



VANCOUVER SCHOOL FOR
NARRATIVE THERAPY

COUPLE THERAPY

NIRI: NARRATIVE THERAPY INFORMED RELATIONAL INTERVIEWING

During August of 2024, the U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek M. Murthy (2024), issued a national public mental health advisory stating how parental stress had become a dangerous mental health issue. The advisory cited 48 per cent of parents (with kids under 18), feeling entirely overwhelmed by stress, and 41 per cent feeling crushed by the stress. The report writes how economic instability, and poverty makes it tough for many families to “meet their children's basic needs, pay for childcare costs, and provide for children’s health and education expenses”. The national advisory also states that “increases in time spent on work commitments and family responsibilities significantly contribute to work-family conflict, burnout, and stress”, and how “cultural expectations, societal norms, pressure to meet perceived parenting standards as well as factors of discrimination and racism”, also underwrote all aspects of parental stress.

Without resolute solutions by way of significant policy change across all relational categories of living and expectation parents are interconnected with - this national mental health crisis will probably remain privatized¹ and on the backs of the individual parents themselves. Even though, Dr. Murthy’s report argues that raising children should be a “collective

¹ Irish psychologist Imelda McCarthy (1995) writes: “By the privatizing of dilemmas is meant that problems, which have a large component of their origin within the social environment of the client, are localized within the personal and private domains of family life. This localizing of problems within the person or family usually implicates the individual client...in the generation of the presented problems. This removes a focus from the larger social contexts which are important in any systemic understanding of the generation of problems in situations of poverty. Privatizing the issues also further risks containing and maintaining the dilemmas within the domain of therapy and thus marginalizing clients and their concerns further. (p. 162)

responsibility” buttressed by “societal support through policies—such as those that invest in the health, education, and safety of children—and community involvement through friendship, practical assistance, and emotional support are vital to the well-being of parents and caregivers and beneficial for children as well”.

If the U.S. Surgeon General’s public mental health advisory statements regarding how parental stress has become a dangerous mental health issue resonates for the reader, then consider how these same parents are engaged in intimate couple relationships. Raising the question of whether modern-day intimate couple relationships may also warrant a Surgeon General’s mental health warning.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE RELATIONAL

“Relationship is not internal to the single person. It is nonsense to talk about ‘dependency’ or ‘aggressiveness’ or ‘pride,’ and so on. All such words have their roots in what happens between persons, not in some something-or-other inside a person (Bateson (1979, p. 133).

The starting place for a narrative therapy informed Relational Interviewing (NIRI) couple therapy practice is an ideological premise that: *Relationships are Relational (and cannot be considered otherwise)*. For some practitioners, a practice of NIRI may require a deliberate political, philosophical, and ideological *practice shift towards* viewing couple relationships within an ecology of interlocking ideas and therapeutic practices supporting:

- Non-individualism/non-essentialism
- Relational-contextual² inter-connectivity

² Bateson writes, “What is crucial for arriving at shared meaning inter-relationally, between persons, is context; and without context, words and actions have no meaning at all” (1979, p. 15).

- Move from Me to We consciousness³.

The U. S. Surgeon General's report (2024) outlines a present-day parenting mental health crisis and how “cultural expectations, societal norms, pressure to meet perceived parenting standards (etc.)” are facilitating this emergency. Similarly, NIRI's non-individualist practice requires couple therapists to consider how intimate couple relationships cannot be individually divided off, disembodied from, nor transcend surrounding culture since, the intimate relationship is socially constructed⁴ by and permanently situated within:

- contextual and cultural complexities.
- social rituals, governing norms, and dominant beliefs.
- structural inequalities, power relations.
- relational responsibilities, obligations, and expectations.
- relational interconnectedness.

A central feature of NIRI stands against the practice of individualizing couple relationships by recognizing the overwhelming relational and contextual factors shaping and influencing every facet of the intimate couple relationship. This post-structural consideration of relational identity turns the focus of therapy away from the individual and towards relational practice questions regarding the intimate couple relationship's relationship to innumerable other cultural norms and expectations. These may include relationships with, but not limited to, work (schedules, timelines, surveillance, competition, etc.), children (school, health, activities, meals, etc.), family

³ Gergen (2009) suggests that people are relational beings and what we generally consider as human knowledge is arrived at through being in relationship with one another. He refers to this inter-relationship as being a “communal construction” (p. 202).

