

**AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF INTRAPERSONAL, INTERPERSONAL AND  
INTRA-GROUP CONFLICT MANAGEMENT INTERVENTIONS IN AN INSTITUTION OF  
HIGHER EDUCATION**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the world of human conflict in the workplace, the workplace (in this case) being a South African university. Using the academic tools of ethnography and autoethnography, I investigate the dimensions of human conflict management, which include intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management, from a psychological perspective. In this thesis I refer, in particular, to examples and extractions taken from case studies that focus on conflicts between employees. In doing so I used an eclectic, psychodynamic theoretical frame of reference. The data was collected and processed over a period of fourteen years. Another focus of this thesis is my reflections on my personal development as a counselling psychologist specialising in intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management within an institutional organisation. The participants' stories revealed intense emotional experiences and I have put forward suggestions on how these experiences could be explored and dealt with by means of psychologically orientated techniques and interventions within the boundaries of the ethical codes and values of counselling psychology. My eclectic choice of brief psychotherapy, strengths-based counselling, and psychodynamic-based intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group interventions are included in my personal narrative. This study serves only as a guideline to other counselling psychologists who deal with human conflicts in similar situations. I have *not* tried to present a generalised theory. In this study, I argue strongly that there is indeed a place for counselling psychologists and the application of psychological knowledge in the world of human resources departments in organisations. I believe that counselling psychologists can operate, alternatively, as individual counselling psychologists, workshop facilitators and co-facilitators, as consultants, and as members of multidisciplinary teams to address, among other, conflict management in a tertiary institution.

### **Key terms:**

Counselling psychologist; identity development; workplace conflicts; conflict management; human conflicts; intrapersonal conflicts; interpersonal conflicts; intra-group conflicts; brief psychotherapy; psychological perspective; eclectic psychodynamic frame of reference; metaphor; storytelling, life stories, narratives, employee wellness, psychological wellbeing, ethnography, autoethnography

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**my supervisor and study leader, Professor Johan Nieuwoudt** – The manner in which one single ray of light, one single precious hint, will clarify and energize the whole mental life of him who receives it, is among the most wonderful and heavenly of intellectual phenomena (Arnold Bennett).

**my husband, At** – How do I love thee? Let me count the ways ..... Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be ..... (Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning).

**my children, Bertus, Riandi and Stephan and their loved ones** – I love each of you ... you fill my heart with joy ... and my prayer for you is "... that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight ... to the glory and praise of God" (Philippians 1:9-10).

**my parents, Andries and Jana Gous** – How dear to this heart are the scenes of my childhood ..... (Samuel Woodworth).

**anonymous employees and line managers** – Better keep yourself clean and bright; you are the window through which you must see the world (George Bernard Shaw).

### **God – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit**

|                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| In Thee I trust, on Thee I rest,    | Thy power, Thy love, Thy faithfulness, |
| O Saviour dear, Redeemer blest!     | With lip and life I long to bless!     |
| No earthly friend, no brother knows | Thy faithfulness shall be my tower,    |
| My weariness, my wants, my woes     | My sun Thy love, my shield Thy power   |
| On Thee I call,                     | In darkest night,                      |
| Who knowest all.                    | In fiercest fight.                     |
| O Saviour dear, Redeemer blest!     | With lip and life I long to bless!     |
| In Thee I trust, on Thee I rest.    | Thy power, Thy love, Thy faithfulness. |

(Author unknown).

## DECLARATION

I, **Adriana Martha Maria Van Niekerk**, declare that the thesis: An ethnographic exploration of intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management interventions in an institution of higher education, is my own work and that all sources that I have used or quoted have been fully indicated and acknowledged.

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Matrié van Niekerk

Pretoria

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## CHAPTER 1

### CONTEXTUALISING THE STUDY

#### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

I am a counselling psychologist registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). I have many years of clinical and counselling experience in private practice, and have regularly attended continuing professional development (CPD) courses as requested by the HPCSA. I now practise in the human resource environment in an institution of higher education. During the past fourteen years, from 1998 to 2012, I have worked as a counselling psychologist in the Department of Human Resources at a South African university. At present I am the manager of the Employee Wellness Division which, as its name implies, focuses on Employee Wellness Programmes (EWP) and Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP). Within this environment, I have broadened my skills to include the practice of human conflict management by means of individual counselling, group conflict management, positive psychology and strengths-based counselling, and conflict coaching. I have also practised brief psychotherapy while performing my tasks in the field of human conflict management (human conflict management includes intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflicts). Before becoming a counselling psychologist, I qualified and practised as a social worker – an experience that has contributed to my personal resilience and ability to work with challenging people and complex relationship issues.

The scope of human conflict issues in my working environment is diverse and broad, and conflict management activities vary accordingly. I am aware that the knowledge and skills of people working in this field need to complement the emerging needs of the persons involved in serious intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict issues at work. I have seen that, in our institution, which is a microcosm of our country and higher education institutions in South Africa undergoing transformation (Gibbon, 2004), human conflict management practice also needs to keep track of the diverse qualifications and fields of specialisation among people working in this challenging field. These include, for example, conflict management coaches and consultants, psychologists and social workers with a special interest in this field, industrial psychologists, and mediators and negotiators



(Augsburger, 1992; De Bono, 1990; Cloke & Goldsmith, 2005; Mol, 1997; Roark, 1978; Shapiro, 2004; Tillet, 1999; Van Epps, 1990; Wylie & Grothe, 1996).

I realise that staff members whose work focuses on human conflict require good listening skills, empathy and a positive regard for the people involved in such conflict (Rogers, 1983), as well as an innovative mindset. I have to utilise my own character strengths, as described by Rath (2007), and practise my competency in dealing with the difficult and complex circumstances that conflict necessarily involves and which places unusual and stringent demands on the counselling psychologist (Strümpfer, 2004). The concomitant and subsequent management of conflict necessitates that the counselling psychologist possess a wide range of conflict management skills. In this extremely diverse environment, it is simply not enough to use the same “technique” or approach over and over again. I also have to deal with challenging questions such as the following: Who am I? Am I a counsellor, therapist, consultant or group worker? Or am I a human conflict management specialist – whatever that entails? Or should I instead label myself as a ‘consultant’ who, eventually, might prove that I have simply been playing games with words? How does one explain what exactly is meant by a “human conflict management specialist”? Which theoretical model(s) should I take as my point of departure?

Over the years, I found it necessary to make a conscious and significant transition from being a full-time therapist to becoming (among other things) a human conflict management specialist/consultant in an institution of higher education. I had to acknowledge that some areas of psychotherapy, such as long-term psychotherapy and a constant focus on intrapsychodynamic issues, are inappropriate in such an environment. However, during some of my interpersonal conflict management sessions with clients, I became consciously aware of opportunities that allowed me to make excursions into brief psychotherapy, conflict coaching, group facilitation and strengths-based counselling. I used these excursions as intervention strategies for keeping the conflict management goals on track. I also became increasingly interested in the relatively new paradigm of positive psychology, which focuses on seeking the positives in a client. Authors such as Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), Seligman (2002a, 2002b), and Biswas-Diener and Dean (2007) inform us that the focus of mainstream psychology was, for many years, pathology-based and deficit-orientated, because it gave priority to negative behaviour and various forms of mental dysfunctions. The vacuum left by this approach is now partly filled by positive

psychology, which acts as a force for understanding and promoting the positive aspects of human nature. There is, however, still a need for research in order to expand positive psychology's theoretical foundation as far as interpersonal conflict management is concerned.

The ongoing journey towards harmonious intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group relationships brought me to the realisation that people in the conflict management field will never be idle as long as people have to work together. Human conflict management is indeed an ongoing process.

In the forthcoming chapters it will become evident how my journey towards helping to establish harmonious interpersonal work relationships ended up including interventions that utilise the following: individual counselling and brief psychotherapy (Wells & Giannetti, 1993; Snyder & Guernsey, 1993); group interventions and facilitation (Cilliers & Koortzen, 2003; Bergh & Theron, 2008); positive psychology and character strengths counselling (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 2002a; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Rath, 2007). The coaching and mentoring (Meyer & Fourie, 2006; Kilburg, 2007a; Bluckert, 2005a, 2005b and 2006) aspects of my approach to human conflict management are not discussed in this study.

Below I will give a personal account of employee health and wellness, or the lack thereof, in human conflict in the workplace. This will be followed by a discussion of the strategies and models used in intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict intervention. Lastly I will discuss my research objectives and the structure of this thesis.

## **1.2 A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF EMPLOYEE HEALTH AND WELLNESS**

The concept of employee health and wellness refers to a proactive approach, with the focus on the enhancement of employee health and wellness in general and in difficult circumstances. Employee health and wellness, like the positive psychology approach, is a movement away from the pathogenic starting point of traditional employee assistance programmes.

