

# Relationship Conflict as Disorienting Dilemma: An Experiential Prototype for Transformation

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## Abstract

*This paper applies Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (2000) to the experience of relationship conflict—characterized here as a disorienting dilemma. We do so in order to facilitate the integration of theoretical knowledge with personal experience that such an application affords. We propose that the resultant procedural framework will more likely be employed to resolve future disorienting dilemmas. We chose relationship conflict as our prototype for two reasons. Firstly, it is virtually a universal experience and as such can serve as a common reference point. Secondly, the emotions aroused during such conflicts approach the same intensity level as those reported for major crises such as bankruptcy, debilitating illness or injury, unemployment, and divorce. Like relationship conflict these dilemmas disrupt and disorient because the challenge they present overwhelm the effected person's conceptual framework. Being faced with the threat of chaos they may begin a search for more encompassing premises. We introduce and employ the concepts of ontological security, edge emotions, and boundary confusion in order to explicate the affective forces and cognitive errors that make such conflicts so distressing. Essentially, two sources of ontological security are pitted against each other: the attachment to a significant other is opposed to the attachment to one's foundational premises. The need to belong is pitted against the need to defend one's meanings. Framed this way, loss is inevitable—unless one develops a premise which transcends that conflict. We conclude with some pedagogical implications.*

*Keywords:* disorienting dilemma, transformative learning, ontological security, boundary confusion

## Introduction

This paper attempts to show how everyday conflicts, or micro-disorienting dilemmas can be utilized to generate transformative learning. By “everyday conflict” we are referring to—those clashes of opinion between significant others which produce discomfort and distress but often leave the meaning framework of each party unchanged. We offer a framework for understanding such incidents that would make perspective transformation a more likely outcome. We also suspect that repeated application of this framework to such conflicts would reduce the necessity for major crises as a precipitating condition for transformation. In order to theorize

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everyday conflicts, we employ Mezirow's (1981; 1991; 2000; 2009) transformative learning theory (TL), as well as more recent elaborations that introduce notions of ontological security (Mälkki & Green, 2014; 2016), edge-emotions (Mälkki, 2010; 2011), and Mahler's (1985) earlier work on the development of psychological boundaries. With the help of these conceptual tools, the paper analyzes the micro-processes of relationship conflict. Having outlined these processes, we then refer our discussion back to educational settings to reveal how this acquired knowledge can be employed pedagogically.

Although relationship conflict is not the typical case represented in the transformative learning literature, it is one that is encountered in most everyone's life—whether it is with one's significant other, a family member or colleague. Because such is the case, students will be able to refer to their own lived experience. This reference point enables them to apprehend the existential matrix from which the theory is abstracted. When that occurs, they will more easily integrate theoretical knowledge with personal experience. Having realized such an integration on one occasion, they will be more prepared to generalize this process to other future disorienting dilemmas (see also Mezirow, 1991). Such repeated experiences begin to problematize the notion that the self is essentially a stable, once and for all, achievement in favour of a model of a dynamic self that requires ongoing construction and maintenance. As Kegan (1983, p. 12) puts it, we are meaning-making creatures. “That activity is experienced by a dynamically maintained ‘self,’ the rhythms and labors of the struggle to make meaning, to have meaning, to protect meaning, to lose meaning, and to lose the Self along the way.” If we educators are to be effective midwives of this process then we need to be able to attune to the learner's ongoing existential and epistemic activity. This meaning-making and meaning-protecting activity is the process we will be exploring as we examine how it manifests during relationship conflict.

