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Language as the Fabric of Conflict—and the Foundation for Dialogic Negotiation



My speech surprises me and teaches me my thoughts.

—Merleau-Ponty (1962/1979, p. 178)

As the opening quote suggests, there is much we can learn about our conflicts and about ourselves from listening carefully to our own speech as we engage in conflict. In fact, Merleau-Ponty (1962/1979) recognized that it is only in speaking that we fully understand how we feel and what we think about a conflict. The language we choose during conflict is crucial in both forming the basis of our conflict stories and in moving those stories forward strategically. Effective conflict management relies on this ability to listen to and analyze the language that you use in conflicts and your ability to imagine and choose language that helps you achieve your goals for that communication—for example, a competitive or cooperative conflict.

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There is something about choosing language that is crucial to actively constructing the dynamics and meaning of the conflict as dialogic negotiation, heated argument, or whatever our goals for the interaction might be. If our talk can surprise us, as the quote suggests, then perhaps we can make choices that have surprising and constructive results for all of the participants in the conflict.

Let's begin with a quick example that we can probably all relate to. Recently, a friend of mine described a very current, turbulent time in her relationship with her live-in boyfriend. She wanted to know what I thought about the possibility of breaking up with him. She explained that her attraction for him had dwindled and that they were in a rut. Their sex life was minimal, and they were not having fun anymore. Coupled with this, she was afraid to raise the topic for fear that he would be terribly hurt and that things could get very difficult in the home context. At the same time, she feared that he was making plans to propose marriage and go to the expense of a ring and a foreign vacation as a graduation gift. Graduation was just a month away. She did not want to wait and risk this embarrassing and awkward scenario, yet she could not face breaking up with him and all of the conflict that might well go along with that. Working on scant information and recognizing that her description may have been tied to the emotional low point of the moment she was talking to me, I was reluctant to offer direction one way or the other—to break up or not. So instead, I asked her to describe what the relationship felt like. She paused and then said that it felt like being on a rollercoaster with too many ups and downs, extremes of feelings, too much uncertainty, and seemingly no safe way off until it came to its own natural end. This seemed like a pretty accurate metaphor in terms of capturing her experience. My next questions were, What do you want a relationship to feel like if you do not like the rollercoaster experience? and Can you get from rollercoaster to that other type of experience with this particular man? More important, perhaps, I asked, Do you want to do that kind of work *with him*? It is in moments like these when you know that the very language of how conflict is thought about and how it is done matters a great deal. You can certainly over-interpret language imagery and approach metaphors too mechanically and simplistically, but that central image allowed her to better articulate where she was in the relationship, where she would like to be, and how the conflict she was experiencing was an expression of the gaps between her desire and the lived reality of their relationship. Last, it provided a means of talking with me beyond the current conflict, and potentially with him, so that they could renegotiate the characteristics of the relationship or get off the "ride" and look for a different experience. Might

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her use of that metaphor be a place where they could dialogue openly as a couple about their relationship and negotiate effectively about what they want the experience to be like? I think that such a discussion might surprise both of them in some important ways.

Besides the overarching images and metaphors of conflicts like the one in my friend's story, the finer details of the language—how we talk in the midst of them and how we talk about them as we remember the experiences, as well as all of the nonverbal communication that we use to express conflict and communicatively construct it *as conflict*—make up the symbolic fabric of conflict. Also meaningful is the language not chosen or the language that could be developed to approach a conflict—more like dialogic negotiation, for example. In this chapter, we examine the relationship between the language that is used to express and engage in conflicts, the connection of that language to the meaning of the conflict, and the impact of language on their dynamics and results. Our objective is to become self-conscious about language so that we are able to understand the complex and multifaceted relationship between language choices and conflict processes and outcomes. Specifically, we will become conscious of the choices of language in conflict and the choices that might be made to manage it. I want you to apply the specific principles of dialogue and negotiation from the previous chapters to each of the stories and exercises in this chapter, wherever possible. The resulting sensitivity to language will provide a foundation for your analytical and creative skills for working through the concepts and exercises in the upcoming chapters.

Main topics and learning goals in this chapter:

- Language, intensity, energy, and meaning
- Metaphors, imagery, and symbolic fabric of conflict
- Speech, silence, and the possibility for dialogue
- Dialogic negotiation as conversational scripts
- Lessons from the field of practice

The following story helps illustrate the relationship between the meaning of the conflict and the form and content as well as the intensity of the communication. It also illustrates well the relationship between the language of the conflict and its broader familial, relational, and community context. This is an archetypal “barking dog story,” but it is a barking dog story with a twist in that you are given access to the deeper meaning of the conflict and the relationship between this deeper meaning for the participants as they communicate.

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❖ LANGUAGE, INTENSITY, ENERGY, AND MEANING

As you do your initial read through of the following story, try to imagine the reality of the everyday relationships within the seemingly tight-knit community of families. How can an old dog who barks a lot seemingly divide these people and lead to some quite intense episodes of conflict? How can such an incident lead to long-lasting distance and animosity between people who seemed so close? Perhaps there are clues to the intensity of the conflict language in the meaning of what Puddles, his behavior, and their reactions to that behavior represent symbolically. The behavior of barking too loudly is certainly annoying, but is it enough to account for the intense language of the conflict? If not, then you are obviously seeing clues to a deeper and more intensely meaningful conflict. In your read through, try to examine the clues to the intensity of the language and the relationship between that intensity and the meaning of the conflict for the people involved.

“Puddles” (Megan)

(Background)

The community I grew up in is a very small, very close-knit place. My neighborhood consists of only 10 houses. All of the neighbors know each other, and they are all very good friends. Two years after my family moved into the neighborhood, a man named Jerry and his family began building a house behind my family’s house. In the beginning, Jerry and my father were very close. They shared secrets about lawn care and gardening and discussed issues concerning the neighborhood. Jerry began to tell my father about his particular problems with the family that lived next to him—the Brown family. My father is good friends with the Brown family, and the situation with Jerry got very uncomfortable for him. Jerry ended up taking the Browns to court for the problems between them, and my father felt that it was completely unnecessary for him to do that.

After this incident, my father began to distance himself from Jerry. He also began noticing some of Jerry’s quirks as a neighbor. For example, Jerry building his fenced-in garden on our family’s property and his constant complaining about all of the other neighbors. The conversations between my father and Jerry became more like Jerry lecturing to my father. He began telling him how to take care of his garden, how to cut his grass, and even how to keep his pets. This caused a strain on the relationship between Jerry and my father because my father was friends with all of the other neighbors and because he is an adult and does not feel he needed someone telling him how to take care of his property. The situation created a lot of tension between them.

(The Conflict—Dad’s story)

It began one morning about 8 a.m. My wife had let out our 17-year-old Bassett hound—Puddles—outside and he began to bark. Being 17, Puddles had

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ODD (old-dog dementia). This caused him to bark a lot and often for no reason. When Puddles was let outside, he began to bark. After a couple of minutes of barking, our phone began to ring. Our neighbor Jerry was on the line.

"Bring your damn dog inside! He's waking Esther up," he snapped at my wife, without even greeting her.

My wife knew that Puddles was very loud, but because he was old and senile, she had no control over his barking. The other neighbors were very kind to Puddles and dealt with his barking because they knew how fragile his state was. When my wife told me about Jerry's phone call, I was furious. I didn't want to see or hear anything from Jerry anymore, and I hoped that he would not have the audacity to approach if he saw me.

