
1-1-2012

Conversing Life: An Autoethnographic Construction

Christopher N. Hoelson

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, christopher.hoelson@nmmu.ac.za

Rod Burton

PostNet Express

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Hoelson, C. N., & Burton, R. (2012). Conversing Life: An Autoethnographic Construction. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(1), 92-119. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2012.1809>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.

A promotional banner for the Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate at Nova Southeastern University. The banner is split into two sections. The left section has a dark blue background with white text: "Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate" in a large font, "Indulge in Culture" in a smaller, italicized font, "Exclusively Online • 18 Credits" below that, and the NSU logo (a sunburst over "NSU" and "NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY") in the bottom left. A white button with "LEARN MORE" in black text is in the bottom right of this section. The right section shows a group of six diverse people sitting on a stone ledge in front of a building with "NOVA SOUTHEASTERN" visible on the wall.

Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate
Indulge in Culture
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits
LEARN MORE

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

Conversing Life: An Autoethnographic Construction

Abstract

This autoethnography is a constructed account of a co-exploration into the nature and effects of a longitudinal dyadic conversation process from a relational constructionist perspective. The conversations, between me as participant autoethnographer and a co-participant, aimed at maximising personal learning for both. Through co-created contexts of mutual engagement and respectful presence, we were able to focus our learning on the spontaneous process and content of the conversations. The qualitative data were sampled purposively from diary entries summarizing the conversations which spanned a period of five years. The data were analysed into themes and together, with selected illustrative examples of significant conversational moments, were woven into an autoethnography that attempts to convey the embodied and systemic learning that emerged from these conversations.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Dyadic Conversation, Communication, Sparkling Moments, Constructionist, Personal Development, Therapeutic Change

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Conversing Life: An Autoethnographic Construction

Christopher N. Hoelson

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape, South Africa

Rod Burton

PostNet Express

This autoethnography is a constructed account of a co-exploration into the nature and effects of a longitudinal dyadic conversation process from a relational constructionist perspective. The conversations, between me as participant autoethnographer and a co-participant, aimed at maximising personal learning for both. Through co-created contexts of mutual engagement and respectful presence, we were able to focus our learning on the spontaneous process and content of the conversations. The qualitative data were sampled purposively from diary entries summarizing the conversations which spanned a period of five years. The data were analysed into themes and together, with selected illustrative examples of significant conversational moments, were woven into an autoethnography that attempts to convey the embodied and systemic learning that emerged from these conversations. Key Words: Autoethnography, Dyadic Conversation, Communication, Sparkling Moments, Constructionist, Personal Development, Therapeutic Change.

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

Introducing the Study

This autoethnographic study emerged from my personal experience, particularly over the past decade, as a clinical psychologist and lecturer responsible for facilitating learning, change, growth and development in clients and students. Having been educated and trained predominantly in a positivist approach to theory and practice in psychology, it was that approach that came to dominate my own theorising and practice for close on four decades. However, during the past decade I began experiencing significant changes in several of my relatively stable life contexts and came into increasing contact with the thinking and practices that emerge from post-modern, ecosystemic, and social constructionist quarters.

This transformational process bears many similarities to the paradigm shift in scientific thinking popularised by Kuhn (1962). He postulated that such a paradigm shift comes into being through the crisis evoked by events that cannot be explained by the

prevailing paradigm and which require a fundamental reconstruction of basic beliefs about knowledge creation. Kuhn likens such major transitions to new ways of knowing in science to revolutions. Such a revolution ushered in a shift from the modernist worldview which emphasised linear, objective, and reductionist thinking, to a post-modern emphasis on recursive, perceptual, and relational thinking accompanied by first- and then second-order cybernetic approaches to understanding and knowledge creation.

Locating the exact origin of my own transformation process, however, is not as easy or straightforward as one might think. As I reflected on this, it became clear that several different threads led up to and constituted the emergence of this significant change process. For the purpose of this paper however, I will focus on only one of these threads—the one that is associated with a long term series of dyadic dialogical conversations.

The specific point at which I choose to begin this autoethnographic paper occurred in 2005 with a casual invitation to share a cup of coffee with a recent acquaintance of mine, Rod Burton, who happens to be a minister of religion. Having engaged in the usual small talk, we spontaneously started to talk about more personal aspects of our lives, in particular our experiences of being challenged to deal effectively with the many systemic changes that have and continue to affect our lives here in South Africa but that are not limited to this local context. The conversation flow between us increased significantly and smoothly in the hour we spent talking with each other. Both of us experienced the dialogue as natural, deep, enjoyable, and meaningful and it filled us with buoyancy and energy we had not experienced so intensely for a long time. The mutually positive experience and effect of this dialogical conversation at the time was followed immediately by a mutual decision to schedule another time and place to meet in an attempt to extend this meaningful experience and conversation.

It was a fortnight later, at our next meeting, that we decided to get together weekly in future to explore and extend our initial positive experience and conversation. Due to the fact that both of us were involved in sedentary occupations and were not particularly keen on physical activity, we decided to include some form of exercise with our meetings. After experimenting unsuccessfully with Tai Chi we decided on walking while we engaged in conversation. And so began a series of “walking conversations” that continue to work their living magic today.

In an initial attempt to capture and record the essence of these ongoing conversations I began to record, in summary form, my experience of each conversation in my diary. Indeed, the conversations have been and continue to be so meaningful to us personally and seem to have so much potential for wider application that they demand description and sharing of their positive effects with a wider audience—a goal which can be accomplished through the writing and publication of this paper.

The Research Context

In discussing the context of this research it is important to note that it differs from conventional research studies in several ways. Firstly, as mentioned above, the data for this study were extracted from existing weekly personal diary entries, in the form of summaries that I had made regarding my participation in a naturalistic dyadic conversational process that took place before the formal research study was initiated.

Secondly, it was only after we started to experience the positive and continuing impact of the process that we decided to explore and describe the process and its accompanying benefits through a formal research study with an eye to submitting it for publication. The primary aim of this autoethnographic study was to share and engage in scholarly conversation with interested others in a more public and critical context regarding our exploration and understanding of the nature and effects of specific spontaneous personal transformational moments that emerged in our dyadic dialogical conversation over time. Although we had shared our experiences with other interested parties which included friends, acquaintances, and a group of student counselors, it was only now that we felt ready to publicise our experiences further. This paper is an expression of our current readiness to invite wider and more distant audiences of interested parties from a diversity of disciplinary backgrounds to read and evaluate the process and outcomes of our study, thereby extending the process of conversational learning that forms the core of our study into the interdisciplinary scholarly domain for further critique and validation. An additional motivation for the study and this paper related to our desire to add to the limited number of autoethnographic studies conducted by professionals in the helping professions. We hoped that by expressing our local voices we would add to the diversity of voices to be heard and might extend conversation and learning to interested and unknown others.

Appreciation of my role and stance in this study is critical and is directly related to the research paradigm that informed the study, which contrasts sharply with that of traditional modernist and positivist research. In this study, I am a co-participant in the conversational process from which the sample of data has been purposively selected and also a co-author and co-researcher of this paper. My position is congruent with that of an engaged second order cybernetic observer (von Foerster, 1996) who co-generated the system and practice being observed and studied. My observations are therefore neither objective, nor value-free, in a positivist scientific sense, but should be seen as comprising a particular pattern constructed from selected fragments of the complex web of interconnected influences of which they are only a part. Questions relating to the influence of my values as a researcher can be answered by recalling the nature and purpose of the conversation process I co-initiated and maintained through my ongoing participation as both the product of and the process of an ongoing embodied dyadic dialogical conversation for the purpose of mutual learning, the phenomenon observed was infused with and embedded in a context congruent with the values underlying dyadic dialogue and processes associated with mutual personal learning, such as mutual respect, acceptance, and commitment to the process.

As this paper reports retrospectively through an autoethnography on a naturalistic dyadic conversational process that initially was not intended or planned specifically as a prospective formal research study, the rationale for the original process and its subsequent reporting is a retrospective integration of both the above intentions. The original purpose of the conversational process we engaged in was to explore through our own experience the nature and effects of living or sparkling conversational moments (Goncalves, Matos, & Santos, 2009; Shotter & Katz, 1999). In addition, once we had immersed and found ourselves to be sufficiently saturated in the process to the extent that we were regularly re-experiencing diverse and systemic positive effects and were able to begin describing and sharing the nature of the recurring epiphanic, living, sparkling, and

energising process, we spontaneously began to experience a need to share and disseminate our experience with others in wider, more public, and more scholarly contexts. It was during that time that we began to think about an appropriate scholarly format to export our experience so that other diverse audiences could access and participate in further conversation regarding our experience and similar experiences by others. It was through feedback on the first draft of this paper from one of our critical research friends, Ricky Snyders, that we decided to represent our knowing through an autoethnography.