⁴ Post-modern Anthropologist Stephen Tyler writes, “Learning takes place within communities of discourse whose members - even in dissent- are guided by and constrained by notions of right, proper and appropriate ways of saying, doing and thinking. (1986)

(parents, siblings, pets, crisis/problems, extended family, birthdays, holidays, etc.), elder parents (illness, homecare/aftercare, hospitals, finances, etc.), friends (socializing, problem solving, phone calls, coffee dates, trips, holidays, etc.), finance (balancing budgets, money worries, rents/mortgages, groceries, etc.), faith (rules, social demands, identity expectations), social media (average 140minutes a day?), fitness (workouts, gym time, sport teams, etc.).

Clearly, across all configurations of intimate relationships (I converse with in therapy), couples outline how their intimate relationship's engagement with other relationships are *always* demanding so much of the couple relationships time and, often to the point of exhaustion.⁵ And as much as couples report the central importance of other relationships, providing immense sources of joy and connection, *these other relationships were also proving hazardous to the intimate couple relationship*. This threat was generally described by the couple as having to *ask* their relationship to *step aside* and wait for time, love, care, and attention - until all other responsibilities and obligations had been met. Sadly, I witness couple relationships so fully engaged in their sworn duties to work, families and community and who, in my opinion, are deserving of distinctions of merit —end up separating. The point being, couples are not fully responsible and nor did they arrive at this separation on their own.

Today's intimate couple relationship is surrounded by a modern-day industrialized context and culture supporting overtly explicit hard driving neoliberal messages to reach for the top, success/failure is individually driven, never having time is normal, busyness is preferred, and exhaustion is to be expected. Subsequently, the overtired, fully fatigued intimate relationship phenomenon becomes a common standard and may help to contextually illuminate some of the

⁵ Responsibilities within the relationship can vary quite as they are often defined by gender, income, capability, desire, etc. At the point of conflict, a lack of contextual understanding and/or appreciation/respect for these differing responsibilities is reported.

reasons why high percentages of marriages end in divorce⁶. To be clear, simply focusing on the individuals of the couple as the site, cause, and responsibility to explain intimate couple relationship conflict is nowhere close to dignifying the complexities intimate couple relationships are facing.

RECONSIDERING COUPLE CONFLICT

Historically, narrative therapy assisted my rejection of couple therapists diagnosing/categorizing/individualizing couple relationships, and numerous difficult to comprehend ideas situating couple relationships as separated-from-culture-and-context. For therapists to insist on couple's shouldering up the sole responsibility for the relational conflict the relationship is experiencing, fails to recognize the indelible influence culture and context has on shaping every aspect of relationship life. Narrative ideas have also raised questions and concerns about the couple therapist attachment to the practice of psychoeducation by offering (often well intentioned) *expert advice* (most often white middle class) to couples through normalizing generalizations of what a couple therapist (often white middle class) believes all couple relationships should be (and should become)⁷.

NIRI's intention is to help conflicted couple relationships break free from more traditional (and what I consider to be unfair) ideas that locate couple conflict as a direct result of their own internalized/interpersonal problems and failures.⁸ This is facilitated by asking questions to both

⁶ According to the data collection agency Statista, in 2022, there were 2.78 million people who had obtained a legal divorce and not remarried in Canada. This figure has been steadily increasing since 2000, when there were about 1.88 million divorcees in Canada.

⁷ NIRI is cautious of couple therapy instructing the couple toward set standards of normativity, and the hegemonic public demand for the performance of this suffering (Illouz, 2008).

⁸ Michael White (2002) noted the dramatic growth of the phenomenon of personal failure is associated with the rise of a distinctly modern version of power that establishes an effective system of social control through what can be referred to as normalizing judgment (Foucault 1973, 1979, 1980). Whereas traditional systems of power operate through moral judgment (as an outcome of which it is determined that people's actions are either right or wrong, good or bad, moral or immoral) and through structures of coercion, modern systems of power encourage people to actively participate in the judgment of their own and each other's lives according to socially constructed norms (as

appraise and map out the couple relationships daily relational obligations, responsibilities, and cultural expectations (Madigan, 2019). Beginning with the first session interview, NIRI practitioners engage couple relationships with questions about the contexts of influence their relationship participates with (and to do this respectfully/properly requires a significant amount of time). As a more complete story of the daily, weekly, and monthly amounts of time their relationship is occupied in the responsibility and care offered to other relationships, couples slowly begin to free themselves away from the individualized blaming of one another (regarding the lack of shared time, fatigue, and diminishing interest etc.) What emerges in the first session is a compassion for the *relationship itself* – with couple’s realizing the complex competing factors demanding their relationship be set aside and, as many state, “wait its turn”.

