

## Notes from the Field: Relational Interviewing

In the following *Narrative & Conflict: Notes from the Field*, John Winslade interviews Stephen Madigan on emotionally preparing conflicted couple relationships for possible reunification, separation, mediation, and family courtrooms through a narrative therapy informed practice.

### Introduction

The purpose of this interview is to make visible the innovative work that Stephen Madigan (2008, 2017) has been doing with couples who are referred to him in the process of separation. Stephen's work is based in narrative practices (Madigan, 2011) but here it is not, strictly speaking, either therapy or mediation. This practice draws from Michael White's (1989; 1997) and Barbara Myerhoff's (1982; 1986) work on remembering conversations. Stephen's therapeutic concentration on relational ethics and re-moralizing relationships involves him interviewing a couple, not so much as two individuals, but as a relational unit.

**John:** What is your aim in relational interviewing?

**Stephen:** Relational interviewing aims to emotionally prepare couple relationships before these relationships come into contact with legal narratives. Relational Interviewing then provides a bridge for the couple relationship to take the rite of passage from therapeutic to legal narratives. Central to this rite of relational passage is the transport of the relationship's ethics from the therapeutic to the legal narrative site, through the writing of ethical documents co-created with the couple during the relational interviews.

**John:** Do you try to undermine or support legal narratives?

**Stephen:** Relational interviewing views itself as working in support of legal narratives by assisting in the emotional preparation and repair of the relationship *prior* to any financial or child care discussions in the preparation of separation agreements. This method is also helpful with couple relationships in which people may express a desire to explore relational reunification. In many ways, the intention of relational interviewing is to separate out what narrative therapists do best (reducing relational conflict and re-membering counter-stories) in order to emotionally prepare the couple to embrace what legal professionals do best (without ongoing conflict standing in the way).

**John:** Do you get the couple to talk about the conflict?

**Stephen:** Eventually (if they so desire) but these conversations are mediated through the remembered relational ethics previously discussed. The purpose of relational interviewing is to first create a proximal distance from any discussion of the problem conflict that has been dominating the relationship.

**John:** So where do you start?

**Stephen:** I begin the first session with re-membering conversations, which afford the couple relationship alternative discursive and experiential starting points for discussion. A re-membering conversation breaks the dominant pattern or cycle of conflicted individualized (non-relational) discourse between the couple – unfreezing the conflict and offering alternative explanations to individualizing blame, shame and anger. This moves the discussion away from the context of the ‘therapeutic courtroom’ where the therapist is viewed as judge and jury by the couple (when each individual presents their “case”).

**John:** What is the purpose of asking the couple re-membering questions?

**Stephen:** Re-membering questions allow for the re-collection of relationship life and the relational values, anticipations, and ethics the relationship once lived through, to resurface and be reimagined, storied and embodied. The collective relational or ethical stories afford the couple’s re-membered relationship a (momentary) common ground for the relationship to stand on (free of conflict). To put this another way, the practice of re-membering in relational interviewing acts to re-moralize the relationship that has been de-moralized by a context supporting of conflict.

**John:** This must come as a surprise to many people?

**Stephen:** Yes. It is a dialogic moving away from a conflict-centered individualist discussion (and/or practices related to internal state humanism/psychology) and towards a conversation about relational relationship ethics. The re-membering questions provide a common

ground for the highly conflicted relationship to experientially stand within a re-membered relational reconstruction before a deconstruction of the problem conflict.

**John:** So what do you actually ask?

**Stephen:** I begin by asking fairly simple questions about where and how the couple first met. What kind of relationship had they imagined or intended to create together and why? Were there certain relational ethics (or values or moral principles) they decided to build their relationship on (such as trust, kindness, loyalty, love)? I ask why they felt these ethics were vitally important to the building up of the relationship? Then I might ask in what ways they had noticed the relationship blossoming within these ethics? What were the daily practices of these relational ethics on behalf of the relationship? How did these practices best serve the relationship? If I was to interview their relationship, what would they imagine the relationship telling me that afforded it to grow forward? These questions are looking for what Geertz (1973) describes as thick description. And all couple relationships I have met within therapy have a stock of these ethical, playful and preferred stories to tell – and invigorate.