The diverse audiences we intended to reach included both professionals and laypersons from all disciplines involved in dealing with people. Although this is an ambitious inclusive intention, we anticipated on the basis of our own experience of the process and its creative humanising effects, that potentially all human beings might be able to obtain some measure of benefit in terms of theory or practice from hearing or reading about this transformational process and its effects. In addition, we were anxious to engage in further constructive but critical conversation with other scholars and knowledgeable persons in order to further refine and extend our understanding and learning of this and similar creative humanising processes.

Due to the retrospective, naturalistic, and purely personal and dyadic nature of the data gathering process no ethical approval for that phase of the study was required. As the recorder of the raw data in the form of my personal diary entries I had no reservations in selectively using these entries to compile the autoethnography. In addition, the decision to compile the autoethnography had been decided jointly with my dyadic conversational partner, Rod Burton, who also gave his voluntary, verbal, participative or continuing process consent (Ellis, 2007) to co-construct the autoethnography. However, a formal application for permission to conduct and report on the study was submitted to the Research Management Subcommittee of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University Research Technology and Innovation Committee and approval was given in May 2009.

The specific objective of this paper is to focus on the positive, creative, and humanising process and effects that emerged from our dyadic conversation process and therefore only a broad outline of the constraining systemic influences we identified in our conversations, together with selected illustrative examples of such influences, are included to contextualise the findings of the study discussed in this paper. Although the construction of this paper is informed by postmodern thinking, perceived linear causes of human imprisonment are acknowledged in partial recognition of the past and current dominant role played by modernistic and positivist theory and practices in knowledge creation.

Theoretical Context of the Study

The body of existing theory and practice that informs this paper is concerned with post-modern social constructionist theory and living ecosystemic organisms and processes. The general origin and nature of such theory and practices is to be found in the writings of Vygotsky (1978, 1986), Bakhtin (1986), Habermas (1979), Wittgenstein (1959), and certain of Goethe's (1988) scientific writings as discussed in Seamon and Zajonc (1998). In addition, strands of related ideas and applications appear in the publications of theorists, researchers, and practitioners in the fields of second order

family therapy, particularly those emphasising dialogical, narrative, and conversational processes, Tom Andersen (1993), Harlene Anderson and Diane Gehart (2007), Gregory Bateson (1972; 1979), John Heron (1996), Robert Hobson (1985), Lynn Hoffman (1993), Dian Marie Hosking and Bettine Pluut, (2010), Arlene Katz (Katz, & Shotter, 1996) Bradford Keeney (1983), Roger Lowe (2005), Russell Meares (2004), John Shotter (1993; 1996; 2005), Ernst Von Glasersfeld (2006), Michael White and David Epston (1990), management and organizational studies, David Boje (2001), Ann Cunliffe (2008), Peter Reason (Reason & Torbert, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2008); science, Alan Rayner (2004); and living educational theory and action research, Jack Whitehead (1989, 2006; 2008; 2009), and Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff (2006) .

According to Freedman and Combs (1996), postmodern thinking is more concerned with contextual specifics, differences, exceptions, and meaning than with facts, generalisations, rules, and similarities that characterise traditional modernist thinking. Knowledge is assumed to emerge through social processes that include interaction, language, and narrative. Any change involving human beings is simultaneously accompanied by change in their language and in other social processes. The dynamic and changing nature of living systems, which includes human knowledge systems, requires that researchers in this domain remain open and flexible to such changes if we are to survive and possibly thrive as human beings in an increasingly complex world.

The current approach to research focuses on conversational and dialogical processes, particularly those that arise spontaneously within human interaction rather than through structured and directive means. The approach is congruent with social constructionist assumptions regarding multiple realities, the constitutive role of language in human behaviour, and the influence of contextual and systemic influences, such as history and culture, on our behaviour (Lowe, 2005). In contrast to the Cartesian and other dualistic perspectives of mind, body, spirit, and environment, this approach views phenomena as part of an unbounded web of interrelated biopsychosocial and spiritual systems and subsystems mutually affecting each other. This holistic complex of interrelationships form the multiple systemic contexts within which all living organisms are embedded and from which we often seek liberation when our freedom becomes too constrained and we become imprisoned by dominant influences in our ecosystemic contexts.

An Attempt to Capture the Emerging Pattern

As has been highlighted by several examples throughout the paper, this study focuses on those striking, arresting, moving, poetic, or living moments (Andersen, 1993; Goncalves et al., 2009; Lowe, 2005; Shotter & Katz, 1999) that emerge spontaneously in conversational contexts, such as learning, teaching, counseling and psychotherapy, management, and ordinary conversations. A deeper understanding of the special nature of this profoundly important dialogical process requires that we describe the specific conditions that enabled us to notice and observe the existence of the special kinds of *living, arresting, sparkling, moving, or poetic* moments that occur in human conversations and actions, but that we are often unaware of or which we may be aware of but ignore nevertheless. A more widely known subtype of similar moments, which is the

focus in narrative therapy relates to unique outcomes. The theoretical history of such *crucial poetic* moments when one is *moved*, *arrested*, or *struck* by the working of certain words within oneself, and in conversation with others and othernesses, is associated with the practice of social poetics as appear in the writings of Wittgenstein (1959) and Bakhtin (1986).

The first mention of this phenomenon in the discipline of psychology I came across was contained in a paper by Katz and Shotter (1996) titled, *Hearing the Patient's 'Voice': Toward a Social Poetics in Diagnostic Interviews*, which explored and discussed "...the role of certain special kinds of 'arresting', 'moving', 'living', or 'poetic moments' occurring in medical, diagnostic interviews" (p. 1). As an exemplar of this practice in the field of psychology, they highlight the therapeutic approach as demonstrated by Andersen (1993) and other social constructionist family therapists (Goncalves et al., 2009). When those conversing are touched, moved, or when some suspended tension or gaps occur between their responses to each other, Andersen (as cited in Lowe, 2005) "slows the conversation and asks questions that invite further exploration and elaboration of the resonance of these moments" (p. 69). Katz and Shotter (1996) add that such moments also provide time for reflection and deeper conversational exploration, but avoid developing these moments in a systematic way as is done with unique outcomes by narrative therapeutic practice.

Katz and Shotter (1996) studied what they call "moments of epiphany" (p. 1) in interpersonal interaction and communication that involved a special practice of social poetics that involved "a relational, dialogical stance toward the study of these often ignored moments" (p. 1). Katz and Shotter emphasised that:

Instead of seeking a universal, cognitive understanding of such events, supposedly revealing of their true nature, a social poetics must 'move' us toward a new way of 'looking over', or participating in, the particular 'play' of unique events unfolding in the conversations between us. Not only must it draw our attention to events that might otherwise escape our notice, but it must also provide us with an understanding of their possible relations and connections to the particular circumstances of their occurrence. It is only by being able continuously to create new links and connections between events within that 'play', in practice, that those involved in a dialogue with each other can reveal both themselves and their 'worlds' to each other ... 'It is in such living moments between people, in practice, that utterly new possibilities are created, and people 'live out' solutions to their problems they cannot hope to 'find' solely in theory, in intellectual reflection on them (p. 2).

Referring specifically to professional medical interaction, Katz and Shotter (1996) stated that it is only within such embodied dialogical contexts that those involved are able to "continuously to create new links and connections between events within that 'play' in practice, that those involved in a dialogue with each other can reveal both themselves and their 'worlds' to each other" (p. 2). The knowledge clients reveal in such contexts is not limited only to their suffering or symptoms but may include more holistic aspects, such as "their own relations, their own moral stance or attitude as persons worthy of human

dignity and respect, able to play a part in their own healing”(p.2). Lowe (2005) highlights that the goal in such moments of mutual responsiveness is to avoid the imposition of external theorising and rather to be present and responsively engaged in the ongoing conversation in order to facilitate the unfolding of a person’s inner world and their real concerns.

Vygotsky’s (1986) stated that all our higher mental processes are mediated processes and that:

If language is as old as consciousness itself, and if language is a practical consciousness-for-others and, consequently, consciousness-for-myself, then not only one particular thought but all consciousness is connected with the development of the word. The word is a thing in our consciousness ... that is absolutely impossible for one person, but becomes a reality for two. The word is a direct expression of the historical nature of human consciousness ... A word relates to consciousness as a living cell relates to a whole organism, as an atom relates to the universe. A word is a microcosm of human consciousness (p. 255)

In addition, Vygotsky (1978) emphasises that spoken words are parts of larger systems and retain the characteristics of the whole in which they emerge, as is characteristic of holograms. Shotter (2005) concurs with Vygotsky that our consciousness and thinking is “relationally structured” (p. 1) and “its emergence depends completely on the dynamical intertwining of our ‘inner lives’ with the ‘inner’ lives of those around us” (p. 1). This contextual understanding of life, consciousness, language and thought resonates with a similar contextual emphasis highlighted in the development of human and other living organisms (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Ford & Lerner, 1992; Lerner, 1995).

