive. Survival of the fittest is no longer understood to

mean survival of the fastest and strongest, but survival of the most *adaptable* in the face of environmental change. According to Eve et al. (1997):

It used to be thought that the more complex a system was, the more elements it contained, the more intricately they were connected, and the greater interdependence of all, the more fragile such a system would be, the more subject to disruption and catastrophic collapse. Simple systems seemed more stable and predictable—stable *because* predictable. But the good news (or the bad news!) seems to have been that complex and interdependent systems can be amazingly robust and enduring... the point is that stability has nothing to do with the relative simplicity or complexity of a system. (pp. xvii-xviii)

While these authors concede that some complex systems can be highly unstable, it is now understood that, in general, complex systems have an evolutionary advantage over simple systems—their ability to respond to environmental changes (Eve et al., 1997). Further, in an unchanging universe, negative feedback leading to homeostasis would be ideal; for a universe in perpetual motion, however, positive feedback (which feeds information forward into the system) continuously produces new behaviours and structures, ensuring that the system survives in a state of *dynamic* equilibrium (see also Kelso, 1995; Mahoney & Moes, 1997). Similarly, according to Masterpasqua & Perna (1997), chaotic systems are at the brink of structural change (known as a phase of “maximum probability”[(p. 9)] and could follow any number of developmental trajectories. The great number of evolutionary paths open to systems in chaos directly increases the chances of survival.

This idea of the emergence of new patterns is central to chaos theory and the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing systems. George Herbert Mead recognized as long ago as 1932 that newly emergent patterns or structures cannot always be predicted based on the behaviour of the original components (Mihata, 1997). In other words, in combining the elements of a chaotic system, something entirely new emerges that was

not there before. This is what makes complex systems so adaptive, because whatever it is that is newly emergent has arisen in relationship to the environment, and is therefore probably more, rather than less, resilient (T. S. Smith, 1997). The newly emergent patterns also circle back and effect changes on the whole system (via positive feedback), implying that novelty is both an outcome and an influence on the future—and therefore that qualitative change is self-reproducing.

With this idea, we have what Mihata (1997) refers to as nonpredictability and nondeducibility—the idea that the behaviour of systems (or future events) cannot be anticipated given only our knowledge of initial conditions⁷. Likewise, the notion of reductionism (that we can understand something by examining its parts) is also challenged (Byrne, 1998; Kelso, 1995), since we cannot deduce behaviour at a higher level from behaviour at a lower level. As Mihata puts it “there is no shorthand representation of a system” (p.33).

Attractors

An attractor pulls components of a system toward it so that behaviour becomes confined within restricted areas (Byrne, 1998; Capra, 1996). Gravity is an example of an attractor. Simple, non-chaotic attractors either restrict behaviour to an exact and precise replication that occurs over and over (called point attractors), or restrict behaviour to within a range of limits (called limit cycle attractors), as with a thermostat. Attractors that operate in chaotic systems, however, are called strange attractors. The behaviour of strange attractors is highly irregular and unpredictable within an overall pattern that,

⁷ This is more so for long-term predictions and less so for events in the near future.

when viewed retrospectively, can be seen to consist of regularities. In other words, the strange attractor also has limits within which irregular behaviour occurs.

The concept of the attractor applies to human and social systems as well.

Behaviour that follows a set order or pattern (or a chaotic one) can be said to constitute an attractor state. Habits are examples of point or limit cycle attractors, while substance abuse (Hawkins & Hawkins, 1998) and domestic violence (Proskauer & Butz, 1998) may constitute a strange attractor because of the chaos within larger, repeating patterns.

Attractors apply to relational systems such as family interactions and workplace dynamics. In their discussion of the application of chaos theory to the personality, Lewis and Junyk (1997) state that “attractors take the place of traits... as the familiar, predictable states people exhibit in their social or emotional behavior” (p. 44).

Masterpasqua and Perna (1997) remind us that chaotic states involving strange attractor patterns are only one in a variety of directions a system might move, and therefore that chaos is not ubiquitous. They do point out, however, that chaos is “an important phase in the evolution of systems toward new organizations, organizations that (for natural systems) are potentially more complex and adaptive” (p. 9). Further, the ability to move to a chaotic state, according to the authors, is important in preventing resistance to change. The following concept is central to that process.

Bifurcation

Chaos theory tells us that the emergence of new patterns in systems is not smooth and incremental but involves dramatic shifts (B. Smith, 1997). Bifurcation describes the point at which a system moves from one trajectory or attractor state to another. Capra (1996) adds that bifurcation points indicate instability in the structure and are

evolutionary forks that take the system in a new and often unpredicted direction. An important point (previously noted) is that very small changes in unstable chaotic systems can produce profound shifts—hence the famous butterfly weather analogy, in which it is said that the movement of a butterfly’s wings in Beijing today can cause a storm in New York next month (Capra, 1996).

This point also has important implications for the helping field. People in the midst of an unstable, chaotic period are especially sensitive to small influences that can set them on a course of action that is radically different from the past. I am reminded of my ex-husband, who was having trouble finding work as a civil engineer technologist during the time that I was expecting our third child. He became increasingly despondent and depressed about his unemployment, but upon visiting me in the hospital after our baby was born, declared that he had become inspired to become a registered nurse (much to my surprise). Three years later he had completed nursing school, and is still a practising nurse today. No one in his immediate circle of friends and family would have predicted his choice.

Self-organizing Systems

Over time, complex systems move through periods of chaos, where the emergence of new patterns optimizes the system’s ability to adapt to the ever-changing environment. Although this process occurs in both non-living and living systems, the latter (ranging from single cells to human social systems) are capable of another level of order: self-organization. The spontaneous formation of patterns in living systems is what is meant by self-organization: “the system organizes itself, but there is no ‘self’, no agent inside the system doing the organizing” (Kelso, 1995, p. 8). The term ‘autopoiesis’ (from

Greek, meaning self-production or self-making) is used by some scientists and authors to describe the same process (see Maturana & Varela, 1987), and the two terms will be used interchangeably here.

The idea that living systems are self-organizing (that they both produce and are produced by nothing other than themselves) was developed by Maturana and Varela (1987). Living systems must be considered in the context of their environment because the energy they need to reproduce themselves is cycled from the environment through the system, and back to the environment again (as with a cell taking in nutrients and passing waste through its membrane). According to Maturana & Varela, in order to understand the dynamics of any system, we need to not only understand the relations between its components in terms of regularity and pattern (or organization), but also to see the system in the context, medium, or environment with which it interacts. They further distinguish between living and non-living systems by showing (with a fascinating but challenging explanatory process beginning at the cellular level and continuing through to human social systems) that the organizational purpose of living systems is self-creation or self-production, which they term *autopoiesis*:

What is distinctive about (living systems) is that their only product is themselves, with no separation between producer and product. The being and doing of an autopoietic unity are inseparable, and this is their specific mode of organization. (p. 49)

The significance of the idea that being and doing are synonymous in living systems is that all interaction between the system and its environment occurs *within* the confines of the structure of the system. In other words, living systems (including individuals, who can be considered self-organizing systems; see Mahoney, 1991) do not

react to stimuli from outside environments as much as they do to their own internal structure, as it is disturbed or perturbed by outside triggers (Maturana & Varela, 1987). Any change in a living system is therefore less a reflection of the environment than of its own internal structure. In fact, because systems are self-referential, from the perspective of the system the environment is really an extension of itself, and any distinctions made between the system and its context are arbitrarily drawn by an objective observer (Morgan, 1997). When it is recalled, however, that objectivity is a physical impossibility (Capra, 1976), we are challenged to view systems as inclusive of the vast, interconnected set of relationships in which they are situated. The following quote by Morgan (1997) explains:

We could attempt to understand such systems by drawing an artificial boundary between the system and environment—for example, around the individual bee, or the society of bees, or the bee-flora-fauna system—but in doing so we break the circular chain of interaction. An understanding of the autopoietic nature of systems requires *that we understand how each element simultaneously combines the maintenance of itself with the maintenance of the others*. It is simply not good enough to dismiss a large part of the circular chain of interaction as “the environment.” The environment is part of the bee system, and the different levels are in effect coproduced. Changes do not arise as a result of external influences. They are produced by variations *within* the overall system that modify the basic mode of organization. (p. 254; emphasis in original)

The relationship between an autopoietic system and its environment (which can include other systems like itself) is called structural coupling (Maturana & Varela, 1987). Structural coupling occurs “whenever there is a history of recurrent interactions leading to the structural congruence between two (or more) systems” (p. 75). According to Mingers (1995), it is “the way in which the system’s structure develops to presuppose or expect that certain perturbations will occur in its environment” (p. 147). Thus, the system is able to self-produce new and creative ways of responding to its environment, which in

turn invokes changes in its own structure that further influences its future behaviours and the environment. As such, autopoietic systems are also learning systems (Capra, 1996), which is not a surprising conclusion to make about humans and animals (as autopoietic systems) for those of us working in the field of psychology.

But rather than these influences taking place in turn-taking fashion as might be implied, structural coupling is a mutual "coordination of behaviour" (Capra, 1996), which is more akin to a dance. With this idea, behaviours linking the system and its environment can take any form of mutual coordination, including conflict. A pattern of behaviours would eventually settle into an attractor state until something disruptive led to the emergence of a new pattern—a point that links this idea with the previous discussion of chaos theory.

According to self-organizing systems theory (Maturana & Varela, 1987), perturbations do not exist in the environment, because it is the structure of the system that determines what is and is not a perturbation or disturbance. A perturbation to the system can only arise within the context of the relationship between the system and its environment. And if we shift the concept of structure from the physical to the level of psychological and social organization, we see links to constructivist theory: people actively construct meaning systems, which in turn determine what does and does not qualify as a perturbation or disturbance to the system. In some socio-cultural settings, a verbal comment might constitute an insult or provocation; the same comment would be entirely ignored in another setting or by a person with a different meaning structure. People can only integrate information that they have self-primed their system to take in;

the ability to adjust in a healthy way to others involves adjustments to the very meaning structures by which we live.

The concept of a boundary is also fundamental to autopoiesis (Maturana & Varela, 1987). Autopoietic systems are thermodynamically open, meaning that they exchange energy and matter with their environment. At the same time, they are operationally closed, meaning that despite having a permeable boundary, the system remains autonomous of its environment (see also Capra, 1996; Kossman & Bullrich, 1997). The system continues to self-organize and self-produce within its environment, and it maintains its identity and ability to function within a network of environmental interactions. Morgan (1997) emphasizes that although autopoietic systems are autonomous, they are not isolated from their environment. Autonomy is organizational, which is the system's ability to close in on itself through feedback loops that always return from the environment to the system. According to Morgan:

(Systems are) self-referential because a system cannot enter into interactions that are not specified in the pattern of relations that define its organization. Thus, a system's interaction with its "environment" is really a reflection and part of its own organization. It interacts with its environment in a way that facilitates its own self-productions; its environment is really a part of itself. (p. 253-254)

Jantsch (quoted in Francis, 1998) makes a similar point: "It is not adaptation to a given environment that signals a unified overall evolution, but the co-evolution of system and environment at all levels, the co-evolution of micro- and macrocosms" (p. 153).

Structure determination is the term Mahoney (1991) uses to describe the idea that living, autopoietic systems have a range of options for change that are predefined and confined by its structure. The implication for human experiencing, including the experience of

conflict, is that objective knowledge is therefore impossible—that is, it is impossible to step outside of one’s own structure to view someone else from their own meaning-making perspective. What we understand about others and the world we share is inherently influenced by our own internal organization. Mahoney (1991) talks about “feedforward mechanisms” (p. 100) in contrast to the older cybernetic notion of feedback, in which information is passively received from the environment, processed, and returned to the environment as feedback with no change to the system⁸. Feedforward mechanisms pose a significant challenge to cybernetic and computer-based information-processing models of human cognition by emphasizing a participatory and active role. Drawing from research on the brain and nervous system, we now know that physiological responses are not caused by outside stimuli; rather, the stimulus “joins the ongoing activity continuously being generated within the system” (Mahoney, 1991, p. 101). Given the ratio of 100,000 neurons connected internally to one neuron connected externally, “we are forced to conclude that one is much more extensively connected to oneself than with the external environment” (p. 101-2).

Self-organizing systems theory (Maturana & Varela, 1987) holds implications for understanding conflict and conflict resolution. In his discussion of autopoiesis and workplace organizations, Morgan (1997) argues that “organizations are always attempting to achieve a form of self-referential closure in relation to their environments, enacting their environments as extensions of their own identity” (p. 256). It may be that conflict emerges in a system when that system encounters problems in organizing the

⁸ Capra (1997) uses the term feedback in the same way that Mahoney (1991) uses feedforward, which is slightly confusing. Both terms are used to infer a closed loop circuit operating between the system, its environment, and back again in an ongoing process. This process continuously informs both the system and the environment and facilitates coordinated change in both.

environment as an extension of its own identity⁹. Or, it may be that conflict arises when the closed feedback loop (to use Capra's 1997 term), becomes disrupted. In other words, conflict may arise within the network of the system-plus-environment when the system is no longer receiving feedback that supports its structure in the manner to which it is accustomed. A period of chaos would ensue (in which conflict might arise) until the system shifts and establishes a new or different structural coupling with the environment that supports its ongoing preservation. This idea is explored further in the analysis of the research.

The self-referential nature of living systems poses unique challenges to conflict interveners. Mediators often try to facilitate perspective-taking between the parties as a way of building connections and promoting understanding and empathy. This could very well be a critical point, because according to self-organizing systems theory, other peoples' points of view, interests, perspectives, and even the people themselves, are extensions of the individual's self-system. According to this view, it is impossible for an individual to step outside of his or her own, all-encompassing system and apprehend the view of another. Perspective-taking would emphasize the process of reorganizing one's own system to include the perspective of another. This process might be difficult if not impossible unless there is a point of reference to begin with, from within one's own system. The bridge that mediators build between parties actually resides, in the end, *within* each individual party—what has been bridged is another part of the individual's environment, within him or herself. But rather than simply forging new connections,

⁹ The term *identity* is used throughout the dissertation to refer to the wholeness or unique, essential quality of a system. As such, I am using the word as it applies to people in the conventional sense of identity as the way they define themselves or the whole sense they have of themselves, and also in reference to the organizational autonomy of a system.

what this type of shift might entail is reorganization and the emergence of something qualitatively new—a second order change in the person’s self-system (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). When coupled with the idea that “any living thing will change only if it sees change as the means of preserving itself” (Wheatley, 1999, p. 147), the importance of understanding systems from within their unique frame of reference becomes clear.

What these ideas suggest, in fact, is that current views of transformation in the conflict field are slightly off the mark: it is not the conflict or the relationship that requires or can even accomplish transformation, but only the autonomous, self-referential systems involved. This is not a regression to an individualist model, however, as both the *autonomy* of the system and its *interdependence* within an environment are integrally related. Therefore, systems thinkers must view systems as both at the same time.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

“At last, the physical and natural sciences are offering a paradigm that does not force the inherent complexity of human personality and behavior into linear, reductionistic boxes.” (Masterpasqua, 1997)

Chaos, Complexity, and Autopoiesis in Human and Social Systems

As previously stated, chaos theory and autopoiesis have been integrated by many systems thinkers and applied to human and social systems (Bausch, 2001; Eve et al., 1997; Luhmann, 1982; Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997). The literature reveals more controversy around the application of the theory of autopoiesis to human and social systems, and less for chaos theory. Mingers (1995) describes the debate surrounding autopoiesis and human/social systems, and defines two central problems: 1) the difficulty in clearly specifying the components that constitute an entity in the social sense, and 2) the difficulty in clearly defining a boundary that separates the entity from its environment—both central requirements for an autopoietic system. For example, a family may consist of human members well as the family pet, depending on the family’s feelings about the pet and its meaningfulness in their lives. And in terms of boundaries, some families include extended family members while others can be defined more narrowly based on the Western, nuclear definition. A further component of the debate raises ontological concerns about objectivity and subjectivity: in order to observe an entity in relationship with its environment, it is necessary for the observer to be outside the entity’s system so he or she can apprehend interaction (structural coupling) in a holistic sense. Mingers questions whether it is possible for us as social scientists to accomplish this—that is, to remove ourselves from the picture to a position in which we can be confident that the observations being made are not artefacts of our own participation.

Mingers (1995) divides writers on the topic into the following camps: 1) those who apply autopoiesis to human/social realms without recognizing or addressing the problems involved; 2) those who do not accept that social systems are autopoietic; 3) those who enlarge the definition of autopoiesis to accommodate social systems; and 4) those who apply autopoiesis in a metaphorical sense to generate “interesting ways of seeing social systems” (p. 120).

Regarding the last point, Reason and Goodwin (1999) argue that metaphorical applications are a legitimate form of theoretical inquiry because “metaphor lies at the basis of all theorizing” (p. 298). After reviewing the work done on metaphor and cognition by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and others, Reason and Goodwin conclude:

The question, then, is not whether in applying (in their case) complexity theory to organizational and social life we are being metaphorical—it would seem that metaphor is unavoidable. The first question, rather, is whether we can ‘see through’ our metaphor (Hillman, 1975), to use the metaphor rather than having it use us, so to speak.... (p. 298)

Rather than attempting to settle the debate or articulate it further in this paper, I choose to affiliate myself with Reason and Goodwin (1999), and with Mingers (1995), who arrives at two conclusions: first, that there is the “possibility of an autopoietic conceptual system,” which “might consist of ideas, descriptions, or messages that interact and self-produce” (p. 125); and second, that the work which takes the basic components of autopoietic social systems to be communications is very well developed, although not still without problems. Minger’s second point refers to the substantial body of work by Luhmann (1982) 1995) on social autopoietic systems. According to Bausch (2001), Luhmann conceptualizes social autopoietic systems in terms of meaning systems, which are autopoietic because “they constantly reproduce and modify their meaning units and

structures of understanding” (p. 194). Meaning systems can be psychic or social: psychic meaning systems pertain to consciousness as meaning, while social meaning systems pertain to communications as meaning. The link between autopoiesis and constructivism is again apparent here, in that both theories hold that people actively construct or organize meanings about themselves and the world.

My conclusion is that, although there are theoretical concerns still needing to be addressed, they are not sufficient to halt the progress of applying autopoietic theory to human and social systems. In fact, there appears to be a growing body of literature that uses chaos or complexity theory and autopoiesis in the study of human and social systems (Bausch, 2001; Byrne, 1998; Eve et al., 1997; Kelso, 1995; Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997; Young, 1994). These theories are being applied in such specific areas as psychotherapy and counselling (Eidelson, 1997; Koopmans, 1998; Marks-Tarlow, 1999; Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997; Miller, 1995; Pincus, 2001), brain functioning and human behaviour (Kelso, 1995), group dynamics (McGrath, 1997), addictions (Broad, 1996; Skinner, 1989), decision making (Richards, 1990), education (Hannay, Smeltzer Erb, & Ross, 2001), criminology (Walters, 1999), health care (Plsek & Wilson, 2001), and legal theory (Kellert, 2001). More closely related to the conflict field, this body of theory is being applied to multicultural conflict (Pedersen, 1995), workplace conflict (Fortado, 2001), public discourse (Dillon, 1993), management (Bartholomew, 2001; Reason & Goodwin, 1999; Stacey, 1996), mediation (Ruhl, 1997), and social theory (Antonovsky, 1993). This section focuses on studies related to the fields of psychology and sociology, followed by a section that reviews existing research on chaos/complexity theory, complex adaptive systems, and autopoiesis in the field of conflict studies.

Masterpasqua and Perna (1997) report a number of studies from cognitive science and physiology that suggest chaotic patterns exist in brain wave activity. It appears that these patterns increase with complex or novel mental challenges, and decrease with some disorders such as epilepsy. The authors conclude from the research that not only is the central nervous system self-organizing, but the whole psychic system as well. This has implications for, at the very least, behavioural patterns, learning, memory, and perception. For example, chaotic patterns ensure that learning systems remain open rather than constantly defaulting to previously learned behaviours. As Masterpasqua and Perna state, chaos brings an element of not knowing, the “‘I don’t know’ state within which new activity patterns can be generated” (p. 16).

This concept of chaos as a necessary and natural phase in a system’s development, allowing it to remain flexible and adaptive within a changing environment, is central to the difference that complexity and chaos theory brings to psychology. Essentially, what is classically viewed as disorder and dysfunction are viewed within the new paradigm as “episodes of personal disorganization” (Mahoney & Moes, 1997), or chaos. In their chapter on the implications of complexity theory for psychotherapy, Mahoney and Moes (1997) state that disorder is no longer “the dragon” of mental health (p. 187), but that:

What complexity studies offer, among other things, is a view of disorder that respects the role of ever-present cascades of disorganization in the living system’s dynamic and lifelong development. (p. 188)

The authors further argue that humans spend most of our time “poised at the edge of chaos” (Mahoney & Moes, p. 188) and expend a lot of energy maintaining the balance between complete disorganization and a rigid level of order that precludes learning and

flexibility. Like a tightrope walker, we maintain our dynamic balance with movement between extremes. But as the authors point out, unlike tightrope walking, chaos lies not just in one direction that we may stray into, but “all around us and partly within us” (p. 188). If we are always engaging in movements that help us to maintain balance, then it is inevitable that we will cycle through periods of chaos and disorganization in the course of normal development.

Mahoney and Moes (1997) review a number of studies showing that chaos precedes change. In one study, chaos, or destabilization, was quantified and measured as cognitive disorganization, affective distress, and somatic complaints (Hayes & Goldfried, 1996, reported in Mahoney & Moes, 1997). Mahoney and Moes are careful to make the point that chaos is not always correlated with positive change, however, and also advise practitioners to be aware of clients’ needs in terms of challenge (which might promote increased destabilization) and support (or the need to provide stability when the system has become too destabilized).

The critical shift in thinking implied by this work is one of focusing on *facilitating the change process* that is indicated by the presence of chaos, rather than focusing on *containment of the chaos*. This is a significant challenge to conflict resolution models as well, whose focus is on achieving stability through either reaching substantive agreements (Fisher & Ury, 1981), or improving relationships (Winslade & Monk, 2000; and to a partial degree, Bush & Folger, 1994). Pederson (1995) says that Western conflict resolution models draw on the assumption that dissonance reduction, as opposed to tolerance of ambiguity, is essential for conflict management. However, if conflict is present during periods of chaos (destabilization) as one of perhaps many indicators of

changing dynamics, then conflict interveners need to shift away from containment of the conflict in all cases, toward helping people track the significance it holds in terms of potential change. The goals instead might become 1) helping people cope with and increase tolerance of chaos, ambiguity, and conflict; 2) identification of the systems that might be poised for change (e.g., the family, personal constructs, organizational structure) and the potential directions they may take; 3) to decrease resistance to change; and 4) to harness the potential energy inherent in chaotic periods for creative and healthy change.

With integration of the notion of autopoiesis into the discussion comes consideration of the system's relationship to its environment. According to Kossman and Bullrich (1997):

We do not learn about the world around us so much as we reorganize ourselves relative to it... at the boundary of self and other, perturbations occur. Information is the result of internal processing of such perturbations, altering the self-organizing activity of the organism. Thus, information is an internal construction based on the interaction of self and other. Information does not enter a system in pre-digested form. (p. 211)

As such, what it is to be human involves multiple levels of autopoiesis. First, we are organisms that self-reproduce our physical components in a constant exchange of energy and matter with the environment. We are also the medium for autopoietic meaning systems (through consciousness) that organize and integrate information from the environment; these meaning systems are self-referential, in that new meanings emerge from the circulation of the old while in relationship with the environment. And finally, we engage in the construction of autopoietic communication systems, in which the environment in this case is other human systems, or the social system.

An interesting notion about psychic and social systems and autopoiesis is the idea that autopoietic systems exist for the sole purpose of producing themselves. This speaks

to the tenacity with which people hold onto their meaning systems (e.g., points of view, beliefs, values, etc.) and the difficulty involved in shifting them (Mahoney, 1991). Meaning systems keep themselves alive by selecting and integrating from the environment only that information that fits the existing structure. This is where the permeability of boundaries becomes important. As previously stated, autopoietic systems are functionally open (i.e., they interact with the environment), and structurally closed (by virtue of their ability to produce and reproduce themselves). The balance between the two is dependent on the state of permeability of the system's boundaries: if the boundary is too open to the environment, the system dissipates or completely falls apart; if it is too closed, the system becomes inflexible in the face of environmental changes, and will eventually face a crisis it cannot survive.

With respect to meaning systems, this balance speaks to the need for the exchange of information in interaction with the environment, and the danger of boundary rigidity. Examples include the stereotypical person who so rigidly holds on to his or her way of being that they are eventually left lonely and bereft of fulfilling relationships; or the company that refuses to update its operations in accordance with changing technology and eventually loses its competitive edge. Boundaries can also be too open, resulting in damage to the integrity of the system. Teaching good boundaries has become important in our present social and technical climate, where the free and ample exchange of values, beliefs, ideas, and meanings can be overwhelming. Kossman and Bullrich (1997) discuss the boundary permeability of family systems within the context of family therapy. They talk about repetitive, first order changes within a system of closed and rigid boundaries as attempts to avoid disorganization: "The closure of the boundary, however, does not

succeed as an adaptive strategy because it leads toward equilibrium, a false safe haven for any open system” (p. 213).

First order change within rigid boundaries amounts to efforts to replicate the past, and according to Kossman and Bullrich, a predominance of such efforts flies in the face of healthy adaptation:

What we call the past is the pattern replication of self-organization in action. The past is the echo of the present in the here and now. Any attempt to interrupt the flow of time by saying, “This moment is good, let me try to hold on to it and stay here,” is an escape into a mental construct distracting attention from adaptation to the next moment. (p. 213)

Thus, although it makes sense to try to maintain stability by doing what we know has worked in the past, the system can be threatened by “an indifferent and more powerful context” (Kossman & Bullrich, 1997, p. 217), leading to the crisis of enforced second order change, in which the system as a whole is affected. This has implications for helping interventions whose primary focus is on previously successful strategies; such strategies can be harmful to the system as a whole in the long term if the need to adapt to the present environmental context is ignored.

The potential for conflict can arise at various levels as systems struggle to negotiate the ideal permeability of boundaries. On an individual level, boundary rigidity around beliefs, opinions, values, meanings, etc. can throw a person into conflict with other individuals (who comprise part of the person’s environment) or with larger systems such as organizations, social structures, etc. If the person does move toward growth by allowing his or her boundaries to become more permeable, he or she might enter a state of personal disorganization or chaos, increasing again the chance of conflict due to anxiety, emotionality, and general difficulty in coping.

The basic notions regarding chaos as a natural and inevitable part of the change process and autopoiesis as a description of living systems can be applied on a larger, social scale as well. As mentioned, a central figure in this body of work is Luhmann (1982, 1995). In his review of Luhmann's work, Mingers (1995) talks about communicative events as the element that social systems continually produce. Communicative events are comprised of information, utterance (the action involved in communicating) and understanding (or misunderstanding), which ensures further communication and thus the process of autopoiesis. For both Luhmann and Mingers, communication is separated from the individuals involved and becomes an entity of its own by virtue of its social or relational nature. This is an example of the whole arising from the interaction of the parts: communicative events cannot be broken down and analysed from the perspective of each individual involved, but must be seen as a complex, interactive whole that is unique to place and time. As Mingers says "the people will come and go, and their individual subjective motivations will disappear, but the communicative dynamic will remain" (p. 144).

In Bausch's (2001) discussion of Luhmann, conflicts are described as particular forms of communication, called "communicated contradictions" (p. 217). Conflict serves a special social function, in that it is the particular form of communication that allows communication itself to continue in the face of conflicting expectations. According to Bausch:

As conflicts go on, they generate creative adaptations, which enable social systems to endure. Conflicts-endured generate a society's immune system. They enter its social memory (history) to maintain alertness and instability among opposing expressions. They strengthen a social system's ability to reproduce under difficult circumstances. (p. 217)

This view speaks to the unique adaptive function of conflict in societies as systems of complexity. Bausch's argument is that societies need conflict in order to "increase the interconnection of its elements and achieve greater ordered complexity" (p. 217). Drawing on a history of conflict, or rather, of maintaining communication through conflict, social systems become creatively adaptive through the "spontaneous generativity of unstable connectivity" (p. 217). Such positive benefits can be seen at two levels. First, social systems can become more creatively adaptive at handling conflict itself. Bausch points out that societies that have a history of conflict develop mechanisms for conflict resolution, thus restricting its most extreme expressions (i.e., violence) while allowing opportunities for the expression of conflicting views. It is the very embodiment of conflict, or continuing communication, that "enables a society to cope with its complexity" (p. 218), and it is this second level, the societal, at which the positive benefits of conflict can also be seen. Implicit in the idea of increasing complexity in social systems is the possibility of divergent goals, views, purposes, needs, etc. A society's conflict history can be seen as a form of social capital, on which it can draw for coping with its own dynamic development.

By way of summarizing this section, I would add that the principles of chaos and autopoiesis discussed at both the psychological and social levels hold intuitive appeal. Personal experience tells me that where I have maintained some form of communication throughout a conflicted situation, my own meaning structures have become more complex and adaptive—that is, I have grown developmentally. From my research journal:

It occurs to me that the most significant conflict I've ever been involved with occurred within my marriage—and subsequent divorce. And because we share

children, I have had to maintain contact with someone who I would have preferred to completely sever ties with. It's been 14 years this spring since I left the marriage, and my relationship with R. has certainly been marked by conflict. And yet, for the sake of the children, I have been challenged to push past the differences and find ways of making peace, if not with R. directly, then within myself about the circumstances surrounding the divorce—or risk inflicting more suffering on the children due to their mother's "unfinished business." Is the business ever finished? I don't know, but I do know it can shift to a different level internally, thereby affecting everyone within the system more positively. For me, that's involved stepping away from blame and taking personal responsibility for my own healing. And over the past few years, I know it has been a tremendous relief for my children to see their father and I able to jointly celebrate important occasions like high school graduations—to be able to sit side-by-side and applaud them and to share a celebratory meal when once we couldn't stand to be in the same room together. Where once there was only anger, there is now space inside for a generosity of spirit. The adaptive, evolutionary advantage in such a shift is apparent in the faces of my children.

This is not to say that people should allow themselves to be unnecessarily vulnerable in the face of types of conflict that are dangerous, such as physical violence or emotional abuse. Establishing healthy boundaries with someone is as much a communicative event as engaging in verbal debate. The difference between over-exposure to a conflict and complete disassociation seems to be that the conflict itself is acknowledged and some form of action is taken, no matter how small. The event is then stored in one's personal history and, as Bausch (2001) says, "the system is prepared to deal expeditiously with new and unexpected complexity" (p. 217). The metaphor of conflict as antibody, as Bausch proposes, is radically different from the metaphor of conflict as a destructive force, or a symptom of dysfunction.

Similarly, there are examples on a macro scale for which the theories make intuitive sense. The race riots in the US during the civil rights movement of the 1960's exemplified chaos and turbulence in the American system. The old civil rights system, which excluded people of colour, passed through a period of chaos that allowed its

boundaries to loosen and become more permeable. The system then reintegrated at a higher level of complexity (second order change) that included viewing Afro-Americans as persons with equal rights in civil society. The system is, of course, still grappling with adjusting to the changes to the overall structure of the system (i.e., legal changes), and will quite likely move toward chaos again in its continuing development. The next period of turbulence might arise from the struggle for the current system to cope with changes in its environment on a more global scale, involving issues such as terrorism and illegal immigrants.

Review of the Conflict Literature

A survey of the conflict literature for research that focuses specifically on the conflict process or dynamic (as opposed to intervention strategies such as mediation or restorative justice) does not produce a lot of studies. In the opinion of one local lawyer/mediator who is well acquainted with the current body of conflict literature, the lack of descriptive research is due to a few factors (Catherine Morris, personal communication, December, 2001). First, the main focus of the field is practice, so much of the research that does exist focuses on outcomes involving intervention strategies such as mediation. Many conflict courses and programs are located in law faculties, whose focus in research is traditionally practice-oriented. And second, there are very few graduate level programs in conflict studies at public universities in North America to date, which would be the primary sites for research. In a previous paper (Hoskins & Stoltz, 2003), it was pointed out that most conflict research was prescriptive in nature (again, focusing on interventions), rather than descriptive of the conflict dynamic. The gap that is created by a shortage of naturalistic or descriptive studies means that a basic,

foundational understanding of how conflict is manifested and experienced by people is missing from the field. To leap to models of intervention without a good grasp of the basic phenomenon is to risk wasting time and resources.

Morton Deutsch has been engaged in conflict studies for over fifty years (Deutsch, 1949, 1994). His work is characterized by the assertion that the fundamental characteristics of conflict are universal, regardless of scale. Deutsch's 1994 paper provides an overview of some basic assumptions of conflict theory, with supporting references from studies carried out in the 1980's. I have used this article to begin locating the gaps in existing research and to make an argument for a research project that describes the conflict experience from a dynamic, relational change theory orientation.

Interestingly, Deutsch begins his overview of conflict scholarship with a description of the field that has strong similarities to chaos theory: he says the multidisciplinary approach "has given the study of conflict a fragmented appearance," but that beneath the "disorganized surface there appear to be some common elements" (p. 13). The four elements he then goes on to describe appear to be based on two main premises: 1) that conflict is either cooperative (and thereby constructive) or competitive (and thereby destructive); and 2) that the cause of any conflict can be located in the cooperative or competitive interests of the parties involved. As such, Deutsch works from an epistemology that is both reductionist, in that it reduces conflict to two primary dimensions (cooperation and competition) and deterministic, in that its aim is to determine causality rather than to describe. The primary focus of the studies reviewed by Deutsch in the 1994 article is to determine causality, as captured in the following quote:

If one has systematic knowledge of the effects of cooperative and competitive processes, one will have systematic knowledge of the conditions that typically

give rise to such processes, and by extension, to the conditions that affect whether a conflict will take a constructive or destructive course. (p.15)

According to chaos theory, however, research agendas based on linear determinism are no longer viable, and the focus should be on understanding rather than prediction (Bolland & Atherton, 1999).

Deutsch is also renowned for his efforts to reframe conflict as functionally positive, as demonstrated in this passage:

Conflict has been given a bad reputation by its association with psychopathology, social disorder, and war. However, it is the root of personal and social change; it is the medium through which problems can be aired and solutions arrived at. There are many positive functions to conflict... (p. 13)

When this notion is coupled with the previous reductionist research agenda, however, the results are a narrow body of research that focus on cooperation as the epitome of constructive conflict. Despite his reference to “personal and social change,” there are no studies conducted by Deutsch or cited by him that focus on change processes.

Another example of Deutsch’s (1994) modernist, reductionist research paradigm is found in his discussion of the “dominant approach” in social behaviour research, which is “one that seeks to understand its regularities in terms of the interacting, reciprocally influencing... determinants” (p. 16). At first glance I thought Deutsch was proceeding in the direction of constructivist theory, but further reading reveals that his definition of interaction is based on a conduit metaphor, in which actors take turns transmitting their internal needs (e.g., the need to express pent-up hostility, or to project disapproved aspects of oneself) to the other party, who then reciprocates based on his or her internal needs, and so on. While Deutsch is probably correct in concluding that the dynamic

serves to keep the conflict going, he is missing a depth of description of the phenomenon that could be provided by a constructivist (Mahoney, 1991) or social constructionist (Gergen, 1994; Lederach, 1998) perspective, or the self-organizing systems perspective previously discussed (Mingers, 1995). What is missing is an appreciation for how the interaction becomes something unique in and of itself, which is more than the sum of the individuals' contributions. His "complex model" is actually very simplistic in comparison to postmodern or complexity theory models, and it sets the tone for a research agenda that lacks richness of description.

Turning to other studies in the conflict literature, Richards (1990) used an experimental, quantitative methodology to explore whether strategic decision-making is chaotic in nature. The link to conflict research in this case is that conflict is often seen to arise out of situations in which parties trying to reach a collective decision or solve a problem together reach an impasse or stalemate. Although these processes have traditionally been viewed as complex and interconnected, Richards wanted to determine whether they actually qualify as chaotic in the strict sense of the word. A chaotic pattern of interaction would be characterized by highly erratic behaviour, short-term predictability but long term non-predictability, and highly structured, deterministic boundaries within which the chaotic behaviour patterns emerge. The research was carried out using a coding scheme and three sets of participants: one set played out the classic prisoner's dilemma game (from game theory) and two sets of participants engaged in a political decision making process. Using non-linear mathematics, Richards showed that all three processes were chaotic in nature.

Fortado (2001) looked at the transformations conflicts undergo in workplace settings, particularly with respect to indirect and informal ways people get even with one another. He used a metaphor of metamorphosis to describe the changes in unresolved conflicts over time. Transformations were categorized into one of four types of process: restatement of the conflict, pressure tactics, acts of retribution, and compensatory acts.

Current (2000) conducted a theoretical analysis of the application of chaos and complexity theory to ethnic conflict. The author developed an ethnic conflict complexity model based on the principles of chaos and complexity, using historical examples of ethnic conflict to illustrate. Similar to this study, Current acknowledges that his model is intended to provide “insights for mental mapping of ethnic conflict” (p. 104), and does not utilize the mathematical and computerized aspects of chaos theory. Current’s suggestion for further research is the development of a computer program for mapping the complexities of ethnic conflict.

I have also reviewed the following study by Hopper (2001) because it includes a conflict context (divorce) and demonstrates connections with cultural discourse. Although Hopper does not use the language of discourse, the study demonstrates how people make sense of a conflict experience retrospectively by drawing from cultural discourses. The relevance to my research lies in the retrospective meaning-making process as well as the use of cultural discourse.

Hopper looked at the way divorcing couples reformulated the story of their marriage in order to account for the divorce. Based on interviews with 40 divorcing people, Hopper found that two stories emerged depending upon whether the person was the initiator or non-initiator of the divorce, and that these two opposing stories accounted

in a much deeper way for the conflict associated with divorce than traditional explanations of “opposing material interests, the adversarial nature of the legal system, latent or manifest conflict in marriage, or psychological reactions to the pain of divorce” (Hopper, 2001, p. 430). Out of the interview data emerged a recurring element of divorce as rooted in the larger, culturally prescribed meaning of marriage as something that is sacred or is supposed to last forever. Because marriage is a powerful cultural symbol, Hopper found that people needed to reinterpret the meaning of the marriage in order to explain why theirs was ending. For initiators, the marriage was recreated or re-storied as a pseudo-marriage, or the “marriage that never was” (p. 431), which allowed them to resolve the dilemma of dissolving the bonds of the sacred while still upholding the notion of marriage as a sacred institution (in other words, they did not have to reject the cultural symbol of marriage itself, only their mistaken instantiation of it). For non-initiators (the recipients of the story of the marriage that never was), this led to the recreation of their marriage partner as someone who had deceived them all along, who had only pretended to be committed, and who could not now be seen as a trustworthy person. Hopper labelled this story “the big lie,” as these interviewees consistently portrayed themselves as the victims of deceit. Hopper then goes on to make connections between these two fundamental stories and the different ways they play against each other to create various conflicts associated with divorce (property settlement, custody, etc.).

