



## Relational consciousness and the conversational practices of Johnella Bird

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In this article we review Johnella Bird's notion of relational consciousness, explaining it in terms of an ethnomethodologically informed social constructionist theory. We extend this notion to her conversational practices in therapy, examining first her general practice (and focus) on relational language-making. We then turn to describing three of her specific conversational practices – negotiating conflicting discursive positions between partners in a relationship, exploring a partner's experience of hurt in a relationship, following unspoken assumptions, and negotiating power relations. We conclude by relating relational consciousness to an attendance to language as it is used by clients and by therapists in dialogue with clients.

*Keywords:* social constructionist therapy; Johnella Bird; dialogue in therapy.

### Relational consciousness

Couple and family therapists have been at the forefront of social constructionist innovations to therapeutic practice for well over a generation. Social constructionists suggest that there is no ultimately correct way to understand or communicate human experience (McNamee, 2004). Their stance on understanding and communicating is preferred by many couples therapists who frequently contend with partners' problematically diverging understandings and descriptions of experience. As constructionist couple and family therapists, we see therapy as a place where such understandings and communications can be beneficially reflected upon, negotiated, alternatively constructed, or even 'de-constructed' in couples therapy (for example, McNamee and Gergen, 1992; Parker, 1999, Strong, 2004).

While initially such constructionist innovations came in the form of particular models of therapy (for example, solution-focused,

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collaborative therapy and narrative therapy) or interventions (reflecting teams), underpinning all these innovations is a profound change in orientation to the use of language. Some constructionist therapists tend to focus on embodied conversational practices beyond words or simple nonverbal expressions (Andersen, 1991; Anderson, 1997; McNamee, 2004; Shotter, 1993). For us, this change in linguistic and conversational orientation is tantamount to a change in consciousness for many therapists but it can involve even more of a change of consciousness for clients. While this conception of consciousness is far from new, historically (Lock and Strong, 2010) or culturally (Cole, 1996), it can be hard to grapple with, given the fact that most practitioners have been steeped in a Cartesian orientation to social science and practice (Toulmin, 1990). This constructionist orientation suggests looking past people's use of language to reflect on their interpretation of reality. We adopt an ethnomethodological (Garfinkel, 1967) and Wittgensteinian (Wittgenstein, 1953) stance on language use and conversational practices as the primary means by which relational life is enabled and coordinated. In our view, it is through people's conversational practices that some uses of language and meaning are talked into significance. This extends to therapists' uses of language with clients but it also relates to clients' language use in making sense of and influencing each other. While such uses of language and conversational practices inform our therapeutic conversations with couples we also recognize that clients are engaged in other relational and cultural conversations that influence how partners in couples converse with each other and with us (Burkitt, 1999; Gale and Lawless, 2004).

Therapeutic and relational conversations, in the ways we have been describing, are shaped by and often nested within other influential conversations. We see couples bringing meanings and ways of relating to therapy that they have defaulted to or would never have chosen were it not for these other influential conversations. This is particularly the case when it comes to the meanings they have for their partner and relationship, and the effects such meanings have on their ways of being in relationship. However, couples and therapists are afforded unique opportunities to reflect upon and talk beyond those other influential conversations, as these have informed or obscured what we will, following Bird (2000, 2004a), be referring to as relational consciousness. We do not assume that the meanings and conversational practices clients bring to therapy are those that they prefer, and so we join many constructionist therapists in seeing therapy as a

context where new ways of understanding and relating can be tried out (for example, Anderson, 1997; Gergen, 2006). Therapy, in other words, can take place where client-preferred developments pertaining to their relationships can be invited and talked into significance and action (de Shazer, 1994) in ways that can succeed beyond the consulting room.

Our interest in this article is to elaborate on relational consciousness by turning to the relational language-making ideas and practices of New Zealand therapist Johnella Bird (2000, 2004a, 2004b, 2006), detailing three of the conversational practices of relational language-making she uses in couples therapy. Finally, we conclude by relating our ethnomethodological stance to the way in which therapists can adopt a relational consciousness in conversing with clients, as they invite couples clients to adopt this stance in their language use with each other.

### **Language is relational**

Language is profoundly relational in that it is humanly constructed and is usually used in ways that generally reflect trust and agreement between those sharing a language (Wittgenstein, 1953). People are thrown into language (Heidegger, 1971) and learn to participate in its cultural discourses, which furnish them with varied means to understand and influence each other. However, differences in such cultural discourses (for example, a spiritual discourse versus a medical discourse used to describe bereavement) underscore the potential challenges people face in being understood and being influential or in trying to talk across discourse differences (Xu, 2005).

