

## Generative Inquiry in Therapy: From Problems to Creativity\*

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*This paper presents a generative approach to therapy which uses clients' resources, values and ability to innovate in the face of an array of difficult challenges. This approach helps clients move from problems to creativity. It regards the creation of meaning, experience and knowledge as constructive processes in action, and finds in the discourse-oriented paradigm a theory and a meta-theory on which to sustain its practice. The generative perspective offers tools for the dialogic construction of new domains of meaning. It emphasizes reflexive dialogue as a means of building resources for creating alternatives. The generative perspective moves away from deficit, and works within a positive framework based on resources, learning, and innovation. It facilitates the emergence of new meanings in action and maintains that these meanings can open up new relationships and possibilities for future action. It revolves around opportunities that arise from unique events, dialogues, learning and innovation in collaborative relationships both within therapy and the extended relations in which the individual is involved. This paper presents and illustrates generative questions, relational cycles, and several tools developed by the model.*

I have directed Interfas since 1984. Originally a family therapy institute, it developed into a think-tank and a cultural organ used to disseminate innovative thinking and practices. In my work as a therapist I was concerned with how new possibilities could emerge in the therapeutic process. I wanted to find ways to use the resources that clients brought to bear on the process, ways to expand on and further what they were already doing well. In that context in the early nineties I found in the new, discursively oriented paradigms a meta-theory and a theory to sustain my academic interest and the development of my practice (Fried Schnitman & Schnitman, 2002). My focus on a generative perspective was developed initially for therapy and then expanded to a range of diverse systemic perspectives and practices.

Within this framework, I called my perspective a generative process of dialogic creation, the gradual construction over time of something new by means of reflexive dialogue and conversational learning in human groups. The unfolding process is one in which persons or groups come to see, experience, describe and position themselves in a different way. This approach regards the creation of meaning, experience and knowledge as a constructive process in which specific events, acts and episodes have the potential power to transform patterns of social relationships from within. Episodes having the possibility to expand, transfer or create new meaning and practice become alternative nuclei that can develop into privileged contexts of interpretation and practice. In this perspective, inquiries focus on how these episodes are generated. How does something new emerge and consolidate to become a main context for practice or meaning? What are

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the discursive and social coordinations that foster these developments? Which are the contexts or conditions that facilitate the emergence and maintenance of new possibilities of meaning and action? (Fried Schnitman, 1996).

I developed generative inquiry to increase clients' awareness of their resources, allowing them to recognize possibilities, opportunities and new avenues in their lives. Generative inquiry involves an ethical positioning based on responsible self-involvement and collaborative co-participation; it has the potential to move us beyond the limits of what we say, think or do and expand our familiar embodied forms of life. Generative inquiry inspires people to find new descriptions, transform relationships, and help themselves and others cope with difficult or problematic circumstances. Therapists facilitate generative inquiry using conversation and language as means for connection, innovation, and alternative coordination of action. The process becomes transformative: participants leave reflecting on themselves, the process, and its results, and they notice a difference. This approach restores the view of persons in relationships as subject-agents who can harness their capacity to learn and innovate in order to handle the diverse problems that life presents. This process enables therapists to recognize and collaborate in the search for alternatives.

### **Innovation through Communication and Learning**

Systemic family therapy presents a tradition of practices that operate on the extant and the emergent (Anderson, 1997; Cecchin, 2002; Fried Schnitman, 1996; White & Epston, 1990), as springboards for expanding possibilities. During the last twenty years, numerous systemic professionals have incorporated social constructionism, narrative theories and, more recently, dialogism, in the development of psychotherapeutic theories and interventions (Fried Schnitman, 1996, 1998, 2002a-b; Gergen, 1994, 1999; Goolishian & Anderson, 2002; Hoffman, 2002; Shotter, 1993), as well as for organizational frameworks (Cooperrider, 1990). From this perspective, dialogue and communication is a formative process that generates social worlds, knowledge, ways of coordinating actions, and experience of identities.

In these new models, communication is viewed as generative, facilitating a *co-constructed process* in which previously unimagined options for addressing problematic situations emerge, thus transforming the experience of the problem. Such transformation allows for creative action in reaching the client's goals. In this process, learning occurs when the participants explore the actions they have taken, the choices they have made, and the values that guided them and informed their choices.

Opportunities are opened up by generative spirals that can emerge in and through dialogue as well as from recycling, experimenting, and scaffolding learning into new knowledge. This entails being on the lookout for transformations that can gradually increase our alternatives and make a conversation take a productive turn. A generative cycle links learning and innovation through different types of constructive procedures. Those involving dialogue include:

- innovating by developing links in dialogue between thematic nodes,
- developing new themes (nodes) by transforming comments into themes or bringing different themes together,
- discovering the novel in and from the extant,

- introducing visions of the future, and reaffirming subjects as producers of knowledge and practices.
- formulating new meanings and narratives.

We can also construct through our ability to innovate and experiment, as well as by expanding our implicit knowledge or using it in innovative ways. In all these instances, we can expand the ability to improve our actions and/or comprehension as they take place.

If one is attentive, a generative cycle can be initiated from many different points: the capacity to innovate, for example, which has been widely explained in numerous articles and will be further illustrated below; unexpected events and transformations in a dialogue: rendering implicit knowledge explicit and/or using it in novel ways (Fried 1996, 2004; Fried Schnitman & Schnitman, 2000a, 2000b), and others. Regardless of the starting points, however, all generative cycles require observation, experimentation, reflection and recognition of innovation. Subjects experiment this process as an empowering source of novelty, well being and new resources.. In all these instances we can expand the ability to improve our actions and comprehension as they take place. These generative actions are connected and together they produce learning and generative spirals.

### **Illustration of starting points for generative cycles in dialogue facilitation**

At a seminar in a master program in Conflict Management<sup>1</sup> I asked the students to present a case that had a surprisingly innovative outcome and to review it from a generative inquiry perspective.