Sunday morning, I was mowing my lawn, and Jerry came over to talk to me. As we were talking, I was not going to mention anything about Puddles, but then it happened. He began to talk about the animals in the neighborhood, and I knew what was coming. Jerry said,

"You know, Stuart, Puddles has been barking a lot lately; you need to pay that dog a little more attention."

I replied, "Well, Jerry, he is an old dog; he is 17 years old. When we let him outside, he barks; we pet him and he barks. We are trying, but sometimes he has spells where we just can't stop him barking. The vet said it was part of the ODD."

"You know, if you really loved that dog, you would put him to sleep," Jerry snapped back.

That was it. I exploded. I told Jerry everything I had been hiding inside since he built his garden on my property. When he told me to put my dog to sleep, it was like someone had just stabbed me through the heart with a knife. Anyone who knows me and my family knows how much I loved my pets, especially Puddles. We had a special bond. The only thought that kept running through my head was, who does he think he is, telling me that I should put my dog (who was like a son to me) to sleep. How dare he accuse me of being a bad pet owner? I began tearing into Jerry, berating him about having no right to tell anyone what was good and bad and how pets should be raised. When I had finished giving Jerry a piece of my mind, I stormed off, leaving Jerry with his jaw dropped in disbelief and an unfinished lawn. I stormed into my house, slamming the door behind me so hard that I saw my wife jump when I came in.

She looked up from the desk and said, "What's happened, what's wrong?"

I explained the whole story. We decided that it was no longer necessary to converse with Jerry or Esther, his wife. We even discussed moving to get away from the two of them. But we decided in the end simply to ignore them.

A few months later, Puddles's health took a turn for the worse. He began to have trouble even standing up by himself, not to mention the fact that he was almost completely blind and deaf. In the end, after a long discussion with our vet, we decided that it would be best for Puddles if we let him go. It was the hardest decision we ever had to make. I was losing a family member, and it was my decision that was causing the loss. A couple of weeks after we put Puddles down, I was in the yard doing yard work when Jerry approached me.

"Stuart, I haven't heard Puddles barking lately," he said.

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All I could say was, "That's because he's gone, Jerry. We had to put him down a couple of weeks ago." I walked away.

Jerry and I keep our distance for the most part. We rarely speak to each other. When we do speak, the conversations consist of hellos and goodbyes. We are no longer the close neighbors we used to be.

Use the discussion and questions that follow to complete the three interpretive steps described.

Step 1: Description of the Conflict Language

Go through the story and identify and describe each of the examples of intensely conflicted language between these people.

Step 2: Reduction to Essential Themes

Try to identify the underlying divisive theme for each intense language exchange as an expression of their conflicted relationships over Puddles. For example, which exchanges or outbursts are linked to themes such as intense dislike, anger, distance, lack of reasoned verbal expression of differences, or combinations of such themes? How do the various events in the conflict connect around those core meaningful themes?

Step 3: Interpretation of the Meaning of the Language

Interpret how the intense language and the underlying themes fit together to create a divisive and argumentative conflict that has layers of meaning. How does their talk connect to deeper relational or contextual themes, such as "insider" and "outsider-newcomer." How do their styles of communication result in specific unproductive dynamics and patterns in their conflict? How might they have negotiated their conflict more dialogically and effectively, and how would the talk of the conflict have been different with that approach? The following theoretical discussion of intensity and conflict and related questions will help you to flesh out this interpretation and think about your own conflict language more broadly.

One of the things that marks communication as conflicted is the presence of unusual levels of intensity (Jones, 2001). Intensity can manifest in many ways, both verbal and nonverbal (Frijda, Ortony, Sonnemans, & Clore, 1992; Jones & Remland, 1993; Noesner & Webster, 1997). For example, conflict is often marked by emotional language of various sorts. Such emotional language can actually be productive for the conflict. People will often not realize that you feel strongly unless you demonstrate that feeling through intense language that shows you have strong feelings. So language that expresses perceived division,

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personal experiences and emotions associated with the conflict, and personal wants and needs from the conflict can be very healthy—even if it is intensely expressed. Intense language can still be dialogic if it opens up communication and makes issues and topics available for negotiation.

The key is that the intensity of language ought to reflect the intensity of the meaning of the conflict. At one extreme is language that does not reflect true feelings; at the other is angry talk that can lead to incivility and even hate (Ellis, 2001; Whillock, 1995). Accusations, personal attacks, blame statements, profanity and name calling, angry outbursts, statements that focus on “I” as an expression of personal needs or stakes in the conflict, crying, screaming and shouting at the opposition or at members of your own side of the conflict, and so on are all ways of expressing that you are conflicting with that other person. These are usually examples of less effective forms of expression because they typically undermine dialogue, limit negotiation exchanges, personalize the conflict, and highlight divisions between people (Leets & Giles, 1997). Conflict is also often marked by the presence of intense nonverbal expressions of division and the frustration of being in conflict with the other person. For example, dramatic nonverbal and paralinguistic expressions, such as door slamming, shouting, glaring, gesturing rudely, and even ignoring people, are all expressions of intense conflict. These nonverbal expressions are ways of working out the energy of intense feelings that the people are not expressing verbally. They are good ways to let off steam. Sometimes they are used to stand in place of what might be much more effective and less ambiguous verbal communication.

Less dramatic forms of nonverbal communication may also show the intensity of feelings in a conflict. Avoiding people, ignoring them, reestablishing nonverbal and territorial boundaries, spending less time with the person, and so on are all nonverbal ways of showing conflict with people, such as the neighbors in the story, and the level of intensity of the conflict. If you suddenly decide to build a communicative fence or wall between you and the other person, you have symbolically marked your distance from them in ways that might not necessarily show how you feel, but they show that you feel differently about them and conflicted with them. They may also be ways of showing the other that you have intense feelings that you are not expressing verbally but that if something triggered you, you might, like preflight displays. They may also be ways of avoiding confrontation while showing a sense of conflict. This is a safety issue in conflict. People instinctively wish to avoid dangerous confrontation that might lead to injury or death and

yet they want to express their desire for a confrontation. These forms of intense expression allow that balance to occur and sometimes can actually invite the conflict to open up. How often do we show the other that we are conflicted with them nonverbally—drifting away, not responding to them as we might, and so on—as a way of inviting them to ask us what is wrong? Go back through the story and identify as many of these dramatic and less dramatic verbal and nonverbal ways of expressing the conflict and try to identify the thematic function that these expressions served.

Conflict language that expresses anger, deep dislike, hatred, or threats to take the conflict toward violence are particularly important to examine as these show a vibrant intensity in the perceived opposition between the people in conflict. This is the notion of interference that was part of our definition of conflict in Chapter 1. These forms of talk are usually clues to a double-bind relationship between the people in which they perceive the presence or even existence of the other as fundamental to the conflict. “It is the other person’s fault,” and “that person is in my way,” are typical sentiments during such conflicts. They may also be clues that the meaning of the deeper thematic differences between the people are not being effectively negotiated. Examine the story in particular for these especially intense expressions. How might these expressions reflect the deeper conflicts between the families in that particular neighborhood?

Such intensity is usually generated by the meaning of the divisions between the participants of the conflict. Of course, intense language can be a manifestation of psychological issues or personality. We have all probably known people who are volatile and ready to take a conflict to an intense level without much provocation. This is not what we are exploring, although it is an important issue to consider when the meaning and the intensity do not seem to match. The more personal and deep the meaning of the issues people are divided on, then the more intense will be the language that they share. Intensity can evolve as the participants perceive difference and opposition to be growing. As a conflict escalates, the intensity can take on a life of its own and grow along with the escalation of differences.

