

Reconnecting with relational values in highly conflicted separating couples: A narrative therapy-informed relational interviewing teamwork-based supervision approach

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Abstract

This article outlines a new supervision practice of narrative therapy-informed reflecting team-based relational interviewing for a high-conflict stuck case of a separated middle-aged couple. The article demonstrates the supervision method consisting in five parts. First, the supervisor interviews the couples' relationship while the team watches from behind the one-way mirror. Second, the team responds to the interview while the couple and the supervisor witness their conversation. The couple is then invited to respond back to the team. Furthermore, there is a meta-conversation about the supervision in collaboration with the couple. The intervention ends with therapeutic letter writing to the relationship. The couple showed a meaningful shift in their positioning towards a more relational awareness and found valuable ways for continuing their therapy. The theoretical elements of the approach underpinning practice to tackle high conflict are considered through the illustration of the case.

KEYWORDS

awareness, narrative therapy, reflecting team, relational, remembering conversations, separation and divorce

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1 | INTRODUCTION

High-conflict couples relationships, irrespective of whether they are divorced, separating or stalemating, present some of the most complex challenges for therapists and family court professionals alike (lawyers, mediators, etc.). Large prevalence studies estimated enduring high conflict ranging from 5% to 25% of cases even up to 5 years after separation (e.g., Smyth & Moloney, 2019). These cases tend to collapse services taking up to 90% of the professionals' time (Neff & Cooper, 2004). Besides, couples explain that being involved with the litigation process usually increases the conflict, creating an endless escalating loop of polarization and blaming.

Separated parents in prolonged conflicts often position themselves as victims and the other as the problematic. Recent research identified two common typologies of conflicted storylines. Storylines of violations of trust, positioning the co-parents in relation to traumatic events in the past, and storylines of who is bad, positioning the co-parent as either a disloyal co-parent or a dysfunctional parent (Stokkebekk et al., 2020). The overarching conclusion is that cooperation and reconciliation of positions seems to be unreachable, unless the meaning framework of reference is changed.

Often, with these couples, these conflict discourses are reinforced within the context of common procedures in therapy, mediation, and court proceedings, despite the praiseworthy efforts from professionals in resolving disputes, because they usually revolve around the same individually-oriented meaning framework. For instance, by trying to find the cause or individual dysfunction to explain the relational conflict, by reproducing normative cultural teachings that intend to instruct them on how to become more successful cooperative co-parents, or by simply having the focus on achieving a separation agreement rigidly upholding individual property and rights of each member, disregarding a relational perspective. Without discrediting the relevance of these approaches, a large majority of therapist, mediator, and legal professionals within the sector claim for complementary practices to help with complex cases that can prolong legal and relational disputes for years.

Narrative Therapy-informed Relational Interviewing (NTRI), developed by Stephen Madigan, (2017, 2019) is an approach specifically focused on emotionally preparing couple relationships for mediation, court procedures, separation agreement or possible reunification. It can be applied as a therapy model with couples as well as a consultancy and supervision approach for difficult cases. This article focuses on NTRI as a supervision practice. This recently developed approach is informed by narrative theories supporting a contextual and discursive view of lives, identities, and relationships (Madigan, 2017, 2019; Montesano et al., 2017; Montesano, 2012; White & Epston, 1990). In a nutshell, this means that it is assumed that a human being's identity and knowledge are constructed (vs. apprehended) in the relationship with significant others and shaped by societal discourses and standards. Thus, relationships are central to human experience and meaning-making processes. In accordance with this epistemological point of view, the NTRI approach theoretical and practical guidelines are oriented by a simple but profound principle: relationships are relational. Under this assumption, the NTRI interview is not directed to the couples as individuals but to their relationship as a unit, in a relationship with a broader cultural context. As the readers will see in the case illustration section, most of the therapeutic questions informed by this approach are intended to give voice to the couple's relationship as such, considering it as an independent entity and placing it in a privileged position for reflecting, feeling, and desiring.

The main focus of the NTRI supervision approach with high-conflict couples is on reconnecting them with their pre-conflict relational heritage (values, principles, know-how, and practices) to experience it in the present and to imagine how to transport the relationships best working values and practices it into a possible preferred relational future. Regardless of the levels of conflict involved in the case, the supervision conversation begins with inquiries about the relationship's memory of relational values and practices, instead of focusing on the couple's memory of suffering, as often do most of the current approaches to conflict resolution. Accordingly, the conversation centers on getting to know the full history of the relationship through a process of asking re-remembering questions (Hedtke & Winslade, 2017; White, 1989) about the moral character and guiding principles once important to the relational life of the couple. The purpose of NTRI practice asking re-remembering questions is to first create a proximal distance

from any discussion of the conflict that has been dominating the relationship (and maybe the therapy process) and to create an experiential safe common ground.

Reconstructing relational values before addressing relational conflict affords a broadening of the conflict-restrained frame and laying the ground for transporting values and counter-stories (Madigan, 2019). This therapeutic practice affords the relationship a more plausible ability to shift the relationship's meaning-making framework from which the couple is interacting in the present. Transporting relational values is not about re-enacting past experiences but rather to re-experience them in the present differently and discovering what their relationship might become in light of this renewed standpoint. This could mean, for instance, wondering what a separated relationship based on their most cherished relational values might possibly become as opposed to the conflicted plotline.