The important connection here is between 1) the cultural symbolism of *marriage* (not divorce) and the need to recreate the story of what the marriage was in order to justify ending it, and 2) divorce conflict as rooted in something new (the new, oppositional stories) as opposed to previous notions of conflict arising out of the marriage

itself or out of the divorce process. Thus, Hopper's work results in theory that is conceptually more sophisticated or dense than prior theories about the same phenomenon, and which is at the same time rooted in the data from which it emerged. As will be seen in the description of the methodology (below) these were important features of the methodology used for this study.

A number of research articles were also reviewed for methodological frameworks. In one, a spontaneous disagreement between acquaintances was taped and analysed using a discourse framework (Butler, 2002). The method used was to break the dialogue into segments, while attempting to hold onto the context of the complete conversation. This research focused on moment-by-moment conversational exchanges between parties, and although the topic was interpersonal conflict, the method is of limited relevance to this study. Four more articles were located in which participants were asked to furnish accounts of their experiences in interpersonal conflict (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Leith & Baumeister, 1998; Morrill, Yalda, Adelman, Musheno, & Bejarano, 2000; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). In all of these studies, narrative elements were identified and coded, and in some cases statistical analyses performed. Only one study among the four (Morrill et al., 2000) was methodologically close to the principles of this research. Morrill et al. collected written narratives about interpersonal conflict from 358 high school students; the objective of the analysis was to identify discourses that guided how students resolved the conflict, but without appealing to the adult-centred discourses that dominate the field of adolescent violence. In order to think about the students' stories in this way, the researchers needed to take context into account, including norms for peer interaction and media influences. Although the analysis followed a more holistic method

compared to the reductionist methods of the other studies, the difference between my study and Morrill's et al. is based on the amount and process of data collection. Morrill et al. had students write short essays, which were then collected and analyzed. The large number and the absence of a computer program for analysis suggests that the researchers searched for specific discursive themes pertaining to youth culture and violence. This study, in contrast, used in-depth interviews of only three participants to explore not only conflict discourse but context and change processes as well.

A final example of an interpretive study of conflict is the study by Hoskins and Stoltz (2003) referred to earlier. We conducted five interviews of people who had undergone mediation to resolve a workplace conflict. The interviews and analysis focused on how participants made sense of their experiences, and what meanings the changes associated with the conflict held for them in terms of self-identity, worldview, and relationship with others. A constructivist theoretical model of change was used to analyse the transcripts, and one of the strongest findings was that very little change occurred during the mediation itself. Instead, changes took place within and between individuals over the ensuing months, and were strongly linked to shifts in the way participants viewed themselves (identity). It was clear that participants needed more support to follow through on insights and core changes (in terms of behaviours and action) than was provided by the mediation.

Based on the previous review, it appears that there are few subjective, interpretive accounts of participants' experiences of conflict, or conflict studied specifically as a change process; there are also few studies of conflict based on the shift in worldview

engendered by the new directions in science. In the following chapter, I describe the methodology used to address this gap.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

“We can never know it completely. All we can do is really dance around it and kind of point at it or something”
(Kate)

Methodological Foundations

From my research journal:

I love the quotation above from one of the research participants. It so perfectly captures for me the essence of the epistemological stance for the methodology. A constructivist ontology does not deny an objective reality, but says that reality is ascertained out of multiple subjective realities through the cooperative and relational constructions of the group. So through the act of dancing and pointing in unison, we bring something into being. Similarly, through this project, the participants, the reader, and I are really just dancing around the phenomenon of conflict and pointing at it—that’s all we can do. Let the dance begin!

In this research, I explored conflict from a new perspective—new for the field of conflict, that is. The foundational principles for this exploration include holism, temporality, and subjectivity. In order for the research to achieve a legitimate degree of coherence and validity, it was necessary to construct a methodology consistent with those principles. Ontology, epistemology, and methodology need to come together to produce a unified and disciplined piece of work (Hoskins, 2001). As such, the methodology for the study reflects a view of reality and truth that integrates both absolutism and relativity in a holistic way. It reflects a view of knowledge that eschews objectivity and reductionism, and instead embraces subjectivity and the collaborative creation of understandings that are complex, temporary, and contradictory. According to Guba and Lincoln (1998), the methodology that best reflects this paradigm is hermeneutic (i.e., uses interpretive methods to analyze data) and dialectical (in that it involves a process of tacking back and forth between data and theory, researcher and participant, in a synergistic process).

Further, the principles of openness, flexibility, and emergence based on chaos theory and self-organizing systems provide ground rules for the methodology that depart from traditional research projects. If the theoretical paradigm for the research is based on these principles, then the methodology should reflect them as well. As such, an emergent methodology was used, which became reflected in the sequence of steps used in the method (described below). Use of an emergent methodology means that methods of data collection are not entirely pre-determined but chosen as the project unfolds and as suggested by prior phases of data collection and analysis.

For example, I was not sure whether two or three interviews would be required with each participant; as it turned out, two interviews generated as much data as I could integrate for one study. Similarly, it was proposed that participants use journaling between interviews for self-reflection, or draw from photographs or art for symbols of the conflict they had experienced. At the start of the second round of interviews, however, it became clear that none of the participants had enough free time (or perhaps interest) in engaging in reflection on their own, but the purpose was still achieved as the interviews themselves were rich with imagery, symbolism, and reflection. A notion similar to emergence in research is Schon's (1983) idea of "reflection-in-action," in which the research "is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case... inquiry is not limited to a deliberation about means which depends on a prior agreement about ends" (p. 68).

Support for an emergent methodological research design also comes from the notion of the bricoleur (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, 2000; Kincheloe, 2001), where the researcher uses whatever tools and means are at hand to understand the ongoing research

experience. This approach means the researcher draws from a number of different methods, using the principles of a customized methodology as guidelines (Hoskins, 2001). The methodology is based on a paradigm or worldview (reflected by the theory underlying the research) that provides the ontological and epistemological basis for the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). But to the greatest extent possible, the concrete methods of data collection and analysis are guided by findings as they emerge.

Kincheloe (2001) states that an objective of the bricoleur is to avoid reductionism by embracing an approach that is open to multiple dimensions of understanding. This guideline is therefore consistent with a primary objective of this research, which was to explore conflict as part of a holistic change process that cannot be reduced to simple parts. The bricoleur draws from a hermeneutic, interpretive tradition, in which “the ability to synthesize diverse information moves the bricoleur to a more sophisticated level of meaning making” (p. 691). Again, this is entirely consistent with the theoretical perspective being applied to conflict here.

Originally, I attempted to use narrative and grounded theory as frameworks for the methodology. After the first draft of the dissertation was written, feedback confirmed my experience with this approach: I had struggled to fit the method that had emerged and taken shape throughout the interviews and analysis into the two boxes of narrative and grounded theory, and my struggle showed in the writing. Ontological inconsistencies between the original theoretical framework of complexity and self-organizing systems theory and the two theoretical approaches to the methodology became apparent. For example, a recent article by (Glaser, 2002) describes the purpose of grounded theory as the generation of theory abstracted from the context and meaning of participants’ lives:

“GT (grounded theory) in abstracting from time, place, or people allows the researcher to develop a general GT on a core variable...” (p. 788). This contradicts a basic objective of the study, which was to locate conflict experiences *within* the context and meaning structures of peoples’ lives. Further, Glaser makes it clear that grounded theory does not lead to a description of experience, and neither does it take voice into account, which throws into question its compatibility with narrative theory. To compound the inconsistencies, it also became apparent that my use of narrative theory in the analysis was restricted, and that I had in fact clearly departed from a narrative approach part way through the analysis in order to analyze the transcripts from the perspective of complexity and self-organizing systems theory. Clearly, I had crossed too many theoretical and ontological boundaries in the first writing. I had tried to foreground narrative and grounded theory, while allowing complexity and self-organizing systems theory to remain in the background. But in order to address the objectives of the study I *had* to draw from complexity and self-organizing systems thinking, so the result was a muddle of competing theoretical voices. An emergent methodology, however, allows for such inconsistencies to be noticed and re-tooled. The decision was made to rewrite the methodology section, this time foregrounding complexity and self-organizing systems theory while narrative and grounded theory became background. This way, I could make explicit the links I had seen between the method and complexity and self-organizing systems theory, while acknowledging that I had really only drawn from narrative and grounded theory as a bricoleur would—for tools as needed.

Because the study was driven by concepts of holism, process, and relationship, it became important, as mentioned, to avoid reductionist methods that are so ubiquitous to

both quantitative and qualitative research. I relied on a quotation by Wheatley (1999; see below) to remind me to hold both the specific and the general, the parts and the whole, in view at the same time. The aim was for a conceptual analysis that was rich, complex, and holistic rather than simple and reductionistic. A methodology consistent with complexity and self-organizing systems theory demands a focus on patterns of relationship between various levels of human, social, and cultural interaction, as well as a focus on process. Thus, conflict is here being viewed not as something that resides within individuals, but in the dynamic, ongoing processes of relationship. A holistic approach facilitated the discovery of patterns of interaction within shifting, dynamic contexts, enabling a description of how participants engage in conflict together that goes beyond simple inherency explanations such as needs satisfaction or aggression drives (Tidwell, 1998).

The following excerpt from Wheatley (1999) fittingly describes the general orientation of the methodology. Wheatley is describing an approach for studying (read: researching) problems in business organizations based on complexity and self-organizing systems theory:

Seeing the interplay between system dynamics and individuals is a dance of discovery that requires several iterations between the whole and its parts. We expand our vision to see the whole, then narrow our gaze to peer intently into individual moments. With each iteration, we see more of the whole, and gain new understandings about individual elements. We paint a portrait of the whole, surfacing as much detail as possible. Then we inquire into a few pivotal events or decisions, and search for great detail there also. We keep dancing between the two levels, bringing the sensitivities and information gleaned from one level to help us understand the other. If we hold awareness of the whole, profound new insights become available.

There are many processes for developing awareness of a whole system—a time line of some slice of the system's history, a mind-map, a collage of images, a dramatization. Any process works that encourages non-linear thinking and

intuition, and uses alternative forms of expression such as drama, art, stories, and pictures. (p. 143)

I have quoted Wheatley at length here because her approach to studying business organizations so aptly describes the emergent methodology of the study. For example, in the interviews participants and I tacked back and forth between various levels-between particular moments and feelings at the height of the conflict, and conflict dynamics across the lifespan; between description of events, and reflective meaning making of events; between micro, intrapersonal processes, and macro processes involving family, social, and cultural systems. This was important to gaining a holistic and contextually grounded sense of conflict as arising among actors who are immersed in both micro and macro levels of experience at one and the same time, and in creating theory that acknowledges the simultaneous, multiple positioning of individuals within different levels of experience and the dialectical relationship between the individual and the collective. This approach also invites variation as a means of challenging the researcher to reflect on, refine, and integrate inconsistent or diverse findings into an ultimately more accurate and useful explanation (because it is closer to the complex, lived experience of the phenomenon).

Vaughn (1992) takes this notion further with a method called "theory elaboration" (p. 175). Working with case analysis, she argues for the inclusion of cases that differ both in substantive detail (for example, different types of conflict) and level (micro and macro) within a given study, and the pursuit of greater, not lesser, ambiguity in the process of theory development. In her words, "Each case analysis will consist of intricate, interconnected detail, much of it perhaps unexpected. It is the 'loose ends,' the

stuff we neither expect nor can explain, that pushes us toward theoretical breakthroughs" (p. 176).

For example, Vaughn discusses researching the concept of culture by including cases of families, organizations, and nation states. If we substitute conflict for culture, the same benefits should accrue from drawing from a diversity of samples. This approach was used to a limited extent in this project. Although each of the three narratives centred around three different contexts (workplace, a business partnership, and divorce), the level of interaction or relationship was similar. In other words, the cases did not mix levels such as individual versus social group, or individual versus government. The central conflict relationship in each narrative involved two individuals, and only the context of the interpersonal conflict differed. It was found in this study that the different contexts provided conceptual complexity, while the consistency across social group size added inner coherence.

Vaughn (1992) also objects to research that is circumscribed by the organizational structures in which the phenomenon most often occurs, saying

We tend to tie our research questions to some organizational form that has a particular function: educational institutions, nation-states, business organizations, families, elite networks, social revolutions, communities, courtrooms.... I am suggesting that when we limit our sociological questions to particular organizational forms, we tend to build on existing theory or generate new theory in fragmented rather than integrative ways. (p. 173-4)

I suggest that this is exactly what has occurred in the field of conflict, where conflict as a phenomenon has been studied in isolated contexts with little effort to identify common patterns and processes, resulting in a fragmented overall understanding. Although some work has been done that spans levels of interaction (e.g., Burton & Sandole, 1986; Deutsch, 1994), most research has been tied closely either to the

structures within which conflict occurs, or to the structures, such as mediation, by which it is addressed. In this project, I attempted to step away from organizational structure (and the pre-definitions of conflict they carry with them) in two ways: first, by looking at conflict as it occurred within a variety of contexts, and second, by avoiding altogether the influence of the structure of conflict intervention models (i.e., mediation, arbitration, etc.). By exploring conflict as it is experienced and as it changes (perhaps becoming resolved, perhaps not) in people's lives *without the influence of professional third party intervention*, I aimed to increase the understanding of the functions and processes of conflict in terms of its connection to processes of human growth and development.

The idea of moving between levels in order to sustain a sense of both the whole and the parts was also applied to the interview process. I followed Polkinghorne's (1988) guidance from the field of narrative theory to be mindful of moving from specific stories to more general life stories "that provide self-identity and give unity to the person's whole existence" (p. 63). As the interviewer, I had prepared open questions that would address conflict in terms of both the specific and the general, but I found that participants often moved back and forth between those levels spontaneously in their efforts to help me understand the significance of conflict in their lives.

In addition to the collection of data, a dialectical process was also used in the analysis to preserve a holistic sense of the data and avoid reductionism. The method consisted of moving back and forth between readings of the transcripts together for an overall, general feel and individual transcript readings that focused on specific words, phrases, and passages. There was also a focus in the interviews on metaphor, symbols,

and imagery, in that participants were invited to describe conflict in these terms. The transcripts were analyzed throughout for metaphors and imagery that would provide links to socio-cultural discourses of conflict. More details about the analytic process are provided below.

Strauss and Corbin's (1998) notion of the "constant comparative method" (p. 159) from grounded theory helped guide the data collection and analytic process. The method proposes the systematic collection of data in conjunction with theoretical analysis as two parts of the same ongoing process. The researcher begins with a preliminary phase of data collection, conducts an analysis to determine the theory that emerges from the data set, and verifies, invalidates, or modifies the theory against further waves of incoming data. For example, during the first interview with Kate an element¹⁰ of identity emerged as she talked about ways she had changed during and after the conflict. I probed this element with open questions during the interview, then re-read the previous study involving mediation and change (Hoskins & Stoltz, 2003) prior to interviewing Paul and Barbara. Identity also emerged quite clearly as an element of their change experiences, so I revisited the topic in the second round of interviews, and revisited the literature on constructivism, complexity, and self-organizing systems theory before devising an analysis of the connection between changes in identity and conflict.

Another characteristic of the emergent method used in the study was that the theoretical analysis emerged directly from the participants' conflict experiences. This point is important because it provides a means, through research, to address some current

¹⁰ I am using the term element in a similar sense as themes from narrative analysis. Just as themes constitute parts of a narrative, elements constitute parts of a system. My intention is to maintain a systems focus throughout the analysis so relationships and processes will not be overlooked.

gaps in the conflict literature. First, as previously mentioned, there has been a recent growth and proliferation of conflict resolution models that are not firmly grounded in people's lived experiences of conflict. These models are based on assumptions about those experiences that may be erroneous, rendering the efficacy of the intervention strategies questionable. For example, Bush and Folger's (1994) conflict resolution model focuses on building relationships as opposed to solving problems or crafting agreements. Their model assumes that people come to mediation in a state of confusion about what they want and what the conflict is actually about (i.e., what their underlying needs are in the situation).

From my research journal:

My own experience of conflict, which has been confirmed in informal conversations with others, is that the opposite is more often true: conflict is often experienced as an opportunity to clarify wants and needs (and, as found in this study, values and identity), and it is often in the midst of conflict or thereafter that real clarity is experienced. This seems to be related to the positive function of anger, which can serve to coalesce previously ambiguous feelings or values about something, and to motivate action. When I choose to enter into a conflict with someone, it is usually after having reflected on what is important to me; otherwise, I would simply withdraw. There is a difference, however, between knowing what is important, and knowing how to ask for it clearly and respectfully without resorting to blame or manipulation or simply being overwhelmed by feeling. Perhaps this is what gives the impression that people are confused.

Other conflict resolution models (for example, Fisher & Ury's [1981] interest-based model of negotiation) assume that people don't know how to communicate properly, and that if they can master certain communication skills the conflict will be resolved. The point here is that current models begin with an assumption of a deficit of one kind or another, which the trained intervener can correct. Research that is grounded in people's lived experiences and that can serve to validate or invalidate these popular, current assumptions is sorely lacking in the field. The methodological objective here was

to be inclusive of multiple perspectives, including lay conceptions, and to generate theory that made sense when considered by the lay-person and compared to his or her experience.

Narrative theory was used as a general orientation to explore conflict from the perspective of peoples' lived experiences. Rather than using questionnaires or surveys to explore lay understandings of conflict, I used a semi-structured interview format that invited a storied, narrative version of the conflict event and the way participants made sense of the experience. It is common for people to respond to interview questions such as "why do you think such and such happened" with a story (Polkinghorne, 1988), and according to Baumeister and Newman (1994), people "make stories in order to make sense of their experiences" (p. 677). I used the concept of discourse (Polkinghorne, 1989) from narrative theory as a tool for part of the analytic process. The discursive approach is founded on the notion that individuals both participate in weaving stories/discourse around them, and are in turn constrained by those discourses (e.g., cultural discourses) in which they participate. In the words of Bronwyn Davies (1993), discourses are the means through which people "speak themselves, and are spoken, into existence" (p. 2). Thus, the narrative or discursive framework opens up ways of thinking about people's described experiences that allows access to the spaces in between the individual and the collective, including a deeper understanding of the meaning people make of conflict, and how they perform it in their lives.

There is a link here with the notion of structural coupling from self-organizing systems theory, in which the person is seen as a system of personal discourses, interacting with the discourse of the larger environment they occupy. The identity system (of the

self, family, etc.) is perturbed by conflicting discourse from the environment, and the structure of the system changes in response; the new response then acts on both the environment and the system, and the relationship of mutual stimulation to growth and change continues on both levels.

A methodology based on the principles of complexity theory also required an approach that allowed room for multi-layered and (potentially) conflicting perspectives on the conflict experience. It was expected that participants' accounts of conflict would be layered or nested according to socially acceptable, surface accounts, and other narratives that operate in pressured, stressed situations (see also Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Polkinghorne, 1989). This was the case for the participants of this study, who sometimes engaged in different metaphors for conflict depending on the context in which they found themselves. The language and metaphors used by participants also gave a sense of meaning systems in motion and the way participants were still partially engaged in one system of meaning as they moved into another. This sense of movement or temporality was integral to the study as well because of the focus on dynamic systems and change. Narrative theorists Clandinin & Connelly (2000) review the contributions of Clifford Geertz, whose reflections on narrative work in anthropology focuses on change. According to the authors, Geertz promotes retrospective accounts of the connectedness and "pieced-together patternings" of events, of how "particular events and unique occasions, an encounter here, a development there, can be woven together... to produce a sense of how things go" (p. 6). This point featured strongly in this research project, with its focus on time and change and the gathering together of "unique occasions," events that would be over-looked from a reductionist point of view. Such events may be only

peripherally related to the conflict interaction itself, but centrally related when the conflict is viewed in the context of people's whole lives. According to Gleick (1987), scientists over-looked indications of chaos in systems for decades, because they were trained to dismiss aberrations or unrelated events.

Another valuable methodological tool came from Gergen and Gergen (1988), who use the term "self-narrative" to refer to "the individual's account of the relationship among self-relevant events across time" (p. 19). By focusing on individual, subjective experiences (as opposed to ethnographic observations), this research is in essence about the collection of self-narratives relating to conflict. And according to narrative theory, such narratives are recounted in such a way as to render them meaningful and coherent to the person doing the telling, which is exactly what we would expect when listening to someone in a mediation session, for example, tell their side of the story.

According to Gergen and Gergen (1988), "the self-narrative is a linguistic implement constructed by people in relationships and employed in relationship to sustain, enhance, or impede various interactions" (p. 19-20). So while the participants' narratives are personal, individual accounts intended to provide a coherent sense of self, they are also the product of social interaction or relationship. In this way, one person's self-narrative can provide insight into dynamic processes of interaction, because they are never produced alone but only *through* interaction. Again, this approach is consistent with an ontology that sees truth (and in this case, people's renderings of the truth) as meaningless and incoherent outside of context, and which assumes that context is integral to the very construction of the truth. Accordingly, lots of time was allowed in the interviews for the description of context: where participants were in their lives at the time

of the conflict, how they viewed themselves, major life issues with which they were grappling.

Other tools drawn from both narrative and grounded theory are described in the sections on representation and validity, below. What I have attempted to do here is to establish a general methodology based on the theoretical foundations of the study. Principles of holism, connectivity, relationship, and pattern are emphasized, along with a recognition of temporality and movement. Because the new science dismisses the objective scientific stance as ultimately impossible, the study takes seriously participants' subjective experience. At the same time, the principles of complexity theory require acknowledgment of a sense of the wholeness of things—of the qualitative, unique, and fundamental essence of an autonomous system. The methodology attempts to hold both these aspects of systems as integral to an understanding of conflict experiences.

The Place of the Researcher

According to constructivist theory, the term construction is used to describe the process by which individuals actively engage in their own, ongoing development (Mahoney, 1991). The assertion that both reality and consciousness arise from the active and proactive efforts of individuals is central to the constructivist view. Consistent with a constructivist perspective, the understandings that emerged from the interviews were considered a co-creative effort by the participants and me. "The investigator and the object of investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that the 'findings' are *literally created* as the investigation proceeds (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 207). Further, from a constructivist perspective, the objective was not to ascertain the truth or facts about a conflict experience, but to explore how participants made sense of their

experiences from the positioning of their own, unique lives. As Hoskins (2002) states in her comparison of the work of constructivist counsellors and constructivist researchers, constructivists are less concerned with factual knowledge and more concerned with “emotional truths and how such ‘truths’ have affected client’s lives” (p. 234).

The methods used in this study reflect the constructivist position by taking seriously the notion that research findings are a subjective, collaborative co-creation of researcher and participant. Consistent with both a complexity theory and narrative perspective, researchers are seen as occupying “the middle of a nested set of stories—ours and theirs” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). But beyond the argument that researchers cannot shed their biases is the question of whether or not they should try. According to Guba and Lincoln (1998), understanding requires the *engagement* of our biases, and bringing them forward rather than screening them out enriches research findings. An important corollary of this approach is transparency about what the researcher brings to the researcher-participant relationship.

Polkinghorne (1989) recommends that researchers build a context of trust and solidarity, in which “both people are engaged in trying to understand important aspects of their lives” (p. 164). But sometimes participants want to hold researchers at a distance from their own processes of reflection, in which case the stance becomes one of “sensitive observation” as opposed to “intimate coparticipation” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 66).

Regardless of the level of intimacy in the interview process, there are a number of ways that I, as a researcher, remained accountable in my stance as co-creator of the research findings. First, I needed to be clear about the assumptions and world view(s) that

I bring to the research project, and any agenda for its *raison d'être*. These have been made clear in the foregoing discussions. Second, I adopted a flexible, interactive stance with participants in interviews, both giving them a lot of open space in which to bring their stories forward, and giving voice to my own experiences and responses in the moment (Polkinghorne, 1988). When a part of the story resonated with something from my own history of experiences, I brought it forward briefly into the discussion. I also checked my interpretations and biases with participants, making sure the primary focus in the collaborative process was on their experience while still allowing it as a co-constructed experience.

Third, I engaged in a process of writing and reflection between interviews and during the analysis stage, where my personal responses to the stories were sorted and sifted. This is how Clandinin and Connelly (1998) resolve the crisis of representation (to use Denzin and Lincoln's [1998] words), or the question of how the researcher is to present the subjective experience of the other. Writing is viewed as central to the reflective process required in qualitative research, where fieldwork and the process of writing about that work, finally become one and the same process. Because the method included a series of interviews with each participant, I used the time in between to reflect and to bring those reflections forward to check for coherence and consistency of understanding against the sense they made of their conflict experiences. This process reflects the dialectic, synergistic principle that is consistent with a holistic and relational worldview. And finally, I bring forward the gleanings from that process into the presentation of the findings, describing my own process of understanding and highlighting points where my understandings of the experiences described may have

diverged from the participants', or points where the co-creation process became shaded with my own stories and experiences. Ultimately, I have tried to ensure that my participation in the collaborative research project enhances and deepens rather than detracts from understanding of the phenomenon. According to the ontological and epistemological principles guiding this research, it is impossible not only to take an objective stance toward the study of the experiences of others, but toward one's own experience as well. A highly disciplined process of reflection and a commitment to researcher transparency are safeguards against a solipsistic collapse in which anything passes as legitimate findings because everything is open to interpretation anyway. These issues are also related to validity, which is discussed in the following section.

Validity

According to the theoretical foundations of the study, each participant in a given conflict scenario will experience and describe that conflict differently. Further, the conflict and the way it is described will shift for participants as time goes by and other changes occur in their lives. This also holds for the re-telling of the conflict story: each time the individual re-engages with the conflict experience in a reflective process, new insights and shifts in meaning can occur through feedforward processes. The story can also change depending on the listening audience. When engagement with the researcher and her biases, assumptions, and worldview (along with participants' desires to present a socially acceptable image of themselves) is added to the mix, further shifts in description are likely.

Those working within qualitative research traditions have grappled with the problem of presenting findings that are taken as valid by scholars who still use statistical

measurement as the benchmark for legitimacy. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest that the use of multiple methods and triangulation provides a much-needed alternative to validity—a term that does not fit well with qualitative research methods because of its association with quantitative methods. Guba and Lincoln (1998) have developed sets of criteria based on terms such as trustworthiness, transferability, dependability, confirmability, authenticity, and fairness. Polkinghorne (1988) talks about verisimilitude in narrative research, or the appearance of truth or reality versus an exact or approximate correspondence with reality. And Baumeister and Newman (1994) speak of the power of interviews or narratives to “accommodate more inconsistencies” than other forms of research; in so doing, narrative may be more rather than less representative of the participant’s experiences. I have also relied on the concepts of viability and utility as important concepts, such that if the practical application of the concepts can be argued, validity is enhanced.

Further, I have drawn from the notion of the internal coherence of stories (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Reissman, 1993) as a way of demonstrating the strength of the study rather than how falsifiable it is, and I have used this particular criterion extensively throughout the analysis. Reissman (1993) describes three types of internal coherence: global, local, and themal. The overall goals, motivations, or reasons for telling the story are referred to as global coherence. Global goals might include justification, impression management, or the fulfillment of a particular need. In the analysis, I combined the thinking of Reissman (1993) and Baumeister and Newman (1994) to establish the global coherence of the three stories. Baumeister and Newman cite four interpersonal motives that influence how people tell stories. The first of these motives is

the desire to obtain rewards, which is played out through presenting oneself as either a victim in need of support or an aggressor. The second motive is the desire to have identity claims validated by others. In these stories, people portray themselves in such a way as to invite validation from others about who they are and the roles they play. The third motive is to pass along information as a narrative for the purposes of teaching or instruction. Parables and stories have long held this function, and it is often the case that students remember stories told by teachers long after the point has been forgotten. The fourth motive behind story-telling is the desire to attract people; stories of this ilk have an element of entertainment to them, which increases the attraction to the narrator.

Baumeister and Newman (1994) also offer a framework for understanding how people make meaning as part of the story-telling process. They discuss four needs that address meaning in life as a whole, which are achieved by narrating events in a way that meets one or more of these needs. The first need is to find purpose by interpreting current events in terms of future goals or types of fulfillment. For example, a person may interpret a sickness like cancer or a trauma as bringing about positive, growth enhancing future outcomes. The second need for meaning is to have a sense of values such as right and wrong for justifying one's actions. Stories can be told in such a way as to exonerate the story-teller from blame by appealing to a moral or logical code. The third need for meaning is met by telling stories in a way that maximizes people's sense of efficacy, competence, and control in their lives. As example, Baumeister and Newman note that many biographies and autobiographies portray the central character as highly efficacious rather than merely lucky. The fourth need for meaning is that of self-worth, which is met through stories that bolster esteem. Research shows, for example, that stories of

unrequited love told by the rejected party are replete with elements that portray the person as desirable and attractive despite the rejection (Baumeister & Newman, 1994).

Reissman's (1993) next level for establishing internal strength is local coherence. Here, the researcher looks closely at the way the story is structured, and how that structure supports or contradicts global goals and content. I looked for patterns in the stories such as the balance of description and self-reflection, the way smaller stories were used to support an argument or point, and the linearity or non-linearity of the storytelling process. I watched for how closely the *way* the story was told reflected *what* was being told.

The third level of coherence is themal coherence, which involves content. I have chosen to think about themes as *elements of systems*—belief systems, the self-system, relational systems, and so on. The elements that emerged (such as identity, self-awareness, and agency) indicated patterns, processes, and dynamics of the multiple, nested systems that made up the conflict experience within the larger context of participants' lives. I have labelled this third level of coherence content analysis.

Other guidelines used for ensuring a standard of quality for this research were drawn from the same principles found throughout the project: holism, openness, non-linearity, reflexivity, and temporality. Translated into practice, these lead to the following strategies. First, it became important to maintain an attitude of openness to critique and contradiction throughout the project. In that way, the research becomes a more holistic enterprise, where point and counterpoint produce a stronger piece of work. For example, participants' descriptions of their emotional state at the height of the conflict suggested the presence of chaos as described in the psychology literature (Mahoney & Moes, 1997).

But participants also described a level of clarity, intentionality, and choice in those moments. This tension between heightened emotion or personal disorganization (to use Mahoney & Moes' description of chaos) and clarity pushed me toward a more complex understanding and description of chaos. Remaining open to such tensions and contradictions is promoted by engaging in transparency about my own worldview, biases, and theoretical positioning that under-gird the project, transparency with participants in the data collection phase, and transparency based on self-reflection during the analysis.

Second, it was important to engage the participants in a critical reflection of the work. This was demonstrated by repeated interviews with participants, where my thinking processes (especially the meaning I make of their experiences) were made explicit and became open to critique and reassessment. As a researcher, I checked with participants about whether my rendering of their experiences rang true for them, although the development of theoretical constructs remained my responsibility. I also forwarded the completed relevant section of the analysis along with a copy of his or her transcript to each participant, with an invitation for comment. The few points raised were discussed in a telephone interview or by email and changes were made accordingly.

On a related point, it was decided that outside readers would not be invited to review the analysis. This was a difficult decision, as there seemed to be arguments both for and against in terms of strengthening the study. In the interest of establishing internal validity, however, it was clear that it would be ontologically inconsistent to require an objective validation of research interpretations when the theoretical foundation of the study rejects that epistemological approach. Further, from a systems perspective, the participants and I were involved in co-creating a set of relationships that could also be

seen as systems. We were relationally involved in the process of building theory from the ground up, over the course of the two interviews and during the analysis phase. To introduce another element to the system for the sake of an objective perspective seemed contradictory to the goal of establishing validity through inner coherence and consistency. And as will be seen in the analysis, the methodological strength of the study comes from its transparency of methods and inner coherence. It was ultimately decided that continuing the agenda of internal strength through transparency and inner coherence was worth more than what would be gained from alternative, objective perspectives on the stories.

This contributed to the third strategy, which was to seek a high degree of cohesiveness in interpreting participants' experiences. An objective of this research was the search for order and pattern among events that are seemingly chaotic and unrelated, over the course of time. It was expected that the research would undergo a phase in which the data appeared overwhelmingly disconnected, and that was in fact the case. From my research journal:

After a few false starts with the analysis, I am almost completely confused. The amount of data seems overwhelming. The frustrating part is that I have a strong intuitive sense about what is important in the narratives in terms of elements and patterns, but translating my holistic sense into an ordered, logical format is extremely difficult. This is the phase of chaos, and the self-reflective part of me is intrigued and almost amused that my process as a researcher so aptly mirrors the theory.

I also now have an up-close and personal understanding of the relationship between chaos and a lack of motivation. This process seems to be dragging on, with me swimming in a pool where a sign should have been posted: "Danger! Qualitative Research Methods! Swim at your own risk!" There just seem to be too many methodological options to compute.

And from a later entry:

Ok, I now have the support I needed. First, a very valuable piece came from the research support group: go back to the research questions and use them to guide analysis. Keep them front and centre. Second, advice on making sure the ontological and epistemological framework guides the method; inner coherence establishes validity. And third, from a good friend: "Write what you know. You know this stuff." The chaos shifts.

It was important during the time described above to resist the urge to reduce and classify information in an effort to give it the *appearance* of coherence by tidying it up. Rather, coherence needed to be established throughout the study, right from the broad theoretical framework to the method. So although the analysis began with the sorting of elements into headings and subheadings, it progressed to the search for pattern and relationships between elements as a hallmark of coherence as the final aim. A metaphor for this kind of analysis would be weaving, with threads emanating in all directions that, by their connection, suggest a pattern.

Finally, in accordance with the notion that events are grounded in time and context, no effort is made to present findings in terms of universality or definitive truthfulness in the positivist sense. Instead, findings are presented with the details of the particular context in which they were created, with attention paid to their subjective, interpretive nature. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), "interpretations of events can always be otherwise," and findings are, at best, "shaky, badly formed, and tentative" (p. 31). This has direct implications for the ability to apply the findings from this study to people or groups in general. Generalization, in the traditional, quantitative sense, was not a goal of the study; rather, a contribution to global understandings of conflict was sought by delving more deeply into the localized subjectivity of the experience. While such an approach is limited in the ability to generalize to other

situations and groups, it is essential for providing a more thorough understanding of the basic phenomenon.

From the perspective of complexity theory, the experiences described and analyzed are ‘snapshots’ of an ongoing process. The metaphor that comes to mind is of dipping a bucket into a river and analyzing the contents; it would be a mistake to say the water in the bucket represents the river, or all rivers in general. And yet there is much to be learned about rivers by exploring the water’s particulate matter, its molecular structure, and the micro-organisms that live in it. Complexity theory also assumes the non-linearity of living systems. If the systems involved in this study are non-linear, then generalization to other non-linear systems is limited to broad patterns. Because complexity theory invites us to look at the connections between singular entities, the question about generalization changes from *how do these findings apply to other people, groups, or situations* to *what is the connection or pattern of connections between the participants and findings of this study, and other people, groups, and situations*. Paths of connectivity can be found between the localized findings of this study and other people and places via the things that connect (and separate) us all: cultural discourses, family structures and systems, power structures, workplace cultures, metaphors and rules for understanding and behaving in conflict situations, and so on. The concept of generalization becomes an invitation to broaden the picture and push the boundaries of inquiry rather than make definitive claims of knowing.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHOD

“Life uses networks; we still rely on boxes”
(Wheatley, 1999)

Participants

Three individuals were recruited who experienced conflict in a variety of settings (workplace, business, and marriage). Participants were asked to engage in a retrospective reflection on a particular conflict, meaning it had to have occurred at some time in the past. A baseline of at least eighteen months prior to the interviews was chosen, in order to ensure that the conflict was not still ongoing due to ethical considerations. Further, I asked participants to choose a conflict that was “significant” for them; in other words, it stood out in their memory and had had some kind of impact on their lives. Conflict was not predefined, except in terms of some limited parameters. For example, participants were told that small disagreements that resolved quickly and easily were not suitable for the project. I chose the wording of the invitation and description of the interview process carefully, so as not to impose expectations and definitions. The following is a verbatim account of the description I used in the telephone or face-to-face invitations:

I am looking for three people to interview who have experienced conflict at some point in their lives, and who would be willing to spend some time reflecting on it and talking with me. I would want you to talk about a conflict you experienced that would have taken place at least one and one-half years ago, and the significance it has or had for you. I would also be asking about other changes, if any, that happened in your life around that time and since then, that might have been associated with the conflict.

The degree of reflection I am looking for would go beyond a description of the events, to the meaning the conflict experience had for you as you think about it in retrospect. As most people have experienced conflict at some point in their lives, the only criteria for participation is a willingness to spend some time reflecting on it and talking about it over two or three interviews.

Recruitment of participants took place by word-of-mouth, and care was taken to ensure there was not a close relationship to me as a researcher (that is, no family members or close friends). The qualities I looked for in the initial interview included a willingness and ability to engage in a reflective process, and the ability to articulate that process. In other words, participants needed to be able to delve into the meaning the conflict has or had for them, in addition to being able to describe the actual events. Drawing from my experience as a counsellor, I thought that what I was looking for in the participants was similar to the level of engagement at which most counselling takes place, which includes dialogue about the content of the issue, as well as reflections. I was also careful to determine that participants were comfortable with revisiting what may have been an uncomfortable period of their lives, and I screened the conflict stories in the initial conversation for violence or emotional trauma. Prospective participants were over 19 years of age, and I was successful in recruiting a combination of both genders (two women and one man).

Stages of Research

In keeping with an emergent methodological approach, a tentative guideline was formulated for the research process. Generally, the process did follow the guideline I had anticipated, with some minor revisions. Based on ideas of unpredictability, uncertainty, and chaos, it made sense to construct a research method that was inherently tentative and open to revision.

The following sections describe the interviews and process of analysis. I decided to maintain the same order in the second round of interviews as for the first (Kate, then Paul, then Barbara), as well as for the telephone follow-up interviews. The rationale for

this approach as opposed to a randomization of interviews was that, because there were only three participants, randomization of the interviews would likely mean interviewing the same participant twice in a row, which I preferred to avoid for the sake of reflection time between interviews. Conducting the interviews in the same order provided a consistent amount of time between interviews for all of us. The limitation of this approach, of course, was the possibility that my impressions from the first interview would influence the second, which would also influence the third. However, because the methodology includes the idea of building theory from prior data collection waves (Strauss & Corbin, 1998a) as well as integration of researcher biases and assumptions (Guba & Lincoln, 1998), this limitation was deemed acceptable.