Intensity can also be mediated by family and cultural contexts. There are families in which intense language, even profanity, is a common way of expressing their conflicts. This can be good if they are able to channel this intensity into clearly expressing conflicted issues. It can be bad if the volatile expressions are used to repress communication or abuse people. There are families in which the expression of emotions, even associated with conflicts, is much more subdued, muted, or even avoided. This can be good if it means that conflicted issues are placed on

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the metaphoric table in reasonable ways. However, passive-aggressive forms of intensity can predominate in such families, and this typically leads to cycles in which intensity is displaced and redirected into such things as sabotage and behind-the-scenes wrangling. The energy of the conflicted meaning has to go somewhere.

There is a balance between intensity of emotion and reasoned discussion that, if done well, is ideal dialogic negotiation. It is ideal because you need the intensity to help express and communicate differences and you also need reasonable discussion to then negotiate the issues in the conflict. As you look beneath the story of Puddles, what clues do you get that there is a lot more going on in this little neighborhood and between these families than a dispute over a barking dog? Of course, for Puddles's owners, he is not just a barking dog, he is a member of the family. Perhaps this aspect of meaning—what Puddles represents—and how the other family relates to that meaning might be at the heart of this conflict. I think it is, but you will need to untangle the interrelationships of intensity and meaning as they all connect together in the conflict story.

Intensity is also important in accounting for the evolution and dynamics of a conflict as well as its outcomes. For example, if the conflict starts to center around one meaning, this focus will move the conflict in particular escalatory spirals that will reduce the level of reasonableness between people. Such a move will also make the motives of others seem darker and more personal, reduce the perspective taking and negotiation that allows dialogic progress on the conflict, and means that much of what could be said that might actually be very valuable in propagating understanding and that might show connections and similarities between the people is lost. When the conflict takes on the form and content that it does, the meaning is led in particular directions *and not in others*. Intensity of language breeds intensity of the expression and meaning of conflict between the people in it. For example, threats often lead to more threats, and so on. What is *not* expressed when the intensity takes the conflict in a particular direction is important for us to consider. For example, we do not know if there is a particular reason why Esther being woken up is a particularly deep issue for the neighbors. Might there be a good reason why the neighbors are so upset, that the other family never considers? How does the communication between them ensure that such personal experiences that might be very important are never discussed and therefore never make it into the story? The following discussion questions will enable you to examine the relationship of intensity, meaning, and the conflict over Puddles. Use your answers to these questions to complete the three interpretive steps given earlier.

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Discussion Questions

- What intense verbal expressions are productive or effective in expressing strong feelings in this conflict?
- How well does the intense language express divisions, personal experience, emotions, and personal wants and needs?
- What less effective forms of intense verbal expression did you notice happening in the conflict? What impact did each of these have on the conflict in terms of undermining dialogue, personalizing the conflict into an us-versus-them form, and highlighting division?
- What dramatic forms of nonverbal communication did you witness in the conflict? Are there other examples of this that you might expect to occur in this conflict but that we do not see directly reported in the story?
- What functions do these dramatic expressions perform: Are they letting off steam, replacing much needed verbal communication, or both?
- What less dramatic forms of intense nonverbal communication are evident in the conflict?
- What function do these less dramatic expressions perform in either escalating or helping to move the conflict forward?
- Are there any particularly vibrant and divisive verbal and nonverbal expressions, such as of anger, hate, and so on? How do these expressions relate to the underlying thematic division between people?
- What are the more fundamental divisions between the two families, and how do these differences fuel the intensity of the specific conflict over Puddles?
- How does the way that the conflict progresses show that the important perceptions and experiences and facts are not expressed or understood, and how does this affect the outcome and level of satisfaction with that outcome?
- How might the participants have handled the language of their conflict more effectively in expressing and negotiating the deeper thematic differences between them as well as with reference to the more specific example of the conflict over Puddles?
- How might you have acted and spoken if you found yourself in a similar conflict? How much would you follow the advice you might give these two families, and how much might you do the same as they did?

It is clear from this first story that there is a close and multifaceted relationship between the language used in conflict and to represent conflicts and the personal and contextual meaning of the conflict itself. The meaning of a conflict structures the language and the intensity of the language that is used in it. At the same time, the language that is available to us and that we habitually choose to engage in conflict with also structures the dynamics and end result of those conflicts. The next story illustrates how a deeper understanding of this twofold relationship of language and meaning can be understood and learned from.

❖ METAPHORS, IMAGERY, AND
SYMBOLIC FABRIC OF CONFLICT

Much has been written about the role of metaphors and language imagery in communication (e.g., see Koch & Deetz, 1981). When thinking about such language devices specifically in terms of conflict discourse, you should recognize that metaphors and imagery do not simply add adornment and beauty to the language (Black, 1979; Davidson, 1978; Ricoeur, 1967). They certainly do add beauty to what you say and how it sounds, and they certainly help with bringing to life the stories of our conflicts, but that isn't all they do. The following poem was submitted as part of a writing assignment in which the student was directed to consciously use language devices to bring to life the meaning of the conflict experience. Recognize that this is not necessarily how we typically talk about and engage in our conflicts. Much of the time we are actually more or less unconscious of such image choices. This is the point I am making here: The language we use to engage in conflict and to represent those processes and experiences in narrative form provides a concrete way of expressing and perhaps guiding the meaning and dynamics of the conflict (Kellett, 1987). Hence, language provides the symbolic fabric of conflict. Creative language devices, such as metaphor, may be quite fundamental or archetypal to the practices of doing and representing our conflicts in ways that are important to reach our goals to openly express ourselves and negotiate from that standpoint.

First, as you examine the poem, I want you to consider how the creative language devices enable the poet, Jen, to express the depth and intensity of her experience both for her and for us, as the audience for the communication. This is a crucial dialogic skill. Consider each image

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and what she is specifically trying to communicate through it. Consider also what the story might have been like without some or all such devices. How could she have portrayed her experience and communicated it to you *as her experience* without such language? To help you to address these questions of language expression and meaning, I have highlighted as many of the more obvious poetic and vivid language devices as I could see. Go through each of them and reflect on how the choice of the image enables her to bring to life some aspect of this specific conflict or some aspect of the more deeply conflicted long-term relationships with her mother, with herself, and with the men with whom she has intimate relationships.

Second, at the same time that language provides a vivid and evocative fabric through which to create and represent conflicts, it may also limit her expression and perhaps even structures her experience of conflict in important ways. Read through your ideas about how the language enables her expression and think this time about ways that these images have implications for how she sees herself, how she continues to have a particular kind of relationship with her mother, and how her relationships with men connect to her conflict language habits. One of the discussion issues we engage through this exercise in my conflict class is the way that the structure of a poem and the need for vivid and poetic language creates structural constraints on how the experience is expressed and portrayed—how the story gets told. Students talk about how the need for rhyme and rhythm and consistent imagery in their poems sometimes structures the very ways that they are able to represent their experience. This vivid experience with language often leads to important reflection on how that is also true of more everyday and less poetically driven representations. How does the language of how we do conflict in our culture impact how we engage in and represent it? How does your language affect how you do it? This is an enormously important question as it has implications for examining the way that our culture and its predominant language forms structure how we see and how we engage in conflict. It also has implications for each of us as individuals or from the perspective of particular relationships to examine the habits and taken-for-granted ways of seeing and doing conflict that are predominant. This in turn sparks the question of how such habits of language limit us in ways that we can address and learn from. It also, perhaps, brings up the question of how our symbol systems provide ways of seeing and doing conflict that we are not even conscious of but that are important in structuring how humans do conflict and certainly how conflict is culturally mediated by language and personal habits.