One of the students relates that she worked with an indigenous community, experiencing community and cultural conflict: men and women were clashing on issues related to positions of power and responsibility in the community. The men were responsible for community issues and the women wanted to participate in decision making and hold positions in the community's organizational network. The women had organized work groups aimed at reviewing the role of women.

With complete respect for the community's culture, the mediator met with both groups (men and women). In the meeting with the men, she asked them how they imagined their daughters' future and how they would like it to be. (*Through her question, the mediator starts a generative cycle through innovation and also the possibility of constructing a desired future*). The men used this question was taken by the men to reflect seriously on issues like women's efficacy in household management. They concluded that if women were good at administration and decision making at home they would also bring those skills to bear in public matters. (*The men encounter the novel through their implicit knowledge about women's abilities which then starts a generative cycle and further innovation*).

The mediator formulated another question: Do you remember that until the 1950s, all natives in Bolivia, regardless of gender, were not considered citizens? (*The mediator*

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*promotes further links between these two significant issues: women's and citizenships rights. She combined and reaffirmed community members as subjects who were also able to promote further changes starting both from implicit knowledge and innovations).* The deliberation continued and the men changed their position: they agreed to women's participation and decision making in the community's network and even in the city itself (*women became a part of the City Council*). Indeed, in some cases more women than men participated in decision-making bodies.

The groups of women spontaneously changed their confrontational attitude. Some time later the mediator was invited to a tribal ceremony in which the women dressed her in keeping with tribal costumes. She was asked to sit at the front in the space used for deliberations. The mediator says that although she had felt very satisfied with her work at the time, until now she had not seen the different starting point, resources and processes that promoted transformations with such clarity in these generative cycles. (*By revising the unfolding of events she, like the community, recognizes herself as a person capable of promoting these processes*).

### **Illustration of a generative cycle in conversations with children and families**

This case involves two therapists working with an Argentine family that lives in Florida. In the first interview with the parents, they expressed concern about their son's symptoms. Nicolas was a four-year-old boy who refused to sleep in his own bed all night so his mother ended up sleeping with him. The child did not want to defecate in the toilet but on diapers and insisted on keeping his soiled diapers on afterwards. Both parents felt that it was inappropriate. His father became particularly upset with the situation; he understood it as a lack of boundaries which he could not deal with effectively.

They also presented an account of their emigration and the painful events experienced by the family during the last few years. They spoke of the difficulties of raising children without support from an extended group of relatives.

Like thousands of others, the family emigrated from Argentina to Florida during the 2001 crisis. After two miscarriages, the mother became pregnant; she was two months pregnant with Nicolas when they left Argentina.

Once in Florida, after Nicolas's birth the mother became pregnant again. This was a complicated pregnancy that required several emergency hospitalizations. The mother was confined to bed rest for a portion of the pregnancy. In the end, a daughter was born prematurely, though she developed normally.

The struggles between the father and son regarding boundaries and the problems that his sleeping difficulties were creating between the parents were causing more and more tension and conflict.

Th.: I am moved by your account of family events. You have faced all these challenges with courage and integrity (*The therapist focuses on resources in the face of situations they were able to face successfully*).

The mother responded by crying and the father with relief.

*(Therapists have a choice when it comes to constructing meaning and identifying resources; here, it was crucial to emphasize the family's successes and ability to overcome significant challenges together.)*

Th.: In my view, Nicolas's difficulties are expressing anxiety about the many losses and changes the family has experienced. I suggest that you see Mariel, a child psychologist—we work together—just to make sure that this is an appropriate view of Nicolas's situation. Our aim is to work towards constructing a positive future environment where you do not suffer additional pain, stress or tension, but have an opportunity to select and enact what is best and desirable developmentally. After you see the child psychologist, we will have an interview together before you go back to Florida.

Nicolas comes to the interview with the child psychologist and both parents. All of his developmental parameters are normal, as are his social skills. Nicolas arrives at the interview with a good attitude; he is happy and vivacious, and he explores the office by looking around, picking up objects and toys and making comments. He chooses a ball with flags printed on it and twists it around. He discovers the Argentine and United States flags and shows them, enthusiastically, to his parents and the therapist.

Th.: Nicolas! How quickly you found the flags you know! Your mom and dad had already told me how smart you are and how fast you learn. *(The therapist initiates a cycle from comments and implicit knowledge she had from the parents. She transforms the parents' comments into main topics in order to explore alternatives. She notices the child's pride and expression of triumph when he finds the flags and also makes this into a central topic from which to look for previously unnoticed possibilities).*

Th.: Would you like to learn some other things that are a little harder for you, like sleeping in your own bed all night and pooping in the toilet? Don't you think you would be more comfortable that way?  
*(N. nods. The therapist invites the child to initiate new generative cycles and the child accepts.)*

Th.: Do those things seem very hard to learn?  
*(N. shows his uncertainty with hand and head gestures.)  
(The therapist synthesizes different topics; she suggests actively innovating and involvest in sleeping and pooping contexts as developmental challenges, co-creating a future for the family and the child that includes an active search for resources and solutions in confronting difficulties. She is supporting her intervention in knowledge she has about resources. She makes use of the pleasure Nicolas shows when he makes discoveries on the ball).*

Th.: Ok, let's think about who can help you to make friends with the bed and the bathroom and how they can help you. I have an idea. *(She proposes innovations and experiments)* Think about how you would like to have your bed, your sheets, pillows, stuffed animals and other things that you like or think you might like with you when you go to sleep. We can do the same thing with the bathroom, trying out seats that are more comfortable than diapers.

The parents contribute ideas. They propose including aunts and uncles and grandparents who can give Nicolas the things that might help him meet these goals. *(The parents, the therapist and Nicolas construct new visions of the future by discovering both the novel in the extant and reaffirming the family members as subjects capable and innovative. A different emotionality emerges).*

Parents and grandparents report that in a few weeks there were significant changes in Nicolas's behavior; he is happier, more active and he has made progress. He has

reorganized his bedroom with his mother. He sleeps in his bed alone even though he can visit the parents' room a couple of times on his way to bed. He no longer wears diapers and has entered into the sea of what he was afraid to do before (*We can see an emerging future with the resources and reaffirmation of the participants*).

