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About the Author

Deborah Deeter, PhD (deb@sunoka.ca) is a licensed psychologist and relational therapist with a private practice in Western Canada. She is a Registered Marriage and Family Therapist with the Canadian Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. She completed her doctoral degree in the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences with the VRIJE Unversiteit Brussels. Deborah is an associate of the Taos Institute. She enjoys and encourages conversation regarding our socially constructed lives.

From Generative Moments to Reflexive Pragmatics and Its Application in Transformative Dialogues

Dora Fried Schnitman

Generative Dialogue

This essay proposes a generative perspective for therapy and other relational contexts that relies on the emerging possibilities of dialogue as a platform to construct possible, realizable futures when clients bring problematic or stagnant situations for consultation. Through joint participation, reciprocal inclusion, and responsiveness in dialogue, the participants –professionals and clients– co-create alternatives to approach the problematic situations. Dialogue is the means and the instrument for this process. This generative blueprint allows professionals to develop a range of practices across contexts and disciplines.

The *generative dialogue* (Fried Schnitman, 2002, 2008; Fried Schnitman & Schnitman, 2000) centers on what participants in therapy may construct, creating unprecedented possibilities, and on the active exploration of the relationship between the problematic situations and emerging resources and possibilities as new territories in dialogue. It focuses, then, on dialogue's capability to construct intersections, forging a path through the emergent resources, options that become available and the problems that led to the consultation. The enactment and the progressive implementation of the new possibilities with an eye to a viable future are equally important for a generative dialogue.

Working with the generative potential of dialogue offers a perspective of relational constructionism in action (Gergen, 2009; McNamee, 2015a, 2015b). Generative dialogue expands the process from a problem-centered focus to the creation of new possibilities, increasing the skills of participants and providing them with additional resources to work with what is emerging. One of the first implications of this perspective is that it enables a focus on the future, on possibilities which are still nonexistent or only incipient but can be either created or amplified, thus expanding the construction of new client alternatives. The people involved in a generative process – professional and clients– work simultaneously to develop resources in the present while constructing a long-range vision for the future and enacting it as new forms of life. The clients learn to learn about themselves, clarifying, exploring and reaching their emerging resources and possibilities through this process which leads towards transformation and a future.

Dialogue and Generativity

Dialogue alludes to the co-creation of meanings and joint social actions by –and among– a certain number of participants. A dialogue is a co-constructive, interpersonal process in which people jointly create meaning, involving diverse voices and resonances¹. Dialogical confluences are

transformative processes in dialogue that extend over time –for example, therapy and other relational practices– in which new perspectives, actions and forms of life emerge.

In this process, professionals and clients are actively working together to explore the situation they endeavor to transform. As people who can produce unprecedented possibilities in dialogue, they become more proactive through this work, utilizing their own inquiries and reflections to improve comprehension and action as they occur.

In this sense, the participants in a dialogic process become creative authors of each single process, focusing on the specific activities that generate new possibilities as working platforms for transformations. This generative capacity of dialogue offers unanticipated possibilities, transforms potentialities into new existential realities, and gives the experiences some of the open and open-endedness associated with learning and creativity.

Working Within the Generative Process

When people explain what has led them to consult a professional, they often provide a one-dimensional and problematic version of themselves and their circumstances. The professional must be aware of this: she meets the clients at the interactive moment and takes their difficulties into account but also considers their expectations, resources and hopes as well as the diverse context of their lives (Figure 1, *problems node, and hopes*).

As the process advances, professional pay attention to how clients could expand this initial moment, further exploring other contexts of life while being attentive to emerging instances, alternative resources and novel elements in the dialogue that are not part of the problematic situation, or actively creating them (Figure 2, *process underway*)

How do emergent possibilities become generative resources? The sequence is as follows: there is an emerging moment which can become generative through reciprocal responsiveness and supplementation between the participants (professional and clients). If the client is responsive and acknowledges and validate the emerging possibility, these generative moments are incorporated to the dialogue and to the client's life as articulators of new perspectives and actions, enabling paths towards transformations. In these cases, generative cycles can be initiated and further expanded into diverse areas of the client's life, bringing more opportunities and learnings to fruition. In a generative process new self and relational narrations emerge.