**John:** That is what you mean by a focus on relational ethics, right?

**Stephen:** Yes. So I might ask whether the relational ethics were in support of their decision to move in together, co-parent, and so on, And who in their community had supported their relationship ethic. These are important rites of passage they collaborated on through the course of living together relationally.

**John:** What have you found this produces?

**Stephen:** Through a re-membering of pre-conflict/pre-problem conversations that survey the ethics and values central to the relationship, the relationship enters a newly possible dialogic territory for discovering an experiential common ground through a broad discussion of the ethical foundations of their relational past. It is to re-experience the old in the present differently and to discover what this shaping of meaning for their possible relational future might possibly mean (if it were to be imagined). This could mean speculating on what a newly separated relationship based in the same relational ethics might possibly become.

**John:** Do people always want to have a relational future?

**Stephen:** The common ground allows for the proximal distance of past stories to transport the relationship beyond the distant past and towards a present experience and future imagination. Re-membering conversations allow the relationship to develop a closer bond through space and time and refashion or reconfigure the relationship. The

relational common ground acts to un-freeze and un-suffer the relationship frame of the problem orientation.

**John:** Do you engage them in any deconstruction of the relationship?

**Stephen:** Relational interviewing begins with a *reconstruction* of the relationship, before any act of deconstruction of the problem is considered. Basically the conversational journey starts at the beginning. The discussion of the problem that has dominated the conflicted relationship is temporarily placed in the background until a new place of ethics can be located to “look back” in reflection, through the experience of restored relational ethics, onto the conflict or problem.

**John:** This sounds like a departure from many approaches to narrative work with couples.

**Stephen:** Yes, indeed. This structure of the interviewing practice has turned our traditional practice of narrative therapy upside down. Whereas I used to begin an interview with relative influence questions, I now begin with relational re-remembering questions about the relationship’s ethics, joy, love, respect and knowhow. The couple’s recollections provide a substitute ethical and value-driven discourse that contrasts with the dominant discourse of individualized suffering, blame, personal failure, and the bifurcating divisive structures of mediation and family law, which often (by their very structure) support the couple’s individualized conflict.

**John:** Where does this lead the conversation?

**Stephen:** After a rich exploration, I ask the couple if these sets of ethics that once formed the foundation of the lived, experienced and preferred relationship might be used as the same (or a reconstituted, yet similar) foundation on which to build the future separated relationship.

**John:** Do you follow up with therapeutic letter-writing?

**Stephen:** Yes. Relationships are relational. The whole is larger than the sum of the parts. So a few years ago we began writing letters of invitation directly to the relationship. To solicit the meaning and perspective of the relationship’s point of view allows the couple to enter into a broader “meta-view” of the relational situation. The relationship’s perspective moves the couple away from an individually-centered approach to the conflict, allowing for the idea that relational conflict is created within a much broader cultural and relational context.

**John:** Where does this take people?

**Stephen:** It allows each member of the couple to *serve* the relationship’s future and any action/practice (kindness, aggression or whatever) is constituted and felt by all parts of the relationship. To bring forth a

preferred relational future requires collaboration and consideration of what is in the best interests of the relationship (and not the individual's best interests). Compassion and empathy often replace blame and self-centered righteous aggression. Here is an example of a letter:

*Dear Kristen and Joe's Relationship;*

*As you know I have met with Kristen and Joe for a two-hour therapy session today.*