Another direct consequence of the premise that relationships are relational is the way in which interpersonal conflict is understood. It is conceived not as reflecting individual deficits or failure (i.e., attachment problems, power dynamics, and individual pathologies), but as a way of expression of the relationship. In this sense, from an NTRI approach, conflict can be formulated as:

1. A relational response to a transgression or change undermining the foundational values and character the relationship once practiced, respected, agreed to or hoped for.
2. A relational protest on behalf of the values the relationship once stood for, and the desire to stand for them once more, in the future.
3. The relationship's desire to recover and reconnect itself back towards the values and integrity it values most, including the relationship's ability to change, and a desire to evolve, differently.

From this point of view, the higher the conflict, the greater the need of the relationship to restore its values and preferred practice heritage. Although this is a value-focused approach, it is profoundly anti-moralistic. At the risk of stating the obvious, the NTRI approach is not structured around the intention to indoctrinate the couple in any set of a pre-specified set of values coming from dominant expert, cultural, or religious knowledge. On the contrary, the practice of NTRI is situated in the therapist's practice ability to respectfully connect with and contribute to the couple's preferred worldview.

The NTRI approach, when applied as a supervision practice with high-conflict complex cases, is performed in a teamwork format, using an evolved version of Norwegian psychiatrist Tom Andersen's reflecting teams (Andersen, 1991). Reflecting teams became one of the most popularized ways of teamwork within family therapy, although teamwork is in the DNA of the systemic approach since its inception. Indeed, the development of family therapy was associated with the use of the one-way mirror, which supposed a true revolution, at that time, in the way of understanding the therapeutic relationship and supervision practices. For instance, the possibility of a team live supervision opened space for new technical and conceptual advancements, expanding the concept of "therapist" towards the concept of "therapeutic team" or "therapeutic system." Therefore, the intimate and private boundaries of the patient-therapist traditional setting were challenged and substituted by the complexities of multiple perspectives and voices of a team in charge of the case.

In this context, the therapist is just a mere representative of a team that can adopt different potions, attitudes, and degree of coincidence, with the possibility to communicate with the clients by different means (direct calls, letters, reflections, through the therapist, etc.). The multiplicity of visions, as a therapeutic tool, had given rise to new intervention techniques (split team, reflecting teams, live supervision, etc.) as well as formats composing the team (interdisciplinary professionals, special witnesses, extended family members, peers, etc.). Also, case formulation, from this perspective, is always performed considering the contributions of the whole team.

Currently, teamwork and the use of the one-way mirror (also the digital one) is a standard in systemic and narrative family therapy main services and is often used for training purposes and for the supervision of complex cases. It has been regarded as a good practice with high-conflict couples given that it allows counteracting the

challenges of enduring conflict (f.i., risk of split alliance), and it facilitates the incorporation of multiple perspectives that lessen polarized positioning and favor the emergence of therapeutic change (Montesano, 2012).

The NTRI supervision has already been implemented using the one-way mirror-based teamwork setting in various family therapy contexts in Norway, Spain, and Canada with promising outcomes for both the couples and the services involved (therapy centres, court rooms, social services, etc). In this article, we present the implementation of this supervision approach with a complex case being attended at a family therapy clinic in Norway.

2 | CASE ILLUSTRATION

2.1 | Presenting problem and couple description

Lisa and Peter were a middle-aged couple that had been together for almost 18 years, and have two children, Mario and Elena. Mario was born after their first year of marriage. Due to medical negligence during birth, Mario's brain was seriously impaired, and he was left with permanent physical and mental disabilities. He was unable to speak, needed help for almost every activity, and was often in and out the hospital several times a year. He finally, could not support more medical interventions and passed away at the age of 12. Their daughter Elena was born 1 year after Mario.

They started couple therapy at a family therapy clinic in Norway, 1 year after Mario's death. At that time, the presenting problems were related to the grief process and the emergence of intimate and economic infidelities. They had been in and out of therapy for 5 years. Eighteen months before the NTRI supervision process, they decided to separate, although they continued with their process at the family therapy center as a mediation because they were unable to reach a separation agreement.

Their therapist opted to supervise the case, given its complexity. In brief, the couple was still heavily struggling with their grief process, they were having difficulties with their daughter's education, they were also bearing some infidelity issues, they were split about economic issues precluding any kind of separation agreement, and their level of conflict, arguing and suffering was drastically increasing. The net result of all these complex relational elements was that they were stalemated in their separation process and polarizing their positioning in the conflict.

2.2 | Course of the team supervision process

The family therapy center with which Lisa and Peter were involved was part of the Norwegian national couple conflict team and housed their own separate High Conflict Couple Therapy team (teams often work and see cases together). This is a public free service attending to couples in their separating process. Couples can be referred by the justice department but mostly couples access the service by themselves. Teamwork is part of the clinic culture, especially with difficult cases, and they have a one-way screen at their disposal to conduct teamwork and supervision. One of the authors, SM, consults and supervises them twice a year on NTRI. When this happens all the team, 12 senior therapists, is usually involved in the therapy and live team supervision process. The supervision intervention process takes places in the clinic, and it has two main parts. First, the supervisor interviews the couple while the team observes behind the one-way mirror. In the second phase, all the participants move to a larger room and have different conversational exchanges. In the following subsections, the process is explained in detail.

