



# Relationality as a Way of Being: A Pedagogy of Classroom Conversations

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## MORE THAN INDIVIDUAL CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

The integration of theoretical paradigms like critical theory in family therapy curriculum has helped create awareness about socio-contextual issues, structural inequities, and the ways in which intersectional identities

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(including but not limited to race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, and disability status) relate to power, privilege, and oppression. This has been crucial for individual consciousness raising and helping family therapy students examine the effects of these societal constructs in their own and others' lives (Almeida et al., 2008). We have also become more socially responsible practitioners, cognizant of the ways in which therapy theories have marginalized non-dominant groups to the ideas and standards of the dominant center.

In efforts to help challenge and dismantle systemic inequities and work toward social justice, dialogues in family therapy classrooms often critically address complex social issues from a structuralist perspective of power (Monk et al., 2008). While these conversations are ripe with the potential to be generative, the tendency can be for students to self-protect, feel silenced, become oppositional, or cede to academic and performative social pressures to appear knowledgeable about social justice ideology. Furthermore, there are dominant discourses in our western culture about what social justice work is and "how it should be done" that tend to focus at the individual level and can be unwittingly colonizing.

For example, there have been strong appeals to use one's voice to resist, call out microaggressions, challenge oppressive actions, and take active steps toward self-accountability for one's unearned privilege. These approaches focus on individual actions to disrupt systems of power. Students may assume that this is how to "do" social justice if instructors do not also teach and model relational alternatives. While it is important to name and interrupt systems of oppression, there are a myriad of options for how we can engage in social justice dialogues, and the context within which it happens is important for us to consider. What we hope to offer comes from how we have learned to be as couple and family therapists: *centered around relationships* and socioculturally *attuned* (Knudson-Martin et al., 2019) *to others and self*.

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## BEYOND A STRUCTURAL UNDERSTANDING OF POWER

As educators that intentionally employ a relationship-directed teaching approach, our definition and experience of power in the classroom depart from humanist and structuralist perspectives of power as described by Monk et al. (2008). From a liberal *humanist perspective*, power is garnered by individuals based upon ability to work hard, gain merit, and contribute to a capitalistic society. For those who hold both greater and lesser societal privilege, the language of power can breed a sense of competition that robs all of the ability to connect and relate as we vie for what we have been taught is a limited resource. This dynamic is exacerbated by the tendency in western cultures to value and preserve the “I” self above relational orientations that are perceived to maintain connection at the expense of one’s sense of personal power. In contrast, our unique communities of origin (e.g. our affirming, progressive Religious faith communities and our ethnic and cultural contexts) orient us to holding space for mutual relationships in classroom conversations around social justice.

In contrast, *a structuralist view* of power ties power to embedded social structures rather than to individuals. Many social justice movements enlist this perspective with people seen as disadvantaged by social class, gendered, and racial identities and as having only the degree of power that social structures afford them. As with the humanist perspective, power becomes a limited resource which is gained in competition. It is seen through an economic lens and treated as a finite commodity that those who occupy dominant positions have and those in subjugated positions do not. This perspective could leave some powerless to the social condition in which they are born with little control to change it. Conversely, some remain in unquestioned positions of power. When we reduce our conversations in classrooms to individualistic frameworks that revolve primarily around a structural understanding of power, we can get hyper-focused on challenging the status quo, and paradoxically, our efforts to challenge it actually unintentionally maintain it.

*A poststructuralist view* of power sees power as being a part of everyday life. It can be concentrated in certain places at times, and everyone is always participating in relations of power as a flexible discursive experience. Power is used to exert influence upon the actions of others (Foucault, 1982). Power is not seen as bad or good, but cannot be separated from our language, experiences, meanings, and discourses. From this perspective we can focus more intentionally on which kinds of power relations are

ethical ones, by examining the effects and consequences of our actions. This poststructuralist view of power enables a different teaching pedagogy that creates room for us as academics to enact an orientation to others, rooted in and sustained by our spirituality and collectivist values.