Opportunities to innovate are presented as novelties in the dialogue through these emerging moments and events; also, when the clients recover or expand resources from their life contexts. Creative processes proposed by the clients or professional can be incorporated to build resources or open up possibilities.

When the generative cycles expand into different areas of the client's life and further generate novel, productive meanings and life possibilities, they can develop into a generative matrix. The generative matrix combines meanings of the emerging perspectives, values, narratives and novel actions that enable the transformations of people and their relationships both now and in the future. It promotes more productive, viable futures in relation to what has motivated the client to seek consultation (Figure 3, *designing a future*).

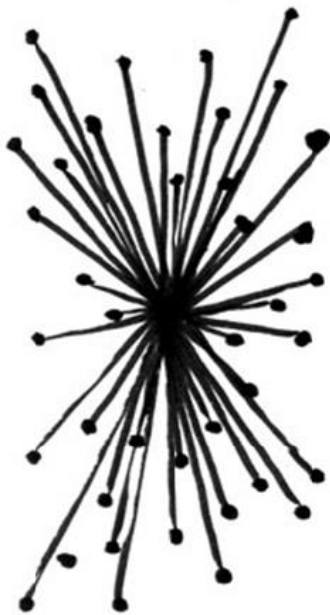


Figure 1.
*Motive for Seeking
Therapy*
Problems node

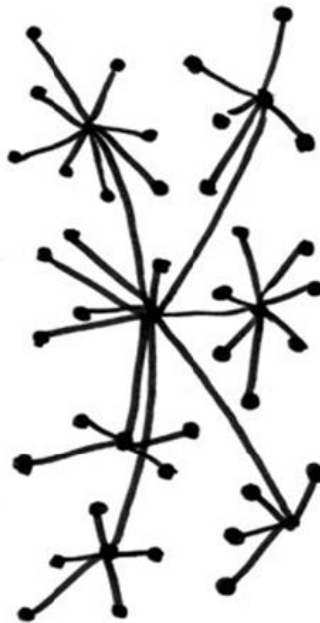


Figure 2.
Process Underway
Construction of a dialogue
network of emerging
possibilities, generative
moments, links and new
narratives that promote
alternatives



Figure 3.
Designing a Future
A new generative
dialogue matrix and
narrative fabric that
build transformational
alternatives

The resources and possibilities that appear in the process are further interwoven in dialogue as new thematic nodes of resources and possibilities, novel narratives, and syntheses of diverse topics that forge alternative paths. These new ways of narrating emerge as part of the generative dialogue and are conveyed as the process evolves. The recognition of these transformations, and reflections on them, give way to new narratives and generative learning.

In sum, the generative process starts with a consultation, where problems are presented (Figure 1). When working with the emergent, this process increasingly focuses on the way in which alternative and innovative resources emerge and get established. As therapy moves forward, networks of new possibilities (Figure 2) are built and a dialogue matrix of new meanings develops and expands. This, in turn, provides novel perspectives on self and context, allowing the client to formulate new narratives that create an alternative life plot or design (Figure 3). This alternative life design and the enabling resources are created contextually, in the specificity of each process, following an exploration of new possible dialogical and thematic resources, generative moments and cycles, nodes and links. These, in turn, create alternatives, and transformative and enabling devices. This process opens up a field of study of transformations in which we can discern open

networks, wholes that are gradually woven over time and that synthesize heterogeneous circumstances, interactions, or contingent results within the frame of the process itself.

Creation of a Generative Process: A Working Platform

The first generative actions of the professional focus on the creation of a dialogue with her clients that establishes a reciprocal responsiveness and a mutually inclusive, trust-based relationship. If the therapist and client acknowledge their reciprocal relationship, we refer to this as an “accepted relational reference.”

