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Narrative Conflict Coaching

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Abstract

Conflict coaching is a relatively new concept, derived from the domain of executive coaching. The concept has gained a foothold in the conflict resolution literature. There have been references made to a narrative practice of conflict coaching but it has not been articulated as fully as it might be. Here we seek to describe such a practice in relation to Foucault's concept of the care of the self and Deleuze's concept of the event. We also outline Deleuze's approach to the reading of time as chronos and aion and show how these different readings might be put to use. A set of guidelines for narrative conflict coaching are proposed and transcribed conversation is provided as a case study to illustrate the process in action. In this conversation, the conflict coach asks questions which lead the client through an exploration of the series of events that make up the conflict story, the externalizing and deconstructing of this conflict story, and the opening of a counter story as a basis for the client's preferred future conduct in relation to the conflict.

Keywords

Conflict coaching, conflict resolution, narrative, care of the self, event, chronos, aion, counter story

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Narrative Conflict Coaching

Conflict coaching refers to conversations with one party to a conflict that do not reach the point of becoming a joint mediation. They are particularly pertinent in any of the many situations in which the relational conditions for mediation have not yet been met or may never be met. Such is the case when professional assistance may only be sought by one party, while the other party refuses to participate, or when separate conflict coaching conversations may take place with each party prior to a later joint mediation. Our intention here is to outline some ideas to guide the practice of conflict coaching from a *narrative perspective.*

The goal of those conversations is, strictly speaking, not "conflict resolution", since that would need to involve the other party. But talking with one party on his or her own can go beyond being just information-gathering ahead of the main event. It deserves consideration as a practice in its own right.

The aim of such a conversation might be to help a person articulate how he or she might conduct himself or herself in the ongoing evolution of the conflict, whether or not mediation is to take place. However, conflict coaching reaches beyond giving direct instruction or advice on performance strategies in a conflict scenario, as strategizing might emerge as a collaborative product of a conversation, rather than as something a professional does to someone who consults her or him.

So why use the term at all? We do so because it has arisen in the conflict resolution literature and gained some traction in practice. Trish Jones and Ross Brinkert (2008) claimed to have written the first book on conflict coaching (see also Brinkert, 2006). Their definition of conflict coaching reads:

> Conflict coaching is a process in which a coach and client communicate one-on-one for the purpose of developing the client's conflict-related understanding, interaction strategies, and interaction skills.
>
> (Jones & Brinkert, 2008, p. 4.)

They add that it can take place in person, over the phone, or through the internet. They trace the derivation of the concept of conflict coaching from the field of executive coaching (Kilburg, 2000, Stern, 1994) and go on to suggest some general principles: a flexible model; the potential inclusion of all stakeholders in a particular context; the suggestion that a relational orientation is essential; caveats that conflict coaching is contingent on an incomplete

knowledge of the situation and that it is not always appropriate; and emphases on client empowerment and cultural and contextual sensitivity.

Jones and Brinkert also suggest several different approaches to conflict coaching, one of which is a narrative approach, drawing on the articulation of narrative mediation (Monk & Winslade, 2013; Winslade & Monk, 2000, 2008). While their description of narrative conflict coaching serves as a useful starting place, the current article aims to take it further and to locate a narrative practice in relation to a movement of thought that can be traced through poststructuralist philosophical work, particularly that of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze.

We shall start by conceptualizing conflict coaching as what Foucault would call a "technology of the self" (Martin, Gutman & Hutton, 1988), that is, a technology aimed at enhancing the "care of the self" in conflict situations. Foucault drew heavily on Pierre Hadot's (1995) account of Stoic philosophy in his later work on the "care of the self", partly, at the time, to correct an impression that, in his earlier work, he had represented power relations in ways that were too deterministic. He was at pains to step away from the suggestion that life experiences were constituted almost entirely by power. Instead, Foucault wanted to stress that people were actually freer than they thought they were. Despite his compelling documentation of how power relations could internalize certain discourses into consciousness, he maintained it was still possible to take up subjective positions and act from a sense of agency.

The "care of the self" was his effort to speak to the crafting of a subjective position, often in resistance to the internalizing force of power relations. Care of the self was about the intentional design of one's life as an aesthetic project. Foucault also referred to this project as "concern for the self" in a project of becoming. Rather than the humanistic project of an essentialist unfolding of the self from within, Foucault preferred the project of producing oneself to become other than who one had been. Production suggests deliberate and conscious action, rather than the unfolding through self-actualization of a pre-existent potential. Deleuze (1990), in fact, calls it "counter-actualization" (p. 150) rather than self-actualization. Foucault describes this project as:

> … those reflective and voluntary practices by which men *(sic)* not only set themselves rules of conduct, but seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make of their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.
>
> (Foucault, 1992, pp. 10-11)

Some commentators get concerned about Foucault's apparent focus on the individual self and worry about whether it might lead to neglect of the other. Critics have even claimed that Foucault was advocating "narcissistic absorption" and "outwardly aggressive self-aggrandizement" (Wolin, 1986, p. 85). In answering these critiques, David Boothroyd (1996) shows that Foucault was not referring to "egoistical self-interest" but to the "practical formation of an interiority" (p. 382) as the basis for the construction of relationships with others. The process of becoming a subject thus involves the intentional construction of a subjectivity through resistance to dominant discourse and this can only be achieved through becoming accountable to the other. Boothroyd concludes that:

> … Only a subject understood in terms of his/her autochthonous self-fashioning capacity and which sustains itself 'before' it encounters the Other, can *respond* without violating the other's alterity.
>
> (p. 382.)

What might we be required to do to take care of the self? Foucault (2005) speaks about a series of disciplinary exercises founded on philosophical truths that were advocated by the Stoics. Meditation was frequently involved. Nowadays practices of conversation often perform a similar function. Coaching, for example, is one of these and it serves a similar purpose to the ancient Greek and Roman practices of meditation. It allows a person to layer experiences of living reflexively over each other. An experience is lived, and then reflected upon, and then the reflections are talked about and distilled into a form that can be taken back into practice and become again the stuff of experience. Like meditation, it is about producing a sense of truth to guide the ongoing project of living.