For Bakhtin (1981, 1984), the words we use are never really ours alone; they come with prior claims on their meaning. Discourses organize words and conversational practices in familiar and expected ways by those sharing a discourse. 'Love', for example, can have two discursive meanings on the tennis court, and one must be careful at times not to confuse them. In Bakhtin's view what matters is that we people our words with intention, making them fit our specific uses, so that they do not carry the unintended meanings of others' prior uses, such as uses learned and taken up in other conversations. Once taken up, such words can find their way into conversations they were never intended for.

In couples' conversations the uninvited words and conversational practices of other conversations can stabilize into unintended or

dispreferred problematic patterns of understanding and communicating between partners. Ethnomethodologically speaking (Heritage, 1984), the routine of such problematic conversations can become familiar to the point of being expected. In other words, over time, unintended language, words and meanings can become anchored and extended in taken-for-granted or seemingly non-negotiable relational interactions. Regardless of the semantic intent of either partner, problems can occur based on how partners perceive and respond to each other's words and ways of talking. Should such problems develop into recurring patterns of misunderstanding and miscommunication the relationship can take on a problematic life of its own – seemingly beyond the influence of either partner.

Bird's approach to relational language-making assumes that language and relationships are negotiated simultaneously (cf. Strong, 2007; Strong and Tamm, 2007). To use any word in a relationship is to invoke a potential negotiation on how it could be understood and shared – included words that characterize the therapeutic relationship. But, too often, the meanings and ways of communicating partners' words can slip beyond negotiability and awareness, even though some of their implications may be at odds with either partner's intentions. Action researcher, John Heron (1996), described the continued and unquestioned use of such words as a kind of linguistic sleepwalking.

Relational consciousness is not so much about putting shared meaning to particular words as it is about recognizing that the meanings of words can be seen as outcomes of ongoing human negotiations. But such negotiations can break down, stabilize into meanings worth extending (or not) or become conflictual and paralyzed by partners' notions of correct meanings – their own meanings, at the expense of those taken up by their partner. Meanwhile, beyond either partner's intentions, undesired consequences can develop for their relationship.

While partners might disagree on particular meanings, their relationships can be strained by such disagreements; disagreements that, when expressed in either/or terms, lose any sense of negotiability. It is this sense of negotiation we are referring to: a kind of conversational flexibility in finding a shared and apt language for, in Wittgenstein's (1953) terms, going on together. Succeeding with this process and its related meanings can be referred to as a relational consciousness.

Relational consciousness takes on a particular focus in Bird's writings (2000, 2004a, 2004b, 2006). For Bird, this focus on language can

help clients gain a better sense of how their words have effects beyond particular individual intentions, and how such words shape and contribute to an emotional tone in interactions within their relationships. John Shotter (1993) has referred to this phenomenon as a kind of knowing of the third kind; a recognition that while both speakers contribute to a conversation, it takes on a life of its own beyond the individual intentions of either speaker. While words might be used to characterize oneself or one's partner, the same words take on relational significance when informing interactions *between* partners.

For example, describing one's partner as 'evil' does not evoke a neutral response. In the back and forth of partners' dialogue or interaction particular words or actions take on relational meanings in the chain of responses following the use of such words or actions. Thus, the specific language used by partners can have unintended relational effects that nevertheless are self-perpetuating. Tomm refers to such language use as pathologizing interpersonal patterns (PIPs): 'interaction[s] in which persons are embedded [that] have a major influence on their experiences and on their mental health' (Tomm, 1991, p. 21). For example, a PIP is discernible in how one partner's criticism finds its complement in the other partner's defensiveness (Tomm, 1991). Such PIPs illustrate an absence of what Bird refers to as relational consciousness; a sense of how such words and ways of responding orchestrate problematic ways of relating and understanding.

Therapeutically reflecting upon and disentangling from such language use can be challenging given common metaphors of meaning and communication (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Most commonly, people see language as a way to communicate information and not as a responsive process that influences both meanings and relationships (for example, Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967). This latter stance is akin to a dialogic metaphor of communication (Linell, 2005) where the focus is also on people's responses to each other, and less on each individual's intended meanings in communicating. Ethnomethodologically and dialogically, to arrive at shared meanings is a relational or conversational accomplishment – not a case of merely being 'clear' or 'rational' in what one intentionally says to a partner (Anderson, 1997; Anscombe, 1957). For us, and for Bird (2000, 2004a), a message clearly and intentionally sent is not the same as a message that could ever be 'correctly' received, particularly when the words involved are experienced as having personal and relational significance.