The mother decided that it was time for her to go back to work. She is an architect who loves her work and will restart her career in interior design. Learning does not stop with our action. On the contrary, action initiates innovative cycles since we can reflect on what works and what doesn't. A generative cycle could be facilitated in therapy, but people are capable of developing these cycles spontaneously. It is important to be aware and alert to the cycles that are initiated by the clients themselves as they appear in the clients' narration.

### **Illustration of the Steps in a Generative Process in the Treatment of a Couple in Crisis**

This case involves a young couple who comes to the consultation due to violent situations and constant and ongoing arguments. They speak of their concern about the arguments and violence, and the exhaustion that it produces. Although they want to stay together, one of the options that they consider is separation, which they see as both a relief and a failure. Both husband and wife are professionals, and they have been married for a few years after having been together for several years. Both perform well at demanding jobs in prestigious companies. Their lives are riddled with unhappiness. They are looking for new horizons educationally and professionally, and another emotional environment for their relationship.

During the first stage, the therapy centered on clarifying problematic issues and on possible, as well as chosen, courses of action. It attempted to differentiate personal possibilities and to position the couple proactively in relation to the specific conflicts that they formulated. The therapy worked to produce the ability to recognize the efforts being made towards a resolution that, paradoxically and despite their interest, ended up in arguments that worsened the crisis. For example, the arguments that each one used imposed a rigid consensus, the denial of the other in reciprocal positions. They could not recognize their participation in the escalation. This dynamic threw the relationship off course and they lost their potential as a couple. In short, the resources that they put into play to actively sustain the relationship ended up escalating the conflicts.

In conflicts where the relationship is in crisis, I suggest that the therapist facilitate generative cycles that allow each member of the couple to find new forms of joint action and a new intelligibility. To do so, it is necessary to explore aspects related to the interest in continuing the relationship (knowing what they want to do, their affection for each other, how they relate, their commitment to each other and to the relationship, and the format that the relationship can take and how they wish the relationship to be). When the clients deem it appropriate, it is also necessary to consider the possibility of a temporary or permanent separation. The collaborative creation of new agreements about basic premises and commitments is reached through the unfolding of implicit knowledge and an expressed desire, commitment and ability to innovate.

Generative questions are used to begin this non-linear process, and their implementation is also explored through questions. In this case, for example, a simple question was: would both of you be interested in continuing the relationship and in making a reciprocal commitment? (*Knowing what they want and framing possible roads and emerging visions*) Under what conditions would you choose separation as a solution?

(*Identifying implicit knowledge, exploring alternatives that they might consider and knowing what and how*) What would a relationship you feel you could be in be like? (*Knowing what the relationship would have to be like leads to knowing what conditions allow them to create this new type of relationship*). This series of questions allows for a recognition of alternatives that have been considered –whether implicit or explicitly– and, based on their responses and dialogues about these alternative, it is possible to imagine possible futures and an emerging relationship.

On the basis of their collaborative production, each one's responses, agreements and commitments are established about new ways of organizing the relationship. These agreements and commitments make up a new matrix to construct meanings and actions. Both respond that, though they have considered separating, they want to stay together because they love each other and because they would experience the separation as a failure.

After this investigation and agreement comes another issue related to the interest and commitment to contributing to change (*a sequence that will clarify generative possibilities and perhaps increase the communal and collaborative conscience*). The questions were: How do you think each of you can contribute to this situation? What options do you have when a fight is about to begin? (*Knowing how by making implicit knowledge explicit*). Surprisingly, both had answers (*they knew how*) and could recognize the options before engaging in a fight i.e. that the dynamic of the crisis was stronger than they were. On this basis, they reached a third agreement about ways of handling differences and what criteria and measures they could implement to choose an alternative approach. Would you both be interested and committed to doing what you think might work instead of what you usually do? They both committed to carrying out this alternative.

The therapist starts a sequence to explore the implementation of all the innovations that the couple recognized as possible. Would you agree to perform an experiment for a week, just a week? The experiment would consist of putting into practice the resources produced in the session and in observing and exploring the difference between the usual situation and the ones that could be produced during the week based on the new knowledge, agreements and commitments made. When a sequence is initiated by the therapist, it is very important to explore the interest and willingness of the clients to work in this direction. A collaborative approach could utilize experiments or explorations such as this one if the clients also include themselves as part of the production of the small experiment. A consensus was reached through a question: Would you like to do it? They accept and commit.

The hope was that by starting with this experiment, perhaps they could begin to construct an alternative future based on the recognition of innovations realized and the capacity to produce new innovations. The implementation and sustaining of the already realized innovations would allow for recognition of the degree to which this alternative could be viable.

This type of sequence is geared towards creating conditions that allow the couple to recognize and confront crisis, and contribute to the choice of an alternative course instead of leaving it to chance. If this procedure is successful, it could be used to explore each problematic situation or situation that leads to arguments. At the next session, we worked on what had happened during the week. They performed the experiment, effecting change by making explicit implicit knowledge [*Each one knew what resources they had to use to stop fighting*]. They implemented the alternative, observed and recognized the differences [*The week was calm and productive, they did not fight*]. Comparing this week with the

others, the therapist asked which one was better. They responded that this week was much better. Not only were they more relaxed and able not to fight, but they reflected on important issues for each one's future. The next question was how they wanted life to be, as it was this week or as it had been before, (when they were fighting incessantly) and, if they considered it possible to keep on implementing what they had done the better week in subsequent weeks. They reflected and positively assessed the results. They recognized that they could innovate and were satisfied with their capacity to do so.

This capacity to innovate expands on the possibility to create different life conditions. Thus, the generative cycle is completed. The clients are able to recognize indicators of change and their own agency in generating that change, as well as new resources.