Based on couple relationships I was interviewing, expressions of intimate relationship conflict appeared much more relationally, culturally, and contextually interconnected and complex. (Madigan 2017a, 2017b, 2019, Montesano, Madigan, Ness & Bronseth, 2023) And yet, inside the therapy room couples were explaining prior experiences of couple therapy was often a matter of being told ‘their’ conflict stemmed from their ‘poor communication issues’, clearly situated in ‘unresolved familial attachments’, or was the direct A to B result of ‘childhood trauma’. These issues may play a partial ‘role’ however the fields reasoned simplicity of what was shaping a couple’s relational conflict wasn’t in line with how advanced thinking democratic societies consider and respond to other relational conflicts (White, J. 2019).⁹

The NIRI journey to create a different framework of couple therapy involved

an outcome of which it is determined that peoples actions reflect degrees of inadequacy, abnormality, insufficiency, in competency, hopelessness, ineffectualness, deficit, imperfection and worthlessness).

⁹ Imagine dividing other relational conflicts off from their contextual, historical, and cultural ideas and influences shaping discussions regarding racism, structural inequalities, homophobia, gender inequity, class disparities, and poverty. Dismissing complexities surrounding historical conflicts, exigencies, and oppositional values pertaining to conflicts is clearly unjust. NIRI makes the case that couple relationship conflict is no different.

innumerable relational complexities, contextual questions, and considerations. One such puzzle was how to create a first session structure that didn't trap the conversation inside the couple's report of the individualized conflict¹⁰, and set up what I have referred to as a therapeutic courtroom (Madigan 2017a). A therapeutic courtroom where each person of the couple relationship is aggressively and forthrightly arguing for the moral high ground and inviting the trying to be decentered couple therapist to cast a verdict of who is right and who is wrong. A practice question that emerged from this conflicted interviewing context was: what if NIRI *did not begin* the first couple therapy session with a thorough investigation of the conflict/problem?¹¹ And instead, what if the interview began with rich understandings about the history of the couple's relationship with a focus on the specific foundational values¹² the couple relationship once stood for, cared about, was proud of, wanted to revive/return to, and become in the future.

NIRI first sessions assist the couple to move away from a rote reporting/repeating of the *partial story/partial history* of the couple's individualized suffering narrative¹³ (the presenting problem conflict). Initial therapy sessions are 90 minutes, and time is spent interviewing, understanding, and re-membering¹⁴ accounts of the of the relationship's *origin story* and pre-conflict values¹⁵, skills, descriptions of relational love, attraction, foundational values,

¹⁰ Couple's often try to argue positions on who is right and who is wrong acting to freeze the couple, therapist, and therapy session within the same landscapes of conflict, loss, grief, and suffering that had initiated couple therapy in the first place.

¹¹ NIRI couple therapy sessions begin with a *reconstruction* of the relationship's relational values ~ before addressing the problem conflict

¹² Philosopher Todd May (2023) writes how the values our stories about ourselves seek to express are ways of being in or ways of engaging the world that I *endorse, identify with, or seek to embody*.

¹³ Like all couple therapy models NIRI begins with memory. The difference with NIRI is unlike other frameworks that begin with a focus on the *memory of suffering*, NIRI focuses on the *memory of values*.

¹⁴ Anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1982, 1986, 1992), and then Michael White (1988), employed the use of the hyphen for "re-membering" to set this word apart from reminiscence and to reflect on what the conflict/problem had dis-membered the person, couple, community from.