With repeated use, partners' linguistic meanings can – intentionally or not – become fossilized, and by using terms emphatically or with unassailable certainty they can become overdetermined or fetishized (Newman and Holzman, 1997). Disagreements are often inevitable in such overdetermined or fetishized meanings, as partners emphatically justify their meanings and positions. Whether as a result of fossilized or fetishized meanings and ways of speaking, partners can find themselves unintentionally stuck on meanings and patterns of interaction that may fail to serve their relationship. In this situation, therapy is about finding a way of exploring the certainty of the language that partners use in their relationship. It was in this sense that Hoffman (2002) suggested that, when partners speak and understand from the position of conflicting discourses, a third discourse that is agreeable (to each partner) may be required to enable dialogue. Such recognitions point to dimensions of consciousness we see as being inescapably linked to the language that is used and can be taken up by couples before therapy, in therapy and beyond therapy. Thus, relational consciousness involves a particular sensibility toward language use; a sensibility that therapists can invite clients to take up by collaboratively exploring the origins, use and implications of language for their relationships.

### **Johnella Bird**

Johnella Bird is a therapist, co-founder, and co-director of the Family Therapy Centre in Auckland, New Zealand. For 20 years she has developed and taught her relational consciousness approach to conversations in family therapy (Bird, 2000, 2004a, 2004b) and supervision (Bird, 2006). We see in Bird's conversational practices a careful focus on both the therapist's use of language and on how the therapist works with partners' uses of language with each other. Her collaborative search for more helpful language sees therapists negotiating language with clients as they help partners reflect upon and negotiate relationally acceptable language with each other. Language can be seen as a verbal and nonverbal resource to sustain relationships in particular ways, and as a resource that enables partners to negotiate relational alternatives. There is a long history in family therapy of seeing the words and ways of talking used by partners with each other, and between therapists and client partners, as both describing and prescribing relational qualities (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967). Partners' linguistic constructions of each other and their relationship stand in for

understandings of their relational reality and thus shape the continued relations between partners. When such language represents relational experiences or partners in ways deemed to be objectionable by either partner (Strong and Tomm, 2007), we join Bird in seeing it as useful to invite partners' reflections on how such language affects them and their relationships. These reflections can help couples to consider alternative language that describe each other and their relationship in ways that fit the situation better. Here we focus on Johnella Bird's relational language-making approach to therapy.

### **Relational language-making**

For Bird (2004a), a therapeutic politics of meaning-making (see Kogan, 1998) can be relevant when clients articulate their understandings in language that undermines their personal and relational sense of wellbeing. There is considerable debate about whether therapists are entitled to substitute professional language to alter these patterns (Larner, 2004; Strong and Sutherland, 2007; Weingarten, 1992). Tomm (1992) suggests that therapeutic violence may result when therapists insist on their meanings or fail to engage with client meanings. Still, therapists can face a dilemma over how to respond when they hear clients labouring over understandings they think merit reflection or alteration (Avis, 1985). In such circumstances therapists, and clients with each other, can feel stuck between two positions, as reflected by Bird's (2000, p. 36) questions below:

1. Do I expose these positions by presenting an alternative version or explanation for life events? If I don't do this, will I be supporting the ongoing oppression of these clients?
2. If I do expose these positions, will clients experience me as another agent of control?

To address this dilemma, Bird developed a linguistic approach where clients are invited to reflect upon the advantages and disadvantages of particular constructions of (or positions on) life events as facilitated through dialogue (Bird, 2004a). She refers to this approach as 'relational language-making', and invites couples to join her in exploring the effects language has had on them, en route to negotiating new linguistic possibilities for their relationships.

Relational language-making involves conversing with clients so that the meanings they attribute to words can be critically reflected upon and negotiated. In other words, clients are invited to reflect upon

assumed meanings and negotiate better fitting alternatives. In such negotiations therapists and clients search for consensual and contextual meaning rather than holding out for 'true' words or phrases (Bird, 2004a). In this respect, language is seen as a conceptual resource for meanings in relationships. But linguistic meanings, and how these are communicated, can stabilize and become taken for granted, binding or constraining partners to understandings and patterns of interaction that may fail to serve their relationship. So Bird engages clients in reflective enquiries into meanings that may have become problematic or objectionable for each other and for their relationship. Such inquiries can transform what otherwise might seem individual perceptions into descriptions that shape relational experience and each partner's participation in it.

Seen ethnomethodologically (Heritage, 1984), partners' communications (use of words as well as paralinguistic features) can stabilize into sustained responsiveness (positive or negative) seemingly beyond the volition of either partner. Family therapists know such sustained responsiveness as 'recursiveness', and cybernetically informed therapists often used pattern-disruption interventions to address such occurrences ('the same damn thing occurring over again' de Shazer *et al.*, 1986, p. 210). Bird's interventions are more invitational and use a linguistic move; externalization, adapted from narrative therapy (for example, White and Epston, 1990). Specifically, she invites couples to reflect upon how their individual constructions of meanings translate relationally. Said differently, she invites partners to link such words to the way in which they feature in their relational interactions so that they can find a more preferable relational language.