In summary, an assessment of the personal, existential and relational advantages and disadvantages of the changes recorded during the week is performed session by session, and these changes are jointly evaluated by therapists and clients. By comparing them to earlier situations all participants assess the transformations. The response of each member of this couple was that the blaming and mistreatment had ceased. This left each more space to reflect on their respective place and allowed them to understand and/or respond differently [*Increase recognition of oneself, the other, communal conscience and emergent identities*]. They could recognize indicators of change and new possibilities generated by new experiences in different areas of life [*Recognition of innovations and their maintenance completes the generative cycle*]. The husband reported that he had more time to think about important problems for him as a person; the wife said she was calmer and had greater possibilities at work. Both recognized the innovations and changes which each of them and the other had made, as well as the fact that they could carry out and implement such changes [*Recognition of each other and emerging resources and emerging identities are identified*].

Other events that they could actively innovate took place during that week. They specified their individual interests, then reached a joint decision and individual choices about the future, after which they began to take the steps necessary to implement that decision. These visions of a future clearly emerged from the experiment that they realized. They also said that not fighting allowed them to move ahead in their projects. With their resources, they were able to develop this new generative matrix; they could work on the specific relationship or personal difficulties.

In later sessions, they reported that they could finish their applications, innovate the handling of their daily lives, and hold conversations with key people in their academic and work environments. Eight months after the initial interview, things were still on track.

A therapist's initiative comes to life only when the clients incorporate them in specific actions.

In handling a crisis and facilitating a generative matrix, professionals can take more initiatives when they have the explicit agreement of the participants; they must work actively in the construction of premises and possibilities.

The active role of the therapist and the importance of any initiative has been indicated in the research of Janet Beavin Bavelas (Beavin Bavelas et al., 2000), who maintain that all professional participation implies an active intervention. As Bavelas and collaborators state, although a therapist may be able to choose how to participate, one can not avoid participating. In other publications, I have argued that some generative movements are the result of the professional's initiative. Yet, the professional initiative is



framed by the conversation in course, and the process and purposes of therapy as stated by the clients. In crisis situations, the therapist's generative function becomes particularly significant. The therapist works within provided by the clients and to it, actively offering professional and personal resources. It should be stressed that a generative effort that is not agreed on by the clients is not ethical.

### **Generative inquiry and transformative dialogue**

I developed generative inquiry as a set of theoretical and practical guidelines to facilitate emerging possibilities in dialogical process (Fried Schnitman, 2004; Fried Schnitman & Schnitman, 2000a, 2000b). This section's specific focus is on generative questions, which are used to explore the construction and recognition of resources. The questions expand participants' abilities to recognize what they have done well, on the one hand, and the available resources, whether implicit or explicit, on the other. These questions are used in a dialogical and relational process to inspire innovation and novelty and to enhance knowledge and possibilities. The questions foster experimentation, discovery, learning, and effective communication. Through generative inquiry, we are able to move towards expanded resources; a new matrix of meaning and practices; personal, relational and organizational enrichment, as well as innovation and change.

Generative questions have many purposes and can be used in a variety of situation. These questions are not intended to be used as a script but to inspire practitioners to think of questions that might be helpful to facilitate therapeutic dialogue. Generative questions have many goals, including facilitating the recognition of generative possibilities; expanding the ability of participants to recognize the novel; inviting them to identify and reflect upon generative cycles; and formulate with clarity—at some point in the process—who and what the subject-agents are. These questions help identify possibilities for new action.

I also employ a range of generative questions to identify implicit knowledge. By recognizing what they know and what they don't about problems, differences and/or possible solutions, participants create platforms for change. For example, *knowing how* is typically a type of knowledge that is implicit in an action; we "know" without thinking about the knowledge explicitly. This implicit knowledge can be made explicit by incorporating descriptions and reflections about a given action.

To illustrate generative work in action I offer two cases. The first, which involves a six-year old boy who could not control his defecation, illustrates how his therapist enabled him to recognize what he did know and apply it to that problem. This process shows how the client was able to solve this particular problem and use his new skills in other contexts (asking various teachers for certain changes, for example). A new positioning of himself in different contexts was facilitated; he became freer and fuller, as if he possessed a new self-agency.

#### **A Case of Generative Inquiry in a Dialogue with the Body<sup>2</sup>**

This case involves an upper middle class, six year old boy whose problem was encapsulated in an inability to control his defecation. He refused to speak about this topic,

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<sup>2</sup> The therapist is Dr. María Elena Gandolla de Czertok (Fried Schnitman and Gandolla de Czertok, 2000).

thus cutting off the possibility of learning and of transferring what he had learned about his body in other areas of life. In the description of this case, we will use underlying or highlighting, which allows the reader to accompany the dialogue, like a spiral of dialogues in which the participants construct themselves and each other. This process entails moving from a theory of reception to a theory of the construction of responses in listening. This is what a co-participating observer, like a therapist, does in the process of participating and constructing. In this therapeutic process, the therapist expands the client's resources for registering bodily signals and dialogue with the self. She also operates by favoring learning circuits. She reframes the problem and the solution in developmental terms, and helps the client to recycle his resources for a different dialogue with his own body. The therapist accompanies him in the construction of resources that allow for a better performance: mainly, resolving what is urgent in a context.

The parents make an appointment at the suggestion of their pediatrician. They describe the child as intelligent, happy, curious and active. He is sweet and not spoiled, and he plays a great deal, both alone, and with classmates and other adults.

The only problem is that he still can not control his defecation and he lets them know that he is concerned, by saying "it escaped me." Without making a fuss, he allows himself to be cleaned up and changed. He does not want to talk about this topic with anyone.

In the course of the conversation, the parents ask me what they should say to Gastón about the consultation.

Th.: Can we try now? Using your own words, what would be the clearest and simplest way to tell him? [*Small experiment to increase the resources for knowing how to speak about; this helps them to recognize how they could respond, explore the resources they have*]

Parents: We are going to see a child psychologist to see if we can solve the pooping problem.

Gastón arrives to the interview with his mom. He greets me smiling and relaxed. Together, they come into the office. He takes everything in, makes some comments, and approaches a low table with paper and drawing materials.