Before continuing, let us acknowledge that the cultivation of reflection and critical thinking is central in the theory of transformative learning theory. Both serve the purpose of deconstructing culturally derived assumptions that may no longer serve the individual (see Brookfield, 1994). The aim of such practices is to remove the constraints on the creative freedom necessary for constructing more adequate premises. It is a freedom *from* limiting beliefs, rather than a prescription *for* specific, replacement assumptions (see e.g. Mälkki & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012). That is, it is up to the individual to develop their own premises as they move through, and emerge from, their liminal experience (see also Green, 2012; Timmermans, 2010; Solnit, 2006). Hopefully they emerge with a more inclusive meaning perspective (Mezirow, 2000). That is, they will have developed a set of assumptions that can be effectively applied to a wider range of circumstances. This wider range implies that the transformative process is not only about resolving the present crisis, but is also future oriented. When further disorienting dilemmas occur, the current resolution is available as a resource that can be applied to the emergent dilemma. Having experienced a greater sense of efficacy as a result, one would expect that the person would, over time, become more willing to subject their governing assumptions to critical reflection. From this perspective, working through relationship conflict could be utilized as a template for other disorienting dilemmas that the student is likely to encounter during his or her education. For example, the acquisition of “threshold concepts” for any academic discipline or profession (Timmermans, 2010) would be one such outcome where these procedures could be applied.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Mezirow's (1981; 1991; 2000; 2009) transformative learning theory focuses primarily on major disruptive events that initiate a process of metamorphosis. Loss of employment, divorce, death, bankruptcy, returning to civilian life are all examples of Mezirow's (1991, 2000) disorienting dilemmas. They present a crisis that exceeds the capacity of the person's cognitive framework to render them intelligible. As a result, one is not able to go on one's life and one feels oneself plunged into non-sense or chaos. The extreme discomfort that such crises elicit can motivate a process to develop a more encompassing meaning perspective. This is how the transformative process begins (see Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow chose to focus his theoretical research on *major* "disorienting dilemmas." Doing so produced clear concepts which were foregrounded or made explicit relative to the tacit background of everyday existence. In this paper, however, we focus on the transformative potential of relationship conflict, as embodying many of the same forces as those unleashed by major crises. Just as reflection and critical thinking are necessary procedures for transformative learning, they can also be profitably applied to the clashes and conflicts of everyday life. However, as research indicates (see Taylor, 2007; Mälkki 2011), reflection is neither easy nor automatic. In other words, even when the results that our assumptions produce fail to satisfy, they do not *force* us to reflect on them. To repeat: reflection is an ideal and not an automatic response to problematized assumptions (Mälkki, 2010). We believe that Mezirow's theory neglects or overlooks the *existential* turning point upon which reflection and critical thinking depend (Mälkki, 2010; Mälkki & Green, 2014). Our quest in this paper is to develop an understanding on which to base a pedagogical approach that would *encourage* the individual to choose critical thinking over assimilation. It takes courage to question one's assumptions—to take up the challenge to author one's life. We are invited to be explorers of an unknown territory. Some confidence can be had if we have access to a rudimentary map of the process involved. Mezirow sketches out the major stages in that sequence. However, we suggest that his theory lacks sensitivity to, or awareness of, the subtle, experiential processes that, taken together, generate the larger processes that he does name. In what follows, we articulate those subtle processes through a phenomenological investigation and description of conflicts occurring in everyday life. We believe that such an enhanced map would give the transforming individual the confidence to continue their personal exploration.

Although the literature on transformative learning names bankruptcy, unemployment, return to civilian life, and divorce as characteristic disorienting dilemmas, we believe that relationship conflict can be viewed as a rehearsal for such processes. Indeed, we think that such dramatic shifts are not inevitable if we learn to make the ongoing opportunities for correction that daily life offers. For example, when we understand that relationship conflict includes within it the *potential* to disrupt or even destroy an individual's preferred life narrative, we can respond in one of two ways: we can impulsively say or act in ways that are damaging to the relationship or we can utilize TL theory to critically examine the inadequate assumptions that are generating the relationship tension. Therefore, in the following, we will offer further theoretical elaborations that deal specifically with the interactions between the meaning perspectives that are being contested.

Let us begin these elaborations with the concept of *ontological security*. This term refers to the existential aspect of the transformative process (Mälkki & Green, 2014; 2017). While the term is not used by Mezirow himself, his writings imply its significance, "[a] defining condition of being human is our urgent need to understand and order the meaning of our experience, to integrate it with what we know, in order to avoid the threat of chaos" (Mezirow, 2000). That

“urgent need” is the engine that drives the TL process. We find ourselves scrambling to give form to the chaos of unprocessed experience. However, Mezirow’s quotation is deceptively simple and benefits from an unpacking. A closer examination reveals a structural model of a dialectical relationship between two levels of human existence: experience and meaning (Mälkki & Green 2017). Here we are appropriating Gendlin’s (1997) claim that meaning gives conceptual form to our inchoate experience. Once given form, this fresh meaning can potentially be integrated with what we already know. And further, we can employ that meaning to communicate with others regarding our condition and intentions. The result is enhanced ontological security as one’s meanings arise from, and are integrated with our bodily experience (Mälkki & Green, 2017).

The “ordering” of experience, that Mezirow refers to, can be reframed as equivalent to establishing and naming conceptual guidelines that take the “if..., then...” form. For example, “*If I cry, then mommy will come and sooth me*”; “*if it’s raining, then I should take an umbrella*”; “*If my partner lies to me, then I should stop granting my trust*”; “*If I like my community, then I should support local business*”; “*If I believe the world is becoming more dangerous, then I should become active in a political party that works for non-aggression*”, etc.