Analysing the Moments

In order to achieve the aim of the study and to demonstrate the nature and effects of living moments in accordance with social constructionist and narrative ways of knowing and to share the findings of the study with a broader community of readers, practitioners, and researchers interested in learning or creating or even extending the current state of knowledge and practices regarding such humanizing moments, the nature of the construction and representation of the study are described. Although autoethnography was eventually identified as the most appropriate representational format for the study, the decision was taken with due regard to the criticisms of potential narcissism and self aggrandisement (Coffey, 1999). Ellis and Bochner (2000) highlight that, “Autoethnography provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world” (p. 738). The choice of autoethnography also enabled me to report meaningfully on the research in which I was both a co-participant and researcher of certain moments of my own life experience within a particular natural social context (Burns, 1997). Furthermore, both the author/co-researcher and the study were embedded in a postmodern epistemology that required a congruent postmodern research methodology and representational format. In order to adequately and meaningfully

capture the specific unique moments that had emerged during the dyadic conversation between me and my conversational partner that were the focus of the study required that our roles as co-participants and co-constructors of those moments be acknowledged in the chosen research design and methodology. The ethnographic part of the study concerned the particular social context (Burns, 1997) we had co-created and as such could be described as the culture of that specific co-created context, in congruence with Van Manen (2002) who states that “ethnography studies the culturally shared, common sense perceptions of everyday experiences” (p. 177). In addition, we were of the opinion that, if we as human beings had experienced such creative, living and sparkling moments (Katz & Shotter, 1996) through dyadic conversation, an essentially everyday human activity, then such experiences were within the potential reach of others that wished to create and share such a subculture as well. Readers of the paper therefore “take a more active role as they are invited into the author’s world, evoked to a feeling level about the events being described, and stimulated to use what they learn to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 742). The story that I co-construct as a participant-author and -researcher demonstrates my life in particular local contexts. Its value lies in “its capacity to provoke readers to broaden their horizons, reflect critically on their own experiences, enter empathically into worlds of experience different from their own, and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of different perspectives and standpoints encountered” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 748).

In order to construct meaningful findings from the extant body of mainly weekly diary entries I had made over the five years of our conversations, I transcribed all the entries from my diary into one computer file to enable ease of access, reading, and analysis. From these transcriptions I purposively selected specific extracts and examples that captured the most meaningful and significant moments according to my personal perception of their potential to demonstrate most clearly and congruently to potential readers of this account, the nature and positive effects of the dyadic dialogical conversational moments that were the focus of the study. Given that this is an autoethnography, the final decision about the selection of moments lay with me. However, mindful of the ethical challenges faced by autoethnographers in co-constructing and sharing stories in a public context and the imperfect nature of human information processing I initiated these processes in accordance with relevant published guidelines regarding informed consent, consultation with relevant others, and vulnerability of the researcher and participants to potential harm (Tolich, 2010) and the recommendation stemming from relational ethics for process consent at each stage of the study (Ellis, 2007). As a result I regularly consulted with Rod, my conversational partner and co-researcher, to check the accuracy, appropriateness, and to obtain his informed consent during the entire research process but particularly during the selection and analysis of the sampled moments. During this process we were also able to address appropriate ethics for the practice of including peripheral but unknowing participants in the construction of the autoethnography (Tolich, 2010) through anonymity and careful constructionist framing and non-accusatory wording of relevant moments where they were involved, e.g., *disappointment at not having enjoyed sufficient opportunities for sharing of intimate personal feelings and experiences with our parents when we were younger.*

Thereafter, we discussed each moment in depth before we jointly allocated and organised them into meaningful clusters or categories to reflect the unitary nature and effects of the selected moments. According to Katz and Shoter (1996) the nature of these moments is best demonstrated “within the practice rather than from a detached analytical stance. For, these moments can best be captured in writing as illuminating fragments by being pointed to or gestured at” (p. 2).

Mindful of readers being able to evaluate the validity claims and quality of this autoethnography, further detail regarding the processes of data construction are offered here although certain operationalisations of the processes are mentioned briefly in preceding paragraphs of the paper. While the requirement of such evaluation of knowledge claims is not contested, the actual process and appropriate criteria of such determination in this study are not as clear cut. However, Richardson (2000) suggested that ethnographic studies could be evaluated by examining their substantive contributions to the understanding of our human world, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact of the text on readers, and whether they express authentic lived experience. Richardson’s “high and difficult standards” (p. 254) criteria are congruent with the reflexive and postmodern flavour of this constructed autoethnography and allows readers of the study themselves to determine the dual creative and analytic quality of the claims to knowledge contained in it. Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria of trustworthiness consisting of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability, appropriate for evaluating qualitative studies, are equally relevant to the construction process that produced this paper. Credibility of the data was addressed through my weekly written diary entries summarising each of our conversations over a prolonged period of five years. In addition, through consultation with and feedback from my critical research friend, Ricky Snyders, a published and experienced qualitative, postmodern researcher and lecturer, we decided on an autoethnography as the most suitable representational format for the study. Through providing lengthy and rich descriptions of the design, processes of data collection and analysis, and the research procedures, such as ethical processes, employed in the construction of the study and this paper the potential transferability of the study has been enhanced. Dependability in the form of external auditing of both the construction process and this representation of the study was operationalised through critical analysis and evaluation of quality by the co-participant and co-researcher, Rod Burton. Through repeated critical co-evaluation of the data and qualitative themes, Rod and I were able to check the accuracy of the data, refine the conceptualisation and derivation of the themes, and subject all data processing to stringent quality co-control and co-evaluation. The external quality control process made possible by the independent reviewers served as an additional quality check on the quality of this, our written report of the study. Finally, confirmability of the study was sought through transparent and detailed reporting of my research approach and preferences in constructing and reporting on this study.

Having previously acknowledged my role as an engaged constructionist observer, participant and researcher, I wish to underline that this autoethnography represents only one of many possible interpretations of the naturalistic data generated but that its construction has been informed by principles appropriate to autoethnographic research (Tolich, 2010). In the final analysis, the value of the current study and this autoethnography rests on verisimilitude, whether “it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible and whether it helps readers

communicate with others different from themselves, or offers a way to improve the lives of participants and readers or even your own” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 751).

The First Moment to Emerge

The first arresting or sparkling moment was captured immediately after our first conversation over a cup of coffee on June 23 2005 after which I wrote “[*We talked*] about old beliefs holding us imprisoned and how we blame ourselves and are not aware of contexts and how they influence our behaviour.”

On later reflection on the same day I also wrote how helpful and energising it had been to engage in mutual sharing of our individual stories around wrestling with some old beliefs and previous learning that had imprisoned us and was associated with a certain degree of personal suffering. However, through our mutual positive experiences of our conversation and our mutual decision to meet regularly to engage in further conversation, we seemed to have stumbled into one of the most important processes for creating more fulfilling relationships and enhancing our wellbeing and possibly that of others. This emerging realisation was captured in my diary entry with the following brief but highly meaningful expression of our experience of the conversation: “*We are becoming free.*”

This first authentic living, arresting moment (Shotter & Katz, 1999) in our conversational co-exploration seemed to us to be a micro-reflection or isomorph, similar to a holographic fragment, of the ambivalent nature of human living, constantly striving towards a balance between those aspects of life that imprison us and are accompanied by different degrees of suffering and those that release us sufficiently from constraining conditions and enable us to live more creatively and in greater harmony with ourselves, others, and our environment. Although the diary entry at the time refers only to old beliefs, conditions of constraint and liberation are not limited only to beliefs and expectations about the past, present, and the future or only to personal patterns of behaviour located within ourselves but also encompass a wide variety of external cognitive, affective, and behavioural patterns located in the different contexts of the human ecosystem that include our home, work, leisure, and other contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Peterson, 2005).

As highlighted above, the first systemic effect associated with our imprisonment that emerged in our conversation on June 23 2005, concerned our micro-, intra-individual contexts, in the form of a learned tendency to blame ourselves when we experienced personal imprisonment and suffering. Associated with this constraining tendency was a limited personal awareness of how different micro-, meso- and macro-systems, subsystems and contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) affected our physical, psychological, social, and spiritual wellbeing. During our conversation we also identified that our imprisonment and suffering was at times associated with being unaware of our own and others’ behaviours, thoughts, and feelings and that we tended to emphasise one aspect of experience while being largely unaware of the other aspects. At such times we tended to emphasise our views and perspectives and did not always see others as also being engaged in similar struggles of their own.