*Health* encompasses physiological, psychological and behavioural symptomology within a medical context. *Wellness* is a broader and more encompassing concept that considers the total humanness of people. Wellness/ wellbeing should therefore be used to (among others) conceptually include life experiences such as happiness and life satisfaction. The literature addresses health and wellbeing from different perspectives, such as the physical, emotional, psychological, mental, occupational, and financial wellness areas. In the context of this study wellness is seen as a relational concept. The focus is especially on psychological wellness which is the result of constant interpersonal (between people) and intrapersonal (within a person) change and variety (Henning & Cilliers, 2012). Flowing from this is the concept *psychological wealth* that is part of the movement towards embracing the positives in mental health and wellness. Psychological wealth is described as the experience of wellbeing, a high quality of life and the deep down knowledge that our life is excellent, rewarding, enjoyable and meaningful regardless of our circumstances (Danna & Griffin, 1999; Meyer & Fourie, 2006; Van der Merwe, 2004; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008).

The ideals of employee health and wellness are seriously challenged when interpersonal conflict issues impact negatively on employees' work performance or relationships with others. Some of these troubled employees are referred to me for counselling with the implicit expectation that I should "*take away the reasons for their misery and, in doing so, restore them to health and happiness*". Individual counselling, however, is often not the answer to the problem because this form of counselling changes neither the situation nor the other persons involved in the conflict. I can, of course, work towards helping these people attain personal resilience so that they can be empowered to face difficult circumstances, and this I do. However, the fact remains that I have to send them back to their conflict-ridden work environments, environments that contribute to their misery, exacerbate their trauma, or exploit their vulnerabilities. My observations and perceptions about these employees, who are frequently confronted with attention-demanding problems and conflicts, are in line with the writings of Van der Merwe (2004). She indicates that people suffering from high levels of conflict often display *physiological symptoms* of stress, such as headaches, tiredness, chest pains, and muscular aches and pains. *Psychological symptoms* include de-motivation, depression, anxiety, anger, poor concentration, frustration and pessimism. The emotional effects are diverse and unique, because these effects are influenced by and linked to each person's unique psychodynamics and life

stories. Sometimes this conflict triggers hidden psychiatric or psychological disorders, such as mood disorders. There are extremities in the external and internal manifestations of these disorders with disruptive consequences in both the individual's personal life and work environment. *Behavioural symptoms* include crying for no reason, alcohol abuse, swearing, and nervous habits such as nail biting, taking tranquilisers to stay calm or, alternatively, taking sedatives in order to fall asleep at night.

In the organisational domain, *wellness* refers to job-related experiences (e.g. job satisfaction and job attachment) and aspect-specific dimensions (e.g. satisfaction with co-workers or with salary), as stated by Van der Merwe (2004).

Experience has taught me that high levels of human conflict are detrimental to an employee's true sense of intrapersonal wellness, and impact negatively on both their productivity and interpersonal relationships within their work context. I have also found that, as a result of unresolved conflicts, employees' satisfaction with co-workers or management reaches a 'low'. In line with my job description, I can deal with these issues both individually and in a departmental context. In doing so, I have found myself in the domain of reactive counselling services or proactive training, coaching and mentoring services, drawing on the insights of psychotherapy or positive psychology and character strengths. I have also found myself having to give coaching on interpersonal conflict management skills, do group work, and refer to brief psychotherapy. I have also become extremely interested in exploring the institution's culture as far as interpersonal conflict management is concerned. In fact, it is this that has motivated me to undertake the present study.

The purpose of my initial approach to conflict management was the restoration of positive interpersonal relationships by means of, among other things, discussions about what successful conflict management skills entail. However, this process gradually became more and more disappointing. The employees involved eventually moved on, but the aftermath of feelings of unhappiness lingered, as did their distancing themselves from interpersonal relationships and adopting an unenthusiastic attitude towards life in general (see Peck (1978, p.13) – *life is difficult ... and a series of problems*). In short, there was a noticeable lack of employee happiness and wellness.

Many authors accentuate the importance of employee wellness in the workplace because of the benefits it brings to both the individual and the organisation; the literature also states that employee wellness eliminates the problems caused by factors that hinder wellness, such as workplace conflict, stress, burnout, change and transformation (Danna & Griffin, 1999; Rothman, 2003; Schaufeli, 2003; Schabracq, 2003). Job-specific wellbeing examines employees' feelings about themselves and their work environment, and their relationship with their job and fellow employees. One of the job features that may influence job-related wellbeing is the opportunity for interpersonal contacts, which should be characterised by quality of interaction, good relationships and good communication (Warr, 1996).

It is exactly in this area of good relationships that the effects of harsh interpersonal conflict can be devastating to a person's physical and psychological wellbeing. Severe unresolved human conflicts at work disturb our peace of mind, our happiness in interpersonal relationships, our job satisfaction and even our work performance. These conflicts sometimes appear suddenly, without warning. At other times they simmer over a long period of time, and eventually 'burst forth', with an extremely negative impact on our emotional, psychological, occupational and social areas of functioning. If not dealt with timely and constructively, such conflicts eventually deplete our resilience, threaten our happiness, limit our ability to cope and destroy our interpersonal relationships. Managers who have a managerial responsibility to engage in third-party intervention and resolve interpersonal conflicts are also faced with an ongoing threat to their own emotional health and wellbeing.

In an effort to address this impasse I returned to the concept of *psychological wealth*. This concept may sound like little more than received wisdom, but it nevertheless highlights dimensions beyond popular concepts such as emotional intelligence and material riches. The premise is that, for example, the quest for academic success is worthless if it implies giving up healthy relationships as a result of conflicts or if it means suffering physical or psychological ill-health. Essential components of psychological wealth are the possession of positive attitudes towards life, spiritual growth and the ability to find meaning in life, material sufficiency to meet one's needs, and physical and mental health. Psychological wealth and health also include the activities in which one engages, happiness, loving

social relationships, worthwhile work, values, and life goals (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008).

The portfolio of the psychologically healthy and wealthy includes the ability to see what is good in the world, although one is grounded in reality - as well described by Diener & Biswas-Diener (2008, p.7): "People who are psychologically healthy are involved in activities that they believe are meaningful and important, and they have found activities in which they can use their strengths."

I realise that the essential challenge of my work is to enable my client-participants to rejoice in their psychological wellbeing and wealth as a result of their new-found strengths and skills in the successful management of human conflict. But, however "beautiful" this may sound, the reality was that I was faced with an impasse. I was haunted by the following question: How can a person obtain this state of psychological health while there are still unresolved issues in his or her make-up that prevent him or her from utilising his or her strengths and skills to successfully manage conflicts or create relatively conflict-free interpersonal relationships?

### **1.3 A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE**

In an attempt to resolve disputes or conflicts between subordinates and groups, managers frequently have to intervene in these disputes and conflicts. Although different facets of managerial third-party intervention in organisations have been explored in the literature, we know little about how it actually should be done in order to be effective. Although Elangovan made this point some years ago now (1998), I can still identify with his statement some fourteen years later. Some managers, regardless of their levels of qualification(s), seem to be trapped in a vicious circle of serious interpersonal and intra-group workplace conflict. They are, at least to a certain extent, ignorant about how to handle these conflicts and have little understanding of their own part in maintaining these patterns of conflict. Other managers believe that they are not sufficiently skilled in changing negative patterns and creating new positive ones, and often do not understand the psychological aspects of human conflicts at work. In addition to this, some simply do not have the insight required to effectively manage these conflicts. They therefore express a need for coaching or training in interpersonal conflict management within the complex

environment in which they work. This need coexists with my attempts to get managers to become more resilient and self-possessed when dealing with interpersonal conflicts in their divisions and departments. I would also prefer them to accept the challenge of personal development in human conflict management instead of only relying on me to solve the conflicts of the people they supervise or manage.

The other role-players (i.e. participants in this study) are the employees involved in the human conflicts discussed here; these people either suffer as a result of these conflicts or are themselves the cause of conflict. My comments above (i.e. concerning the challenge of personal development) apply to them as well.

Conflict is a complicated, multi-faceted phenomenon. Shockley-Zalabak (1984) and Barki and Hartwick's (2004) belief that a singular definition of this concept has no consensus among researchers, and we still lack a clear and generally accepted definition of what constitutes conflict, still hold true today. For the purpose of this study, I have chosen two definitions of conflict on the basis that both these definitions include the concepts of incompatibility and processes:

A conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur. An action which is incompatible with another action prevents, obstructs, interferes with, injures, or in some way makes it less likely or less effective (Deutsch, 1973, p.10, as quoted by Roark, 1978, p.400).

“Conflict is a process where one party experiences or perceives that another party has negatively affected or is about to negatively affect something that the first party cares about” (Robbins, 2003, p. 396).

Combining the above definitions, one could say that conflict is an “... intense interpersonal ..... dissonance between two or more parties (individuals or groups) based on incompatible goals, needs, desires, values, beliefs, attitudes or perceptions of entitlement” (Campus Conflict Resolution Resources, 2003, p.9).