2.2.1 | The interview

The first part of the supervision consisted of a 45-min interview based on the NTRI practices. With the intention of facilitating the reader to follow the development of the interview, Figure 1 summarizes the storyline of the

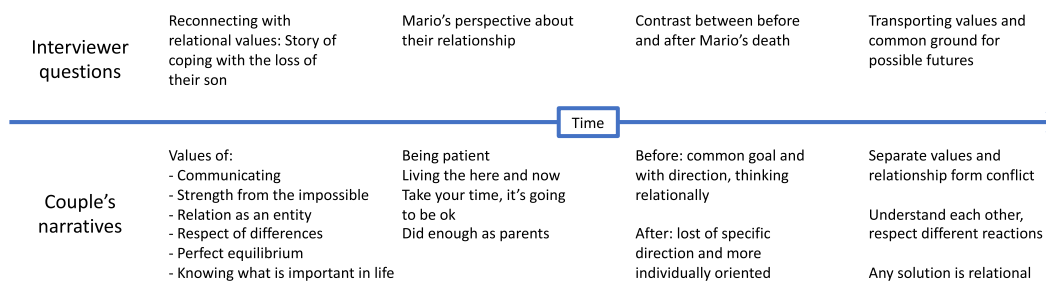


FIGURE 1 Storyline of the relational values transportation narrative arch.

conversation. In the first row, the four main topics being addressed sequentially by the interviewer are highlighted. Under it, there is a synthesis of the key content that emerged in the narrative of the couple's responses. In this overview, it can be seen that some of the couple's foundational values are transported into the present and possible future relationship (i.e., understanding and respect). In the following paragraphs, the reader will find the excerpts of the actual unaltered transcripts exemplifying the NTRI-informed questions that allowed such transportation of values and the creation of a safe common ground for their relationship.

Reconnecting with relational values

The supervisor (SM) started the interview alongside with the therapist (SRB), and the high conflict clinic team is sitting behind the one-way mirror (although the couple had a brief meeting with the team members just before the interview for transparency reasons). The supervisor deliberately refused to have information about the couple's therapy process and started the interview by asking the therapist to introduce him to Lisa and Peter's relationship (instead of Lisa and Peter themselves). Then, he asked the couple if they agreed with their therapist's account of their relationship story. The couple agreed and added details about the story of Mario's birth and the medical negligence, regarding the experience as a "big challenge". Therefore, the supervisor followed that relational storyline as an entry point to begin re-constructing the couple's relational values and historical common ground:

- Stephen: Do you mind if I ask you, when you look back, how was a young couple like yourselves who had only been together for a couple of years, what was it that helped you meet that challenge?
- Lisa: To stick together. It was us against the rest, and we had to do this, and we did it in our own way...
- Stephen: Can I ask you; how did you know how to do that?
- Peter: I think about that sometimes, looking back, I don't know where that came from, but I think we just instinctively, we were just met by a different challenge every single hour, almost, or day or, and I think we just did the best we could... We really focused on: this isn't going to break us, we're going to get through this no matter what because, first, we thought we were going to lose him, that was the first initial message that he wasn't going to make it at all.
- Stephen: Was it something beyond instinct that guided the pair of you to be able to meet this challenge? Well, I wonder if there's another name for what was in support of this instinct? In Canada we would call it a principle or an ethic that supported your ability to keep this relationship together in the face of great challenge. What was that?

Lisa and Peter unfolded some stories about finding strength where it seemed an impossible situation and about supporting each other in the way they were grieving. Stephen continued to fuel the re-connecting conversation to allow the relationship to re-experience the values of their former relationship life and questioned how the practices of these values allowed them to face their challenge with Mario. Many more questions were asked to thicken the

newly emerging re-membered counter-story being told. For instance: You see I don't understand your specific definition of strength. I know what it means for me, but... What was it that the two of you were serving the relationship with so that it had a place of strength to stand in? or How do you explain how it was that the two of you showed up together in your relationship in the face of what you're calling "This is life"? How did you know how to do that?

Mario's perspective

The interview then moves forward to begin co-creating a narrative arch (see Figure 1) in which the couple's relational values, which once served as the foundation of their relationship had begun to be replaced by challenging struggles. This relational change is richly explored as possible and preferred expressions and practices of what may become a newly formed separated relationship.

In this case, however, was necessary to begin by incorporating the voice of their dead son Mario into the story. Therefore, the supervisor continued by asking, "Where is Mario now in your relationship? This question prompted a 10-seconds meaningful silence followed by a knowing smile and look. They broke the silence by answering:

- Peter: I think he still has a big place in our hearts...
- Stephen: Can you tell me what you mean by that?
- Peter: Yeah, I find that when we are...I mean it's just logical in a way, but you would think not, I suppose...I think sometimes when we're fighting about something, everything that we're fighting about now seems pathetic compared to what we went through. So, I feel that...and that's not necessarily about Mario...sometimes I feel like this: What would he think, you know?
- Supervisor: Can I ask you what he would think? If Mario was here with us, today, can you imagine that he'd be able to help or weigh in on your relationship in some way?
- Lisa: I think the first thing that strikes me is...the way he was. He was patient. He was patient because he couldn't speak. He couldn't say what he wanted. He had to wait a lot. [...] the first thing that I think now is that he will say something like, "It's OK, just take your time. It's going to be OK..."
- Stephen: He would advise you in your relationship that it's OK and to take your time?
- Lisa: Yeah, that's the first thing that I thought...
- Stephen: Would you agree?
- Peter: Yeah, absolutely.
- Stephen: Why would you agree?
- Peter: Because I think that's what...we both talked about this a lot...just this feeling that he understood what matters even when we didn't. You know, we had a way of communicating with him, absolutely. We talked about this: living in the moment. Because a lot of the stuff we fight or worry about is maybe about the past or it's about what may happen in the future, worries like everyone does... That was the thing I think that really...life with Mario was about the moment. You never knew what was going to happen and we knew how fragile things were...it was just about there and then...
- Stephen: And what did that inform your relationship that there and then, the patience, the fragility of life and not knowing what... What did that provide your relationship with?