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Third, it should be possible, once you have explored some of the enabling and constraining functions of language, to reflect on the ways that Jen and her mother might examine and question the language practices of their conflicts together. There may be ways that the language Jen used to represent her relationship might be questioned for their effects on their relationship—likewise with her relationship to men, and how she does conflict more generally in her life. It would be useful for her to reflect on how her habits of language and representation enable and limit her. How do her habits reflect or differ from our discussion of dialogic negotiation? It would also be useful for her to examine how her cultural and family background has impacted her language practices and representational choices (how she talks during conflicts and how she portrays and remembers them through conflict stories, respectively). It may be possible to use key elements of her representation of her conflict with her mother as a starting point for dialogue between them. It might be useful, if extremely difficult, for Jen's mother to read the poem. Perhaps she could respond with her own account of their relationship. This might be the basis of some productive and even transformative dialogic negotiation between them. It might make things worse, too, at least in the short term, but at least they would have some deeper understanding of the long-term and dysfunctional cycle they are maintaining through their language practices. For Jen, this understanding seems particularly important, in that her conflict with her mother seems to be central to her sense of identity and the source of issues in her relationships with men.

Finally, it might be possible to use vivid and evocative language to create alternative visions for her relationship with her mother, herself, and with men through changing the habits and practices of how she engages in conflict and how she represents conflict. Think about what some alternative images for her conflicts and her relationships might be and what it would take for her and her mother to create alternative images and then stories. For example, instead of using the story archetype of her overcoming the villainous actions of the mother, might it be possible for them to work toward a new story that moves the relationship forward? Look for the seeds of such images in the images she does use. Very often the images used also contain or connect to the desire for a different or oppositional image. This creative function of language can enable new relational stories based on new images and metaphors and different communicative practices. These might be idealistic goals, but they are worth exploring, if only to understand the power of language as the symbolic fabric of your own conflicts.

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Here is some important background to the story behind the poem: Jen sees her mother as a very bitter person who has had a lot of things go wrong in her life. She feels that her mother had conditioned or “designed” her to be someone who does not get close to people as a protective move so that she would not go through what her mother had experienced in her life. Jen was never clear to me about what those experiences were. Jen had two abusive relationships because that was the type of man who reflected her experience with her mother. She chose men who reinforced the belief that she was stupid, ugly, and could never be loved. Then she decided to date really good men, but when there was a conflict, she blamed herself, to re-create those personal doubts. The poem evokes the moment when she told her mother that she was dating a really good man and that she was not going to follow what her mother had conditioned her to expect anymore. Her mother reacted angrily and told her that he would probably not care about her, even though she had never met him.

To My Mother (*Jen*)

I won't be your *Frankenstein* any longer
 After all the years, all the lies and *propaganda*
 Your greatest creation has an independent mind
I've shattered the empty cup of life you gave me, and I'm stronger
 I will no longer live my life alone always looking behind
 The self-loathing and destructive ways you taught me
 Are far behind me now, I have found my free will
 I know who I am and what I passionately refuse to be
 I am a person with intelligence and a big heart, I am real
The path you designed for me is not the one I will follow
All those years of beating me into your reflection
 Have left me *craving desperately for a life less shallow*
 I'm all grown up now and I've got my own protection
 The *frigidity of my childhood* will no longer *haunt* me
 Someday I will be able to trust a man, maybe today
The scars you composed inside and out will no longer be
 the reason I can't let anyone close enough just so I run away
 I will no longer live in fear of someone finding out
 I have a *soft heart that breaks as easily as others'*
 Today is the day I tell you what I am all about
 I'm going to have a life that's my own not my mother's
 I will not be afraid of losing control and loving a man
 And allow him the opportunity to love me in return
 Maybe I will start today—*today is the day I take a stand*
 I know that I still have so much about life to learn
 I think that this is a good start for the rest of my life

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I will reveal myself to the person who is supposed to know me best
I know that I may be throwing myself onto a double-bladed knife
But isn't that what life and love is all about—taking a risk?
 If I get hurt, so what—life is about hurting and loving and being better
 for the pain
 If I never take the risk I will be deprived of what life has to propose
 I want to learn and love and *if hurting is part of that then come on*
let it rain
 I'm tired of protecting myself from feelings and who really knows
 Maybe I will be able to prove all that my mom said was wrong . . .
 Maybe someone will love me and maybe I am not such a bad daughter
 Maybe I will find my own special place in the world to belong
 As painful as it may be for you mother, *I won't be your personal martyr*
 Maybe I was supposed to be your *vessel for retaliation*
 Because *life dealt you a really bad hand*
But you will have to find your saving grace in another occupation
 Because the *revenge vocation has no merit where I stand*
Your savage words no longer strike me as volcanic as before
I am resigned for my steps on this path to be lighter
I will not try to bear it like a scarlet letter any more
 Because *I am a never-give-up prize fighter*
And I have a lot more rounds left for me in this world

Use the following questions to organize your interpretation of the language and meaning of the poem into the following interpretive steps.

Step 1: Description

Identify and describe the important language expressions that express Jen's conflicted relationship with her mother. What underlying relational issues and problems do these expressions connect together to express?

Step 2: Reduction to Central Themes

In what ways do Jen's conflict with her mother and the way she expresses it both enable and limit the dynamics and outcomes of their conflict in important ways? How does their talk to and about each other both enable and limit their communication?

Step 3: Interpretation of Meaning

In what ways does the language of Jen's conflict enable and limit the *meaning* of her conflicts with herself, her mother, and with men? How can they, as mother and grown-up daughter, question and possibly change the language of their conflict together?

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How does the language of Jen's conflict function as a symbolic fabric that can be rewoven to look more like dialogic negotiation? What are the relational barriers to this goal?

Discussion Questions for Analyzing Jen's Poem

- How do each of the images and metaphors enable her to capture the depth and intensity of her conflict experience?
- How important are each of these images? Are there other ways she could communicate the same experiences and feelings?
- In what specific ways do you think that her choices to represent the conflict through these images might limit her understanding and experience of the conflict?
- In what ways do you think that how she represents the conflict hints at why her conflict with her mother is an ongoing and difficult cyclical pattern?
- Where do you think these habits of representation and the ways of doing conflict that they evoke come from, in her family background and in our culture?
- How can the enabling and limiting function of language as shown in Jen's story be something that you can learn from in terms of your practices and their cultural and contextual (even ideological) backgrounds?
- What patterns and habits of Jen and her mother do you think that she is still unaware of or that remain invisible to her because they are part of the taken-for-granted-ness that language embodies?
- How does the poem seem to provide a good way for Jen to examine the impact of her family background, culture, and experience on her conflict practices and ways of representing those practices?
- How might the language of her conflict story be a good starting point for her and her mother to dialogue about their relationship?
- What are the key images, issues, and questions that the poem generates for you, that you would use to facilitate dialogic negotiation between them?
- What images, issues, or questions do you think would enable Jen and her mother to talk about commonalities (first), and what would enable them to talk about differences between them?
- How might Jen and her mother use language images or metaphors to evoke a new or alternative archetype that moves their conflict forward or that enables them to vividly and clearly share their sense of division, if that is where the dialogue ends up?

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- What are the images already in Jen's narrative that might prove to be the seeds of change as you facilitate their talk?
- If Jen was more or less unconscious of the language practices of her conflict with her mother before the poem exercise, what lessons or *aha* moments do you think the poem might lead to for her?
- How did her poem and the analysis of language used in the poem enable you to think about the creative and limiting effects of your own conflict language practices and how you might learn from them and possibly change your habits and representational choices?