¹⁵ Withing the NIRI framework, values may also be viewed as a *critically reflective surface* to point the relationship *towards* a direction of where the relationship 'might' like to go – to what might be possible, desired, created and celebrated.

negotiating rites of passage, and unique forms of connection and communication. (Madigan 2019; Madigan & Nylund, 2018a; Montesano, Madigan, Ness, Brothseth 2023). Investigating the relationship's origin story includes questions about how the couple first met (mutual friends, University, online dating, work etc.), what drew them towards one another (physical attraction, lightheartedness, athletics, humour, intelligence, arts, adventure, politics, culture of origin, etc.), what the primary values the couple shared were (kindness, fair-mindedness, respect, sense of family, trustworthiness, equity, etc.), the building up of passion and intimacy (how they may have moved from a friendship relationship¹⁶ to an intimate relationship). Session questions amplify the relationship's stories of important trips/adventures, practices of shared living (how finances and housework were negotiated), how the couple relationship moved through various crisis (family deaths, illness, job loss, etc.), negotiated various differences (cultural, class, religious, gendered, familial etc.), found agreement in where to live (moves, homes, neighbourhoods, etc.), and developed dreams and desires of what they had relationally hoped the relationship might become.

An important side note: NIRI practice sessions are guided through theoretical understandings of relationships that suggest how no experience has a set of meanings that exists - *independently of other experiences*. The receipt of 'news of difference'¹⁷ requires that couple relationships perceive a contrast between two or more descriptions (i.e., expressions of values vs expressions of conflict). NIRI presupposes couple relationships make meaning through operationalizing that "*this set of experiences are different from . . . this other one*", and institute

¹⁶ More than 50% of couple relationships I interview start out as friendships and evolve into an intimate relationship over time.

¹⁷ NIRI practice of relational questioning acts to amplify differences (respect/lack of respect, listening/not listening etc.) between what the couple begins to *remember about their preferred relationship values and what the experience of the conflict has helped the relationship remember to forget*. For the relationship, the tension brought forth by difference represents a potentially rich experiential space yet to be articulated and to one day be materialized.

what is called double forms of therapeutic listening or simply, *double listening*.¹⁸ Anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1979) stated his understanding of this relational phenomenon as – “*It is the difference that makes the difference*” (where the difference Bateson refers to is viewed as information). Questions constructed to remember the history of relationship values created a *double description* - one countering the couple’s current relationally waterlogged experience of conflict. NIRI’s implementation of Bateson’s landscape of difference created an ever-rising *tension* within the conflict, where more traditional couple therapy approaches were focusing on the expressed side of a conflict *in need of a double description*¹⁹.

NIRI first session interviews are intentionally structured to produce double descriptions, tensions, and difference between the present saturated experience of conflict/loss/grief and the preferred history of values (and practices of these values). By painstakingly mapping out rich descriptions and remembered relationship stories highlighted a possible return of the relationship the couple desperately wanted to invite back into their lives²⁰ (this occurred despite whether the couple’s intention was to separate or repair the relationship) Madigan 2019; Madigan & Nylund, 2018a; Montesano, Madigan, Ness, Brothseth 2023).

Couples interviewed discussed how the experience of remembering conversations created a friction between what was relationally preferred compared with the experience of what the couple began realizing had been relationally lost throughout the conflict (and how the experience of losing/transgressing the relationships values had produced profound forms of mutual grief).

¹⁸ *Double listening* is used in NIRI and refers to listening not only to the dominant problem/conflict narrative but also to the meaning given to alternative stories, resistance, or values that couple relationship’s take toward what dominates their experience.

¹⁹ Munro (1987, p. 185) wrote that double description challenges restraints, thus triggering new solutions; for example, the second description and the new perceptions of this description allow the client to experience a view of the problem (and of themselves) that is not bound by the restraints under their first description operated.

For example: a couple relationship begins to articulate how their practices of relational respect are experienced by the relationship as different to those that are less respectful, and/or how the loss of respect had, in part, been fueling the present conflict. Couples began to relate how *expressions of conflict* that instigated coming to therapy (expressions of conflict such as sadness, withdrawal, anger, resentment) were now viewed more as demonstrations of, 1) *a relational response to relational values lost/transgressed*, 2) *a relational protest in support of their preferred relationships ethos or character*, and 3) *a relational desire to recover values of importance that have been lost*.

Below is quick and simple Couple Therapy session demonstration, story, and transcript – interlocking NIRI’s ecology of the receiving context involving:

- contextual and cultural complexities.
- social rituals, governing norms, and dominant beliefs.
- structural inequalities, power relations.
- relational responsibilities, obligations, and expectations.
- relational interconnectedness.
- full story/origin story remembering of relationship values.
- memory is not a photograph.
- difference and double description.
- reconsiderations of couple conflict.

1st SESSION WITH JOEY AND JOE.