As it can be read, both Lisa and Peter identified transportable values, meanings, and skills of their relationship through the eyes of Mario, such as "living the here and now", "being patient" and confidence by "taking their time because everything is going to be ok."

There were also a piece of conversation redefining the value of their parental dedication to the care of Mario, displacing feelings of "guilt" for "not doing enough" as parents, by asking a set of evaluating-taking a position scaffolded questions (see White, 2007 for a description of this type of questions) that finally led to Lisa answering

exhausted: "I am making new systems in my brain now, this is really new!". This set of questions revolved about two main themes:

- I. Fairness: So can I ask you about what you are telling me about Mario and also what you are telling me about how the two of you formed a relationship that met the challenge, do you think it's fair that guilt bosses its way into an already challenging situation? (evaluating question) Why don't you think it's fair that guilt sometimes tries to disrupt your ideas of yourself, your ideas of your relationship, and your relationship with your son? (Taking a position question)
- II. Mario's perspective on their parents caring: Would your relationship with Mario change in any way if you think that he thought that you and Peter did enough? If I was to interview Mario now, do you think that he would tell me that as a mother and as his parents that you didn't do enough, or that you did do enough? (evaluating question) Why do you think that if I was to interview Mario now that he would say that yes, my parents' relationship did enough? (Taking a position question)

Mario's death was clearly a turning point in the couple's relationship. Asking about Mario's perspective reconnected the couple with their memories of him, themselves as caring parents and their grief and loss processes. This relational reconnection contributed to strengthen their incipient common ground and to continue reducing the limiting restraints of the conflict landscape. In a certain way, Mario's death brought them apart in the past, but now, through the above exemplified re-remembering conversations of Mario's story, Lisa and Peter's relationship re-engaged with significant values and collaborative-based plotlines.

Generative contrast: Taking a stand

As the counter-conflict blueprint was becoming clearer and vividly experienced by the couple, the interviewer decided to introduce in the conversation contrasting questions between their relationship before and after Mario's death. Such questions were posed to help them to take a stand in the polarity between the relational conflict storyline and the preferred relational future based on their values.

- Stephen: Was it easier to have a relationship between the two of you that you have built when Mario was with you than after Mario died?
- Peter: I can say maybe, yeah. Yeah, in some ways maybe it was because... when Mario was alive, that maybe it was easier...I don't know if easier is the right word...but yeah it was like...
- Stephen: What word would you use?
- Peter: Yeah, I guess easier, but it was almost like it was more natural... In a way the relationship grew at the same time as the challenges we had were there and maybe...we didn't sort of worry about the minutiae or the small things of a day-to-day relationship stuff that you normally would when you've just got married to somebody. I don't know, but...I think we've talked about this before, but we had a common project in a way and that's not a... you know...it's a silly way to talk about a child...but it's kind of like that.
- Stephen: I understand.
- Peter: We had this thing that was taking all our focus and we were working together towards a goal of the family and the relationship was a part of that.
- Stephen: And what is your common goal now?
- Lisa: Yeah, that's the...big question.
- Stephen: Why is it the big question?
- Lisa: Or the common goal, maybe that's it. It must be to find out how do we want to live? What do we want?
- Stephen: So that's one of the questions: how do we wish to live relationally? Yes?
- Lisa: Yeah.

- Peter: What do we want, both individually and together and...yeah. Which maybe we didn't think about that much before, because we didn't have any choice in the matter. It wasn't an issue either, that wasn't...we never felt anything was missing, but it was, all focus was going in a direction.
- Stephen: And what direction does it go now?
- Peter: No, that's where, I mean obviously we have Elena, so we still have a common direction. She is soon going to be 17, so it's a little different, clearly, but I think a lot of the majority of the time we've had since, well in the last year or year and a half something where there've been more problems in the relationship. A lot of the time it's been about we are trying to find a direction.
- Stephen: Finding a direction. Would you agree?

At this point of the interview, Lisa and Peter found themselves already remembering and becoming tangled up in an emotional recollection of their prior relationship life. They seemed to be feeling the contrast between being relationally oriented with a common goal to more recently since Mario's death becoming more individualistic, directionless, and polarized. The conversational context was ready for the last movement of the narrative arch.