His first drawing is a very nice house rich in detail. It has a landscape and a curved horizon line. He explains that now he draws it like that because a classmate taught him how.

Th.: That's a very nice drawing. Few six-year olds who have just started first grade know how to draw like you...How about making up a story for this drawing? Who lives there, what do they do? [*The therapist initiates a conversation that Gastón then refuses to follow. The therapist pays close attention to his response.*]

Gastón: No...(He begins to make another drawing. He goes back to the one of the house, looks at me and adds a sign that says: "For Sale or Rent") [*Elaborating by shutting down the topic*]

I take his comment as a sign not to advance, not to move further. I think that Gastón is testing to see if I will follow him, listen to him, and not be intrusive when he does not want to respond. I do not ask any more questions or make any suggestions, thus letting Gastón guide the conversation. He talks to his mother and with me. He enjoys the conversation and, spontaneously or at his mother's suggestion, he tells stories about his classmates and his cousin, whom he criticizes for being very bossy.

Thus, three sessions are spent playing, drawing, cleverly mimicking characters from television shows, his teachers, his grandmother, and others. A friendly and cordial atmosphere is established; we laugh a lot and he calls me over frequently to tell me things or ask me questions. He watches his mother carefully when, after a moment of silence, she starts up a conversation (I think she does this to keep us from talking about defecation).

In the next session, after the usual update on the week's events, I tell him that there is something I know he has asked his mother not to talk about. But that I, like everyone else, am concerned about it, and we do not have much longer to take care of it. In this situation, there is implicit knowledge: the parents had told Gastón that I was a child psychologist [who knew about children] and that together we would try to solve the pooping problem. This time Gastón will follow me in the conversation. How do I know that I have a green light to move ahead when I did not before? I take as an indicator the fact that Gastón seems quite comfortable in the therapy room (he moves around, explores, uses the materials available and makes eye contact and verbal contact). How long it takes to reach this level of engagement in conversation varies according to the child, and closely monitoring this engagement allows the therapist to assess when the time has come to introduce a new topic. Insofar as therapy is a collaborative endeavor, it is crucial that the therapist be able to articulate when and how to introduce a new idea especially when the client does not want to speak about a given topic. [*The therapist changes the course of the conversation by furthering a new topic based on a comment made by the parents: it is a worrisome topic that must be resolved in a given timeframe. Thus, she contributes to constructing a future vision.*]

Th.: Now, you and your classmates are “facing similar situations.” You are all starting first grade. Some of them have been your friends since kindergarten, other new ones are starting this year and, of course, they all experience different things. Maybe some of them pee in their pants, others miss their mommies and daddies and cry, their tummies hurt or they want to go home, or they don't want to go to school, they get bored of having to stay seated, they get tired of writing [*The therapist introduces a new topic- the beginning of elementary school and the reactions of the other children- which places Gastón's problem in a developmental and social framework; there are certain tasks and moments that are difficult for children, and they express this difficulty in a variety of ways. Gastón takes up the topic and a series of elaborative comments are produced. The therapist draws attention to another way of considering the topic and its resolution. She expands the possibilities of dialogue by recognizing and expressing shared interests, thus maintaining a collaborative attitude. Together, they explore doubts and uncertainties, and the therapist's own contribution is considered just one of the many possibilities.*]

Gastón listens to me carefully and agrees that what I have said is true, that all of these things happen. Surprised, he looks at me and asks:

G.: And how do you know this? [*He confirms his participation and allows the conversation to continue. This response is very different from the initial shutting down, or the hegemonic control of the channel.*]

Th.: Because I know a lot about kids and I know that it is hard to learn so many new things at once. (Gastón then relates the different difficulties that some of his classmates have had or have.) [*He elaborates by confirming with different comments*]

Th.: Yes, these are not pleasant things, and we have to hurry along so that you learn to leave your poop in the bathroom, or else I don't think you are going to be very comfortable... [*The therapist links thematic nodes that have already been established—the time-space context, school—and frames them in terms of resources for Gastón's own care and comfort. Next, a sequence is started in which Gastón can learn by reflexively revising his own processes. He links his recognition of signals, indicators and knowledge. When the child knows what he knows and how he knows it, he can know about knowledge and convey it.*]

G.: I can't, I don't know how, it escapes me!

Th.: (After a moment of silence) Do you know when you are hungry? (Gastón remains silent) [*A sequence begins where the therapist helps the child recycle his resources and knowledge about what his body tells him. She would explore know how, know what, know about and know about himself and how to position himself in context.*]

Th.: Do you know when you are cold?

G.: Yes.

Th.: Do you know when you are sleepy, when you are hot, when you are thirsty, when a mosquito has stung you?

G.: Yes.

Th.: Do you know why you know? [*The therapist proposes a new topic through a question. Knowing how and knowing about knowledge*]

G.: No...

Th.: Because your body tells you. We all have a body that tells us and a tummy that tells us when the poop wants to come out, and so we go to the bathroom. We leave it there and that's it...And how does this work for you? Doesn't your tummy tell you? Or don't you listen to it? [*She summarizes and puts him in dialogue with his own body.*]

G.: Yes, I hear it.

Th.: So, how about if you pay close attention to your tummy and when your tummy tells you, you RUN and BEAT it, and leave the poop in the bathroom like everyone else? [*She helps him to recycle his resources and put them into action. The therapist focuses on the emerging possibilities in order to help him to recognize how he could respond and to assess what he could do.*]

The flow of the conversation between Mariel and Gastón shows how this is a collaborative process where each participant includes the other and the comments made to construct new knowledge and resources. The next two sessions are very much like the others. Gastón makes some complaints, saying that playing with his grandmother is boring because she always lets him win. We speak of thinking up solutions: one would be to look for new games with his grandmother, games that are equally difficult for both of them.