In their confluences in dialogue, professional and clients jointly build a working platform which connects problems with possibilities and gives meaning to the direction the process is taking. The term “working platform” refers to a consensus in dialogue and coordinated actions on the issues at hand. It is a process that connects problems, resources and possibilities over time, within the framework of a relationship in which both parties recognize one another as a party to the dialogue.

The generative process is a unique process that leads to a forward-looking “search” of the resources and possibilities that apply to each client’s circumstances. In other words, as it advances, a future is constructed. It is a joint exploration of the resources and possibilities that come up during the dialogue between professionals and clients.

Professionals are part of the scaffolding that sustains the transformative process for clients; clients acquire generative capacities to acknowledge and take pride in their achievements, create the conditions for implementation, and reflect on their productivity.

Generative Professional

It is important for the professional to be mindful of the opportunities to initiate or recognize generative moments and cycles, to be observant of the clients’ responses, the confluences and supplementation in dialogue and finally to build novel working platforms that move from the deficit or problem towards an opportunity. By expanding on these opportunities, meaningful transformations can occur for clients. Similarly, the professional is attentive to sustaining the transformations once they are initiated, moving to consolidate the necessary tools and foster reflexivity and learning.

In the fragments of the cases presented below, the responsiveness and transformations of the clients are palpable in their comments and reflections over the course of the generative moments and cycles.

Example 1 – Family Therapy: First Encounter

1. Reason for consultation: Two brothers, Pablo (age 32) and Santiago (age 24), and the father, come in for a consultation. P –who has brought S in– asks to come in first and describe the problems S is causing the family: the lying and stealing things from home

- has led the family believe he has a drug problem. He speaks negatively about S, emphasizing the problems and blaming S.
2. Generative moment: The therapist: hears the problems and asks him what has motivated him to consult the therapist on behalf of his brother. P. then transforms his narration involving himself, moving from blaming and a third person story into one of genuine concern [*generative moment*], narrated now in a first person personalized expression, responding that S. is a good and persevering person with initiative. He includes himself and his concerns and feelings in the narration and admits he is fearful of S. becoming a different person.
 3. Working platform: The interview with the two men begins. The therapist briefly summarizes what she has discussed with P. She emphasizes his affection and concern for S, mentioning the description of him as a good, persevering individual with initiative, focusing on his resources. S looks at his older brother, pleasantly surprised at what he has heard, and the two begin really listening to one another. [*A dialogue is created which includes a reference to all of them being participants in the conversation, there is the trust, and the begin building the working platform*] The father is included in the conversation. (...) All express their desire to come back again. This is a conversation very different from the ones they have home and they wish to continue.

Example 2 – Generative Family Therapy: Single-Mom Family

1. Reason for consultation: The mother is referred to a family therapy center by the counseling office at her children’s school because they have noticed a problem, i.e., a lack of closeness and affection between the mother and her children that the school relates to “children difficulties”.
2. Generative moment: At the start of the interview, the mother explains that she is separated from the children’s father and is working in two jobs six long days a week to support her children. The father left home and is not paying child support or assisting her with their care; although he does maintain contact with the children. The maternal grandmother is helping with their care. The children are healthy, well-dressed, focused and attentive. As part of the dialogue, using a generative question the therapist proposes an alternative narrative: “*Would you say that the dedication and efforts of a mother who works between six and seven days a week in two jobs to support her children is an expression of affection for them?*” The mother, taken aback, responds, “*I had never thought about it that way*” (her expression and body language reveal a different understanding and emotionality).
 - The therapist’s question initiates the generative moment, which is only secured when the mother responds affirmatively [creating a possibility]. By acknowledging the question as valid, a different perspective, values and “realities” are enabled, an alternative vision that transforms problems into resources, changing the sense of one’s self and redefining relationships and affect.