### LITERATURE REVIEW: RELATIONALLY ORIENTED PEDAGOGY

While a growing body of literature addresses pedagogy oriented to diversity and social justice in family therapy and related fields, we will highlight literature that speaks to relationally oriented pedagogy. Structured approaches from the field of social work, such as the Critical Consciousness model (CC model) developed by Kang and O'Neill (2018), emphasize relationship and the instructor's role in attuning to self and students. These approaches propose that there are both intra- (e.g. tuning in to self) and interpersonal processes (e.g. noticing, reflecting, naming, and discussing power dynamics) that instructors must facilitate in order to help students stay present with the content and process and be able to cultivate self-awareness, reflexivity, and critical reflection (O'Neill, 2015).

Literature on the instructor's way of being in the classroom suggests that when instructors are welcoming, nurturing, curious, empathic, and respectful, they help create learning environments similar to therapeutic contexts, providing the potential for transformative conversations to occur (Nixon et al., 2010). McDowell et al. (2003) discuss the facilitative nature of instructor self-disclosure in conversations about racism, and Nixon et al. (2010) propose the value of instructors modeling what it looks like to acknowledge one's mistakes, misconceptions, and ignorance.

The literature also reports that pedagogical practices which are intentional about community building (Nixon, 2005) are most conducive for conversations across difference. This style centers the wisdom from African American scholars who note the importance of creating a sense of unity among learners (hooks, 1994; Nixon, 2005). This context promotes sharing and hearing one another's personal stories about the ways that societal "isms" play out in their lives, which promotes personal growth (McDowell et al., 2003). We draw on our spiritual, ethnic, and cultural experiences to create our relational pedagogical perspective that emphasizes a sense of unity, as opposed to more western notions of individualism.

Students start to change their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors when they learn relationally how to take in the experiences of those different from them. Transformation occurs when one is able to challenge or

confront their thoughts and beliefs in a way that creates cognitive dissonance (Kiselica, 1999). However, being challenged or confronted can incite defensiveness and alienation if not done in the context of relationships. Therefore, genuine respect and collaboration (Korin, 1994; McGoldrick et al., 1999), as well as time and space to reflect and think (McDowell et al., 2003) are necessary elements of critical conversations. Therapeutic relationships that facilitate change must value each person's voice, be affirming, and honor differences. This invites trust and encourages emotional vulnerability and conversational risks.

### TOWARD A RELATIONALLY DIRECTED PEDAGOGY

While individual consciousness raising and accountability work have been important aspects of social justice practice, we propose that our ability to transform our social world lies in our relational capacities. In classroom spaces where learners are colleagues seeking to learn and grow, an approach that harnesses the power of relationship to enact change may be the most constructive and sustainable. Contexts where each person can feel valued and cared for are ones that enable us to practice humility, learn to be vulnerable with one another, and remain open to change. This compels us to orient differently to power, shifting from an individual process to a relational process.

In our approach to teaching, we center relationships and collaboration, which values each person in the conversation and what they bring to the classroom. We draw upon two articles about relationally focused processes to support our approach. Tuttle et al. (2012) speak to the idea of parenting as a relationship, and Knudson-Martin and Huenergardt (2010) discuss relational processes in couples work. While these are not pedagogical frameworks, both emphasize the importance of mutuality in relationships through specific and intentional relational practices that stand against individualistic ideas of responsibility.

Approaching conversations about social and political issues in the classroom from a relationship-directed stance shifts traditional/hierarchical ideas of the teacher-student relationship. Western education has emphasized the power over relationships where the teacher is all knowing and the student is not yet enlightened. Paulo Freire (1970) articulates this as the banking approach to education, which does not hold space for relational partnership in the classroom. Freire (1970) contends that in order to “undermine the power of oppression and serve the cause of liberation,”

both in and out of the classroom, we must hold partnership with students as central to this task. Taking a relational turn in our pedagogical practices is one way to decolonize the classroom and decenter western European ideas that have been privileged in academic institutions.

### CONNECTING IDEAS TO CLASSROOM DIALOGUE PRACTICES

A relationally directed pedagogy needs to attend to power in classroom dialogue, and we propose this can be done through relationships. This means that as instructors, we center relationality while staying conscious of the larger contextual issues and structural power dynamics at play. Our pedagogical framework subscribes to the notion of “power with” (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2007) and assumes that power can be shared from varying positionalities through the ways we construct and negotiate it in our immediate classroom contexts. To do this, we are intentional about promoting relational connection and mutual support between all members in the classroom.