*In past sessions - Kristen and Joe talked about you – their relationship – quite a bit. In fact, they took me through the history of building you up, their dreams of the kind of relationship they desired to build, and the values and ethics on which they wished to build the foundations of you, the relationship. They also discussed the loss that has come with Joe's affair and the end of the intimate relationship. As with many couples who are separating, finding a map to help them make the rite of passage through the loss can be quite complex. Without a relationship map to guide them forward, conflict and misunderstandings could hold them frozen in time.*

*As Kristen and Joe's relationship therapist, I am writing to ask if you would write them a letter from your point of view. Perhaps you could give them your version of what you as their relationship need to grow forward, share any experienced wisdom, and perhaps offer a "tree top" view of what you would like to see the future relationship evolving into.*

*Many thanks,  
Stephen Madigan*

**John:** I imagine couples must experience a sense of loss or grieving for the relationship that once was.

**Stephen:** Yes. Exploring loss and grief of the relationship's ethical life that once was, is often undervalued and overlooked by the couple and by the therapist (loss of dreams, love, values, hope). In separation or conflict, loss and grief usually become an individual and not a relational experience.

**John:** What do couples say about this?

**Stephen:** Couples report the relationship loss as never before encountered and wonder alone whether the other is experiencing the suffering they feel or whether the relationship meant anything to the other. Once ethical relationship values of the past have been secured, I can begin to address the loss of this relationship and relational values that occurred during separation and has been accelerated by legal proceedings.

**John:** So what do you ask them about loss and grief?

**Stephen:** I ask: Is there anything from your past relationship that you now miss about what you once had that you might now re-invigorate as a separated couple? Was this relationship you lost a relationship you created together? What is it that stands out about this relationship you lost? What does your relationship feel about not discussing this loss and grief together? What does not grieving loss together produce in the relationship? When your joint orientation towards the ethical foundations of the relationship was shifted, what was the orientation that replaced it? What is hidden that needs to be re-found, if your relational ethic's orientation of the relationship were to make a comeback?

**John:** I can imagine people feeling a sense of personal failure about the lost relationship?

**Stephen:** The idea is to broaden the individualized idea of the intimate relationship to include all the many contextual and culturally inspired relationships their relationship is in relationship with. Living within communities of discourse, couple relationships are relationally engaged with many other relationships during the time of their relationship (their relationship has relationships with work, children, school, finances, siblings, parents, friends, fitness, health).

**John:** Doesn't this run counter to the neoliberal assumptions about individualized rights and the like?

**Stephen:** In the world of neoliberal values and individual rights, a couple understandably experiences the failure of the relationship as a failure of the self and the intimate other. But this common experience of personal failure denies any contextual or cultural influence. For example, many couples complain about not having enough "time" for one another. They often attribute this lack of time as a sign they do not care for one another. When we inquire about the other relationships their intimate relationship is involved with (work, children, family, friends), most relationships come to realize that accommodating the demands of other relationships can place their intimate relationship as a low priority. For example, work hours are growing longer, and demands on parents to be more intimately involved in all aspects of their children's lives have accelerated; time needed to care for elderly parents becoming ill increases; finances and debt seem to be getting stretched, and so on. Ironically, couple relationships report that by becoming "good citizens, workers, parents", the intimate relationship suffers.

**John:** It sounds like you are placing the relationship in a social context rather than individualizing it?

**Stephen:** I feel our cultural desire to individualize couple relationships is dramatically unfair. To simply focus our practice on poor attachments or improving communication and thereby cut the couple relationship off from the broader cultural context of influence is rather absurd – and

unfortunately this is the dominant practice of couple therapy and legal practices. As a result, couples quite understandably come to experience a deep sense of personal failure. It is also of vital importance to have witnesses to the newly re-membered ethical relationship. Couples explain the story of the conflicted relationship as “frozen in time” and “having no direction to turn to” outside of the conflict. Couples explain how at the time of separation, once-unified families and communities feel compelled to “choose a side” they will support (while not supporting the other side). Involving the relationship’s broader community allows for the circulation of the new “conflict-free” story to be supported, guided forward and storied. By therapeutically engaging and involving members of the couple relationship’s community of concern, we assist in transporting the newly shaped preferred relationship from the past *into the future*. This allows for a separated, but newly reunited, wider family identity they can agree on.