Introduction

Joe and Joey’s direct comments below are written in *italicized* quotation marks. My first question asked in the session was whether the purpose of couple therapy was to separate, repair,

or if either person wasn't quite sure where they stood. Joe and Joey stated they were looking to "*repair the relationship*" and "*put an end to bickering*", "*building resentment*", "*un-togetherness*", and "*distance*". The interviews next questions involved asking a) had they been to couple therapy before ("*yes with three different therapists in the last two years*"), b) did they find the therapy helpful? ("*No, none of them were*"). I then asked each of them for a *thumb nail sketch* of what had specifically brought their relationship (18years of married life) to therapy, at this *particular time*?

The couple described how their "*sex life and togetherness*" was "*on the rocks*", how they are feeling "*miserable*" and "*exhausted*", how they "*bicker over the slightest thing*", leaving them to feel like "*a couple of complete and utter losers*". They also agreed on how they would like therapy to "*help find their comfort zone with each other again*".

Beginning with Relational Remembering Conversation.

For the better part of 45minutes, (1st NIRI session interviews with conflicted couple relationships are 90 minutes in length), I slowly, purposefully, and painstakingly interview Joe and Joey about the intimate particularities and history of values of their pre-conflict relationship²¹. The primary focus is gaining an understanding about the mutual values they co-created and practiced²² that formed the foundations of their preferred intimate relationship. A long discussion of relational values and shared *common ground*²³ arrived through the couple's

²¹ Important to note NIRI is not conflict avoidant. Couple's experience and presence of the conflict that brought them to therapy remains in the session. Their experience of conflict is present but becomes less central/dominant as the story of difference and foundational values is remembered and embodied in the present.

²² For example, the couple discussed the value of fairness (I view their telling/including fairness as a preferred social construct and practice they adhere to). Once the couple reveals the value of fairness, I am interested in hearing examples/stories of how they practiced fairness, how the relationship was affected/shaped by these practices of fairness, how the relationship might respond in the present if these practices of fairness made a comeback, etc.

²³ Remembering relational values provides the conflicted couple a common ground to stand in the practices of conflict had deprived/restrained them of. A large majority of couples report how relieved they were by finding this common ground together in the first session.

revived (and often underappreciated) memories and stories of how they practiced these values within the relationship, for many years. Our interchange appeared to help Joe and Joey find a common ground to temporarily stand in, outside the conflict. And while the conflict was still present in the session, the dominance of the conflicted story began to fade into the background.

The embodiment of preferred memories and practices created a purposeful NIRI tension and difference between the practices of conflict and the practices of their preferred values. Allowing for double distinctions/descriptions that this experience (as Gregory Bateson described) was different in emotional form, expression, and function - to this other current one. As our first session discussion continued, the tension and difference of the relationship's double description (alternative story) escalated while never actually having the desire to spend too much time discussing the present conflict. Throughout the couple's embodied recall, the joy of remembered-refreshed-revived memories framed a history of their relational relationship values.

As previously mentioned in the theory section, *memory is not a photograph*. The experience of memory remains, but what shifts is how Joey and Joe remember these experiences through the *thickness of time, experience, and relational context etc.* When Joey and Joe remember an experience/value/story from their relational past it is sedimented, but they can't see it 'just as it was',²⁴ ²⁵.

NIRI practice invites the couple to explain (at length) the intimate experience of collaboratively giving, receiving and participating with each preferred value, and the influence this has on their relationship and, relational living. For Joey and Joe, the most important

²⁴ Personal conversation with Todd May (Trondheim Norway, 2017).

²⁵ Memory will be remembered by Joey and Joe through every other experience since the time the memory was first experienced. The idea that memory is not like a photograph, and that it changes through the course of time, context, and experience holds considerable implications for couple therapy models who believe they are discovering and recovering *the* memory.

relationship values of the intimate relationship they created were described as - “*love, fairness, passion, adventure, integrity, responsibility to family and community, laughter*”. I then proceeded to ask a series of relational-contextual questions to help relationally situate the conflicted couple relationship in a much broader context of cultural responsibilities, social norms, expectations, and ongoing obligations.