Having discussed the important role of language imagery in making vivid and real the experiences of our conflicts and how we might use language as the symbolic vehicle for guiding dialogic negotiation and change, we move on to discuss the equally important role of the relationship between speech and silence in conflict language.

❖ SPEECH, SILENCE, AND THE POSSIBILITY FOR DIALOGUE

It might seem unusual to talk about silence in a chapter about language use. However, as you will hopefully see, silence—*what is not said*—is intimately tied to the meaning of *what is said*. Both speech and silence are also intimately tied to *what could be said* (Lanigan, 1988). Hence the idea, also Merleau-Ponty's (1962/1979), that silence is pregnant with possibilities. Silence intersects with language in some important ways for us. First, we rarely have all the language at hand to capture how we feel in something as often personally and emotionally charged as a conflict. Second, sometimes we know that any language we do choose is charged with relational and even cultural politics. So, much of the time we use what is at hand for us. Third, sometimes all we have is silence because we do not know how to talk about something that is out of our realm of experience but that may be central to someone else's existence. We may also be afraid of how we might be interpreted and where the conflict might go from there. Fourth, sometimes we do not know what to say because we do not know exactly how we feel. We recognize that choosing something to say may actually shape how we feel and will certainly shape the interpretations that others make about how we feel and hence will affect the direction of the conflict. Fifth, sometimes we do not know exactly how we feel because we do not know how to use language to express what it is we do feel. We may have never had such a conversation before. In everyday life, we feel comfortable most of

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the time because we know what to say. Conflicts often throw us into unusual, highly charged, and very important conversations. And yet, because of issues and stakes similar to the ones listed earlier, we are effectively paralyzed into silence. The conflict gets mismanaged and lingers and often does damage for extended periods of time, sometimes to aspects of the relationship that have nothing much to do with the specific conflict. Such is the case with Jamie's story that follows, captured in poetic form. Silence, we shall see, is a crucial part of language use. Silence is richly informative in that at once it reveals the constraints of language, the limitations of the people in the conflict, and the underlying or hidden possibilities for alternative forms of talk that might be more productive between them.

I want you to reflect on the crucial role of the relationship between speech and silence in the meaning of conflicts and in revealing possibilities for dialogic negotiation that are held in that pregnant silence but that might be born through speech. First, carefully consider the spoken words and actions that are described, evoked, and hinted at in the conflict story. Describe the characteristics of the communication in the family over the specific issue of Jamie being a lesbian daughter. Describe how each of the family members reacted to her news and how those reactions affected the flow of the relationship between the family members on the issue. Try to understand the things that have been said and done and that have come together to create the broken ties that are felt as very real relational effects of the conflict. As I have said, sometimes what is said in conflicts is both crucial in affecting the ebb and flow or escalation and possible integration of the conflict. Similarly, it is important to understand the meaning of what is said and done communicatively. As you describe the reactions, counterreactions, and evolution of the conflict (and devolution of the relationships), try to imagine why people said and did what they did. How much of what was said and done is related to the limitations of what people are familiar with and comfortable with? How much of it is based on the inability of Jamie's parents to relate to her experiences and her sense of self? How much of it is based on judgmentalism or other darker motives, if any? As you dig beneath what is said and done, consider what is not said and done, because in the relationship between the two is a deeper interpretive opportunity for you to understand their conflict and suggest ways to move it forward.

Second, I want you to carefully consider the silence in the story. Look beneath what is said and done and read between the lines and in the white space around the story, and you will uncover clues in the relationship between that silence and what actually manifests in communication. Silence is never neutral but rather is pregnant with possibilities,

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as I have discussed. In the silence are the choices not made and clues to the reasons why. What conversations never happened between these people that could have and perhaps should have? Why has so much possibility for closeness and love been closed off into silence for so many years? Go back to the moments surrounding the actual conflict. In Jamie's mother's sobs and cries and her father's run from the issue, there are clues in these communicative actions to choices not made that could have been made. Of course the people in the conflict may not be aware of those choices not made. They may not have the skill to express themselves any other way. What they do say may also be exactly representative and expressive of how they feel. At the same time, however, closing off possibilities and relegating them to silence may involve conscious decisions. It may also involve specific cultural and contextual factors surrounding the place and time of the conflict that feed into its form and content. This is a crucial aspect of silence—the things surrounding the conflict that are not so much in it but which might nonetheless have a strong influence on choices made. The first thing Jamie's father thought might have been, "How do I get out of this discussion as quickly as possible?" Such decisions that lie behind the talk are quite revealing—if you can tap into them. This is particularly useful to consider when you are interviewing people for their stories. They reveal contextual and personal constraints, motives, limitations, and so on if you can uncover them. This is a big "if" because people are often not fully conscious of what decisions they did not make and why they did not make them, and they rarely remember the minutiae of their thoughts and strategies behind how they acted in the conflict. Yet it is crucial to try to reach into the silences for clues to what did happen and therefore for clues to what might happen differently in the future. Explicating silence and its relationship to speech as it reveals the meaning of a conflict will stretch your interpretive skills and your ability to piece together the picture that is the meaning of the conflict *for the participants*.

Finally, it is important to examine the story for hope and to think about ways that it can be encoded into their communication as they might talk at this point, 12 years after the initial conflict erupted. My hope would be that they could talk before someone dies. I think there is enough hope in what has and has not been said so far and how Jamie talks about her family that this conflict could move in a productive direction. Your task is to think about shifting the potential energy that has been subordinated beneath the surface for 12 years into kinetic form with a content that connects that energy into dialogic negotiation. It is possible to see how any conversation between them might end up taking them back to the same old judgments and hurts. This is the volatile character of their conflict.

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To develop productive dialogue, go back through the characteristics of what is said and done in the conflict, how this speech is connected to the possibilities that did not happen, and the reasons you think those things did not happen (constraints, limitations, hidden possibilities). From the relationship between the speech and the silence, develop some possibilities for how they might move forward from here. For example, if the reasons why Jamie's parents reacted as they did were related to their sense of disappointment that their daughter did not follow their values and beliefs in building a good life for herself, perhaps they can work to recognize what is good about her life nonetheless. At the same time, perhaps Jamie can work to understand that her parents' reactions were connected to their cultural context and worldview and that their disappointment can be understood in that way and not so much as a weapon used to attack her. In this way, the relationship between speech and silence reveals new communication opportunities. Spend time bringing to the surface all of the possibilities that you discover and develop them into a list of possible topics and new ways of seeing what has become an old and entrenched, but definitely not hopeless, conflict.

As you do your initial read-through of the poem, imagine how these otherwise caring and close family members might talk when there is no script that they know of to engage the topic. How might they create a dialogic negotiation in the form of a conversation to help them as they fumble for the right language to meet on the topic? How might they do the conflict effectively when it is so loaded with meaning? Why does it end up in silence, accusations, heated argument, personal attacks, and, most of all, long numbing distance in which no one makes the first move to reconcile? How can they find the language to heal from a break that seems as deep as this one and is so tied to parental expectations and disappointment on all sides? Perhaps in the interconnections of speech and silence—the spaces between what is said and what is not said—you have discovered some of the clues to what *could* be said. Engage the questions below to help you explicate this relationship between speech and silence and the connection between this relationship and possibilities for communication.