3. Working platform: It also enables the building of a potential working platform that can serve to continue treatment with a mother who has changed her own view of herself. The working platform establishes a path towards a possible roadmap that can include a different point of view on the systems involved, including the counseling office that referred the family.
4. Generative process: The social ecologies involved share and sustain a gender perspective, a model of expressing affection and of relating to others. Under their family model, the expectations for a single female household head are the same as those of a mother in a two-parent family. In this conventional view of how affection is expressed, taking care basic needs of the children are not seen as an expression of maternal affection. In a generative process, work with the social ecology must accompany the work with the mother, her personal changes and her way of relating to her children.
5. Social ecologies involved: School system (teacher, counselor), family members and organization including grandmother and father, family health care system, labor system, sociocultural system (gender perspective, what is expected of mothers, family model).

Example 3—Generative Community Mediation: Gender Conflict in an Indigenous Community

1. Reason for consultation: The mediator reports a major conflict between the men and women in an Indigenous community. The conflict is the result of a request or need on the part of the women to redefine their participation and community spaces. The men believe that this request does not fit with the community's perspectives and values. In the words of the mediator, “They were on the brink of war.”
2. Generative process: The mediator works with two separate groups –men and women– according to the cultural tradition of this Indigenous community. The example shows the steps of a generative process with the men group that starts with two generative questions about the past and future from the perspective of the present conflict. The first question invited them to visualize a future involving their daughters: “Imagining the future for your daughters, how would you like it to be?” [the future in the present]. The second question refers to a moment in recent history in which the members of the Indigenous community were not recognized as citizens [the past in the present].
 - The consideration of both questions by the group of men yields generative moments and cycles in which they review and acknowledge the women's myriad resources and competencies in terms of running the household and explore all that they could contribute to the community if involved [building a possibility]. Negotiations between the men and women began anew.
3. Working platform: This recognition enabled a working platform geared towards advancing in the process towards new possibilities. In this process, the men gradually

build new meaning matrices and social narratives that integrate gender relations, allowing them to recognize and accept the women's point of view. They design community actions that invite women to participate in running the community. The generative process includes the transformation of the people, relationships and the community itself. This is achieved by building the present-day integration of the women along with a viable future that can be sustained in the long term.

- The women progressively participate in running the community council and gradually becoming part of political life in their country. Transformations are sustained and expanded [building a path and a possible, sustainable future].
4. Social ecologies involved: The Indigenous community, the culture and its changes and interfaces, the diversity among social groups within the community and the openness to considering different historical moments (past-present-future), the transformation of community relations with social groups outside the community.

Final Remarks/Considerations

Through my professional, teaching and research practices, I have designed a generative perspective founded in creative relationships and dialogues. I started working in therapy and later expanded to different practices and contexts. The generative perspective focus in the relationship between problems, resources and possibilities, offers tools and skills based on social constructionism, dialogism and new paradigms (Fried Schnitman, 2002, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017; Fried Schnitman & Rodríguez-Mena García, 2012; Fried Schnitman & Schnitman, 2000). For many years has been a resource for professionals working in different fields and countries including therapy, conflict management, community and organizational development; education, health, research, project management, learning communities, organizational crisis, public policies, working dialogically in the psycho-social-juridical interfaces, civility development, social dialogue, etc. (Crescini, 2015; Morales, et al., 2015; Ospina-Alvarado, 2015; Rodríguez-Mena García, et al., 2019; Sánchez Jiménez, 2019; Santiago Estrada, 2017).

In these diverse contexts generative dialogues increase the resources and possibilities people have to face problems and crisis, fostering personal, relational and social transformations toward viable futures.

Endnote

1. Dialogue is approached from Mikhail Bakhtin's perspective (Morson & Emerson, 1990).

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About the Author

Dora Fried Schnitman (dschnitman@fibertel.com.ar) is founder and director of Fundación Interfas in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Together with Edgardo Morales Arandes, PhD, she directs the International Diploma on Generative Perspective and Professional Practices, certified by Fundación Interfas, The Taos Institute and CINDE-Universidad de Manizales. She also directs and participates as faculty in diverse post-graduate programs at universities and institutes in Latin America, the United States and Europe. Dora has published nine books—most of them included in WorldSeries Books (Spanish, English and Portuguese)—and over 130 articles and book chapters in five languages in Latin America, Europe, the United States, and Japan.