Turning to a common example, in responding to a client's description of being responsible for a situation, a therapist might ask, 'When you're being responsible how does that make you feel?' Bird, from her relational language-making approach, instead might ask, 'How would you describe this sense of responsibility that you hold?' (Bird, 2004a, p. 12). Answers to such a question invite a shift in focus from individual meanings to meanings for phenomena, as they are understood in relationships (that is, with one's partner). The term 'responsibility', in this case, can take on a relational meaning pertaining to both partners, as opposed to an individually experienced one. In this style of inquiry therapists respond by posing questions from a philosophical belief that the self is never singular – nor are the words used to describe 'it'. The self is known and experienced in relational interactions with one's partners and physical reality. Returning to the term,



responsibility, reflective questions from the perspective we have been describing invite partners to consider such a word in relational as well as individual contexts of meaning. Such reflections enable partners to better understand the relational effects of such individually contextualized words as part of a search for words that can better serve their relationship.

Relational problems around objectionable language use are sustained by particular conversational practices. Inviting clients to reflect upon words they have described as significant or meaningful to them can help to create a relational space where they can disengage from prior conversational practices (Strong, 2002). Such disengagement can help in contextually reflecting upon and possibly modifying their linguistic representations of, and ways of communicating about, relevant relational experiences (Bird, 2004a). Gadamer (1988) saw such a context as a place where people could play with meaning through language. Through the kind of process we have been describing, partners can be invited to collaboratively develop a language of co-constructed or negotiated relational consciousness, a language and way of communicating they deem mutually suitable for going forward together in therapy.

Bird developed this practice firstly, to engage partners in negotiating meanings or language with her and secondarily, to promote such negotiations between partners. The aim is for partners to learn to negotiate a shared language for understandings (words) and relational actions (ways of talking) where they might otherwise impose them on each other. We will now turn to specific conversational practices which we see Bird engaging in with clients.

### **Conversational practices using relational language-making**

#### *Negotiating conflicting discursive positions between partners in a relationship*

Couples usually seek therapy because of relational matters (Gurman, 2008, p. 3), where conflicts and disagreements occupy their relationship. In such circumstances Bird negotiates with conflicting partners a third discourse (Hoffman, 2002) introducing relational language-making into their therapeutic conversations.

Bird suggests that partners develop an awareness of how conflicting discursive positions affect their relationship (Bird, 2004a). To develop this awareness she encourages clients to reflect on the specific language used when describing the linguistic positions each partner

experiences or takes up in relation to the other. Encouraging such reflections by one partner can promote reflection by the other on how such linguistic constructions affect them and the relationship. This can enable the discussion of one partner's 'private' experience as it is experienced relationally and described to her partner, and vice versa. When moving from a private construction to a relational construction of experience, such language can be collaboratively reflected upon and possibly negotiated in a different way (Bird, 2004a).

The following example shows Bird (as therapist) inviting a couple in the therapy (Rick and Alison) to reflect upon their private and conflicting linguistic constructions of experience (their discursive positions) as a step toward constructing alternatives relationally:

EXAMPLE 1 Moving from 'private' constructions to relational constructions (Bird, 2004a, p. 98–99)

Line no	Speaker	
1	Rick	Having individual time is really important to me. That's
2		where I sort things out in my head.
3	Alison	That isn't the issue here. When you've sorted things out in
4		your head, you just come with a definitive position. I don't
5		know how you get there and there seems to be no room to
6		move. I either do it your way or we argue until I give up.
7	Rick	That's not true, I'm happy to hear what you have to say.
8	Therapist	Okay Rick, <i>in this process of sorting</i> it out, what room is
9		there for discussion with Alison?
10	Rick	Of course I want to hear what she has to say.
11	Alison	That's not how it feels, you come back with bullet points
12		and I'm just catching up with the fact there's a problem.
13	Therapist	Alison, when you hear <i>the bullet points</i> , how easy is it
14		for you to contribute to the discussion?
15	Alison	It isn't easy. I feel I'm ten steps behind and if I hesitate
16		at all, he just pushes for a conclusion.
17	Rick	Look Alison, if you got your way you'd like to talk about
18		it <i>ad nauseum</i> and I've got my way of doing things.
19	Therapist	How <i>does this difference in ways of sorting things out</i>
20		affect the relationship? I mean there's <i>the way you use</i> ,
21		Rick, which is to silently identify a problem, go away,
22		think about it, come back with solutions; and there's <i>the</i>
23		<i>way Alison uses</i> , which is to identify the problem, talk
24		about the problem, come to a decision about solving the
25		problem. Rick, <i>what's the impact of this difference in the</i>
26		<i>relationship?</i>
27	Rick	We argue I guess, but I'm not doing it differently just
28		because she wants me to. This works for me.
29	Therapist	<i>This way, which works for you</i> , does it work for this
30		relationship?
31	Rick	No it doesn't, but most of the time I'm right.
32	Therapist	When you say that 'most of the time I'm right' are you
33		suggesting the idea that <i>Alison should go along with you</i> ,
34		go along with this way of <i>sorting things out that you use?</i>