"Broken Ties" (Jamie)

(Background)

I was raised in a very small town in Northern Indiana. It is the kind of town where everybody knows everybody, and everybody knows everybody else's business. I am the middle of three girls. Staci, my older sister, was considered the "pre-madonna" of the family. Megan, my younger sister, was considered the bookworm.

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I was really neither. I was the tomboy of the family. My sisters and I were very much loved and cared for. My family believed very strongly in having close relationships with one another. My family was very passionate as well as compassionate—the kind of family who would walk to the ends of the earth for one another.

I carried a heavy weight on my shoulders, though, in that I bore the ambitions and dreams of my parents. I was to finish high school, which I did! Go to college on a basketball scholarship, which I did! I was to be a leader, which I was! And I was supposed to marry my high school sweetheart, which I did not! And this is where my poetic narrative begins.

Broken Ties

All families fight and fuss and argue and disagree,
 But when I was 17 a conflict arose to a much higher degree.
 My mom had found some letters, and there it did not end.
 She read on to find out that the girl was more than just a friend.
 Though I was not ready, out of the closet I came.
 Scared to death of what I'd face, I had disrespected our family name.
 But what the hell, there I was, with the world all my stage.
 Yet never did I consider what my parents felt . . . unadulterated rage.
 My mother questioned why and wondered where she went wrong.
 Her sobbing tears and heartbreak revealed like an old country song.
 Dad simply acted like it was just a bad dream,
 But it was obvious to all that he wanted to break down and scream.
 They called in reinforcements, my sister and my grandma,
 But much to my surprise they said, "Don't worry, honey,
 there's nothing wrong with you at all!"
 My parents were like lost children trying to find their way.
 Confused, disappointed, and angry, because their daughter was gay.
 Through hindsight I tried to explain this is how I'd always been,
 But mom and dad couldn't take it, for I was living in sin.
 So, out of the house I went to find a brand new life.
 No friends, no parents . . . I had been stabbed by a friendly knife.
 I couldn't believe how all of this happened, but I was praying for it to end.
 I needed my family and I prayed, "Dear Lord, help me . . . an answer you
 must send!"
 Days became weeks, then months, and then years.
 I had to face my challenges and wipe away my hidden tears.
 I stood strong in my values and my beliefs.
 Never really realizing my parents experienced grief.
 So it was on that day that I broke the ties that bind.
 I searched for myself and the answers I only hoped to find.
 Things have calmed down but they will never be the same,
 And though I have dealt with some of it, I still carry the blame.
 It has been 12 years ago since this ugly conflict reared its ugly head.
 We will probably never speak of it, at least not until after one of us is dead.

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Use the following interpretive steps to organize and interpret the answers to the following discussion questions that are in addition to the ones integrated into the foregoing discussion. The steps and related questions should enable you to explicate the relationship between speech and silence in Jamie's family conflict and to explore the possibilities for new or different conversations between these people based on that relationship between speech and silence.

Step 1: Description of Speech and Silence

Describe the speech between these family members. What is talked about and with what impact on the conflict and the people in it? Describe the silence between the family members that the speech points to. What is not talked about and with what impact on the conflict and the people in it?

Step 2: Reduction to Relationship of Speech and Silence

Explicate the constraints, the limitations of the people, and the possibilities revealed to you between the speech and the silence. What are the central oppositions between what happens in the conflict and what does not happen?

Step 3: Interpretation of the Meaning

Interpret the meaning of the conflict in terms of what could be but is not yet talked about. What possibilities in the silence show you what meaning is lived by the participants and what some alternative approaches might be for them in dealing with their conflict so that it might move toward taking on a new meaning for them?

Discussion Questions for Interpreting "Broken Ties"

- What are the characteristics of how these family members talked to each other before this particular conflict?
- How did each of them react to the news of Jamie being gay through their verbal and nonverbal communication about the issue?
- How did these reactions and patterns of communicating in the conflict create what appears to be a deep and unresolved conflict?
- What details of the story and of their relationships might lead you to have the hope that this conflict might be productively addressed, even this many years later?
- What ways of reacting and ways of talking were negated—never happened—because of the choices that were made?

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- Why did certain possibilities for handling the conflict differently remain in the realm of silence? How were these silences related to constraints, skill limitations, and possibilities that remained hidden?
- How is the meaning of the conflict as the expression of several factors coming together, revealed by the way the conflict was handled and the things that remained silent and avoided?
- How does this meaning suggest possible, realistic ways of approaching the conflict that might take it from this point of distance and strained relationships through dialogic negotiation to something more fulfilling and reminiscent of their preconflict relationships?

Having examined language practices for clues to the possibilities that are embodied in the silence of a story—the stories not told and all of the language practices that might have been and that could be—we move on to examine what those dialogic forms of language might look like, as personified by Jamie’s communication with her father. By contrast we will also examine what communication looks like when it is definitely not dialogic negotiation, as personified by Dana’s grandmother in the poem that follows. In the next section, we link the ideas of presence (father), absence (grandmother), and possibility (her grandmother becoming more like her father) to our goal of searching for opportunities for dialogic negotiation, by showing what such alternative language actually looks like, as represented and personified in her poetic account.

❖ DIALOGIC NEGOTIATION AS CONVERSATIONAL SCRIPTS

The following poem shows the power of language to create differences that matter and the power of dialogue to explore and negotiate those differences. As you engage with the strongly evocative imagery and the powerfully emotional conflict that this poem evokes, I want you to compare and contrast the ways of talking that are practiced by Dana’s grandma and by her father. I want you to explore what it is about her father’s communication style and the content of his talk that led their relationship to where it is today. I also want you to explore the differences between the father-daughter communication and the grandmother-granddaughter communication as a paradigm exemplar of much of the dialogue and negotiation principles we have discussed so far in Part I of this book (see also Goodall & Kellett, 2004; Kellett & Dalton, 2001).

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In your first reading of the poem, notice how Dana's grandmother's words make the differences between Dana and the others real and how they create the value judgment that makes a difference to the lived-reality of their relationships. The narrator is biracial, and her grandmother appears to dislike her for it. Why would her grandmother be so seemingly hateful about an issue such as this? What symbolic value does it have for her? Does it perhaps represent a shame or a lowering of the family's social status in some way? Dana is insulted in front of others while the other grandchildren are favored. Notice how Dana refuses to communicate with her for 7 years. The rift between them has to be connected in some ways to their communication relationship together.

Also as you read the poem, examine Dana's father's relationship with her and try to document the clues in the poem that indicate that he values her experience, understands her feelings, and is trying to develop a solution to their family conflict that engages her perspective and his own. Her father's forgiving manner and acceptance of his mother's attitudes do seem to lead to more positive patterns of talk between them. Her grandma's actions had caused her inner conflict and caused her to question herself, and yet her father seems to be more accepting. Her color will not wash out—hence the laundry image. Her dad is white and her mother is black, and yet, through the image of the matching sock, she visualizes and perfectly captures the experience of matching with her dad. She says that she used the metaphor of mismatching socks to describe how she felt. She felt like the sock that came out of the laundry with no mate. She looked for someone biracial who could relate to her but never found anyone who knew exactly how she felt. Her dad let her know that even though he did not know how she felt, he gave her the support and love she needed. She also recognizes that her grandma—an elderly Southern white woman—was probably reflecting the era when the mixing of races was more taboo, and she probably felt she somehow failed as a mother when her son defied her and Dana was born. Perhaps her grandmother wanted her to absorb the shame that she felt. Her grandma was the matriarch of the family and was able to define who Dana was and how she was viewed. Dana seems to have been made to feel that because she did not match, she did not belong, and therefore she ended up feeling like an outcast. Notice how she had little to no contact with that (white) side of the family. Use the questions that follow the story to explicate a comparison of conflict communication styles between that of the grandmother and that of her father. This comparison should lead to some useful insights into

the characteristics and qualities of dialogic negotiation as a style of doing conflict. It should also lead to insight into the way that such differences are often represented by differences in key language practices that then find their way into our conflict stories.