To these definitions we can also add the constructs of intrapersonal conflict, interpersonal conflict and intra-group conflict. These constructs need to be contextualised because they are central to this study.

*Intrapersonal conflict* refers to conflict within the individual (Barki & Hartwick, 2004). Geldenhuys, Naidoo and May (2008, p.220) describe it as "... the existence of simultaneous, opposing and conflicting thoughts, feelings and activities". Some of the symptoms of intrapersonal conflict are anger, frustration, uncertainty, hesitation, stress, anxiety, depression and sleeplessness.

Barki and Hartwick (2004, p.1) regard *interpersonal conflict* as conflict that occurs between individuals and groups in organisations. They define the construct of interpersonal conflict as "... a dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals". They propose that the three fundamental properties of this construct are disagreement, negative emotion and interference, interference reflecting not only its principal cognitive, affective and behavioural elements, but also the simultaneous presence of these cognitions, emotions and behaviours within the relevant context of conflict. Geldenhuys, et al., (2008, p.220) add to this by stating that interpersonal conflict "refers to the existence of simultaneous, opposing and conflicting thoughts, feelings and activities of people in the same environment."

*Intra-group conflict* refers to conflict inside the group or conflict from within between members of the same group, and calls attention to group members' interactions with each other. These interactions are, amongst others, influenced by intrapersonal issues or dynamics within the organisation per se (Van Rheede van Oudtshoorn, 2004; Plug, Meyer, Louw, & Gouws, 1988 & Robbins, 2003).

People's responses to conflict may be constructive or destructive, appropriate or inappropriate. The way individuals respond is of critical importance, particularly the way in which they cope; the latter is influenced by the way they appraise their problem-solving skills and whether they generally approach or avoid the many problems of life (Heppner & Lee, 2002). Their responses are also influenced by negative emotions such as depression, anger, frustration, aggression, hostility and destructiveness (Barki & Hartwick, 2004).

In my work, I gradually came to realise that conflicts that appear to be of an external nature often arise from a person's internal world, a point that relates to the construct of



intrapersonal conflict mentioned above. For example, an employee may cognitively understand why he (or she) is not getting promoted but, at the same time, another part of his being desperately needs the appreciation and recognition which he (un)consciously links to promotion. He subsequently becomes upset for not being promoted to a higher position and accuses his manager (who may eventually become my client) or the system for discriminating against him/ her. Conflict arises from within this person (who may also eventually become my client) due to the internal tension resulting from an unfulfilled need for acknowledgement. This movement from an internal battle to an external battle and vice versa sometimes happens when the person relies on external resources to satisfy his or her needs – in this scenario, the external resource is often promotion to an academic position at a higher level. This movement (i.e. to an external battle) may also be linked to unfinished business in the person's life story that has never been dealt with effectively. Unfortunately, this battle does not offer a solution to the problem, because it has now moved from an internal context to an external context. This, in fact, leads to higher levels of frustration which is especially the case when two parties differ in their perceptions and expectations of each other and each tries to coerce the other.

My conclusion is that the solution process often starts with the identification of the authentic source of conflict. I have furthermore discovered that the process becomes much more complicated because neither the manager (my client) nor the employee (also my client) is suitably qualified to recognise or deal with the situation. After all, the manager is not the 'difficult' staff member's psychotherapist and the employee is not the 'difficult' manager's psychotherapist. These difficult circumstances have an effect on both the manager and the employee, whose ways of dealing with human conflict are also influenced by their own life stories. As it is, the conflict leads to reciprocal feelings of intense frustration, irritation, impatience and anger, all of which exacerbate the situation. For example, it eventually leads to the manager refusing to deal with the difficult situation and refusing to deal with, in his view, the unreasonable and difficult employee. In short, my clients' reactions contribute to an already complicated and toxic situation. Over the years I have, therefore, come to the conclusion that, in many situations, it is insufficient to focus solely on conflict management techniques (which are at a cognitive level).

I believe that, in some cases, conflict in the workplace can simmer for long periods with occasional intense flare-ups, or is consistently present at a high level of intensity. In other

cases, it lasts for relatively short periods, with levels varying from low intensity to what can only be called levels of 'sky-scraping' intensity. People accountable for the resolution of these conflicts sometimes intervene timely or else wait too long before addressing them – possibly in the hope that they will disappear or gradually fade away. Unfortunately, more often than not, this simply does not happen.

Many of these conflicts are eventually dealt with by means of informal processes such as meetings and counselling sessions, or they are dealt with by more unpleasant formal conflict management processes and procedures, such as disciplinary hearings, dismissals, grievance procedures, voluntary resignations or redeployment of staff members. Whatever the process, the employees involved have to work together again while, at the same time, having to come to terms with the strong negative emotions evoked by the conflict. At times the process is so toxic that it leads to a total breakdown in both interpersonal and intra-group relationships. Also, of course, the distressed employee may well resign for his or her emotional and psychological survival – sometimes to the disadvantage of the institution if this employee is an excellent worker who adds real value to the work environment.

According to Rinner, Joyce and Porter (2002, p.1), there is sometimes a need to help staff members to “acknowledge the ending of a conflict, come to terms with their negative emotions about the situation, and move on to contribute productively in the workplace.” This is easier said than done. It often happens that employees do not want to forgive or trust one another, or that the lingering anger becomes a stumbling block to any form of reconciliation. It is then necessary to offer guidance and support to line managers to enable them to help their subordinates recover from conflict and restore equilibrium to work units. Should the staff members not recover from a conflict situation, their emotional and physical health will suffer, they will express a negative attitude towards others in the workplace, and there will be a decline in productivity. All of these might lead to high stress levels, absenteeism, presenteeism, job loss, and even a lack of any real joy in life itself.

In the context of my workplace, interventions aimed at dealing with dysfunctional conflict in workplace relationships often do not focus on the intra-psychic complexities and positive attributes of human beings. Instead, these interventions are predominantly centred on mediation and negotiation activities, some of these eventually involving traditional labour law procedures such as grievance procedures or disciplinary hearings. Occasionally there

are efforts to empower managers towards dealing successfully with interpersonal conflicts; these efforts tend to be centralised on the availability of cognitive information and training. The impact of conflict management training is not clear to me, given that no formal research has been conducted within the university to measure the impact of its own conflict management interventions. On those occasions where I did intervene, both the managers and employees were keen to participate in the conflict management procedure. However, the expectation was for me to manage the human conflict on their behalf and to 'take sides'. I acknowledge the fact that managers and staff members are entitled to use all available conflict management support structures and resources, especially when they realise that nothing else will resolve the conflict. It is, however, also true that it will be to the benefit of the manager to recognise intrapersonal conflicts for referral purposes. It will also be to his (or her) benefit if he can be empowered to withstand the negative effects of interpersonal and intra-group conflicts, and to experience himself as psychologically competent and motivated to deal with conflicts among his staff members, or between him and his staff members. It will also, of course, be to the benefit of employees.

This brings us to the question of how these human conflicts should be dealt with. Rahim (2000, p.1) takes the emphasis away from the resolution of conflict and instead emphasises the management of conflict. He states that "managing conflicts involves designing effective strategies to minimise the dysfunctions of conflict and maximize the constructive functions of conflict in order to enhance learning and effectiveness in an organization."

Institutions can only benefit from properly developed interpersonal conflict management systems. The implementation of well-researched conflict models and/or training and/or coaching for managers can be seen as a proactive and preventative step that will resolve conflict and contribute to employee wellbeing.

Conbere (2001) indicates that, since 1988, six models for designing and implementing organisational conflict management systems have been proposed (i.e. in the literature). His conclusion is that none of these, however, has been thoroughly researched to validate the premises of the design. He views theory building via empirical research as an essential component in the development of successful conflict models.

## **1.4 STRATEGIES AND MODELS: INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT INTERVENTION**

The far-reaching effects of human conflict necessitate a clear approach to conflict management. Disruptive conflicts impact negatively on many work-related aspects of the institution and the wellness of its employees. It becomes visible in phenomena such as absenteeism, presenteeism, low work performance, stress-related illnesses, poor behaviour, resignations, and early retirement. It shows that even the best of us can become involved in traumatic conflicts for which we need professional and empathetic support. There are many conflict intervention strategies and models for institutions. Some intervention strategies focus on learning and training, with a sound academic research background. Other intervention strategies are compiled according to the presenters' knowledge base, which is based on their personal experience, perceptions and theoretical knowledge, for example, consultancy firms when presenting corporate conflict management workshops. Other strategies focus on health and wellbeing, while still others focus on what is wrong and then attempt to set it right.

For various reasons, I decided not to become stuck in a pathogenic paradigm, i.e. concentrating only on what contributes to the client's inability to deal constructively with human conflict management at work. In fact, I have become far more interested in the positive psychology movement founded by, amongst others, Seligman (1998, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, and 2006). This paradigm's centre of attention is on helping people from normality to optimal functioning. Its vision is the promotion of the human fulfilment of each individual.