First Interview

Interviews took place at a location convenient for the participants (four in their homes, two in mine), and except for the initial recruitment interviews and the follow-up telephone calls, were audiotaped. I took only brief notes during interviews, mainly consisting of one-word reminders to revisit a point later. The first interviews focused on a description of the main conflict and were facilitated by open-ended questions such as “Can you tell me about a significant conflict that took place for you?” supplemented by probing questions such as “What happened next? How did you respond when that happened? How did you feel at the time? Who else was involved? How did the conflict end? Was the conflict resolved?”, and so on.

The objective for the first interview was to build a description of the conflict that included as much detail and context as necessary to enable a cohesive understanding. Interviews were semi-structured, with questions and discussion emerging in response to

the direction of each interview. The questions listed in Appendix A were used as a listening guide for all interviews.

Reflective Process

At the end of the first and second interviews, participants were invited to engage in a reflective process on the particular conflict discussed before the next interview (interviews were spaced one to two weeks apart). Each participant was given a sheet of paper containing the following questions to use as a prompt for reflection: “Were there any changes occurring in your life both during and after the conflict? Is there any relationship between these changes and the conflict you experienced? How would you describe that relationship? What sense do you make of the conflict when you look back on it? How does it fit with the larger picture of your life, if at all? Are there any events you can think of that may have been related, even in a small way, to the way the conflict shifted? Can you think of anything that might symbolize the meaning the conflict has for you, for example pictures, photographs, movies, stories, poetry, music, etc.? What other conflicts stand out for you in your life as being particularly relevant? Is there a pattern, metaphor, or symbol that would best describe conflict you have experienced over your lifetime?” Participants were invited to journal, use artwork, review old writings and other artefacts, or engage in any other type of reflective activity that they might have found useful for this process. The objective was to have them cast the net wide in a search for relationships among events and a deeper understanding of conflict experiences.

Between interviews, I also engaged in a reflective process, as previously described. I wrote in my research journal after each interview and after reviewing the tapes, and allowed metaphors and symbols to emerge that could be checked against

participants' meanings in subsequent interviews. I also used the questions in Appendix A as a tool for reflection.

Second Interview

There were a number of objectives for the second interview. First, it was used to review the reflective processes of both researcher and participant and engage in discussion of the understandings being created. Second, the participant was asked to elaborate further on events and occurrences from other parts of his or her life that appeared only tangentially related to the original conflict discussed. This was also the point at which to delve into narrative elements that were contradictory, and in essence, create a more complex picture of the conflict. The overall effect was the feeling that the conflict was situated within a context that was both deeper and wider in scope than obtained during the first interview. Larger life patterns of conflict and change were discussed. Lastly, the second interview served the purpose of confirming the holistic description that had been provided by the participant. By this time, I had a good grasp of the meaning of conflict from the participant's point of view, but wanted to remain open to contradictions and possible shifts that may have occurred during the interview process.

Analysis

First, it is important to reiterate that the analysis was ongoing as the interviews proceeded, in the form of the reflective process described. This is consistent with the emergent method described earlier. It also follows Strauss & Corbin's (1998b) approach, in which variation is added to the data, serving the function of challenging initial conclusions and pushing the analysis further.

Each taped interview was transcribed by a hired typist. The typist was instructed to include minimal responses like *mm-hmm*, and to note laughter and pauses in brackets. My comments and questions were also to be inserted in brackets when they occurred within a cohesive statement by the participant; otherwise, they were typed on a separate line. Upon receiving the transcripts, I blacked out identifying information such as names of participants, towns, cities, and third parties.

After the interviews were complete, I read the transcripts for global and local coherence, as described earlier. I then used the conditional matrix from Strauss and Corbin's (1998a) work in grounded theory methods to organize relationships between macro and micro elements of the stories. The purpose of the conditional matrix is to help analysts keep in mind points emerging from the data along both the macro and micro levels, as well as the ways these points intersect, or the "paths of connectivity" (p. 182). In the words of the authors,

Locating a phenomenon in context means more to us than simply depicting a situation descriptively, as would a good journalist or novelist. It means building a systematic, logical, and integrated account, which includes specifying the nature of relationships between significant events and phenomena. (p. 182)

However, the conditional matrix doesn't just string together events and their consequences in linear fashion, and Strauss and Corbin point out that linearity "is not consistent with real life" (p. 183). The conditional matrix helps illuminate connections and patterns of events, and is therefore an analytic tool consistent with the objectives of the research. For each analysis, I used the conditional matrix diagram—a spiral showing the different levels of context surrounding a phenomenon with micro levels noted in the centre, moving outward to macro levels noted on the outer rings. I used large sheets of paper to draw the spirals, and labelled them as I identified the levels of context relevant

to each story. I then tracked the direction of influence between levels of context. For example, in the story of Kate, Kate's mother is influential in teaching her how to assert herself in conflict, so an arrow connected the family level of context with the level of self. Cultural discourses also exerted influence on participants, as well as family expectations, so all these interactions were mapped on the matrix.

I then moved to a content analysis of the elements of the relational systems as they related to change. These would be analogous to the themes of a narrative analysis, but the focus was on both intra- and interpersonal processes such as identity development, acts of agency or intentionality, and patterns of responsibility. These patterns and connections then became the focus of analysis, not their continued reduction because of the goal of holistic understanding.

Anti-reductionism in hermeneutic analysis is consistent with Denzin's (1997) criticism of the "standard" approach to narrative analysis, which essentially reverts to an empiricist paradigm. Computer programs such as NUDIST were not used, as they essentially serve as data reduction tools. Instead, a dialectic process of moving back and forth between individual accounts and the collection of interviews as a whole was used. For example, the whole collection of accounts was viewed from the perspective of individual, unique accounts, using questions such as "How does this story fit with the sense I have of all of the interviews as a whole? Does it cohere or contradict? Do I need to re-think the conclusions I have reached so far in the analysis? What are the similarities and differences between this story compared to other stories? What is the underlying tone and emotion of the story and how does it compare? What are the significant changes that occurred in this person's account of conflict, and how do they compare to other processes

of change? Is there a connection between conflict and change emerging from the stories?" and so on.

It is at this point that the analysis departs significantly from a narrative methodology. The content analysis of the three stories integrates both the voices of the participants and my voice as the interpreter, as I apply the constructs of complexity, chaos, and self-organizing systems theory to the stories. The analysis is an integration at this point of transcript excerpts and the language of complexity, chaos, and self-organizing systems theory in a process of meaning-making. This process relies more heavily on interpretation than traditional narrative approaches, but because an important objective of the study was to explore the viability of these theories, they were used explicitly in the analysis. Because of the objective of assessing viability, it seemed necessary to apply the theories rigorously, while still allowing the voices of the participants to come through as well.

I used the research questions to guide the content analysis. My research questions centred on the two elements of context and change, and those were the central concepts around which I organized the analysis. First, I read the transcripts for micro through macro levels of context, noting the levels of context on the matrix spiral as described. This was to ensure a holistic interpretation of the narratives that extended beyond intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. The levels identified included self-system; (meaning any references to the narrator and his or her intrapersonal processes); the context of the interpersonal relationship with the person involved in the conflict; and family, work, social, and cultural contexts. The latter utilized metaphor to create links to the largest level of context. As I read, I noted the levels of context in the left-hand margin

of the transcript. For example, if a participant talked about his or her mother, I wrote *family* in the margin; if they talked about work, I wrote *work* in the margin; and if they talked about friends, I wrote *social*. Whenever a metaphor (such as “I didn’t want us to be in two opposing camps”) or cultural belief (such as gender-related expectations) appeared, I wrote *culture* in the margin.

I then re-read the transcripts for anything that shifted or changed on each of these levels, in order to address the question of change. I underlined the parts of the transcripts where change was indicated, on any level of context. Next, I typed a condensed version of the transcript based on the identified levels of context. I organized this version of the transcript according to levels of context, beginning with the most micro (self) and progressing through the larger macro levels. Wherever a level of context had been noted in the left-hand margin, I either summarized the passage (if it was lengthy) or used the exact excerpt. Of course, because virtually the whole transcript contained references to different levels of context, this version also included the changes I had noted. I underlined references to change again in this condensed version, and it served as a check on my first reading.

It was in this phase of the interpretation that particular process elements began to emerge. Because so much of the narrative focused on my central question of change processes, the elements that emerged in this part of the interpretation are largely things that shifted over the course of the conflict, such as identity, assertiveness, trust, etc. I soon realized that in order to track changes over each of the three transcripts (which averaged sixty pages each), I needed to separate the conflict into stages. For each participant, there was a central crisis event that seemed to act as a watershed or pivotal

moment. I found this intriguing, as I had not specified that conflict stories should contain this factor. This *crisis event*, as I called it, consisted in all three cases of a face-to-face, emotional interaction between the participant and the other person involved in the conflict. This way of conceptualizing or defining conflict goes a long way to helping understand how lay persons define the concept, in contrast to many theories and models that define it differently. For example, Burton (1986) defines conflict as broader situations in which the satisfaction of human needs are denied, while the term he would use to describe what the research participants described as conflict, would be dispute.

Because each conflict revolved around a crisis event, I re-read the transcripts, thinking about the conflict in terms of pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis phases. I then re-read my margin notations and colour-coded each level of context according to which of the three phases of the conflict it appeared in. Next, I reorganized this version of the transcript according to pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis phases. Each transcript was now organized into three major headings (pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis), with levels of context as sub-headings. At this point, I noted the process elements that had emerged in the right hand margin of the condensed transcript. I then re-read and marked the original transcripts for process as well, and then compared my findings from the two different transcripts (original and condensed). I generally found that the two readings produced the same elements; the few times there were differences, I found that it was because I had overlooked an important contextual link on the condensed version, so I corrected in favour of the original transcript reading. I then noted all process elements in the left-hand margin of the condensed version of the transcript. This allowed me to track parts of the story that included change, and to note those that did not. For example, in the third story

(Barbara's), there was an element of responsibility toward family members and generally in life. This sense of responsibility at the family level of context did not shift for Barbara over the course of the conflict, but it did shift in relation to other levels of context such as self, work, and her marital partner.

Lastly, I returned to the conditional matrix drawings I had done and noted the processes there as well. This provided a large, conceptual overview of the pattern of relationship between context and change.

The steps of the analysis process are listed below:

1. Read transcripts for context, note levels of context in left-hand margin
2. Read for change
3. Underline parts of transcript where change is indicated
4. Type condensed version of transcript, organized according to levels of context
5. Read condensed transcript, underlining change as indicated
6. Re-organize condensed version of transcript into major headings of pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis phases; read for process elements and note in margin
7. Read original transcript for process, compare to condensed version and finalize process elements
8. Note process elements on conditional matrix drawings

This part of the analysis utilizes reductionism to the furthest extent in the study. A series of three maps track the changes experienced by participants over the duration of the conflict, bringing the analysis back to a holistic perspective. I had originally intended to use the conditional matrix to show the links between various levels of context, but found that the computer-generated diagram did not accommodate enough information.

Instead, I transferred the information from the matrix onto three maps for each participant, showing pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis contexts and changes (see Appendixes B through D).

After forwarding the relevant sections of the analysis and transcripts to each participant for review, I scheduled follow-up telephone interviews with each. There were a few minor changes based on their comments, mainly pertaining to factual details, but all three participants said they had found the analysis interesting, informative, and accurate. At this point, I determined that there were enough data for the study, and no further interviews were scheduled or participants recruited. According to the dynamic principle of complexity theory, the meanings participants made of the conflict experience would continue to change, and the changes they had experienced after the conflict would continue to unfold. The decision to end data collection was mainly based on my ability to synthesize what had been collected thus far. Given that the connections between conflict and complexity theory in research are fairly new and exploratory, the data seemed more than adequate for the task of concept building and theory application.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE 'MAKINGS' OF A CONFLICT STUDY

“We casually speak about changing our clothes, changing light bulbs, changing weather,
and changing minds... .”
(Mahoney, 1991)

Consistent with constructivist (Mahoney, 1991) and post-positivist philosophies of science in general (Lather, 1992) is the idea that research findings are co-constructed by researcher and participant, and that meaning-making is an active process. I have chosen to experiment with the term *makings* rather than findings in my presentation of the participants' stories. The following section begins by briefly introducing each participant. I then use Reissman's (1993) three levels of coherence (discussed earlier) to organize my presentation of each story according to global goals, local structure, and content analysis, and draw from Baumeister and Newman's (1994) work on motives and needs in story-telling. Each individual analysis is summarized in a map. It should be noted again that the global and local analyses are based on narrative analysis, whereas the content analysis emerged from the theoretical framework of complexity. After these individual presentations, I move to a comparison of all three stories and a discussion of the applicability of the change theories explored in the study.

I also grappled with the question of how to introduce my participants to the reader. There are concerns about anonymity, but there also concerns about representation: how I describe the participants will influence how the reader interacts with the story, but short of having participants provide their own descriptions, I am left with a representation that will have been filtered through my own personal interview experience. The way I make sense of this is to see the descriptions of participants as largely interpretive, just as the analysis of the stories is interpretive. Introducing the participants then becomes part

of the analytic process. I have chosen to draw from my research journal to create an impressionistic portrait of each participant. My intention is to draw the reader into my experience of the emotional and energetic tone of the interviews, with the hope that this will aid understanding of the interpretations that follow. Some details have been changed to protect identities. I also begin each presentation with a summary of the conflict story. Because a lot of the details also come out in the analysis, I have concentrated on information that would be necessary for anyone who is new to the story to know, in order to understand it at a basic descriptive level. Finally, before beginning the presentation of interpretations, I begin with an excerpt from my research journal that positions myself in the interview and analysis process.

As I prepare to begin the interviews, I reflect on what I bring to the process, both in terms of points of connectivity and potential constraints. I see myself type the words white, middle-class, educated, heterosexual, middle-aged female, but I feel strangely removed from those labels—and I realize that's a dangerous potential blind-spot right there. What does my positionality within those systems of power and structure mean to this study? There are the obvious associations with authority in relation to participants who may craft their story the way they think I want to hear it, and I will certainly be considering that possibility.

But what exactly might they think I want to hear? That they are heroes of their own lives, perhaps... that they made intelligent, responsible choices amid difficult circumstances... that their lives aren't the usual, messy muddles of contradiction... that the conflict wasn't their fault. But I am not unfamiliar with this dynamic, as projection is something I've encountered both in counselling and teaching. So drawing from what I know from both these areas of experience, approaching the interviews with authenticity and a willingness to be somewhat transparent about my own life experiences should help.

And what about other blind spots? All participants are white and middle-class like myself, and it may be difficult to identify cultural discourses that we all take equally for granted. Swimming in the same pond... the advantages are an affinity for common experiences, an ability to connect, but the disadvantage is that it's difficult to see the water you're all swimming in together. I am attuned to some conflict-related discourses based on previous study in the area (competition and war metaphors for conflict are ubiquitous in Western societies), but what about the influence of gender? As a female in this culture, I was raised to acquiesce in

conflict, to make peace, to smooth things over for the sake of the relationship. How might this cultural conditioning influence the way I hear participants' stories? I may have judgments about the way participants handled the conflict, especially if the women relate stories in which they took a strong or even aggressive stance. I may feel subtle approval, with thoughts of "I wish I had the nerve to do that!" As with counselling, I find my best stance in this situation is one of curiosity and interest—"tell me more, how did you come to that choice," etc. When I let my curiosity drive, my judgments tend to take a back seat.

With regard to the analysis, there is no question that I bring a strong affinity for the group of theories that are the foundation of the study. Both personally and academically, I think they ring true—and by that, I mean they make sense. So I know I will be listening for places in the stories that can be described using concepts of chaos, emergence, bifurcation, paradox, etc. There have been two clear moments in my own life where the theory fits. One was during the chaotic months before I decided to leave my marriage. Our relationship was a shambles, emotions were running high, and conflict between my husband and I hovered around every interaction. A friend made a casual comment one day, wondering out loud what it would be like to be single. "Single." Not divorced. The word made all the difference, and I literally felt something shift inside, like a window opening. Where I had resisted the concept of myself as a divorced person, I could imagine myself single, and with that picture in mind I could finally take the necessary steps to leave.

The second moment was similar, when my aunt made a comment about a woman she knew, single with three children, who had just completed a PhD. Again, I felt something rearrange inside, as though things were making room for this possibility. Systems of belief and identity reorganized and my life bifurcated in a different direction. Not unsurprising directions in either case, but significant life choices nonetheless.

So a further bias I bring to the study is a keen interest in how conflict relates to intrapersonal processes of change, within the context of relationship. Both the experiences I related happened in the context of conversations with another person—not by reading an information pamphlet or during a session of solitary contemplation. Bringing forward this particular bias seems consistent with Guba & Lincoln's (1998) notion that understanding requires the engagement of our biases, and that bringing them forward can enrich research findings.

Narrative 1: Like A Call To The Fire

The setting for Kate's conflict was her place of employment, a restaurant where she worked as a server for several years while attending university. The conflict took place seven years prior to our interviews, and centred on one evening shift during which Kate served a large party of 18 or 20 people. The restaurant had a policy of adding a 15% gratuity to the bill for parties of eight or more, but when Kate presented the bill to the person who was to settle it, he said he hadn't been informed of the gratuity and became argumentative. Kate chose not to call the manager but to handle the situation herself, and tried to reason with the man. He left without paying the gratuity and because there was a tip pool to be paid into by servers each shift, Kate was left having to pay \$50.00 out of her own pocket that night.

Kate took half an hour to think about the situation, then approached the manager and asked if she could talk, and he agreed. While Kate was explaining the situation and presenting new ideas for making the policy work better, the manager continued to eat his dinner and talk to other people. In the end, he said "*well, that's just the way it is, nothing is going to change.*" At that point, Kate became angry and replied "*well that's bullshit*" and walked away. The manager became angry, followed Kate into the kitchen, and yelled at her for about ten minutes. Kate remained silent until he finished, then on the advice of the other servers who had observed the whole interaction, left work early and went home.

Kate talked to friends and her mother about the altercation over the next few days, and also had about ten days of vacation time before returning to work. Her mother reminded Kate this was not the first incident with the manager, and suggested she write a letter to the owners outlining the problems at work. Kate followed this advice and met

with the owners. At her next shift, the manager asked if he could speak to her. They sat down before her shift started, and the manager apologized for this and other incidents.

The gratuity policy was also changed.

From my research journal:

Kate, a petite, freckled redhead in her early 30's, is a vivacious, animated speaker. She engages me as a listener with her whole being as she talks: her face, eyes, hands, and torso move in support of her words as she sits on the stool across the counter from me in her kitchen. I've often seen her dressed in scarves, bangles, and hoop earrings, but today she wears cargo pants and a loose sweater, no makeup or jewellery. As we sip tea, my predominant impression of Kate is a person who is comfortable with herself, someone who fits inside her own skin, who is confident about who she is. She is a rapid and articulate speaker, her style running to both profanity and poetry. But by the end of the first interview, I realize there is also a marked lack of ego present: her animation doesn't seem intended to impress or to simply attract attention. Rather, Kate seems to become easily caught up in the drama of her own narrative, and I find her almost naïve enthusiasm hard to resist. It is obvious this is a person who loves story.

The interpretation of all three stories begins from a broad perspective (global and local coherence), moves to the particular (content analysis), and back to a broad systems view. This process supports a holistic approach to interpretation that resists a trend toward reductionism.

Global and Local Coherence

Beginning with the overall or global goal (Reissman, 1993), I draw from Baumeister and Newman's (1994) four interpersonal motives that influence how people tell their stories, and it seems clear that Kate's primary motive was the second in their list—to have identity claims validated by others. As the story unfolds and we begin to talk about the changes Kate experienced, she moves from the specifics of the conflict to the meaning it had in terms of her unfolding identity as an integrated, whole person:

It was definitely a milestone in my life about feeling like a person of integrity. And not just integrity like, like a person of integrity.... But like integrated. Like integrated in myself in that all these parts of myself can exist at the same time.

Kate supports this identity claim by describing a parallel process of integration in her work as an artist. Kate talks about the conflicts involved in directing theatre, and how the experience at the restaurant helped her feel more integrated as a director:

In theatre a lot of it is like spontaneity in rehearsal... and that can be a really scary place to be to work completely in the present moment if you're not... it's not about being sure of yourself but feeling like you're coming from the right place... so part of my work as an artist has been to feel like an integrated person and to become a human being. You know, to really be a human being and if I'm there then I can be in the moment and feel very confident that my decision in those moments are going to come from a place that is truthful and it's from the heart or that it's... it's coming from a place of integrity and then I can feel confident being in the moment and dealing with whatever's coming up...

By the end of the narrative, Kate has spoken about various identity elements or parts, including the feminist, daughter, girlfriend, and director against the backdrop of the conflict experience. But predominantly, what emerged from the story as a whole was an in-depth articulation of her emerging identity as a theatre artist, and in fact, the interview experience seemed to provide an opportunity for Kate to explore and receive validation for that part of herself in particular:

And my feeling is that, like my life as an artist—and I haven't been able to say that for a long time, or it took me a long time to be able to say that—is that it's not separate from my, like, My Life. Like, I don't have a job and then my life. Like, they do play into each other and inform each other in those ways.

As will be seen later in the content analysis, a second global goal fits Baumeister and Newman's (1994) notion that people tell stories to fulfill certain needs. In this case, it seems that Kate's story fulfills the need to find purpose for the conflict event. There are strong links made between the conflict and ensuing, growth-enhancing changes, and interestingly, this meaning making process is evident in the stories of all three participants.

A closer, more localized review of the structure of the story (Reissman, 1993) reveals an internal coherence in support of the global goal. I noticed a preliminary pattern in which Kate supported her statements of grievance against the manager with supplementary stories of things he had done in the past that demonstrated his bad behaviour:

I'd seen that happen before... he hated having someone walk away from him. He wasn't a super well-liked person, he didn't deal with people well, and he had a short fuse sometimes, like you never knew what it was going to be and all of a sudden he could just sort of turn on you.

I wondered whether there was an element of victim-hood emerging, as in Baumeister and Newman's (1994) storytelling motive in which the speaker tries to obtain rewards by presenting oneself as a victim in need of support. But I quickly noticed that the pattern of reflective statement (e.g. "...*other things had come with him being in a position of authority that was [sic] totally inappropriate behaviour.*"), followed by a story or stories in support of that statement, was present throughout the whole narrative. In fact, most supporting stories within the narrative were strategically placed to validate identity statements more than any other kind of statement. Throughout, Kate used stories from outside the context of the conflict itself to support whatever point or claim she was making. This is an example of the way people actively construe their own life history in the process of making meaning.

There is also a significant, developmental shift in the story that occurs over the course of the two interviews. The narrative begins as a chronology of events, with Kate choosing a point in time and relating events in sequence as they had occurred. In the first interview, Kate even answers my questions such as "*how did you see yourself as a person*

during the time of the conflict?” with a chronological description of life events that illustrated choices made and barriers overcome:

I think that... I just have to back up for a little bit. Like, I didn't get a student loan when I was at school....”

The structure of the first interview is a detailed chronology filled with descriptions of the feelings involved in the conflict, but with very little reflective commentary except toward the end when Kate briefly talks about what she gained and learned from the conflict experience. The second interview begins in much the same way, but gradually the structure shifts. As Kate explores the changes she experienced as a result of the conflict (in response to my open-ended questions on change), the structure shifts to a predominance of self-reflective statements interspersed with stories that support those claims, rather than the reverse. I see this change in narrative structure as a deepening of the narrative, moving from superficial description of events to the meanings underlying those events. Before the end of the second interview, Kate had fully described the intrapersonal changes she experienced during and after the conflict, and we moved to an even more abstract discussion of chaos and its place in her life and work. Not only is there a clear and consistent unidirectional pattern in the story as a whole (that is, from concrete to abstract), but we had also reached the point of having addressed all the research questions to the extent possible for Kate at the time.

In another structural sign of internal coherence, there is a pattern in which Kate consistently returns to the original conflict story to support her more abstract reflections. These re-turnings to (or re-workings of) the original story signify the importance and centrality of the conflict in terms of the changes Kate experienced during and after the conflict. And in this way, the structure supports (adds validity) to the global message of

her story: that the conflict was profoundly related to her development as a more integrated person and her development as an artist. It also adds validity to the question of how closely related the conflict was to the changes Kate experienced in general, which is a central question of the research.

Content Analysis

This excerpt from my journal describes my reflective process as I proceeded through the next level of analysis of Kate's story:

The first part of the analysis is easy, identifying different levels of context in Kate's story. While I do that, I can't help but begin to see elements emerging, around identity, agency—in the many examples she gives of practising assertiveness after the conflict—of support she received or constraints experienced from family and management at work. There is also a strong element of a growing trust in process, which Kate talks about in terms of both conflict and her emerging identity as a theatre director. As I work through the transcript, I am reminded of the paint books I received as birthday gifts as a child: the pages were blank, but impregnated with raised dots, which contained the colours that were released as I passed my water-soaked brush over the page, revealing the picture. I never tired of watching the spread of colour emerge like magic from emptiness.

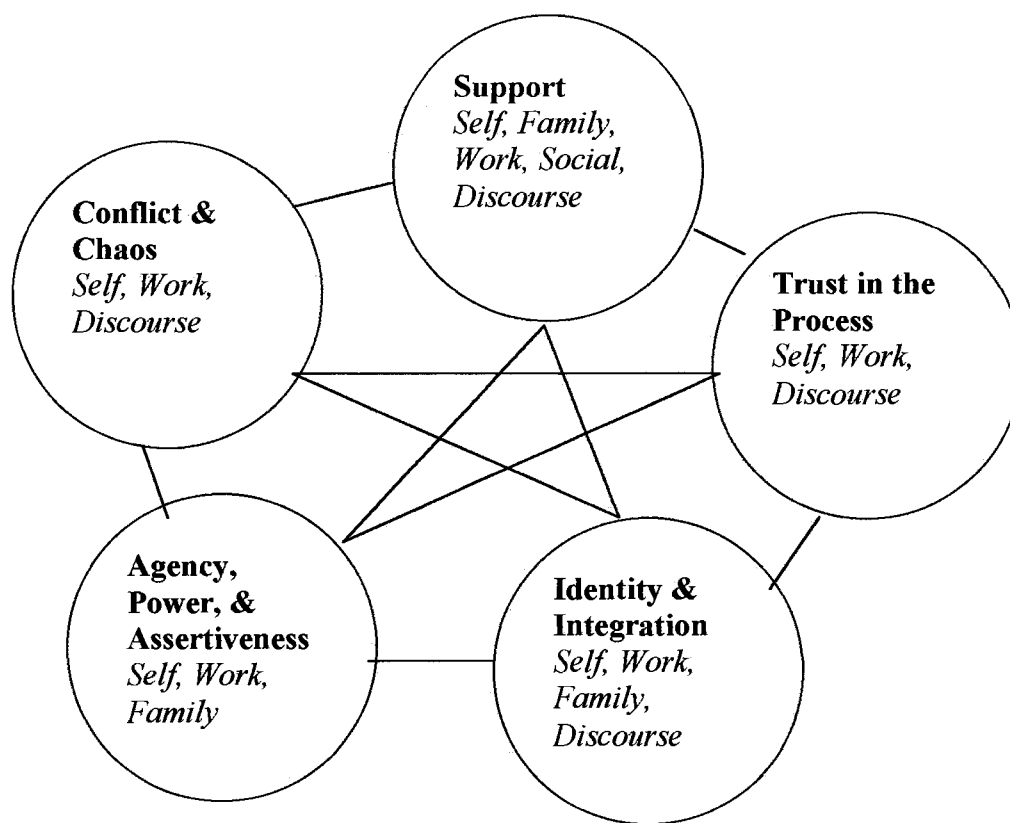
Yet I have to resist this metaphor, because what I'm doing is as much a creative, constitutive process as it is one of uncovering what is there—in fact, more so. While the story already has form and structure, I am providing shades of colour, intensifying some areas while letting others fade into the background. Perhaps it's really more like a colouring book, where the pictures are outlined in black and I crayon in the colours I choose. Of course, the sky will be blue and trees green and the sun yellow (I remember correcting my peers in kindergarten who violated these basic truths), otherwise it will be difficult for others to identify with my work—but that still leaves plenty of room for creativity.

And this leads to question of how to choose: why these elements and not others? This is where I feel that the coherence of the study is strengthened by having the person who was there for the interviews, who has a 'feel' for the participants through repeated interactions, and who is familiar with the theoretical framework of the project, do the analysis (i.e., me). The study is fundamentally grounded in the idea of relationship, so it would in fact be inconsistent to bring in someone who has no relationship to the project to provide an analysis check.

But this is also the unnerving aspect of a methodology that embraces emergent processes: how can I trust that what I am seeing emerge is 'valid'? I am

reassured by knowing that the analysis is grounded on notions of internal cohesiveness, and as long as what I do is consistent—with the theoretical framework, with establishing connections between multiple levels of participant positionality, and consistent from one story to the next, I think I can trust what I see. I am also looking forward to the feedback from participants, and to reworking the analysis as necessary from there.

Figure 1. Levels of Context and Process Elements, Kate



As shown in Figure 1, I have chosen to view the process elements that emerged from the analysis of Kate's story as related and interdependent. The interdependence of elements became clear as I struggled with representing this, the most fundamental part of the story. The elements themselves seemed to resist my efforts to talk about them separately—I could not ignore the fact that agency and the instances of assertiveness Kate talked about were integrally related to the process of identity development that ran throughout the story as a whole. So rather than organize the discussion of elements under

headings, I have chosen to discuss them within a more holistic, integrated discussion format, using bold-faced type to bring the reader's attention to elements.

In organizing this section, I have also chosen to move chronologically through the story, from pre-crisis, to the crisis event, and into the post-crisis phase. Participants did not necessarily tell their stories chronologically, but more typically used the crisis event as a central point and reached back into their life history for related threads that would help me, the listener, understand how they made sense of the conflict today. But because there is a developmental or change focus to the research, it makes sense to track elements and changes in a linear fashion rather than follow the tacking back and forth found in the transcripts. After experimenting with other ways of structuring this section, I realized there were too many complex relationships to account for and that the analysis needed this kind of structure. A chronological discussion also supports the identification of patterns of emergence, which would otherwise be lost.

Pre-crisis

It is difficult enough to define conflict, never mind define its beginning, middle, and end. As previously stated, there was clearly a crisis event that marked a turning point in each conflict story, but it was also clear that that event did not in itself precipitate the conflict. For each participant, there was a context that set the stage for the crisis event, and this context contained the seeds of the conflict.

I have chosen not to attempt to define a clear beginning or end to the conflict. Instead, I chose to follow the story-teller's lead: with each participant, my questions about where and when the conflict began elicited a description of the context out of which conflict emerged. So the choice to resist a concise definition is both internally

consistent (because it follows the structure of the narrative), and theoretically consistent, because simple cause and effect are rejected while holistic contextual descriptions and emergent processes are emphasized.

As previously stated, the first interview with Kate consisted of a thorough description of the crisis event. Toward the end of the interview I had noticed a process of **identity development** emerging, and closure of that interview included my thoughts and Kate's confirmation that she agreed with that idea. After settling into the second interview, I asked Kate to describe herself at the time of the conflict crisis (she was in her mid-twenties), and she chose to reach back to her high school years and begin there. The only child of a single parent, Kate describes herself as having been a "brain" in high school. She excelled academically, played a variety of sports, and participated in school plays. Her mom and the extended family on her father's side would watch her plays and cheer her on in sporting events, but there was also a clear message about pursuing a science or law career:

I think everyone just thought Kate's good at everything. And so there was never any real, you know, push to the arts. It was more expected that because I was good at everything I would be a superstar something... doctor or... I think there was this perception that there is not that many women in science, like it's not really a female career. And so if I was good at that I should go into that.
Kate's struggle to assert her own direction of identity development in the face of

familial and cultural expectations had already begun. The financial help given by her father's family placed expectations on Kate to comply with her grandfather's wishes. And these wishes and hopes for his grand-daughter emerged out of a cultural discourse that contained messages about opportunity—not many women entered the sciences, so Kate would stand out and be able to make a name for herself.

...my grandfather at that time was a pretty big factor in my life and he...like I worked at a law firm part time when I was younger too and he used to come to the law firm and just say to me you could have all of this, you could... and so I think there was this impression that I was going to be a doctor or a lawyer, or in some kind of very powerful position. I felt a lot of pressure.

In contrast, her mother had fewer specific expectations of Kate at that time. A busy working single mom, Kate says she was generally supportive of her interests, in the context of the message: *“find your own resources and make it happen for yourself.”* This led to an early view of herself as having an *“independence of spirit,”* in Kate’s words.

This sense of independence was carried forward, even in the face of family expectations, to support a major life decision. After high school, Kate completed two years of sciences at university before deciding to quit: *“I just thought no, this is not right. And it took a lot of courage for me to not go back...”* This is the first instance in Kate’s story in which she **asserts** her own power to determine her life course. Two elements—identity and assertiveness—have emerged thus far in the story. I am using the term assertive in the sense that something is being brought forward or being helped in the process of emergence by an act of agency or intention. In this case, Kate has facilitated an emergent aspect of her identity or self-system (that is, her interest in the arts) by choosing to ignore her extended family’s expectations and quit the sciences.

Kate’s interest in theatre had been growing since high school, but only a few teachers and her high school principal had validated that interest. Her mom was supportive of her choice to quit the sciences, take a break from university and decide what she wanted to do with her life, although support for Kate’s choice to switch to the fine arts only gradually emerged over the ensuing years. Thus a third process element, **support**, reveals itself for the first time in the story. Mahoney and Moes (1997) talk

about the importance of supporting a system through chaos, and this process will be revisited throughout this and the next two stories.

At the new university, Kate found herself drawn to theatre. She also worked at a restaurant to support herself through school, and her co-workers became the circle of friends she socialized with. Kate knew she would be faced with another major life decision about career when she finished her theatre degree:

And in my first few years at school I was just enchanted by being involved in theatre and feeling really creative and I did a lot of really interesting projects. And as time went on in school I felt pressure mount of what I was going to do when it was over.

Her mother had been dropping hints that a career in the food service industry could be lucrative, and Kate says she had worked hard to know the food and wines at work. It is at this point, about two years away from graduation, that the conflict at the restaurant where she worked took place.

A final point about identity at that time in Kate's life is that she describes herself as having a "lightness of being... being light of heart." This way of experiencing herself at age 25 is associated with a physical sense of being in her chest and head area, which she indicates to me with her hands as she talks.

...I can be a very light hearted person and especially my role within the restaurant was certainly...I was almost always in a good mood and so I didn't like to...I was sort of like feeling like I'm in my chest area, you know, in your head area. Like really...like not flighty...like I wouldn't say that I was ever flighty but just this lightness of being...

Kate goes on to describe a sense of being ungrounded, that anything could pull her attention, and of not standing "in her own authority." This retrospective description of herself is located at a later point in the narrative when we are talking about chaos theory and exploring whether or not that perspective fits with her experience. Kate

confirms that it does, both for her at that time in her life generally, and more specifically during the crisis event. From a theoretical perspective, it could be said that Kate's sense of being ungrounded at that time indicated that she was "poised at the edge of chaos" (Mahoney & Moes, 1997, p. 188), meaning that the systems involved (identity, patterns of interaction, and so on) were also open and vulnerable to a significant, qualitative change if a perturbation was to occur. This element will be explored in greater detail in the next two sections.

The process of assertiveness or agency identified above continues into Kate's pattern of responding to conflict. According to Kate, conflict is like a "*big obstacle*" before which she freezes or runs away.

I think I've always been very resourceful when there haven't been tonnes of obstacles in my way. When I have a really open space to work with then I'm pretty good at discovering what comes up. But the minute someone puts a big obstacle in front of me I can sort of freeze or just kind of avoid it, like avoid or sort of step beside the conflict and not deal with it straight on.

The metaphor of an obstacle in one's path reveals cultural meanings about conflict. Obstacles are things that impede progress and slow one down; they require resourcefulness; they are blockages in life's path. We can choose to step around the obstacle, as Kate describes, or "*deal with it straight on,*" which might involve having the obstacle removed or dismantled. Either way, conflict is seen as something negative. Notice also Kate's use of the term "*someone puts a big obstacle in front of me,*" suggesting she is the unwitting target, perhaps, of others' actions.

Kate says she can confront or face the obstacle only under the right circumstances:

It's ok to have conflict if you're in an environment of respect and love... and not that you'll get the same thing back, but that at heart you know that person cares about you.

Kate's examples of this environment are her boyfriend and her mom, who both know the language of respect that Kate needs in order for her to engage in conflict. But when I ask what happens when those conditions don't exist, Kate replies "*then it's a dangerous place to go.*" Conflict is only safe if it doesn't become "*personalized,*" to use Kate's word. Becoming personalized means to blame or attack the other person, and therein lies the danger.

I guess my rule for conflict is that it has to be about the conflict and not about the person.

Here again is another metaphor for conflict, this time a place that is dangerous unless the relationship in which it occurs is safe. Interestingly, this rule remains consistent through the crisis and post-crisis phases; what changes, however, is Kate's ability to remove herself from conflict without giving away her power. In essence, that process is also about assertiveness, in that the act of avoiding conflict often involves giving up power or, as Kate puts it, "*not honouring myself.*" Assertiveness can be conceptualized as a way of finding and maintaining a balance of respect for oneself and the other person in a conflict situation. Kate's rule about conflict suggests that she wouldn't engage in acts of disrespect toward the other person, so her challenge became finding a way to remove herself from potentially "dangerous" conflicts without losing respect for herself. This is where Kate's mother plays a part in both setting the stage for the crisis event, and for its resolution.

Up to the point of the crisis, there was a pattern of interaction with Kate's mom in which she would intervene when Kate could not face and resolve a conflict herself. Kate says there were occasions when her mom had "*risen to protect me.*"

And my mom knew that about me (the tendency to avoid conflict) because even with, sometimes in conversations with her or stuff, like I would just get silent, or I would... whereas my mom would just bring it up and be very forward. So she was conscious of my tendency to do that and to just get stepped on. And that's where I think she saw a little bit of my father in me. Because apparently my father when they were first together he would get taken advantage of by lots of people and she hates seeing people get taken advantage of. So there's certain things that really bring out the lion in my mom.

The language here suggests an oppressor/oppressed dynamic, and a lack of power or agency on Kate's part. There is an image of Kate as a weak, less powerful being who is in need of protection in the face of conflict.

So Kate's pattern of extricating herself from dangerous conflict situations was to turn to her mother for help, and her mother responded by intervening on her behalf. But this pattern did not necessarily leave Kate with a sense of having honoured herself or maintaining her self-respect in the process. It took her mother to recognize this and point it out to Kate, and to change their pattern of relationship around conflict in order for her to learn to become assertive in the face of dangerous conflict.

At this point, it is important to notice that there is a relationship, although not an immediately obvious one, between Kate's process of identity development and her way of conceptualizing conflict. The commonality between the two is the element of assertiveness or agency, in that after she asserts herself in the crisis phase of the conflict, she experiences a leap forward in the development of her identity as a theatre artist as well. It may be that intentional, agentic acts are important to the development of the self-system.