At the beginning of the next session, he is standing on the third step of a staircase that connects that waiting room with the office. He calls out to me in a vibrant voice:

G.: Mariel! ¡Mariel! (Triumphant, he continues). I won! I beat the poop once and for all! [*In a generative process, the restoration of skills is promoted. The acquisition of resources is the focus, considering the fact that people can recognize themselves as proactive subjects in the resolution of their problems. In latter sequences, the child is able to resolve other situations using the proper resources.*]

Th.: Congratulations!

Once in the office, I asked him if it had been difficult to win [*Recognizing one's own resources*]. Without stopping what he was doing, he answers me with a gesture that says "more-or-less." [*He could dissolve the boundaries between his abilities and his difficulty.*]

Once a connection and collaboration have been established, they will increase as the child discovers and tests the therapist's genuine interest in what happens to him and what he thinks about what happens to him. In the following interviews, new topics emerged related to his social activities, proposals for new activities, opportunities to visit classmates at their homes, and complaints about the music teacher when he musters the courage to suggest including his favorite songs in the repertoire.

During this time, I witnessed the beginning of a new experience of him in a context. Although apparently the contexts in which he spent his days were the same, now his position was different, freer and fuller. It was as if he possessed a new self-agency.

Later, in an interview, I asked him:

Th.: Gastón, you always tell me what places are like, and you never told me about the bathrooms at school. It occurs to me that for you these bathrooms must be something new because you did not use them before. [*The therapist embarks on the exploration of a novel context*]

G.: They are nice, but they have a problem. There is a string to flush the toilets but it is very short, and shorter kids like me cannot reach it. We have a stand on top of that thing (the toilet) to be able to flush. [*Knowing about oneself in a context includes knowing and expressing a problem*]

Th.: Is that very uncomfortable? Could you tell the teacher? [*It is possible to talk about what can or must be resolved and about the resources necessary to do so*]

G.: Hmm... I don't know...how could I tell her? [*Exploring knowing how and knowing how to talk about*]

Th.: Let's think. Would you like to talk to her about it? If not, whom could you ask to help you tell the teacher about this? (He is quiet, thinking. Then, picking up a piece of paper and a magic marker that he puts in my hand, he suggests:)

G.: Let's write a letter (you dictate it and I write). Tomorrow, I will give it to the teacher.

Later, he proudly tells me about the success of his idea. "Two!! They put longer strings on two toilets!" [*Sequence of links between "knowings" that allow the child to become an agent*]

Gastón illustrates knowing how; the next example illustrates *knowing what*, which has a slightly different logic. *Knowing what* provides a framework for visualizing possible futures and creating contexts for communication and consensus with others. In *knowing how*, as we have seen with Gastón, the change resides in self-agency in what may be the same situations, in re-positioning and implementation knowledge and competences. If the process is started from *knowing what*, its unfolding in specific actions will make the emerging possibilities concrete. It has a different relationship to the materialization of possibilities or alternatives. Adjustments and modifications gradually transform both the imagined and the encountered effects. Thus, new perspectives, practices, experiences and descriptions can become *indicators* of the emerging as we illustrate in the following consultation.

### **A Case of Post-Divorce Family Re-organization**

The second case of generative intervention emerged from a training program I did in Porto Alegre, Brazil several years ago. The family involved was poor, though not poverty stricken. The mother, Maria, connected her roles as mother with her concern and responsibility for the children: she knew what was best for them and was working in that direction. One central node in this consultation was her relationship with Analía (her daughter), and her difficulties- or perceived difficulties- in expressing affection. This node includes notions of expressing affection that will later be taken up and re-signified by the therapist.

In a generative process, one is attentive to what plants possibilities that can later be harvested as an alternative. One pays close attention to comments that can become thematic nodes/new themes as well as reframing old themes that might open up alternatives. In terms of the client's outlook and mood, this process works with variations, and it is important to recognize which resources the client finds that might allow for a successful transition from a state of discouragement to an improved outlook.

The key to this interview was a narrative transformation that allowed the client to recover resources, to recycle stereotyped meanings of maternal care and to recognize the ramifications of her task as mother in the post-divorce transition to being head of the family. In the interview the mother was able to identify her actions as positive resources in child care, thus opening up generative possibilities for an emerging perspective of herself as a mother.

The family was referred by an educational institution. The information available about them before the interview was minimal: a daughter had been in individual therapy, after repeating a year of school, the parents were separated, and the school had proposed family therapy. The session was attended by María (the mother, age 34), Analía (the daughter, age 10), and Joaquín (the son, age 4).

Therapist: How do you think this interview could be useful to you? [*Make explicit her implicit expectations*]

Maria: I would like to improve my relationship with Analía and feel less discouraged. [*The answer contains agency and intention, taking care of her relationship with her daughter and of herself is a frame to find possible roads in the relationship*]. (While she is speaking, the two children are playing, aware of the conversation). A little over two years ago, I separated from my husband because I thought that the separation would be good for the kids (...) I moved back in with my mother, who helped me a lot. (Throughout the account, she seems to be exhausted, in pain and even somewhat disoriented). My ex-husband does not help out economically. To support my family, I have two jobs and I take care of the kids. I work twenty-eight days a month. I was feeling very bad, down in the dumps, very tired. I took medication until I decided that it was not a good example for the kids, that they were small and needed their mother to be around for much longer. [*Spontaneous innovation initiated by the mother which will be further explored as generative seeds for emerging possibilities and resources*] I am doing better now, though I still have problems sometimes, and occasionally I take medication... [*She is actively assessing the results of her initiative, pondering the effects and the indicators of different outlooks.*]

Th: How were you able to improve your outlook, what helped you to do so? [*The intervention recognizes and describes emerging possibilities and new knowledge,*