**John:** I imagine there are not many maps available for people to rely on to create this different kind of relationship?

**Stephen:** Many conflicted relationships have no definition of what the separated relationship’s rite of passage migration is from the intimate relationship to a public “friendship” relationship. Without rite of passage guideposts to imagine, the separated relationship experiences no future definition or character (except as a conflicted relationship). This lack of orientation disorients the relationship and can freeze solid its conflicted identity and, therefore, it cannot change or grow. The majority of couples I see have forgotten to remember the numerous rites of passage the relationship has successfully traversed through the course of their relational life. These rights of passage bring forth the ethic of relational decision-making. When the relationship realizes it has developed through several life-changing rites of passage, the relationship’s ability to change and grow forward into something new is highlighted.

**John:** Such developments must have implications for children too.

**Stephen:** Defining the separated relationship identity is especially important to the children of the separated relationship. Exploring rites of passage from the past enables the couple to have a view of how they will embrace rites of passage in the future. These may include how they will organize the relationship around: significant events in their children’s lives (birthdays, graduation, weddings, births, holidays); their extended families (holidays, funerals); and their community lives (social events).

**John:** How do you think identity is usually thought of and how do you think of it differently in the relational interviewing you do?

**Stephen:** “Identity,” says feminist Jill Johnston (1974), is “what you can say you are, according to what they say you can be” (p. 11). The identity she is referring to is not a freely created product of introspection or the

unproblematic reflection of a private inner self. The dominant Western psychological understanding of identity is based in great measure on a liberal individualist framework that is maintained, and shaped through the institutions, discourse, and archives of science. Narrative practice and relational interviewing organizes around the idea that identities are conceived within dialogic, ethical, political and ideological frameworks. From a relational interviewing perspective, the concept of identity is cultural, discursive, multi-sited, multi-storied, contextual and relational. Relational interviewing considers identity not as “one’s own” as characterized by the Enlightenment’s creation and production of the self-contained individual searching for a singular, unifying fundamental governing principle. The alternative view is that any identity will build upon its relations to other identities so that nothing can be itself without taking into consideration the kinds of relationship by which - to use Sampson’s (1993) idea - the “selfsameness” is constituted.

**John:** In what sense is identity political?

**Stephen:** We might view our identities and our re-membering of our identities as profoundly political, both in their origins and in their implications. To take up Karl Tomm’s (Tomm et al., 2014) idea of distributed and negotiated selves - and the selves we normally remember - they are influenced by and reproductive of cultural and institutional norms. As contributing members of this community of identity and discourse, we come to experience our relational selves within the relational politics of these dominant norms. Poststructuralists argue for a post-humanist and decentered view of identity.

**John:** What does this mean?

**Stephen:** This post-humanist position unsettles any essentialist psychological notion of the stable autonomous person, drawing on Derrida’s (1976) idea of there being no original author (of ideas, problem conversations or otherwise), or a given reality of what constitutes the self. All is considered in relationship to a wider context.

**John:** This sounds like a departure from what is usual practice. Is it?

**Stephen:** When I look out upon the vast landscapes of couple therapy practice here in North America, it seems impossible to separate our most common therapeutic methods from supporting neoliberal individualist ideas. In addition, couple therapy (as far I can see) is also informed by structuralist, functionalist and humanist presuppositions that guide the practice.

**John:** Is all of this not entrenched by neoliberal forms of capitalism that have become so dominant?



**Stephen:** Neoliberalism sees competition and an individual's rights and freedoms as the defining characteristic of human relations. Efforts to create a more ethical society that is concerned about structural inequalities are viewed as both counterproductive and morally corrosive. The market innately ensures that everyone "gets what they deserve". All responsibilities in life are placed on the individual. We are left then to internalize and reproduce the neoliberal creed of self-realization and the subsequent eerily decontextualized sense of personal failure.