In the section that follows, I will briefly discuss two issues, namely: (i) some intervention strategies presented by consultancy firms to South Africa's corporate world; and (ii) conflict management models based on international academic research.

### **1.4.1 Conflict management and training intervention strategies as presented by various consultancy firms**

A literature survey of subject areas and content categories of a few corporate conflict management workshops (Bacal, 1998, Connectivity & ABSA, 2002; De Clerk, 1991; FAWESA, 2001; Jude, 2005; Kroeger & Thuesen, 1993; The Arbitration Society of South

Africa, 2002; Norcaz Academy, 2012) indicates that the corporate training in conflict management in South Africa concentrates on the cognitive (knowledge) level, the emotional (reactions) level, and the behavioural (what to do) level. Managing the psychological components of interpersonal workplace conflict is restricted to a low level of cognitive knowledge about intra-personal characteristics (e.g. personal qualities such as empathy and intuition), interpersonal skills (e.g. active listening in communication), and behaviour evaluation (reactions and responses, practical implementation in the workplace). When it comes to effectively managing conflict in the workplace, I believe that there is considerable room to include a more psychologically based approach and to improve capacity building at a psychological level.

#### **1.4.2 Conflict management models based on academic research**

Van de Vliert (1997, p.150) emphasises that too few scholars of conflict are able to recognise adequately the degrees of scientific contribution because they “are too readily satisfied with low levels of theory construction and utilisation. They get stuck, so to speak, on the bottom range of the theoretical ladder.”

Conflict management models accompanied by research evidence are based on a variety of theoretical assumptions (De Clerk, 1991; Van de Vliert, 1997; Jameson, 1999; Sorenson, More & Savage, 1999; Gross & Guerrero, 2000; Rahim, 2000; Rahim, Antonioni & Psenicka, 2001; De Dreu, Van Dierendonck & Dijkstra, 2004). What all these models have in common is the fact that they are based on research in answer to the need for well-substantiated and sound models and strategies. The purpose of these models is not to be prescriptive or to say ‘this is the only way it ought to be dealt with’. Instead, the intention is to acknowledge that many factors, theories and paradigms influence effective conflict management. These models are diverse in terms of their recommendations for conflict management and training, a fact observed some years ago by Shockley-Zalaback (1984). There are, however, no formal programmes that include specific conflict coaching, individual counselling and brief psychotherapy interventions, strengths-based counselling, and group facilitation linked to psychological interventions. This is the gap that I would like this study to address.

This study focuses on what might be called my 'journey of interventions'. This journey has alternated between individual counselling involving brief psychotherapy, strengths-based counselling, and group facilitation. Eventually, the content of this journey has become the core of my intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management repertoire. It becomes my integrated human conflict management system that I make use of in the institution.

## **1.5 OBJECTIVES**

Frequent and intense conflicts in close interdependent relationships become disruptive and toxic if not dealt with timely and effectively. Such conflicts should be dealt with by people who understand both the culture and context in which the conflict occurs and the human dynamics involved. There is an organisational need for effective interpersonal conflict management in order to ensure the smooth running of an institution's daily activities. There is also the need for effective human conflict management with the purpose of enhancing the wellbeing of the people involved. One of the tasks of managers is to resolve work-related interpersonal conflicts which hamper the effective functioning of their departments, or which impact negatively on sound interpersonal relationships in their departments, or which have other disruptive consequences.

The present research addresses the human conflict management problems of managers and their subordinates. Some managers find it difficult to cope with serious conflicts in their departments and instead turn to other people for support in solving the issues facing them. In the worst cases, the conflict has been allowed to escalate and expand into destructive conflict, characterised by power play, threats and deception. Communication becomes deceitful and unreliable. Some managers act destructively because they lack knowledge and skills, while others are unable to cope because of a deficiency in their psychological make-up. Efforts should be made to empower these managers with the relevant skills so that they become capable of productively dealing with interpersonal conflicts.

The subordinates/employees involved in these conflicts suffer as a result of the increase in misunderstanding and misperceptions, the outcome of which is distrust, suspicion, anger and hostility. In extreme situations disproportionate efforts are made to "win", regardless of the cost involved.

I intend to focus on the interaction between brief psychotherapy, the client's positive character strengths as personal resources for effective conflict management, and group facilitation. The underlying assumption, however, is that these people are emotionally wounded but not suffering from mental disorders which subsequently need to be diagnosed clinically. They are regarded as normal persons in need of healing in some areas of life and guidance (e.g. via individual counselling) in order to become empowered.

In my efforts to develop and clarify my research objectives, I have come to agree with Gladding (2000): namely, that this is a slow, painstaking process.

I am still grappling with four questions, namely: Is the present approach of interpersonal and intra-group conflict management, which concentrate almost entirely on labour relations practices and which exclude methods such as conflict coaching, group facilitation, positive psychology and strengths counselling and brief psychotherapy, the most effective way of helping a client to overcome conflict issues? This is a general question, and one that challenges the *status quo*.

What are the focus areas of human conflict management from the psychological point of departure? This is a question of *personal identity*.

How can both clients, i.e. the manager and the subordinate, be supported in such a way that it will bring about the desired outcome of resolving human conflicts? This is a general question aimed at identifying the *scope of practice*.

What value can be added to the process by means of counselling, brief psychotherapy, conflict coaching, group facilitation, and positive psychology and strengths-based counselling – either simultaneously and/or alternatively? This is an ethical question of *accountability and quality assurance*.

The data will be explored against the background of the interventions mentioned above. Suggestions will also be made regarding the options of managing human conflicts from a psychological viewpoint in a higher learning institution.

In summary, the research question asked, and the problem and purpose statement made, is as follows:

What are the options of managing interpersonal conflicts in a higher education institution from a psychological viewpoint and how could human conflict management psychologists/specialists be orientated and trained to: (i) orientate managers; (ii) support both the manager and the subordinate; and (iii) bring about the desired outcome?

The main objective is to explore and inquire into the many approaches within the culture of the institution that play a part in the management of human conflicts, and to draw on the findings of this ethnographic and autoethnographic study to generate suggestions concerning the management of staff members who are involved in these conflicts.

A related objective is to create awareness and to establish dialogue among human conflict management or counselling psychologists or specialists with a view to optimising their skills accordingly. Another related objective is to create guidelines for the development of a model of human conflict management that includes interventions based on brief psychotherapy, group facilitation, positive psychology, and character strengths counselling.

These objectives exclude labour relations processes such as disciplinary hearings and grievance procedures.

In pursuing the above objectives, I will:

- i Relate some stories to show how I dealt with workplace conflict (i.e. conflict that is related to the research topic).
- ii Use ethnography and autoethnography as research strategies that focus on understanding the culture and dynamics present within the single settings (i.e. when exploring the options of how to manage human conflicts).
- iii Identify possible psychological issues contributing to the client's inability to deal successfully with intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management at work. Here I will strive to understand the psychology behind their behaviour, and to explore questions such as what happens to them when they find themselves in conflict situations and what motivates them to act in certain ways.
- iv Recognise the unique needs of the client that make him or her eligible for receiving brief psychotherapy, group facilitation, and strengths-based counselling.



- v Identify the *internal strengths* of the client in order to empower him or her to deal constructively with the demands of managing human conflicts.
- vi Explore group facilitation interventions as a way of dealing with interpersonal or intra-group conflict management (e.g. by identifying the group's *internal strengths*).
- vii Build skills and knowledge through a series of sessions to equip and empower the client to deal with future human conflict management events at the workplace.

I see the client as a co-researcher who will be part of the research by sharing his or her life story and human conflict story. The client will, on a voluntary basis, participate in brief psychotherapy, utilising his or her personal resources for problem solving, and take responsibility for his or her own wellbeing, while creatively designing constructive solutions and alternatives.

In asking the question how they, the managers and subordinates, can become the healers and the makers of peace in their departments, one has to take into account that the parties most directly involved in a dispute are usually those least able to settle the dispute constructively (Augsburger, 1992). In view of this, the outcomes of this research will be applicable to: (i) managers whose inability to act exacerbates the conflict situation, causing them to be most directly involved in the dispute; and (ii) subordinates involved in the conflicts whose behaviour causes or exacerbates tensions.

## **1.6 ORGANISATION OF THESIS**

This thesis consists of seven chapters. The focus of the present chapter was on contextualising the study. Chapter two describes the research methodology followed. The themes of my intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management journey embedded in the culture of the university are explored in chapters three (forming an approach to conflict management), four (intrapersonal conflict management), five (interpersonal conflict management), six (intra-group conflict management) and seven (conclusions).