- inquires into which resources she implemented and could use again in the effort to improve her state. It also invites the client to recognize her knowledge (knowing what/how/about herself in context).]*
- M.: When I was able to talk to my co-workers, to goof around with them, forget myself, stop thinking all the time. I still feel discouraged from time to time.
- Th.: When you feel discouraged, what makes you feel that way? [*Knowing about the difference between processes and contexts that construct positive and negative outcomes could become a resource for framing possible roads and emerging visions of self, transformative knowledge.*]
- M.: When I feel very tired and everything at work weighs me down (she indicates her fatigue physically) (...) the problem with Analía is that I cannot demonstrate affection (she makes a gesture of caressing). Her father can do it, and I am afraid that she will leave me and go with him when she gets older. Analía is too attached to him. The psychologist that we used to see made us sit together and made me caress her. There I was able to do it, but at home afterwards I couldn't, it was the same. [*The school psychologist, the culture and experts suggest that maternal affection be expressed in a certain way, and in the face of that notion she is deficient; she cannot do it and is afraid of the consequences. When the idea of a deficit is installed, it is difficult for mother and daughter to re-signify or re-construct options for a good relationship. She manifests her fear of losing her daughter as a consequence of this deficit. Her present narrative of her identity as a mother does not include her efforts. The therapist will be attentive to other possible description of motherhood.*]
- Th.: What do you think makes it hard for you to approach Analía? [*The therapist invites her to explore her experience, to expand her comments about the problem, the relationship, and the display of affection*]
- M.: She is always talking to me about her father and I can not, I can not listen to her because I can not hear anyone speak of him. I loved him too much, but he did terrible things to me in front of her. I left him for the children, and now I am very angry with him [*She expands her descriptions and her motives and works out the context and the difficulty.*]
- Th.: If Analía did not speak to you about her father or if he were not in the middle in some way (she makes a hand gesture indicating the space between them) would it be easier for you? [*The therapist works with mother on alternatives that might open relational and personal possibilities and from there, transform a problem into a possible path.*]
- M.: Yes (she nods).
- Th.: Could you consider that a mother who works very hard twenty-eight days a month, who has two jobs to support her children, is a mother concerned with her children, a mother who takes care of them [*This intervention and the following are based on different comments the mother has made throughout the interview. The therapist invites the mother to consider her previous comments in an appreciative manner; she formulates them as thematic nodes that, when linked, can be organized into central themes that offer a different intelligibility about motherhood. The idea is that this might facilitate an emerging identity for the client, a vision of the different ways of caring for children, and help her advance towards a narrative of a positive vision of herself, a vision in which she has resources. Insofar as the kids are*

*listening, the question opens up opportunities to expand the communal and collaborative conscience. ]*

M.: (Surprised, she nods; she smiles, pleased). [*The mother recognizes and accepts this possibility as an opening. The therapist recognizes the acceptance of this re-signifying as a possible path. Thus, reflexive cycles of recognition and evaluation of what has been built in the process take shape; these milestones gradually construct the process.*]

Th: Could you accept that when you take care of yourself you are taking care of the mother of your children and that- as you said- the children need their mother for much longer and so it is important that you take care of yourself? [*She takes up and reworks the mother's earlier comments, making them into a node wherein caring for the children implies the mother caring for herself. By harvesting the client's previous comments, the therapist expands the narrative of positive identity and a caring relationship.*]

M.: (She nods with a broader smile) I never saw it that way before. [*An alternative begins to crystallize as a new vision*]

Here, generative questions allowed this client to experience herself differently. She could conceive of herself as a good mother because she could adjust pre-existing ideas of motherhood to fit with her skills and resources in a new family situation.

### **The Generative Process in Motion**

In generative inquiry, the participants produce new connections and understandings in dialogue, increasing their capacity to identify the novel by exploring what they know in unprecedented ways. Participants frequently recognize and describe the steps that lead to results, linking them to options, choices and diverse possibilities. Of particular interest is the relationship between actions and descriptions. When people reflect upon actions by describing them, this process opens new possibilities because it makes the implications of the actions clearer.

Comparing similarities and differences between actions, descriptions, experiences, results and contexts reveals a sort of *blue print* that accounts for the actions taken and the knowledge acquired; it is an endpoint rather than a point of departure, since it is constructed during the process.

Generative inquiry requires one to proceed with rigor, staying open to all evidence, even to failure. Unexpected, unintentional effects, as well as refutation and resistance, also provide valuable information to orient the process. Thus, if the hypotheses, frames or motions prove inadequate or untimely (as we saw in Gastón's case), the professional needs to reflect on this and find new ways to understand the situation.

When the participants in a generative process in therapy actively inquire as the process is taking place, their experimentation is exploratory; it entails testing hypotheses and procedures. In practice, active inquiry is a learning process in a given situation. Generative inquiry during the process is not, however, the only possibility for active inquiry; participants can utilize generative inquiry after the process has been completed. Whenever generative inquiry occurs, what is learned about new possibilities and expressions of self in relationships affects action. We learn to recognize, to see difference – novelty– and in so doing, we learn to inquire *a posteriori* about these moments in order to increment our resources.



The roads designed depend on previous movements and on the projection of future possibilities. The relationship to the situation is always dialogical, transactional and transformative: what we try to understand is, at the same time, what we are constructing or transforming, and the situation is understood, precisely, as we try to change it, giving rise to a process of investigation in action and the acquisition of new knowledge.

### **A Generative Position**

In a generative context, communication/learning reconfigures the place of each participant. The participant becomes a member of a collaborative team<sup>3</sup> that learns from its own processes, a community interested in, and capable of, inquiring into both convergence and difference, using diversity and conflict generatively to develop resources or to create possibilities.

The solution to problems becomes fieldwork conducted by these collaborative teams of professionals and participants, or participants themselves outside the therapy context. They research *in action*, in order to better understand the spectrum of alternatives available and the novel resources they bring with them. In the case of Gastón cited above, when the therapist asked the client how he would like to communicate to the teacher the problem with the toilet flush, she was proposing a small experiment in a collaborative context (mainly, the context of therapy). His response- asking her to help him write a letter- demonstrates the importance of collaboration. In a process that integrates resolution and creativity, the participants can go through previous experiences and select what has been useful and what can be recycled, transformed. They reflect on this process –what is happening, what opportunities are available, what procedure is adequate, what they want for themselves and for the others involved. They propose alternatives that will potentially enrich the experience of all the participants. They perform small experiments designed to test those alternatives. They learn by observing and trying new possibilities and skills.