Two things can be said about the foregoing list of conceptual “rules.” Firstly, those exemplary premises are loosely arranged from the most particular to the most general. Such is also the developmental path from infancy to adulthood (Kegan, 1983). That is, with the accumulation of processed experience, our premises become more encompassing. Consequently, they can be applied in a way that brings order to a wider range, of seemingly disparate experiences. For example, once one grasps the psychological notion of projection, then that can be applied to developing a deeper understanding of one of the roots of relationship conflict. Another way to understand meanings or premises is through the metaphor of “connecting the dots”—an attempt to identify patterns. Once identified, those patterns can be the means to augment our efficacy and autonomy. If we can predict what is going to happen, our sense of control is enhanced—the threat of chaos is calmed<sup>1</sup>. And this, in turn, produces an enhanced sense of ontological security (Mälkki & Green, 2014; 2017). We feel a sense of well-being...that we are OK, and the world is a good place. Giddens (1991) offered a complementary definition of ontological security as a sense of order and continuity regarding an individual's experiences. He argues that it is reliant on people's *faith in the stability of their meanings*. When an event occurs that destabilizes their existent meaning perspective, it will undermine their ontological security. The parallels with Mezirow’s thought are obvious. Reliable meanings equal ontological security.

Let us deepen our understanding of these phenomena by employing a developmental lens. From that perspective, the roots of ontological security are initially established through attachment to our caregiver. We know, without “knowing” conceptually, that without the nurturance and love that our caregivers offer, we will surely perish. Our bonding is a matter of life and death (Mahler, 1985, Bowlby, 1988). Eventually, because we find this dependency on another to be uncertain or insecure, we begin to strive for autonomy. That is, we begin to develop behavioral schemes, and later, conceptual meanings that permit us to take care of ourselves. Gradually, our meanings begin to augment attachment, with both contributing to ontological

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<sup>1</sup> The attraction of conspiracy theories is that they do connect dots resulting in a coherent worldview that is not necessarily true.

security. That is, meaning schemes not only provide us with a conceptual understanding of the world (as Mezirow's emphasis on rationality implied), but they also serve a more fundamental affective need: maintaining one's sense of ontological security (Mälkki & Green, 2017). This discloses why individuals cling to their meanings even when they suspect that they might be inadequate. They attach to these meanings for the same reason that they clung to their caregivers as infants and toddlers. These *attachments* make up the emotional substrate that has to be taken into account when supporting people during their transformative process. Toward that end we will engage in a closer examination of the theoretical aspects of reflection and their relation to the "edge-emotions."

Comfort zone and edge-emotions are concepts that represent recent developments in the theory of transformative learning. These concepts were developed by Mälkki (2010; 2011) in order to explicate the challenges and prerequisites for actualizing critical reflection. Through this process we hope to account for the perceived difficulties of translating the theoretical ideals of TL into practice.

One's *comfort zone* (Mälkki 2010; 2011) refers to the affective dimension of one's meaning perspective. We experience pleasantness and comfort as we carry on with our lives and interpret events, our social relations and ourselves unproblematically—according to our established meaning perspectives. The world appears as understandable, and consequently we have confidence in our ability to survive. Although we may be aware of the possibility of multiple, alternate, interpretations, we are grounded in our own sense of coherence and continuity as we apprehend the world via our expectations and previous understandings.

*Edge-emotions* (Mälkki, 2010; 2011) refer to the unpleasant emotions (such as fear, anxiety, shame, guilt, frustration) that appear when our meaning perspectives are challenged. Some conditions that produce edge-emotions include: when we are unable to utilize previous experience to understand our current situation; when our values, assumptions, or cherished viewpoints become questioned by others; and when our interpretation of that situation carries with it the risk of social exclusion and isolation. These unpleasant emotions have an existential basis as they basically work to preserve our sense of continuity and equilibrium, thereby, maintaining a stable identity and a consistent worldview (Mälkki, 2011). Generally, emotions work in favour of survival by informing us as to whether our external environment is safe or dangerous, and, when the latter is the case, mobilizing us for action (Damasio, 1999). Similarly, the edge-emotions alert us to the potential threat to the adequacy of our psychic organization or meaning perspectives (Mälkki 2010; 2011). In the first case, it is our biological survival that is at risk, and in the second, it is the viability of our ego. When the latter is the case, we often have a natural tendency to avoid dealing with the issues that challenge our premises. We accomplish this by interpreting the situation in a way that confirms, rather than invalidates our assumptions. For example, we may blame the other for the situation. In contrast to that tendency, we suggest that these same edge-emotions, when reframed, can be used to access, then inspect, the problematized assumptions. That is, we can learn to embrace the edge-emotions, to accept them as a source of significant information—as opposed to considering them shameful, because they've revealed gaps and contradictions in our conceptual framework. Rather, we can come to appreciate them *because* they allow us to identify those flaws. The edge-emotions can, in fact, be seen as the path toward more rational thinking: When we are able to embrace, feel and live through the unpleasant edge-emotions, the resistance to reflection that they provoke can be transcended. (Mälkki, 2010; 2011.)