## 1.7 CONCLUSION

When employees experience intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflicts in their daily work environment, line managers often discount these conflicts as trivial issues and respond with messages telling employees to focus on their work (the reasoning being that they are only colleagues and that it is not necessary for the subordinates to be friends or even to like each other). Hidden intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group issues are often ignored by those directly involved in the conflicts and by those higher up the hierarchy. This is partly because conflict is a complex and complicated area to move into and also because some of those involved lack the psychological know-how and skills needed to find solutions for their conflicts. Efforts are sometimes made to address these issues (e.g. by means of discussion opportunities and legal processes). On some occasions, it becomes necessary to resort to concrete measures such as institutional policies and legal procedures. The approach followed by me, however, is the so-called soft approach. In adopting this approach, my aim is to enable employees to respond to future potential conflict situations in a way that brings about psychological growth and healing. This, I believe, is far preferable to the so-called hard approach, an approach that entails legal actions such as disciplinary hearings.

## CHAPTER 2

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I will discuss qualitative research in general. This will be followed by a discussion of the key concepts, principles and assumptions of ethnographic and autoethnographic research and its unfolding methodology in the present study. I will also present the theoretical and conceptual framework used to collect and analyse the data.

#### 2.2 WHY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

*Quantitative research* starts with the researcher's predetermined hypothesis, a hypothesis that needs to be tested and eventually either confirmed or disproved. The hypothesis is concerned with the control and prediction of variables, and priority is given to design, measurement, sampling and quantifications. The hypothesis is tested under experimental conditions. The deductive approach of quantitative researchers emphasises detailed planning prior to data collection and analysis. *Qualitative research*, on the other hand, concentrates on an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and on finding meaning in identified themes and patterns by means of the researcher's direct participation and experience. Qualitative research is conducted in a natural setting where the researcher assembles a complex picture by analysing the participants' words and behaviours, and by detailed documentation. The centrepiece of qualitative research methods is observation, interviewing and qualitative analysis, rather than an obsession with the triad of validity, reliability and generalisability. Qualitative researchers are more concerned about the issues of richness, texture, and "feeling" of the raw data. Their inductive approach emphasises developing insights and generalisations (if possible) from the data collected (Gladding, 2000; Mouton, 2001; Henning, 2002; De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delpont, 2002; De Vos, 2002; Neuman, 2006; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006; Creswell, 2007; and Du Plooy, 2009). Inductive reasoning is applied when formulating findings; to do this, qualitative researchers move from the specifics found in data, responses and observations, to establishing patterns that are then compared. Once this is done, they then formulate general and final conclusions. In qualitative research, this formulating procedure

“...focuses on the logic of exploring the meaning-making processes as experienced by different participants.” The outcomes of inductive reasoning will be in the “...format of narrative descriptions...” whereby accounts are given of identified patterns and themes (Du Plooy, 2009, p. 33).

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches are recognised as established ways of doing research. The choice between these two approaches depends on the research question and goals (Gladding, 2000; Mouton, 2001; De Vos et al, 2002; Strydom, 2003). Gladding (2000, p.490) formulates the choice as follows:

“Neither quantitative nor qualitative research is superior to the other per se. ... The major strength of quantitative research is its emphasis on analyzing large amounts of data in a clear, mathematical fashion. The major strength of qualitative research is the way it picks up subtle, individually focused, developmental, and experientially reported aspects of counseling.”

The focus area of this study is on managers and their subordinates (the latter referred to as employees) in a university, this being their natural setting. These managers and subordinates are caught up in intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflicts, either because they are the victims or because they have provoked these conflicts. The question is: how can I assist in managing or resolving these conflicts or, at least, help people to let go of grudges and come to a situation of relative peace? It is also crucial to deal with the after effects of conflicts, whether these are resolved or unresolved. In both scenarios, interventions are necessary for these people to survive the conflicts.

The open-ended, inductive and in-depth exploration of qualitative research is more suitable for my purposes. This decision was made because not enough is known about the area being researched to warrant a focused quantitative study. The theoretical paradigms of positive psychology (focusing on the strengths of a person), brief psychotherapy from a psychodynamic psychology viewpoint, narrative, ethnographic and autoethnographic research are suitable for qualitative approaches such as qualitative analysis of case studies, interviewing and participant observation. For example, the narrative approach is linked with the paradigm of social constructionism which, as its name implies, asks questions about how the social world is constructed. In this study it refers to the social

world of the managers and employees involved in conflicts. These theoretical paradigms in general help to determine the questions I ask about constructs such as, in the context of this study, strengths and life stories (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Terre Blanche, Kelly & Durrheim, 2006; Kilburg, 2007a; Pauw, 2004b).

According to Muchinsky (2009), the origins of qualitative research are actually found in the work of the ancient Greeks, who wanted to document the course of human history. Qualitative research is therefore not a new concept. Muchinsky (2009, p.34) describes qualitative research as a method in which the researcher "takes an active role in interacting with the subjects he or she wishes to study". In line with this I was *not* a detached and objective investigator. I became personally absorbed in the research process while, at the same time, maintaining my professional and ethical values. I learned from watching, listening, reading, conversing and interacting with the participants.

The following quotes typify qualitative research (as cited by Gladding, 2000, p.490):

- It is inductive and phenomenological, placing primary emphasis on understanding the unique frameworks within which persons make sense of their feelings, thoughts and behaviours (Neimeyer & Resnikoff, 1982, p.84).
- It is deductive and objective, usually subordinating subjective understanding to clarity, precision, and reproducibility of objective phenomena (Neimeyer & Resnikoff, 1982).
- It focuses on understanding a complex social question without previously defined parameters (Jencius & Rotter, 1998).
- It examines what people are doing and how they interpret what is occurring rather than pursuing patterns of cause and effect in a controlled setting (Merchant & Dupuy, 1996, p.537).
- It is based on a positive-reductive conceptual system that "...values objectivity, linearity, cause and effect, repeatability, and reproductivity, predictability, and the quantification of data" (Merchant & Dupuy, 1996, p.538).

I decide to engage in this qualitative study from a psychological perspective and concentrate on the following challenges, namely:

Will it be possible to make psychological and theoretical sense of my ways of dealing with intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict in a university in my capacity as a

counselling psychologist/ interpersonal conflict management specialist? A question that comes to mind is identity, namely, am I a counselling psychologist specialising in human conflict management or am I a human conflict management specialist at a university?

Will the theoretical framework that I have “grown into” over a period of almost fourteen years be appropriate and helpful in making sense of the conflicts I have to deal with?

Will it be meaningful to make use of data generated over such a long period?

Will it be possible to improve the human conflict management skills of managers and/or the employees by not only utilising their positive attributes, but also by dealing with those psychological issues which could be regarded as barriers in the way of successful conflict management?

Will the documentation of my intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management journey meet the academic requirements of a thesis?

## **2.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THE PRESENT STUDY**

### **2.3.1 Introduction**

Muchinsky (2009) views research as a formal process which includes a systematic study of phenomena according to scientific principles by which knowledge is produced and understood. Questions that initiate research are based on the researcher's existing knowledge and experience of the problem. A suitable research paradigm is essential in order to substantiate the claim for scientific research, a viewpoint endorsed by Gladding (2000). Muchinsky (2009, p.25) quotes Campbell (1990), who notes that scientific research in psychology poses more problems than in physics or chemistry because people are far too variable to be considered equal and to be defined as a single blueprint. Bantjes (2011) adds another dimension by stating that the academic study of psychology has a problematic history in that it is both fragmented and splintered. Each of the numerous competing schools of thought has its own unique underlying assumptions. The psychologist researcher therefore has to select a suitable research paradigm and a theoretical paradigm through which to understand the human behaviour he or she is studying.

Different research methods address different research questions. All research methods have, however, what Gelso (1979) describes (quoted by Gladding 2000, p. 490), as *bubbles*, or flaws. In research, the only way to avoid all flaws is not to do research. Gladding (2000) comes to the conclusion that, as imperfect as research methods may be, they are a necessity for both professional edification and academic development.

### **2.3.2 The researcher's objectives**

There are three kinds of research objectives. Firstly, *personal objectives* are those that form the basic motivation to conduct a study (e.g. personal desires and interests). As far as these objectives are concerned, the researcher should be cautious not to shape his or her research too much in accordance with personal objectives, because this may lead to invalid conclusions. In my case, my purpose is to narrate my experiences of intra-group, intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict management in the context of a university and against the background of academic and theoretical considerations. Given this, I need to start by acknowledging that I cannot remember all my experiences in detail; I may not always be objective and sometimes I may even get things wrong. Taylor (2002) indicates, however, that any account of a qualitative study is often an interpretation rather than an objective description. I believe that the interpretation of my stories will genuinely reveal the truth and themes of my experiences (Ellis, 2004). My daily work in conflict management was energising but simultaneously difficult and time-consuming. I had not only to deal with the intense emotions of the managers and employees in the midst of their conflicts, but also had to facilitate the process of finding acceptable solutions, and to restore relationships to such an extent that all parties could proceed with their duties. I would like to achieve the personal purpose of this research by telling my stories of counselling, brief psychotherapy, positive psychology's strengths-based counselling, and group facilitation.