In summary, the pre-crisis phase of Kate's story includes processes of **identity development, agency/assertiveness/power**, and **support**. Kate's process of developing an identity as a theatre artist was aided by the exercise of agency and power when she chose to drop out of the sciences at university and enter a fine arts theatre program instead. Kate was able to make that move with a minimum of support from her family. Assertiveness, as it relates to personal power, is also found in Kate's pattern of responding to conflict; however, in this case the pattern of relationship in which her mother intervened on Kate's behalf in conflict situations precluded her from taking assertive action on her own behalf, thus leaving her with a felt sense of diminished personal power. This felt sense does not become articulated until Kate's mother changes the pattern in the post-crisis phase, when Kate acknowledges she had known for a long time that she didn't feel good about herself when she avoided conflict in this way.

Finally, there is a process of support: Kate's mom supported her ability to make her own choices and find her own resources, except in situations when Kate was "*being taken advantage of*." Then, her mom would support her by intervening on her behalf. It could also be said that Kate's extended family tried to support her by encouraging her toward a socially prominent and lucrative career, but because their hopes for her contradicted Kate's hopes for having a career in the arts, it was construed not as support but as expectations and pressure.

The Crisis

There are three stories within Kate's conflict narrative that I have included in the crisis event. The first is the argument with the customer over the 15% gratuity. The second story involves the argument with Kate's manager, and the third story involves the

follow-up conversations with the restaurant owners and subsequently, the manager.

I've included the latter two conversations in the crisis phase because if the outcome of those conversations had not been as positive as they were, the crisis would likely have continued.

Processes of **chaos** and **identity development** were found within the story of the argument with the customer. Mahoney and Moes (1997) include affective distress and personal disorganization in their list of indicators of chaos in human experiencing, and Kate's description of her feelings during the argument with the customer and then with the manager, fits that descriptor. The words Kate uses to describe her response to the customer's reaction to the bill are: "*taken aback*," "*thrown off balance*," "*embarrassed*," "*vulnerable*," and "*raw*." The fact that she had engaged in the conflict with the customer instead of calling the manager in right away speaks to her trust that it was safe to engage in this particular conflict, as defined by her internal rules. Kate had also had experience dealing with this type of situation before, and says she usually felt comfortable dealing with them. But in this case, the customer became quite angry with Kate and left without paying the gratuity, which was a more upsetting situation than she had ever dealt with at work.

In the half hour it took to clean the party's table and cool down, Kate decided to talk to the manager—not about the money she had lost, but about the gratuity policy.

And I was also feeling really good about myself because I didn't make it about the money I lost, I wasn't saying oh I don't want to pay the tip pool or anything like that, I was making it about the future.... I felt kind of proud of myself for getting over the money...and that this was the right thing to do. It was right to make it about this and not about me losing the money. I did feel good about going beyond it and getting to a larger issue and being a bigger person in some ways. I felt like a real grown up at that point

Kate's process at this point involves the clarification of personal values and a decision about who she wants to be and how she wants to be seen in the world. Kate sees her choice of priorities as a sign of maturity.

Kate goes on to say, however, that the "*rich emotional experience*" she had had due to the argument and the reflection time, actually set her up for the "*huge meltdown*" that occurred during and just after the interaction with the manager. She approached the manager with expectations of a positive, productive discussion, and instead the experience was almost exactly the opposite:

And I remember during the conversation, as I was talking to him I realized that he wasn't listening, or barely just listening because he was eating and talking to other people at the same time. And slowly, as the conversation sort of reached its end I felt the energy kind of deflating... I began by feeling really passionate, and not angry anymore but just really solid and really good about what I was going to say and I even had some potential solutions... and when he said 'well that's just the way it is, you know, nothing's going to change', I thought you asshole. You asshole.... And I was shocked actually by how dismissive he was.... Then I started to feel angry. And all of a sudden all the guards that I had put in place, to sort of approach him and to feel good about that decision, not feeling vulnerable... they just started 'pinging' away... and I said 'that's bullshit' and he said 'what did you say' and I said 'that's bullshit'.

In this part of the story, Kate has broken her own rules for engaging in conflict by attacking the manager verbally. The guards she had put in place are down and her anger, which she describes as controlled but strong, takes over. But her actions can be seen as something more than just an uncharacteristic loss of temper or act of disrespect. The choice to defy the manager can be seen as an agentic act of self-assertion—asserting her self, her identity—which is linked to the values she had tried to bring to the conversation. Kate says she chose to honour herself by speaking back to the manager in that way.

Kate's emotional vulnerability played an important part in her choice to verbally attack the manager rather than either avoid or continue to try to reason with him. His

response to her comment evokes a reaction in Kate that is even more characteristic of chaos as a process of personal disorganization (Mahoney & Moes, 1997). During the second interview, Kate and I collaborated in exploring chaos as a descriptor of her experience. I asked whether she thought chaos was present during any part of the conflict, and her response includes a rich description:

Certainly. Like I felt that hugely the night of the conflict when I said 'that's bullshit' and he was coming after me and attacking me verbally in the kitchen. Part of me just lost it and it's been very rare... like on very rare occasions in my life have I ever felt like I have, you know, come apart like that. I tend to keep myself in a certain amount of like controlled kind of space... and that just shattered a lot of that. I just felt like I was going to start throwing things or explode and didn't really want to do that but in some sense inside I already had even though it didn't, like, manifest itself physically on the exterior... but there was this just blowing apart. It did sort of blast apart a lot of my notions about fairness or how somebody would react. I felt so vulnerable and in some ways it's almost as though I had been flipped inside out or something. And I just remember just a moment, it was like there was a burning in my chest and I just thought, like I don't know what's going on here... I remember being very disoriented.

The description is rich with the physical experience of meaning systems at the moment of disorganization. There is also the sense of *I don't know*, which is associated with chaos as the void, the empty place (Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997). But the void is also pregnant with possibility and ripe for reorganization. The application of chaos theory to human change processes allows a link between episodes of systemic disorganization and ongoing reorganization. By this view, disorganization is seen as essential to healthy development (Mahoney & Moes, 1997), and the challenge is to support the system through such episodes so reorganization can occur. Following this thread, it appears that the support Kate received from her mother, her co-workers, one of the restaurant owners, and the manager himself was essential to the emergence of the more developed and integrated identity described in the next section.

The support given by Kate's mom came in a different form than a direct intervention, which had been the norm. When Kate told her mom what had happened, her mom pointed out this was not the first such incident with the manager, although it clearly was the most serious and most upsetting for Kate. While her mother remained emotionally supportive, she also insisted that Kate take action herself:

Mom said 'you have to speak to the owners, in order to feel good about yourself' and to feel that I wasn't being taken advantage of... and she said it's a good time to get all the issues out on the table.

Kate's mom helped her draft a letter that respectfully and diplomatically described various incidents that had taken place at work, as well as making the suggestion about the gratuity policy again. The relationship between mother and daughter shifts at this point from one of protector of a vulnerable child, to mentor, educator, or teacher, in that Kate's mother is now helping her learn the skills of assertiveness. This shift is key, in that the letter had a positive and productive effect on one of the restaurant owners, which was enough to garner a positive response from the manager as well. In turn, these supportive responses reinforced Kate's skills in assertiveness, which also had a positive effect on the process of identity development and integration.

There is one more element of this part of the narrative that deserves comment before turning to the post-crisis phase. Kate talks about the choice she made to not shed tears while the manager yelled at her in the kitchen after she had sworn at him. Kate says she knew in the moment that if she allowed herself to cry in front of the manager, the altercation would shift to a gendered dimension that would not serve her:

I remember feeling like, oh, I'm going to cry. I don't want to cry in front of people while he was yelling at me. And I just thought, like how powerful my tears were... not willing to cry. I guess that was, in a certain way, wanting to make it not

about... that it's seen as weakness often... that the tears are seen as weakness or that it changes something for people.

A number of the problems Kate had experienced at work were of a sexual nature (e.g., being the recipient of inappropriate touching or comments), but Kate says she experienced a shift in her thinking about gender after the crisis:

I was very gender-sensitive, especially when I was first working at the restaurant and there was a fair amount of bitterness about that. And that sort of collapsed for me after that...

Again, the language speaks to a disintegration of a system or way of making meaning of events. A key to that disintegration was the meeting with the restaurant owners (a husband and wife partnership):

I was supposed to meet with both of them but just L. (the wife) came. So she read the letter, and then she tried to tell me that boys will be boys, and that it's not a big deal and that's just the way that it is, sort of thing. And just as she was going on, T. (the husband) came in and he read the letter and he said 'Kate, we really want you to know that we value you as an employee and we will talk to D. (the manager) and this will change. And this behaviour has got to stop.

Kate says her response to the wife's comment was "what are you talking about, like with children?"—and how at that point she knew that making it a gendered problem, in terms of male power and female victim-hood, would not serve her interests. The response from the husband was supportive, but the response from the manager when they sat down later to talk, helped complete the shift.

Because it was easy for me to speak about my experience as a woman. And people say, 'oh right' and put it in that category.... And so it becomes kind of an excuse as opposed to, well this is my experience, regardless of my gender.

Key for Kate was that she and the manager spoke together "as two human beings," not as male and female, and when the manager said with sincerity that he had had no idea of the effect of his behaviour on Kate, she believed him. Their connection at

that point was not gender-based, but based on authenticity as human beings. Kate describes the shift more fully:

And I remember feeling that is just wrong (referring to the incidents described in the letter). And so I guess there was some gender issues there. But I spoke about it as a person and not necessarily as a woman being subjected to this. Because another thing that I felt like I claimed as my own was that I have a responsibility to speak how I'm feeling.

I remember saying this to my mom. I said like he should just know that he can't touch me or that he can't do this. My mom said 'you have to say it.' Like, 'you (emphasis) have to say it.' Not that just as a woman I should expect this kind of treatment or this kind of... that I need to speak it and say I don't like to be touched that way, not because I'm a woman and not because... because this is how I feel as a person. Period.

And so that did sort of shift for me in thinking less about... and maybe that really brings me into a feminist... like in some ways like you can see feminism in that way. That it becomes about just your personal authority, not necessarily your role as a woman.

Cause I think I saw that for me to speak of, you know, the event like, oh well, you know, that's how men are, I have to learn how to tolerate a certain amount of misbehaviour... and sort of I'm in this camp and he's in that camp, was not serving my interests at all. And what really needed to happen was just honesty from each other, like, as people, you know.

In summary, the stories that make up the crisis event involve a number of key processes that are central to the story as a whole in terms of later changes. First, the argument with the customer prompted Kate to clarify the values that were important to her, which was a process that left her feeling proud and mature. Second, Kate **asserted** that **identity** when the manager tried to dismiss her concerns, but the way she did it (by swearing at him) invited an angry response. This response, which was a worst-case scenario according to Kate's definition of dangerous conflict, threw Kate into a state of internal chaos, where notions of fairness and the usefulness of gender roles disintegrated and she was left in a state of not knowing. Third, the **support** Kate received from her

mom helped her to stand by the values and identity she had tried to assert earlier, and she was able to bring herself forward with the letter in a way that garnered a mainly positive response. Her identification as a feminist shifted during this period, and her prior intuition about not allowing the conflict to settle along gendered lines was confirmed as she saw that it was more beneficial to have connected with the manager as a person rather than as a woman.

In the final segment of Kate's story, the thread that was begun in this section regarding the changes she experienced during and after the conflict, is explored in depth.

Post-crisis

From my journal:

As I stretch myself to articulate the elements from this section of the narrative, I again struggle to hold both the individual elements and the essence of the whole at the same time. It occurs to me that it is the same thing I teach my Helping Relationships students about paraphrasing—“Don't lose the essence by becoming caught up in the details of the story; when you hold the essence, the details will sift out in order of importance, and you can let go of the rest.”

At the heart of Kate's narrative is a description of the process of integrating a multi-faceted **identity**. I quote here a section at length in which Kate describes how her sense of herself changed after the crisis event, in answer to my question about the kinds of changes she experienced as a result of the conflict:

I think from that point on I really began to get a sense of myself as a person who is grounded in a certain set of values... I didn't have to be a person who just everything was okay all the time, but that I could be rooted in a set of values that for me were very important. I was aware of those values, but I didn't always bring them to the surface.

Like a wholeness and bringing all kinds of myself into my relationship with other people... that I didn't have to be just this person with this person over there and that person with that... you know, so that I didn't have to play different characters depending on who I was with... that I could bring my full self to every relationship that I had... and yeah.

And so yeah at that time... I certainly felt that I had... that it was going to be easier next time and that I was building an authentic integrated person for myself. I certainly felt more grounded. And yeah, there's definitely that feeling of at the time that I felt more sure of my feet, in some ways, of where I was standing, my own authority was really... that's when that really started to kick in and become more of a element in my life about my own... yeah, authority. Taking up space and because that became a thing for me after that... because when I was carrying food often I would move out of the way for other waiters to go by even though I had plates full of new food and they were carrying dirty dishes, so they should move, not me.... And there was one waiter who would always just barrel through without looking and I remember putting my foot up one time, balancing on one foot carrying three plates and saying 'you move'. And he was like 'oh sorry', and laughing. And I said 'well yeah, you know, like I've got right-of-way here.'

And I just remember being a lot more assertive about my own needs and my own physical space. So I remember that was a big realization after that. There was this sense of, you know, I can be fully here, I don't have to worry about offending people and I think there was a certain amount of... I was always kind of biting my tongue a little bit and after that it became easier for me to... I think I really blossomed as a person after that... I do remember certainly that physical change of space, that awareness of space and my own authority.

There are a number of indicators that speak to the depth of integration of Kate's new sense of herself. First, she is able to articulate it on a number of levels, from a defined set of values to a physical sense of actually take up more space. Second, Kate illustrates the perseverance of the changes with stories about conflicts that occurred after this one, in which she is able to assert herself and her values. In a separate incident that occurred fairly soon after the restaurant conflict, Kate tried desperately to call her mother, who was travelling abroad, for advice. Unable to contact her, Kate relied on a friend instead, and was able to face rather than avoid the conflict situation. In another incident, Kate became upset and withdrew from an interaction with a professor when she thought he was criticizing her. She realized later that it was not about her personally, but about her theatre work, and she was able to re-engage with him for more discussions. This incident was important in that it showed Kate was able to reflect on her own conflict

framework, and to assess more realistically the level of perceived danger involved in the conflict. Her increased self-confidence would have made her less likely to become defensive and mistakenly perceive a criticism of her work as a personal attack (a challenge for many artists, who are often personally devastated by criticisms of their work). In another incident, she chose to withdraw from a conflict that she perceived would be futile to engage in, but not before making eye contact with the other person as a way of asserting her authority and honouring herself.

For Kate, the process of identity development is clearly linked to increased assertiveness. But it is important to ask what is being asserted in each situation? Is it simply a new set of learned behaviours, or is there something fundamental that guides the behaviours? According to complexity theory, what Kate asserts are emergent properties of her self-system: her values and personal authority, the notion that she is the author of her life story, that she has a right to take up space in the world, and her identity. The relationship is dialectical and interdependent, in that values and authority are part of identity, and the act of asserting that identity leads to an increased sense of self, which then enables further assertiveness, and so on. It is also important to note that identity development for Kate involves integration: as her sense of herself increases, various parts come together at a higher level of organization. This is seen in the shift away from the roles of gender to a new definition of herself as a feminist, based on a set of values that subsumes gender under a broader and more complex sense of humanity. As Kate states, she now finds it more important to “speak my truth as a person, as a human being,” not out of her role as a woman. It is also seen in her description of being able to bring her values forward more consistently across various situations, and of not having to bite her

tongue or be cheerful all the time. The identity element will be explored further toward the end of this section.

Post-crisis, there is also a process of **awareness** that pervades the changes Kate describes. This emerges from Kate's description of how her way of making sense of and moving through conflict has shifted. As stated above, Kate provided stories of post-crisis conflicts in which she was able to assert her newly found sense of personal authority. Kate uses one story to illustrate that as she moved through the conflict, she knew there was a "gift," a benefit and a purpose for going through it. This seems to be related to a shift toward being more present in the moment during conflict situations. Kate describes how being present is also related to a physical, embodied way of making decisions and choosing actions during conflict (my responses are shown in brackets):

I think that for me it's very much about being completely present in that moment which my faculty of reason doesn't really... not that it doesn't enter into it but in my head I'm not going through these logical steps of what's going to happen in the future. It's more...at that moment my sensation. And I think there's so much that is informing you in that moment and I'm sure reason is a part of that but I wouldn't say that it's... that's my first.

For me, very much it is a kind of physical feeling that's rooted in my body and in memory too. Like, memory does play a huge part. Like, oh, this feeling is familiar to me... and I remember in that situation thinking I felt this before and I still can't, like today I still can't remember what that was but I remember feeling something familiar about that moment. Thinking this is a good time to walk away. It's like I'd been there before and I knew what I had to do. Not from a reasonable... like not what was reasonable or what was rational but from just knowing how that would affect me and how I would feel.

And so there is an idea of... and I don't know if I talked to you about this before, but the idea of remembering is to re-member. Like to actually bring things back together again in how everything comes back together... and I think that memory is... it's an emotional memory, it's a physical memory and it's a... it operates on a lot of different levels. (And it operates as a guide) Yes. (What to do, choices to make in the moment). Yeah.

Here again, a process of integration can be seen, in that Kate relies on multiple kinds of intelligence and ways of knowing for decision-making in conflict. It may be that the “memory” feeling she had, the feeling of familiarity with the situation, may not be a memory at all, but a way of making sense of an embodied awareness and intuition in a situation, especially since she couldn’t associate the feeling with a particular memory from her past.

As Kate spoke of the increase in awareness as a change she had experienced after the conflict, she forged another link between conflict and **chaos**. Drawing from her theatre work as metaphor, she describes a new way of conceptualizing conflict:

And I would even go so far as saying that at times I’ve called that into my life, that I’ve called chaos into my life. And I can tell when I’m headed into that. And actually the play that we’re doing right now sort of operates a little bit on that theory. The idea of inviting... or invoking a certain amount of chaos in your life in order to push through a membrane, or to get to another level of being, or of organization in some ways.

It’s like a call to the fire. It’s like you see it in the distance and it’s a curious thing. And you go closer to it and as you get closer it becomes more spectacular and awesome. And then you get quite close to it and then it’s dangerous and it’s... you know, all of a sudden there’s the fear of being that close. Then all of a sudden you’re in it, and then you just, you’re just totally blown apart, transformed. All of a sudden you’re through and you’re like a different thing.

What Kate describes is so beautifully representative of the experience of transformation through chaos, I literally felt as though I had hit the research jackpot when I heard her words. We had only discussed chaos theory in terms of an emotionally disorienting experience, and intuitively Kate added the elements of transformation, emergence, and reorganization. Interestingly, her new way of making meaning of conflict still includes elements of the old: the fire can be seen as an obstacle, but this time it doesn’t block one’s path but invites one to explore. So there is more of a sense of choice

and agency about entering conflict with the new metaphor. There is also still the sense of danger around conflict, because the fire is, in her previous words, a “*dangerous place to go*,” but now there is a reason to visit the dangerous place: it has transformative potential.

And not that that's always been the case, but in some sense for me, the more, the stronger the conflict is, the more resolutely I can come back together again because there was a definite... sometimes I've had conflict where things have come up but I haven't felt like I pushed through it or I haven't gone through that state of you know, whatever it is, of being in the middle of the fire or... and then it's not quite as, not that it's not satisfying afterward, but it's not as clear afterward. So there is this idea of having to go directly through something in order to emerge kind of on the other side of it.

Further, there is a focus on process that emerges post-crisis, which I label a process of **reflexivity**. Linked to Kate's ability to be more present in the moment during conflict, Kate speaks of the unpredictability of conflict as a void, a place of not knowing what will happen next. This is consistent with descriptions of chaos from the psychology literature as well (Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997). In constructing this meaning of conflict, Kate draws from improvisation in theatre, where actors step outside of prescribed roles and into the unknown, from where creativity emerges.

I think the question, like what if... if you create a void in some sense by stepping outside of roles and allowing for an emptiness. Not like... but an emptiness that is waiting, like is expecting or calling something into it. So that the void is actually a question, like it's a calling into that... not as an... like as an object into that space but your curiosity, your wonder will draw you into that space as opposed to your role necessarily. But, so that void is like... it's a bowl of something... it's a container for a question, you know for questions and yeah so that we can all sort of dive into that.... We can never know it completely. But we can... all we can do is really dance around it and kind of point at it or something.

Kate talks about needing to trust and stay focused on the process in order to allow creativity to emerge from the void. She describes her work as a theatre director as having been supported by the conflict experience:

More trust in that chaos is part of it and letting it be that chaos. And so yeah I think part of my work as a theatre director is also helping people discover their own authority so they can come from a place of integrity...

Finally, Kate articulates the integration of her artistic work with the conflict and the rest of her life:

And my feeling is that... like my life as an artist... and I haven't been able to say that for a long time, but... or it took me a long time to be able to say that... is that it's not separate from my, like, My Life. Like, I don't have, like a job and then my life. Like, they do play into each other and inform each other in those ways.

In tracing the path of Kate's changes during and after the conflict, it can be seen that a process of increasing assertiveness and a claiming of her personal authority supported identity development in a reciprocating process of reinforcement. There is also a dialectical relationship between different parts of Kate's identity: rather than being unified and singular, Kate's story articulated different parts of herself, each informing and interacting with others as development progressed. This was especially evident between her post-crisis sense of personal authority, as a person taking up space, and the claiming of the artist part of her identity. Consistent with complexity theory and constructivism, however (Mahoney, 1991), is the idea that the self is always in the process of integration. For Kate and for the other two participants, this was evident in elements of the story that were contradictory or fragmented, where speakers struggled to articulate themselves as a fully coherent whole, or where words failed altogether. As stated earlier, however, Kate's story was the most coherent and fluid in this respect, which I see as a reflection of the degree to which she accomplished a shift from one attractor phase of her self-system to another. This shift had begun before the conflict, which perhaps accounted for the cohesive feeling of the story.

For Kate, although conflict continues to be a dangerous place, it now holds the potential for growth and transformation, and she learned to trust an embodied sense of awareness to distinguish those conflicts that were potentially transformative from those that were not. This sense of trusting the process of chaos and transformation transferred to her work in theatre, which reinforced her confidence as a director and her unfolding identity as an artist. But finally, Kate points out that it is the underlying processes that define her life, not the various roles she plays. There is an integration of identity at a higher level of complexity and organization, based on ideas of embodied intelligence, values, self-awareness or reflexivity, and a process-orientation to life.

The changes discussed in this section are shown graphically in the three figures in Appendix B. As previously stated, I had originally intended to use the conditional matrix from grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998a) to display the relationships between process elements and levels of contexts, and to track change. Although the conditional matrix was essential as an analytic tool for clarifying relationships between levels of context and processes, I found that the conditional matrix diagram could not, in the end, hold enough information to convey the complexity of change as well. Therefore, I have resorted to simple stick-and-bubble maps to show the dynamics involved. The maps for Kate's change process are found in Appendix B.

Story 2: We Are All Former Children

I begin, as before, with a brief description of the conflict story before moving to an introduction of the participant and then to the analysis. This conflict takes place in the context of a business partnership. Paul came into the partnership as the financial backer, while his partner was to provide the expertise. Within a few months it became clear to

Paul that the business was losing money at a rapid rate, something he would not be able to sustain for long. He approached his partner with the news that he would like to dissolve the partnership and end the business, but the partner refused. This is the crux of the conflict, which climaxed with a face-to-face altercation that is described below in the content analysis. The partnership was eventually dissolved, although Paul kept the business going on his own.

From my research journal:

Paul is a pleasant looking man in his mid-30's who appears self-confident and interested as he settles himself on the couch in my living room. He has light brown hair, a muscular build, and is neatly but casually dressed. He has a youthful look and a playful, boyish manner at times. But there is an intensity about him as well, and as I make tea and chat, I notice him taking in the objects of the room—surveying a painting, reading book titles, checking out an antique mirror. He seems to notice everything. As we settle into the first interview, I sense that a slightly nervous energy accompanies the alert presence, or perhaps it is restlessness. Paul shifts and moves regularly throughout both our talks, and the movement seems to reflect an equally active mind. He thinks carefully about my questions, and often the amount of creative metaphor and feeling descriptions take me by surprise. I recall that Paul was raised in a wealthy home, I can see his well-honed social graces and charm, but there is also sensitivity beneath the relaxed banter. My sense is of a very articulate, intelligent person, somewhat distractible, somewhat vulnerable, and often humorous. Paul has a way of dramatizing his stories to gain full effect on the listener, either by inserting a 'punch line' or joke at the end, or by using colourful description to convey how awful or difficult an experience was. I know from previous conversations that Paul is also a proud and very involved father of a six-year old son. By the end of the interviews, I know that family is important to him, as well as values such as responsibility and loyalty. And out of the three stories, I am aware that Paul's was the most emotionally difficult conflict—or, more accurately, that he expressed having had the most emotional difficulty in his rendering of the experience. There is a sense of someone who has been through 'the dark night of the soul', and although he is still somewhat vulnerable, his optimism and enthusiasm has kept him from becoming cynical.

Global and Local Coherence

From my research journal:

As I begin this analysis, I am struck by the difference between Paul's and Kate's stories. This narrative feels less structured, less conclusive, and in that way I am taken with how it seems to mirror Paul's process of making meaning of the conflict experience, which even after ten years is partial and unfinished. Perhaps this is more the norm, though, more accurately reflective of life. I am also struck, at this point, by how much analysis takes place in the articulation or writing process itself. My notes and journalings from the analysis of Kate's narrative probably constituted only half of the finished product in the end, and I anticipate the same for the next two stories as well. There is constitutive power in saying something out loud, whether in writing or in speech, and in this sense my own process as a researcher seems consistent with the constructivist methodological assumptions of the research.

Identifying a global goal (Reissman, 1993), or the motivation behind Paul's telling of his narrative, is less straightforward than with the case of Kate. An analysis using Baumeister and Newman's (1994) taxonomy of four interpersonal motivations for telling stories reveals elements of three out of the list of four motivations. First, it seems possible that there was a "desire to obtain rewards" (p. 680), in that Paul chose to relate the worst conflict he had ever experienced. And not only was it the worst conflict, but that conflict was also situated in a context of other extremely difficult life events, which were the death of his mother and being fired from a position as an accountant. Paul spares no effort in describing to me the negative effects on him, using highly descriptive language and metaphors to convince me of just how traumatic the events of that time were. Language such as "*horrific,*" "*horribly depressing,*" "*hell to live through,*" "*psychologically broken,*" "*shattered,*" and "*emotionally and physically crumpled*" are consistently found throughout the two-interview transcript, and there is no question Paul wants me to understand just how difficult the experience was. However, Baumeister and Newman (1994) talk about this motivation in terms of narrators presenting themselves as helpless victims in search of sympathy or support, which seems to apply only to a very limited extent in Paul's case. For example, there is the way Paul portrays his ex-business

partner: rather than describing him as an aggressor or evil-doer and himself as a victim, Paul conveys an empathic understanding of the man's actions, and an ability to take his perspective.

Essentially I went into the business being the financial backer and the fellow I went into it with was sort of the experience, I guess. But it turned out he was a fraud, and a con artist, I guess. It's difficult to say... his actions were certainly the actions of a con artist. I tend to be a bit of a personal optimist and I don't like to think the worst of people, and it doesn't come really naturally, so I think he was driven by his situation, his circumstances, and his state of mind. And he must have been in a really bad spot.

And from another place in the transcript:

I've gotten to the point where I wish him well, but I wish him well somewhere else (laughs).

So while there seems to be a motive to elicit an empathic understanding of the experience, there does not seem to be a motive to obtain sympathy from me, the audience. And I certainly was not left with the impression of Paul as a victim, but more as a person who had struggled through difficult times and was still coping to a certain extent with the effects.

Two other motives seem to apply to create a global goal for Paul's narrative style. First, there are elements of the same motive that was so clear in Kate's narrative style, which was the validation of identity claims. Baumeister and Newman (1994) state "although people may desire to regard themselves in certain ways, they do not feel that they completely hold these identities until their claims attain *social reality* by virtue of being recognized and accepted by others" (p. 680; emphasis in original). In this sense, it seems that Paul tried on, with me as witness, the identity of himself as a designer and successful business operator. As will be seen in the content analysis below, Paul was not able to answer my questions of how he saw himself currently in terms of identity, and

admitted he was still struggling to get a sense of what had “filled the void” since the conflict. There was, however, ample evidence of a shift in identity that includes the successful design work he now does and acknowledgement of his artistic skills, which had gone unrecognized by his family of origin. In this sense, then, a motivation for the story may have been to take the opportunity to articulate and gauge the response of newly emerging aspects of identity.

Third, it can't be denied that there was also a purely entertaining quality to the narrative, which Baumeister and Newman (1994) say is motivated by the desire to increase attraction to the narrator. As previously noted, the narrative was spiced with drama and humour, and Paul's style of talking was often animated and always engaging. I infer that there was a degree of desire to obtain the rewards of approval and to be liked by me, the listener.

In terms of needs for meaning (Baumeister & Newman, 1994), Paul's narrative again seems to fulfill the need to find purpose and meaning behind the difficulties he experienced. As with Kate's narrative, Paul articulated a number of positive changes, ways he had grown, and lessons learned as a direct result of the conflict. It is important to note that such responses were given to the open-ended question of what kind of changes participants had experienced during and after the conflict, and that I did not specify positive or negative changes in particular. In Paul's case, he also described one lasting negative (as he seemed to interpret it) effect, which was a tendency to be more emotional than before the conflict. Overall however, it seemed there was a strong need to find a positive, life-enhancing meaning in the difficulties Paul had experienced. None of the other needs listed by Baumeister and Newman seemed relevant to Paul's narrative (the

need to find justification in terms of right and wrong for one's actions; the need to establish efficacy and control via the narrative; and the need to bolster self-worth by proving oneself superior to others).

In terms of a more micro, localized analysis of the story structure, there is evidence of internal coherence in the way the structure reflects and supports the global goals. Specifically, the global goal of eliciting an empathic response from me, the listener, is demonstrated in the way Paul contextualizes the story within a highly descriptive matrix of smaller, supporting stories. This means that, in contrast to Kate's first interview in which she gave an in-depth, chronological description of the conflict itself, Paul immediately begins his narrative of the conflict by situating it within other, difficult life events such as his mother's illness with cancer and her death at the height of the conflict. An example is the following response, within the first moments of the first interview, to my question about how long ago the conflict had taken place:

This was '94... just after the Commonwealth Games... and it was kind of during the dying of my mother, too. She died pretty slowly over the course of, about one and a half years, of lung cancer, so it wasn't a very good point in time... my mental state of mind was pretty horrific right about then... y'know, it was a complete financial disaster to me... the business and the break-up.

This response is typical for Paul in that it weaves together the conflict narrative with other significant events in the same response, providing an ongoing emotional context for the conflict. Further, at my invitation to describe other events going on in his life during the conflict, Paul chooses to step back further in time and relate another extremely difficult and painful experience from his early twenties. This story has no immediate connection to the conflict (other than in a psycho-emotional and developmental sense), but does reinforce the notion that the interview is an opportunity

for Paul to relate to me his most difficult life experiences. In this way, the global goal of eliciting an empathic response from the listener is supported.

A localized analysis also reveals inner coherence in the narrative in terms of supporting the global goal of identity validation. As previously stated, Paul seemed to be on the actual cusp of being able to articulate a sense of himself as a person since the conflict, and this is supported by the amount of self-reflection present throughout the story. In Kate's story, the structure followed what I termed a developmental progression in terms of an increasing tendency toward abstract reflection on the events of the conflict. In Paul's case, however, the story is suffused with self-reflections throughout, signifying that Paul is firmly embedded in the process of making sense and meaning of the events of the conflict. As Paul states at one point, he is "*in the middle of trying to develop different sorts of over-all philosophies, for trying to deal with*" the changes that occurred as a result of the conflict. Whereas for Kate it was a matter of simply articulating what she already had a good grasp of internally, for Paul the interview itself seemed part of the integration process, as demonstrated by the commingling of reflections and abstractions throughout. The following excerpt is an example of how Paul moves from relating the chronology of events of the conflict, to self-reflection, and finally to an identity statement, all within the same narrative segment. The segment begins with my reflection statement:

(So you went through all that [the conflict], got fired, while your mother was sick, and then she died, wow...) Yeah, I got there, then I moved straight from (home town), because it didn't look like my mother was dying anytime soon, then um...I went to (other city) and started looking for work and it was the great recession of '92, and I had made an in, in a really good accounting firm (Paul goes on to describe a number of failed attempts to secure a position as an accountant). So as a result, I have no experience to actually work for anyone (laughs).

And it's psychologically difficult, because even how I feel about my own business, I still, even though I do very good work, I'm very professional—or very proficient, I don't know if I'm very professional, I know I'm not as organized as I should be—but the product that comes is crisp and refined and it works and it's beautiful and all that... but still it feels like I'm still scrounging for money—I'm a professional scrounger for money! (laughs)

The type of movement and fluidity within the story structure demonstrated here is evident throughout the two interviews, and to me reflects the process of meaning making in which Paul is still currently engaged. There are also contradictions within the story that, paradoxically, also reflect an inner coherence because they reflect the uneven, two-steps-forward-one-step-back process of emergence. At one point in the second interview, Paul is talking about how his conception of people has changed, and how he now uses different criteria of assessing the skills and expertise of others in relation to himself. I ask what kind of criteria he now relies on, and whether it involves intuition. Paul replies: “*No, no, I'm not really trusting intuition so well.*” And yet, later in the interview, Paul states that the biggest mistakes he's ever made in his life have been a result of not trusting his intuition, which leads to a discussion of how the conflict experience has helped him trust his intuition much more now compared to then. This could signify the role the interview itself had in the integration and meaning making process.

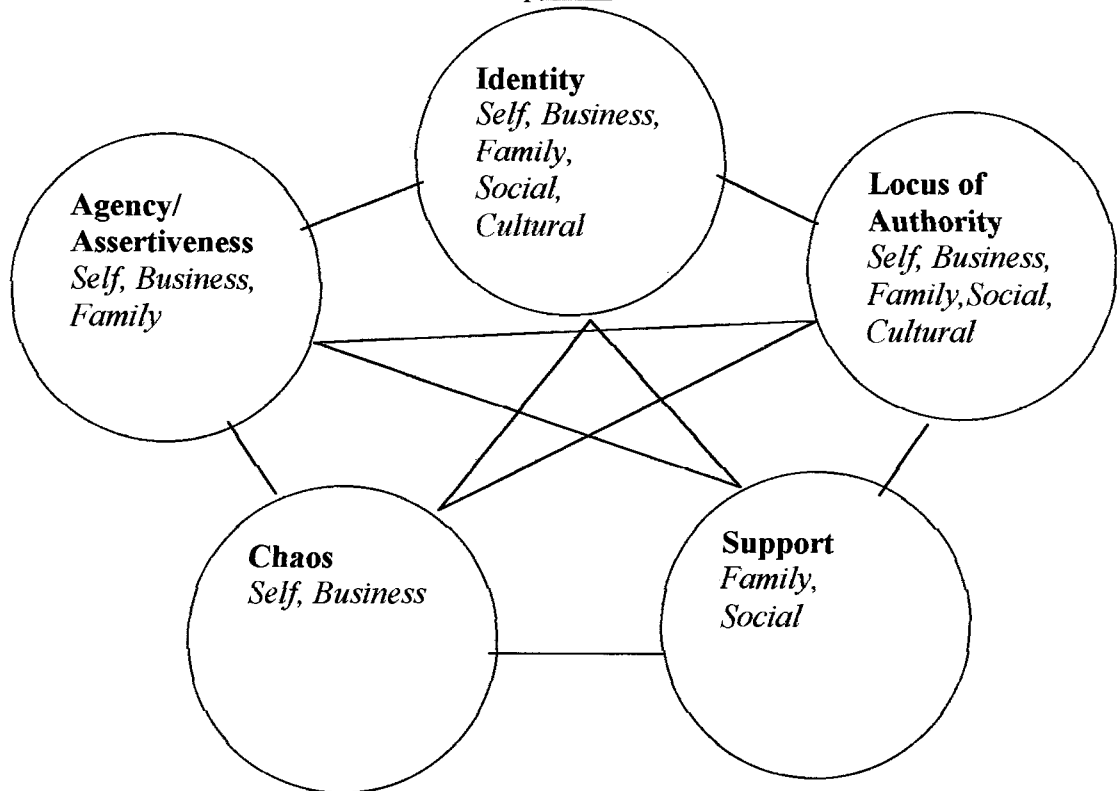
Part of the movement of structure in this story also involves a circling back through time and bringing forward stories that reinforce the meanings being currently forged. Over the two interviews, Paul touches on almost all developmental stages of his life, from childhood to adolescence to early adulthood and his current age and stage. But there is nothing superficial or arbitrary about the selections; each story brought forward is intentional and relevant to the topic of discussion. The overall result is a story that is intensely focused on process and reflection, while at the same time drawing from a wide

range of specific, substantive details. In this way, the internal structure of the story provides internal validity through a coherence and cohesiveness with the its content.

Content Analysis

Figure 2 shows the processes and levels associated with this story.

Figure 2. Levels of Context and Elements Map, Paul



Pre-crisis

As with the content analysis for the first story, I have organized this section into three parts: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. Paul was 25 years old when the conflict occurred, almost 10 years ago. The conflict took place in the context of a business relationship with a man with whom Paul had attended high school. According to Paul, the business partner brought knowledge and business expertise to the partnership, while Paul provided the financing. But as Paul says, he “*went into it naïve,*” and the business began

rapid loss of cash, and finally had to inform his partner he was withdrawing financial support. That set the stage for the next, crisis phase of the conflict, but the changes Paul experienced during and after the crisis also have their roots in the months and years that preceded the business.

Once again, **identity development** emerges in this story in terms of changes associated with conflict. A significant part of the pre-crisis context is that Paul's mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer one year before he began the business, and passed away just prior to the crisis event. Paul was very close to his mother, and both his parents were important to the development of his sense of identity. At different points throughout the two interviews, Paul talks about how his sense of himself prior to the conflict was associated with his ability to earn money. Paul grew up in a wealthy family, enjoying vacations abroad, ski trips, private schooling, and other benefits of wealth. But his parents were also both very hard working professionals who had earned their wealth, and Paul grew up with expectations about standards of achievement in school, and later, in career. In Paul's words: "*...and my choices, you know, you could be whatever you wanted as long as it was a doctor or lawyer or an accountant (laughter).*" The laughter in Paul's delivery of this kind of statement is typical of his storytelling style, and conveys a sense of affection and respect for his parents. While he is forthcoming about the negative aspects of his upbringing and the impact on his sense of self, his tone also tells much about the quality of connection between him and his parents.