Ending the narrative arch: Transporting values to the present and future

In the last part of the interview, the supervisor focused on scaffolding questions to help the couple in transporting their relational values and stories toward a preferred relationship future. Eventually, this will contribute to helping the therapist and the couple to avoid conflict-based decision-making and reconfigure a future relationship through the ethics and values they had come to remember, transform, and project into a preferred future. The architecture of the questions being asked followed the pattern of: Asking them what their relationship would need to transport from the past for a better present and future. The conversation continued as follows:

- Stephen: Is there anything that you feel the relationship would like you to retrieve from the years that you describe caring for Mario to bring forward into the present and the future relationship?
- Lisa: Yeah, I couldn't tell.
- Stephen: ... from those years before. It might not tell you of the direction, but it could help you begin taking steps in a new direction.
- Lisa: Yeah.
- Peter: Mm-hm.
- Stephen: Does the relationship need the pair of you to find somewhere safe for it to stand first before you look at any of the things that you are bringing up now?
- Lisa: Again, I don't understand the question. It's not like you're not clear, but ...
- Stephen: No, I think it's probably that I'm not clear. Is there any wisdom in the two of you helping the relationship stand on some safe ground, through the memory of who and what this relationship is before you go any further trying to figure out finances, or the future? Do you think that might be a plan?
- Lisa: Because he, I felt that for a while that everything I did or said was wrong, and your dad got sick at that time, and then I said something, and then you used that against me as well... "How can you say this when my dad is sick?" ...and I was like...this is difficult.
- Stephen: Would I be right in thinking...that you once described yourself as a relationship and then more recently, you began to describe yourself less as a relationship, but more as individuals?
- Lisa and Peter: Mm-hm. Yes.
- Stephen: And do you think conflict takes advantage of relationships when they become more like individuals? That it is easier for conflict to fester and, as you say...
- Lisa and Peter: Mm-hm. Absolutely.

- Stephen: ...regardless of what the solution is in the future...so we will leave that aside... Is there any merit in becoming more relational as you once were in terms of the treatment of the relationship and less individual at this time?
- Peter: If you just...I think so, absolutely, because that's...how we've always solved issues before. And, like you say...no matter what happens in the future, no matter what the goal is, right, I think that's true, to be more together, in the relationship.
- Stephen: Are these values that you've spoken seem to ring true now? Were the foundational values of your relationship, like kindness and respect and communication? Would you agree with Peter?
- Lisa: Yeah
- Stephen: Do you think that, again, regardless of what the future holds in terms of your intimate relationship together, do you think that your values that were the body and the soul of your past relationship, do you think they might be helpful in terms of your treatment of one another? Your treatment of the relationship? So that it could leave less room for guilt and conflict? These things that seem to interrupt any kind of movement or good feeling.
- Lisa: yeah
- Peter: Yeah, I do, I think that that's the value, I think that it's also maybe I'm misinterpreting this, but I think maybe it's important to separate the values and the foundation of the core of the relationship from what happened in terms of, of course we have to deal with everything that happened, but that's not the values, I think that that's like...uh...everything's happened and the way we've been angry with each other since. That's something that's happened, but that's not our relationship and that I think maybe that's the thing we need to focus on.
- Stephen: And maybe that's the experience. Do you feel that what you're experiencing is the stepping away from those values? I wonder how the two of you can help each other step back towards the values, while at the same time looking at these differences?
- [...]
- Stephen: My wonder is always this... Is there anything from that time of hard-won learning that would benefit the relationship at this time?
- Lisa: The first thing that I think is what I said in the beginning...that we try to understand the other. We react differently and at different times. And we do the best we can to support each other...
- Stephen: Yes, this is what you said at the beginning. Do you think that it might be of some consideration that you don't have to do it the same?
- Lisa: Exactly, that goes without saying...
- Stephen: That you aren't judging each other?
- Peter: Yeah, that's true...that's really true... I definitely can see that I've done that... On the one had I kind of wanted a feeling...I lost myself, and I was trying to find my own way of dealing with something, but I realized that my own way of dealing with something wasn't the right for me. It's that I'm used to dealing with something as a couple, and that's how we should be doing everything... Once I've gone slightly down that path...it's strange that when I look back at the times with Mario, it was very often that we were on this perfect balance that when Lisa was really down, I had the strength to bring her back up and vice versa. It was like that over many years...it was just weird. We were either there together or when one was down one helped the other... Then we both slipped...and we both went in different directions...and trying to find a way of dealing with the situation... It's almost like we just dumped all that that happened behind and that's not right because it doesn't feel right... Recently, things have been... And I know I can be really angry sometimes... When I'm thinking thoughts of, like, what is going on here... And then I just call Lisa and we just speak about things, and everything is fine again...
- Stephen: I see.
- Peter: You know, for me. I can only say for me, obviously... I find that there's never a solution that doesn't involve at least, discussing things with her...

- Stephen: Even though you might be responding to a different thing in different ways?
- Peter: Exactly, yeah.
- Lisa: Yeah.

As it can be seen in the transcript, these transportation questions were not easy to answer but still had a meaningful impact in their relationship. They allowed the couple to a) make explicit their desire to create a distance between the conflict and their relationship values, b) retrieve relevant values such as respect and understanding of each other (vs. judging and demanding the same pace and responses), and c) came to the understanding that any solution might be relational.

It is noteworthy to highlight the supervisor explicitly stated that the relational intention was not to find a specific pathway for their relationship to resolve the separation agreement, but rather, to experience a safe common ground from which they can think of the direction to face all the present and future challenges. This practice approach of NTRI contributed to reducing the relational pressure and to transport the relationship to the imaginative foreground.

The team behind the mirror was sharing a complicit silence. Everyone knew that the conversation they had just witnessed was poignant not only for the couple but also for them, and that many emotions were about to flourish in the following part of the supervision.