On reflection during the actual process of writing this paper, we came to realise that our first meeting and dialogical conversation had emerged from a vague unexpressed feeling of lack or absence and a desire for something more from life than we had

experienced in the past. Although our mutual decision to participate in regular conversations was not consciously motivated by this need, we unknowingly had begun to address and dissolve the constraint and its attendant suffering through accommodating the emerging and relatively uncharacteristic thought of engaging in conversation with each other. It is this creative, relational, and dialogical process, consisting of moments of wellbeing and enhanced living with others that we wished to share with others through the construction of this autoethnography. The potential of similar isomorphic interpersonal neurobiological processes to enhance integration and human wellbeing has been the focus of ongoing interdisciplinary research by Siegel (2001, 2007). While the focus in this paper is on exploration and description of the experiential, dyadic, and dialogical aspects of the process, its interrelatedness to other aspects of the human ecosystem should not be underemphasised.

Subsequent Ambivalent Moments

On May 12 2006, after about a year of having begun our conversations, we were able to name the constraining and dual nature of our need for personal agency and for community and connection to others as *conflict between autonomy and independence and belonging and acceptance seems to be a core conflict in being human*. Additional micro-systemic examples of constraint which at times also served as directions and sources of potential liberation emerged again on May 12 2006 and June 30 2006 when we both shared our respective sense of disappointment at not having enjoyed sufficient opportunities for sharing of intimate personal feelings and experiences with our parents when we were younger.

During our many conversations over the past five years, we also identified and discussed several examples of larger system constraint, which we renamed influences due to their potential dual negative positive potential, associated with our personal imprisonment and potential liberation. One recurrent meso-system example that emerged on March 17 2006 concerned our dissatisfaction with education generally and our own paradoxical involvement in facilitating learning through traditional lecturing and teaching rather than through our preferred approach of involving students in their learning, which was more in alignment with our lived experience and emerging insights. We expanded on this dissatisfaction on July 28 2006 by noting that education lacked sufficient depth and diversity in terms of human values, and neglected experiential learning, integration, and congruence with life in the “real world” and our unknown future.

Our conversation on May 26 2006 concerned our struggle in dealing with such constraints, influences, conflicts and personal contradictions (Whitehead, 1989) related to our perceptions of duality and opposition within and between us and different perspectives, beliefs and world views acquired from our past and current embeddedness in larger meso- and macro-systems. We spoke about how, at times, we were forced to comply with certain normative demands without having time, being able, or grasping the opportunity, to reflect adequately on the demands being made because it was expected in certain contexts, for example certain demands made in work contexts. Another work related example concerned feelings of uncertainty, powerlessness, exclusion, impotence, difference and self-consciousness that arose in me during a group discussion that triggered acute distress, un-worded at the time, concerning the unknown future. On later

reflection, I discovered that these feelings of threat concerned my uncertainty about personal and family survival in the event of becoming unemployed. The feeling of threat concerned an expectation of not finding alternative employment, particularly due to my middle age, being a member of the previously advantaged white minority, and not being a potential beneficiary of affirmative action policies that apply to current employment in South Africa. Another source of personal discomfort in my work context occurred in relation to not being listened to sufficiently and then reacting with verbal aggression (March 31 2006 and August 18 2006). These personal experiences of vulnerability and disempowerment resonated strongly with similar experiences of neglect in being included and listened to that were experienced by some members of staff affected by the organisational merger process at the time.

Further conversations explored the need to survive in such toxic and rapidly changing contexts and the associated consequences. Our acute and particular concern in this regard involved actual and potential contexts of oppression in which we felt incapable of surviving, not to mention thriving, and in which we experienced personal suffering. The experiences of suffering we explored were not limited to personal or individual contexts but resonated with certain aspects of universal human suffering and imprisonment in larger more distal systemic contexts that included group, organisational, national, and global contexts. Bai and Banack (2006) postulate that “the ontology of the Mechanical Universe with its dualism, reductionism, essentialism, and determinism disposes us to moral fundamentalism by virtue of objectivist language, imposing categorical and linear thinking as absolutes” (p. 9) and “lends itself easily to the operations of oppression such as control, domination, and exploitation.” (p. 9). One major source and effect of such influence within the western world is a powerful tendency towards individual achievement that emphasises competing with others and ourselves, almost to the exclusion of cooperation with and respect for other living beings and our ecosystem which makes life possible.

Suffering and imprisonment due to learned patterns of being and living that were no longer as life sustaining or life affirming as they were before and the universal striving to overcome and be free of such embedded systemic influences (Borrell-Carrio, Suchman, & Epstein, 2004; Gharajedaghi, 2007; Mowles, van der Gaag, & Fox, 2010; J. C. Quick, Nelson, Quick, & Orman, 2001) demonstrate the relevance and isomorphic relationship between such contemporary and local micro-experiences and the historical, enduring, and universal web of systemic interrelationships that are shared by others in similar contexts in South Africa and the world—an inadequate and insufficiently “humane” approach to dealing with people—which at times gives rise to abuse and even to a loss of life.

However, we also noted our embeddedness, interrelatedness, and our co-creation and co-responsibility for the establishment and continuation of certain of these patterns of influence through not letting go of such acquired patterns of learning and socialization, even in the face of strong personal intentions and pressure to do so. Such patterns of behavior, cognition, and affect related to our need to be in relationship to salient others and to participate and succeed according to our own standards when embarking on any new learning.

Our conversation about personal contradictions and toxic environments ushered in another major influence and potentially liberating conversational theme related to

imprisonment in longer-term patterns of thinking which are associated with suffering and social problems such as homelessness, poverty, crime, chronic health problems, and long term personality difficulties in contrast to specific short-term problems. Richmond (2001) states unequivocally that “The way we think is outdated. As a result, the way we act creates problems, and then we are ill-equipped to address them because of the way we think.” (p. 3). The exploration and identification of our concern with these distressing cognitive and affective patterns both within ourselves and in our everyday contexts was accompanied by the simultaneous embodied awareness of potential liberation that could and did emerge from our reflection on the deeper nature and possible meaning of such patterns.

Early the following year we again explored living with such problematic moments and patterns and our conversation touched on Ken Wilber’s book *Grace and Grit* that recorded the process of him and his wife living with the cancer which eventually caused her death. Tied to this we also

Wondered about Eastern healing and how it related to western healing and how it involved spirituality and wholeness and how it might offer us westerners something different. Mentioned staying in the moment and how this seems one way to deal with difficult experience and the unknown, uncertain as we had experienced in the past in walking and talking.

We also mentioned Steve de Shazer *do something different* and how it broke patterns. The diary entry ended with *No solution at present but sharing honestly being in this moment, for now.*

Our awareness of the complementarity between these perceived polarities and of our own living contradictions (Whitehead, 1989) in this regard regularly emerged unbidden during our dialogical conversations. However, our conscious intention to engage actively and as fully as possible with these moments when they presented themselves enabled us to remain in the here and now without disengaging and escaping the initial experience of unfamiliarity, accompanied by varying degrees of personal discomfort. This continuity of engagement usually brought about an unanticipated and creative integration of the initial perceptions of duality or polarity, accompanied by an equally unexpected resolution and experience of positive wellbeing. On certain occasions we found ourselves experiencing an overwhelming feeling of awe, humility, and gratitude after such integrative moments.

Suffering in Life

On February 15th 2005 we explored these patterns of influence further and realised that *Suffering seems to be part of life ... our own and other’s suffering, especially when we can’t remove the suffering; and about chronic, long-term problems which seem devoid of solutions.* In our conversation on November 10 2006 we again realized that our experience was at times contrary to our expectations but that:

Life often seems to provide such contexts – where we want certainty in ourselves about how things should be and then they don’t work out like

that. We were trying to work out how one lives more effectively in such contexts.

This contradiction in how we desired life to be and how we experienced life is another common human experience (Whitehead, 1989) that we cannot escape and therefore need to engage with all the potential that we have at our disposal or can co-create in our ecosystem. Whitehead (1989) stated that on observing a video recording of himself teaching he came to realise “that the ‘I’ in the question ‘How do I improve this process of education here?’ existed as a living contradiction. By this I mean that ‘I’ contained two mutually exclusive opposites, the experience of holding educational values and the experience of their negation.” As a result he suggested that rather than relying on theoretical propositions to describe and explain educational theory, “practitioners should produce educational theory in the living form of dialogues” derived from their own value-based practice.

On February 2 2006 we reflected on coping in contexts where we felt powerless and helpless to change our circumstances and noted on February 9 2006 how difficult it was to focus on the here and now “moment” of perception rather than only on past memories or future expectations.

On January 12 2006 I noted in my diary that in similar contexts we at times became concerned *about what would happen [as a result] and we tend to rush ahead and seek out ways to ensure or hold onto and be certain about the future so it will be in our power or ability to remain in control of the future.* The experience of not being in complete control also infiltrated our conversational micro-context on June 23 2006 as we could not “at first find a topic of comfortable communication”. Although we talked about our family contexts and what we had been doing over the past two weeks it was “without any real connection”. On November 10 2006 I recorded in my diary that what complicates living in such contexts of limited personal control was *past learning and lack thereof and wanting to avoid or get out of the situation or “get rid of” it in some cognitive emotional way—or even physical way.*

This experience resonated with the all too human difficulty of remaining in the here and now in dealing with problems of living and daily life and avoiding consciously and unconsciously the inherent tension and lack of immediate reinforcement in such contexts through various mental, physical and social learned survival mechanisms. These understandable but less than effective classical Freudian mechanisms rob us of potentially valuable opportunities to further reflect and explore such tension filled contexts, on our own or in company with one or more other trusted others, to our own or mutual current and future benefit .