Finally, transformation is a restructuring of a person's way of being in the world. Not only does it change one's understanding of the self, but it also changes one's beliefs about the world (Mezirow, 1991; Kegan, 1994; Taylor, 2007). That structuring process is governed (at least initially) by the ongoing recalibration of the boundary between Self and Not-Self (or world). The border that divides what is "me" from what is "not me" is not fixed and permanent but rather evolves over time (Mahler, 1985). In addition, the position of that structuring boundary isn't so much a matter of conscious, rational deliberation as it is a developmental achievement. At each stage, one's behavior is generated by a boundary assumption that signifies one's developmental level. Initially, for example, in childhood we experience the world as revolving around us. Only after achieving a boundary do we realize that much of world is "mind independent." At different stages of life, one's boundary gets redrawn. As infants, we act as if "mommy and I are one person." Ideally, by the age of three, according to Mahler (1985), we have achieved the beginning of a separate identity. But this struggle with regard to positioning the boundary is far from over. As we shall see later, romantic attachment often is an attempt to erase that demarcating boundary between Self and other—to achieve a state of perfect union. Only after repeated disappointments do some individuals turn to critical reflection as a preparatory step for redrawing that boundary. One of the first author's clients made that explicit when he stated, "I've re-drawn my circle of care to include my wife but not my in-laws."

### **From Theory to Praxis**

In the following we use the above concepts to analyze the case of a relationship conflict. This analysis explicates the dynamics of the transformative potential of everyday encounters. We will consider various iterations of the phenomenon of relationship conflict. Iterations are not mere repetitions, but rather a cyclic process of inquiry with each cycle revealing another aspect of the phenomena. The more accurate this built up or sedimented description, the more likely the reader will be engaged. An engaged reader is more likely to internalize or integrate the process as a form of practical wisdom. Whereas theory engages the mind, narrative is more likely to engage the existential self. In this way, we intend to bring the ontological aspects of the transformative process to the fore besides the more often considered epistemological aspects.

Most often relationship conflict involves an incongruence between one's prereflective expectations for the other and their actual personhood and behavior. Phenomenologically, this is experienced (at least initially) as "you've upset me," or "I'm upset and you're the cause", or "I blame you for not living up to my expectations!", or, "you, and not my meaning perspective, is the source of my distress." In the foregoing series, we've gone through various ways, from very simple to more complex, that the distressed person is construing the incident. What they all have in common, however, is that they attribute the cause of the problem to the other. However, one's partner is unlikely to accept that attribution, and thus we have the potential for relationship conflict and a disorienting dilemma. By definition, in such cases, the parties' existent meaning perspectives are *incapable* of producing an outcome that would resolve the conflict. Ideally, they would interpret the situation "rationally" and objectively as a conflict between two sets of meaning perspectives. Framed this way, the conflict could then be seen as a source of motivation to search for possible resolution. However, in actuality, we often tend to experience the situation as if the possibility of resolution is being blocked...by the other. That is, the relationship has moved from harmonious and pleasant to one of frustration and distress.

We may unpack this situation further from the perspective of boundary confusion. Earlier we stated that we continually redraw the boundary between what is my Self (me) and what is not (Mahler, 1985). To get a sense of the far-reaching consequences of where that line is drawn, consider what happens when one experiences one's partner or child to be an extension of one's self—when a defining and separating boundary has not been established. In such a case, it would be the most “natural” thing in the world to attempt to control one's partner or child in the same manner as one attempts to control one's self. This imperative would certainly have relationship consequences. Attempts at independence by the partner or child would often be interpreted as defiance or disobedience. From a psychological perspective, the first party's way of understanding appears to be generated by the premise: “I hold *you* [the other] responsible for *my* expectations.” That is to say, “*It is your behavior and not my assumptions that call for critical thinking.*” If we manage to find “evidence” for our discomfort in the other's behavior, we preempt the need to critically examine our perspective. This is an inevitable result of boundary confusion. It's not hard to see how such a premise will inevitably produce a disorienting dilemma vis-à-vis relationship conflict.

The first author uses the following narrative to communicate the above abstractions to various audiences including grad students, conference attendees and couples in conflict. Relationships, if they are to persist, evolve through two, radically different premises: communion and communication. During the initial phase, communion is the objective. During the courtship, a secret conversation is taking place along the lines of: “It's a real drag being alone! Why don't you and I get together and be one person? And...that one person will be me...OK?” [This never fails to illicit a laughter of recognition.]