- 35 Rick Yeh, I guess I am. I think it would make it easier.  
 36 Alison I bet you'd like that, you're in charge of things, well that  
 37 doesn't interest me.  
 38 Rick You are taking it wrong Alison, I didn't mean that I'd be in  
 39 charge,  
 40 it's just that I think I'm good at seeing the problem and solving it.  
 41 Alison Maybe you are at work Rick, but there you're the boss, that's your  
 42 job – don't treat me like one of your secretaries.  
 43 Rick Now you're exaggerating – it's like this ...  
 44 Therapist I'd just like to interrupt here. It sounds like Rick, this way of  
 45 solving problems works for you at work and maybe other places  
 46 it works for you, however, you said it doesn't seem to work  
 47 for the relationship?  
 48 Alison, you have a different way of solving problems to the way  
 49 Rick uses. Are you both interested in finding a way that works  
 50 for the relationship?  
 51 Rick Of course I am. I love Alison.  
 52 Therapist Okay. Let's go back to the beginning. In order to solve  
 53 problems, problems need to be identified. I'm going to  
 54 ask you both the following question – 'how do you know  
 55 that there is a problem for and in the relationship? What's the  
 56 first indication?' – Alison you start.

This passage shows Bird negotiating with the conflicting discursive positions between Rick and Alison. The conflicting positions are evident from the start of the passage where Rick and Alison show how they disagree on the ways to solve problems in their relationship. What happens when partners argue over what each partner believes to be true in a difficult situation in a relationship is what Bird (and others) calls a 'binary position' (2004a, p. 92). This is where partners use either/or linguistic constructions to describe difficult situations in the relationship to each other, as Rick and Alison do in Example 1. The conflict between the couples' discursive positions becomes readily evident throughout their interactions by line 19. Bird then intervenes by asking how differences between Rick's and Alison's private linguistic constructions of their problems and disagreements, or both, affect their relationship with each other. She does so by reflecting back on each partner's position, while inviting discussion on the relational impact of the differences between their positions.

Rick responds with a relational effect ('We argue') but then reverts to an individual position; one he says, 'Works for me'. Bird's response, however, stays relational; inviting Rick to reflect upon how what he describes as 'working for him' works for the relationship. The discussion between lines 27 and 44 illustrates more of the polarizing effects of the individual discursive positions taken up by Rick and Alison. However, these differences in positions (over how to solve problems) offer Bird data to use in inviting Rick and Alison to discuss what might

work instead of what hasn't worked for their relationship. Rick takes up this invitation (line 51) so Bird asks both Rick and Alison how each identifies problems for their relationship (that is, not for each partner personally). This couple's initial discourse illustrates where conflict has persisted over (and because of) differences between individual discursive positions. Bird's question, in this sense, can be seen as part of her ongoing (see lines 29 and 32) negotiation of a relational discourse.

Throughout her work with couples, Bird invites and negotiates a 'relational consciousness' (2004a, p. 3). Her questions and reflections invite and negotiate a focus beyond individual positions and back upon what serves and does not serve their relationship. Some might see a paradox here, as relationships are made up of individuals, whereas relational consciousness implies a space where individuality disappears. Shotter (1993) has written along the same lines about what a sense of 'we-ness' entails for people in relationships, in a mutuality that transcends their individual experiences. This is not only about particular words; it is also about how such words come to be shared in relationship-shaping ways of addressing each other. Bird's relational language-making points to ways in which therapists can invite partners to reflect on the effects of their discursive differences in their relationship, while inviting them to consider alternative words and ways of addressing each other that might become shared.

*Exploring a partner's experience of hurt in a relationship, following unspoken assumptions*

The ideas and behaviour of one partner can represent to the other partner a movement away from what may have seemed a shared understanding, a sense of closeness, a hope or a dream. Such movements away from perceived mutuality can create conditions where the relationship suffers the effects of cumulative small injuries (for an example of a partner's experience of hurt; see Miller and Stiver, 1997). These small injuries can make evident the unmet everyday expectations to which partners hold each other, those which are often assumed (taken for granted) rather than identified and negotiated. A lack of success in either relationally repairing these small injuries or renewing relationship expectations can result in couples limiting the emotional and physical availability they extend to each other. In this climate the intimacy clients experience can slowly erode as their interactions are overtaken by accusations, blaming and apologizing that are

anchored in non-relational language. Partners may have limited linguistic resources to negotiate their way through a dialogue beyond such injuries and problematic interactions.