Secondly, the focal point of *practical objectives* is to meet a need or change a situation. In my case, I would like to bring about interventions which will help managers and employees to become more self-sufficient in dealing with intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflicts (i.e. make them less dependent on others). I also want to prevent them from re-doing the things that cause them to come into conflict with other people in the first place. I want to empower them towards being able to effect successful intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management, even if only partially (simply because it is not always

possible to solve one's own conflicts). Among other things, this requires that I have an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of their apparent inability, something that might be clarified when I listen to their stories of the past, present and future.

Thirdly, *research objectives* focus on gaining some insight into what is going on in reality, and why. My research objective is just this. However, I need to be consciously aware that my personal purposes may “intermingle” and influence my conclusions, as Muchinsky (2009) suggests.

All these objectives have caused me to become decisively involved in research into the three aspects of human conflict management, namely intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management.

### **2.3.3 Research design**

The research design is the entire process of research, from conceptualisation of the problem to the writing of the final report. The research design forms the strategic framework for action that serves as a bridge between the research questions, the execution of the research, and the report writing. This map for conducting the research also guides the collection and analysis of data (Fouché, 2002; Terre Blanche et al, 2006; Muchinsky, 2009). In this study, the focal point of the research design is centred on exploring my intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management interventions in the university.

Muchinsky (2009) points out that, in the research design, the *naturalness of the research setting* should be taken into consideration. In this study, the setting is my workplace, a South African university. The people participating in the research are managers in their capacities as heads of department within the university, as well as other employees in their capacity as subordinates to these managers. Permission to approach these employees and to use their stories was granted by top management on condition of confidentiality (which is an ethical requirement of any research study, in fact). The managers and employees were selected to participate on the basis that they had all requested my facilitation support in dealing with interpersonal and intra-group conflicts in their various departments. Others were automatically “selected” because they were the “other side” in



these conflicts, while others were involved in their own intrapersonal conflicts. The conflict management issues under discussion are assumed to be part of this university. The material utilised and information obtained (as mentioned) took place over a period of more or less fourteen years: it involves my stories about the various ways in which I have sought to manage human conflict in the university.

This setting includes the second dimension that needs to be taken into account when planning the research design, namely, my *degree of control* over the research and the way in which it was conducted. In my capacity as human conflict management specialist within the university, I have direct access to the research participants. I am also knowledgeable about the university's culture, learning characteristics, academic and administrative context, post-merger issues and so forth. This makes it easier to "zoom in" and focus on the concerns and conflict management needs of both managers and employees.

#### **2.3.4 Ethnography**

My choice of ethnography as a qualitative research approach is, according to Madden (2010), not the sort of endeavour that allows for a clear definition because of its focus on human beings, who are far too complicated to be understood in easy and straightforward terms. The Greek *ethnos* means people or folk and *graphein* refers to describing or writing about something as it unfolds - broadly spoken *writing about people*, specifically about particular groups of people. Ethnography concerns itself with the comparative and analytical study of an intact culture or social group or account of "other" peoples. It is flexible in nature and therefore not restricted to a specific set of research rules and principles. On the other hand, ethnography may use whatever rules and guidelines belong to either or both qualitative and quantitative research paradigms (Hammersley, 1998; Brown, 2008).

Du Plooy (2009) and Madden (2010) give a bird's-eye view of the developments of ethnography since 1900. Ethnography originated in British social anthropology, American cultural anthropology, and the qualitative sociology of the Chicago School. Researchers as early as the 1900s and 1940s used ethnography to give interpretative descriptions of the experiences of small numbers of people. Modernists between the 1940s and 1970s were of the opinion that reality should be discovered through the eyes of the people who

experience it. Since the 1970s, the view is that knowledge about reality can only be constructed and not discovered. Amidst the developmental processes of ethnography there was uncertainty on the one hand, but excitement on the other about new methodologies and research practices.

Madden (2010, p.16) states that ethnography's shared ancestral heritage paves the way for identifying some common issues and mutually valued characteristics, namely:

*Writing about people* – interpretive and explanatory stories about a group of people and their sociality, culture and behaviours. These narratives are based on data that has been systematically collected and analysed.

*Being with people* – by means of participant observation, this is a fundamental aspect of ethnographic research over the past century, and which is direct and face-to-face. People are studied in circumstances that are typical of where they interact with one another, and in ways that are typical of that situation. Ethnographers cannot, and do not want, to control what takes place in their field situation. Ethnographic research projects are conducted over long or short periods of time.

*Theorising about people* – description and analysis come together to answer questions and to build theories that might generate future ethnographic theories. In theory-building two approaches are combined, namely, inductive (bottom-up theory based on observations and interactions) and deductive perspectives (top-down or general theory based on grand theories acquired in educational institutions). Ethnographic research constantly commutes between the inductive and deductive, the challenge being to find a middle road between the two. Any emerging theory is a thinking tool that attempts to explain human behaviour, to improve understandings, and to solve problems.

The goal of ethnography is to capture and produce detailed, situated knowledge rather than universals. This is achieved through what are known as a "thick description, a thick explanation" (Henning, 2005, p.142) and "a slice of account" of the nature of a specific group (Taylor, 2002, p.2), all of which is the foundation of ethnographic research (Geertz, 1973, cited in Bantjes, 2011). Jenks's perception (2002) is that thick descriptions in ethnography are rhetorical constructions and not merely interpretations. It becomes an art

and science for the researcher when describing a group or culture in such a way that he (or she) comes to an understanding of the phenomenon as another way of life from the viewpoint of those who live this way of life. Ethnography is more generally the study of subcultures, e.g. professional groups. In my case, the professional groups studied are academics and their support staff in a South African university (Kelly, 2006). My research entails the study of these people in their natural setting, where they display thoughts and emotions about specific phenomena through culturally determined behaviour. The displaying of behaviour per se, however, does not give meaning. Ethnographic research seeks to find the meaning of behaviour. It therefore moves beyond what is heard, seen and observed to what is meant, i.e. an improved way of coming to understand the participants' life stories, and how participants interpret and add meaning to their experiences (Neuman, 2006; Minuchin, 2009). Ethnographic research is not so much "studying people" as it is "learning from people" (Spradley, 1979, cited in Bantjes, 2011, p.41).

The culture-sharing groups as the unit of analysis in this study are the manager sub-group and their employees within a university culture. These people participated as individuals, sometimes in a group context, and they all asked for support in their daily tasks of managing or dealing with interpersonal conflict. They become the key informants by sharing their thoughts, feelings and ways of interactions in their specific place, i.e. the university, during their everyday lives (Creswell, 1998). Their unique stories will be explored by means of detailed descriptions and careful analysis of the cultural phenomenon I am investigating in order to clarify the research topic, to learn from them, and to arrive at a new understanding of their processes and the meanings they attach to each of their experiences. I am a participant in this prolonged process of understanding. For me it becomes an inquiry process guided by a specific set of techniques whereby I would like to establish how "ordinary people in particular settings make sense of the experience of their everyday lives" (Wolcott, 1988, cited in Brown, 2008, p.26). Eventually, whilst analysing their stories and experiences, I will link the results to the established concepts and theories already described in the literature of my particular discipline (Bantjes, 2011).

To articulate and apply in practice the theoretical language in the preceding paragraphs may sound straightforward and uncomplicated. In reality, the complexities of my subgroup and my own experiences might make it difficult to utilise my unique opportunities to the full. On the other hand, to delve deeper into these complexities might prove to be a very satisfying exercise whereby I can include my thoughts and feelings and, by doing so, move towards autoethnography also (Ellis, 2004).

### **2.3.5 Autoethnographic research**

My stories about intrapersonal, intra-group and interpersonal conflict management switch, occasionally, between the writing of ethnography (about the stories of the managers and employees) and the writing of autoethnography (adding the dimension of my own stories). Telling a story is one of the major methodological components of ethnography, but it can be turned into autoethnography via pushing and questioning, in that one is looking at why she did this and why she would not do that (Kiesinger, 2002, p.121). My focus is therefore not only on the beliefs and practices of the managers and employees, but also on my own subjective experiences, understandings and ways of doing - which will probably construct a portrayal of who I am. When involved in the intense experiences of intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts I, as the facilitator, cannot be taken out of the picture: my own experiences, emotions, beliefs and values play a significant role in the process (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), as quoted by Porter (2004), autoethnography connects the researcher's truthful personal experiences to cultural situations. It displays multiple layers of consciousness, and the reader is asked to engage in the story line morally, aesthetically, emotionally, and intellectually. Eventually, autoethnography becomes also my stories, the telling of which leads to the reframing of many incidents. The therapeutic value of deconstructing sometimes debilitating narratives is powerful, especially when the reframing of these narratives is done in ways that empower us, and in ways that improve the quality of our lives (Kiesinger, 2002; Atkinson 2006).