We, therefore, want to propose that we think of conflict coaching in these terms – as a reflexive practice of layering and distilling experience and thoughts, a "practical formation of an interiority" in advance of an "encounter with the Other". It is an example of what the ancient Greeks called a *techne*, a method, aimed at the "care of the self". We would suggest that the English word "craft" is a good candidate for describing this method. It conveys the sense of an art (informed by practical skill) and a science (informed by knowledge). It might be useful, then, to describe conflict coaching as conversation in which a professional helps someone craft (the verb can be said to derive from the noun) a sense of who he or she is becoming in relation to another or several others in the context of the events of a conflict.

How might we think of conflict?

Let us turn to the conceptualization of conflict itself and consider how it might be thought about in ways that enable the emergence of such a practice. There are many possible places to start, such an inquiry, but here we will focus on Gilles Deleuze's (1990) work on *The Logic of Sense* as a productive starting point, because of its philosophical rigor and its originality. This work of Deleuze is difficult to read, but the account of it presented here has been aided by the explanations of James Williams (2008) and Sean Bowden (2011), who help draw out Deleuze's purposes.

One of Deleuze's central ideas is the argument that events are logically prior to identities. It is more than an opinion, because Deleuze sustains a systematic philosophical case for it, complete with mathematical proofs. The idea is revolutionary, because the modern "image of thought" habitually thinks of identities first to explain events. In other words, when something happens we seek to explain it by looking for a category of person and understanding events that follow as typical of what that "type of person" would do (Bansel, Davies, Linnell, & Laws, 2009, p. 61). A category of person might be a diagnostic category, a personality type, a social or cultural designation, a political or religious affiliation, a position in a relation (such as victim, perpetrator), or a lifestyle (lesbian, sports jock, surfie, cheerleader, vegetarian, Manchester United fan) and so on. Deleuze's concern is that, when we start with identity categories, we notice and privilege sameness over difference. Emphasizing what is "identical" with a category of classification impedes the process whereby people differentiate themselves, and differentiation is necessary for the development of nuanced practices of living (what Michael White & David Epston, 1990, called "unique outcomes"). Instances of difference are instead squeezed into boxes and people experience discomfort if they do not fit the box. Michael White (2001) referred to this phenomenon as the "cellularisation of life" (p. 20).

To be assigned to an identity category can be of little consequence unless the assigned classification falls on either side of a line along which a given society exercises "dividing practices" (Foucault, 2000, p. 326). When dividing practices are at work, the identity category can have serious consequences for structuring, as Leonard Cohen (1992) puts it, "who will serve and who will eat".

Deleuze's logic here resembles Michael White's aphorism: "The person is not the problem; the problem is the problem" (White, 1989, p. 6). The alternative to an emphasis on identity

categories and on explanations based on who persons "are" is to start with events. Bronwyn Davies (2009) puts it simply:

> Being a person in this way of thinking is not to belong to a category, but more in the nature of an event, or a series of events.
>
> (p. 19)

Accordingly, Deleuze advocates that we understand problems of living by starting with the priority of events. To this end, Deleuze expounds a "logic of sense" which serves the purpose of explaining the relationships between events and persons.

How we might think about events in a conflict

Deleuze's first assertion is that an event always takes place as part of a series of events that coalesce to form a narrative. A narrative conveys a sense of movement through time and a series also refers to moments in time organized into a sequence. For Deleuze, each event in a series stands out, because it is (perhaps only slightly) different from earlier events. On the other hand, each piece of difference can only be recognized when it is part of a sequence and, therefore, significant, because of its participation in the series of events.

The concept of series thus has explanatory value. It helps explain how events developed in the way they did. Deleuze argues that such explanations do not rest on the usual grounds of formal causal logic. Events in a series do not determine each other. If anything, events in a series mutually "cause" each other's participation in the series. Deleuze does not reject the causal logic that has been so important in modern science. It is more that he wants to add to it and mark out a space for a different form of logic to be also accorded value, particularly in situations of complex human interaction.

Deleuze, therefore, interrogates the nature of the connection between events in a series. His argument for such connections relies on what he calls "sense". Sense is felt rather than logically determined but nonetheless operates to hold events in sequence with each other. Deleuze illustrates it with reference to paradox (where we can sense a connection that defies strict logic) and to nonsense (where something is logically impossible but still hangs together). He uses Lewis Carroll's (1865) *"Alice's Adventures in Wonderland"* to illustrate how nonsense events need not interfere with narrative consistency.

Chronos and aion

Following the ancient Stoics, Deleuze (1990) also argues for the parallel existence of two distinct readings of time – which he calls *chronos* and *aion*. Each of these readings amounts to a discrete, consistent system of thinking about time. Each is "complete and excludes the other" (p. 61). *Chronos* refers to the conventional conceptualization of time as divided into the discrete categories we call the past, the present and the future. In the modern world, we divide time further into days and hours and minutes and measure it precisely. *Aion* is a more elastic reading of time in which the past, present and future are conceptualized in an unbroken line. From this perspective, the past flows into the present and the future is already implicit and exerting an influence right now. This more fluid understanding of time draws upon Henri Bergson's (2001) concept of "duration". Thinking in terms of aion produces an awareness of the arc of time, as if we are viewing events from above, rather than from within the immediacy of the present.

Deleuze does not argue for one of these readings of time as more important than the other. Both have their value for different purposes. It is, nevertheless, worth pausing to note that modernist culture has exercised a preference for chronos. In fact, many texts in humanistic psychology (for example, Krug, 2009) have emphasized staying in the "here and now" as a preferred value. The present has been established as the territory in which feelings and emotions take place and their spontaneous expression has come to represent authentic presence. Consider, for instance, the current fascination with mindfulness. To live as much as possible in the present is taken by many people in the therapy field to be a cherished goal and the message is reinforced in many products of popular culture (songs, television shows, and movies).