This lack of systemic fit with and between us and our ecosystems and the difficulty in tolerating toxic contexts of actual and potential uncertainty and threat, devoid of immediate reinforcement also resonated with a difficulty to separate from familiar contexts and to seek out new experiences and contexts, emerged in our conversation on August 4 2006. Although our conversation was initially concerned with someone else who experienced such difficulty in relation to a family context we soon identified a degree of similar difficulty in our own experiences in different contexts. However, what I did not anticipate was the holistic impact that this conversation would have on me.

As we talked about this experience I experienced a sudden unexpected welling up of positive emotion and thoughts of closeness and embodied understanding that can only be described as deep empathic resonance with the suffering of this person. From my previous more detached discussion of this person's experience I found myself emotionally moved through no conscious effort on my part, to be more intensely connected to the person through our conversation. This vivid, intense, and sparkling experiential moment, had spontaneously and gently fanned the embers of belongingness and community in my innermost being. Gone were the theories and labels of pathology and in their place was an inclusive, holistic, and integrated experience of "we-ness" that included both self and other both within and between myself and another person.

In the following week, August 11 2006, our conversation again concerned the theme of separation as I spoke of my personal struggle to separate from the university where I was previously employed at the time of restructuring and how I felt almost totally incapable of "letting go" and finding alternative and more fulfilling employment. Struggles to separate seemed more intense and difficult to manage when contexts did not seem to value or accept what you are or have to offer. My conversational partner, Rod also experienced struggling to separate from familiar or preferred contexts at two local gymnasiums. One of the gyms he experienced as being oriented to more formal and serious exercise while the other where he felt more at home was perceived as more informal, relaxed, and more welcoming.

On March 24 2006 we linked the difficulty in separating from familiar and preferred contexts to a deeper and more extensive isomorphic pattern of struggling to deal with differences that occur in daily life. Our conversation touched on how our lives require us to deal with differences on a daily basis, especially in the context of a global village, and that people cannot help but express their individuality and differences and that we need to deal with this more constructively and creatively. Although we sometimes expected life to be without conflict and frustration, we also acknowledged that "life is not like that – it's up and down". This led to the realisation on the 31 of March that we shared in the suffering of others and that it was an inherent part of our daily existence. *Others are struggling like us with dealing with our hurried, stressed, uncertain, conflictual, busy lives with little time and energy for much else but to survive. We need to talk together about how to survive and even thrive in a context such as this (survival mode).*

Our Embedded Lives

This partially liberating and reassuring connection to other parts of our human ecosystem, however, was complemented and complicated by another systemic process of mutual influence we identified on June 9 2006 that concerned *how problems are in structures and we maintain and reinvent them constantly – embedded in the problem context and how difficult it is to change this from within the system/structure*. Our reflection on the nature and complexity of this process at the time revolved around *Senge's structure determined system dynamics and how contexts determined the meaning and fit between components and systems* and his example of *beer sales and how one gets caught in a system's structure and how difficult it is to bring about change in yourself and others embedded in a system*. We realised that such embeddedness in systems often

resulted in “more of the same” problems and resistance to novel approaches to addressing problems of living, instead of creative, liberating, and sustainable conversations and potential solutions as described by J. D. Ford, Ford, and McNamara (2002) in their seminal article, *Resistance and Background Conversations of Change*. On June 23 2006 we identified another influence in our work contexts that involved *a certain protectiveness and resistance and caution in doing things differently in case it results in overwhelming of current way of doing things*.

We were repeatedly confronted with this complex pattern of being embedded in different contexts. For example, on July 14 2006, we spoke about certain members of a particular group that were not as interested or motivated as we would have and *weren't into learning anything much different as they were satisfied with the status quo*. We gradually came to realise that if we expected more of them than what they wanted it would bring about a lack of fit and harmony between them and us that could erode our connection to and resonance with them and result in increased dis-ease and discomfort.

On August 25 2006 we explored our expectations of ourselves through our *loss of connection and neglect in doing important things in our lives and then ending up feeling disappointed, sorry, guilty, discomfort in ourselves because we weren't able to do – did not do some of those important things at times*.

The process of such derailment seemed to involve neglect in giving sufficient conscious attention and action to these more personal aspects in the face of challenges or distractions to our energy and attention from other quarters. At times this seemed to happen to me because these actions, although they were part of my cognitive and affective preferences, were not yet an adequately automatic or unconscious part of my experiential repertoire. The non-performance of such preferences seemed to involve the perception of possible rejection, threat, particularly perceived threat to my own personal and ecosystemic survival. Such non-performed preferences became monsters, narratively speaking, to be avoided although at other times they seemed to be easier to defeat with hardly any thought at all. Being embedded and living in such complex contexts of influence seemed to require additional knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes which are not currently a dominant part of society and our lived stories.

The diary entry on September 22 2006 reflects that living in such perceived contradictory and paradoxical contexts where we are confronted by *nothing to talk about/not belonging/acceptance/valued by others/listened to/personal control/ambiguous/when cannot change self/needs time and space*. In addition, we noted that living optimally was also constrained further by our tendency *to want to locate and hold onto, have certainty and control of our valuable experiences but life involves uncertainty and the unknown*. Our conversation regarding the process of survival in such complex situations involved seeking a personal balance between stability and change in the face of unfamiliar changes in our ecosystem and our tendency to hold on tightly to our known and familiar patterns of living while desiring to be more open and flexible in such contexts which involved: *feeling secure about the next step and knowing you are where you are supposed to be at present and can only move once you have a feeling of security about the next step*.

The deep seated need for security in moving physically or mentally into new contexts we associated with Harlow's experiments with monkeys and also with the development of human infants learning to explore their unfamiliar environments. This

dynamic survival process was captured in a pictorial metaphor that emerged in our conversation on January 26 2006. The picture was of a person in the process of taking a step forward while one foot was still suspended a few centimeters above the ground. This metaphor emerged again spontaneously on December 1 2005 in our conversation regarding the tension that accompanied the non-resolution and ongoing nature of such problems in living.

A Metaphorical Path Emerges

A related but more meaningful and frequent visual image emerged spontaneously during our conversation about how to deal with life experiences we did not welcome or prefer. The relevant diary entry on September 22 2006 reads as follows:

Likened our experience to walking on the rocks at the beach and then finding no further rocks where we wanted/expected to find rocks and then reacted emotionally due to not having rocks where we wanted to walk. Laughed about how silly and irrational this was. ... the effect of this ... (resulted in) feelings of awe, amazement, almost ecstasy and being full of life – life in all its abundance and were filled with gratitude and humility and absolute joy and amazement at the effect of our changed feelings and the simplicity of the metaphor and the process and effect that our routine of walking and talking had and continued to have on our experience of life—how positive and life affirming our experience had become and how surprising it was to keep re-experiencing it repeatedly. We had a long walk and would have kept going if we had not stopped ourselves.

Rod re-experienced and re-recognized the relevance of this metaphor on October 6th 2006 when he set aside time to prepare for a workshop but was prevented from using the time as planned when builders arrived to do repairs to the house and he experienced having “no rocks” to stand on.

The above diary entry captures the disorienting experience of being unexpectedly halted or blocked in continuing smoothly with one’s preferred life journey by any number of undesirable micro-, meso- or macro-system influences. The impact of such unpredictable interruptions in everyday life vary in the power and magnitude of their disruptive influence due to the complex interrelationships between intra- and inter-personal, and other environmental and systemic influences involved in such interactions and their manifestations. In this instance the impact was not limited only to the cognitive dimension but was also accompanied by simultaneous emotion. However, this undesirable embodied state was of limited duration due to the spontaneous emergence of laughter and the realisation that our reactions were *silly* and *irrational*. The spontaneous occurrence of this micro-narrative experience at the time was accompanied by intense and spontaneous positive feelings of awe, amazement and joy, bordering on ecstasy, in addition to an infusion of life energy that left us *filled with gratitude and humility*.

We could not attribute the emergence of the metaphor or its accompanying manifestations to any direct individual intention on our part but rather to the some intangible, third influence that seemed to be potentially present in the context of our

conversation at certain times and under certain conditions. Not being able to take ownership and hence sole responsibility for the creation of this experience we found ourselves filled with *gratitude* and *humility* for the living gift we had been able to experience and enjoy. The experience left us with a sense of loss at not being able to continue enjoying immersion in this positive state of heightened living indefinitely but also a desire to re-engage in it as soon as possible and also to extend it to others.