2.2.2 | Team responses to the interview

Following the steps of the NTRI response team procedure, it was now the turn of the team to respond to the interview. So, the couple, the therapist, the supervisor, and the team moved all together to a larger room. The team was seated in a circular table looking at each other while the rest were witnessing the team's conversation. They were invited by the supervisor to not respond to the interview from an expert position but by answering the question: Where did the couple's conversation transport each of you in your personal life.

Table 1 contains the individual responses of the 9 members. It was clear that the couple's story emotionally moved the team in several ways. In consequence, their responses were also emotionally intense and impacted the couple's relationship by offering them an echoed deep appreciation of their ways of relating and dealing with their life challenges as well as by making them feel that they were not alone neither the only ones facing such adverse circumstances. Indeed, two members of the team have had similar experiences with their own children (see responses of team member 2 and 6), and so they constituted a privileged audience to appreciate the couple's relational values of respecting each other ways of grieving and reacting to adversity. Other relational values that emerged during the interview were also highlighted by the team responses such as Mario's advice of being patient (members 1, 7, and 9), living the here and now (members 7 and 9), and how they managed to strengthen each other in difficult times (members 2, 3, 4, and 5). All these resonances contributed to the solidity with which the values were transported and re-imagined in the couple's current relationship.

2.2.3 | Couple's response

The next step of the NTRI response team process consists in the couple having the opportunity to respond back to the team. Specifically, Lisa and Peter were invited to answer the following question: Does anything that the team brought forward resonate for you or your relationship?

The couple seemed to be surprised and moved by the emotional relationship and understanding of the team with their story. The couple in turn showed their appreciation for the team's feedback and expressed an increased

TABLE 1 Team responses

Team member	Responses
1	I'm so grateful to get to know the story of Mario, his skill, of being patient in his stressful life...the thing about forgiveness... I was thinking about my own life, conflicts in my own life, and realized that even the smallest people, children, have extremely good advises. This have had an impact on me. Thank you
2	I was very touch by listening. Some of you know about the links of my life with this conversation... I have a disabled child... I was touched by many things. They were talking about their supporting and appreciating each other way of grieving and I really think that is a very strong attitude in their whole conversation... how to respect each other's ways of reacting, grieving, and supporting
3	I was touched by how they talked with each other having different positions. That gives a lot of hope, if they can continue to do that regardless of which way they go, they can bring along this strength
4	First of all, I would like to acknowledge that you are sharing your story with us. It is fantastic, that I, as a professional can be allowed to bring them with be into my work in so many other situations at work. Because I am meeting with couples every day who are also in similar situations. And learning from and listening to how they experienced losing a child and through their grief has been given a shared language together, that I believe is so valuable for their life forward. That must be a gift even though they are not girlfriend and boyfriend, but parents together. Being parents together is something one cannot divorce. So, thank you so much
5	I also got very touched by this story. What made the most impression on me was the story of how they managed to strengthen each other in a difficult time, and that they managed to support each other without romanticizing grief and not romanticizing what was difficult. So I got interested in how they have created a relationship to save and nurture that in the future
6	Sitting behind the mirror and listening to the conversation brought me everywhere—here and there—in my own life. So thank you. First, I stepped back 23 years ago. So it tells me that what we experience in our life, it stays with us all the time... At that time 23 years ago, I hate to say it, we lost our child. He was only three days old. And then, not so very far after, we moved to [city]... and no one knew about what we had been through. And I felt it was a challenge to cope with it because the only person that knew was my husband. We still are married now... Listening to them I thought I need to go home and speak to him again... Looking back, what has it done with us? Yeah...thank you for that
7	I have three children in school-age that they continuously are trying to tell me that they don't like transitions and it was very nice to sit and listen to how you shared stories that Mario was living in the moment. I think I would bring that with me home and start noticing what I think my own children are trying to do – keeping me in the moment, albeit I am trying to move them forward or backwards. So, I got inspired to try to the skill that our children have – to be in the moment. Thank you!"
8	I was thinking about your story... it brought me into my own life. I've been married 19 years... I've been married twice and what is very similar is that you depend on each other only one year and them you decided that you will stay together... this is not like my way of living because I tend to need things to be very save and very stable but something made me feel very certain at that point, you were talking a bit about to get this certain feeling back again to find out how to heal this relationship. That you have been very strong to get there... there was something you said about the time those challenges and they were collective, and Lisa said that Peter came to her and said Don't leave me aside... I found that very moving
9	I am so grateful to be allowed to hear such stories. I want to brief and would like to reflect especially on two things: First, being in place where one does not know which road one should take, and it is moving to hear the advice from the patience. That is a good advice to me as well. Secondly, it makes much meaning to me, and I would like to acknowledge rich life is, and how close to life one is, when life is at it hardest, thank you

reconnection with their own relational story as a result of the team responses. The specific responses of the couple are presented in Table 2.