Paul uses stories to describe to me how deeply identified he was, prior to the conflict, to the image of a male who earns money. He describes a conversation with his mother:

And I remember when I was about 11 and she decided to tell me about women, and she said 'the only reason that a woman will be interested in you is to get at your money'. And I said 'oh, ok, then I must have money to be attractive to women'. So that ties that into my identity. And she meant it as watch out for gold diggers, but instead to me it was like 'this is why you're valuable'.

This next section of the transcript shows the connection between Paul's sense of identity as someone who earns a lot of money, and the beginning of the conflict.

I was, pre-conflict, I think I was a lot more about what money I had. I think that, maybe in society too... no, I don't want to bring up society and stuff... but I think that one of the fundamental measures of 'manhood' in North America is how big a paycheck men have... (And that was where your identity, the way you thought of yourself...) Yes, I always saw that as being one of the primary characteristics of why people would want to know me or to be around me... it's a defence largely against loneliness, y'know... people are around me as long as I'm buying (laughs)... something like that...

(Right, right, and if I'm buying, I need to stay in money so I can keep on buying) Exactly. And when I saw the prospect of losing it at that rate—my god, what if I lose \$5000.00 every month for the rest of my entire life! (So for you, then, what was being shaken up was... because the business was losing money to the extent it was, your identity, who you saw yourself to be was being threatened) Yeah.

Paul uses the term “bleeding cash” to describe how quickly the business lost money in its first months. For me, the term brought to mind the draining away of one's lifeblood, signifying the central place money occupied in Paul's sense of himself and his life. Further, the inverse aspect of connecting to others via money was a strong sense of responsibility. According to Paul,

It's very important to make sure that you don't owe anything to people... you've got your reputation and that is so incredibly important... that's one of the few things that... if it's damaged permanently it never repairs.

It seems, therefore, that Paul's position within a system of discourse at that time was at the nexus of a cultural discourse that equates manhood with money, a family discourse of career and identity expectations based on the cultural discourse, and an internalized belief that Paul himself had little more than money to offer to others.

Another significant event that took place prior to the conflict was that Paul was fired from the accounting job he took when he moved home to be closer to his terminally ill mother.

It was difficult because I'd moved to (home town) largely to be closer to my mom when all this was going down. I'd also managed to get a job not through my own merits, not by any stretch of the imagination... it was in accounting. I was an accounting student, I was a good accounting student, but not a good... person. Not a good worker, not... I had never learned exactly what are the boundaries of a appropriate behaviour, because I'd been raised essentially in a fraternity environment, you know, a high school environment, where everyone stayed up till two, watched Saturday Night Live, cruised chicks, shot pool, you know... and I ended up in a small town in a small accounting firm, and accounting firms are usually quite conservative anyway, and I was the youngest person there, by about 20, 25 years.

And in terms of the staff I was working with, I was the only one on the academic career path. So it was important to demonstrate my thorough knowledge of accounting, but probably the wrong, the damn wrong thing to do. From the social... you come off as the know-it-all.... And I ended up getting fired, which was devastating to my mom, certainly, and devastating to me too because it was indeed a personal rejection.

Interestingly, the language Paul uses to describe the event is to first say that it was “devastating to my mom” before saying it was devastating to himself. This tendency to defer to significant others in relation to himself is consistent throughout the story, which gives rise to the second major element. I’ve borrowed the term **locus of evaluation** from person-centred therapy for this element (Corey, 1996; Raskin & Rogers, 1995).

According to the humanistic school of thought, locus of evaluation is one of three dimensions along which clients are seen to progress in successful therapy. As clients gain self-regard, they shift the basis for their standards and values from other people (an external locus) to themselves (an internal locus) (Raskin & Rogers, 1995). The term describes Paul’s tendency to depend on others, prior to the crisis event, for expertise, a sense of identity, and guidance. For example, before the crisis event, Paul saw others as

more able, more capable, more skilled and knowledgeable than himself. With regard to his business partner:

The guy who I went into business with he was quite popular in high school. He was, you know, a jock, his rugby... very tough big guy and so there was almost kind of like an idolizing type thing going on there. And I... you know what I had definitely going into it, I was like oh well this is so and so, you know he must know what he's doing. You almost assume that because someone has a personal power to them that they've also got... that they know what the hell they're talking about. And in this relationship that I was in I completely devalued... you know, the business relationship, I completely devalued every other aspect of what I could bring except for the money. (That was who you were.) That was who I was... it wasn't anything to do with talent or design.

Paul also formed his identity and values based on those of significant others (mainly his parents).

To do what I want to do has never been a strong instinct in me. It's more about duty, what are you supposed to do, which is largely why I got married anyways. We got pregnant, so we got married. I was like, you've got a kid, get married.

Using the metaphor of a cell from self-organizing systems theory, we could say that Paul's boundary or membrane that differentiated his self-system from the surrounding context, was very permeable. The tendency to rely on authority figures to provide an outline or definition of his self-system would have left the system somewhat vulnerable and exposed in certain situations—which is exactly what occurred in the business partnership.

Paul explicitly acknowledges this tendency later in the narrative when we talked about changes he experienced in the years after the crisis. But it is also implied in the structure of the narrative when Paul speaks about a personal event first in terms of its effect on someone else, and second in terms of its effect on himself. Besides the example given above, there is an instance when Paul talks about working as an accountant:

“Eventually, you knew there would be good money, and that was important to my mom, and to me as well I guess.”

And there is another instance when Paul talks about transferring to a private school to escape the bullying he experienced at the public school in his hometown. Paul says he was small for his age, but during his years at private school he lifted weights, participated in martial arts, and “*grew and grew.*” When I asked whether that changed the way Paul saw himself, he replied by saying

It did, yeah, ummm...you’re still sort of...my dad was always the kind of person—and I love my dad a lot, especially since mom has died, I see him as much more human—I used to see him as infallible. He was infallible. See his mom had left his dad when he was 2 years old, and when he was ten his dad fell off a roof and he was hurt so much so that he couldn’t take care of him, so he was raised by a foster family, and he worked. He worked his way through university, he ended up being head of his fraternity, captain of the basketball team at (university), maintained an outstanding grade point average, and made himself a millionaire by, you know, whatever. And yet, after work he coached every single sports team I was ever on... and he was, you know The Man. He was... everything that I saw that was a man, that’s my father.

Again, the excerpt shows Paul’s tendency to define himself in relation to others. As will be shown in the post-crisis analysis, the locus of evaluation shifts significantly to an internal locus after the conflict, signalling a second order change in his self-system.

There is one more life experience Paul related that I saw as part of a pattern involving identity and a locus of evaluation. About 5 years prior to the conflict, while Paul was attending university, he joined an American-based group that he described as a “*cult.*” Paul was recruited at university and travelled with other young people to an American city where they underwent intense training to sell books door-to-door, which Paul describes as “*brainwashing.*”

I had been sort of sitting back and watching, and in the auditorium they rented they’d have these demonstrations about how to sell and how to succeed, and how you’re not going to fail... and the how-to-books... and seeing the whole

auditorium get up and start chanting, and standing up and looking around and going oh my god, I'm in Nashville Tennessee, with no money, part of this group and oh my god even the people who I thought were immune to this are not.

Paul says he was always able to hold part of himself apart and observe what was going on, and that he was the first of his group to leave. So although there is a strong tendency in Paul to follow authority, there is also a pattern of asserting his uniqueness, or identity. The decision to join the cult can be viewed as an act of individuation in relation to Paul's parents, who he did not consult before leaving, and the decision to leave the cult was another act of individuation. And in the crisis phase of the conflict, the actions Paul takes against his business partner can also be seen as an assertion of his identity.

The Crisis

When Paul begins telling me about the crisis event, he says:

I guess the biggest conflict I ever had was around the dissolving of my business and the fellow I got into it with... it was a sort of a partnership thing, it was a (type of) store. It was probably the whole situation around the break-up, which took place... the physical break-up took place over I guess 2 or three weeks, and it was probably the worst 2 or three weeks I can remember in my entire life.

Because the business was losing money at such a rapid rate, Paul approached his business partner and said he was withdrawing his financial backing and wanted to close. But the partner refused and continued operating as usual, and although Paul consulted a lawyer and began a process of closure through legal channels, things continued to build toward a crisis. Part of the psychological context for Paul was that his mother had just passed away, and he was not eating or sleeping well. When he returned from the funeral, he found the business "in shambles," and suspected his partner was:

(...) stiffing creditors, selling things to tourists, taking the money and not sending anything...um... conning people, yes, but I like to think he had the intention to deliver when his fortunes changed. I don't think he deliberately went into it to con people.

Paul describes his emotional state at the time, and the support he received from his lawyer:

It was a difficult thing, and thank God I had a good lawyer, and it really helped, I think he saved my life, because I had folded. And he could be the person who could stand up and be there when I had folded... I had completely folded. I was emotionally and physically crumpled.

As he relates this part of the story, there is a quality of earnestness and depth to his speech, but not to the point of emotionality. Again, Paul seems focused on letting me know how difficult this time was for him, but without portraying himself as a victim. At this point in the story, there is an emerging process of **chaos** characterized by psychological and emotional disorganization. The chaos reaches its peak during a heated confrontation between the two business partners. Paul had decided that he no longer trusted his business partner to deliver merchandise, as he suspected he was keeping the customer's payments. He decided to deliver the merchandise and collect the payment himself, so he loaded it into a truck and parked at an undisclosed location the night before his partner was scheduled to make the delivery. He knew this action would precipitate a confrontation:

I knew, one way or the other, that Saturday morning was going to be a showdown over this.... So I had to go down to the store at 7 am and wait for him to go out to the shop, find that the delivery was missing, put two and two together and come back. And I was terrified, I mean psychologically I was already broken... and I didn't want my wife there... I feared he'd go ballistic, I mean you know he probably had about 50 pounds on me and like 6'3", so physically a big guy, so you know... and it was scary, it was very very terrifying being there. (How long did you wait like that?) Alone in the shop probably about 45 minutes to an hour... and good lord, I saw him come in and I dialled 911 right away, which was not my proudest moment as a guy, I think maybe? You know, guys are expected to stand up and not wimp out, but I really didn't know which way the whole thing was going to play out. And yeah, he was pissed, and after a fairly heated exchange of words and insults hurled largely in my direction, y'know, I just sort of sat and took it, he said, "This is of course, over now. I can't be in business with you anymore." And I said, "Look, I understand (laughs)." And it was tough, because I

left and I said "Look, ok, I'm going to deliver all this stuff," and he said "How can I be sure you're going to pay the suppliers," and I said "Well look because my name is on the business, and I've been doing it so far, why wouldn't I now?"

After the confrontation, there was a period of time before the partnership was fully dissolved, and although there were other smaller conflicts along the way, nothing compared to the intensity of emotion during the face-to-face confrontation. The period right after the confrontation continued to be emotionally difficult for Paul, which again can be described in terms of chaos as emotionality and personal disorganization. He says he continued to feel afraid whenever the phone rang or there was a knock on the door, and that he continued to experience difficulty eating and sleeping. Paul uses the phrase "*like thin crystal*" to describe the extent of his emotional fragility. He also says that his "*confidence was shattered.*" He made the decision while in this state to marry his girlfriend, who had been somewhat supportive throughout the conflict, but the decision is one he regretted:

I married horribly and incorrectly after the conflict... you know, for a lot of different reasons that... that... you know there was just... I don't know if my marriage was really a direct result of the conflict, but it had a lot to do with it... it was like I just felt like I could not live alone...

And lastly, Paul speaks about how his identity underwent a "tearing down... it was like a gigantic mental void, or sort of a personality type void, where it's like oh my God, if I don't have this to offer, what..." Here again is the reference to chaos in terms of a void, an emptiness or time of not knowing (Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997).

Although emotional chaos is the predominant process identified with this part of the narrative, there is also the element of **agency** and **assertiveness**. Paul had tried to convince his partner that the business should be closed, but the partner had refused and

had continued to expect Paul's financial backing. Drawing from the elements of identity and locus of evaluation discussed in the previous section, it seems that Paul was caught between two belief systems: on the one hand, the rapid loss of money was a threat to his identity, but on the other hand, he saw his partner as having more business knowledge and expertise, and therefore more authority. These two systems had operated compatibly in Paul's life (for example, in relation to his parents) until now, when Paul found himself in a different context. That context was a) a relationship involving money, and b) in relationship with a person who did not possess as much knowledge and expertise as originally thought. In order for the conflict to be resolved, Paul essentially had to choose one system over the other, and he chose to protect his identity system by asserting his own authority, which was a difficult and unfamiliar action. As we will see in the next section, this act of agency ultimately promoted a shift in both systems.

Post-crisis

When I asked Paul to describe how the conflict shifted for him after the confrontation, he described the change process in metaphor:

You know, there was not one event that shifted it, it was largely time. It's strange because, you know, there was never a moment of where it was like oh, that's over. It always felt sort of like a very very still pond where you throw a big rock into it and there are rippling waves. And you're never quite sure exactly where the moment is that it suddenly becomes calm again.

And from another part of the transcript:

I'm not sure exactly when that returned (Paul is talking about a feeling of relaxation) but it has. I mean, it's sort of like a rainbow... the in-between the colours... where exactly does it go from being blue to becoming red or purple or whatever. You know, there's the colours in between you can definitely tell when one is... when one part is yellow and one part is blue, but you can't tell exactly when the colours have changed.

(So eventually the ripples just died down and you what,... you found yourself realizing you hadn't been thinking about it? Is that how it worked?) *Yeah, just largely when you get to the point of where... I was not even that conscious I think of it disappearing from my radar. There may have been one or two points where I said, you know I don't think about it that often anymore, okay, it's getting better.*

I've quoted this section at length to make the point about the amount of time it can take for the participant in a conflict to define the conflict as having ended. From my research journal:

It seems important that in Paul's case, there was a legal agreement that formally dissolved the business partnership, but the conflict itself continued to exert effects throughout the systems of Paul's life. It feels so important to me to communicate to those involved in conflict resolution to be aware of the time it can take for the changes associated with conflict to play themselves out or to reorganize. I also wonder about the relationship between intrapersonal changes for the parties to a conflict, and the effect on the conflicted relationship. In the case of Kate, those changes took place fairly quickly and the conflicted relationship with her manager underwent a positive change, but neither of those things happened for Paul. And I wonder whether the difference may be the amount of support the person has while going through the chaos of reorganization, as Kate clearly had more support than Paul throughout the conflict. Hopefully, this research will provide strong indicators of positive change that facilitators can use as guidelines.

So there is not only the process of change as a unique phenomenon associated with a given conflict, there is also the substance of change—in essence, both *how* change occurs and *what* it is exactly that changes. Over the course of the second interview, Paul was very clear about the changes he experienced in the years after the crisis event. Again, the segue to a discussion of these changes begins with a reference to his father, and introduces an element similar to that from the previous narrative about Kate and her mother. Paul tells a story about his father taking him to Reno, Nevada for a holiday shortly after the crisis event, and how Paul still had a difficult time relaxing and detaching from the conflict. The excerpt begins with my reflection statement:

(So not even your dad could alleviate...) *No, no.* (Nobody could take this away and make it better). *Exactly. And it wasn't... technically... because it's never been to the point of where technically I couldn't be bailed out, in some respect. My dad has money and even the sums that seemed large weren't really.* (And did you turn to him for help? Did he offer, or even know?) *Yeah, yeah. Basically yes he knew and it was largely like okay, you've got to be a man sometime. So stand up and take it. Figure your way out of it.* (How did that feel?) *You know (laughing) horrifying but really a good thing to look back on and think oh... (trails off).* (So tough it out.) *Yeah, there comes a stage of where you are now, you know, you're a man. You're a grown up.* (And that means... taking responsibility?) *Exactly, that's it.*

Notice the way Paul makes the link between being “*a man*” and being “*a grown up*.” This passage signifies the shift from an external locus of evaluation—or what I also think of as a child’s eye view of the world, to an internal locus, or an adult’s eye view. Although it is the same discourse in operation (manhood equates with earning money), because Paul now *owes* large sums of money the emphasis has shifted to personal responsibility. Having to face that responsibility without the financial support of his father—and eventually being successful in paying his debts—helped facilitate this shift. So while one belief system (money/manhood) was reinforced, the message implied in his father’s refusal to help Paul shifted the other belief system—that Paul was not as capable as others. His father’s refusal brought Paul to an adult level, and between that and the loss of faith in his business partner, the external locus of evaluation began to shift. From the same excerpt, immediately following Paul’s statements above about having to take responsibility and becoming “*a man*”, comes this definitive statement:

And I would say that probably the biggest mistakes I've ever made in my life that I can think of have been because I've ignored my own gut, my own feelings, my own intuition. And I've trusted other people, like the judgment of other people, over my own. That has been the biggest single source of harm, discomfort, everything.

(So did the conflict help you in that respect?) *Oh it gave me a clear, clear cut... you know, example of yeah, I should have trusted my intuition. There were a lot...*

there was a lot of big flashing red lights and stuff that, in hindsight, not even in hindsight, that I just... I just said, yeah yeah, you know, it was like hitting a mental snooze button... the alarm goes bing, bing, bing, wake up, stop doing this... oh, just an hour, just another week, just another month, we'll see how it goes. (So has that changed? Do you trust your intuition more frequently now?) Yeah, I certainly listen to it a lot more. I still for some reason, for some reason have value in bouncing ideas off of, you know, off of people around me, but...

(So on a scale of one to ten, ten being in full trust of your intuition, and really living your life that way and operating that way and having that as a really clear belief and value, and zero being no trust, like abdicating all of your inner knowledge to other external sources... where were you before and where are you now?)

Well, before I was probably I would say... it sounds horri... I'd say about a three, really you know. It was... so much of it, was like I would not do anything unless Mom or Dad thought it was a good idea. (So not just about the business) No, in lots of areas, exactly, like I could be over-ridden like that (snaps his fingers) (And did you ever turn to your mom and dad for advice?) Oh yeah, oh yeah, and they would give it. And...you know this was all part of the grown-up knowing everything, sort of mythology... and yeah, now I've seen my dad make enough big mistakes to realize, hey, you know, he's... he's like me, and I'm like him. (You're just human) Well, exactly, I mean, you never think of your parents as being... just, you know, grown up children, that's really it, you know. (And so where are you now?) Where am I now? I'd probably say like... eight point three-five. (That's quite a big jump)

It seems paradoxical to me that out of a traditional, conservative discourse about what constitutes manhood, should arise an appreciation for the importance of intuition, which has traditionally been associated with femininity. The way I make sense of the paradox is that relying on one's own intuition is also an act of independence, which is also consistent with traditional discourses of masculinity. And a further paradox is that although the action (or inaction) of Paul's father reinforced the discourse of money/manhood, that discourse also shifted significantly for Paul after the crisis event. But again, it is consistent with systems theory that the two belief systems are related, and that a shift in one would affect a shift in the other.

At another point in the interview Paul talks about how his view of not only his father, but others in general has shifted significantly. He says he's lost the "*pedestal effect*," or the tendency to see others as more knowledgeable and capable than himself.

And I don't know if it's a result of that conflict or not or if it's something that was just a gradual evolution. I have sort of lost that pedestal effect of sort of looking at people and thinking oh well he's just exceptional, he's just great, I couldn't possibly hope to do that. Now, it's like, you know, screw this, whoever... whatever he did, whatever he accomplished. It's possible within the realm of the... of anyone really.

I don't see people in terms of a hierarchy of what because, you know, I see so many intelligent poor people, so many beautiful rich people, so many ugly rich people (laughing). You know like physical attraction, you think okay of someone who's beautiful, you put them up there, people who are physically less attractive down there, what about intelligence, what about money, what about occupation. I know some people who, you know like doctors and you think oh god they've done that much school they must just have it made financially. And I know some that are just scraping. And some plumbers who are literally, hey I've got a boat... I just bought a boat and next we're going for a four week vacation wherever every summer and things like that so. I just don't have this hierarchy so much. I just see everyone largely now as being kind of different.

He also says the process has been one of "*deconstructing my preconceptions*." In other words, Paul's system for viewing others has become more individualistic, more relative, and thus, more *complex*, which is exactly what is predicted by complexity and self-organizing systems theory (Bausch, 2001; Capra, 1996). It is also again consistent with the humanistic school of psychotherapy, which says that successful clients "(shift) from a rigid mode of experiencing self and world to an attitude of openness and flexibility" (Raskin & Rogers, 1995, p. 130).

Finally, using a wonderful metaphor to describe the shift, Paul says:

We are all former children... we are now the grown-ups and we... when we're children we look at grown ups and we think oh they're a grown up they must know everything, they must know so much more, they must know exactly what they're doing. And then when we become grown ups we realize this isn't the case

We are all former children... we are now the grown-ups and we... when we're children we look at grown ups and we think oh they're a grown up they must know everything, they must know so much more, they must know exactly what they're doing. And then when we become grown ups we realize this isn't the case but maybe we perpetuate it anyway because we've got to put bread on the table and we've got to convince people that we know exactly what's going on.

Paul also describes how his relationship to himself in terms of identification with money has shifted:

I was forced very early and quickly (after the crisis event) to come to... it shattered my relationship with money.

Note the language, “*shattered*,” again suggests chaos, and the shattering of a system as it reorganizes toward something new.

(You had talked about your self-image in term of money. So is that related to this?) Yes, yeah. It forced me to disconnect a great deal... and for me it was big time tied up with self worth and apparent happiness. My value as the bringer of money, that's what I sort of saw myself as. And in this relationship I was in I completely devalued... you know, the business relationship, I completely devalued every other aspect of what I could bring except for the money. (That was who you were). That was who I was... it wasn't anything to do with talent or design. That wasn't even a part of it at that point, it was a latent thing that I had learned. And I learned hey wow I'm actually a really damned good designer so that's neat. But I had always, I always had that too. I really had.

Paul goes on to convince me of his natural talent by explaining that his grandmother had taught art at a university, and that he was “*born with a paintbrush*,” but that his talent and interest in art were never acknowledged by his family. When I ask if it was after the conflict that he began to recognize the talent for himself, he replies:

Yeah, well... yeah and it sort of came out of necessity too. It was sort of like, well, I've got to make some money. Some people were asking me to do stuff (design work). But whereas before maybe the old attitude might have been, well I'm not qualified to do that... (trails off). (So how come you didn't revert to that old position? What came...?) Well it was a bit of a survival mode then, in a lot of ways. (So it was like I can't afford to have anybody else help me with this. If I'm going to crawl out from underneath it I have to pick up the pencil and I have to do

this.) *Yes, yes, that was it. And it came in little steps... but the big statement is 'why not me. Sure, why not, I can do this'.*

Again it seems paradoxical that out of the very discourse that gave rise to conflict in the first place, emerges a new sense of identity. The original discourse about Paul as a money-maker was fairly simple and unidimensional. But it also required Paul to become creative in facing his financial difficulties and repaying his debts, and so, taking small, incremental steps, he tried his hand at the design work himself. He experienced a number of successes over time, and his business has been growing steadily over the last ten years. Paul is now at the stage where he is doing design work equivalent to someone with formal training, and his business is financially lucrative. Although one would think he would be able to articulate a changed sense of identity based on external indicators (i.e., his obvious talent and success as a designer), Paul is not able to. This excerpt begins with my question about the period after the crisis, during which Paul has said his view of himself as a maker of money was shattered:

(So what happened was that you went through two months of where that was completely torn down and then did something sort of emerge to take its place?) Not quickly, not quickly. You know, I really don't know... I don't know the answer to that. I don't know what has sort of come in and filled the void, if anything.

And yet in another place in the transcript, Paul says the following:

But I've also come to realize that over the last ten years there are things that I'm really, really good at, and the things that I'm not good at are the things that I don't know. I've learned to think. And to project that fact that I have this (the ability to think). I will become expert at it by the time, you know, it's ready to be done (referring to customer requests for design work).

The implication, both in words and in narrative structure, is that the change process for Paul has not only been long (and is still in progress), but is convoluted, progresses in uneven increments, and is marked with difficulties. Paul says a significant

loss for him during the conflict was the sense of security and privilege that had been hallmarks of his wealthy upbringing. As Paul says, “*if everyone in the world feels like they’re walking on a bit of a tightrope, at least I had a pretty big safety net.*” Now, Paul’s sense is that the world, and his place in it,

(...) is not as safe as it seems. I feel like I’ve lost the feeling of comfort and safety and that everything will be okay. It (the conflict) made me realize, you know, sometimes everything will not be okay. Sometimes. (So how do you live with that now?) Um... I’m sort of in the middle of trying to develop different sorts of over-all philosophies, for trying to deal with that—just different outlooks and... I don’t know.

Paul’s words seem to provide a bird’s eye view into the process of reorganization. He cannot articulate the newly organized system yet, but he is aware of the process, and is even bringing agency and intentionality to it by “*trying to develop*” new philosophies.

As suggested earlier, the lack of support Paul experienced during the crisis and post-crisis phases may explain the time involved in reorganization of systems. And there are indicators to suggest that the specific type of support needed to facilitate the change process would have been emotional support. As described earlier, Paul was very emotionally fragile after both the confrontation with his business partner and the death of his mother. In comparing those two events, he says

I would say my mother’s death affected me longer and at a deeply disturbing level. I’d say it was the difference between being knifed or hit with a club. Whereas my mother’s death was like a club, sort of numbing, the conflict was like being knifed. It was far more intense and painful and sharp. I don’t know if that’s what removed my cushion of safety, charmed, blissful sense of existence, or the death of my mom, I’m sure it was a combination.

A few points come to mind with this excerpt: first, regardless of which experience was better or worse, it is obvious that the combined effect was emotionally devastating. Second, the death of his mother would have removed an important support person from

Paul's life, although he describes his current relationship with his father as emotionally closer than ever before. Paul talks about increased emotionality as one of the lasting effects of the conflict. He says his range of emotions is both higher and lower since the conflict, and that he has to be somewhat watchful of himself in this regard. There are also still emotional triggers associated with the name and logo of his company, and although Paul says he would have liked to change them at some point in order to decrease the attachment to so many unpleasant memories, he knows it's better for the business that they remain the same. The topic of support will be pursued again below in the comparison of all three narratives.

I also discussed with Paul his pattern regarding conflict in general, and any changes associated with the way he sees conflict or deals with it. Paul had said earlier that he avoids conflict whenever possible, but that since this particular conflict has become slightly better at asserting himself. There is also a suggestion of movement toward reorganization at a more complex level:

I don't see people as being purely evil or purely good. I mean more... there's no us and them. I have no concept any more... I mean, even in the global situation that's going on right now (the U.S./Iraq war) I don't see good or bad. I see shades of grey and more importantly than just shades of grey, I see constantly shifting shades of grey. Darker some days, lighter some days. (So it sounds like your view of the world and of things is much more fluid.) Yeah. I used to have unquestioned answers and now I have unanswered questions. I guess (laughing).

At my invitation to explore possible metaphors for conflict, Paul first said he did not have an image, then offered a Chinese parable about a Zen master teaching a student that it was better to be like the bamboo, which is flexible and can bend in the wind, than like the oak tree, which is strong but can be destroyed by a hurricane. Paul values

flexibility in conflict, taking each situation as it comes; but he also still finds conflict uncomfortable and avoids it unless necessary.

Finally, Paul says the way he makes sense of the conflict experience that played such an important role in his life is largely dependent on his mood: when he feels that things are not going well, Paul wonders whether the conflict was a breaking point in his life, and whether things have simply deteriorated since. But when he feels more successful and optimistic, the conflict is seen as a turning point for him, a point at which he discovered a greater sense of his own capabilities and strengths.

The changes associated with Paul's story are shown in Appendix C.

Narrative 3: There Will Be A Tomorrow

As with the first two analyses, this section begins with a short overview of the conflict and then introduces the participant.

The context for this conflict was marriage and divorce. About seven years ago, Barbara married her husband shortly after meeting him, and the two-year marriage was fraught with conflict. On the day of the crisis event, Barbara's husband was fired from his second job, leaving her responsible for paying the rent they could barely afford together. When her husband came home that day and informed Barbara of what had happened, she yelled at him and approached him with upraised fists. He turned around and left, and over the next two years Barbara expended considerable energy trying to convince him to return to the relationship. Barbara and her husband were divorced two years after he walked out, and the analysis describes the changes she experienced over those two years and since that time.

Barbara is the perfect hostess. An attractive brunette in her early forties, Barbara has a stable job at a bank, and loves reading and music. I also know Barbara is

an accomplished cook who loves to entertain. She settles me into the most comfortable seat in her living room and pours the tea that was all but prepared for my arrival. There is even an assortment of baked goods on the coffee table, and as I reach for one Barbara hands me a napkin. We make small talk as I set up the tape deck, then we begin. My sense of her after the two interviews is someone who contradicts the immediate impression of an independent, responsible, pragmatic and down to earth person, with a less accessible side that is zany, romantic, idealistic, and vulnerable. But the ingredient that seems to hold both sides together is Barbara's honesty. She is one of the most forthright people I have ever met, especially in terms of admitting her own shortcomings and faults. I am left with the sense of someone who has been held under the scrutiny of her own microscope for some time now, and who is much harder on herself than she could ever be toward others. While she does hold strong opinions about some things, Barbara is also compassionate, understanding, and generous. It is not unusual to hear casual comments like the following in the midst of a conversation: "So I was on my way to so-and-so's house to drop off a cake I made 'cause I knew it was his birthday and he would be alone this year, when...." Barbara seems eager to share her experiences with me throughout the two interviews, and also expresses a keen curiosity about the underlying theory and the research process as a whole. Perhaps because we are close in age and both divorced (although her story is much different from mine), there is a sense of sisterhood between us. She laughs easily and often, and I thoroughly enjoy hearing her story.

Global and Local Coherence

As with Paul's story structure, the global goal (Reissman, 1993) of Barbara's story is evident in her opening statements:

You know, it (the marriage) was just doomed to fail right from the get-go... however it was an excellent experience and you know, lots of good things came from it and I don't regret it at all.

And again in a similarity with Paul's story, the global goal of Barbara's story does not appear at first reading to fit any of the four motives in Baumeister and Newman's (1994) taxonomy (the desire to obtain rewards, the validation of identity claims, to pass along information, and the desire to attract other people). Throughout her story, Barbara goes to great lengths to demonstrate that she is a better and healthier person because of the conflict and the breakdown of her marriage. This is the overall theme of the story, but

it did not take long for me to realize it is directly related to Baumeister and Newman's motive of having identity claims socially validated. In Barbara's case (in contrast to Kate's story), the element of identity was associated more with how she perceived and felt about herself before and after the conflict, rather than identity as associated with a specific profession or role such as wife, mother, female, etc. As will be seen in the content analysis, Barbara played a significant role as the responsible caretaker in many areas of her life. And this role eventually taxed her health and contributed to both choosing to enter into marriage when her instincts told her it was "*doomed to failure*," and to the eventual divorce as well. The identity claim Barbara makes throughout the story is that she is now a healthier, more self-aware, and more responsible person (that is, responsible for her own health and well being). The element of responsibility is also present in the presentation of a difficult experience in terms of one's growth (e.g., "see how responsible I am by interpreting this experience in terms of self-growth"), which provides further inner coherence by supporting structurally a major element of the story. But it is also present in that growth seems to serve the purpose of learning from one's mistakes so they are not repeated (which is also a form of responsibility). This is captured in the following quote:

And I examine it (the conflict experience), you know, in my mind, I examine my responses and you know, just trying to reconstruct just exactly what went on so that I can examine my role in it so that I don't do that again, kind of.

In asserting her claim to an identity as someone who has learned and grown from an experience, Barbara provides a very balanced picture of herself. She consistently acknowledges and describes both her strengths and weaknesses, and is consistently compassionate toward her ex-husband (the 'significant other' in the conflict). So I did not

perceive a fit with Baumeister and Newman's (1994) motive of storytelling to portray oneself as a victim, and neither did the story seem to be simply informational or designed to attract me, the listener. Again, the closest association seems to be with the validation of identity claims, and the idea that presenting a balanced picture of oneself reinforces the element of responsibility.

In terms of needs, Baumeister and Newman (1994) suggest, "the need for purpose is satisfied by interpreting present events and strivings in relation to future events or states" (p. 681). However, all three narratives seem to fulfill this need by working in the reverse order: past events are interpreted in relation to present states, and the meaning one makes of the past event supports the (mainly positive) present state. For example, Barbara turned 40 a few years after the break up of her marriage. She says that turning 40 was a significant milestone in her life, which brought a feeling that "*I finally belong in my skin.*" To Barbara, the conflict was directly related to this present feeling, and she claims that if it weren't for the marriage and conflict, she would not have had the positive 40th birthday experience, which has continued to this day.

In terms of local goals (Reissman, 1993), coherence is evident in the way the internal structure of the story supports the overall global goal. Throughout the story, Barbara engages in what I think of as self-appraising statements, where she moves from an anecdote to a definitive statement of what she learned or how she's grown as a person. For example, in answer to my question about how Barbara handles conflict in general, she relates a story about conflict with a co-worker:

There was a woman at work who is actually kind of a friend now. But she created a lot of unrest at work, and it wasn't a very nice place to be at that time. And she put a lot... while she was a friend, she put pressure on me at the same time, just to provide, you know, work. You know, it was work pressure. And she was my friend.

And she was going through lots of stuff at work. And she ended up getting deleted or made redundant. And so, because she was my friend, I kind of went through all that with her. I think that's where the conflict was there. But... it opened up lots of stuff for me... because I'm pretty aware of myself. And I take responsibility for my actions and feelings, and maybe too much sometimes.

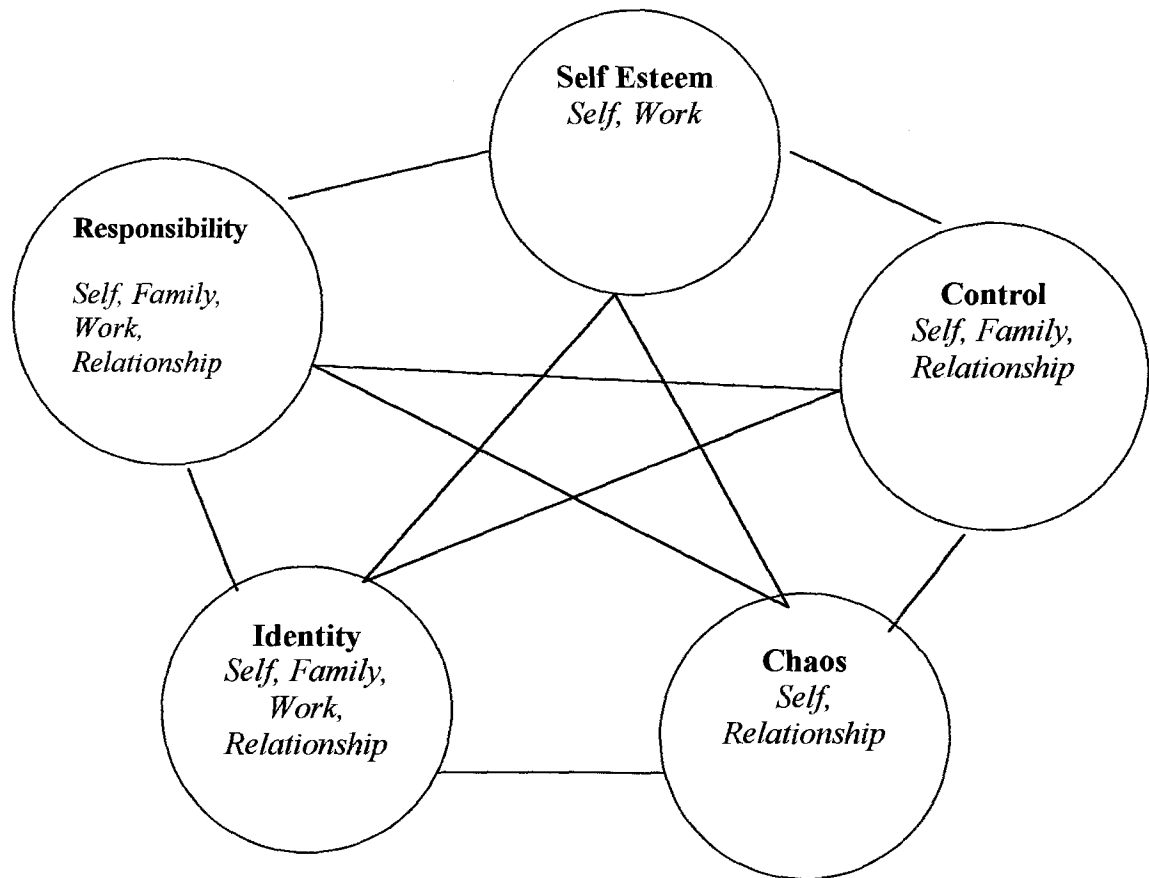
So while the segment begins with an anecdote, it moves to a definitive and self-appraising statement, which is typical throughout the two interviews. It is almost as though Barbara is demonstrating self-responsibility to me by creating links, as though stories cannot just be stories, but must also serve a purpose.

In summary, rather than following a strict chronological format, Barbara's story follows a pattern of pairing anecdotes with moral conclusions, all serving the purpose of illustrating her path of healing, self-responsibility, and growth. In this way, the internal structure of the story provides internal coherence with the main elements, which are discussed below.

Content Analysis

The following figure shows the levels and processes that emerged from Barbara's story.

Figure 3. Levels of Context and Processes, Barbara



Pre-crisis

As with the previous two stories, Barbara's conflict involves a critical scene between her and her husband that was highly emotional and confrontational. And in further similarity, understanding the pre-crisis context is important to understanding how that scene played a critical part in the changes that followed.

Barbara's life was marked by challenge from an early age.

I'll do the Reader's Digest version... okay, so I was born in (town) and my dad died when I was 11. And I have a younger brother and sister. My mom subsequently got a brain tumour and so she was quite sick until she died in 1977. Then we moved to (another city). My brother got put into a boarding school. My sister and I moved to (town) to live with my mother's brother and his wife, which was a horrible, horrible thing. Yeah...it was really bad. And but then... was a

year later, I turned 18. I took... went and got (brother and sister) and we drove out here to (city). So I came here in '78 cause my (other relatives) lived here.

Barbara admits she still carries the responsibility for her younger siblings today.

Barbara was also diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in her early thirties. The onset of MS was accompanied by a significant loss of energy, and Barbara became grateful for her stable bank job, finally settling in one city after a few transfers. She had also dated a man for a few years in another city, but had never had a serious relationship by the time she was in her mid-thirties. Barbara married her husband within the first three months of meeting him, and she admits that part of the impetus was the “*shock value*” it had on her friends and family:

So then we decided to get married, I think, in June, or June or July and set the date and everybody was flabbergasted and I was probably... part of my draw to the whole wedding thing was everybody in my life's reaction. Because I didn't even have a boyfriend.