Later, on October 6 2006, we again *marvelled/were in awe, amazed at how often we were in a difficult place with nothing really to say and then found through just continuing to walk and talk we often, usually found something emerged which left us more fulfilled, happier, amazed, that the situation could turn out so differently and positive.*

In my diary, on October 13 2006, I recorded the embodied creativity of such a simple communicative experiences as follows *I, amazed/awed by the experience of starting off with only walking and casual enquiry about each other and then discovering as we walked and talked that another topic of critical importance to us both emerged later which also related to earlier topics and also related directly to us personally and was not an externally imposed topic of interest. More to do with our personal identities and values.*

One of the major criticisms of autoethnography has been a concern with potential of self indulgence and narrowed focus on local issues or concerns having little or no relevance to broader contemporary and systemic issues. Early in the dyadic conversational processes under study and throughout the construction of this paper, we both have been all too aware of the need to address the legitimacy and credibility of the knowledge created through the process. As documented above, these concerns also emerged during the process itself when we became aware of the need to share our experiences of the process with others in an attempt to test their validity, relevance, and value. It was not enough for us to have merely experienced the benefits of the process personally. We were eager, although also anxious, to obtain feedback from various others in this regard. If the process was merely personal and did not offer potential and actual benefit to others in terms of reducing their suffering and enhancing their wellbeing, it would not have satisfied our core concern with enhancing our own humanity and that of others. The process only had value because of its mutual and simultaneous benefit to all participants in the process. From a narrative perspective the story had to benefit both the “story teller” and the listening but participative “audience”. This quality of the process was the essence of its ecosystemic nature and identity. The relevance of the any research including the current autoethnography should also be determined through published criteria. Hammersley (1990) highlights two criteria of relevance: one being the public importance of the topic and the other being that the research must contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the relevant field being investigated.

Sculpting our Emergence

We experienced this process and its liberating and enlivening effects on several occasions without the process losing any of its positive impact on us. In addition, we were also becoming aware that such sparkling moments of living that emerged in our conversation were not isolated or singular instances brought about by influences external

to us but that they required us to be personally involved in a particular way if they were to emerge in conversation. Later, while further exploring alternative ways of dealing with life's problems, a visual image of one of Michelangelo's unfinished slave sculptures I had seen in the Academy in Florence emerged unbidden from my memory. The conversation and experience is cryptically captured in my diary on May 8 2009 as:

Chipping away at values emerging from blocks of marble in Madrid? ... Need to make space to do our chipping away at making this lifestyle type changes which are different to routine everyday changes we make – takes a long time, are small daily tasks we need to keep at chipping away and not see destination as the goal but merely daily chipping and seeing the integrative value of such changes at all levels of ourselves in context.

On December 14 2007 the most meaningful example of spontaneous, responsive, living moments in our dyadic dialogical conversational process emerged, which special experience we came to refer to as “fridaying”:

This fridaying experience seems a core process and highly meaningful (personal) experience that can extend into other spheres of our lives – spiritual, friendships, work, marriages, etc., but still realising that it is change that emerges from ourselves and is not imposed. This emergence of change seemingly within ourselves is paradoxical and still pretty mysterious but something which does not have to be completely understood or resolved as we are living the “answer” or the “process” and not seeking to achieve a final destination – possibly still seeking but not a final destination, as the achievement is in the process.

The dialogical interpersonal nature of the process was noted in another diary entry on November 6 2009 *Only through participation with each other can the quality of fridaying/life emerge – not in isolation. This is awesome!!*

The significance of this living fragment for us was contained in the word “participation” that captured the core meaning of “fridaying”: its relational and dialogical nature and the interpersonal context of its creation. The nature of the fridaying process is such that it cannot occur in isolation but that it requires certain conditions to be created within and between the persons involved to emerge. The original dialogical need to initiate our conversational five years ago has continued to sustain an ongoing creative, nourishing and relational process that has been accompanied by numerous sparkling, arresting, living and moving moments as we have engaged in what has become known to us as the fridaying process.

Early the following year, my diary entry of February 29 2008 captured the essence and effects of these living moments in the following words *We again felt awed by the connection which emerged naturally during our walking and talking and likened it to LIFE – or at least to an important part of life – a part that we missed when it was absent and a part that was needed to function normally as a human being who was active, empathic, calm, and connected to what is eternal.*

Another relevant fragment from my diary on June 26 2009 notes that: *this fridaying thing is so central, so important/meaningful and fills [my conversation partner] with amazement and wonder at how interconnected and influential it is.*

Another profound yet everyday example of a sparkling moment took place while we were walking and talking along the beach front on July 6 2007—we saw a youngster taking his dog for a walk. This may not seem unusual or sparkling in any way, but in this instance the youngster, on his skateboard, was being pulled along the pathway, holding onto his dog’s leash. Witnessing this caused us to both to break out in spontaneous appreciation at the unexpected display of living creativity.

Katz and Shotter (1999) have explored the nature of such *arresting, striking, moving...* or “...living moments in which certain not-yet-related events come into living relation with each other, or, ...into a dialogically-structured, responsive relation with each other” (p. 4). As they concern “processes of first-time creation” (p. 4), Katz and Shotter named them “poetic moments” (p. 4) that can have a significant impact on our lives. This living encounter with spontaneous creative manifestations also characterised our dialogical interaction on numerous occasions over the past five years while we have been co-researching our mutual learning.

We connected the “walking the dog” experience to several other threads of discovery over the next two years. One of the most relevant and productive that occurred on November 16 2007 was its connection to *both/and thinking ... that changes the original task/expectation.* The unexpected, unplanned and spontaneous appearance of this poetic image ushered in the theme of spontaneous creativity and an increased awareness of the constraints of dichotomous thinking in scholarly and everyday contexts. The process of integrating or combining two seemingly independent and separate everyday functions in this creative image and metaphor was astounding in its structural unity, the simplicity of its composition but also in the complexity, and multiplicity of its potential meaning and systemic significance. Its relevance, isomorphically speaking, to the ongoing debates and controversies taking place in multiple systemic levels of both theory and practice regarding learning and knowing seemed to us to be disproportional to its initial perceived simplicity. The independence and identity of each part of the new composite image were not destroyed through their integration but were retained in the newly created third composition. This transformation process resonates strongly with Bateson’s (1979) illustration of the binocular vision process in human beings.

Another characteristic of our fridaying experiences is that they have an affective-volitional (Vygotsky, 1978) or emotional-volitional (Bakhtin, 1986) tone, which according to Shotter (2006) means that besides being “possible to possess a *transitional understanding* of ‘where’ at any one moment we are placed in relation to another person’s expressions, [they] ... possess also at that moment an *action guiding anticipation* of the range of next ‘moves’ they may make” (p. 1). Shotter (2005) links these characteristics to Goethe’s (1988) view on exact sensorial imagination whereby our “livingness” is “very familiar to us in our practical lives, as well as being quite extraordinary to us in our intellectual lives, due to the current inappropriateness of our academic modes of thought and talk” (p. 1). Shotter (2006) suggests that if we are to focus on word meaning in Vygotsky’s (1978) and Bakhtin’s (1986) sense “we must focus on those events or moments in our lives in which we are in an expressive -responsive, living relation with the others and othernesses around us, moments or events when the

words we use are merely an aspect of, or a unit within, a larger whole - a surrounding situation into which they are complexly interwoven or intertwined” (Shotter, 2006, p. 2).

Living Amid Suffering

While we were talking about suffering and pathology on June 1 2007 I wondered aloud:

What if I embraced/did not reject what I think is wrong? It does not need fixing but possibly acceptance. Language is incredible and awesome – the way we talk about things makes a lot of difference to how we experience and perceive things. It seems with certain difficulties it is better to accept and embrace them rather than get rid or attempt to reject them. Incredible!!

At the time that this spontaneous living or arresting moment emerged, I initially experienced it as possibly being slightly inappropriate, incongruous and laughable; but as I had experienced several years of unconditional acceptance of what I expressed in our conversations, I was willing to go ahead and risk expressing this thought in words as well. It was this conversation which most clearly and decisively arrested our taken-for-granted ways of talking and living up to that point in time.

On March 3 2006 we reflected on the benefits of our conversations and how long we had been involved in them and started thinking about sharing our experience with others. The first new social and public context we created for sharing our experience involved a small group of six other acquaintances who responded positively to our invitation to meet with us over breakfast so we could share our experience with them. After this first conversation we continued to meet with them for regular monthly conversations. When an invitation was extended to me to facilitate an experiential workshop for a group of twenty three counseling psychologists and student counselors at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University towards the end of 2007 we came to a mutual decision to share our experience through the workshop. Within the very next week, however, I noticed how anxious and cautious I had become and how both of us had become more hesitant about involving others and extending our learning into such a relatively unfamiliar larger public group context. Fortunately, the urge to share the positive effects of our conversations was only temporarily halted as we successfully facilitated the workshop on August 18 2008.