Anderson (2006) offers analytical autoethnography, as an expansion on what autoethnography could be, as part of the *analytic* ethnographic tradition. He is committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena, the rationale of which become visible in subsequent published texts. The value of telling emotion-laden stories, on the other hand, cannot be underestimated. Ellis (1997, cited by Anderson, 2006) refers to writing emotionally about our lives as *evocative* ethnography. The focus of this writing is on narrative enquiry about personal stories, which is a mode of explanation and inquiry where the researcher/author is present in the text. "Traditional analysis is about transferring information, whereas narrative enquiry emphasizes communication" (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p.438).

For me, both analytical and evocative autoethnography become a conscious integrated act in telling my stories. This process *requires courage, creativity, and a willingness* to look differently into my narratives (Kiesinger, 2002, p.95, italics original). In doing this, I found some sense of resolution, completion or perhaps an answer to some of my questions about the impact that other people's intrapersonal, intra-group and interpersonal conflicts have on me, the impact that I have on others, and the impact of my conflict management skills and interventions on those who requested my services. In addition I have a need to describe where I am coming from and how I arrived at my current professional identity in terms of my theoretical stance, the use of psychological tests, and my choice of therapeutic techniques.

Unsure of how to approach my struggle with my way of thinking and questions in the preceding paragraph, I was tempted to give up, simply because it seemed too much of an effort to authenticate myself. However, my inner voice and the voice of Johan, my study leader, convinced me that it was worth the effort to turn the struggle into a topic of study. This was deepened by memories of my interpersonal conflict experiences in the past, and by the voices of the managers and employees in need of healing from painful experiences of conflict. Gradually it merged into my autoethnographic story about how to find my own personal, professional and academic voice in my still-evolving intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management interventions. This also involves reconciling the voices of the people I interacted with in my journey, which includes the voices of my past, the voices of my research participants, and the voices of other professional people I interacted with in this context (Johnston & Strong, 2008).

Furthermore, the decision to write my own stories led to many uncertainties and questions. How would I find the balance between writing too much about my own experiences and not enough about others, and vice versa? Would my personal stories, where I was the “victim” of interpersonal conflict at work, influence my construal of other people’s stories? How could I be sure that what I wrote would be truthful? However, in my search for autoethnographic credibility, I found that my concerns were echoed by Jenks (2002, p.184):

“What I found is that who I am affects what I observe, what I write and how others will react to what I say. What I found is that I was somewhat reluctant to embrace this evocative form (Richardson, 2000, p. 931) of self-reflection .... It was the act of writing field notes in a context I both was and wasn’t a part of that allowed me to become an autoethnographer.”

In my literature review, I found nothing that was at all similar to my venture into autoethnographic research that focused on intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management; there was certainly nothing to help me develop an autoethnographic rationale for this study. There are many self-help books about how-to-manage-conflicts in general, but I could find no autoethnographic voices in an academic environment. The literature, however, contributed to my understanding of autoethnography on which I build the sections of my thesis that deal with my personal voice about how I arrived at my present professional identity in terms of my theoretical stance, use of psychometric testing, and choice of therapeutic techniques. It also reflected my feelings and thoughts about my experiences in this context. I have to acknowledge, however, that I struggled to understand autoethnography and that I was “overwhelmed with how much of it was left for me to decide and rationalize ..... Not only this, but in order to share my story, I would have to write using “I” (Johnston & Strong, 2008, p. 52). I am an introvert and a private person, someone who intensely questions myself and who prefers to keep my deeper emotional and other experiences private – sharing them only with close significant others. I am a better listener than a talker. It was therefore difficult for me to ‘share’ my stories through writing. I actually enjoy listening to other people’s stories, but I also enjoy me-time during which I do a lot of self-talking (Ellis, 1989). To quote Johnston and Strong (2008, p. 59): “autoethnography not only pushed boundaries in qualitative research, but it also pushed

boundaries within me” .... and it was these boundaries that enabled me find my own voice and that gave me the confidence to share my stories.

### **2.3.6 Combining ethnography and autoethnography**

Ethnography and autoethnography are closely related and share similar philosophical and political standpoints. Similarities include the position of the researcher as a participant observer, using methods such as case studies, interviews and critical report writing. In order to tell my stories in the context of this study I combine the paradigms of these two research approaches. In his analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of doing so, O’Byrne (2007) concludes that the success of this approach varies. It can be done under certain conditions, these conditions being that the differences, subsets and boundaries of these two methods and their paradigms need to be identified beforehand. The researcher should thoroughly analyse his or her perspectives, which also means that the researcher must have the flexibility to think beyond his or her own paradigm – this process might signal the beginning of new discoveries.

As I said earlier on, ethnography is a form of social research that is designed to study a specific culture or social group. Many ethnographic projects are based on a personal commitment, since there is a close symbiosis between ethnographers and their subject matter (Atkinson, 2006). Currently, ethnography continues to be adopted by other scientific disciplines, while its purpose, processes and specific approaches are continually debated and modified. One such modification is autoethnography which is the study of a culture that involves the self (Ellis & Bochner, 2003; and Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Autoethnography addresses the research process by writing and recording (graphy), culture (ethnos) and self (auto) (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p.2, cited by O’Byrne, 2007, p.1382). Autoethnography becomes a reformulation of ethnography’s traditional twofold emic perspective (description given by the members of the group about their own culture) and etic perspective (the researcher’s interpretation of the culture). Autoethnographic accounts are no substitute for ethnography, however, because ethnography is ultimately about other people. Its accounts do touch on the lives of others, but it does so in a more haphazard, less systematic way than ethnography. However, autoethnographic accounts may suggest possibilities that require ethnographic investigation (Porter, 2004).

When considering a suitable ethnographic approach, I came across O'Byrne (2007, pp.1383-1389), who distinguishes between three specific ethnographic methods with differences that occur across their paradigm span. O'Byrne places the autoethnographic approach in general within the context of each of these:

*Classical (positivistic) ethnography* – this refers to the traditional form of cultural research. Researchers enter remote minority cultures to 'go native' and eventually write these people's narratives by describing their lives. From this perspective, they believe that there is only one ultimate self-apparent reality that they can describe and capture with objectivity in the same way that a camera captures a picture. By combining this form of ethnography with autoethnography, more data can be collected and this, in turn, may discover a truth that validates the research results.

*Critical (postpositivistic) ethnography* – this branch of ethnography is critical of positivist beliefs and their associated research methods, and is based on the assumption that the discovery of an ultimate reality is not as straightforward and simple as proposed. Additional techniques such as triangulation are regarded as a truth-discovering method whereby more accurate knowledge can be obtained. The subjectivity of the autoethnographic researcher becomes an accepted condition of research that needs to be addressed. It brings about multiple perspectives and methods, and invites individuals to participate. Two researchers are required: one representing the traditional ethnographic component and one representing the autoethnographic component.

*Postmodern (critical theory) ethnography* – this approach rejects the idea of finding only one true answer and makes room for the worldview of others; indeed, multiple viewpoints are acknowledged. Postmodern ethnography seeks to promote discussion and dialogue within a scientific context that challenges the status quo. It is based on the idea that the solution of one problem will only generate additional problems. It endorses the assumption that identified patterns only exist within, and not outside, a specific research context. Furthermore, the importance of the researcher's subjective influence on results cannot be overestimated, although postmodernists believe that the researcher possesses an entirely or nearly objective viewpoint within this process. The postmodern perspective allows for the possibility that one researcher can use, simultaneously, both ethnographic and autoethnographic methods.



I decided to utilise the postmodern (critical theory) ethnography in this study because this approach meets my own needs. My justification (in analogy with the example given by O'Byrne, 2007) is as follows: the study of the effects of intrapersonal conflict on intra-group conflict can be studied from my position as a researcher who, externally, observes the intricacies of this situation. The same situation can also be described by me after I become a participant (facilitator) in, for example, a group meeting which endeavours to find a solution to conflict. I will then experience firsthand the effects of managers and employees angrily challenging one another in these meetings: this means that the process involves an autoethnographic depiction. The process as a whole would be acknowledged because, obviously, there will be a variation in data-collection methods. The process will be described as starting from a position of observer, moving to a position of participant as observer and, finally, adopting the position of participant. The postmodern perspective makes possible the following: "that researchers are the tools of research and thus construct their findings, which, in turn, allow them to act in two different roles simultaneously" (O'Byrne, 2007, p.1389).

I also need to decide which autoethnographic approach to follow in this study. Broadly speaking, this requires autoethnography wherein the researcher chooses between the following options as the basis for his or her study (Ellis & Bochner, 2003 as cited by O'Byrne, 2007, pp.1382-1383):

Option 1: His or her own culture, referred to as native autoethnography.

Option 2: A culture into which he or she has been totally accepted, referred to as complete-member autoethnography.

Option 3: The culture of the self, referred to as personal autoethnography.

Option 4: The culture of another as it relates to the self of the researcher, referred to as reflexive autoethnography.