NIRI Transcript - 45 minutes into the 1st interview

SM – Thank you for catching me up on a full and I would say more ah interesting description of the relationship beyond, well beyond the story of conflict and the way you show the relationship – let me read back to you from my notes - “love, fairness, passion, adventure, integrity, responsibility to family and community, and laughter” – the values you created the relationship to live through and I guess feel gratified by for many years. I’d like to take a moment to interview your relationship²⁶ and ask what you feel the relationships felt listening on and receiving your stories.

Joe – Oh, all the fun and love and amazing times we shared. We were free. Yeah, and how easy it was just you know being together. And how long all this lasted.

Joey – Yeah, I agree, just how easy we were together, just how like Joe said how easy life was no matter what else was happening to us. We were together like a team. We had and you know like an Us.

SM – (I pause to write down exactly what Joe and Joey have said²⁷) Let me see if have this right – (my reading of their words back to them is a retelling practice to afford Joey and Joe a different location to re-listen and reexperience their relational experience) - “*all the fun*

²⁶ The practice of NIRI often interviews the externalized couple relationship directly. Giving couples a chance to reflect on the experience the relationship is experiencing while in relationship to them.

²⁷ To witness live demonstrations of my practice of reading and retelling client experience - by way of reading back the session notes—please watch this on VSNT.live.

and love and amazing times shared “you were free”, “and how easy it was being together and how long all this lasted”, “how easy life was no matter what else was happening”, “you were together like a team” where it felt “like an Us”. Is there anything else you’d like to add?

(Couple shakes their heads no).

SM – And if I was to interview your relationship^{28 29} and ask if there is anything from this history of being a relationship team, an Us, and feeling easy together no matter what, do you have any thoughts or could imagine what your relationship would most like returned back at this time?

Joey – Interview our relationship? Ok. What would our relationship be feeling now?

SM – Yes. Is there anything you can imagine from the stories you’ve been remembering and telling me, that perhaps your relationship would most like back at this time?

Joey – Ok – well I’d like to well have to say time to enjoy each other. You know be together and not just like talking about problems we have to solve all the time. Like the stories, you know we were actually pretty cool if you can believe that (laughs). We have zero time for this now. None. It’s awful because we’re super busy all the time. Really frustrating.

Joe – I’d agree with that, yeah, with everything she said we do like with well everything we barely see each other. Maybe just TV late at night.

SM – Do you ever feel that when you feel your relationship looks onto the changes from then to now it feels that it holds a sense of compassion for you both?

²⁸ NIRI has a practice of interviewing the relationship “itself.” Questions directed to the relationship further the idea that *relationships are relational* and allow the couple to speculate on the relationship from the relationship’s perspective. You will witness this practice further when you read the therapeutic letter I wrote to Joey and Joe’s relationship.

²⁹ Examples of interviewing the relationship questions are: In what ways was this value important to the relationship? Why do you think the relationship feels this way about this value? Why would the relationship take this stand/position on this value? Could you tell me a story that would help me to understand why the relationship would take this position on this value? What do you imagine the relationship values most about this value? and so on.

Joey – Hmm that's nice. You mean it understands? Like wow have they become different.

SM – Yes.

Joey – Strange to think this way but I guess in some ways the relationship might maybe likes Joe and I no matter what's going on and not sure how it feels about us the past while. Is this what you mean?

Joe – Yeah, like the there they go again arguing about nothing and doing everything for everyone (laughs).

SM – When your relationship experiences you not having any time and restricted in the amount of time spending time with the relationship, what do you imagine this experience is like for the relationship.

Joe – I guess it feels dumped. Yeah, maybe just empty (long pause).

Joey – Like what hello what about me!

SM – When your relationship experiences you not having any time is there something you are asking of the relationship?

Joey – Yeah. Like wait. It's not your turn (laughs). It's kind of non-existent.

SM – Would you agree Joe?

Joe – Yah its complicated. Its busy. I mean Joey does everything for everyone. She works full time as a nurse, and you know sits on 2 community boards, ah we have two great kids, her mom is having a hard time . . .

Joey – And he works a lot and there's always pressure from the higher ups expecting him to do more and more work and that sucks and but still coaches the kids and his brother broke well recently his back so he jumps in to help and yeah.

Like time disappears.

SM – (Reading back from my session notes, offering a re-telling experience of their words back to afford the couple relationship a chance to witness their experience). Let me just see if I have this right – Joey you “*work full time as a nurse,*”, “*sit on 2 community boards,*” you are a parent” to “*two great children*”, and your “*mother is having a hard time*” – while Joe you “*work a lot*” and there’s “*expectations*” for you to do more at work, and you also “*coach the kids*” with their sports teams is that right and your “*brother recently broke his back*” so you help out with his family. Do I have this correct?