Of course, this conversation has to be covert—its expression would reveal its absurdity. So, keeping their wishes private, the two parties join together in an initial, blissful union. They can finish each other's sentences, read each other's minds. They have become a kind of composite creature—like a dog with a tail. The party who gives up most of their autonomy becomes the tail. The one who doesn't, is the dog. The dog's confidence and power increases as a result of their partner's sacrifice. The tail, on the other hand, becomes weaker and weaker, more and more *indecisive*. Finally, it has had enough, “I want to be a dog too!” It jumps off the dog, reclaiming its personhood—independent, no longer compliant. As a result of this separation, the first dog, once again, experiences the vulnerability that it had thought it had left behind. This is a turning point for their union: it can dissolve through divorce or the second phase of relationship can begin. In that phase, *communication* replaces mindreading as the preferred mode of coordinating their worlds. Their interactions are based on the assumption that they are two unique individuals who must express their needs and desires if there is to be any chance of getting them met.

This all sounds neat and tidy but there is grief involved in giving up the fantasy of perfect fusion. Grief that is accepted and worked through, is the prerequisite for establishing healthy boundaries. Grief denied means continuing frustration. Transitioning between these two phases is difficult because the parties have lost the ground of their initial premise—they have been disillusioned. (We hyphenate that word to reveal its original meaning.) The construction of a new, more effective relationship premise requires confidence and courage, as well as support from others.

Let us deepen our understanding of the boundary phenomenon by asking how it might work in a collectivist culture. In such cultures, there may be no boundary demarking individuals from the collective, such that one family member's behavior is interpreted as the whole family's responsibility. For example, when one member violates a tradition, the perceived taint is on the family's reputation. This underwrites the punishment delivered. Thus, the assumptions that comprise the family's collective comfort zone (Mälkki, 2010; 2011) may be internalized as the inviolate standard for each member. In a more individualistic culture, as in the West, there are still remnants of this kind of boundary confusion. This will most likely occur in an intimate relationship. There, a partner's non-alignment with one's assumptions is often taken as evidence of his or her moral culpability. These examples, drawn from both collectivist cultures and from intimate relationships, make it clear that such embodied premises orient or call forth behavioral reactions. A challenge to those foundational beliefs, therefore, provokes an intense reaction—the “offended” party knows that something vital has happened but doesn't know how to respond. There appears to be no acceptable script and the individual is thrown into chaos. Verbal abuse or physical violence is often the result. The forces unleashed by this disorienting dilemma reveal why transformative learning is the exception rather than the rule. Few people have the resources to move through the ontological upheavals engendered. If they are fortunate enough to have a teacher, professor, life coach or therapist that understands the process, their chances are increased considerably.

### **Personal Identity Anchored by Meaning Perspective**

Our “urgent need to understand our experience” (Mezirow, 2000; Mälkki & Green, 2017) can also be understood as a need for intelligibility. We want to *know* why we do what we do. That is, we want to codify our experience into concepts that allow us to navigate intentionally. Here again we have two levels: experience, which is sub-verbal and meaning which is a linguistic codification or mapping of that experience. When we *identify* our selfhood with the resultant map, an eruption of unprocessed experience is experienced as the threat of chaos. An adequate map, on the other hand, seemingly “guarantees” our continuity. That is, intelligibility enhances survival. The life force, or the will to survive, is primary and acquiring reliable knowledge, meaning, or concepts are the means to that most important of ends. We attach to those meanings as they function like life preservers keeping one afloat in the flux of experience...providing a kind of stability within that flux (see Mälkki & Green, 2017). Before we develop and attach to those meanings, however, we attach to caregivers. We are utterly dependent on their care for our survival. In summary, both caring relationships and reliable meanings are in the service guaranteeing our ongoing existence.

As a consequence, relationship conflict represents itself as a disorienting dilemma. We attach to our partner and expect them to be a stable source of belonging. Similarly, we attach to our meanings as a reliable map for insuring our ongoing survival. When we are in relationship conflict, both those attachments are threatened, and one's sense of ontological security (Mälkki & Green, 2017) faces a double threat. On the one hand, we risk losing our attachment to the person we love and a caring relationship is put in jeopardy—it might be severed. And, on the other, we risk having the meaning that we were struggling to assert, invalidated. If we sacrifice our meanings for the sake of preserving the relationship, our dependency on that relationship is amplified to compensate for loss of meaning. That is, we surrender our autonomy and adopt

someone else's meanings, in an effort to retain our relationship attachment. In contrast, if we sacrifice our relationship in favour of our hard-won meanings, then those meanings can become closed or rigid in order to compensate for the loss of belonging. Because the relationship support is being threatened or undermined, both parties tend to insist on the meanings that each is advocating. Such uncompromising insistence further threatens the relationship. It seems like either way some loss of ontological security is entailed. No wonder the conflict can become so intense. That intensity is the spur that drives a transformative process whose end is a premise that reconciles the need to be both authentic and in relationship. This happy solution is only achieved when both parties recognize that, while there may be only one reality, there are multiple, valid perspectives on the issue being contested.