On the one hand, much of this emphasis is worthy of value. To live in the fullness of the present is necessary to get the full value of certain experiences, such as the tasting of a fine wine, the successful sporting performance "in the zone", and the experience of the joys of sensuality. The intrusion of the past or the future into each of these experiences would interfere with their impact.

On the other hand, a reading of time through the lens of *aion* also has value. It opens up a certain flexibility of perspective that is not possible within the confines of the present. The sense in which events from the past continue to live in the present is one such value. A sense of *aion* allows us to dwell in what we remember and hold a sense of movement over the span of a series of connected events, over a lifetime. The future too, can haunt or can animate the

present and even the past. What we imagine might happen can motivate us to work for a desired future outcome or away from a feared one. Deleuze (1990) asserts the value of reading time as *aion* in relation to the process of personal becoming:

> … becoming does not tolerate the separation of or the distinction of before and after, or of past and future. It pertains to the essence of becoming to pull in both directions at once.
>
> (p. 1)

We need a reading of time as *aion* in order to hold a sense of a career, for example. Career counseling, thus, is not just about the expression of identity in the present moment, but explores how a person's interests and commitments might propel them through time. The temporal trajectory of such exploration always invokes a sense of relationship with a past, a present and a future.

We also need the reading of time as *aion* in order to invoke "a life". In conflict coaching we might inquire into the life of a conflict story, or the life that a counter story might promise. Or we might inquire into the values that a person might hold dear and wish to express in response to others. Such values may transcend any particular moment in the present and suggest an arc that runs through the past, present and future. Reading time from this vantage point allows us to sense the duration through which commitment to a particular value endures. It also allows us to step out of the immediacy of feeling in the present and to see a conflict in wider perspective. In the process, events which have caught us up in their thrall can reappear as more trivial in the greater scheme of things. If this leads to a shift in response, then conflict coaching may be demonstrated to contribute something of value.

The process of conflict coaching

In what follows we will outline a map (see Figure 1) for a narrative process of conflict coaching. Of course, no map fits exactly to the contours of any given conversation and this one should not be read as prescriptive. What such a map can do, however, is to serve an orienting purpose for a conflict coach. It might guide the building of a conflict coaching conversation and render a conversation more purposeful than haphazard. That is the spirit in which this set of guidelines for conversation is offered.

In broad terms, these guidelines move through three territories of conversation. Within these three different territories some specific lines of inquiry that can prove useful for each territory are suggested. The first territory is focused on understanding the conflict story. The second

territory involves asking questions to deconstruct the conflict story, make visible the lines of force (Deleuze, 1988; Winslade, 2009) that run through it, and loosen its authority. The third territory involves asking questions to grow a counter story (Nelson, 2001), an inquiry rooted in a reading of time as *aion*. We shall introduce some of Deleuze's (1990) terms into each of these territories of inquiry in order to ensure that the conflict story is fully understood and the lines of force that run through it are made visible.

To help understand the story of what has happened in a conflict, the guidelines draw from Deleuze's (1990) account of an event in order to specify what we might listen for. Deleuze begins his account of an event by including Bertrand Russell's (1962) explanation for an event, which features the three criteria of "denotation", "manifestation" and "signification". Denotation is about the facts of what has happened. Few would disagree that listening to understand a conflict story would need to include an inquiry along the lines of, "What happened?" Manifestation is the name for the second line of inquiry. It refers to the persons involved and is founded on the idea that we cannot understand an event without inquiring into the "beliefs and desires" (Bowden, 2011, p. 26) of those involved. For conflict coaching this means asking about what the events of the conflict make manifest about the beliefs and desires of the person consulting the conflict coach, and also what this person guesses to be the beliefs and desires of the other party or parties. The third inquiry is into signification. Signification refers to the relationship between what happened and its "conceptual and logical implications" (Bowden, p. 27). This is a recognition of how meanings circulate within a discursive field and influence what people say and do. For this reason, a conflict coach should maintain a stance of curiosity about the discourses that dominate a particular situation, the concepts that are salient in the discourse, the positions established for people by particular language uses, and the "images of thought" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 129) that are conveyed by the words uttered.

Deleuze argues that these three aspects are necessary, but insufficient for purposes of explanation and need another element to be added. To this end, he outlines the location of an event as always part of a "series" (1990), and then he proposes that "sense" is the element missing from Russell's account and, what is more, that sense is the glue that holds Russell's other three criteria together. Thus the conflict coach should remain alert to the ways in which one event is explainable through its connections with other events in a series of events, none of which can be said to have caused other links in the chain, but none of which would be likely to have taken place without the sequence having occurred. Sense is the glue that holds such a

sequence of events together. It refers to a form of narrative logic that need not reach the standard of causal determinacy, but is enough to satisfy the disputing parties that things are connected.

Figure 1 includes these elements in a suggested road map which might guide a conflict coaching conversation. It also includes some other concepts which will be further discussed below.

Figure 1: Narrative Conflict Coaching

Understand the conflict story			
1.	Denotation	Establish the facts.	What happened?
2.	Manifestation	Inquire about people's desires and intentions.	What was your hope? What do you think the other party intended?
3.	Signification	Ask about the influence of discourses and systems of meaning.	What concepts, meanings, discourses govern the situation?
4.	Series of events	Establish how events are part of a series.	What was the sequence of what happened?
5.	Sense	Ask what holds the series of events together.	What is your sense of what is driving this situation?
Deconstruct the conflict story			
6.	Double listening	Listen to both the conflict story and the counter story.	It sounds like … happened, but you would prefer … Is that right?
7.	Ask deconstructive questions	Loosen the authority of dominating discourses or lines of force that run through a series of events.	How much were gender stories, or race, or the conventional family idea, or normality etc., affecting what happened?
8.	Explore assumptions	Inquire into background assumptions.	What were you assuming? What was the other person assuming?
9.	Externalize the problem story	Help people separate from the conflict story by naming it as outside them.	What would you call this situation?