(Couple nods yes).

SM - Given all that your intimate relationship is relationally involved with regarding responsibilities to your work, extended families, family illness, children, children’s activities, and the community boards etc. – do you think it’s fair to conclude the conflict the relationship is experiencing is just about you being “losers and failures”?

Joey – Is it fair?

SM – Yes is this a full and fair description of your relationship difficulties?

Joe – No it’s not fair at all.

SM – Joey would agree with Joe that the conclusion you both arrived at about the relational conflict you are experiencing is because you’ve both personally failed – is this a fair conclusion?

Joey – No. Absolutely not!

SM – Joey and Joe could you help me understand why you feel this isn’t a full and fair description? (I then ask a few questions as to why their initial description may not be a fair telling of this now more complex/complete contextually situated story). We continue:

SM – In looking after your relationship’s obligations, expectations, and responsibilities you’ve just described, is your intimate relationship in a position to accept that it must wait its turn? Wait its turn for this attention, love, passion, support, and caring?

Joe – Well when you put it that way – yes. Our relationship used to be priority number one. It was great. (Long pause). I really miss it. I think we both do.

Joey – I do too. I miss Us and what we had (crying now – Joe reaches over and caresses her back).

SM – Do you feel the present expressions of (reading back to the couple from my notes) “*ongoing bickering*”, “*building up of resentments*”, and “*distance*” is somehow your intimate relationships way of asking you to help recover and and maybe revive the values your relationship, values, values most?

Joey – Values the most? Yes, that could be right. I dunno I just feel shitty now and so sorry for our relationship. That like in doing all this other stuff with everyone we’ve let it down.

SM – Do you feel you are experiencing a conflict that might be your relationships way of protesting that you return to and revive the values you created your relationship through? In the past?

Joe – You mean the relationship is about to go on strike?

SM – Yes.

Joe – Well it has every right to.

SM – Do you feel the assistance we spoke about in changing to living your intimate relational life in this way?

Joey – It’s just the way it’s done – or at least most couples we know do it kind of this way and

we and you know they end up losing each other.

Joe – Like yeah, we're supposed to you know we'll go out of our way to help everyone but at the end of the day we've left our relationship kind of hanging in the wind.

Joey – Why hasn't anyone pointed this out before? You know you're our fourth therapist (Laughs). I mean like our kids, friends even our our two dogs! (laughs) and whatever, our relationship needs us. But that's Joe, like we say wait a little longer and we'll get back on the flipside.

SM – Can I ask you what you feel your relationship might be feeling at this moment listening in on our to our discussion?

Joey – Relieved, I guess. No, it's really more than that it's like feeling like a dried-out flower garden and maybe or whatever needing water.

Joe (a fireman) – I'll get the fire hose and turn it up full blast (laughter).

We spoke more on this theme of the metaphor of their relationship garden needing care and concern, and after our first session I emailed Joey and Joe two days later.

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After the 1st session I like to write a quick letter that adds a simple question or two for the couple relationship to consider between sessions³⁰. Post-session one quick therapeutic letter to Joey and Joe:

Dear Joey and Joe: Just a quick question I forgot to ask: If you do manage to get the fire hose out and water the relationship this week, what do you imagine your relationship might

³⁰ I ask/invite couples that we meet for three weeks in a row so as to secure the preferred story and values of the relationship (and not lose any non-individualist momentum we have on the conflict). After session three the couple and I decide what the course of therapy going forward might look like.

begin growing towards? Do you feel your relationship will regrow the garden you once had, something new, or perhaps a little bit of both?

Until next week's session. Stephen

I met with Joey and Joe for 60 minutes one week later and focused (almost entirely) on questions regarding their experience of difference. The difference between values they cherish and the present conflict. Specifically, the difference between the values and practices of "*love, fairness, passion, adventure, integrity, responsibility to family and community, and laughter*", and the practices of conflict involving "*constant tension, bickering, resentment, un-togetherness, exhaustion*".