So part of it was just me surprising things. You know me, I say things just to get a reaction sometimes (laughing). In that case I did something to get a reaction.

It is at this point in the story that the first process element begins to emerge. After listening to the background of Barbara's life before her marriage, I ask her where she was as a person and how she would describe herself at that time:

Well, I think that I was nowhere. My sense of myself was totally wrapped up in my work and my family, and my history, you know. It was all about my history, you know, my mom died and my dad died, that kind of thing. The struggles that I'd had.

And from another point in the transcript:

(Your sense of yourself... can you say more about that, your sense of who you were? You identified with work, your own history, your upbringing, things that had happened to you, and your health. And was there anything else that contributed to your sense of self?) *I think I... just felt about myself what I thought other people felt about me. (Which was generally...) Sometimes pretty good.*

Although there is the same indication of an external locus of evaluation (as with Paul's story), it either shifted at some point in the past, or Barbara's accomplishments gave her a sense of her own self worth and identity. Unlike Paul, Barbara is able to articulate her sense of herself without referring to others in comparison. Barbara goes on to describe the sense of fulfillment she gets from her job and how much she enjoys the relationships with her co-workers, who she calls her "kind of co-worker family."

I have... drew a lot of comfort from the people that I work with and the stability of the job, because that work has been the most stable thing in my life. The job, the bank. So I highly value that, and I know that I'm a good worker and I know that I... you know, where I fit in that kind of wheel.

(So it sounds like you've managed to set up for yourself, through your relationships... not your marriage, necessarily, the things that you... that you were under-compensated for as a child, especially as a teenager growing up... the need for security, the need to belong, the need to know where you fit... Is that right?)

Yeah, that is right, which is a real tribute to me, like... and I think I was born bossy, is what the thing is. I mean, I think I was just born for this life, this role, right, because I've done really well. I mean, it was certainly not perfect, and I'm nobody, you know...

The strongest element I identified within Barbara's story to this point is a highly developed sense of **responsibility**¹¹. Barbara's words connote a certain amount of pride in how she managed to care for her younger siblings under such tragic circumstances. In her words:

And all I... through my whole life I've had to do everything. And right or wrong or... you know, whether I did it right or wrong. It was always me that controlled everything, that moved things in a certain way. I'm the one that brought the kids out here and I think I'm a very strong person and I have good common sense and I guess I trust that.

¹¹ I am referring to responsibility here as a process in the sense that it involves a process or pattern of relationship with others.

The processes of **trust** and **control** will be discussed further on, but for now it is important to note that responsibility extends toward others and toward controlling life circumstances.

There is also another process revealed in the words “*I’m nobody, you know....*” Along with the responsibility toward others was a minimizing of herself, a tendency to give away her own power in her efforts for others. For example, Barbara talks about the relationship she had with a man prior to her marriage, and how she moved to the city he lived in to be near him even though he was not committed to the relationship.

Then I moved to (city) and I fell in love with G. And he moved to (another city), so I followed him there. (And since G., you hadn’t had any serious love relationship before you were married?) No, and G. was just... G. was just serious in my own mind (laughing).

I began to think of this as a process of regarding herself, or **self-regard**, which I drew again from humanistic psychology. According to (Raskin & Rogers, 1995), self-regard or self-esteem (which is the term Barbara used) pertains to the positive or negative views people hold of themselves, and again I am transferring the concept to a systems context by viewing it as a process of regarding the self. This process would involve not only the intrapersonal level (as in the more traditional, individualistic humanistic view), but also the interpersonal level involving others’ views of one’s self and how those views are integrated into the self-system.

Although Barbara’s self-regard shifted after the crisis event, in this stage it appeared fairly negative (a point Barbara substantiated in her review of the analysis). The combination of low self regard and the sense of responsibility to others seemed to produce the dynamic that contributed to the crisis in her marriage. It was in hindsight that Barbara realized that this combination manifested as a need to control situations and

people. In part, it was the way Barbara had coped with the huge task of looking out for her younger siblings after their mother's death, when she was too young to know how to do anything but try to control them. But the low self-regard also meant she was not looking after her own needs, and in fact looking to others to fulfill those needs for her. One specific experience prior to her marriage started Barbara on a path of understanding this aspect of herself. Barbara had enrolled in a weekend Inner Child workshop, but found herself so emotionally overwhelmed that she literally fled the workshop and didn't return. Barbara says now that the metaphor of the inner child helped her put things into perspective:

I think my child is very, or at that point, was very well hidden. And I didn't realize that I was so needy and thinking that he (her husband) was going to take care of me. And it's only after the fact that I really understood that. And my way of dealing with that and managing that inner child kind of thing, for lack of a better phrase, was to, you know, have my adult come on like gangbusters. By "having her adult come on like gangbusters,"

Barbara means control. So the context leading up to the crisis event included processes of responsibility and low self-regard, which manifested as being overly controlling in relationships. In addition, due to her deteriorating health, there was also a sense of wanting to shed some responsibility and to have someone take care of her. The following excerpt is a description that captures the tension between Barbara's need to have support and help from her husband, and her way of achieving that through control:

He was out at school all day. And I was out at work. And we'd come home. And you know, we'd make dinner together and stuff like that, but if I asked him to do anything, he felt resentful of that. You know, like clean the bathroom or something like that. You know, if I wasn't working...there's a conflict there about who was doing more work, right? Instead of making a list of chores and saying this is yours and this is mine... And then he always wanted to get Starbuck's coffee. And I always felt that that was just an extravagance, but I had my own extravagances, and I justified it because, well, I'm working. I'm bringing in money. You know, I can do what I want. But YOU can't, basically. Never mind that his father died and

left him all the money and he put it into our relationship, you know, whatever we had, that kind of stuff. So it really was not fair for him. And I regret that.

Barbara says she wasn't fully conscious of the shift toward wanting less responsibility until after her marriage ended, but looking back recognizes that she had turned down a promotion at work in order to avoid taking on more responsibility in life, and that the desire to have someone look after her was a major motivating factor in the hasty decision to marry.

And, you know, he said he would take care of me if I got sick, he knows my health and that was pretty... that was a big contributing factor actually.

And since controlling others was the predominant way to ensure that her growing health needs would be met, Barbara says she brought a lot of controlling behaviours into the marriage. It is important to understand that Barbara herself explained these dynamics to me in the interview, thereby reinforcing the element of responsibility as she articulates the ways in which she was culpable for the eventual failure of the marriage.

But of course Barbara's husband also contributed to the pre-crisis context. Without focusing on her husband's psycho-emotional issues that Barbara disclosed in the interviews, it is enough to note that he brought instability to the marriage in terms of circumstances and finances. There turned out to be many areas of conflict in the marriage, including conflict over her husband's son and ex-wife, conflict over finances, and conflict around intimacy. Barbara admits she had doubts about their marriage before the wedding actually took place, saying she ignored the intuitive inner voice that warned her against it. But as she says, "*the wedding machine was in motion*" and she didn't want to disappoint those who had planned to be there—another example of her sense of responsibility to others.

Barbara also thought she was strong enough to handle the problems she saw coming at the time. Later in the second interview, Barbara identifies an underlying belief that fuelled her responsibility and tenacity in trying to make the marriage work. According to this belief, if Barbara just improved herself (became prettier, worked harder, was smarter), things would improve. The assumption under the belief was that the outcome of Barbara's circumstances in life depended on her efforts. This belief is associated with the element of responsibility, and it undergoes a significant shift in the post-crisis phase of the conflict.

In summary, the major processes present in the pre-crisis phase of Barbara's story are **responsibility** toward others and for determining the outcome of life circumstances, and low **self-regard** due to the tendency in Barbara to neglect or discount her own needs. And as Barbara's health deteriorated, she began to develop unspoken expectations and hopes that others (specifically, her new husband) would take care of her. According to Barbara, this dynamic exacerbated the conflict in the marriage, with Barbara trying to **control** her husband and their life together. After two years of marriage, the crisis event occurred which was to set a number of changes in motion.

Crisis

A few months prior to the crisis event, Barbara and her husband had moved to a more expensive apartment, which they were able to manage financially between her bank position and her husband's two part-time jobs. However, shortly after moving, Barbara's husband lost one of his jobs, and Barbara says she felt increasing pressure to meet the couple's financial needs. Then, on the second anniversary of their marriage, Barbara's husband was fired from his second job. Barbara describes the scene that followed:

I remember coming home and he told me he lost his second job. I don't remember specifically, but he lost his second job. And I just remember being filled with rage because he was so irresponsible and not... he just didn't understand the gravity of what was going on. And here I am trying to manage everything and pay this \$1100 a month rent. And it was fear, in retrospect, that caused me to just freak out.

And I did freak out, like... and he was abused as a kid, so any kind of physical contact just shut him down. And I didn't know that. And I just let myself get that angry. And I kind of just went up to him and said 'what are we going to do', like I was yelling and I was raising my fists to hit him on the chest, and... and he just stepped back, and he left. He walked out and he never came back.

And I remember going to the door, and I said 'don't you walk away on me. We can't... how can we ever deal with anything if you just walk away all the time?' And he just turned and looked at me—and I can still see his face—and he just shook his head and kept going.

And I let him go. I thought, you know, okay, he just needs to go for a walk or something like that. He'll come back. And then he never came back all night. And I was awake all night. He just never came back.

Barbara describes how she worried that her husband might become suicidal, so she called the police and had them look for him. When she came home from work the next day, however, she saw that her husband had been home and had taken some personal belongings, so she knew he was safe.

In describing the altercation to me, Barbara emphasizes that her aggressiveness at that moment was not characteristic of her usually controlled way of being. Barbara's behaviour during those moments were part of an unfolding process of allowing herself to relax control over herself, others, and situations.

And I remember thinking when I was, you know, going to hit M. like that, there was something in me that kind of allowed myself to let go, because I felt that that letting go would promote some healing... but I remember thinking at that moment, can I let myself go?

As will be seen in the post-crisis phase, Barbara views this act of letting go as an important step in the healing and positive changes that followed; in the short term,

however, her actions led to the collapse of the marriage and a period of profound stress and turmoil. Again, the presence of **chaos** can be seen in the progression of this conflict, on a few different levels. At the level of the self, Barbara was really taking a risk and experimenting with a new way of being; in that sense she was stepping into the chaos of the unknown by allowing herself to lose control with her husband. The behaviour was new, and so the outcome was unpredictable. Part of the context that allowed that risk-taking behaviour was Barbara's recent, emerging awareness that she wanted less responsibility in life and that she wanted a partner to take care of her. Another part of the context was that Barbara felt safe with her husband:

But to me, I wasn't going to beat on him. I was just making a point... I was completely frustrated. And ordinarily I'm not a physical person. I would never do that. But you know in therapy sometimes they get you to punch a pillow or whatever and let your aggressions out? I think, at that point, I felt safe enough to do that with (her husband).

Chaos is also a useful metaphor to describe the period immediately following the crisis event. It was two years before Barbara and her husband were formally divorced, and for the duration, the relationship existed in a state of not knowing. Although Barbara's husband never returned to live with her, they did continue to be physically intimate. They also attended counselling, and continued to experience conflict. Barbara's life apart from her husband also underwent a period of stress and change, as she struggled to manage financially by bringing a roommate into her home (which ended disastrously), and moving. Gradually, however, the positive changes began to emerge, and these shifts are described in the next section.

Post-crisis

From my research journal:

It is difficult to clearly define the difference between crisis and post-crisis in this story, and I find Paul's analogy of not quite knowing when the colours of a rainbow shift from one to the next, appropriate here. Because there are implications for the application of chaos theory as a change metaphor, it is probably best to associate the 'crisis' in this narrative with the actual altercation, although Barbara was certainly in crisis for a number of months to follow. A complicating factor is that Barbara also experienced a marked growth in self-awareness, both during the crisis itself and certainly over the stressful months and years that followed. So chaos was present in terms of stress and personal disorganization, but also in terms of allowing herself to relax control in her life, 'let go', and see where things would take her. In that sense, there is again the element of the void or place of not knowing and of unpredictability, but with an element of intentionality not unlike Kate's metaphor of walking into the fire. I think at this point I need to avoid linking too closely the ideas of crisis and chaos, in order to allow more possibilities for the broader application of chaos theory to change. The crisis will therefore be associated with the actual altercation, and everything after that event will be considered post-crisis.

Barbara spent the two years following the crisis event focusing on repairing her relationship with her husband. She considered the failure of the marriage her fault, and persisted in following the same patterns she had for most of her life in terms of trying harder to make things work. In Barbara's words, "*there was lots of me trying to control the situation.*" In describing her gradual acceptance of the breakdown of the marriage, Barbara says,

I don't think I realized that he wasn't going to... I thought we could work it out, we could patch it up. (You were waiting). That's right. And I mean it was four years later till I realized that that was never going to happen. (Okay) Well, two years at least. I tried for a long time...

And from another place in the transcript:

I was trying to keep tabs on him and keep him in my life because he's very important to me. And I wasn't ready to give up. It's a huge thing, like I did something wrong if I gave up, or you know, I'm a bad person, something like that. You kind of had to deal with all that, those emotions.

The crisis and marital break up shook Barbara to her core in terms of self-image and identity. In a sense, it pushed her to confront one of her greatest fears, which was the

loss of control of a situation in which someone would be hurt, and which would ultimately be her fault. As time passed, however, Barbara found that on the other side of her worst fears were positive change, a renewed sense of self, and growth:

So I mean it was a whole bad situation, really, nobody's fault. He's not a bad person, I'm not a bad person. It's just, we weren't evolved enough mentally, emotionally to enter into a union of two people. We were both running from something or trying to... one therapist said you two are trying to heal each other's childhood wounds. That's why you're in this relationship. And I think that's true.

But I don't know that (her ex-husband's) got healed, but I know mine... that was the catalyst for me to do the work to move through my childhood pain. (So can you talk about that... how did that, how did that awareness and that change happen?) Well, it was an evolution. I started... because of all the stress and everything, it was manifesting in my MS. And I met this doctor...

The doctor Barbara refers to was both a medical doctor and an ayurvedic practitioner. He introduced Barbara to the world of alternative medicine and meditative practice, which had a profoundly positive effect on her health. It is important to note, however, that Barbara says she was first physically attracted to the doctor, who was recently divorced, and she pursued a quasi-social relationship with him by attending the same workshops and conferences. Throughout Barbara's change process are examples of how old patterns or systems are not completely discarded, but are incorporated into the new—and in Barbara's case, how the old acts as a stepping-stone toward the new in the process of change. This notion is consistent with Kenneth Wilbur's (1998) description of system change as an “irreversible hierarchy of increasing wholeness” and of development as envelopment. As Wilbur explains:

... Each successive unit transcends but includes its predecessors. Each senior element contains or enfolds its juniors as components in its own makeup, but then adds something emergent, distinctive, and defining that is not found in the lower level: it transcends and includes. (p. 67; emphasis in original)

This and other ideas about change processes will be explored further in the next section, but there is another wonderfully paradoxical example of this notion from Barbara's story. Barbara describes another scene with her ex-husband, which took place about two years after he first left. It was New Years day, and when Barbara asked her ex-husband if he had made any resolutions, he replied that he had decided not to sleep with her any more. Barbara says she was shocked because she thought they had been making progress in mending the relationship, but despite her attempts to convince him otherwise, her ex-husband was resolved. Barbara says she then handed him the divorce papers and told him he could take care of it all. After he left, Barbara says she tried to turn on the television to distract herself, but that "*it chose that moment to blow up.*" She says she had to laugh, telling herself the "*universe was trying to tell me something.*" She decided to not have the television repaired, and to use her time more constructively. The following passage describes what happened next:

And that (meaning when her husband terminated their physical relationship) was quite pivotal. I think I sucked it up... and like I tend to have a private pity party, for a couple of days I'll wallow in things. And then I always pull myself up by my bootstraps and say, ok, I'm... life goes on, you can't do anything. So I think I started stalking him (laughs). (Okay... you had a really hard time letting go of him...) Oh yeah, I have a hard time letting go of anybody. And that's my parents. The whole death thing.

Anyway, so he just lived down there. And I was physically not very well, like I couldn't walk very far, and I was much heavier than I am now. And I would walk down to Starbucks and I would have to walk past his place. I'd walk down to Starbucks and I'd sit there and have a coffee and rest, and then I'd walk back. And that was kind of the beginning of my physical recovery, which was huge. (Isn't that interesting, the way that something...) That negative... (turned out to be really functional) Exactly, yeah. And I knew that. That's why I allowed myself to do the stalking thing. You know, because I was getting some physical benefit from it. Anyway, I'd just walk by and look in his window and see if he was there and stuff like that.

Note the similarity between this action and her choice to allow herself to lose control and become angry with her ex-husband. In both instances, Barbara knew in the moment that the behaviour was negative but that it also held the seeds for healing and growth.

According to Barbara, the two most significant changes to come out of the conflict were a change in her self-awareness, and a change in her health. Out of these changes, I have identified two new process elements, **awareness** and **agency/empowerment**, and a shift in the previous element of **responsibility**. Again, it is impossible to completely separate the processes, as they are integrally related and at the same time, they illuminate different aspects of one overall process. In terms of awareness, through the practise of meditation Barbara experienced a greater awareness of her body and its tensions and anxieties, and became better able to cope:

You know, I remember sitting and meditating, sitting in my chair, like that chair, in my bedroom, and trying to meditate, which is very difficult. Meditation is very difficult. But through that meditation, I became more aware of the anxiety or the tension in my body. So I became more able to control that to a certain extent or find things that, you know, would bring you down, or calm me, or have a bath, or just be quiet.

At the same time, Barbara quit the MS medication she had been on, and undertook a massive course of vitamin therapy instead. She eventually stopped the vitamin therapy as well, and says, *“I’m not doing anything now. And I’m way better for it.”* The process of agency/empowerment is evident here, in that Barbara makes choices independently and autonomously of others’ opinions. This indicates a shift in the process of responsibility, which had previously been defined as a process primarily involving others, but is now directed toward herself. This in turn is also related to the process of

identity development, or how Barbara sees and experiences herself. Her increase in self-awareness at the physical and emotional levels promoted a significant shift in identity:

I'm way more aware of who I am, you know, and how much... how I react to things and how I respond. Turning 40 (about three years ago, two years after the marriage break up) was the best thing that ever happened to me. Ever. So, and that, when that birthday was just... I just remember feeling, oh, my God, now I belong in my skin. (Wow.) It was very profound actually because I always felt like I was 40 but I never really belonged. Cause you know, people don't look at you. I don't know why 40 was the number in my head. But... (You finally felt grown up, or...?) Yeah, yeah. And entitled. Yeah, like I belonged, I guess. And this whole marriage was a necessary part to my growth and development.

This newfound sense of entitlement and belonging manifested as better self-care, which demonstrated a shift away from relying on others to fulfill unmet needs and greater self-responsibility. In turn, doing things for herself like going to a therapist, spending money on health and beauty regimens, and becoming involved in weekly social events enhanced her self-esteem and lessened the need to control others in order to have her needs met.

All of the above processes combine to produce an emergent shift for Barbara at a fundamental level. Her experience of watching her ex-husband struggle without her help—and survive—challenged core beliefs about life, death, and relationship:

He (her ex-husband) has proven to me that, you know, the will to live is a lot stronger than anything else because, yeah, because he just kept on going. Barbara talked about how having her husband leave challenged her fear that

letting go of someone would cause their death, and of how letting go of control of herself would cause her to “fall into the spinning vortex of depression.” Of course, another way of talking about letting go of something is to say that the person has developed greater trust in something else. In Barbara’s case, there was an increasing trust in something

greater than herself, a spiritual presence, which shifted the responsibility for everything in life off her shoulders. Barbara says she is now more able to “*just see where the punches roll... I’m not going to try and control everything.*” Barbara says she is also able to let go emotionally with her therapist and sometimes on her own, and allow herself to feel pain without fear of becoming irreversibly depressed.

As we continued to talk about symbols and metaphors for conflict, Barbara revealed more about this fundamental shift:

Growth, I think. (Ok, can you say more?) Yeah, and it’s always darkest before the dawn. And whenever there’s conflict in my life, that’s what... now I think, okay, well, something wonderful’s about to happen. (So you can feel yourself go into that place...) Yes. (You’re aware that you’re there and you know that there’s a shift that needs to happen) Yeah. Yeah.

(So it sounds like you’re able to go into that place of not knowing what’s going to happen next, the darkness before the dawn, and trust that...) There will be a tomorrow. And M. (her ex-husband) is key in my fully realizing that, because I thought that he would die without me. And he didn’t. And he lived, and flourished and ended up in a wonderful relationship. (And he proved you wrong) Yeah. And so that was really like me watching a movie, right, of how things go. And then so I could have a tangible picture of how it’s not... it doesn’t always end in death, you know. (You had proof) That’s right. (That it doesn’t always end in death) So it wouldn’t for me either. If something really bad happened to me it doesn’t mean to say that life stops and it’s over.

So it kind of made it easier to go on and kind of pick up and go to (weekly social event) and kind of start baby steps to re-establish myself. (So you were actually able to be aware of that, yeah. You got it, the penny dropped) Yeah. (And then that was... that allowed you to then practice opening up and letting go and trusting. And that whole metaphor of that it’s okay to go through the darkness, that the dawn will come, just trust) Yeah, that’s it.

As we continue to talk about metaphors in relation to conflict, Barbara suggests another one based on her love of the ocean:

I think it’s like... you know as far as a symbol goes, I think it’s like the ocean, you know. It goes out and comes back in. So I would have to say that the conflict-change-growth, conflict-change-growth, is like the tide. (Ok, so can you say more about that... like when there is conflict, is the tide going out, or coming in, or...) I

would have to say going out, because something's taken away. And then the change is when the tide changes. Then the growth is when it comes back, you know the way it comes back. And it's like the circle of life I guess. It just continues on. (Very nice) I'm so poetic sometimes it just kills me (laughs).

But part of what comes from this whole thing is now I'm alone and I know that I can be alone and I'm okay. As a matter of fact, I'm probably better alone than with someone.

In summary, the changes Barbara experienced in relation to the conflict involved a shift in **responsibility** away from others and toward her self; increased **self awareness** of her physical and emotional needs; greater personal **agency/empowerment**; and a shift in **identity** toward a sense of entitlement and belonging in the world. These changes are shown graphically in Appendix D.

By way of concluding the individual narrative analyses, I include reflections from my research journal:

The first question that comes to mind when I reflect back on the interview process with Kate, Paul, and Barbara is—'Is it allowed to be that enjoyable?!' The stories were fascinating, and the interviews seemed to flow exactly where they needed to. I think a balance was found between allowing the space for participants to create their own subjective meaning of the events, and a collaborative process of co-constructing a shared understanding that incorporated theory and the objectives of the study. After reviewing the transcripts, I saw that places where I interjected were mainly to check my understanding with paraphrases, to ask questions that would either clarify or deepen the conversation, and to bring forward notions such as chaos to see how they fit with the participants' experience. I found that I was so engrossed in listening and being mindful of the questions on the listening guide, that there were very few points that triggered an emotional response or memory for me. I also realized later that I used very little self-disclosure, after my previous concerns about power imbalances and social desirability.

I felt a deep sense of appreciation after the interviews were finished, for the degree to which the participants were willing to share their life stories. The fact that there were very few adjustments to make after the follow-up telephone interviews told me that, although the interview process was collaborative, the understandings reached were consistent with the meanings participants made of the experience. The only weak point in the interview process was that participants did not engage in as much active self-reflection between interviews as I would have liked—each cited busy lives as the reason. They had each read over the

reflection questions and given them some thought, but my expectations for drawings, poetry, references to literature, etc., were obviously unrealistic. This did not seem to hamper the ability to create images and metaphors for conflict in the second interviews, however, so the question of cultural discourse and symbols could still be addressed.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

“If one really wants to understand one’s environment one must begin by understanding oneself”
(Morgan, 1997)

Cross-narrative Comparisons

This section reviews the similarities and differences between the three conflict stories. Because many of the points relate to change, they are only briefly discussed here and are explored in more depth in the following section on change theory.

First, as previously noted, it was telling that all three participants chose conflicts that included an emotional, face-to-face interaction with the other person involved. It may be that folk understandings of conflict include such interactions, but of course the nature of this study and the small number of participants precludes generalization in this respect. It would be useful to conduct further research, perhaps based on a large collection of narratives, for the purposes of ascertaining folk definitions and discourses surrounding conflict.

A second point related to the first is that all three crisis events involved a high level of emotion for the participant. This point will be discussed further in the next section on the application of change theory to conflict, as there may be a link with Mahoney’s (1991) notion of the requirement of emotional experiencing for core, second order change.

A third point of similarity is that all three stories included shifts in identity. I understand this *making* as follows: a) participants were asked to relate a story about a significant conflict in their lives, which means the conflict held personal meaning for them; b) the depth of significance or meaning associated with conflict is related to

identity—how the person sees him or herself; and c) other core personal structures related to identity (such as belief and value systems) were part of the conflict experience. Because of the interrelationship between all these facets of the self-system, shifts in identity became apparent. This point will also be considered in light of theories of change in the next section.

A fourth point of similarity is the power of the relationship between the participants and their parents. This was a completely unexpected but very clear element of each story. Kate's mother changed a pattern of interaction involving conflict and personal authority, which facilitated a significant shift in Kate. Although Paul and his father had not had the same type of rescuing pattern in their relationship, Paul's father's refusal to help was an important part of his shift away from a child's eye view of the world and toward a sense of personal competence. And there is no question that the death of Paul's mother during the conflict played a role in his experience of chaos. His mother was also influential in Paul's participation in a cultural discourse equating masculinity with money. Finally, although Barbara's parents both died long before the conflict, that experience contributed to it in a significant way. Her over-developed sense of responsibility toward others, which negatively impacted her ability to fulfill her own needs, contributed to her anger response toward her husband. And the length of time it took for Barbara to accept the result of the conflict (i.e., divorce) spoke to her deeply held fear that someone she loved would die due to her lack of responsibility. Each story speaks to the power of familial relationships to extend well beyond parental modelling of behavioural responses to conflict.

A fifth similarity between narratives is the way all three participants made meaning of the conflict experience. For Kate and Barbara especially, and less explicitly so for Paul, participants saw the conflict as an ultimately positive experience in their lives. Paul was able to articulate a shift away from putting others on a pedestal, seeing himself as just as capable as others given the time to learn something. He also expressed a stronger trust in his own intuition, and a more complex way of seeing the world and people (“*moving shades of grey*”). But for all three, the way of making meaning centred on the idea of self-growth and self-understanding, and the metaphors used to describe that experience were very fluid and transformative. All three participants drew from some of the most powerful forces in nature for images to convey their understanding of conflict. For Kate, the image was fire, for Barbara it was the ocean’s tides, and for Paul the image was hurricane winds (present in the story of the Zen master and the student—and the advantage of being flexible bamboo compared to rigid oak). And consistent with notions of evolution and change is the idea that all three forces hold the power to transform. Because primal images cross cultural and social barriers, they hold great potential as tools for facilitating growth through conflict.

There were also distinct differences between the three stories in terms of the conflicts themselves. All three participants told different stories about how conflict between people comes to resolution. For Kate, there was a clear and positive resolution to the conflict. The manager took responsibility for his behaviour and apologized, and the gratuity policy was changed. Interestingly, however, the resolution of this conflict did not bring the two parties closer together, but saw them retreat from their friendship further into their work roles. This was probably a required stance for each of them, in that Kate

likely needed to be somewhat removed from her manager socially in order to maintain her boundaries, and the manager probably needed to be removed socially from Kate in order to remember to respect her boundaries. For Barbara, the conflict ended in divorce (conflict unresolved?), but the friendship and respect between Barbara and her ex-husband remained fairly constant throughout. Barbara still cares deeply about her ex-husband, but now has a clearer sense of where her responsibility for him and his ability to meet her needs begins and ends. And for Paul, the conflict was resolved through the break-up of the business partnership and the complete severance of the relationship.

What I find most intriguing about these research makings is that there are a number of striking similarities across conflicts with such divergent outcomes. And it seems that the similarities are related to the deeper human processes related to change and identity, while the differences are related along the more substantive levels of the different contexts involved. The next section invites a closer look at the connection between change and conflict by applying the change theories used in this research to participants' experiences of conflict.

Discussion of Change Theories

It seems important to acknowledge the difficulty in assessing the fit between a given theoretical approach and the description of a given phenomenon, when that same approach was used in formulating the research and for structuring the interviews in the first place. It would make sense to ask how I am able to evaluate the explanatory value of the group of change theories I've used in this study, when the study was founded theoretically on those same theories. Of course, this problem is present in any research project, as it is impossible to conduct research a-theoretically or a-paradigmatically, but

the question bears discussing anyway. First, although the project was founded on a particular set of theoretical principles, an emergent approach meant that assumptions were revisited regularly throughout the process. I have regularly questioned the relevance of chaos theory and strived to remain open to contradiction to the assumption that chaos would be a useful metaphor in describing participants' experiences. I also proceeded cautiously around the element of identity after it emerged so strongly in the first interview. I was careful with the second and third participants to avoid leading questions about identity until the element had emerged spontaneously from the narrative, and I did the same with the ideas involved in chaos theory. I also checked my assumptions with participants regularly throughout the interview process. This is the part that grounded theory has played in the bricoleur methodology, in that reflections and assessments of theory took place during, not after, the data collection phase.

Second, it can be argued that if there does seem to be a good fit between the chosen group of theories and the experiences described by the participants, it is partly due to the amount of thinking and analysis that took place before the research was even begun. It has always made intuitive sense to me that chaos and complexity theory, and self-organizing systems theory would be powerful tools for understanding conflict and change, and certainly a degree of confidence seems appropriate before launching oneself into a research project that will consume the better part of a few years of one's life! So having said that, it is important to acknowledge that my ability to assess the explanatory value of the theories used in the research is hampered by a desire to enjoy the fruits of my labour—I can't imagine how discouraging it would be to do all this work only to find that

one has been following a false trail, and that nothing really significant (in the sense of meaningfulness) has come of it all.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that these theories provide only one point of view, one possible way to understand this particular phenomenon. Some things will be highlighted by their application, and other aspects of the phenomenon will be ignored. But I do feel confident in answering the question “why do I choose this meaning over others?” with the response, “because it is consistent with the philosophical and theoretical foundations I have chosen for the project. My interpretations are not (completely) subjective or random—they do cohere to a set of underlying principles.”

The following discussion is divided into two sections according first to constructivism and second, to chaos, complexity, and self-organizing systems theory. Because of the connections between these two bodies of theory, each section does contain some references to the other at times.

Constructivism

According to constructivist theory, humans are actively and constantly involved in making meaning of their experiences within the context of relationships, through the use of socially and culturally constructed symbols and metaphors (Mahoney, 1991). Central to the concept of change from a constructivist perspective are the notions of identity and the active construction of a self. Constructivists argue that lasting, second-order change involves change at a core level of the self (Lyddon, 1990; Mahoney, 1991), where individuals form systems of beliefs, values, identity, and so on. One of the main focuses of the study was change, and it is consistent with constructivist assumptions that each participant talked about changes in his or her identity or sense of self.

Using systems theory as a metaphor, identity can be seen as a sub-system of the individual, an internal way of making sense of the self that consists of structure and organizational processes. As with all living systems, the identity or self-system would undergo constant shifts in the effort to maintain itself in relationship with its environment. It would also settle into attractor states or set patterns for periods of time, and likely pass through phases of chaos while in the process of growth and development. And as with all living systems, the identity (of groups, nations, and states as well as individuals) would become more complex and integrated as it followed a course of healthy growth.

Each participant clearly described their sense of self at the time of the conflict, and also described changes to identity following the conflict. Kate's identity was in a process of change and growth; she was gaining clarity about her identification as a theatre artist and gaining clarity about the values by which she wanted to live. The connection between the conflict and identity development was an increased sense of personal authority and a shift toward a more complex, process-orientation in life. This was evident in the themes of conflict as transformation, moving away from rigid roles to spontaneous interaction such as improvisation in theatre, and the shift away from gender role expectations to a more complex level of human interaction

Barbara's identity had been firmly associated with the death of her parents, her care-giving role toward her younger siblings, her health problems, and her work at the bank. For Barbara, shifts in identity were associated with a newly emerging sense of entitlement, of having a right to express and fulfill her needs as a whole person, and an increased trust in spirituality and process. The shift in identity for Barbara occurred at a

subtle level, as the more explicit roles associated with identity (such as her work at the bank) did not change.

Paul's identity had been firmly settled for some time in an attractor state associated with cultural expectations about masculinity and money. For Paul, shifts in identity were related to the complete shattering of a former concept of himself (i.e., the association with money) and the very slow and gradual emergence of a new identity based on his work as a designer.

From a systems perspective, integration is crucial to the process of growth and development because of concurrent processes of complexity or differentiation (Wilbur, 1998). Just as a zygote differentiates or complexifies as it divides into two, then four, then eight cells, so it must also integrate this multiplicity in order to maintain its coherence or identity as a multi-cellular system. For Kate, the identification of her self as an artist had begun before the conflict, so there was a strong element of integration and increasing complexity associated with identity development. The conflict seemed to serve as a catalyst for further integration of an ongoing process of identity development. Kate repeatedly used the word integrated throughout the two interviews in reference to her sense of self.

Although Paul could not fully articulate his current sense of self, it was clearly more complex than his previously singular identification with money. His view of people and the world had become more subtle and complex, and in terms of his business operations, he had differentiated his role to include his former partner's responsibilities (sales and marketing) as well as design. And it appears that Paul is currently still in the process of integrating the differentiation process that he underwent after the conflict. For

Barbara, differentiation accompanied what she called the “greatest change” to emerge from the conflict, which was increased self-awareness. Self awareness and a more complex identity seemed to reciprocally inform each other as her awareness of her needs led her to investigate alternative health practises, which helped her become more self aware, which then helped her to participate in more diverse social relationships, and so on. The integration of this complexity for Barbara seems to centre on her spirituality and the trust in something greater than herself, a divine order in which everything happens for a reason and for the greater good.

The integration that accompanied differentiation for participants was apparent in the way different aspects of the self-system shifted concurrently. According to constructivism, shifts in any one set of the self’s “core ordering processes” (Mahoney, 1991, p. 259) affects change in other, related areas, and this was found to be the case in the participants’ stories of conflict and change. For Kate, for example, an increase in personal authority accompanied the development of identity; there was also clarification and refinement of her values and beliefs about gender, feminism, and being a person of integrity. For Paul, an emerging identity as a competent business owner and designer was accompanied by a shift in values about money, people, and his own competence.

An interesting similarity between Kate and Barbara was that an increase in personal authority was accompanied by a shift toward a process-orientation in life. In Barbara’s case, this was reflected in her newly acquired attitude of going with the flow and a relaxation of control in general. The same link is also evident in Paul’s narrative, although not as explicitly. Paul experienced an increase in trust of his own intuition (which I am linking to personal authority), and a shift toward seeing the world in more

fluid, less rigid terms. From a systems perspective, this link between a more complex, process-orientation to life and increased trust/decreased control-needs would indicate that the individual (as a system) is becoming healthier and more adaptive to his or her environment. There would be less distress and anxiety with an increase in trust and a decrease in control-needs, and more openness to creativity and responsiveness. This is consistent with the third indicator of client improvement from the humanistic school of psychotherapy:

A third central concept in person-centred therapy is *experiencing*, a dimension along which successful clients improved, (...) shifting from a rigid mode of experiencing self and world to an attitude of openness and flexibility. (Raskin & Rogers, 1995, p. 130)

I am struck by the implications for conflict resolution of this link between personal authority and a decreased need for control. If conflict (especially entrenched, long term conflict) is accompanied by rigidity in roles, in thinking, and in views toward others, then it seems a shift toward a more fluid, open, process orientation would be advantageous. And perhaps the key to this shift is an increase in personal authority or empowerment. This would seem risky to those involved in the conflict, however, as the last thing they would want to see is more power for the person they are in conflict with. But according to the experiences of the participants of this study, the more personal empowerment, the less need for control of situations and others. This point is consistent with Bush and Folger's (1994) notion that transformation of relationships involves helping parties empower each other through recognition and empathic listening. The difference is that, from a systems perspective, empowerment can come about by many different means other than from the relationship directly. A key point may be the facilitation of a process-orientation in general, rather than facilitation of a shift only in the

way parties view each other. There may be many opportunities to facilitate a more open, fluid view of the world and others that might be lost when the focus remains exclusively on the parties involved. Systems thinking would propose that once this shift begins in a given area, it will affect other areas.

Further, in all three conflicts, participants used agency to exert their personal authority (Kate by swearing at the manager, Paul by withholding merchandise from his partner, and Barbara by allowing a loss of control and expressing her feelings in the moment). Agency seems to be related to change in that acts of asserting a developing identity or defending the existing one (or a combination of both) moves the relationship into chaos. An act of asserting a newly emergent aspect of the self would move an individual closer to the unknown of others' reactions. And an act of defending an aspect of the self may indicate that a previously established feedback loop has been disrupted (hence the need for defence), again inviting chaos. Kate's act of assertiveness (swearing at her manager) was a way of bringing forward and defending her emerging values and sense of self. Paul's decision to deny his business partner access to the merchandise was a way of defending his identity, but at the same time it was a new way of behaving in comparison to his previous pattern of avoidance. And Barbara's gesture of anger was both a defence of her belief that it was important for her husband to take care of her, and a new act of giving herself permission to lose control. Agency may be a fundamental aspect of change for self-referential systems, in that acts of choice and will are required to move the system due to the way it is so strongly anchored to the self.

Perhaps conflict interveners need to see that people's actions serve a positive, empowering function—although the attempt may be clumsily executed. In each story,

participants were trying something new, were changing old patterns; a shift was already in progress, but the skills to support that shift were not yet in place, giving rise to an emotional confrontation. According to a transformational view of conflict resolution (Bush & Folger, 1994), conflict interveners should try to facilitate empowerment of the parties by teaching communication skills and developing empathy. Perhaps this misses the mark by not taking into account the attempts at self-empowerment that contributed to the conflict dynamic in the first place. Rather than seeing people in conflict as deficient in communication skills, empathy, and power, we might see them as in need of facilitation of a process that is already in motion—trusting that the keys to positive resolution (whatever that may be) are already present.

Constructivism also asserts that selves are constructed and changes occur not in individual isolation, but within the context of human, social relationships; in fact, it is only within the context of relationship that individuals develop meaning, values, beliefs, identity, and so on (Mahoney, 1991). This was evident in two fundamental ways in the research. First, each of the conflicts was interpersonal and relational, and indeed it would be difficult to imagine a conflict that was not centred on relationship—even conflicts with faceless entities such as government involve relational interactions of some sort. Further, each of the participants was also embedded within a system of personal and social relationships that helped shape the changes that took place. For example, the relationship between Kate and her mother was integral to both the way the conflict was resolved, and the changes Kate experienced as a result. Kate was also embedded in a supportive social network that included her co-workers and the owners of the restaurant, her friends, and her theatre work. The people in these systems played an important

supportive role in the positive integration of the conflict experience, whether they or Kate were aware of it or not. Barbara and Paul also experienced the conflict and the ensuing changes within a matrix of social relationships, which would have influenced and shaped the sense they made of their experience as well. For example, Paul's request for financial help from his father and his father's refusal was a key factor in the shift away from a child's eye view to an adult's eye view of the world. Paul also credits his lawyer with having provided the support and expertise he needed when he had reached the limit of his ability to resolve the conflict (by dissolving the business).