Therapy can help clients in a couple renegotiate their relationship in such critical situations. Therapy can also be useful for partners attend to and repair small hurts or misunderstandings in their relationship as they occur. It may also be a place to find ways to notice and address the small hurts before their effects worsen as in the following example.

EXAMPLE 2 Exploring the experience of hurt that follows unspoken assumptions (Bird, 2004a, pp. 271–272)

Line no	Speaker	
1	Dean	I thought you'd be more supportive.
2	Laurel	What do you mean more supportive? I'm
3		doing almost all the housework now and the
4		kids hardly enter your head anymore, because
5		I'm organizing everything since your bloody PhD.
6		We've both got jobs you know.
7	Therapist	What kind of support did you imagine Laurel would
8		provide in the PhD studies?
9	Dean	Take an interest; ask how it's going. We're both scientists,
10		I thought she'd be interested in it too.
11	Therapist	A colleague kind of support. ... When the decision to return
12		to study was made, how did you both identify what you
13		would need in order to feel support?
14	Dean	I guess that's the trouble. I assumed Laurel would just
15		manage, she's so capable. And I think I felt guilty that I'd got
16		the scholarship because Laurel didn't even apply because
17		the kids are still quite young.

This passage shows Bird responding to Dean and Laurel's discursive differences over what each partner means by 'supportive'. Bird rhetorically sidesteps these differences; inviting Dean to discuss how he imagined (that is, assumed) Laurel might have provided support. This enables Dean to discuss what had been unspoken; the origins of a private construction that now was open to mutual reflection and negotiation. Bird offers a candidate description of Dean's construction ('a colleague kind of support') and then inquires how each identified what they needed from the other in terms of support. Dean's response further indicates what had been privately assumed, as well as what he felt had gone unidentified and un-negotiated between himself and Laurel. Dean's words and manner of expression became clearly different from what he used at the start of this passage.

In examining this passage, what stands out for us is how an individual construction (here, a private, assumed one) can be invited into

the light of conversational day where it stands a chance of being reflected on and improved upon in ways that can enhance a relationship. Of course, there is more conversational work to be done to arrive at a shared discourse of support that each partner makes explicit, endorses and then enacts. But sometimes relational language-making, as we read Bird, begins by inviting partners' private and assumed (and thus non-explicit and non-negotiable) constructions to become open for reflection and negotiation. Such reflections and negotiations, however, are made more difficult when power relations are an issue.

### *Negotiating the power relation*

Power relations are an ever-present, integral part of every therapeutic conversation, interaction or movement; they can never be separated out or be calmed by good intentions or a single conversation. As Foucault claimed: 'power is everywhere: not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere' (1973, p. 93). Thus, no individual can hold power alone because power does not emanate from one source. In a sense, power is inscribed in people's social ways of being and in the spaces inherited by people (Foucault, 1980; Paechter, 1998). Power can therefore be seen as inherent to our institutions and relationships, in how we relate to each other and in our language use with each other (Paechter, 1998).

Bird (along with Bateson, 1980) describes power as an abstract notion, like other abstractions: 'Truth, justice, love and commitment are abstract notions brought into existence through the relational environment' (Bird, 2004a, p. 158). Power in this sense is often attached to particular linguistic abstractions that partners may try to make real (at their partner's and the relationship's expense) when arguing over truths, words or descriptions of the other or about difficult situations. Said differently, power relations arise when particular linguistic constructions (for example, ideals, 'truth', goals, expectations) affecting people in relationships are enacted or responded to as non-negotiable. There will be some relationships (for example, parent-child and supervisor-supervisee relations) where such negotiability or non-negotiability involves special considerations but it is in the relations between supposed equals, like those between partners, that power relations can become problematic. Problems can arise in circumstances when enacted meanings (for example, that one is correct and the partner is wrong) have been implicit or inadequately

subjected to critical scrutiny – either for the meanings or the consequences of acting from them. Consequently, Bird suggests that relational language-making can help make explicit and alternatively negotiable the meanings behind these power relations, as taken-for-granted notions to be named and critically reflected upon. When clients examine their relationship and balances of power within it this way, they can consider implications and developments in their relationship as these are related to the relational effects of language used (for example, ‘you are an aggressive person’) by each partner (Bird 2004a).

In therapy, where power relations often go unacknowledged, therapists may similarly find themselves categorizing the client’s responses or actions, such as when:

A client’s lack of willingness to engage with the change strategies the therapists suggested, indicates that she can be ‘manipulating the situation’, or another client’s refusal to attend the family meeting reflects his ‘resistance’ to therapy. (Bird, 2004a, p. 160)

Regardless of whether clients do this sort of categorizing with each other or therapists do it with clients, Bird’s concerns are with the effects of such categorizing on the relations between the people involved.