We focus on process rather than outcome, and model sociocultural attunement (Knudson-Martin et al., 2019) to the experiences of both self and other. We also model how to use mental flexibility and emotional reflexivity (Garcia, Kosutic, & McDowell, 2015) to both honor one’s own experience (Watts-Jones, 2010) and affirm others’ needs. It is particularly important for students to witness instructors do this in moments of conflict. Therefore, we use these moments to show students that centering relationships in dialogue can start with seeking to “get” where others are coming from and attending to their needs, instead of prioritizing one’s own experiences and perspectives first. We do not view this as an act of subjugation, but rather as a sequence in the process toward sharing power through relationship. We acknowledge the vulnerability that dialogues about difference can evoke. Therefore, we actively convey our care, value, and respect for each person as a way to welcome and invite people to lean into discomfort. We also encourage honesty and humility (McDowell et al., 2003), by intentionally acknowledging our own mistakes. Being accountable in relationships is one impact that the four of us authors have experienced being socialized as women, and we have intentionally privileged this relational stance.

Specific aspects of our social locations shape our approach to relationality in the classroom. I (Lana) draw on my second-generation, Korean Canadian identity and the generational, matriarchal legacies from

my immigrant grandmother, mother, and aunts, where benevolent hierarchy and community were concurrently modeled. I (Justine) am a white person who was socialized within the larger context of white supremacy, which inclines me toward western individualism where relational responsibility is not always an explicit value. However, I heavily draw upon my experience as a queer person in the world, which for me has been an experience of not being visible unless I privilege relational ways of being that help others hold me in the middle space I inhabit as a gender queer person. I (Jessica) draw on my second-generation Taiwanese American close-knit family, lifelong Asian American sisterhood, and ever-transforming Christian spirituality (there have been many iterations of this). I (Elisabeth) draw on my upbringing as a white woman in a multicultural, Hawaiian/Asian American context of extended “hanai” family, and on my spiritual journey toward a more inclusive, mystical, affirming practice of Christianity that acknowledges oppression as well as liberation is possible within a religious framework. Together the four of us draw on the relationships we have created with each other across difference, rooted in mutual respect for our shared social justice and systemic theoretical underpinnings. The following case scenario will illustrate our relationship-directed pedagogy in action.

### *Case Scenario*

I (Elisabeth, a white, heterosexual, cisgender female professor) teach a sex therapy course to second-year graduate MFT students each spring. One spring I worked with a group of students holding particularly polarized sexual values, informed by different political and religious views. At midsemester I met with Nina (all names changed), a biracial Latina, Black, non-binary, queer, pagan, single parent in their mid-20s, who expressed that they’d been deeply hurt by students such as Brooke, a white, cisgender, married mother of five in her mid-40s, and devout member of a conservative branch of Christianity.

Nina told me, “You’re not seeing it but there’s a growing divide in class between students like me and students like Brooke. We’re feeling judged for who we are and our ‘lack’ of sexual values.” *I could immediately feel a pull toward becoming defensive, and noticing this I breathed and slowed myself down. I admitted to myself that I had missed this, and then felt a pull toward becoming embarrassed and shutting down. Again, I breathed slowly and gave myself permission to make mistakes and repair.* “Nina, thank you

for sharing this with me. I'm so sorry you've felt judged in class and that I haven't caught these moments. Can you tell me more about how this has been for you in particular?" *By being gentle with myself and knowing I could process later the extent of my own responsibility in missing this classroom divide, I could access my genuine desire to validate and attune to Nina's experience.* Nina described feeling better after our talk but asked, "Can you still address this divide and all the hurt in class?" *I felt scared of what this would open in class. I breathed and sensed there was also an opportunity here for relational healing.* I asked Nina, "Yes, and can we start with the conversation we just had, with you sharing your hurt and me validating your experience, in front of the class?" Nina agreed.

In the next class I set up a fishbowl, with all the students in chairs forming a large circle surrounding a smaller circle in the middle. Nina and I sat together in the smaller circle. I began, "Today we are going to honor one student's experience and invite anyone willing to join the conversation. Our goal is to understand each other across differences, to listen and share experiences, and to take responsibility for any pain we have caused." *Feeling the adrenaline in my body, I took a deep slow breath, acknowledged my nervousness, and reminded myself that I trust in the possibility of repairing relationships.* Nina began to share their pain of not having me catch some of the hurtful student comments in class. I listened and validated as they shared several specific examples. Silently the students around us observed.