2.2.4 | Supervising the supervision

The last part of the NTRI supervision sequence is devoted to the open and transparent supervision of the supervision. It is not only done in front of but in collaboration with the couple. The team is asked to ask questions to the supervisor about how he conducted the interview and what was behind his thinking in the kind of questions he formulated. In this case, the team had only one question to ask which prompted an interesting fruitful conversation. Indeed, the conversation ended signaling a possible future line of work for the couple with their therapist:

- Team member: you said... Was there something beyond instinct when they were speaking about how they responded in difficult times... Why did you ask that?
- Stephen: Yes, because I think we always use these general words, like instinct, to describe very profound experiences... So I'm interested in the profound experience about how they did this, what this was, what supported them, what they stood on, how they manage to do that... otherwise I think without that rich development of that memory or story their profound story get lost and I think maybe some of those experiences can be very valuable particularly in the memory of their appreciated practices... that makes sense to you?
- Team member: Yes
- Stephen: I guess that the other thing I would say is that I really don't understand what people mean... I know what I know about instinct but I have no idea about their meaning about instinct or about what good communication is or anything like that so I think we can't take for granted that we have shared meaning about

TABLE 2 Couple's responses

Couple member	Responses
Lisa	We are talking about our lives and sometimes I think...I go back home and we still struggle and... yeah...it's not like a quick fix and...this is... I feel that I need to get this feedback, to hear someone else being touched by my story, our story. It's like it's lifting up our lives again. It's so valuable. It's just...I feel like...um... I look back and I feel like I hadn't taken my life seriously. Or it's like...seeing everything from the outside... It's like, is this happening? Is this real? And then to have someone else with such...I feel that they are really taking it in...seriously getting in touch...giving this really good feedback in itself is so much value...yeah, so thank you... They're all thanking us and I, of course, have to thank you back...to take our story so seriously...so that's like a new role thing...not individually...maybe I don't have to say more...thank you very much...
Peter	I feel the same way, as well. I think we've always known that our story is quite amazing and whenever people hear it, in a way, we understand...yeah, I mean...but it's...because it's our story, we don't see the thinking of wow, what a life we've had, you know? It isn't like that... For us this isn't new, it's just like wow yeah of course I understand that people may be affected by it. We have a story to share. It's really good because it's been a long time since we've had that kind of feedback. Yeah, it's been more focused on the challenges we have now. Yeah, and it also... I never think that, everything that we went through with Mario... We have to find some way of justifying the situation at the time. You find ways of justifying things, like it is fate. But I really felt like that...if he was going to come to somebody, it had to be us. And I felt that we learned so much. From seeing that so many years later, some of the things we've learned are still so important and relevant and it just makes it more good, the memories to look back and think, this is a lifelong experience. No matter that we only had him for 12 years. It's, uh, yeah... Yeah, that's it really.

that... So, I think is important to question and spend time there and get a better meaning and richer understanding of their experience.

- Peter: I think it was a pretty interesting question
- Lisa: yes
- Peter: and even though I didn't know the answer I found very interesting to think about it. I think is very valuable, and it is hard to come with a quick response to say... but just to go that deep into thinking about it was good... Because it's otherwise easy to just say oh it's instinct and let's move on. That's not really the whole story.
- Stephen: I don't believe that could be the whole story of what you were sharing, you know?
- Peter: For me it's always the combination of the communication, the shared experience, or the instinct...I don't know...but it's something that I'm going to continue to think about..
- Stephen: Yeah, and you could discuss it with the three of you [referring to the couple and their therapist]. Thanks...

2.2.5 | Letter writing to the relationship

Although the conversation ended with the questions about the interview, there was still another movement as part of the NTRI supervision practice: consulting the relationship through letter writing (see Madigan, 2019; and Montesano & Ness, 2019; for a description of this letter writing practice). In the next day of the interview, Stephen along with the entire team wrote the following letter to Lisa and Peter's relationship:

Dear Lisa and Peter's relationship;

As you know Stein-Roger has met with Lisa and Peter a number of times over the past year through their separation. And yesterday Stein-Roger invited the clinic's therapy team and Stephen Madigan from Canada to meet with up with Lisa, Peter and you - their relationship - for the first time.

Lisa and Peter were kind enough to catch all of us up about their history of creating you, their adventurous start together, and they also introduced us to their son Mario. They explained how Mario was born with disabilities during the first year of the relationship. They guided us through a detailed history of how they built a strong relationship at the time of Mario's birth, and the values they shared when meeting the challenge during a time when they were told a majority of couple relationships experiencing the birth of child with disabilities tend to separate. We asked Lisa and Peter many detailed questions about exactly how they managed to step into the challenge and richly explored how they may have under appreciated the many moral principles they stood on throughout Mario's life.

We also explored what the unique values were that assisted them in creating a safe relationship home for Mario and you - their relationship. They toured us through the collaborative ethics that built the foundations of the relationship that allowed everyone involved to thrive and the many lessons Mario taught the relationship like "living in the moment" and "patience".

They also spoke about a sense of loss and grief they feel having moved you away from their best intentions and unfortunately - filled you up with disagreements over this past year. However, you may be happy to know they now seem concerned for your well-being in the future. There was talk about a consideration of leaning on the relationships past values of "collaboration", and "acceptance" as a way to move forward. They may even be reconsidering how the guilt that has been pushing you around may not be fair minded.

As Lisa and Peter relationship therapists, we are writing to ask if you would write them a letter from your point of view. Would you consider writing them and offering your version of what you as their relationship needs to grow forward? Claim back? Perhaps you might consider saying a bit about what you value; share any experienced wisdom you have collected over the past 23 years; and perhaps offer a 'tree top' view of what you would like to see the future separated relationship evolving into.