### **Accepting Rather than Suppressing Edge-Emotions: News from Reality**

Above, we have illustrated the way the relationship conflict presents itself as an everyday disorienting dilemma, where our initial response to edge-emotions is not to reflect and transform, but rather to fight for our right to remain in the comfort zone. In the following, we consider what it would take to transcend these tendencies and to actually utilize the potential for micro-transformations that these instances involve. Toward that end, we offer the following illustrative narrative:

A psychiatrist with whom the first author worked conducted a training day for the staff which began with the following question: "Have you noticed that couples who have lived together successfully begin to be conflictual after they get married?" There was wide spread head nodding. "Would you like to know why that happens?", he continued. Again, more head nodding. He answered as follows: "We all have a dormant fantasy of the kind of person we will marry." That fantasy is activated once the relationship is formalized through marriage. Once activated, that previously dormant template becomes the standard by which one's partner is compared and criticized. Whereas, before they were good enough; now, they can't measure up. The resultant relationship difficulties are attributed to the other. Or, to put it in everyday language, "Somebody is crazy here, and I'm pretty sure it's not me." This "diagnosis" is a means to situate chaos outside of oneself. In such a case, a disorienting dilemma has occurred but it doesn't, of necessity, lead to transformation.

What are the conditions that might favor critical self-reflection rather than faultfinding? One such condition is the dissolution of the marriage followed up some time later with a second marriage. When this second attempt gradually begins to resemble the first, an opportunity for critical, reflective thinking is more likely. It is the "sameness" across different relationship contexts that raises the possibility that one's behavior is, in some unrecognizable way, contributing to the relationship conflict. Being implicated in the creation of this recurring pattern, the person may begin to look at the beliefs, meanings or premises that might be generating that pattern. For example, they may discover a belief that their partner is an extension of their self as in, "you and I have achieved a state of perfect fusion—I can finish your sentences and you can finish mine." Tracing out the logic of this initial premise, one comes to realize its inevitable consequence: "When you do something that is different than what I would expect, you ruin everything." Going one step further, I may come to see that I might try to prevent this unpleasant outcome by coercing compliance. However, with a little reflection, I can recognize that I chafe at my partner's attempts to do the same to me. I resist having my autonomy and agency drained off

into compliance. Again, this presents a disorienting dilemma: “How can I justify getting my own way when I strenuously resist my partner’s desire to do the same?”

Once premises have been explicitly articulated in this manner it becomes possible to think critically about them. In addition, once given a cognitive form, it becomes possible to track the consequences and contradictions that such premises produce. One is then motivated to begin a search for alternative premises that might make more satisfying outcomes possible—perhaps a premise that integrates the need for autonomy with the need to belong—something like an, “I’m OK; you’re OK” disposition.

We’ve condensed a whole complex process of two marriages into a beginning and end, giving scant attention to the micro-processes that occur within either. Let us correct this omission. We suggest that valorizing, rather than repudiating, one’s edge-emotions during relationship conflict might make a major crisis, such as divorce unnecessary. In what follows we will present a description of such a process. This evocative description is intended to remind the reader of their own experience of relationship challenges. Hopefully, they will be able to apply the framework articulated here as a model for articulating their own.

To begin: a conflict with one’s partner can be used as a marker for one’s felt, but unrecognized, internal conflict. It is the successful resolution of this internal conflict that will signal that transformation has been achieved. Initially, this internal conflict is experienced as a somatic tension that lacks cognitive content. Rather, one’s embodied experience is a confusing mixture of unpleasant edge-emotions such as anxiety, frustration, sadness, disappointment and distress. Whatever cognitive powers are available are usually focused on the external conflict: marshalling arguments, preparing defenses, etc. (Mälkki, 2011). Thus, our cognitive capabilities are not employed for critically examining our interpretation of the situation but rather to promote defensive action—in a manner analogous to our response to physical danger (Mälkki 2010; 2011). Underneath this flurry of justifying activity an internal conflict is also occurring. That conflict is still inchoate...not yet formulated conceptually. Ideally, when the external argument is abated or suspended, then either or both parties have the opportunity to turn their attention inward. This turn to reflexivity is a necessary precursor for giving form to the internal conflict. This might take the form: “How can I be both angry and in love with the same person?” To experience and name such ambivalence is an improvement over the more global descriptor of disorientation, disorganization, or chaos. It is a more workable expression of the discomfort. One can re-orient by addressing both aspects of the ambivalence separately. “What specifically am I angry about?” And, “How can I express my distress in a manner that doesn’t damage my loved one?”