During the 2nd session Joey and Joe informed me of a few conflict-counter-practice developments like deciding to "*take the relationship out for a hike on the trails*" and "*we also went on a bike ride with it*", and decided to "*cook a family meal together*" after they realized part way through the week they hadn't spent enough time attending to their relationship.³¹ The couple also let me know how they both got into "*a habit*" "*of wondering out loud*" what the relationship would like to experience once they found themselves returning to discussions of troubles and solving problems. They also seemed quite pleased to report one night and another early morning of, as Joey put it, "*great sex*".

After this 2nd session I wrote a *letter of consultation directly to their relationship*.³²

Letter to Joey and Joe's Relationship

Dear Joey and Joe's Relationship.

³¹ I ideologically oppose couple therapists recommending '*date nights*' - reported by far too many couple clients I see in therapy - as a universal remedy to relational conflict and change. From what I am told, the date night usually consists of a few hours of getting away during a week (in a week 168 hours long and filled up with numerous responsibilities and obligations). Surely, after 60-70 years developing couple therapy, this is not the best couple therapists can come up with.

³² There are numerous examples of my practice of writing letters to the couple's relationship and each member of the couple reading their letter written from the relationships perspective in the session you can view on VSNT.live.

As you know I have met with Joey and Joe for relationship therapy twice. I'm writing to you with the hope you might offer wisdom and counsel regarding your preferred relationship future.

During our meetings, Joey and Joe caught me up on their fascinating 18-year history. They told me how they first started out creating you though a 'good friendship' and, eventually, you became an intimate relationship. And told me so many stories about how you, their intimate relationship, experienced *"all the fun and love and amazing times shared"* *"you were free"*, *"and how easy it was being together and how long all this lasted"*, *"how easy life was no matter what else was happening"*, *"you were together like a team" where it felt "like an Us"*. They also let me know how the foundational values you were built upon included, *"love, fairness, passion, adventure, integrity, responsibility to family and community, and laughter"*.

Joey and Joe also helped me understand how they had come to couple therapy to *"repair the relationship"* and *"put an end to bickering"*, *"building resentment"*, *"un-togetherness"*, and *"distance"*. And perhaps more importantly how they have found very little time to spend with you on account of numerous obligations, and expectations such as your responsibilities to work, extended families, family illness, children, children's activities, and the community boards etc. And despite all of this taking them away from you they first concluded the conflict the relationship is experiencing was just about you being *"losers and failures"*? Now do you think this a fair-minded account?

I've thoroughly enjoyed my conversations with Joey and Joe. I find them mutually reflective and sincere in their hope for intimate relational change, and throughout this therapy process so far, I've noticed how Joey and Joe have been working respectfully, relationally, and collaboratively to place you their relational focus be separated from the hardship and difficulty of

this conflict.

If it's possible, I'm wondering if you could look at the questions I've listed and write a letter back to Joey and Joe regarding what your relationship preferences are and pathway going forward might be. My questions ask if there are any particular values or ways of being - you would like restored, any creative ways of relationally being together you would like them to consider, and, if there are any negative aspects of the relationship you would like to see them leave behind - in the future. Thanks.

As Joey and Joe relationship I'm asking you to consider the following questions:

1. Are there specific and treasured values you once experienced that you would like to see make a return and experience more of?
2. As they move you forward, are there any aspects of the relationship you would like them to seriously consider leaving behind?
3. Do you have a clear vision of what you would like to see yourself becoming in the future?

Whew! I know this may seem like a large assignment so:

- 1) Please take your time, 2) and please keep your letter to a maximum of 150 words.

Thanks a lot for your help.

Stephen Madigan (Joey and Joe's couple therapist).

NIRI views a modern-day intimate relationship's relationship to other relationships as crucial, life sustaining, and potentially, highly problematic. The context of relational influencers include how intimate relationship practices are imbedded within sets of social, moral, and cultural obligations, responsibilities, and expectations. And these are interconnected with collections of internalized, governed, and distributed cultural ideas and meanings that frame and

normalize what constitutes socially accepted practices of not only couple relationships but include decrees on how to be a proper parent, friend, sibling, partner, employee, neighbour, etc.

NIRI's intention is to shine a light on how relationships are, in fact, relational. A relational view of relationships necessitates an invitation for couple therapists, researchers, and academics involved with intimate couple relationships to consider a relational movement away from individualist/essentialist identity conclusions and the subsequent view on what constitutes expressions of couple conflict. NIRI emboldens the reader to consider the many relational complexities that effectively influence and shape how we view, live through, love through, fight through, and practice intimate relationships.