10.	Map the effects	Explore the effects of the externalized conflict.	What effect has it been having? (emotional, physical, relational, financial, institutional, academic)
Grow the counter story			
11.	Evaluate the conflict in relation to the arc of one's life	Ask the person to look at the conflict in relation to a reading of time as 'aion'.	Where does the series of events fit in relation to what is important to you?
12.	Ask about preferences	Open the story of what the person would prefer.	What would you prefer to happen?
13.	Find unique outcomes, differences	Identify moments which contrast with or contradict the conflict story.	Have there been any times more like what you would prefer?
14.	Anchor counter story in value system	Link the preferred way of handling the conflict with the person's values.	When that happens, how does it fit with your values?
15.	Trace the history of these values	Give the preferred values a history.	How have those values been important in the past? Can you give an example?
16.	Extend preferred values into the future	Extend the preferred values from the past into the future.	How would you act in future in this situation if you were to apply your preferred values?

A case study

We shall trace the development of these lines of inquiry through a case study of narrative conflict coaching. This conversation was recorded and transcribed for the purposes of this study and took place between the first author[1] and a volunteer who was a recent graduate of a Masters degree in counseling[2]. According to the guidelines, the first part of the conversation would involve the conflict coach in understanding the conflict story and following lines of inquiry into the denotation, manifestation, signification of the conflict, as well as tracing the series of events in which it has taken place and the sense which holds it together as a narrative. Now, let us look at what transpired.

Understanding the conflict story

> **Jocelyn:** Well I do have something on my mind that's been pressing and it's my job. My boss currently, and we used to be co-supervisors, and when the program manager retired, he is acting program manager, so now he's my boss. And because he's wanting the program manager's position, he now sees me as competition.
>
> **John:** Oh I see.
>
> **Jocelyn:** And so the relationship that we've had since December of 2012 has been very oppressive, like he's not communicating anything with me. If I shut my door to my office, he's knocking on it to ask what I'm working on. He'll want to ask me what happened at the meeting. Or if someone is coming to my office, he'll stop them on the way or he'll call people into his office after they come out of mine. So he's had this almost like paranoid type of reaction...

Jocelyn begins her explanation of the conflict story by referring to what the conflict manifests about the person she is in conflict with ("… he sees me as competition"). She explains it further by designating a signifier for her relationship with this person ("oppressive") before moving to some denotative aspects of the story ("… he is knocking on [my door]"; "…he'll ask me what happened at the meeting"; "… he'll stop them on the way [to my office] or he'll call people into his office after they come out…", etc.). In the last part of the segment she reverts to an explanation of the conflict as manifestation (of the other person exhibiting a "paranoid reaction"). In other words, the denotation, manifestation and signification are woven together in the initial representation of the story. The conflict coach then begins to sort out the sequence of events into a series that takes place in time:

> **John:** So this changed around December you said.
>
> **Jocelyn:** Mmmhmm.
>
> **John:** What happened in December? What followed through? What happened?
>
> **Jocelyn:** The program manager retired. So he went from being my … co-supervisor to … because there was two.
>
> **John:** So you were colleagues then.
>
> **Jocelyn:** Right we were colleagues and then we would play uh … supportive roles to each other and we had two different units that we supervised and we were under one program manager and so, when that program manager left, he became acting program manager. But that doesn't necessarily give him the full scope of the program manager's duties.

An event is established (the manager's retirement) which does not determine the events in the series that follow but is clearly connected to these subsequent events. The denotative event is traced through into what was made manifest before and after it (that is, what colleagues might manifest and what an acting manager might manifest). The word "then" is used by both the conflict coach and Jocelyn to indicate the temporal dimension of events. Jocelyn responds to the conflict coach's inquiry with more denotative details of what happened. She establishes more of a time sequence in her account ("… we used to be co-supervisors"; "… now he's my boss"; "… the relationship that we've had since December of 2012"; "then we would play uh supportive roles") and thus supplements the conflict coach's inquiry. The conversation continues with further explanation of the conflict in denotative terms:

> **Jocelyn:** Ya, he called a meeting with my unit … and wanted to let them know. This was, like, back towards January. He figured he would let them know his position on … he doesn't know much about children and family services, nor does he want to. And my whole unit basically functions under children and family services. And all the things that have to do with child welfare, from the federal government to state to county too and so for him to kind of put out there that I'm not going to do what the program manager used to do. He's more of a statistical analyst supervisor, so he kept up with numbers.
>
> **John:** Right.
>
> **Jocelyn:** As opposed to we come up with outcomes and we do research on the programs that the county offers.
>
> **John:** Ya.
>
> **Jocelyn:** And we audit different programs and we do all kinds of stuff with CFS, I'm sorry, with Children and Family Services and uh Department of Aging Adult Services and things like that.
>
> **John:** Yes, yes.
>
> **Jocelyn:** And he had said that he was no longer going to carry that out, and I told him well I'm going to continue to carry that out, because … I'm actually the vice chair for C.M.P.A. and he kind of just like paused. And from that point on, he has been involved in trying to be involved and signed up for CFS and CWDA and he doesn't share any of the information with me. And I've asked him, hey, can you share this information with me and he'll say yes and he doesn't. I've asked him to share his calendar with me, because I've shared my calendar with him and he doesn't. I've given him permission to see my calendar and he hasn't given me any permission to see his calendar.

While this segment is largely denotative, there are also elements of manifestation built into it (references to the parties' different roles and interests) and there are allusions to discourses

that govern relations between managers (for example the expectation that they might "share calendars"). But little inquiry is needed in this instance, because Jocelyn is continuing to flesh out the conflict story with little prompting. In the next segment, however, the explanation dwells on a specific element of signification:

> **Jocelyn:** And there's already been two people who I've had to go to human resources about, because of the words that they used. And so I told them that once you say that, then I have to document that and take it up, and they were fine with that but …
>
> **John:** Once you say what?
>
> **Jocelyn:** That they've been harassed. That they feel like he is bullying them.
>
> **John:** Those are words that are kind of red flag words.
>
> **Jocelyn:** Yeah, that he uh, those are words that as a supervisor it turns the conversation you're just venting to now I have to …
>
> **John:** Have to act on that.
>
> **Jocelyn:** Right, I have to act on that. Um … two situations now which creates an awkwardness between him and I, because I technically have to write up my colleague, slash boss, and that in itself has caused, you know, kind of a wedge between us and um … but at the same time we're both trying to hold a unit together.