**John:** If we load up the individual with a heavy sense of responsibility surely that increases the possibilities of failure too?

**Stephen:** I've been thinking about the merits of failure lately. Judith Halberstam (2011) cites Foucault when she suggests that failing can stand in contrast to the "grim scenarios of success that depend on 'trying and trying again'" (p.3). What kind of recompense can failure offer us? Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms of disciplined behaviors and the boredom of managed human development. Perhaps neoliberalism partially explains how the field of normative couple therapy continues to support the predominant narrative of individualism and self-realization, and hence our culture of therapy privileging the individual's performance of trauma and suffering.

**John:** That makes failure sound like a relief, attractive even. You are talking about a counter-narrative here?

**Stephen:** Yes. The therapeutic narrative of self-realization can only function and be completed by identifying the complication in the story of – "What prevents me from being happy, connected, intimately attached, successful?" The modernist couple therapeutic project readily proceeds to make sense of this question through a "working through" of an event from one's individual past.

**John:** The hunt for the definitive trauma story is certainly very popular.

**Stephen:** As this self-realization or trauma tautology guides couple therapy practice, its mandate is to structurally help one understand one's relationship life as a generalized dysfunction to "overcome". The dominant therapeutic belief is that a true "self" is only uncovered and expressed in the experience of the "*suffering narrative*" and in understanding the underlying emotions gained by telling the therapist the intimate particularities of the deficit story.

**John:** So confess your deficiencies and therapy will grant you absolution?

**Stephen:** Yes! This predominant narrative of psychic suffering tells the story of the self as never quite "made" and one's suffering becomes constitutive of one's identity. As Michel Foucault (1985) laconically remarked in his *History of Sexuality*, the care of the self, cast in medical

metaphors of health, paradoxically encouraged the view of a “sick” self in need of correction and transformation.

**John:** So what do you try to do differently?

**Stephen:** The narrative of a modern day self-realized, individualist couple therapy is fundamentally one of memory - and quite opposite to yours and Lorraine Hedtke’s re-membering practice, John - since their re-membering practice is centered on the memory of suffering. One exercises one’s memory of suffering in order to free oneself of it and become successful in relationship life.

**John:** No gain without pain! That sounds very familiar!

**Stephen:** This method of couple therapy instructs an ever-increasing, pervasive and hegemonic public demand for the performance of suffering in modern day culture - through discursive avenues like therapy, talk shows, legal courtrooms, intimate relationships and so on.

**John:** What are the different starting assumptions for relational interviewing?

**Stephen:** Relational interviewing fills in gaps in individualized couple therapy work and mediation with conflicted couple relationships. As a starting point, let’s presume *relationships are relational*. What begins as a couple creating a relational relationship descends into conflict when the relationship becomes individualized (there is me and there is you). It is often at this point that we see relationships come to therapy.

**John:** So what might be the starting-point of a relational interview?

**Stephen:** The starting point of a relational re-membering conversation is to reinvigorate the historical relationship’s relational ethics *prior* to the onset of the conflict. The practice allows for reengagement with the relationship’s ethical and moral principles, once important to relational life.

**John:** How would you create this?

**Stephen:** The purpose of the first relational re-membering therapeutic session is to afford the relationship an experiential difference beyond relational conflict. Re-membering conversations allow the relationship to re-experience the ethics of their former relationship life and the practices of these ethics that allowed the relationship to live free of the present conflict.