However, the above iteration doesn’t do justice to the most difficult aspect of this process: the experience of chaos that has yet to be given a conceptual form. One has been thrown into a quandary by an unexpected disagreement. Because there are two, conflicting response potentials (love and anger), the distress is experienced as noise, not signal—chaos not cosmos. The chaos may be felt as if one has fallen through the false bottom of one’s expectations into some formless helplessness, into some kind of existential noise. As an expression of instinctual resistance and self-preservation, one can lash out, only making matters worse. Over time, one suffers and then recognizes the consequences of such indulgence. Self-control is cultivated as one struggles to master these hostile impulses. Toward that end, many individuals attempt to minimize the damage by turning away or withdrawing from the fray. Yet, the unpleasant emotion

continues to be stoked by the discrepancy between what one wanted and expected and what one actually received. One's attention is absorbed either by trying to control one's responses or collecting evidence to justify one's reactions. No reflection going on here.

In either case, cognitive tools are being employed, yet suffering continues. This suggests that cognitive strategies alone may not be the best way to move forward. Rather than managing or suppressing these disturbing feelings, we suggest that they should be accepted and valued (Mälkki, 2010; 2011). The following aphorism supports that claim: "You should feel grateful whenever you are disappointed or frustrated because it means that you are getting news from reality." The implicit wisdom in this aphorism is that one's emotions are pointing to the discrepancy between what one expected and what actually occurred. That is, the emotions are not some extraneous interference, but rather a more immediate (although difficult to interpret), registration of the reality of one's situation. When we try to control and avoid these alarming emotions, we block access to a source of information that might help us to resolve the dilemma. On the other hand, by "feeling grateful," we stop trying to control those emotions. In any case, they prevail despite our attempts at erasure—now without conscious awareness but as somatic distress. Our unsuccessful attempt to control the uncontrollable reveals the limited powers of our willfulness resulting in greater, not lesser, insecurity (Mälkki & Green, 2017). Such attempts tether our cognitive resources to an impossible mission—like a dog chasing, but never grasping, its own tail. In contrast, acceptance of the emotions enables a more realistic apprehension of the situation.

Furthermore, the aphorism is valuable because it identifies and separates two domains which formerly had been conflated: the domain of assumption from the domain of the event. Firstly, emotional arousal is a somatic response to a challenge presented by an event. It can be used to direct our attention toward the event in an effort to collect more significant information. Simultaneously, it raises the question, "Are one's operating assumptions adequate to that challenge?" When taken up in that manner, those emotions can be employed as signs that could direct our attention toward assumptions that had been operating in the background. For example, "When it comes to vacations, my partner and I *should* be on the same page." Such an assumption can now be subjected to critical scrutiny. "Just because my partner prefers museums and galleries whereas I like hiking and swimming doesn't presuppose that something is wrong with our relationship." This is the moment of negative capability—the moment when one realizes that things could be otherwise than previously construed. The "shoulds" that one has been laboring under are not absolute laws but rather provisional, and, therefore, modifiable orientations. Secondly, now that one's assumptions have been identified and made provisional, one can turn to the "news from reality"—to perceptions that haven't been prepackaged into familiar but inadequate meanings. This fresh "news" can be employed as a potential basis for constructing a more effective meaning framework. For example, if one turns and engages (even if only visually) with one's actual partner—that is, if one allows oneself to "receive" them—then one discovers that the "other" is different than that negative internal image that is being nursed. In other words, one sees more of the actuality of the other person juxtaposed alongside the internal image that one has been priming. They're both present and, being so, can be compared and their differences revealed. Whereas, formerly this gap was an occasion for disappointment or frustration, it now can be employed consciously and positively to learn about aspects of one's partner that had been previously obscured.