We can see here particular pieces of signification that produce developments in the series of events (use of "red flag words" like "bullying" and "harassment"). Thus it is not just denotative actions that can lead to the generation of signification. Sometimes signification can also produce actions. This is consistent with Deleuze's (1990) argument that denotation, manifestation and signification can all produce each other. What is more, the whole situation is summed up in the concept of the "wedge between us" that has been produced by events and that, in turn, contributes to discomfort in relation to the task of "trying to hold a unit together". This may be a localized example of what Foucault (2000) refers to as a "dividing practice" (p. 326). The effect is that everyone is positioned on either side of a designated conflict in the workplace.

Here we can sense the dilemma that Jocelyn is experiencing. The sensing of this dilemma is enough. It need not be analyzed in terms of causal factors. The sensed dilemma itself is enough to serve as the glue that is holding the conflict story together in Deleuze's terms. In

the following segment the conflict coach endeavors to summarize the series of events and connect up the narrative.

> **John:** So, there's been a series of events, there's been … first it started with the resignation of the old manager, the program manager, and then you've had signals that he's treating you as competition.
>
> **Jocelyn:** Mmm.
>
> **John:** Then it started with that meeting back in January.
>
> **Jocelyn:** Mmm.
>
> **John:** And there's been a series of little interruptions with people coming to see you. There's been denials with you being able to go to a conference. Or not getting, or requiring to actually go over his head to get that … um, interference with things that are part of your job. And part of how you've done your job in the past … right?
>
> **Jocelyn:** Right.

The connective tissue between events largely lies in the denotative sequencing of plot elements here. The conflict coach is setting up a reading of events through the perspective of *aion* by invoking a contrast between "how [Jocelyn] has done her job in the past" with what is happening in the present. There are, however, some allusions to the sense of a pattern at work that is referred to through some key significations: "competition", "interruptions", "denials", and "interference". These all suggest some form of power relation at the epicenter of the conflict, and it will be the task of the next section of conversation to tease this out.

Deconstructing the conflict story

The first element of deconstruction in the conflict coaching guidelines is double listening (White 2007; Monk and Winslade, 2013). The task of double listening is to "listen for exceptions, gaps, contradictions, and expressions of resistance of the dominance of the conflict, as well as of the conflict-saturated narrative itself" (Winslade & Williams, 2012, p. 34). Double listening builds on the notion of active listening, but extends it by specifying a distinction between what is listened for. It occurs when the conflict coach hears both the problem story and a counter story simultaneously, making possible a contrast between the two. This counter story is not necessarily at first well-formed enough to be clearly articulated by the subject, but may be constructed out of elements or fragments of a possible narrative that are spoken of by the person and granted increased significance by being heard by the conflict coach. The

contrast makes it easier to move away from a conflict story and towards a story of hope (Winslade & Williams, 2012, p. 20). Double listening makes it possible for the conflict coach to say once the conflict story has been explored:

> **John:** And if you look at that sort of series of things that have happened … that this doesn't fit with how you want to be in your life and do your professional work and, I'm wondering if I can ask you to speak to that. What is it about this whole situation this series of events that is kind of um, creating this sense of challenge for you?

This inquiry is informed by double listening, because it draws out a contradiction between Jocelyn's account of what has been happening and her preferences for how things might happen. It also implies a contrast between events in the conflict story and Jocelyn's beliefs and desires. Jocelyn supplements the question the conflict coach asks by confirming what he has heard.

> **Jocelyn:** Well you're right about that … it doesn't fit with my style of supervising. And my style of supervising is one you … um, you should, whatever you expect from the people you're supervising, you should be willing to do it yourself.
>
> **John:** You should be willing to do it yourself. Yes, ok.
>
> **Jocelyn:** Also um … inviting people out, coaching, mentoring, developing skills. Things like that I'm huge on and so to have one of my people to follow me to a meeting or I have even invited a few of them to the Children's Network Conference, um … just things like that, having them um … really get their face out there and learn more about what it is that they're doing, even though they only have, you know, they basically only collect that data … it's still my hopes that they would want to know.

What emerges here is a distinction between the story of what happened and the story of what Jocelyn would prefer. This distinction is not yet fully developed but a gap is opened up that serves a deconstructive purpose. In this gap there is the possibility for surplus meanings and actions consistent with them to arise. The gap opens as a result of the conflict coach listening for a distinction and inquiring about how accurate what he has heard is. In a further example, the conflict coach responds in a way that indicates double listening:

> **Jocelyn:** And um, because he's been going to those just recently, the assistant director has been asking me to come to his office. And he asked me, how do I feel about Brett? … So, for him to ask me that kind of threw me for a loop. And I just told, him … hey, let me just tell you a little bit about myself,

> because I didn't come to your office to discuss Brett. You know I didn't really want to have to be a part of, you know, and mainly because I didn't have many nice things to say.
>
> **John:** So you'd rather not say anything disparaging of him?

"I didn't have many nice things to say," could be read as a reference to thinking things that were "not nice", but the conflict coach also attends to Jocelyn's positive intention of ethical restraint from saying "anything disparaging", and emphasizes that in his response.

> **John:** So, my next question I had in mind was something like … what made this get so big … into such a big challenge sort of so quickly? What were the conditions that sort of enabled that to happen?"
> **Jocelyn:** Well, he was given the authority.
>
> **John:** He was given the authority. That was one thing.
>
> **Jocelyn:** That was, that was the hugest thing because he's even stated to me that he only wants the program manager position for the authority. He said it wouldn't be too much …
>
> **John:** He actually said that?
>
> **Jocelyn:** He said that to me. He said that it wouldn't be actually that much of a pay scale raise for him, because the program manager has to come in um … five days a week and we only have to come in five days one week and four days the next week.