The role of culture was evident in the metaphors and beliefs of each participant; cultural artefacts such as *conflict as competition or war*, *conflict as an obstacle*, or simple, gendered expectations, constrained participants' views and choices at different points in their lives. Conversely, cultural discourses also facilitated opportunities for change, in that participants were able to access alternative discourses such as *conflict as fire as transformation* and *conflict, change, and growth as the ocean's tidal pattern*. Such alternative discourses are also the product of social, cultural, and historical processes, and are powerful tools for facilitating conflict resolution through human growth and development.

Constructivism also underscores the link between emotional experience and identity, and the central role of emotionality in human change processes (Greenberg & Safran, 1987; Mahoney, 1991). I have extrapolated the conclusions about working with emotional expressiveness in psychotherapy and applied them to the conflict experiences related by the participants. According to constructivist therapy, emotional expressiveness is most closely linked to human change given three conditions. The first is when the

affect involved has been “previously avoided, unconscious, or conflict-laden” (Mahoney, 1991, p. 199). In the case of each of the participants, the emotion experienced during the crisis event had often been avoided, and was certainly conflict-laden: Kate struggled with her anger toward her manager and with her tears; Paul was conflicted about the fear he felt during the altercation with his business partner; and Barbara struggled with allowing herself to express her anger toward her husband.

The second condition under which emotion relates to change is when “the individual experiences that affect as personally meaningful” (p. 199), and it was clear by the central placement of the crisis event in each of the three narratives that this condition was met as well. Finally, it is important that “episodes of emotional intensity are later ‘harvested’ by reviewing and restructuring the memories, beliefs, or self-appraisals they involve” (p. 199). Although this condition is intended to be met therapeutically, there is relevance to the participants’ processes as well. In the case of Kate, there was ample support from her mother and friends for processing the emotionality of the altercation with the manager. Kate had given much thought to the feelings she had experienced and was able to articulate them and engage in reflection quite easily. Barbara sought professional counselling to help her with the loss of her marriage, and had resolved the crisis experience by understanding where her anger came from and how she had allowed herself to express it; she had also reached an internal resolution of the experience by concluding that neither she nor her ex-husband were bad people or were solely to blame for the crisis incident. And from his narrative, Paul appeared to have the least amount of integration, understanding, and resolution about his feelings during the altercation with his business partner. His statement that his fear at the time, and his choice to call 911,

was “not my proudest moment as a guy” indicates continuing discomfort and a lack of acceptance of his emotional experience. And again, looking at all three narratives, there is a suggestion of a parallel between this aspect of the change process (support for and integration of the emotional experience) and the amount of time involved in the change process itself.

In summary, a constructivist approach to human change processes provides a number of points of entry into understanding the conflict experiences described by the participants. The following quotation by Mahoney (1991) provides a nice connection between constructivism and the following section on chaos, complexity, and self-organizing systems theory:

Bluntly, we are learning that psychological change is neither simple nor easy and yet that it is pervasive and relentless. Humans can and do change in significant ways: they also exhibit important psychological continuities. . . . Of central importance to psychotherapy practitioners is the realization that the processes underlying human psychological change are non-linear and complex, thereby preventing perfect predictions of what will happen to the particulars of any given individual’s life. (p. 259-260)

Chaos, Complexity, and Self-organizing Systems Theory

The basic notion underlying complexity theory is that systems cannot be understood in terms of their parts, but must be seen as a complex whole in order to be understood (Capra, 1996; Kelso, 1995; Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997). Similarly, self-organizing systems theory stresses that systems must be considered in relationship to the environment in which they exist (Maturana & Varela, 1987; Kelso, 1995). The stories related by the participants of this study are excellent examples of both kinds of systems thinking: each story was rich in contextual detail, and the in the end, a truly subjective understanding of the way participants each made meaning of the conflict experience and

the changes that ensued requires a holistic perspective. For example, it would be difficult to understand why the break with Paul's business partner was so emotionally devastating to him without knowing about the death of his mother and how his parents were integral to the development of an identity based on money. Similarly, it would be difficult to understand why Barbara struggled for so long to repair her broken marriage without knowing about the death of her parents in her youth. So many significant keys to understanding how participants arrived at the particular meaning they made of the conflict would be lost if the phenomenon was reduced to simple parts such as needs or interests.

As I have become more versed in this group of theories, they have become more integrated in my mind. I tend to see the biological model for self-organizing systems theory as a meta-perspective on complex systems. That is, the idea of a system such as a cell in relationship to its environment seems to capture the idea of the person situated within a matrix of relationships and social and cultural discourse. And we know that from this perspective, the cell or system is constantly reorganizing itself in relationship to the environment (Maturana & Varela, 1987). These episodes of change might require the system or structure within the cell to undergo periodic phases of chaos in order to maximize the cell's potential for creative adaptation to its environment.

In the process, the relationship between the cell and the environment (which includes other cells like itself) may also be marked by periods of chaos. These periods may signify the difference between superficial first-order changes (Watzlawick et al., 1974), where the basic cellular structure and relationship to the environment remains the same, and deeper second-order changes, in which the cellular structure and relationships

spontaneously reorganize and emerge as something qualitatively different and more complex and adaptive. Conflict may emerge as a property of the chaotic periods associated with change. More specifically, conflict may arise when the feedback loops that stabilize the relationship between a system and its environment are disrupted. In the process of second-order change, these loops would be re-established in a way that preserves the functional integrity of the system. From this perspective, conflict is a way of making sense of a given set of circumstances, and resides within the system. It would subside once more when the system has settled into a pattern of feedback that it finds satisfactory.

The study indicates that this metaphorical description is a viable tool for understanding conflict, and the following discussion presents a number of points in this regard. First, each participant had been involved in an attractor state or set of feedback loops that had operated for some time. Attractor states are any pattern of repeated action or action sequences in human behaviour (Kelso, 1995; Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997). Kate and her mom interacted within an attractor state prior to the conflict crisis event that involved her mom stepping in and intervening when Kate became overwhelmed by conflict. Kate had also interacted within a particular pattern with her manager, which involved her taking offence at his behaviour but not speaking up about it. Note that these two patterns of interaction are connected, in that the pattern involving her mother would have enabled Kate to maintain the pattern of silence with her manager.

Barbara and her husband also interacted within a pattern that involved Barbara's over-controlling behaviours. And Paul had operated within an attractor state that involved him giving away his personal power to others he perceived as more competent than

himself, until that pattern resulted in the actual giving up of money. Due to the perturbations described above, the systems involved then shifted into a strange attractor, or chaotic, phase.

Second, an important part of the cell metaphor for human and social systems is the idea of the permeable cellular membrane. The membrane or boundary around a system ensures that the internal structure stays intact, while at the same time allowing a sufficient exchange with the environment to enable continuing growth and development. Human and social systems need a free exchange of information, support, communication, and so on, in order that belief, value, power, and identity structures continue a process of healthy adaptation.

This leads to the third point of viability of the theory set: when boundaries are too rigid to allow for adaptive change, the system actually benefits from a period of chaos. The fluctuations involved in chaotic periods allow the boundaries around a system to open, and for the system itself to enter what is called a phase of “maximum probability” (Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997, p. 9). A clear example of this from the study was from Paul’s story, in which his self-system included an external locus of evaluation. This self-system was not ultimately adaptive, in that it led to him to place too much trust (and money) in someone who did not live up to his expectations. Paul’s self-system was thrown into chaos due to the threat to his identity, which ultimately led to reorganization that includes an internal locus of evaluation and a shift away from money as a primary source of identity.

For Kate, chaos was present in the emotional episode with the manager, and during that experience she became open to the idea of withholding her tears as a form of

personal empowerment and as a way of shifting the conflict away from gendered norms. Kate also remained open to the suggestion to write a letter stating her complaints, which was a new behaviour for her and an alternative to collapsing back into the old pattern of relying on her mother to rescue her. For Paul, the period of emotional chaos and emptiness immediately after the crisis event was the matrix from which the idea emerged that he could try his own hand at design. And for Barbara, the chaos of emotional distress upon hearing that her husband had just been fired from his second job opened her to the choice to show her anger, which she says she intuitively knew in the moment would be healing despite the immediate consequences. The ensuing period of emotional upheaval and not knowing regarding the state of her marriage was also the matrix out of which new behaviours and pursuits in self-care emerged.

Chaos also invites openness through the void or experience of not knowing (Masterpasqua & Perna, 1997), which is similar to the idea that people have to bottom out or reach the end of their known strategies for coping before they will be open to trying something new. This too was evident in the study, especially in Paul's experience of emotional fragility immediately after the conflict. Kate also spoke of the void as an important part of the creative process in her theatre work. After the period of chaos, the system will either undergo a qualitative shift (bifurcation) into another pattern of behaviours, beliefs, values, and so on, or it may revert back to the old pattern and operate at the edge of chaos until it reaches a bifurcation point again.

A fourth point is that perturbations or disturbances to the system are not one-way events (Maturana & Varela, 1987). In order for something to disturb a system, the system must be primed to perceive it as such. Systems and their environments are unified in the

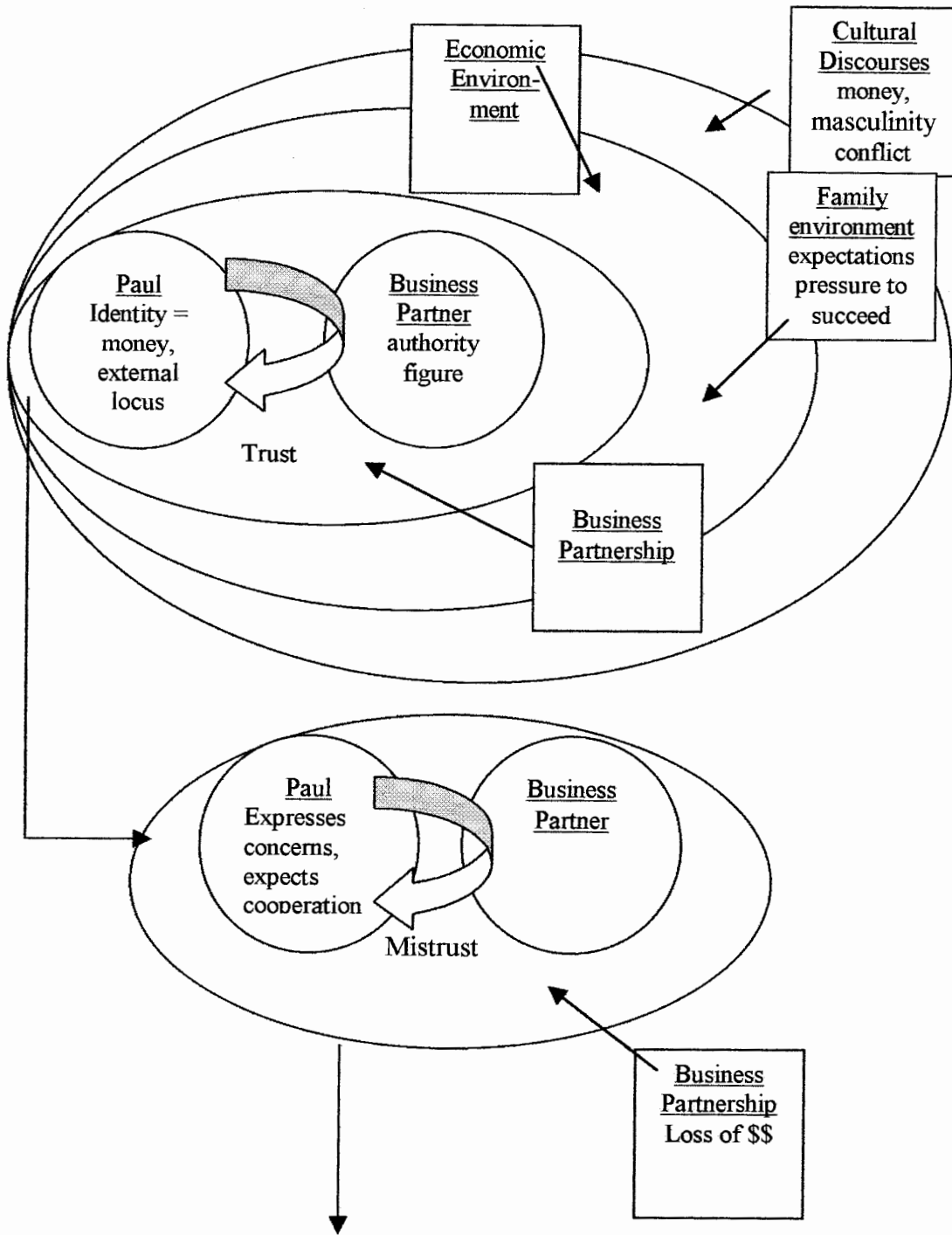
co-creation of phenomena such as conflict. For example, Kate approached the manager after having had an emotional interaction with the angry customer and after a period of reflection on her values—which was also an assertion of her identity or who she wanted to be. The off-hand comment of the manager then qualified as a perturbation to her system of values, because she had expectations about how he should respond to her suggestions. If Kate hadn't cared about the incident but was merely mentioning it for the manager's information, her value system would not have primed her to see the manager's comment as an insulting provocation.

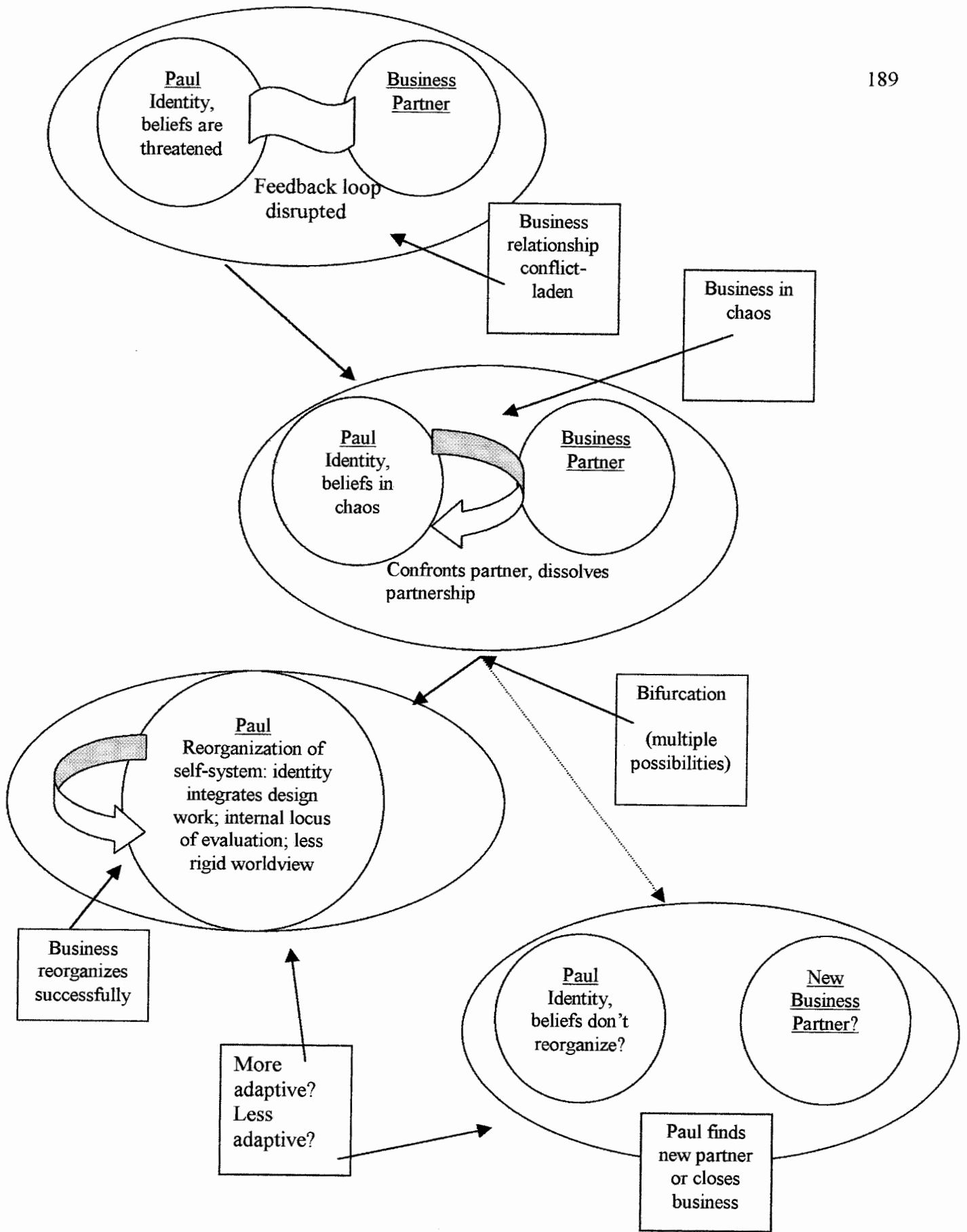
Fifth, an important factor in enabling positive growth out of periods of chaos is support (Mahoney & Moes, 1997). Each participant experienced different levels of emotional and social support during the chaos phase of the conflict, and the correlations to change and development have been noted earlier. The makings of this study are supported by previous work by Hoskins and Stoltz (2003), which showed a similar trend in terms of support: in that study, the participant who received the least amount of social support also articulated having a difficult time integrating the changes required of him in the mediation. Although this participant had experienced a significant shift in awareness during the mediation, he said he struggled daily with the translation of that awareness into behaviour at work. Without adequate social and emotional support, change appears to proceed slowly and partially.

And finally, although change can be abrupt and non-linear, it does build on the prior system. This is evident in the change process when previous ways of being are enfolded and integrated into the new, more complex and advanced systems level, as described by Wilbur (1998). For example, Barbara's stalking behaviours, which were

based on her attempts to control, were the basis for integrating the idea of daily walking for health. The system of beliefs that said she had to keep track of her husband's whereabouts primed her for integrating a daily exercise routine. Similarly, Paul's system of beliefs around money, identity, and reputation was the basis for integrating the idea that he could design his product himself, which would eliminate the cost of hiring a designer and enable him to keep his business afloat. Developing this skill set then became part of a feedforward mechanism (Mahoney 1991) that allowed the emergence of a new belief system about his own competence, expertise, and authority in comparison to others, which when fed forward again resulted in a dramatic shift in his general beliefs about people. This process exemplifies autopoietic, self-organizing, learning systems. These points are represented graphically in a map of Paul's change process, below.

Figure 4. The Path of Change, Paul





As shown in the last three segments of the figure, there was a bifurcation point in the evolution of Paul's business as well as in his developing identity and belief systems. Paul could have chosen to close the business entirely and repay his debts after finding steady employment. Or he could have found someone else to bring into the business as a partner, someone again with more business acumen and experience than him. But out of a complex combination of personal and social dynamics, Paul made the choice to continue the business and try his own hand at design. Chaos theory accounts for that choice and the changes that followed by suggesting that the systems that would have had to revert to previous attractor states or patterns (e.g., his identification with money, his child's eye view of others), were now in a state of chaos, and so second-order change became possible. Of course, it is impossible due to the design of this study to know whether the changes Paul experienced would or would not have occurred if his choice had been different, but we do have a rich description of the intra- and interpersonal dynamics that led to the choice he did make.

A challenging notion to emerge from the study is that the way conflict is constructed and approached may have more to do with individuals' ongoing processes of development than it has to do with deficits in the ability to resolve conflict via communication, problem solving skills, or empathy, as many current conflict resolution models suggest. In fact, it may be that individuals are more concerned about their own developmental paths—in terms of grappling with the ongoing challenges of their lives—than they are with finding a “resolution” to conflict when it occurs. This may account for why participants' stories were largely devoid of references to “conflict.” Except during times in the interviews when we were specifically discussing conflict as a concept,

participants' language and ways of making meaning of the experience focused more on identity, beliefs, and the challenges they faced than on finding resolution. This is not to say that people are egocentric or not attuned to the problems of relationship; it is simply to acknowledge the frame of reference from which people construe a situation as conflicted, and that frame seems to be centred on the challenges of human change and development. When people see themselves as being in conflict, it seems they are just as deeply immersed in feelings and emotions, the clarification of values, and challenges to identity as they are consciously concerned about resolving the conflict. It may be that conflict interveners have interpreted peoples' actions and choices in conflict as being deficient in the skills of resolution *because resolution is the goal for interveners*. For those *living* the conflict, however, the experience is a continuation of ongoing processes of development that unfold in the context of relationship. Resistance to conflict resolution may occur, then, when the strategies for resolution do not facilitate or fit with the person's own unique processes of adaptation and growth.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

“So we must live with the strange and the bizarre, directed to unseen lands by faint glimmers of hope” (Wheatley, 1997)

The Research Objectives Revisited

It is important to begin this final section by stating that these concluding remarks are meant to incite further questions and exploration. Consistent with the philosophical foundations of the research, there is no claim to a conclusive or definitive truth about the phenomenon under study; rather, it is my hope that these ways of making sense of the research stimulates a shift in perspective, and invites new ways of thinking about conflict.

By way of summary, I would like to revisit the questions associated with the five research objectives of the study. The first objective was to explore the lived context in which the conflicts were situated. The three stories were rich in contextual description, with participants drawing from elements of their lives that were not immediately associated with the conflict, in order that I might better understand how the experience unfolded for them. A research question associated with this objective concerned the number of levels of context that could be identified, and each narrative included at least the following: intrapersonal, interpersonal (the relationship with the other person involved in the conflict), family, work, social, and cultural. In this regard, it was surprising to me how important the level of family context was to the participants' experiences. Each participant had been strongly affected by the relationship with his or her parents, which held significance for identity as well as for how they approached conflict as adults.

A second question asked how the conflict was affected by context and how it affected the context in return. It now seems apparent that the contextual positioning of the

participants and their history of life experiences had *everything* to do with how the conflict unfolded. Further, participants' context and experiences contributed to their construction (or construal) of the interaction with the other person as a problem in the first place. Systems theory says the system must be primed to understand something as a perturbation or disturbance because the system exists in relationship to its environment, not in isolation. If the complex history of unique, contextualized experiences had been different, participants may have responded differently in interaction with the other person involved, and the situation may never have been considered problematic. The study suggests that there is a very strong, dialectic relationship between contextual positioning and the actual creation of a conflict dynamic, which may have profound implications for conflict resolution. An important question conflict interveners might ask is "how did these people come to define this interaction as difficult, problematic, or conflicted in the first place, both individually and together?" From a constructivist perspective, we can also say that conflict does not arise, it is co-created by the participants involved, out of their contextual and historical life experiences.

The second research objective was to explore conflict as a dynamic change process that occurs within the context of other lived experiences over the lifespan. The findings of the study provide a strong link between this objective and the previous one, in that the exploration of the context of the conflict led—in each case—to stories about life experiences that, from other theoretical perspectives, might have been considered unrelated to the conflict itself. In other words, there was a natural progression in the interviews from "tell me about the conflict" (context) to "tell me about what else was

happening in your life at the time” (concurrent life events). In answering the first question, participants of their own accord provided answers to the second.

There were three research questions associated with this objective. The first was “what is the relationship between the conflict and other concurrent life events?” It seems clear that there is a very holistic, dense connection; people seem to make sense of conflict experiences not as isolated incidents, but as integrally situated experiences within the broader matrix of their lives. This making addresses the second research question, which asked “what sense do participants make of a conflict experience in relation to other aspects of their lives?” Again, the answer seems to be that individuals *can only* make sense of conflict experiences from within the whole context of their lived experiences. So as interveners, it seems necessary to avoid the mistake of perceiving and addressing conflict as an isolated event simply because we are not familiar with the rich context from which it emerges. This is also consistent with the self-referential nature of living systems. The meanings each participant created about actions and events within their environment formed a closed loop with their internal frame of reference. The complex history of prior life experiences of each participant informed the meaning they made of others’ actions and their own choices for action as well.

The third question associated with this objective asked “what sense do participants make of conflict when viewed from a lifespan perspective?” This making was discussed earlier, when it was noted that all three participants ultimately saw the conflict as a growth-enhancing experience. Each participant was able to articulate positive lessons and changes, one of the most significant being an increase in trusting their own inner voice, instinct, or intuition. This was a surprisingly strong outcome of the

research. I had anticipated some positive interpretations of the experience, mixed with some residual cynicism and acrimony. In fact, the narratives were surprisingly devoid of bitterness and anger toward the other person involved in the conflict. Certainly the passage of time could be a factor, although it is also not uncommon for people to hold grudges for many years. The link between the three participants in the positive meaning they made of the conflict may be that all three also experienced second-order shifts in core aspects of the self. Perhaps change of this nature—in which there is a shift toward seeing the world and others in more complex, less rigid ways—is linked to an increase in empathy and compassion. This would hold implications for conflict interveners: currently, attempts to increase empathy between parties in conflict centres on perspective-taking and communication skills (e.g., Bush & Folger, 1994). A focus on development may enhance this approach, and from a systems perspective it would be understood that increased empathy and a shift in the way the person (or organization) sees the world and others will have an impact on their relationships.

The third objective was to explore the fit between conflict and the group of selected change theories. The first research question asked “what is the process of change within a conflict dynamic?” The study suggests that there is a dialectical relationship between conflict and change that resists linear explanations based on cause and effect. It is difficult to determine whether individuals enter into or create conflict due to changes they are currently undergoing, or whether conflict instigates change in new directions. Conflict may arise when peoples’ attempts to enact new ways of being disrupt or disturb the structural coupling with other people and systems. As previously noted, this was evident for all three participants. Conversely, the conflict experience also prompted

system reorganization that may not have occurred in its absence. This was also evident in all three narratives, due to the experience of chaos and the subsequent opening or even complete disintegration of old patterns and systems, which allowed for the reorganization and emergence of the new.

The more accurate answer seems to be that conflict and change are integrally related, in that the dynamic, changing nature of human development sometimes gives rise to conflict, and conflict in turn *may* facilitate human development¹². Complexity theory invites a more sophisticated understanding of this relationship, one that resists reductionistic, linear explanations. As Efran and Fauber (1995) state:

The human desire to give each thing (as created in language) a discrete beginning and end generates, as in the classic chicken-and-egg problem, a virtually endless supply of explanatory paradoxes. The process loops in which people live do not necessarily have identifiable, objective beginnings and ends, nor can exact, lineal cause-effect sequences be defined. (p. 289).

The second question associated with this objective was “what role does conflict play in the course of human change processes?” and certainly the previous points are relevant here. Based on the study, it appears that, given adequate support, conflict provides opportunities for learning and growth. Chaos and self-organizing systems theory are important theoretical foundations for this perspective, in that it is through the disorganization of chaos that systems can reorganize and evolve in healthy, adaptive ways. A direction for further research would be to explore the limits of human and social systems for positive, healthy change through conflict. Even under ideally supportive conditions, is there a point of too much conflict, when systems become overly strained?

¹² The last part of the statement is qualified because there also seems to be a need for support both during and after conflict experiences, in order for development to be enhanced by the conflict experience.

And conversely, further research might explore human and social development in the absence of conflict: how necessary is conflict to growth and development, and what is the lowest minimum requirement for challenge through conflict, to keep the system evolving?

The fourth objective for the study was to explore conflict from the subjective point of view of participants. The questions associated with this objective were: “how do participants describe their experiences of conflict; how do people make sense and meaning of a given conflict; how is the conflict storied or narrated by participants; and are conflict experiences integrated into participants’ lives, or are they contradictory and partial?” All of these questions have been addressed in depth throughout the analysis and discussion; the only point that bears further comment is with regard to the last question. The study suggests that conflict experiences are integrated into participants’ lives to the same extent that the changes associated with the conflict have been integrated. More specifically, it seems that when core aspects of the self that were affected by the conflict are still undergoing change, then the sense the person makes of the conflict may be partial and contradictory. This was evident in contrasting the story of Kate with that of Paul: for Kate, many of the changes associated with the conflict had occurred fairly quickly, and both the changes and the conflict experience itself had been integrated in a very cohesive, comprehensive way. Change was slower for Paul, and he was still clearly in the process of articulating a new sense of identity. This was reflected in the partial and sometimes contradictory narration of Paul’s story, compared to the integrated, progressive narration of Kate’s story. Of course, the contrast may also be due to differences in personality and

styles of communication, bearing in mind that these interpretations are tentative and inconclusive at best.

The fifth and last objective for the study was to explore the larger, collective, socio-cultural discourses and narratives within which participants' conflict experiences are embedded. This topic has been discussed elsewhere, but I will add further comments here regarding the nature of the dominant discourse that was present in all three narratives. This discourse was evident in the way participants referred to conflict as a negative experience to be avoided, and as an adversarial dynamic between individuals. For example, Kate's choice to suppress her tears during the altercation with her manager was intended to avoid the default position where individuals occupy different "camps" (her word). Other references like "opponent" suggested a discourse of competition, and part of the shift Kate experienced was the realization that the conflict could not be resolved from within this framework. Similarly, Barbara and Paul both experienced a shift away from a good/bad, oppressor/victim discourse after the conflict, which suggests that this discourse had been dominant prior to the shift. The presence of these references in the narratives suggest a cultural discourse that relies on a binary framework for conflict based on notions of war, competition, and opposition, and indeed the very word "conflict" has a deep association with these notions in Western society. Given the strength of dominance of this discourse, I find it highly optimistic that two out of three participants were able to articulate an alternative discourse for conflict based on transformation and change rather than competition. Such alternative discourses could be powerful tools for conflict interveners.

And as mentioned, all three participants viewed conflict as negative (e.g., the metaphor of conflict as “a dangerous place to go”) and as something to be avoided if possible. I see this way of making sense of conflict as directly related to the dominant discourse described above: if conflict is understood as a competitive dynamic *requiring* an oppositional stance, individuals who are uncomfortable with this style of interaction would likely avoid rather than engage in conflict. Although discourses of respectful assertiveness also exist in Western culture, the language of the dominant discourse is very pervasive and may have a counteractive, distancing effect for many people. Interestingly, all three participants said they still tended to use avoidance as their predominant conflict strategy in the years after the conflict. There were, however, subtle shifts for each: in Kate’s case, she is able to use more discretion about which particular conflicts are potentially transformative for her and the relationship, and which should be avoided because they would be a waste of her time and energy. Kate also said she relies on an embodied, felt sense of knowing when to engage in conflict. In this sense, avoidance is not predicated as much on fear (as it was prior to the restaurant conflict) as it is on an awareness of her own process of growth and development.

Paul also stated that although he still prefers to avoid conflict, he has become more confident and able to address problems and conflict situations “head-on.” And for Barbara, although avoidance is also still her predominant strategy, she has a profound trust that all things happen for a reason and therefore she has less anxiety about conflict. It is highly likely that many people, given the dominant discourse surrounding conflict in Western culture, utilize avoidance as a common strategy, and there is certainly an argument to be made for the wisdom of walking away from a potentially fruitless conflict

situation. It is only when avoidance creates more difficulties than the original problem itself that the strategy becomes problematic.

The study suggests that individuals are constrained in their developmental processes by a dominant discourse of conflict that is based on competition and binaries like good/bad, right/wrong, and win/lose. The study also suggests that when individuals experience positive change after a conflict, they shift away from this discourse toward one of transformation and potential. If ongoing, healthy adaptation of human and social systems is the ultimate goal in conflict situations, then alternative discourses based on growth and transformation would be facilitative.

Limitations of the study and Further Research

When most of us think about paradigms, we often forget that, in addition to their limiting and restrictive nature, they are also powerful tools for focusing on and exploring a given phenomenon (Kuhn, 1962). This study has provided a different paradigmatic lens through which to view and understand conflict. But of course, every lens limits the viewer and the subject to a certain extent, and so the study is limited in a number of ways as well. A framework that is partially based on a subjective, relativist ontology means the study lacks the objectivity and validity associated with positivist models of research. An objective stance would have introduced information that, while inconsistent with the ontological and epistemological foundations of the study, would have been informative in its own right. Specifically, one of the central criticisms of the study could be that I interviewed only one of the parties in each of the three conflicts, and while my choice is justified on the basis of the theoretical arguments put forth earlier, what is lost is a perspective that shifts away from the individuals involved toward a broader

understanding of the relational dynamics. In fact, a holistic exploration of conflict would seem to demand a multiple perspective of the phenomenon, and that would certainly be my next step in a research agenda that continued to apply the theories of chaos/complexity and self-organizing systems. A thorough exploration of conflict from a holistic perspective that takes time and context into account might include the following components. First, the research could be based on a series of cases drawn from different contexts in which conflict had occurred, including family, work, other organizations (schools, government, multi-party settings such as environmental disputes), cross-cultural, and international. Each case could include interviews with different parties to the conflict as well as observation and document analysis. Further, the temporal dimension could be addressed via a longitudinal method, where data was collected during, immediately after, and a number of months or years after the conflict. Each participant would be involved in narrative accounts of the conflict that included both personal and larger cultural discourse, as well as reflections on changes occurring in their lives during and after the conflict. Cases could also be divided into those involving professional third party interventions and those that did not.

The decision-making process for choosing the method for the current study included the consideration of a case study method, in which multiple participants of a current, ongoing conflict would be interviewed. This option was rejected because it lacks the retrospective element, in which participants explore the meaning of the conflict in the context of their ongoing lives. Admittedly, the chosen option lacks multiple perspectives on the same phenomenon, but previous research attempts have disclosed the difficulty in obtaining consent from multiple parties to a current conflict (Baumeister et al., 1990;

Vaughn, 1986). There are also ethical considerations involved in interviewing people involved in a current conflict: parties might use information gained from the study to the disadvantage of the other (or parties may later claim that was the case), and the reflective interview process may cause additional stress in an already emotionally volatile situation. At this point in what is a new direction in conflict research, it seemed important to delve more deeply into the subjective experiences of participants, beginning with the level of the self-in-relation and moving outward from there.

A related limitation is based on my role as researcher. The interpretation of the makings of the study were largely my own, based on the theoretical and philosophical foundations employed and corroborated by participants. It was argued earlier that to have an objective reader review the analysis was inconsistent with the ontological positioning of the study, and what the study gained in internal validity and consistency would necessarily have been offset by what it lost in perspective. My role as researcher is also constrained by my positioning within the social and cultural discourses of academia, white middle class culture, and so on. These points have been reviewed earlier.

Another limitation of the study was the small number of participants involved. There were a number of differences and similarities between the three stories, and it would have strengthened the study to see those patterns remain consistent with larger numbers. Again, a continuing research agenda would explore whether identity, intuition, conflict-as-transformation, and the presence of chaos emerge as strong elements. This point also relates to the limitations of the study in terms of generalization. The ability to transfer the understandings from this study to other people, groups, and conflict situations is severely constrained by the methodology, which does not support the generalization of

findings. The ability to generalize is therefore constrained by the very context explored in the study. Specifically, all participants are white, 30- to 40-year old middle class, working, educated, and (presumed) heterosexual individuals. While these descriptors fall far short of capturing the context explored in the study, they do provide very real limitations on the ability to generalize to other people and situations. Further, the conflict situations explored were interpersonal, which excludes generalization to conflicts at macro-levels such as government, social or cultural groups, organizations, and so forth.

Concluding Comments

In the introduction to this work, it was stated that the paradigmatic shift in science in the twentieth century challenges us to find the patterns of order inherent in the universe as opposed to simple cause and effect sequences. Using an approach that embraced notions of holism and transience, my goal was to delve more deeply into conflict as a phenomenon that is common to the lived experiences of individuals, and to seek patterns of order there. What I found are deep connections—between conflict and human change processes, between experiences of conflict and other life events, between cultural discourses and individual experiences of conflict. Given the density of connections involved, it makes sense to apply theory founded on ideas of holism and context, and the set of theories used in the study were assessed to be highly viable.

There were three significant points to emerge from the study. The first was that conflict and change are integrally related, but not in a simple cause and effect relationship as described in the literature. Rather, change appears to be the backdrop against which conflict emerges, and it both precedes and succeeds conflict in a non-linear, complex

relationship. Additionally, the change associated with conflict appears to be the type of change associated with the growth and development of all living systems, and particularly, the periods of chaos that are necessary for healthy adaptation.

Secondly, the adaptive change associated with conflict appears to involve shifts in identity. Threats to identity or to the process of identity development may push systems toward chaos and conflict, from which healthy, adaptive change can occur.

The third significant point was that the conflict experiences related in the study are consistent with the idea of self-referential systems. The meaning participants made of the conflict experiences, both at the time and years later, showed that life experiences and intrapersonal systems are brought forward to ground events in the external environment firmly within personal frameworks. A working hypothesis at this point is that conflict is associated with the chaos that ensues when feedback loops linking systems to their environments are disrupted. Disruptions can be generated from within the system or from without. If the system is adaptive, it reconnects feedback loops to its environment as it self-organizes at a more complex, integrated level, and conflict and chaos subside.

Further, both conflict and its resolution can be viewed from this perspective as emergent properties of systems of interaction. Rather than imposing resolution on a conflict, the focus would be on supporting and facilitating an environment in which resolution can spontaneously emerge. This point draws on the Be Spontaneous Paradox (Watzlawick et al., 1974), which is “the demand for behaviour which by its very nature can only be spontaneous, but cannot be spontaneous as a result of having been requested” (p. 64). The failure of mediation participants to comply with agreements may be due to agreements for change that did not arise spontaneously from within their organizational

meaning structures. An important issue becomes knowing the difference between the subtle coercion of change as opposed to the facilitation of an environment within which change can spontaneously emerge.

What all of this suggests is that it may be more productive for conflict interveners to shift the focus of attention away from conflict and conflict resolution, and toward the growth processes of the systems involved. Labelling an interaction as conflict may be too restrictive, blinding interveners to opportunities to facilitate the growth process as well as limiting their understanding of participants' experiences. This approach would include options contrary to current models, such as ending the conflicted relationship if doing so supports healthy change. It is important to note that although each conflict in the study resulted in more distance between the parties involved, all the participants experienced positive changes over time. In other words, it was not necessary for the conflicted relationships to be reconciled in order for positive change to occur. According to a systems perspective, the goal need not be resolution, but *evolution*. The accompanying assumption is that when one system within a larger network experiences adaptive, healthy change, there will be a positive effect on other systems within the network (e.g., the other parties involved).