I then took responsibility for my part in Nina's pain. "Nina, I hear your feeling marginalized and dismissed by certain religious discourses isn't new for you. But the fact that I, a white, religious, cisgender woman, didn't catch some of the hurtful comments in my role as professor, really hurt that I wasn't there for you. I acknowledge that it was my responsibility to do so and that by missing these comments I added to your hurt." *I could feel myself playing it safe. I felt scared to be more vulnerable yet didn't want to miss an opportunity to really connect with Nina.* "What you don't know Nina is that for years my religious beliefs were directly oppressive to you, and I was not supportive of gay marriage. I'm sorry." *I could see Nina's surprise and felt hopeful Nina could feel my attempt to convey respect to her. I also felt afraid of alienating Brooke and others like her.* "It's been a long journey for me to come to a new affirming theology while still understanding and loving my old friends who hold different views." *I hoped that Brooke could hear how much I value maintaining my friendships across difference and could still feel room for her in this classroom.* Nina said, "I don't



know if I'm ready to love someone who believes I'm wrong for who I am. I'm still feeling really hurt." I said, "That makes a lot of sense to me, Nina."

With Nina's permission, I then extended an invitation for students to join us. "I'm wondering if anyone wants to join me in taking responsibility for how we've hurt Nina?" *I felt it was important to align myself as one who had hurt Nina so I could support students who might want to apologize.* From the larger circle Brooke started to share. *I felt myself wanting to ask Brooke to follow the fishbowl rules and sit with me and Nina. I took a breath. I could feel Brooke's bravery and her need to stay outside for now.* "Nina," said Brooke, "I know I said some of those hurtful things. But I didn't mean to hurt you." *I knew I needed to catch Brooke's defensiveness while also acknowledging her courage in breaking the hurtful silence.* "Brooke," I said, "thank you for your courage in acknowledging Nina's pain. I'm wondering if you can try to center Nina's pain and hold her experience as more important than your own at this moment." Brooke tried again, "Nina, listening to you I feel like I better understand how my faith impacts you, and especially my membership in a religious denomination that says your way of life is sinful." Nina responded, "I know your religion is really important to you Brooke. It's just really hard that everyday I'm living the reality of a life that's judged as wrong." "I don't think I ever saw how hurtful that is," said Brooke.

After witnessing Nina and Brooke talk, a few other students from the wider circle both expressed hurt and took responsibility. I felt that the "growing divide" Nina had described shifted into a space of more mutual expression and growing attunement. Reflecting on what happened in class that day, I see the results of relationship-directed teaching. As scary as it was, I was able to attune to students collectively (Nina and Brooke in particular), share myself as a person with needs and feelings, encourage a mutual expression of feelings (between Nina and Brooke), and support students in learning to attune to each other especially across difference (Tuttle et al., 2012). Students from that cohort continued to refer back to "that class" as a turning point toward relational connection and a deeper understanding of how to make space to attune to others.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND PRACTICE

We believe it is significant that our ideas about a relationally directed pedagogy have emerged not only from our years of clinical work and teaching and supervising MFT students, but also from our friendship. As we have

moved toward an increasing understanding of power as relational, we have been influenced by different streams including poststructuralism, eastern collectivism, and spirituality. Listening to each other across our own differences has deepened our understanding of this relational pedagogy and has been a rich part of our own growth as educators. Our commitment and invitation are to increasingly center relationships in our teaching by:

- Deconstructing dominant discourses around power to see everyone as holding inherent value and worth
- Attuning to own needs and feelings while attuning to students' needs and feelings
- Recognizing the privilege as instructor of holding and orchestrating space and modeling presence
- Facilitating students in mutual attunement and expression of their needs and feelings
- Reflecting together on the byproducts of growth and learning that emerge from connecting in mutually vulnerable, relational dialogue

The relationships we build both in and outside of the classroom are pivotal to our ongoing learning and growth. As we make space for more time to talk, interact, listen, and learn from one another, we are building trust with one another. This foundation of trust in real relational connections enables the kind of learning we believe promotes the dismantling of systemic inequities necessary for social justice.

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