This exchange makes visible some of the power relations that are entwined with the conflict. The word "authority" is the key signifier that is shaping relational positions for Jocelyn and her colleague. It is a word that assigns authorship of the unfolding narrative to the other party and implicitly positions Jocelyn as having little chance to be an author. Making such power relations visible rather than having them remain hidden is sufficiently deconstructive in conflict coaching.

The next step in the deconstruction of the problem story is to nominalize it and assign it a name. The conflict coach joins with Jocelyn in finding a name for the problem story in externalizing language (White & Epston, 1990; Winslade & Monk, 2000). The conflict coach attributes any negativity to the problem instead of to Jocelyn. The words are separated from the person who utters them and they are assumed to have a certain amount of power or influence on people's actions. This process begins with a question:

> **John:** So, if you think about what you have talked to me about, how would you describe the interactions between you and this other person? How would you describe the things that have been happening in the relationship? …
> **Jocelyn:** Yeah, it's annoying for me and I'm at the point now that, when we're in meetings, because now the assistant director has invited me to their meetings. And I still don't understand why the assistant director would ask me that. And I almost feel now that maybe I caught myself up by even saying anything negative.
>
> **John:** So, it's like this whole problem almost got you into saying and doing things that you would not normally do and think twice, and would not fit with who you think of yourself as.

Jocelyn talks about the effect of the problem but the conflict coach, after calling it "this whole problem", persists in asking about an externalized name for the problem story.

> **John:** So, you're talking about some of the effects of this whole thing here. I don't know if you would call it an outright argument or it's not quite like that, it's something else.
>
> **Jocelyn:** It's a um, it's almost like a sibling, um … um …
>
> **John:** Sibling rivalry?
>
> **Jocelyn:** Yeah I almost want to say it's like a, like a … or it's almost about a tension.

Whether or not the name is settled upon, the purpose of the externalizing language has been served. The problem has become an "it" and is separated from the persons involved. A collection of actions and meanings are bundled into a noun. The "sibling rivalry" or the "tension" both refer to events in the relational domain between persons, rather than to either party's internal experience. Once this bundling has been achieved, the mapping of the effects of the externalized problem begins. Jocelyn says:

> **Jocelyn:** But on the other hand, I was thinking to myself, this guy is so concerned about getting the program manager job that he can't even see straight. He can't even see the bigger picture.
>
> **John:** So you've got this … what you described before as a sibling rivalry going on, even though that doesn't describe how you would like to behave, it ends up being what you get caught up in, or pulled by, or affected by … right?

The word "but" is an early indicator of a different story beginning. The preferred story is referred to as "seeing straight" and "seeing the bigger picture". It is a reference to a more inclusive viewpoint that is not yet visible to Jocelyn, while she remains embroiled in the sibling

rivalry. The conflict coach's response sharpens the sense of difference between the two stories. It pries them slightly apart and differentiates the two stories. It implicitly invites Jocelyn to "see the bigger picture", since that is the viewpoint it is spoken from and opens up an inquiry into how the conflict has affected Jocelyn. According to Michael White (2007) mapping of effects of a problem story entails an inquiry into:

> … the various domains of living in which complications are identified. This can include:
> - Home, workplace, school, peer contexts
> - Familial relationships, one's relationship with oneself, friendships
> - Identity, including the effects of the problem of one's purposes, hopes, dreams, aspirations and values
> - One's future possibilities and life horizons (p. 43).

The purpose is to increase the motivation of a person to change what is happening in the conflict when he or she starts to notice the extent of its effects and its emotional impact (Winslade & Williams, 2012). Here is a part of the externalizing conversation that addresses this task:

> **John:** What I'm thinking about now is what effect does that have on you? Because it gets you to sometimes say too much.
>
> **Jocelyn:** Right.
>
> **John:** What else does it do? Embarrassed, you said before.
>
> **Jocelyn:** The thing is … I'd like to move up in the county and, you know, build on my career there and I'm sitting with the H.S. director, not knowing what he's thinking of what's coming out of my mouth and how he's going to see that as me being able to solve my own problems or … you know, I don't know how he sees that, even though he initially asked the question, you never know if you just caught yourself up in your own web type of thing. So, I don't know what this does for me as far as my relationships with human services and moving up … you know he may say … yeah I've had talks with Jocelyn and she doesn't get along well with others. You know, you just never know what could come out of it. And so I would hate for it to become a blemish effect on my, so far so good, work ability with the county.
>
> **John:** Yes, so that's kind of what it would get you worrying about, creating a blemish.
>
> **Jocelyn:** Mmmhmm.

> **John:** It could interfere with what you were hoping for in your career and you're wondering if what you have said so far could be interpreted that way, even if it's not anything intended that way, it could just get interpreted that way. Anything else?
>
> **Jocelyn:** Well it's definitely um, it's making me um … I'm not insecure, but I'm more watchful of what I say, what I do. How I do it, when I do it. I just don't know what direction. I don't know what anyone is thinking. I don't know what's being discussed about me. I don't know … So I've had some things that have played well in my part, but, at the same time, you just never know what position is going to open up to you. You don't know who knows who or whatever and I just don't, you know, need any bad marks or saying or concern about me.
>
> **John:** Right, you don't like being so watchful and guarded, right?
>
> **Jocelyn:** Right.

What is exemplified here is the way conflict can invite people into self-monitoring and becoming hypervigilant about others' surveillance of them. Foucault (1980) would explain this internalization of the gaze as a phenomenon of modern power. There are other effects mentioned by Jocelyn, but this one stands out as something that Jocelyn is thinking carefully about.

Growing the counter story

The process of mapping the effects of the conflict eventually leads to the opening of a counter story. This often begins with the conflict coach inviting the person to evaluate the problem and its effects. The purpose of evaluating the conflict story and its effects is to explore "… whether these effects have been good or bad, okay or not okay…" (Mann, 2002, p. 6). If the answer is that the conflict story is not okay, the conflict coach next invites a justification of the evaluation, often by asking simply, "Why?" The purpose of inviting the justification of the evaluation is to "open up space for the people consulting us to give voice to the values, beliefs and intentions that inform those justifications" (Mann, p. 6).