Looking for My Matching Sock in the Laundry (*Dana*)

I never knew that I did not MaTcH
Never saw differences between them and me.
It took my grandmother's words in order for me to see.
But from the day she spoke those words
So full of hate, disgust
The difference became so clear,
My five year old heart began to bust.
Grandma would explain to others
That my tan was year round.
I had never noticed that compared to hers
Mine was extremely brown.
And Christmas after Christmas she had gifts for my brothers
And never any for me.
Daddy always sent them all back
And refused to let it be.
See, I never knew I did not MaTcH.
That sense of belonging I had was rocked.
And for many years afterwards
All communication with her was blocked.
She had made me feel like that sock.
Searching for the missing mate.
And all the while her echoing words
Would be filled with so much hate.
Daddy wrapped his arms around me
And soothed away the pain.
He described how his love for me
was anything but shame.
So even if I thought my mate would match
On the outside a little more
Daddy and I are close as can be,
Mated and tucked away in the drawer.

Use the following interpretive steps to organize the answers to the discussion questions. This will enable you to clearly articulate the relationship between the presence and absence of particular style and content elements of conflict language that contribute to the experience and outcomes of Dana's conflict.

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Step 1: Description of Communication Styles

Describe the characteristics of her grandma's communication with Dana. Describe, also, the characteristics of her father's communication with her as it is pointed to and highlighted by that of her grandma.

Step 2: Reduction to Thematic Differences

Explicate the essential thematic differences between the two forms of conflict communication evoked in the poem. Specifically, try to point out how Dana's grandma's communication as the absence of dialogic negotiation differs from her father's communication as the presence of dialogic negotiation. What makes the two styles important as differences?

Step 3: Interpretation of Communication Styles

Interpret how different styles of doing conflict impact its process and outcomes. How does the presence and absence of dialogic negotiation account for the differing quality of communication and outcomes of Dana's conflicts and to the enduring experience and quality of her relationships?

Discussion Questions for Explicating Dana's Poem

- In going through the poem carefully, how would you describe the characteristics of how Dana's grandmother talks to and about her?
- What particular language is used by her grandma to express her thoughts and feelings toward Dana?
- How does each of these characteristics of communication and language use practiced by her grandma affect Dana's thoughts and feelings?
- How do these effects in turn affect the communication between Dana and her grandma?
- How are all of these practices and their effects brought together and represented in the central imagery and metaphor of the poem?
- What do these images and central metaphor tell you about the family and their main dysfunctions relationally?
- Might the central images also be used as a way of opening up dialogic space between Dana and her grandmother or between conflicting parts of the family, thus allowing an exchange of concessions and demands in negotiation?
- How would you encourage such dialogic negotiation scripts to be developed, and how would you use the poetics of her

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account as a starting point for examining the origins, affects, and possibilities for change in the family relationships?

- How would you describe each of the characteristics of how her father relates to her?
- How do these characteristics of communication affect her relationship with her father and her sense of self?
- What lessons might her grandmother be able to learn from her own son in terms of the language that can be used to approach conflicts more closely to our ideal of dialogic negotiation?
- How does her father model the characteristics of dialogic negotiation and an approach to the conflict through the meaning of the conflict for Dana?
- What lessons might you learn about your own language characteristics and practices conflict engagement? In what ways are you like Dana's grandma, and in what ways are you like her dad? In what ways or in what particular conflict would you like to be more like her dad if you could be?
- Imagine that you were helping this family to reconcile and rebuild their damaged relationships. How would you develop the conversation so that you would use the characteristics of her father's communication as the presence of dialogic negotiation and her grandma's communication as the absence of dialogic negotiation, to guide and to be guidelines for those conversations? Develop these characteristics into script form. For example, you should talk in the following ways: _____, and you should not talk in the following ways: _____.

Having examined some of the important ways that language, as the symbol system we all use to engage in and represent our conflicts, interconnects with the expression and structuring of the issues, themes, and experiences of conflicts, we move on to enable you to examine these issues through several exercises. These exercises push you to use the ideas of this chapter to learn from your own field of practice as a communicator.

❖ LESSONS FROM THE FIELD OF PRACTICE: EXERCISES
FOR EXPLORING THE LANGUAGE OF CONFLICT

Work through the following exercises that will challenge you to apply the principles from this chapter into your everyday life in which you practice conflict. The exercises are designed to get you to work closely

with and look closely at the language through which you engage in conflicts and through which you construct your stories. You will also be challenged to think about the representational issues associated with the language of your conflicts.

Exercise 1: Personal Poetic Account

Adapt a conflict that you have experienced into a poetic account as three of the stories in this chapter illustrate. This could take the form of a poem, sonnet, song, or any other form that gets you to think carefully about how to capture and represent experience through the poetic form of language. As you develop your poetic account, carefully bear in mind the following five guidelines.

- a. Use evocative language. Poetic language is different from everyday forms of talk that tend to be more descriptive in style. Focus on using wording and phrasing that capture and communicate the essence or core meaning of the conflict.
- b. Use precise language. The wording of your poetic account should be precise and efficient, with everything designed carefully around communicating the central meaning of the conflict experience.
- c. Use poetic devices. Metaphors, similes, and vivid and emotional imagery that appeal to the senses often characterize poetic representations. Use these where they help you to communicate the meaning of the conflict.
- d. Carefully compose the structure of the poem to parallel and evoke the meaning. Develop repetitions, parallelisms, alliteration, antithesis, or rhyming patterns and organize the language around particular rhythms if these help you to evoke the meaning of the conflict in important ways. The musical structure of the poem should help to evoke the meaning of the conflict.
- e. Communicate a central thematic idea. You are trying to evoke the meaning of a conflict so that someone reading the poem might understand at least some of that meaning that you are coding into language form. The account is a piece of communication, so decide what it is you are trying to communicate and organize the poem around this central theme or set of themes.

After composing the poetic account, use the following discussion questions to explore your experience with the language of conflict.

Discussion Questions

- What language devices and structures did you choose to communicate the core meaning of the poem?
- What imagery did you consciously avoid as you were composing the poem because it did not accurately represent the conflict experience?
- How did the poetic structure and language devices open up your ability to communicate the essential meaning of the conflict?
- In what ways did the poetic structure and language devices constrain and limit your choices of representation? How did these constraints specifically impact how you represented the conflict?
- How does language both help you to create and also constrain the expression and representation of conflicts more broadly?
- What are the implications of these creative and constraining functions of language for how we do dialogic negotiation?

Exercise 2: Exploring Your Conflict Language Habits

Language practices form the symbolic fabric of how we do conflicts when they become habits. The habitual form and content of our conflicts is connected to the cultural and historical context of our lives—where we are in the world and how conflict talk typically gets spoken there. Our habits are reflections of our own biographical characteristics and personalities and family backgrounds, as well as the dynamics of the particular relationships in which the conflict has meaning. This exercise is designed to get you to tap into these contextual features of conflict language and critically examine how they combine for you as habits of language practices that can be questioned, affirmed, or possibly changed.