Concluding Remarks

The influence of language, particularly in the form of disciplinary discourses, on our own embodied living, not only in our thinking, becomes visible and almost tangible in the above manifestation during our conversation. The discourse in psychology regarding psychopathology and its continued strong dependence on linear thinking and the medical model to deal with problems or difficulties in human living, is a pertinent example. This is not to deny the past and continuing benefit of medical theory and practices in alleviating certain types of psychological suffering, but merely to highlight

the existence of other equally or even more valid and beneficial ways of languaging our human suffering and our attempts to address such personal suffering without dehumanising those affected. The emergence of this realisation and understanding is not limited to our conversations, but is also connected to similar discourses in other systemic contexts.

The recent emergence of, and increase in, relational approaches (Borden, 2000; Ford & Lerner, 1992; Gergen, 1999; Meares, 2004; Reynolds, 2007; Stern et al., 1998) aimed at enhancing human agency and personal empowerment in dealing with psychological suffering and transforming dehumanising theories and practices serves to support the dyadic conversational process we co-created. In the light of our experience of engaging in our embodied conversations over the past five years, it is clear that the construction of such humanising contexts flow from our personal and voluntary participation in co-creating such liberating and nourishing contexts and cannot be imposed or prescribed.

Drawing the various threads that comprise the present study together for the purposes of this discussion has enabled me to gain a better and more integrated perspective of the product and process of the dyadic conversational phenomenon we came to name, *fridaying*.

The specific examples of sparkling moments selected for inclusion in this exploratory study have demonstrated the spontaneous dialogical nature and creative function of such experiences and illustrated their presence in dialogical processes of everyday dyadic conversations. It is not that these moments are extraordinary or hidden from our view but that they are actually right before our eyes, and other senses, although we do not notice them. Remaining unaware of their existence and frequent occurrence in everyday conversation is to the detriment of all living beings, and the earth, as it deprives us of experiencing the full measure of their positive effects, seen from positive psychology, fortigenic, ecosystemic and sustainability perspectives. The identification, understanding and elaboration of these moments, particularly through the practice of a social poetics as highlighted by Shotter and Katz (1999), has the potential to enrich, nurture and counter the many dehumanising influences we are exposed to in our daily lives, including contexts in which we least expect to find such influences, e.g., in health and welfare systems.

As alluded to earlier, a central process that emerged and which we sought to demonstrate through the above examples is what we came to call, *fridaying*. The process of *fridaying*, at this stage of our knowledge and experience, seems to capture the essence of what we have tried to demonstrate through the selected examples. The essence of the process is its spontaneous origin and its relational and dialogical nature.

Engaging in this exploratory naturalistic study focussed on selected examples of sparkling moments that arose during a long-term dyadic dialogical conversation process over five years has also resulted in a learning conversation with a multiplicity of other voices and speakers. Although only selected parts of the conversation between me and these other conversational partners can be reported here, my aim has been to provide an authentic and trustworthy account of both the process and products of this dialogical process. As with any dialogical process, even though the participants have certain aims or intentions, the process and outcome of the conversation is unknown and cannot be specified beforehand. Even when the boundaries of a specific fragment of the

conversation have been negotiated and agreed upon, there is no specific known endpoint or final outcome that can be specified, as the conversation process cannot be controlled or limited by any one participant. Such conversational processes are in fact unbounded and can continue indefinitely, as is recognised by researchers and practitioners that adopt a second order cybernetic perspective to understanding human interaction processes.

The social constructionist and dialogical or conversational theories form a background for the examples of sparkling, arresting, poetic, and living moments selected to demonstrate the occurrence of such spontaneous dialogical phenomena in everyday conversational contexts. A closer inspection of the examples reveals their unique nature as unintentional and unplanned moments of potential creativity and mutual relationship, if attended to at the time of their occurrence.

The focus of this study on such moments should not be understood as a claim to their universality or be seen as an attempt to replace other more positivist conversational phenomena such as deliberate planning, problem solving, or intentional creativity. Rather, this study is an attempt to record and disseminate examples of alternative and different types of everyday conversational phenomena that arise spontaneously in dialogical contexts. If attended to with patient expectation and awareness of their possible appearance, and with openness to one's own embodied experience and that of the "other and othernesses" involved such moments, they can be expected to appear spontaneously.

In terms of their unique nature and origin, such moments do not arise in isolation and independently of their context. The seeds of their creation might be located within either of the dialogical participants but they do not have their origin within participants but rather arise in the responsive interchange between dialogical participants. That is to say that they receive their life or are born in the space of dialogical "in-betweeness", where life is breathed into them and where they can be experienced by those sufficiently attentive and open to their existence. If they are not attended to and responded to, they cannot be experienced or continue to exist experientially and perform their life giving effects, although they might have been momentarily present in the situation. As mentioned above, the life giving potential contained in such moments only becomes actualised and accessible when conversational participants respond to such transitory moments.

The responsibility for the occurrence and potential benefit of these moments does not lie with any individual participant, as they arise in the space of "in-betweeness", for which neither participant is solely responsible. In addition, their potential meaning resides neither within themselves nor with any single conversational participant, but rather emerges from the relational responsiveness between the participants. The moments are therefore relational in nature, constructed socially between those engaged in such dialogically structured conversation.

The value of the current study can fruitfully be assessed through an ecosystemic or socioecological (Oishi & Graham, 2010) perspective as it enables a comprehensive mapping of the contribution of the study in multiple contexts. As discussed in some detail above the current paper has provided an opportunity to share with unknown others experiential evidence obtained from both proximal micro level systems, consisting of more intimate, intra and interpersonal contexts regarding physical, cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual benefits, and also from less intimate and more distal meso- and macro-systems, such as our work contexts, through engaging in a relatively simple and

enjoyable dyadic conversational process while walking outdoors. These ecosystemic benefits are also available potentially to others who care to embark on similar dyadic conversational learning adventures. The recent and ongoing publication of research on the integrative neurobiological effects of similar experiences (Siegel, 2001; 2007) serves to highlight the relevance and potential benefits to be gained from engaging regularly in similar relational processes. The current autoethnographic study conducted in a local naturalistic context adds to the limited number of published international and local autoethnographic studies in psychology and indirectly invites interested researchers to participate in both the theory and practice of meaningful and mutually beneficial interdisciplinary conversational processes. For example, the ongoing polarities between science, psychology, and spirituality seem to be potentially fruitful contexts for further exploration in this regard. The current study has demonstrated that such seeming contradictions, polarities, and dualities in our human ecosystem that at certain times and in certain contexts constrain optimal human development can, at least at a dyadic level, be addressed in an accessible, creative, and mutually humanising approach that benefits all the participants engaged in such dialogical conversational processes.

Embracing Imperfection for Now

One of the main limitations of the present study is its reliance on data in the form of my personal diary entries over five years. Although I was able to immerse myself intensively over a lengthy period in the dialogical conversation process from which the examples of sparkling moments were selected, the actual dialogical processes we engaged in could not be adequately captured in the diary entries. As a result, certain important data could have been lost due to the fallibility of human memory and the passage of time between the experiences and the time of their being recorded in my diary. In addition, certain subtle nuances could have been lost in the process of retrospective recording, instead of recording the experiences on audio or video tape. However, for the purposes of an exploratory study aimed at the identifying and describing examples of sparkling moments and their accompanying ecosystemic benefits, the diary entries were adequate. Future research into the participants and the actual conversational process itself through video recording will enhance the authenticity and validity of the data. Whitehead (2008) posits that because certain evidence “cannot be communicated using only words on pages of text, I will use video-data in a visual narrative to help with the public communication of these meanings” (p. 107). The current study has not had as its aim to test theoretical hypotheses empirically, or to construct a theory based on these examples, but rather to explore and stimulate further dialogue regarding such moments. The exploratory nature of the study does not lend itself to claims for more advanced knowledge, but to share the theoretical and experiential knowledge gained through the study with members of the wider scientific community in an effort to engage in further mutual exploration of the nature and benefits of such moments in different contexts.