This inquiry can begin the process of opening a counter story, because the problem is no longer represented as part of the person, but is now the object of the person's judgment. In the conversation with Jocelyn, however, this stage in the process remained implicit and was overtaken by other developments of the counter story.

John: So, why is that important to you? I'm just interested to know why that's important.

Jocelyn: It's important to me, because we supervise two units that have to work together and, if we can't be professional and we end up arguing or being inappropriate again, one, it can affect my career advancement, because that type of behavior will for sure be reported up in our next to the H.S. assistant director. So I wouldn't want that to …

John: But it's more than that right. That's just one reason. It's more than just your career.

Jocelyn: Yeah and then, two, it's just not worth it to me.

John: Like personally it's not worth it?

Jocelyn: It's personally not worth it. He's just a guy I work with and, yeah, I do spend a lot of time at work, but I have so many other things outside of work that I do, that I'm a part of, or responsible for, or whatever. And I have so many connections with the county that do matter, that are positive, that are role models that it would be unwarranted from myself to give him any type of attention that would cause …

John: Not give him that much power over you and let you take it home. Is that right? …

Jocelyn: Yeah it bothers me to the extent that, like I said, like I'm trying to think what does the assistant director … where is this going to end up? What are these meetings that we're having every month? What do I do in these meetings to remain professional? … It bothers me to that extent … but at the same time I know that … if I stay within my rules, that it's gotten this far within the county just within seven years, so it has to continue to work. So, I have to stay within those professional boundaries that I've set for myself within the county.

The mapping of the effects of the conflict has thus directly led into an expression of the values that Jocelyn holds to be important. These values are expressed as "staying within my rules", observing "professional boundaries", and "not being dictated" to. Sticking to these values becomes an expression of agency in the face of provocation. This opens up the possible counter story. Continuing to inquire into such cherished values can eventually be expected to throw up unique outcomes (White & Epston, 1990; Winslade & Monk, 2000), which can be found in moments when the problem story did not dominate Jocelyn's experience of a specific situation. These unique outcomes may be volunteered or may be sought out through questioning. For example, a useful question would be, "How are your

preferences being expressed in action? Can you give me an example?" Here is a unique outcome that just appears in Jocelyn's account of recent events.

> **Jocelyn:** I've even asked him, "Are you picking on me, or is this a rule you're going to apply to everyone?" And this is something that I just came up with a few weeks back. It was about transportation, about driving the county car. I was like, nobody drives the county cars. So, why are you telling me to drive the county cars? So it was like one of those things where I had to tell him like, if we're going to start doing that, then technically everyone will have to drive the county car. He said oh no, no, no, no. Let's not play that, because we've all been just kind of doing our own thing in our own cars. So, if you're trying to pick on me, then you know, because you're in one of your moods today and you're trying to control me, or whatever. So I have to constantly do that with him, because he constantly does that with me.
>
> **John:** So, it sounds like, in many of those instances, you're quite successful in making that shift. In getting him to back down.
>
> **Jocelyn:** Oh yeah.
>
> **John:** In getting those things to work in more of the direction you want them to go.
>
> **Jocelyn:** Mmmhmm.
>
> **John:** How do you know how to do that?
>
> **Jocelyn:** Mmmm, I guess just growing up and having been picked on before. I pretty much get it … you have to stand up for yourself or people are going to continue to pick on you. And usually, when you say things back to someone, they don't pick on you anymore.

This is a confident statement of agency in knowing how to deal with petty authority when it is used against Jocelyn. It is a unique outcome, because it does not fit with being harassed and bullied, or being fearful of being subjected to monitoring. It speaks to an emergent counter story. The conflict coach becomes interested in extending this counter story and granting it even more significance. He responds:

> **John:** So you've developed a sort of principles of how you respond in that sort of situation, right?
>
> **Jocelyn:** Right.
>
> **John:** You stand up for yourself.

Jocelyn: Right, I don't like for people to just throw anything at me. If it doesn't make sense, then I'm not going to give it that much attention.

John: Yeah, right.

Jocelyn: So it has to make sense to me and, if it doesn't make sense, then I'm going to throw it back at that person, and see how they can make it make sense.

John: So that's your criteria. So it has to make sense in context.

Jocelyn: It has to be factual, because then we're only having a conversation that's a rule for me. And I like to get people to realize what they're saying. So if you say something to me, then I want you to know exactly what you just said to me, and how it sounded.

John: Ok and how it sounded.

Jocelyn: So I will repeat it back with some facts.

John: With the intention of … ?

Jocelyn: With the intention of that person knowing, getting an idea of … what you just said doesn't make sense. It's not something that can be carried to a factual. It doesn't make sense. It's not facts.

John: So it's almost like you have an educational agenda there. Like you're trying to help someone to see something.

Now the actions of the unique outcome are granted the enlarged status of enactments of a principle, in which can be seen a recognizable process of making sense and of educating others to do the same. As the conversation continues, these principles emerge into generous actions, for which Jocelyn feels a sense of accomplishment. They start to constitute a line of flight (Winslade, 2009) out of the striated spaces (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 474) produced by her colleague's managerial actions.

John: Yeah, but to help them to realize what they sound like and when I hear that, I'm hearing, I'm not just interested in telling you what you sound like, I'm interested in you learning to modify your behavior by you hearing what you sound like. Right?

Jocelyn: Exactly … and usually he does.

John: And usually he does. Then, you're quite effective in modifying his approach.

Jocelyn: Yeah.

John: When you get that opportunity. Right?

Jocelyn: Right and it just further pisses him off, because he can't find a way to control me.

John: And what does that do for you when it pisses him off?

Jocelyn: Well I've learned how to be quiet. I've learned that less is more. So, I just return to whatever I was doing and I don't necessarily feed into it.

John: And you don't want to just push him further at that point?

Jocelyn: Right.