One is now at an existential turning point: do I revise my assumptions, giving up some troublesome ones such as “If you really loved me, I wouldn’t have to ask you to do X because you would know what I wanted?” Or, do I share this fresh experience of my partner in such a way that the whole situation can be carried forward—no longer “locked in” to our habitual interactive pattern. Feeling freshly recognized, one’s partner is more likely to respond in kind. Choosing the latter could be the occasion for one’s trial learning. This claim is based on the notion that anything which results in a reduction of one’s anxiety can have a structuring effect on the psyche. That is, the new response can become a premise that operates without conscious willing—based on the neuroscience dictum that what fires together wires together. Concretely, if the individual experiences a better outcome through stating their needs clearly rather than assuming that their partner is a mind-reader, then one is more likely to try communication on the next occasion. In this manner, a disorienting dilemma that has been successfully integrated through the adoption of a more inclusive premise will become part of one’s automatic response set. A more modest claim would be that this pattern would need to be consciously enacted a number of times before it becomes one’s default orientation.

In summary, we have discussed how to employ emotional reactions as the means toward identifying one’s assumptions. Giving them conceptual form is a necessary precursor that enables a critical evaluation of their adequacy. That is, one has to *know* that one has been engaging in “mind-reading” before one can question its efficacy. This process is more difficult than it sounds because one’s ontological security is dependent, in part, on our *attachment* to those operating assumptions and premises. Separating identity from those premises means loosening, even dissolving, that attachment—throwing one into a liminal state—betwixt and between two differing sets of orienting assumptions: those that are being shed and those that have yet to be fully formed. We employed the example of relationship conflict as a prototype of that process. We did so because such conflicts produce intense emotions because of the seemingly irreconcilable conflict between the need to belong and the need to be autonomous. The only way “out” requires the construction of a new premise that doesn’t set these primal needs in opposition.

### **Educator as Midwife**

Keeping the above considerations in mind, we wonder about their pedagogical implications. For example, as educators interested in Mezirow’s theory, are we responsible for producing a disorienting dilemma for students? Or, would it be preferable to apply his theory to the students’ *previously* experienced disorienting dilemma (Mälkki & Green, 2016)?

Let us pause briefly to consider one possible reason why these questions are being contemplated. Disorienting dilemmas have the power to unleash negative or regressive change as well as positive transformation. As a result, collateral damage is a distinct possibility. Emotions are “contagious,” and one student’s distress may stimulate others. For that reason, we suspect that many educators would not want to intentionally produce a disorienting dilemma. Furthermore, this potential for extreme reactions can also produce internal conflict for the instructor. On the one hand, they might feel reluctant to provoke or even accompany a student who might be experiencing such a disruption/eruption for fear of being caught up in the student’s chaos. On the other hand, they want to see the student all the way through to the far side—a side where the student has constructed and integrated a larger frame of reference. One’s reluctance to accompany that person can be substantially reduced if the educator functions as a catalyst for

integration rather than the “cause” of the disorientation. When the “disaster” has already happened, the educator is more likely to be perceived as a resource, rather than a source of danger. The boundaries, and thus, understandings of respective responsibilities are clearer.

We offer an example of this based on the first author’s 45 years’ experience as a psychotherapist and educator:

*When doing relationship counseling I might offer an alternate, more hopeful framework for understanding a couple’s dilemma. When it is received enthusiastically by one of the parties, the other will frequently remark, “I’ve been saying the same thing for the past six months.” Yes, the second party has been sending, but the first party has not been receiving. It’s not received because the party offering advice is the same party who “caused” the distress.*

An important issue here is trust. With a professional counselor, the client can more easily offer their trust because their relationship history with the counselor is blank relative to that with their partner...the client’s expectation is for help rather than further injury. The same holds true for the educator student relationship *when* the former doesn’t provoke the chaos.

### **Conclusion**

This paper’s claim is that the serial resolutions of relationship conflicts can produce the micro-transformations that successful living seems to require while at the same obviate the need for major crises as the pre-requisite for transformation. In addition, by employing relationship conflict as the prototype for disorienting dilemmas, we tap into the students’ personal history, thus enabling them to integrate theoretical material with personal experience. We believe that such integration increases the chances that students will be able to apply this process to future disorienting experiences. That is, integration will allow them to generalize these procedures to differing contexts.

We also think that this essay has implications for widening transformative learning theory’s range of influence beyond formal education. Western culture seems to be entering a transitional era replete with multiple disorienting dilemmas. Many of our fundamental institutions: education, law, health, government, etc. all exhibit signs of transition or even disarray. Surely, TL theory has a lot to offer persons working within or effected by those institutions. Because the experience of relationship conflict is a prototypical disorienting dilemma it can be used as an introduction to the theory of transformative learning and that, in turn, would enable more of us to navigate post modernity successfully. In addition, in this essay we’ve employed ordinary language, rather than a specialist vocabulary, such that its concepts are more accessible to as wide an audience as possible. In summary, relationship conflict appears to be an intermittent but inevitable aspect of all human relations and therefore offers an experiential basis to which we can apply the heuristics of TL theory.

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