- How do you typically approach verbal and nonverbal communication in a conflict with a close friend or loved one with whom you desire to maintain the relationship and resolve the conflict effectively?
- What typical things would you say or do to create an environment of collaboration with them?
- What kinds of things do you typically or consciously avoid saying or doing that might jeopardize the relationship or the feelings of the other person?
- If someone else were to describe your conflict style, including the typical phrases, tactics, and so on that characterize you, what things do you think would be listed?

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- What do you typically say when you are angry in a conflict, when you know that you are wrong, or when you want to escalate the conflict by shifting the blame?
- How do you typically talk in a conflict that has an intensity of meaning that makes it very personal and difficult?
- What typical imagery and metaphors do you draw on in conflicts or when talking about them afterwards?
- How does silence figure into your conflicts? Do you use silence effectively (cooling-off periods, pauses to allow the other to think, and so on) or abuse it as a way of avoiding conflict or as a passive-aggressive tactic (the silent treatment)?
- In what ways do you use dialogic negotiation effectively?
- Where do these habits and practices come from, and in what ways are those habits strengths or weaknesses for you?
- Which of your habits are cultural, in that this is just how things are done where you are from for someone like you (age, sex, race, class, etc.)?
- Which of your habits of language are based on your family background and are inherited habits?
- Which of your habits are based on you personality type, world-view, and particular mood at the time of any particular conflict?
- How do you typically approach talking and behaving in a conflict in which someone is angry with you or being very difficult, aggressive, argumentative, and competitive? What are the ways of talking and behaving that allow you to compete with that person?
- How does the style of the talk affect the process and outcome of the conflict?
- When is the last time you tried a new tactic or a new approach to talking in a conflict and what opportunities for dialogic negotiation did that experiment lead to?

Exercise 3: Language Role Play—Planning the Wedding, Planning a Life Together

It is a truism that couples often focus so much on planning their wedding that they do not always effectively prepare themselves for the life together that the wedding ceremony represents. The young man and woman who are depicted in the following poem are planning their wedding. Their conflict shows that they have some interesting differences in how they express themselves and their love for each other, as well as some interesting dynamics of jealousy, insecurity, and power. They also seem to be settling into a pattern of how they deal with this

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difference. She gets jealous about something because she is not sure of how he feels sometimes, he tells her that her questioning is ridiculous, and then she thinks it through to where she agrees with him. She blames herself for the little conflicts that pop up around this pattern. With a discussion partner, try to imagine how these patterns might come to a head in the complex and often difficult time of planning a wedding. What is likely to be a trigger for their conflict cycle as they plan the ceremony and choose the pretty platters? Role-play their interaction around this conflict and allow the conversation to evolve around the conflict pattern outlined earlier. As you get into the conflict, take note of the language that comes out of you as those feelings of jealousy are pushed aside with the denial strategy of calling those feelings ridiculous. As you get into the characters, note the nonverbal and verbal characteristic of the language that marks it as conflict communication. Try to work the conflict through beyond the specific wedding planning to address the deeper issue of communicating love and dealing with feelings of jealousy and insecurity. Use a dialogic negotiation style and strategy where you can. Note how the language of the conflict changes over the course of the interaction.

Carefully read the following poem and develop the characters you will role-play based on the personal and relational clues you are given. Then answer the questions that follow the poem to explicate the importance of language in conflict.

Ridiculous (*Jen*)

Ridiculous,
 That is what you always say
 When I am upset or not feeling the right way
 I don't know what is so hard to understand
 I say what I feel, and you don't lend a helping hand
 I want you to understand me
 But, you just will not let yourself see
 I am the one who thinks about us all the time
 And you say all I do is fuss and whine
 I know you love me to no end
 Yet sometimes I still will not bend
 We have fun together every day
 The two of us in our own way
 Sometimes when we fuss and fight
 I can see the both of us wanting to see the light
 Happiness is our goal
 Overlooking its existence with our souls
 I love the way you look at me

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Like no other could even see
 You kiss my forehead every night
 At this moment we know it's alright
 Ridiculous,
 That is what you love to say
 It makes me wonder if I am ok
 Sometimes I argue about crazy things
 The truth is I just want you to see my wings
 I feel like a toddler jumping up and down, screaming "look at me!"
 Everyone around you, you always see
 I'm just wondering about little ol' me
 Ridiculous,
 I am tired of hearing it
 Damn, where is the relationship kit?!
 You say concentrate on what really matters
 Land, house, ceremony, registering for pretty platters
 We know exactly what this fight is all about
 So let's just fix it, so I don't have to pout
 I am looking and I can see, you are ready to give up
 This time it will be different you'll see
 I will not act like a sad little pup
 Today I will leave it be
 I am going to get over all this jealousy
 Ridiculous, you say,
 You are right today

Discussion Questions for Explicating Language in the Role Play

- For those actually doing the role play, how did the language you chose as you engaged in the conflict connect to the communication goals and outcome needs you were thinking about, as well as to the character you were playing, as you talked?
- How did your language make the conflict real? What was it about the way you talked to each other that was different from ordinary conversation? What specific words, phrases, tactics, tone, energy, intensity, and interaction processes made it feel like a conflict?
- If the conflict was divisive and difficult, how did the language used reflect and help create the divisive process and unequal outcomes? For example, how were threats, accusations, lies, denials, belittling statements, finger-pointing statements, face attacks, expletives and foul language, and so on used to express and create the conflict? How were these tactics connected to both the

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specific conflict over planning the wedding and the deeper relational issues of love, communication, jealousy, and insecurity?

- How effectively did the specific and deeper symbolic issues get expressed and negotiated through the conflict? How was this effectiveness linked to the language in the conflict? What did the players express effectively, and what did they not express effectively?
- How were dialogic negotiation tactics, such as trying to see and acknowledge the perspective of the other, allowing each other to express themselves fully, and allowing the interaction to emerge and evolve toward mutually beneficial solutions, acknowledging and working from the foundation of commonalities and shared interests, and so on, that are evident in the language of the conflict? Was the fabric of the conflict woven from dialogic language? If not, why not? If so, what could the role players have done differently with language?
- As the conflict moved through to the deeper issues, how did the verbal and nonverbal language of the conflict change? How do these changes help create positive or negative direction in the conflict?

❖ CONCLUSION

This chapter has probably pushed you to become much more self-conscious about language. It did me in developing the ideas and writing them into this chapter. The self-consciousness should not be something that makes us shy about expressing ourselves in conflict or so critical of the discourse we create as we do our everyday conflicts that it silences us. Rather, I hope that you have become more aware of the habits of your language practices as you engage in conflicts and as you represent their meaning. If you tend to use the language of war to structure how you think about, act, and make sense of your conflicts with others (or with very specific people), then perhaps you can step back from that and ask some good questions about why this is the case. I hope that you have also become more aware of the origins of how you use language in your conflicts in the personal, relational, familial, and cultural contexts from which your language practices come. Another really important set of critical questions has to do with examining the language not used that could have been. As you have discovered, the way that we use language in conflicts necessarily means that certain choices are not made. These choices to leave out possible ways of talking are also related to your personal, familial, and cultural context.

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Perhaps in the relationship between the language used and the language not used, there are possibilities for rethinking our language practices and impacting the process of how we do conflict as a result. This is the true value of becoming self-conscious about language. It makes you sensitive to and skillful at using symbols as possibilities for connecting with yourself and with others in ways that achieve your goals.

I encourage you to express yourself as fully as possible in your conflicts, invite others to do the same, and at the same time, explore and play with the creative opportunities that language embodies for all of us. This ideal is at the heart of our goal—that you use meaning and an understanding of how meaning systems, such as language, are used and can be used for managing conflicts more effectively, perhaps in ways that surprise everyone involved.