We are inviting both Lisa and Peter to write separate letters from your relationship perspective. We'd ask them not to share the letters with one another until their next meeting with Stein-Roger. They will then each take a turn to read the letters from your perspective out loud in the session. We realize this may seem like a large assignment so - please keep the letters to a maximum of 150 words or so.

Many thanks again;

Stein-Roger, Stephen Madigan and the Entire Team

Soliciting the relationship's point of view allows the couple to adopt a meta perspective of their relational situation and moving away from an individually-centered approach to the conflict and relationship life. Also, this letter writing to the relationship assignment served as another extension of the supervision within the process of the therapy. In fact, their therapy at the clinic continued with their therapist inviting both Lisa and Peter to each read their letters aloud, to the other, from their relationship's point of view.

2.3 | Outcome and prognosis

Their therapy lasted for ten more sessions. Although we did not monitor outcomes regarding personal or relational well-being, clinical impressions were that they made meaningful relational improvements over their family decisions and personal well-being. Even though the focus of the supervision and the therapy was not on reunification but on restoring relational well-being in their separation process, after the NTRI team supervision and the following therapy sessions, Lisa and Peter decided to get back together again. They restored their intimate relationship and re-membered values and practices of relational living. A routine follow-up contact 6 months after the end of the psychotherapy confirmed they still were in an intimate relationship.

3 | CLINICAL PRACTICES AND SUMMARY

In this article, we have reviewed in detail a teamwork-based supervision practice from a narrative therapy perspective for a separating high-conflict couple that has experienced the loss of their son. The practice of NTRI couple therapy approach understands the process of relational conflict as a response of protest in support of preferred relational values and reflecting the desire to recover values of importance that have been lost. Therefore, re-membering, re-collecting, and reconnecting with couples' relational values and transporting them into an unknown relational future constitutes the focus of the conversation.

In this case, the supervision intervention achieved its goal of repositioning the couple towards a more value-driven relational stance. It also got to sensitize and to attune the therapist and the team with the couple's relational values, as well as with the value of their responses to the loss of Mario. In addition, the supervision ended with the opening of some specific lines of work and an assignment for the continuity of the therapy. All this can be regarded as an excellent result, considering the complexity of the case and, especially, how insidious, invasive, and pervasive the high conflict usually is.

This supervision format has several advantages. On the one hand, the setting factor of being watched by and receiving an emotional response from the team increases the likelihood of having a deep impact on the couple. And, as seen in this case, the higher the emotional involvement of the team the bigger the resonance of their responses on the couple. On the other hand, focusing on reconnecting with relational values gives couples the opportunity to keep their conflict (and conversations about their conflict) in the background and to restore an experiential common ground. In the case of Lisa and Peter, it gave them a place to rest together for a while far from the conflict, the guilt, and their persistent disagreements.

There were three specific learnings that made the difference in this case and that should be considered in similar future cases and supervision processes. The first concerns their grief process. It seems wise that, whenever a couple has experienced the loss of a significant other, and especially if it is about their child, the story of their grief is relationally accounted for. As in the case of Lisa and Peter, scaffolding a rich description of their relational values and responses to their loss paved the way for an emotional reconnection. Moreover, the relationship of the deceased with the couple relationship should be explored not only in the past but also in the present and the future, as an exceptional audience. Including the voice and the perspective of the deceased into the conversation opens the possibility to bring forth a complex meaning framework from which generate preferred identities and futures (Hedtke & Winslade, 2017; Kristensen & Hedtke, 2018).

The second learning refers to the best path towards developing a rich counter-conflict story when conducting a team supervision with stuck conflicted cases. Most practices would opt for unraveling the core of the conflict as a way out from suffering by talking about it and trying to better understand the underlying causes of the conflict. However, our suggestion goes in the opposite direction: by thoroughly exploring the pole of their preferred story, couples can experience a generative contrast that makes the difference for them, while the pole of the conflict storyline remains in the implicit. There is already some research that identified such contrasting conversations as narrative markers of meaningful change (Montesano et al., 2017). Precisely, the team supervision setting provides a privileged position from which to make this counterintuitive turn of deliberately disregarding the conflict and focusing on preferred identities and futures.

We finally would like to highlight the relevance of the letter-writing practice. As seen, this provides a bridge between the supervision and the continuity of the therapy. More importantly, it can also serve to bridging the gap between the psychotherapy and legal narratives. This was not necessary in the case of Lisa and Peter, but, in other cases, the couples' responses to the letter could be transformed into a document to be shared with court professionals outlining specific relational values that will help in guiding and discursively constructing future legal procedures.

Although this is a promising supervision approach for high-conflict couples there are some limitations that need to be addressed. First, it is not very appropriate for cases in which there is violence despite it is sometimes present in high conflicted couples. Second, it would be necessary to evaluate the impact of this supervision approach on the couples' well-being and on therapists' subsequent practice to optimize the process and to find which are the most and the less useful aspects of the intervention. This should be done, for instance, by performing qualitative analyses of ad hoc follow-up interviews. Finally, the non-pathologizing relational focus of this supervision approach might be complemented with further individual work in cases in which one or both members of the couple are struggling with a clinical condition. Nevertheless, recent literature is indicating that couple-based interventions have obtained solid support for its effectiveness as stand-alone interventions for addressing a broad spectrum of specific individual emotional and physical health problems (Lebow & Snyder, 2022).

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