Participants in this type of process not only engage their emotional lives in new ways, they also recuperate power if they reaffirm each other as capable of generating options, learning and advancing in the direction they intend. Thus, they can recognize, evaluate, modify and experience their operational possibilities at different levels: they can review their responses and the selection of alternatives by evaluating the context, as well as by examining their constructions and constructive processes. They recognize the models, guidelines and criteria by which these constructions are produced, as well as the purposes and values that organize their perceptions and actions. Through this process, they come closer to aspects of learning and feeling such as understanding, strategizing, implementing, becoming aware of, and monitoring what they initiate. They also acquire abilities for the reflection and construction that characterize transformative processes. They learn how to learn. They have the possibility of finding solutions and new procedures and of transforming their circumstances and themselves through learning.

### **Ethical Perspectives and Generative Processes**

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<sup>3</sup> I provide an example in therapy, although I use the same approach in training and education (Fried Schnitman & Schnitman, 1998), conflict management (Fried Schnitman & Schnitman, 2000a-b), organizational consulting.

When we work beyond the limits of the resources we have and move towards generative possibilities, we facilitate the emergence of new realities and forms of life. I presented discursive, narrative and learning resources working on the assumption that language and reality are reciprocally constitutive. The instruments are based on discourse, narrative and learning and support the subjects' capacity to create.

Félix Guattari (2002) formulated what he called a new aesthetic paradigm. He reflected on the techno-science cultural narrative in which human creativity is primarily limited to artistic endeavors. In his formulation of a new aesthetic paradigm, he expanded this creative capacity to other realms of human life, such as natural and social sciences, economy, management, entrepreneurship, community work, daily life, psychotherapy, and education. I proposed, in this and other articles, that it is possible to empower people to explore and participate in the creation of their own future by bringing this creative dimension into their daily practice of life (Fried Schnitman, 1996, 2002a).

The generative perspective proposal also relates to ethics. Silvia Rivera, an Argentine philosopher whose current research explores the relationship between language and ethics in Wittgenstein's work, elaborates further on this matter. Rivera (2001) suggests that although the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein, 1979) is most often connected with an analysis of language, it can also be considered a book on ethics. According to Rivera, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* implies that we cannot speak about ethics, but only exercise it by examining the assumptions inherent in the limits of the language we use. After a ten-year silence, Wittgenstein returned to the topic of ethics in *Philosophical Investigations* (1988), where he proposed that we participate in multiple intertwined language games<sup>4</sup> that are diverse, complex, and connected through tight webs of words and actions. These games have a constitutive force to shape the forms of relational life in which we are inserted.

Ethics then becomes a constant exercise of reflection on how we construct meaning and how we open up spaces for re-creating meanings. It entails new ways of coordinating actions and intelligibilities through re-signifying our forms of life. Re-significations are the work of subjects in relation, co-evolving together. As we have seen in all examples presented, the transformations that took place carried the participants beyond the limits of the world as it was known and spoken about; they coevolved together towards new perspectives, re signifying and creating new meanings and possibilities that went beyond the descriptions of their world and relationships as they knew it, even a new emotionality that emerged in each example. Language, actions and relations are then intertwined and embodied in relational games that are constitutive of our lives. These games both limit and open up possibilities.

Rivera proposes, then, that ethics is a constant exercise of inquiry that proves, in action, the limits of our description of the world. It is precisely this *ethics-in-action* that allows us to work on the limits of the language we use and the way we live our lives, to transcend these limits and explore new ones that might be possible if a generative posture is established. By examining the limits of our language games, we can also recognize our relational responsibilities in their production and maintenance. We make choices when we engage in conversations, when we respond or express, when we are available or not to receive and to respond to the expressions of others, when we organize our discourse or narrate our stories.

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<sup>4</sup> "I will also use 'language game' to refer to everything formed by language and the action with which it is interwoven". (Wittgenstein, 1988, p. 25).

Since therapy is, in essence, a language game, all of these choices are operative in it. Therapists must be aware of what they propose in conversation and how these proposals are received. In the case of Gastón, the therapist did not push when the client did not accept one of her proposals (mainly, describing who lived in the house he drew). In recognizing and accepting his limits, the therapist created a collaborative atmosphere in which other games could emerge. Similarly, in the case of Maria, it is clear how a new notion of herself as a mother and as a person emerged through conversation. She moved from a model of deficit, where she was not meeting certain cultural expectations, to one of strength and possibility, where she could see herself as a caring parent by providing for her home. She could also recognize that taking care of herself was crucial to taking care of her children. In this, she moved beyond the limits of the initial session's discourse and narrative...

Sheila McNamee and Kenneth Gergen define relationally responsible actions as those that sustain and enhance forms of exchange out of which meaningful action is made possible (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). If human meaning is generated through relationships, then to be responsible to relational processes is to favor the possibility of meaning itself—of possessing selves, values, and a sense of worth. Isolation represents the negation of humanity. Relational intelligibility simply refers to the constructionist stance that everything that is meaningful emerges in relationships (McNamee & Gergen, 1999).

A generative inquiry process is built on the creation of resources to design new possibilities in the face of situations which render us speechless and without resources; we have no words or are confronted with instances where we have no forms of life to understand what is going on. The *possibilities* are not necessarily there, available, already given. It is our challenge to construct and discover them, facilitate them, create them in domain after domain, on the basis of coordinates and procedures that will allow them to emerge, as can be appreciated in the examples presented in this paper. Like every generative process, this one, too, is at once pragmatic and reflexive, a starting point and an endpoint, an open task.

We have options because we have pools of discourses that are spoken with different purposes and objectives; we are peopled by the voices of the many dialogues in which we participate, and we have a wealth of different stories and story-lines available. Our relational responsibility in generative processes is precisely the inquiry, the ethical cycle on the limits of what we do, speak and think with others.

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