**John:** Can you explain the premises of a re-membering conversation for a conflicted couple?

**Stephen:** Well the history of re-membering conversations is situated in early narrative therapy work, Michael White's (1989) ideas on "Saying hullo again", Imelda McCarthy's (2007) Fifth Province practice, and more recently yourself and Lorraine Hedtke's (2017) terrific new ideas on the practice of re-membering conversations around grief and loss. I suppose we could also throw in Gregory Bateson's (1979) notions of restraint and how problem orientations help us remember to forget aspects of our relational lives lived outside and beyond (in the couple's case) the story of conflict. Re-membering conversations assist the couple to member themselves back within their relational ethics and values that a contextualized, saturated conflict has dis-membered them from. The premise of a re-membering session is located in purposefully establishing new relational vocabularies. I find the Danish psychological researcher Svend Brinkmann's (2016) work in this quite informative. Relational Interviewing conversation is situated in vocabularies of experience based in the relationship's preferred ethics. These alternative vocabularies act to interrupt and rupture psychological vocabularies that offer both limiting and pathologizing descriptions of the relational experience.

**John:** So what do you try to achieve in a first interview?

**Stephen:** What emerges through a crafted relational first interview is an appreciation and recollection of the beauty of what was once present in the relationship, as well as questions concerning how the relationship created was unique, loving, intentional and created upon a foundation of specific relational ethics (love, trust, humor, fair-mindedness, and so on).

**John:** This emphasis on ethical values sounds different from the usual focus on emotions. Can you explain the thinking behind it?

**Stephen:** The couple's relational ethics (that once served as the foundation of the relationship when it was becoming imagined and free of conflict) are explored as preferred expressions and practices or possible building blocks of a newly formed separated (or reunified intimate) relationship of the future. Relational interviewing affords a dialogic space for the couple relationship to experience their ethical past in present time and imagine transporting these ethics into a possible future.

**John:** Would you do this if a couple were planning to separate and also if they were planning to reunify?

**Stephen:** How the relationship anticipates the possibility of a conflict-free future has direct meaning for the relationship's present dialogue and practice. When the relationship remembers the particularities and multiple stories that make up the relationship's ethical past, the story of the relationship expands beyond the confines or restraints of the conflict's frozen landscape. So yes – whether the relationship is separating, planning to reunify or doesn't really know the direction, the starting point is the same. Primary to the relational interviewing process

is the production of “ethical documents” that will then help guide and discursively construct the legal narrative and subsequent relationship mediation process.

**John:** What are ethical documents?

**Stephen:** Ethical documents are created from direct session quotes taken from the relational interviewing conversation. The ethics and values most important to the relationship’s past and possible future are documented and summarized. Relational documents provide a therapeutic narrative outlining what legal narratives will be *contextualized through*. The relationship’s ethics orient the conversation and are viewed as immanent to the legal narrative. Ethical documents pre-empt a legal and psychological “therapeutic courtroom” approach to separation and divorce (negotiating a separation agreement on property rights and child access). Couples explain that central and sometimes mandatory services such as mediation, litigation, court rulings, psychological assessments and therapy itself can increase the conflict through systems of bifurcated, discursive he said/she said arguing or proving “who is morally right and who is wrong”, “who is sick and who is healthy”, “who is reasonable and who is unreasonable”, “who most subjugated the other”, “who has the most traumatized past”, “who has the more severe attachment issues” and so on.

**John:** Do you try to keep therapeutic narratives and legal narratives separate or allow them to blur?

**Stephen:** The therapeutic courtroom is a term I use to describe the blurring of borders between relational therapeutic narratives and legal narratives. A therapeutic courtroom is set up when the psychologist or mediator finds themselves caught between de-centered therapeutic attempts to reduce relational couple conflict, while at the same time offering advice on the terms of the legally sanctioned separation agreement. Relational interviewing assumes that it is in the best interest of the ongoing relationship that legal and therapeutic narratives be distinct and separate. Once the ethical documents are produced there is “bridge” session between therapist, couple and legal representation/mediator. This session is viewed as a right of passage – moving the relationship ethics established from therapeutic narratives towards the process of entering into legal narratives.

**John:** Okay. Thank you for explaining this innovative practice.

**Stephen:** Many thanks to you, John! Your curiosity has pushed the practice of relational interviewing that much further along.

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