John: So you just have learned to be quiet … and allow him to back down in his own time almost.

Jocelyn: Mmmhmm … and sometimes he'll be so upset that he'll go home early. A lot of times he'll do that. He gets so upset that he has to leave. And so I do the little … uh, well, good night. See you tomorrow.

John: And what's your intention in that moment when you say that?

Jocelyn: That it bothers me, but my intention is that we keep a professional working relationship.

This is now a conversation that is doing more than reporting on what has happened. It is starting to generate new meanings about Jocelyn's own actions and to invest them with a more fully articulated ethical rationale than was contemplated before. They are coalescing into a more well-formed narrative with its own trajectory of becoming. To achieve this, the conflict coach invites Jocelyn to read what has been happening from a perspective of *aion*, rather than *chronos*. From this perspective, it is more important to view events in terms of "keep[ing] a professional relationship" than in terms of the immediate hurts from relational slights. We are starting to see what I believe Foucault meant by the "care of the self". But the conversation is not yet done. The conflict coach keeps inquiring into the counter story and differentiating it further from the conflict story.

John: When you hold all of those things clear in your mind, what happens in the situation with Brett?

Jocelyn: Um, it really doesn't matter. What he does doesn't really matter … at this point I feel sorry for him … You know, I watch him sometimes … just some of the things he puts himself through. He's his own worst enemy. He goes home sick, because he created a problem.

John: You almost feel compassion for him?

Jocelyn: Yeah.

John: You do?

Jocelyn: You know I'm at the point where I think this man doesn't even know what he's doing … So not only is he suffering from, you know, whatever else is going on, he's also being asked to look very smart in a child welfare position and that's not something he's passionate about. He doesn't care about it. He's said that. And he's … said some things to me about it being too much for him, but I've offered him my help. I've even said, "Hey Brett, if you can't make this meeting, because you have this going on, I'll go for you." Well his response was oh no, no. I don't want you to go. That way I can tell the assistant director that there's so much going on here that we need a program manager, because I'm missing meetings. And I'm like, but you could just send me.

John: You don't get it, I was just trying to help you. Yeah?

Jocelyn: Right, and how does that look to the assistant director? That you don't know how to utilize people in your unit or the other supervisors to go to these meetings on your behalf, instead you're just willy-nilly missing meetings, but he thinks that that's smart. So it's just things like that …

John: So you actually stand up for the things that you stand for. The professional stands, the commitments you have. The beliefs, the values you have, and, when you do that, it sort of puts you in a stronger position of yourself so you don't feel like you have to … you can feel sorry for him, you even feel compassion for him. So what's it like to think about it that way?

Jocelyn: Well, for me to think about it that way, it keeps me, it makes me want to help him.

Jocelyn can now be seen to be speaking very differently from how she started. In response to the invitation to "hold all those things clearly in your mind", she talks about how she can "feel sorry for him", "want to help him", and "feel compassion for him". These are values rooted in the counter story and the conflict coach helps her to extend them into future interactions. He asks what it is like to think about it in this way, which again takes her to the perspective of *aion,* the viewpoint that sees time as an arc that includes the past, present and future. She can view the evolution of her own thinking from this vantage point.

There is one last exchange to note. It focuses on what Michael White (2007) has called the experience of "transport" (p. 191). The conflict coach asks about what she will "take away"

from the conversation he and Jocelyn have been having. In itself, this question zooms out again to a different territory. It "reterritorializes" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 142) her earlier words in a place governed by a perspective of *aion*.

> **John:** One last thing I want to ask you, Jocelyn, and that is what are you going to take away from this conversation that we've had?
>
> **Jocelyn:** Um, I guess that I'll take away, one, that I do have the support of other people throughout the county … Yeah that and the fact that I do have the strength to stand on, and I'm compassionate enough, and that I can find compassionate at a time at odds, when it's somebody who is against me.
>
> **John:** Yeah, yeah, when it's not easy to feel compassion.
>
> **Jocelyn:** It's not easy to feel compassion, you know, when someone is not treating you the best.
>
> **John:** What's it like to think of yourself in that way?
>
> **Jocelyn:** Well um … it's a good thing, because I wasn't always the one who was a compassionate person … however, people showed compassion towards me. So I feel like, you know, sometimes I need to think of … let's not forget there were times when you were not nice.
>
> **John:** Yeah, yeah.
>
> **Jocelyn:** Or compassionate or whatever and people still stood by you and were compassionate and all of those things, and this is kind of like a returning of that favor that other people did for me.
>
> **John:** Wow! That's lovely!
>
> **Jocelyn:** So that's kind of why I'm the way I am now.

The response Jocelyn makes, from the territory of *aion*, makes a link between this conflict situation and other moments when the boot has been on the other foot and others have shown her compassion. It strengthens the meaning she has been making into a meta-learning with the potential to govern future interactions with Brett and others.

Concluding remarks

Narrative conflict coaching has not been extensively written about, nor is it widely known. It thus can benefit from being articulated in case study examples that serve as a benchmark for future exploration. In this example, we have shown the relationship between an actual conflict coaching conversation and a set of guidelines intended to inform such practice. The

transcribed conversation demonstrates a shift from a territory of striated constraint, to a more expansive vision that can even allow the feeling of compassion toward the other party to the conflict. Such a shift is what Deleuze & Guattari (1987) refer to as deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Jocelyn negotiates a shift to a territory in which she can view the strained relations with her temporary manager from a different perspective, one that allows a reading of the series of events of the conflict through the lens of *aion*. This reading generates a different sense about the conflict and about self and is, therefore, about "differenciation" (Davies, 2009), about becoming other than who one has been. It does not solve the conflict but it offers a forward trajectory. Jocelyn sounds clearer in how she might conduct herself in the conflict situation. This is the aim of a conversation concerned about the "care of the self".

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Author's Notes

1. The conflict coaching in the case study was recorded from the work of the first author. It was transcribed and analyzed by the second author as part of a research project for a Masters degree.
2. Names of participants have been altered to protect anonymity.