Power relations can be seen as efforts to use and act from language, to have power over others, or to share power (have power with others) (Miller and Stiver, 1997). The nub of any power over issue comes down to one partner’s (or the therapist’s) insistence or imposition that the other(s) live by his or her linguistic construction. Conversely, ‘power with’ in this context refers to linguistic constructions that are mutually negotiated and shared in explicitly recognizable and accepted ways. Once both therapists and clients acknowledge such understandings over power relations, Bird (2004a) suggests that therapists can use relational language-making to avoid imposing therapists’ meanings (or common assumptions) upon the client. Elsewhere, Strong and Sutherland (2007) have described this concern in terms of an ethic of contestability; that therapists’ linguistic constructions be proposed tentatively in ways clients can reject, propose alternatives to, and ‘wordsmith’ (Strong, 2006) into mutual acceptability and use. Therapists’ generalizations or assumptions about couples’ or partner’s experience in this regard can translate to power over circumstances, partners or relationships expected to abide by such ‘expertly’ proffered interpretations or diagnoses. One way of imposing meaning

might be to voice an assumption that ‘most couples experience anger over this topic’.

In the following extract Steve (the client) has been describing the problem, which is he needs to have sex with Gemma to feel connected to her (lines 1–3). Toward the end of the session Steve interrupts and the following conversation ensues as Bird uses relational language-making:

EXAMPLE 3 Negotiating the power relation (Bird, 2004a, pp. 274–275)

Line no	Speaker	
1	Steve	This isn't working for me. I've got the problem I
2		need to have sex with Gemma so that I feel connected
3		with her.
4	Therapist	How did you come to realization that this was a problem
5		you had?
6	Steve	What do you mean?
7	Therapist	You said: 'I've got the problem I need to have sex with
8		Gemma in order to feel close.' How have you come to
9		realize this is a problem for you?
10	Steve	It's not my problem, it's Gemma's problem. If she was
11		sexual with me I would feel close.
12	Therapist	Are you able to feel a sense of closeness with other people
13		including Gemma without being sexual?
14	Steve	Yes but that's different.
15	Therapist	How is it different?
16	Steve	Well I feel close to her but it's a different closeness when
17		we've had sex.
18	Therapist	How would you describe the closeness you have before sex?
19	Steve	It's difficult to describe, I just love her I suppose.
20	Therapist	So it's a closeness born of a knowledge that you love Gemma?
21		Do you think Gemma feels this sort of closeness before sex?
22	Steve	I don't know, it's so long since we had sex. I suppose so.
23	Therapist	How do you demonstrate the type of closeness born of the
24		love that you have for Gemma before being sexual?
25	Steve	What do you mean?
26	Therapist	How would I see this closeness you're describing being
27		displayed in the relationship?
28	Steve	I just know it. It's just there.
29	Therapist	Do you think that Gemma also knows or feels this
30		closeness from you?
31	Steve	She should know I love her.
32	Therapist	If she said it was difficult for her to feel or know this
33		closeness from you, would you be surprised?
34	Steve	Not really.
35	Therapist	Do you want her to know and appreciate this closeness you
36		feel?
37	Steve	Look, what's this have to do with sex? That's the problem
38		here.
39	Therapist	I thought you said that the feelings of closeness are everything
40		to do with sex. We've discovered a type of closeness that is
41		necessary before sexual intimacy and a type of closeness comes
42		after sexual intimacy. If Gemma said there are ways you could



43		demonstrate this closeness which you've identified and that this
44		would support her to feel a closeness to you, would you be
45		interested in hearing her ideas?
46	Steve	I suppose that is reasonable.
47	Therapist	Is there interest in this for you?
48	Steve	If this will work I'll give it a go.

Example 3 shows Bird negotiating the power relation suggested by Steve's problem description: 'I need sex with Gemma to feel close' (lines 1–3). Bird responds by selectively paraphrasing Steve's language (her 'closeness' for his 'connected'), extending this paraphrase to inviting reflection on her proposed metaphor, 'a sense of closeness' as a linguistic construction to reflect and improve upon (line 12). Bird invites Steve to explore different kinds of closeness, offering candidate notions such as 'closeness with other people including Gemma without being sexual', by proposing that closeness before and during sex is different (line 16) and by eventually asking, 'How would you describe the closeness you have before sex?' (line 18) Steve eventually takes up Bird's invitation to speak from this discourse or metaphor of closeness; 'it's difficult to describe, I just love her I suppose' though he later interrupts wondering what this (closeness) has to do with sex (line 37).