References

- Andersen, T. (1993). See and hear, and be seen and heard. In S. Friedman (Ed.), *The new language of change*. (pp. 303-322). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

- Anderson, H., & Gehart, D. (2007). *Collaborative therapy: Relationships and conversations that make a difference*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Bai, H., & Banack, H. (2006). "To see a world in a grain of sand": Complexity ethics and moral education. *Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education*, 3(1), 5-20.
- Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and nature: A necessary unity*. New York, NY: Dutton.
- Boje, D. M. (2001). *Narrative methods for organizational and communication research*. London: Sage.
- Borden, W. (2000). The relational paradigm in contemporary psychoanalysis: Toward a psychodynamically informed social work perspective. *Social Service Review*, 74(3), 352-379.
- Borrell-Carrio, F., Suchman, A. L., & Epstein, R. M. (2004). The biopsychosocial model 25 years later: Principles, practice, and scientific inquiry. *Annals of Family Medicine*, 2(6), 576-582.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Ceci, S. (1994). Nature-nurture reconceptualized in developmental perspective: A bio-ecological model. *Psychological Review*, 101, 568-586.
- Burns, R. B. (1997). *Introduction to research methods*. Melbourne, Australia: Longman.
- Coffey, P. (1999). *The ethnographic self*. London: Sage.
- Cunliffe, A. L. (2008). Orientations to social constructionism: Relationally responsive social constructionism and its implications for knowledge and learning. *Management Learning*, 39(2), 123-139.
- Ellis, C. (2007). Telling secrets, revealing lives: Relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13, 3-29.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity. In N. Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.). *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 733-768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ford, J. D., Ford, L. W., & McNamara, R. T. (2002). Resistance and the background conversations of change. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 15(2), 105-121.
- Ford, D., & Lerner, R. (1992). *Developmental systems theory: An integrative approach*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Freedman, J., & Combs, G. (1996). *Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Gharajedaghi, J. (2007). Systems thinking: A case for second-order-thinking. *The Learning Organization*, 14(6), 473-479.
- Gergen, K.J. (1999). *An invitation to social constructionism*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Goethe, J.W von. (1988). *Scientific Studies*. New York, NY: Suhrkamp Publishers.
- Goncalves, M., Matos, M., & Santos, A. (2009). Narrative therapy and the nature of innovative moments in the construction of change. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 22, 1-23.

- Habermas, J. (1979). *Communication and the evolution of society*. (tran. T. McCarthy). Suffolk, England: The Chaucer Press.
- Hammersley, M. (1990). *Reading ethnographic research*. London: Longman.
- Heron, J. (1996). Helping whole people learn. In D. Boud & N. Miller (Eds.), *Working with experience: Animating learning*. Retrieved from <http://www.human-inquiry.com/WholPeop.htm>
- Hobson, R. F. (1985). *Forms of feeling: The heart of psychotherapy*. London: Tavistock.
- Hoffman, L. (1993). *Exchanging voices: A collaborative approach to family therapy*. London: H. Karnac.
- Hosking, D. M., & Pluut, B. (2010). (Re)constructing reflexivity: A relational constructionist approach. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(1), 59-75. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR15-1/hosking.pdf>
- Katz, A. M., & Shotter, J. (1996). Hearing the patient's voice: A social poetics in diagnostic interviews. *Social Science and Medicine*, 43, 919-931.
- Katz, A. M., & Shotter, J. (1999). *Social poetics as a relational practice: Creating resourceful communities*. Social Construction and Relational Practices Conference, University of New Hampshire, Sept 16th-19th. Retrieved from http://pubpages.unh.edu/~jds/js.ak.SOCPOENTS.htm#N_1
- Keeney, B. P. (1983). *Aesthetics of change*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Kuhn, T. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lerner, R. M. (1995). The place of learning within the human developmental system: A developmental contextual perspective. *Human Development*, 38, 361-366.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lowe, R. (2005). Structured methods and striking moments: Using question sequences in "living" ways. *Family Process*, 44(1), 65-75.
- Mearns, R. (2004). The conversation model: An outline. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 58(1), 51-66.
- Mowles, C., van der Gaag, A., & Fox, J. (2010). The practice of complexity. *Journal of Health Organization and Management*, 24(2), 127-144.
- Oishi, S., & Graham, J. (2010). Social ecology: Lost and found in psychological science. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 5(4), 356-377.
- Peterson, R. L. (2005). Twenty-first century education: Toward greater emphasis on context – social, economic, and educational. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61(9), 1121-1125.
- Quick, J. C., Nelson, D. L., Quick, J. D., & Orman, D. K. (2001). An isomorphic theory of stress: The dynamics of person-environment fit. *Stress and Health*, 17, 145-157.
- Rayner, A. (2004). *Inclusionality: The science, art, and spirituality of place, space and evolution*. Retrieved from <http://www.people.bath.ac.uk/bssadmr/inclusionality/placespaceevolution.html>
- Reason, P., & Torbert, W. R. (2001). *The action turn: Toward a transformational social science*. Retrieved from <http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/index.html>
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (Eds). (2008). *Handbook of action research*. London: Sage.
- Reynolds, R. (2007). How does therapy cure? The relational turn in psychotherapy. *Counseling, Psychotherapy and Health*, 3(2), 127-150.

- Richardson, L. (2000). Evaluating ethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(2), 253-255. Retrieved from <http://qix.sagepub.com/content/6/2/253>
- Richmond, B. (2001). *An introduction to systems thinking*. Watkinsville, GA: STELLA, High Performance Systems Inc.,
- Seamon, D., & Zajonc, A. (Eds.). (1998). *Goethe's way of science: A phenomenology of nature*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Shotter, J. (1993). *Conversational realities: Constructing life through language*. London: Sage.
- Shotter, J. (1996). Social construction as social poetics: Oliver Sacks and the case of Dr. P. In B.M. Bayer, & J. Shotter, (Eds.), *Reconstructing the psychological subject*. (pp. 33-51). London: Sage. Retrieved from <http://www.massey.ac.nz/~alock/virtual/sacksdrp.htm>
- Shotter, J. (2005). Vygotsky and consciousness as *con-scientia*, as witnessable knowing along with others. Retrieved from <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~jds/VygotskyT&P.htm>
- Shotter, J. (2006). Vygotsky, Bakhtin, Goethe: Consciousness and the dynamics of voice. Retrieved from <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~jds/SanDiego.htm>
- Shotter, J., & Katz, A. (1999). 'Living moments' in dialogical exchanges. *Human Systems*, 9, 81-93. Retrieved from <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~jds/ta-hs.htm>
- Siegel, D. J. (2001). Toward an interpersonal neurobiology of the developing mind: Attachment, "Mindsight", and neural integration. *Journal of Infant Mental Health*, 22, 76-94.
- Siegel, D. J. (2007). *Mindsight*. New York, NY: Bantam.
- Stern, D. N., Bruschweiler-Stern, N., Harrison, A. M., Lyons-Ruth, K., Morgan, A. C., Nahum, J. P... Tronick, E. Z. (1998). The process of therapeutic change involving implicit knowledge: Some implications of developmental observations for adult psychotherapy. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 19(3), 300-308.
- Tolich, M. (2010). A critique of current practice: Ten foundational guidelines for autoethnographers. *Qualitative Health Research*, 20,(12), 1599-1610. Retrieved from <http://qhr.sagepub.com/content/20/12/1599.full.pdf+html>
- Van Manen, M. (2002). *Glossary*. Retrieved from <http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/glossary/glossary.html#ethnography>
- von Foerster, H. (1996). *Cybernetics of cybernetics*. Minneapolis, MN: Future Systems.
- Von Glasersfeld, E. (2006). The reluctance to change a way of thinking. *Irish Journal of Psychology*, 9(1), 83-90. Retrieved from <http://www.univie.ac.at/constructivism/EvG/>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1986) *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- Whitehead, J. (1989). Creating a living educational theory from questions of the kind, How do I improve my practice? *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 19(1), 41-52. Retrieved from <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/livtheory.html>
- Whitehead, J. (2006). *How can explanations of educational influences of learning flow with life-affirming energy and values of humanity in relationships of affirmation*

- and contexts of lack of recognition?* Retrieved from <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/jwVasilyuk220906.htm>
- Whitehead, J. (2008). Using a living theory methodology in improving practice and generating educational knowledge in living theories. *Educational Journal of Living Theories*, 1(1), 103-126. Retrieved from: <http://ejolts.net/drupal/node/80>
- Whitehead, J. (2009). Generating living theory and understanding in action research studies. *Action Research*, 7(1), 85-99. Retrieved from <http://arj.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/7/1/85>
- Whitehead, J., & McNiff, J. (2006). *Action research living theory*. London: Sage.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1959). *Philosophical investigations*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
-

Author Note

Christopher N. Hoelson is a clinical psychologist and professor in the Department of Psychology at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth. His research interests include qualitative research, narrative and conversational therapies, and personal and professional development of clinical and counselling psychologists. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed to Dr. Christopher N. Hoelson at the Department of Psychology, P O Box 77 000, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth, 6031 and E-mail: christopher.hoelson@nmmu.ac.za

Rod Burton is an ordained Methodist minister, with a keen interest in spirituality generally, and in Spiritual Direction in particular. Dyadic dialogue has become key to exercising this ministry. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed to Rod Burton at PostNet Express, Suite 68, Private Bag X13130, Humewood, 6013.

Copyright 2012: Christopher N. Hoelson, Rod Burton, and Nova Southeastern University

Article Citation

Hoelson, C. N., & Burton, R. (2012). Conversing life: An autoethnographic construction. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(1), 92-119. retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17-1/hoelson.pdf>