From a systems perspective, conflict interveners would require different tools than the prescriptive, linear models currently in vogue. Working with individuals or groups in conflict would require a mindset that is open to recognizing the creative potential of chaos, and to helping people cope while the system struggles to evolve. Intervenors would have to be skilled in recognizing the difference between challenge and threat, and be able to muster the support necessary for the system to evolve adaptively. A

metaphor for this type of role is the midwife—a person skilled in facilitating the natural process of birthing. Both chaos and childbirth are messy, painful, and dangerous, while at the same time joyous, life-giving, and transformative for all involved.

Interveners working from this perspective would also be alert to paradoxical, non-rational, spontaneous events that could provide the catalyst for system change. Levels of human experiencing beyond rational problem-solving modes would be embraced, including intuition, emotions, embodied intelligence, and symbolic representation (including metaphor, art, music, literature, film, etc.). Some authorities working in the field, such as Michelle LeBaron (2002), are breaking new ground in these directions. Systems thinking provides a strong theoretical foundation for what many experienced practitioners have discovered after long years of practice—that sometimes conflict is resolved not due to linear, prescriptive processes, but through intuitive, non-rational events that were unpredictable and impossible for the professional intervener or anyone else to have orchestrated. Training interveners from this perspective would involve cultivating a mindset as a foundation for skill sets, a mindset that involves attunement to process and connection, openness to non-linear, non-rational modalities, and a high degree of reflexivity.

The stories told for this study were rich in potentially useful information for conflict interveners, but more importantly, I found them full of optimism and hope—hope that if we pay attention to and support the ways in which people strive to adapt and grow, natural processes of change can be powerful tools for peace.

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Appendix A

Research Questions/Listening Guide

Objective 1: To explore the lived context in which the conflict narrative is situated

- a. How many levels of context can be identified?
- b. How is the conflict affected by context, and how does it affect the context in return?

Objective 2: To explore the conflict as a dynamic change process that occurs within the context of other lived experiences over the lifespan

- a. What is the relationship between the conflict and other concurrent events?
- b. What sense do participants make of a conflict experience in relation to other aspects of their lives?
- c. What sense do participants make of conflict when viewed from a lifespan perspective?

Objective 3: To explore the fit between conflict and the selected change theories

- a. What is the process of change within a conflict dynamic?
- b. What role does conflict play in the course of human change processes?
- c. How well do participants' description of change fit with the suggested theories?

Objective 4: To explore conflict from the subjective point of view of participants

- a. How do participants describe their experiences of conflict?
- b. How do people make sense and meaning of conflict?
- c. How is conflict storied by participants?
- d. Are conflict experiences integrated into participants' lives, or are they contradictory and partial (e.g., 'unfinished business')?

Objective 5: To explore the larger, collective, socio-cultural discourses and narratives within which participants' conflict experiences are embedded

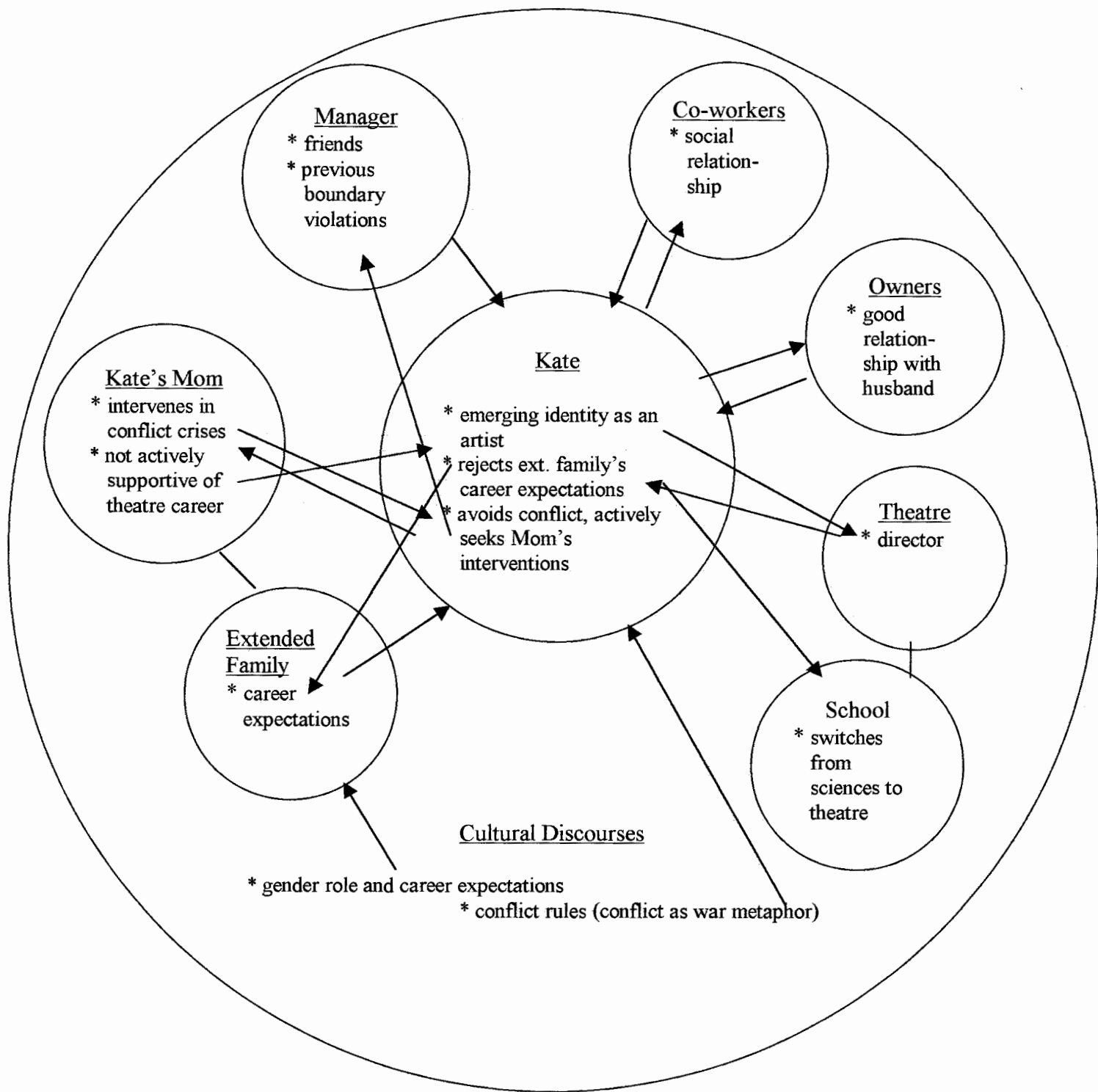
- a. How do such discourses shape the way participants enact and make sense of conflict?
- b. What are the dominant and alternative narratives about conflict? (rules, metaphors, prescriptives)
- c. Are there cultural messages or symbols attached to the conflict narratives?

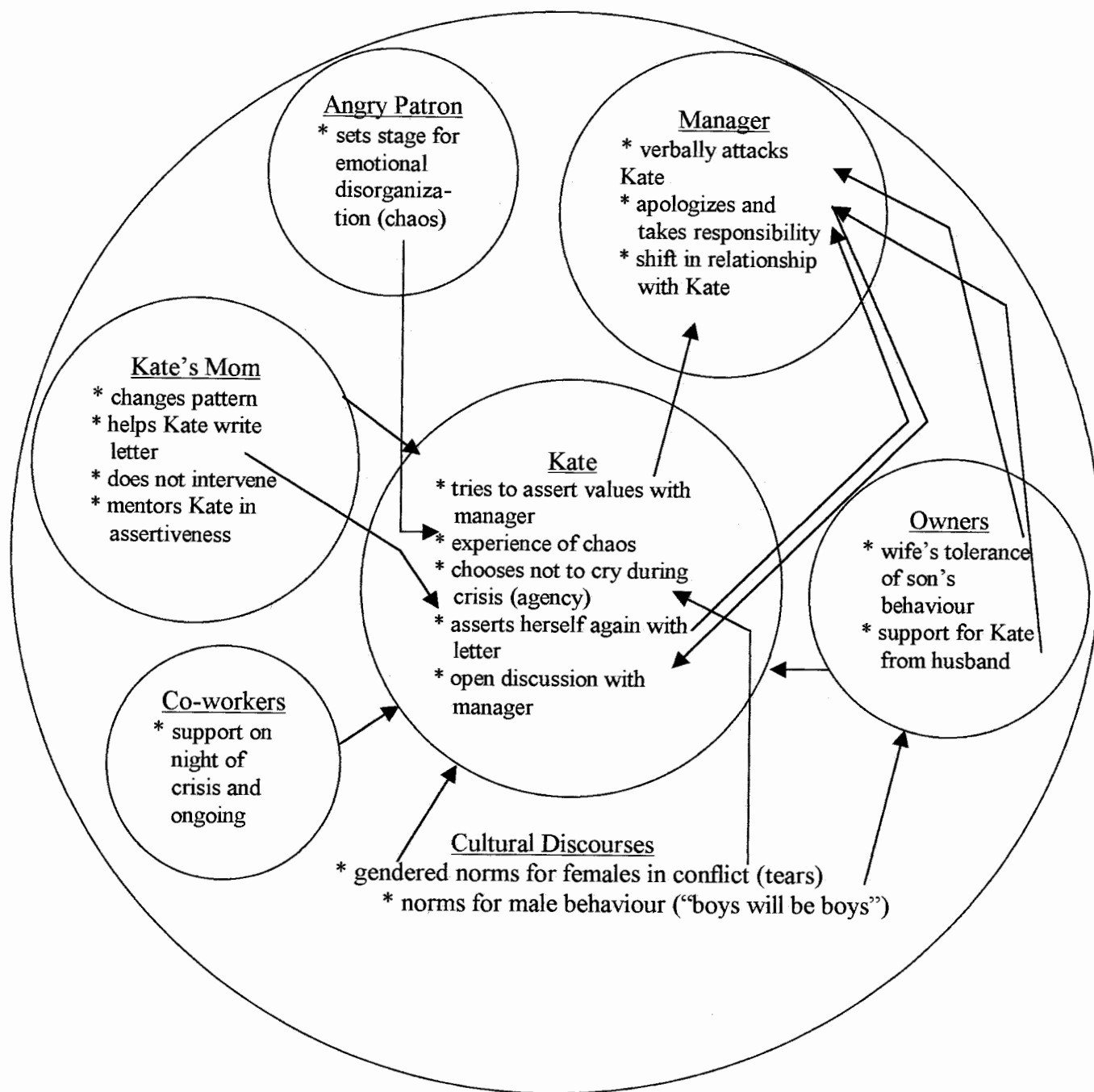
Appendix B

Changes Associated with Conflict for Kate

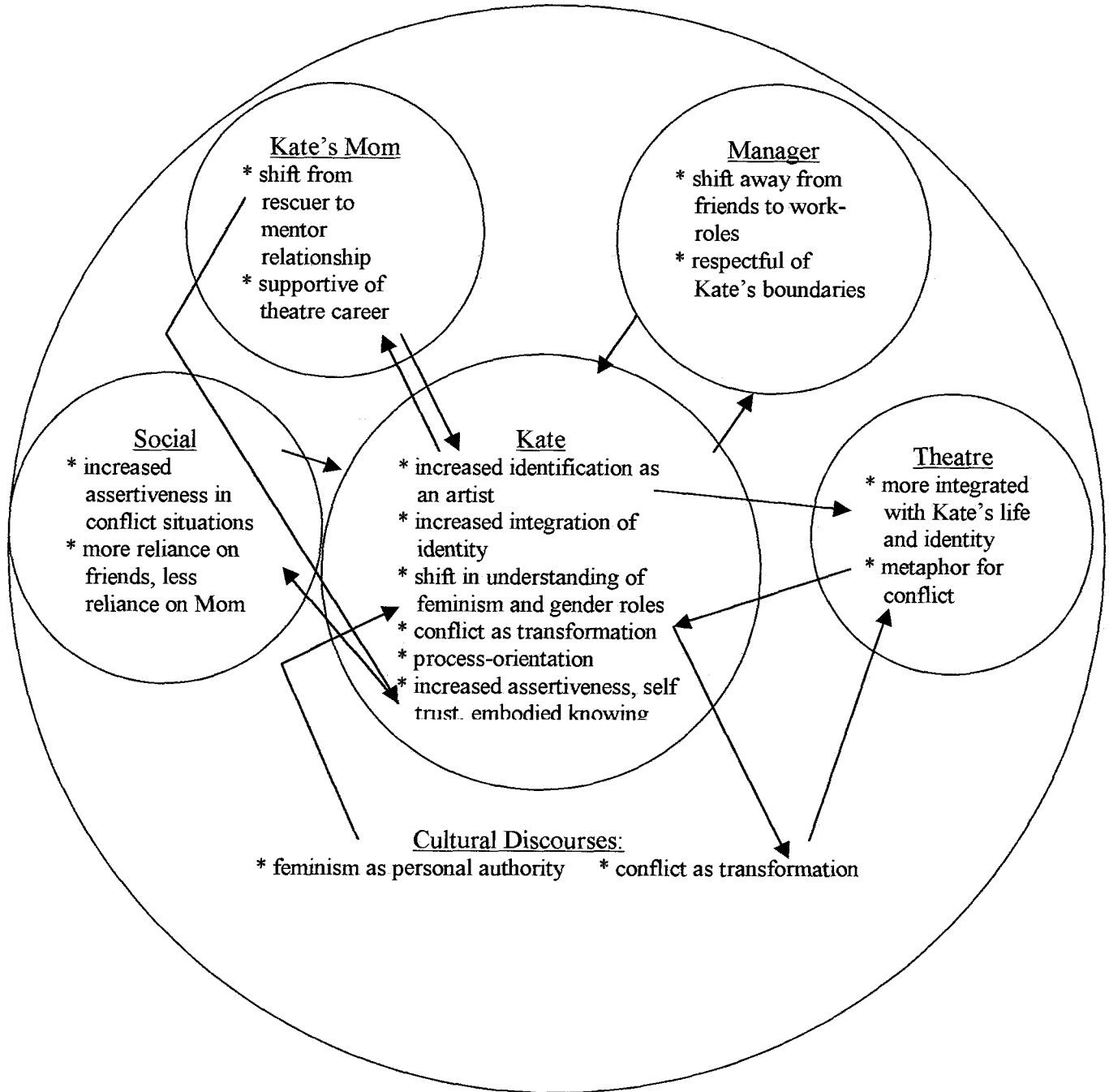
The arrows between bubbles indicate directions of influence. For example, in the figure below, there are two arrows, one pointing in each direction, between the bubbles labelled Kate and Kate's Mom. These arrows indicate the reciprocal relationship in which Kate's mother provides help in crisis situations, and Kate turns to her mother in those situations. There is another arrow pointing away from the note about this dynamic in Kate's bubble, and ending in the bubble labelled Manager, at the note saying "previous boundary violations." What is implied in this connection is that the dynamic between Kate and her mother influenced Kate's conflict avoidance behaviour, which was connected to previous boundary violations by Kate's manager that she had not addressed. When arrows begin and end at the periphery of one bubble and the next (rather than connecting specific notes within bubbles), it means the dynamic does not warrant more specific comment than to indicate that a relationship exists. And finally, there are a few instances where I have connected bubbles with simple lines, such as between the bubbles labelled Kate's Mom and Extended Family. This indicates that although there is a relationship, the nature of it was not explored in the narrative.

Pre-crisis, Kate



Crisis, Kate

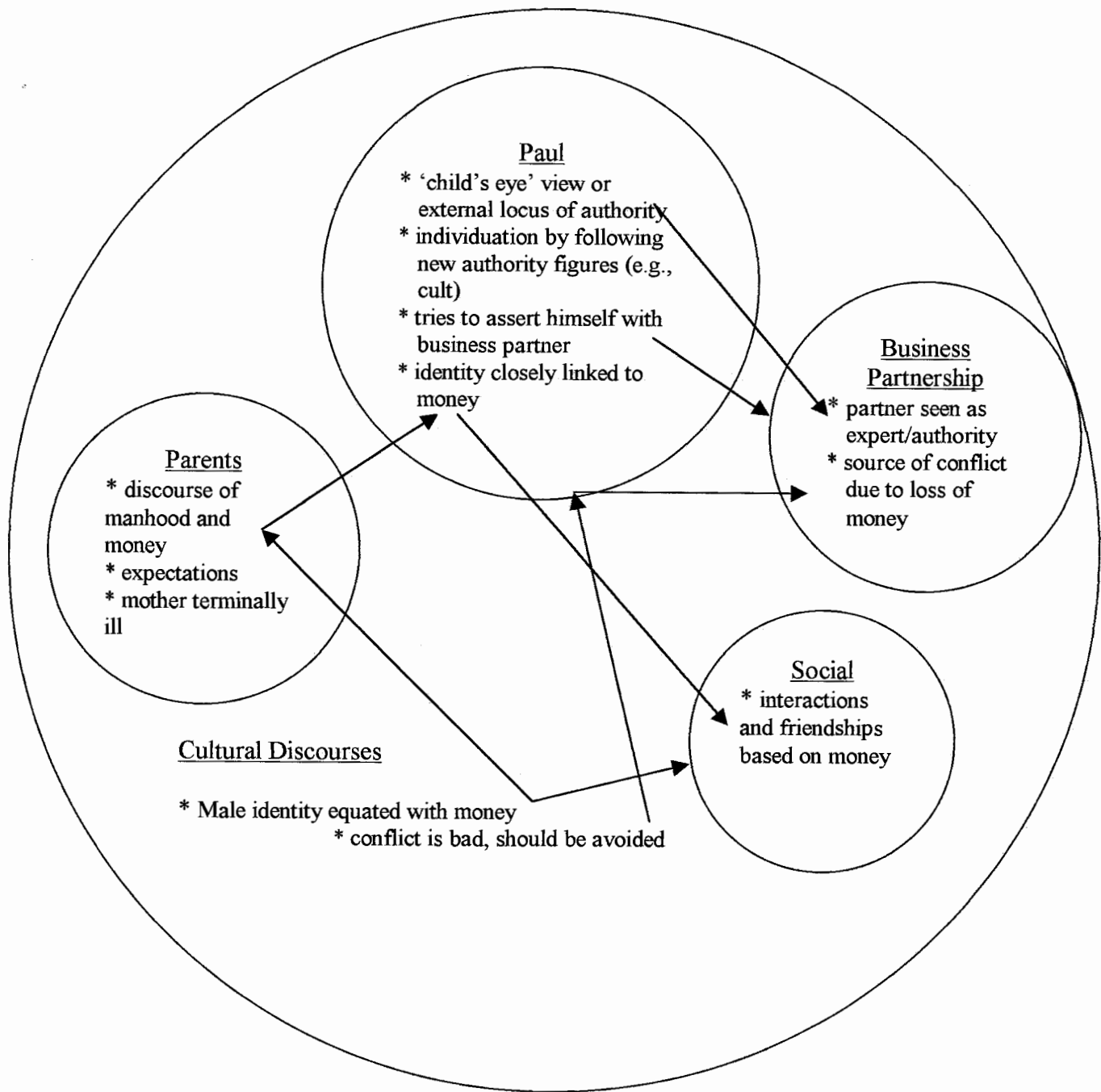
Post-crisis, Kate

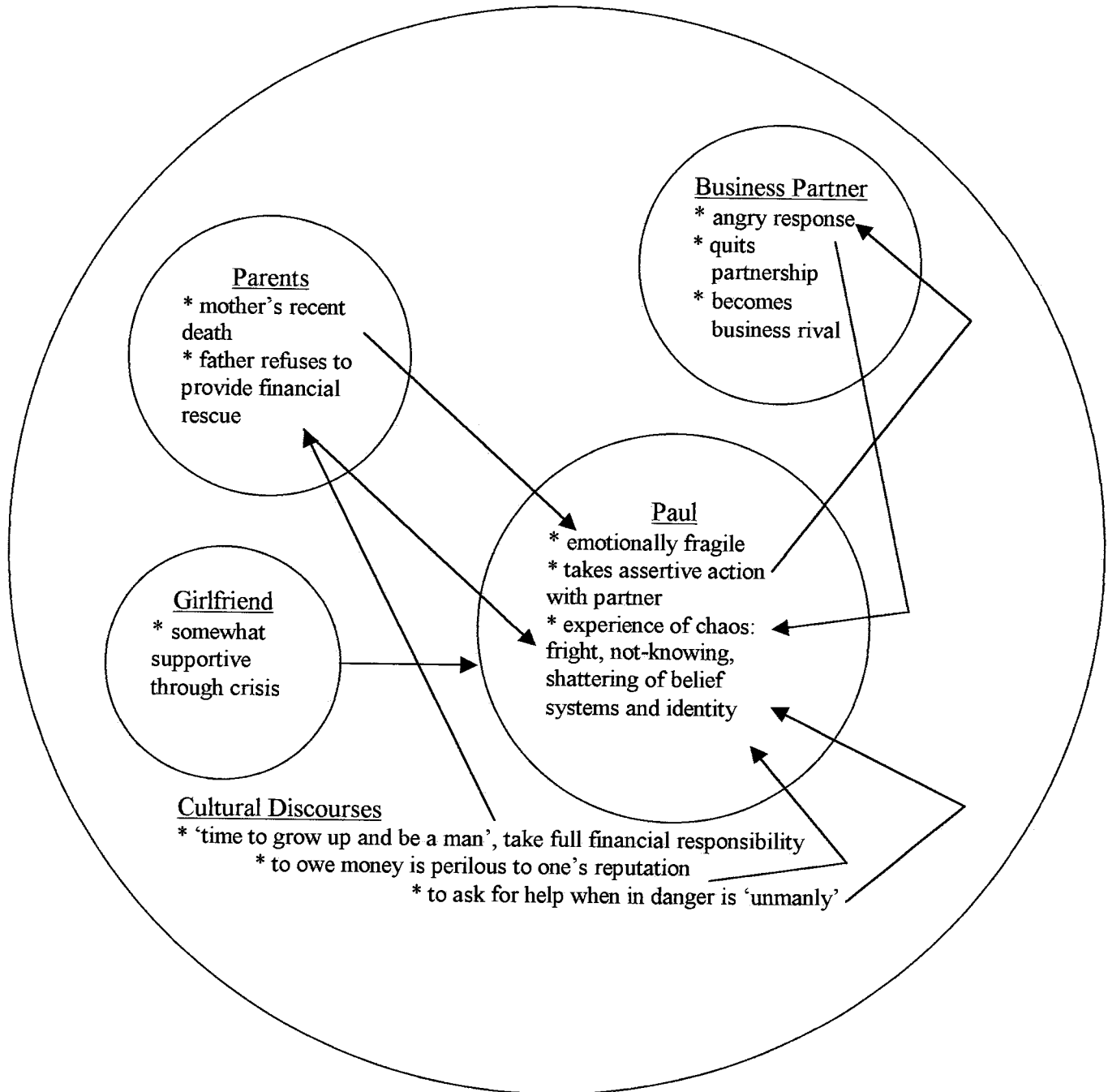


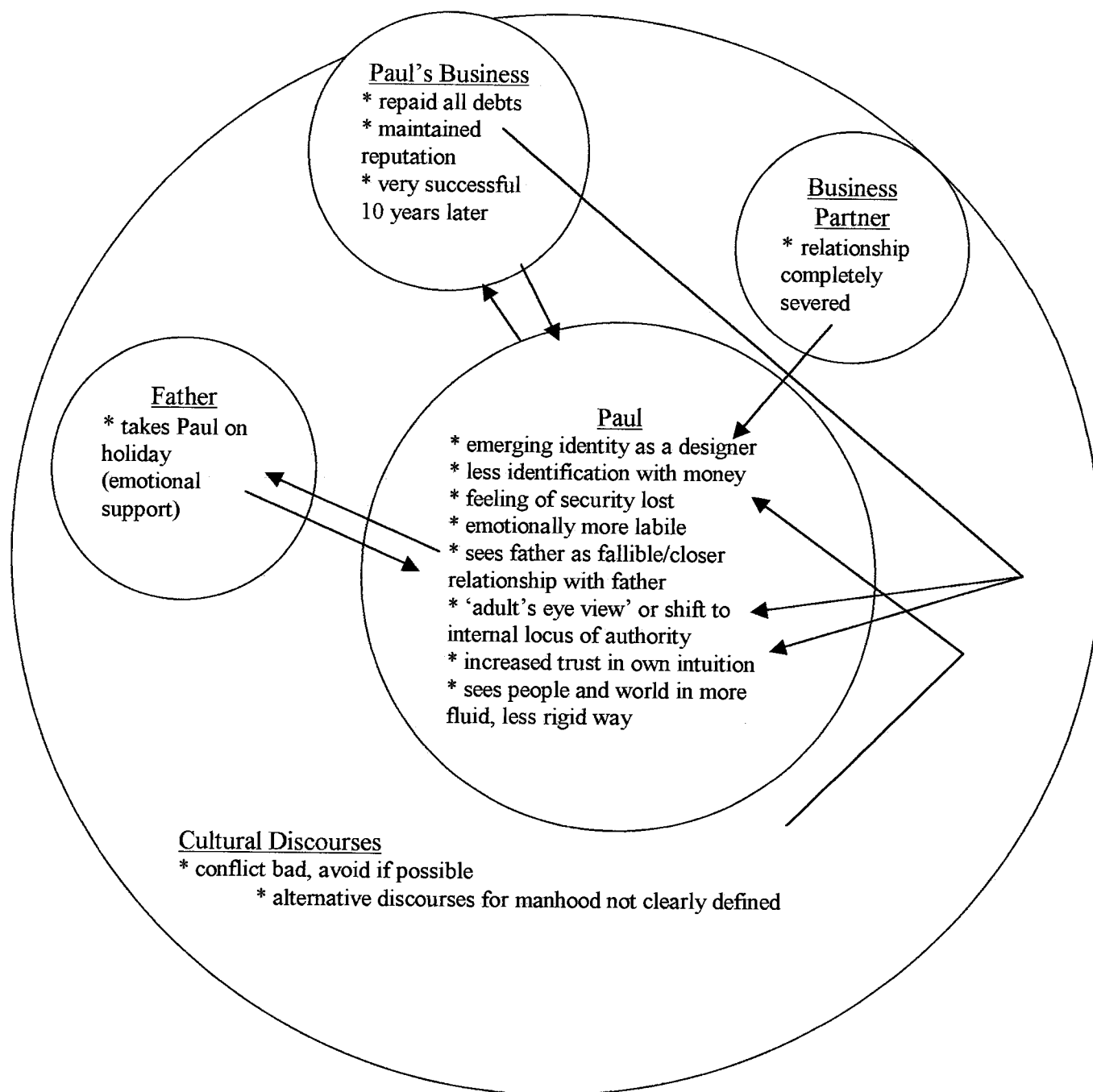
Appendix C

Changes Associated with Conflict for Paul

Pre-crisis, Paul



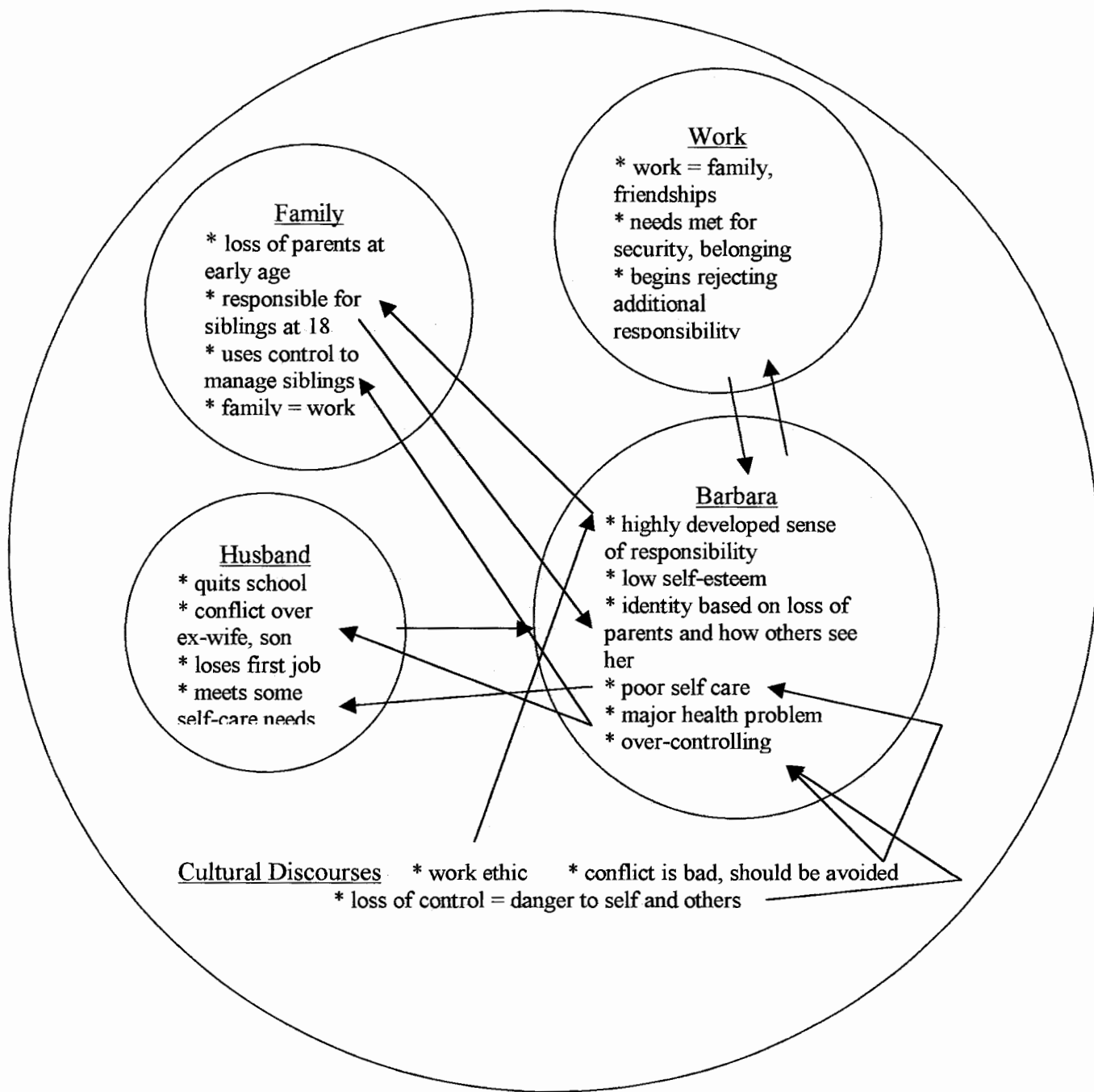
Crisis, Paul

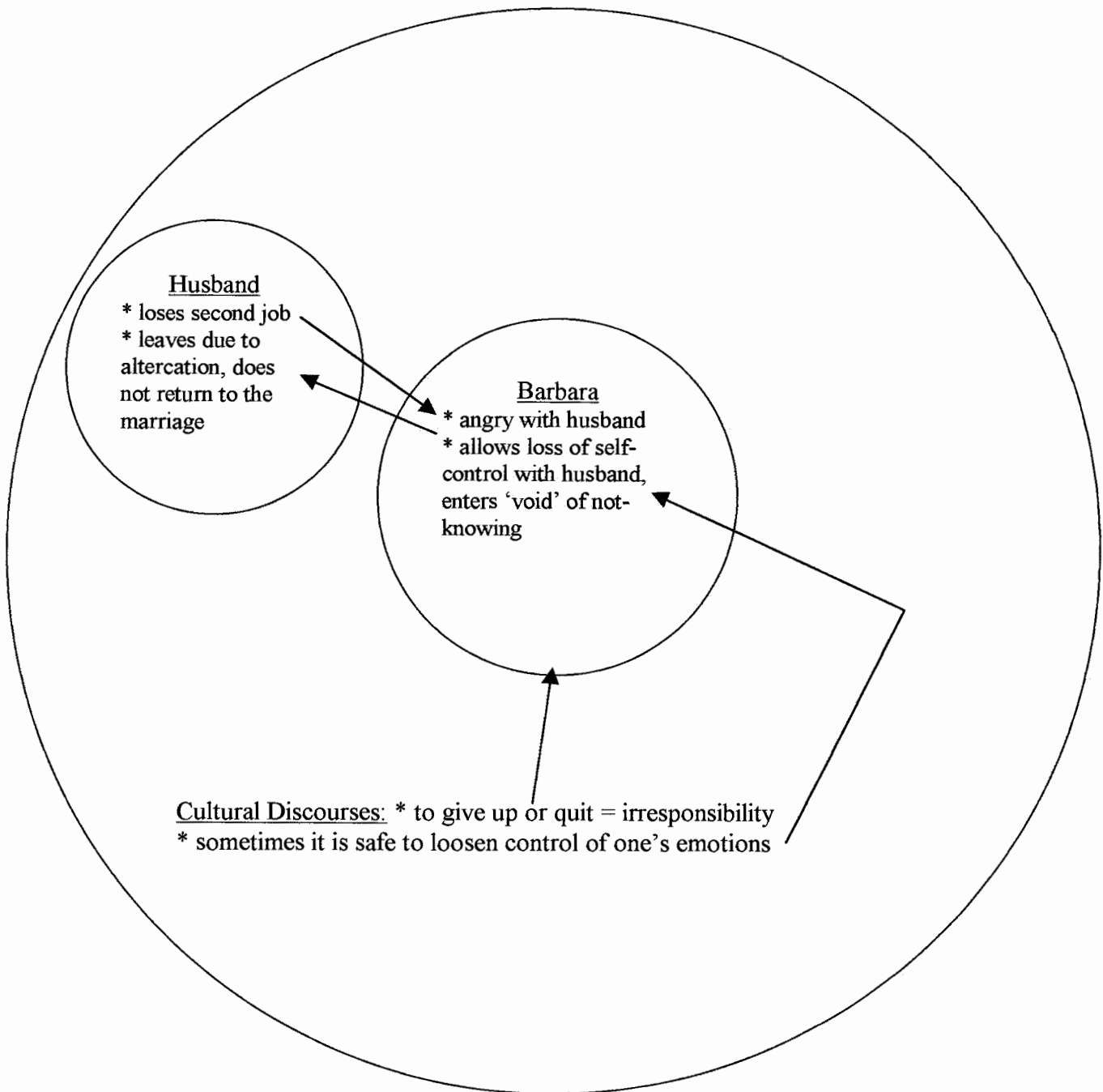
Post-crisis, Paul

Appendix D

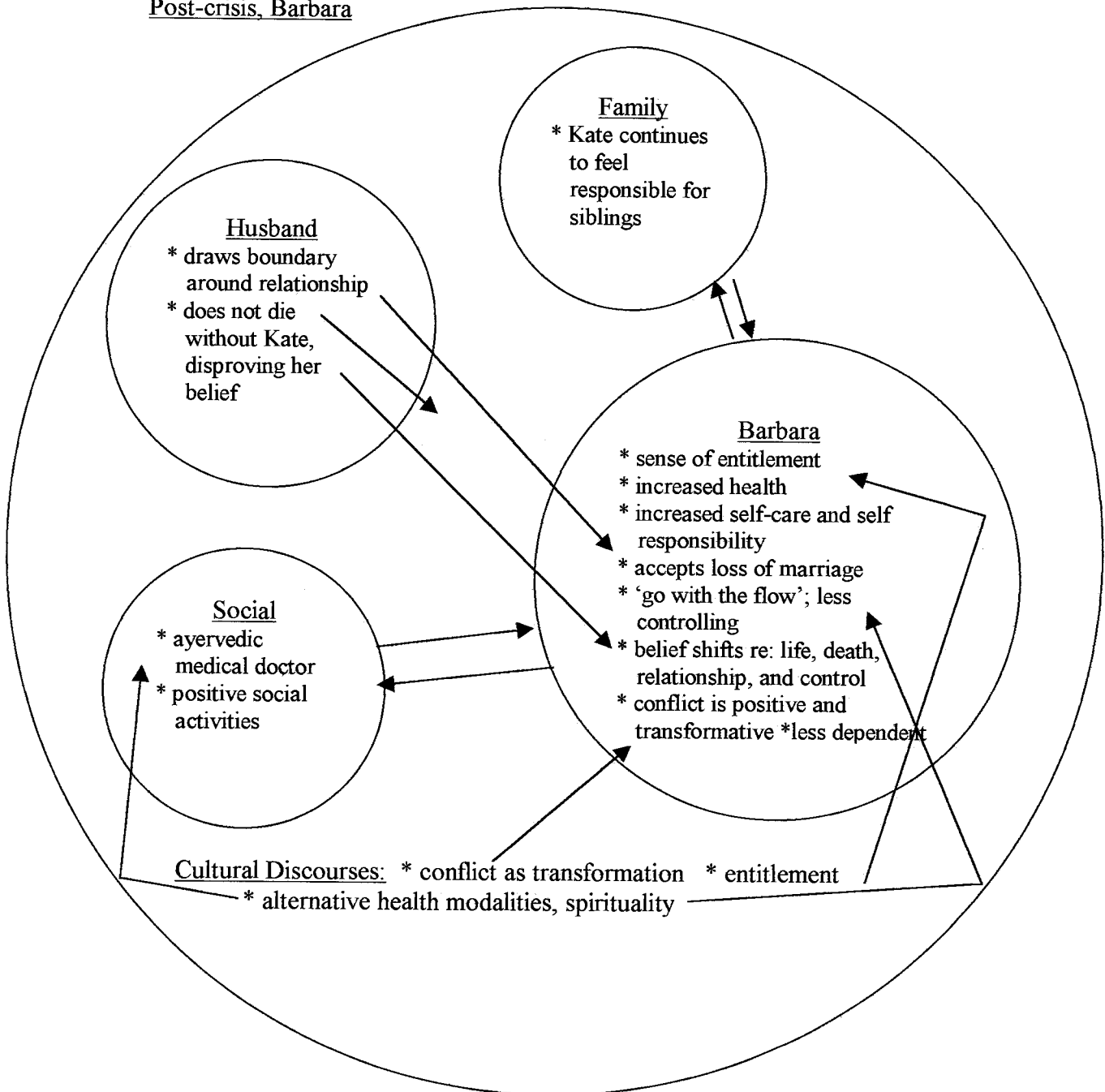
Changes Associated with Conflict for Barbara

Pre-crisis, Barbara



Crisis, Barbara

Post-crisis, Barbara



Husband
 * draws boundary around relationship
 * does not die without Kate, disproving her belief

Family
 * Kate continues to feel responsible for siblings

Social
 * ayurvedic medical doctor
 * positive social activities

Barbara
 * sense of entitlement
 * increased health
 * increased self-care and self-responsibility
 * accepts loss of marriage
 * 'go with the flow'; less controlling
 * belief shifts re: life, death, relationship, and control
 * conflict is positive and transformative *less dependent

Cultural Discourses: * conflict as transformation * entitlement
 * alternative health modalities, spirituality