For micro-sociologist Erving Goffman (1981) what Bird is negotiating above is the conversational footing for the therapeutic dialogue; the discourse or topic from which therapist and clients may speak. Consistent with this way of thinking, Potter (1996) has alternatively suggested that such junctures in dialogue are where speakers negotiate the stakes of their dialogue; not only the topics or outcomes up for negotiation but any moral impressions that could be inferred from a speakers' choice of language and topic. Accordingly, we see Bird and Steve negotiating a language for going on, in Wittgenstein's (1953) sense, a language that Steve accepts or at least leaves uncontested as the content and direction of their talking. Some readers may regard Bird's insistent invitation for Steve to talk about closeness over sex as an imposition itself, that Steve's responses on lines 10, 14 and 16 are superseded by Bird's insistence, culminating in a kind of acquiescence by Steve on line 19. That would not be our analysis, given that Bird shows an openness and flexibility in her language until Steve responds in ways that enable some discussion of 'closeness'. It is clear that the conversational work around 'closeness' is not over, however, as Steve's line 31 response shows, though 'closeness' is negotiated into a more explicitly agreeable topic for Steve as shown by lines 46 and 48.

It is this negotiability of the stakes or power in using language that we see as central to Bird's approach, both in terms of her own language with clients, and in terms of the uses of language she promotes between partners. Part of what we see occurring in her dialogues with clients is a demonstrated sensitivity and inquisitiveness to power over linguistic constructions, with determined efforts to invite reflection and mutually endorsed improvements on such constructions. We also see resourceful efforts to invite and negotiate power with constructions where the former power over constructions was not serving partners and couples well.

### **Conclusion**

We reduce the risk of imposing meaning by asking questions that support people (clients) to respond in such a way as to challenge, add to or change our thinking or belief. (Bird, 2000, p. 112)

In this article we reviewed Johnella Bird's notion of relational consciousness drawing on social constructionist theory. We have explained how this central term in her approach to therapy can be adopted in ways that promote mindfulness in how therapists can use language with clients and how they can invite clients' mindful use of language with each other.

For us, relational consciousness is less about putting shared meaning to individual words than it is about being sensitively oriented to how words and meanings feature as outcomes of ongoing human interactions. Such sensitivity is central to the way in which we see language and consciousness negotiated in mutually satisfying or accepting ways through language – words, as well as all features of communication (such as gestures and tones of voice) that accompany their use. But such sensitivity sometimes can become a casualty as particular descriptions and ways of talking overtake partners in couples, and therapists with couples in their conversations with each other. Similarly partners, and therapists in talking with them, can lose the sensitive awareness to negotiating how their relationship is going, and instead be carried along linguistically by meanings and ways of talking that could benefit from an update. Relational consciousness is an enacted sensitivity to the way in which one's use of language performs in terms of how others respond to that use. What may seem like one's individual utterances call forth dialogic responses from one's conversational partners, responses that shape an inescapable hermeneutic circle of mutual construction (Bakhtin,

1984; Gadamer, 1988). Such a perspective is consistent with our ethnomethodological view that particular social orders – conflicts included – require a familiar organization sustained by recurring relational or conversational practices. Again, it is not so much the words themselves as the responses they elicit that can ossify into circular patterns of interaction and affective tones that partners find objectionable and stuck with.

By intervening as she does in the way in which language is used by partners, Bird is breaching (Garfinkel, 1967) the social order of couples' familiar meanings and conversational practices. In this manner she disrupts the language use and communication patterns anchoring couples' conflicts in ways that make it possible for the partners to step back from their accustomed ways of enacting those conflicts. But it is her particular focus on how such use translates from the individual to the relational context that we see as her most innovative therapeutic move. Negotiating a relational language from what had been two individually held discursive positions is clearly more than an exercise in reflection. It takes disrupting the enactment of particular conversational practices, and proposing a new relational language for what has been occurring, together with conversational work with clients for them to consider and enact such a new language. Our selected passages of Bird's conversational work illustrate her work in not only helping clients to reflect on their prior language use, but also how her work translates to clients eventually taking up (that is, enacting) the relational discourse. In other words, these passages illustrate not only the consideration of preferable words but the active use of these words in the couple and therapy-couple relationship – in a new performance of relational meaning. In those performances, we contend, are enactments of a relational consciousness where formerly individual consciousness held sway in partners' linguistic choices and conversational practices.

Couples therapy can offer conversations where words and meanings that compromise a relational quality of life can be reflected upon and renegotiated in different ways. Johnella Bird suggests that her linguistic approach; relational language-making, may be used as a practical resource for therapists to adopt a relational consciousness. We have described three of her conversational practices for relational language-making because we see in them mindful or sensitive ways of negotiating meaning or language within relationships while promoting such negotiations between partners. In adopting such practices, therapists can invite clients to reflect upon how language limits their

relationships, while engaging them in collaborative searches for better language for (in Wittgenstein's, 1953 terms) going on together.

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