In this study, I have chosen option 4, reflexive autoethnography, since I make the most of my personal experiences, reactions, emotions and thoughts as they relate to the culture of the managers and employees involved in conflicts. My focus is twofold: firstly, why I experienced certain particular sensations and in what context and, secondly, how my interventions contributed to my identity as a counselling psychologist specialising in human conflict management. These insights form the basis for my understanding of the data (O'Byrne, 2007).

### **2.3.7 Ethnographic and autoethnographic research methods and methodology**

It is possible to come to an understanding of the phenomenon we seek to understand by, broadly speaking, watching, listening and sometimes even via participating. Participating is a way of *getting at meaning*, at understanding how people “construe their experiences and what those experiences mean to them” (Muchinsky, 2009, p. 34). My intention is not to do a focused quantitative study by means of measurement and quantification, as Terre Blanche et al (2006) refer to quantitative research. Instead, I will embark on an open-ended, inductive and qualitative exploration of the matter at hand. The research will be undertaken from an interpretive perspective, which implies that the research participants' subjective stories and experiences will be taken seriously as the essence or what is real for them about intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict management at work. I will attempt to make sense of their experiences by interacting with them, listening carefully to what they tell me and recording these experiences (in writing) within a theoretical context. Qualitative research techniques will be used to collect and analyse information (*methodology*).

*Methods* refer to the tools you use, such as participant observation and interviewing. Taken together, methods make up a toolkit that stipulates procedures for data collection, that tells you how to obtain reliable knowledge, construct a hypothesis, design a questionnaire, conduct an interview or engage in participant observation. Writing is also viewed as a method when we treat text and acquire style, voice and character in a certain way. *Methodology* is the justification of the use of a particular set of methods, together with an explanation of why these tools are being used. However, it is not enough to simply list the tools used – methodology has to be grounded in a discussion about why the data was

obtained in a specific manner; this is needed to add transparency and value to the research.

Although ethnography originates in cultural anthropology, its methodology has been adopted by other disciplines in the social sciences, including psychology (Madden, 2010). Methods in ethnographic research are therefore readily available. Bantjes (2011, p.42) says the term *ethnography* does not refer to a single methodology, but to a set of research methods for collecting data about cultural phenomena. In autoethnography, however, “we don’t, methodologically speaking, have standard practices, procedurally, for teaching people to work as autoethnographers” (Flemons & Green, 2002, p.115).

Van Maanen (1995) and Hammersley (1998) describe the following five features of ethnographic research which gives an indication of its methodology as utilised in this study. To this – see number (ii) - I have added two (out of three main data-collection methods) as described by Creswell (2007), namely, participant observation, interviewing and documentation – methods which are adopted by autoethnography as well (Ellis, 2004).

(i) People’s behaviours are studied in *everyday contexts* rather than in experimental conditions or pre-contrived circumstances as created by the researcher. My everyday context is interpersonal conflict management within a university environment.

(ii) Data is collected from a range of data-collection methods, such as:

*Participant observation* – the focus is on human interaction in a specific setting from the insiders’ viewpoints. The purpose is to generate a cultural portrait, to find the meanings the insiders attach to their interactions and, eventually, to generate theoretical truths as interpretive theories (Jorgensen, 1989). The discourse between the researcher and participant within this shared context is a way of being together in the world (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). In this process I valued the emphasis of Neuman (2006) on the importance of trust, openness, active participation, and empathy. Over an extended period of time, I occasionally became involved in the common culture of a group of managers and their employees who were caught up in intense interpersonal conflict issues in the workplace. I was, so to speak, a “first hand insider” in this inner circle, and not a detached outsider (Mouton 2001; Welman & Kruger, 2002). By observing and listening I gained

insider perspectives of these people's interactions and practices. This provided me with a deeper understanding through which a holistic picture could be generated about otherwise inaccessible dimensions of the phenomena investigated (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Hammersley, 1998; Taylor, 2002; Terre Blanche et al, 2006; Brown, 2008; and Bantjes, 2011). Specific aims will be to gain an understanding of the inordinate demands/stressors the participants face in dealing with interpersonal conflict at work, to explore how participants are able to achieve success in dealing with these conflicts, gain an understanding of how participants view conflict, and what their needs are regarding the level of support from the Employee Wellness office and from management.

*Formal and informal conversations* – such as (interactive) interviewing, which is the predominant mode of data collection and documentation thereof in both ethnographic and autoethnographic research. The aim is to focus our attention on “what individuals think, feel and do and what they have to say about it in an interview, giving us their subjective reality in a “formatted” discussion” (Henning, et al., 2004, p.52). I am sensitive to the type of language and symbols used, the narrative frame, and the fact that meaning is created as we speak in two-way communication. Both ask questions and participate on an equal basis. The strengths of interviewing lies in the fact that it gives access to large amounts of data quickly, that it is an effective way of obtaining in-depth data, and that non-verbal communications can be followed up later. Limitations are that cooperation from the research participant is essential for sharing information; he or she must be willing to answer questions accordingly. The different perspectives are equally valid and essential for understanding their narratives: there is no absolute truth. Interviewing methods may be one-to-one qualitative interviews and/or focus groups (Mouton, 2001; Greeff, 2002; Henning, 2004). The dimension of interactive interviewing to autoethnography as interpersonal interaction is added by Ellis (2004), according to whom interactive interviewing produces understandings that are difficult to achieve through more unidirectional information. The form of interviewing engages the emotional experiences of the participants to create deeper, sometimes new, understandings about, for example, conflict experiences. We will then come to a better understanding of what it is to be involved in conflicts. During the process I am also aware of my own personal reactions, perceptions and interactional processes. While they share their stories, the manager and employee are co-constructors in the meaning-making process (Ellis 2004, p.64, 375). As a

counselling psychologist, I draw on my knowledge about individual interviewing skills and techniques, communication skills, and awareness of the processes during interviewing.

The content refers to *what* the client is saying, while the *how* refers to reading between the lines and noticing how the participant talks and behaves during interviews. As indicated by Greeff (2002), I attempt to unfold the meaning of their experiences and to uncover their lived world prior to embarking upon any scientific explanations. The one-to-one interviews are sometimes semi-structured interviews, sometimes unstructured interviews. The unstructured interview is allowed to take place because I am an experienced interviewer. I am respectfully curious of the managers' and employees' psychodynamics, truths, beliefs, values and perceptions in their social context of interpersonal conflict at work. The semi-structured interview is basically an open-ended way of discussing conflict-related topics. I put similar questions to them in these interviews, although these questions have been adapted in line with my perceptions, in order to find out about the background and educational level of the respondents. Semi-structured interviews also allow me to use 'probes' in order to clear up vague responses, or to ask for elaboration of incomplete answers (Welman & Kruger, 2002). Both the interviewer and the participant are co-constructors of the meaning of the data obtained (Henning, et al., 2004). Questions are asked about sensitive and sometimes emotional issues which invite the participant to share facts, ideas and opinions and, possibly, their deepest emotions and personal life experiences.

(iii) I followed an *unstructured approach to data collection*. I did not follow a detailed, drawn-up plan. The categories used for interpreting what the research participants said were not predetermined or fixed: instead, I allowed the themes, patterns and processes of the unfolding data to take their own course. This does not indicate that my research is unsystematic – but to explain that, initially, the data was collected in as raw a form as possible and as wide a front as possible.

(iv) The focus is usually on *a small number of cases, a single setting, a small group of people* and a relatively small scale. This study took place in the single setting of only one university, and involved the random selection of a number of cases (all of which will be discussed in the chapters that follow).

(v) The *analysis of data mainly takes the form of developing a story* and eventually entails the interpretation of the meanings and functions of the participants' actions from which themes, descriptions and explanations are then extracted.

Autoethnographic research methods can be approached from different angles. Some autoethnographers focus on analytical autoethnography, which is more attuned to traditional ethnographic ways of doing research (Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006). Ellis (2004), on the other hand, produces narratives that blend together fiction and science, and this can be regarded as crossing the boundaries between science and art. She asserts that autoethnography should be a narrative written in the first person, a generalisation within a single case extended over time, and offered as a narrative with a storyline, characterisation and a plot line. Ellis values the features of the final written text. In order to explore the experiences of the participants, she uses interactive interviewing techniques. Participants engage in conversations, share personal stories, experiences and feelings. One technique is to share your own personal story first in the hope that this will inspire the participants to share their own personal stories. Another method is case studies – this follows the tradition of ethnographic research (Duncan, 2004).

## **2.4 DATA COLLECTION**

Data-collection methods included as part of the repertoire of participant observation and interviewing are documentation, case studies, psychometric questionnaires, and narrative analysis (Terre Blanche et al, 2006; Greeff, 2002; Mouton, 2001; Pillay, 2006). Since ethnography allows for flexible research methods and procedures, I had to ensure that I did not employ too many of the methods available although, at the same time, I tried to avoid being limited by an inflexible research design.

**Documentation and report writing** - documentation includes the written material collected during the research process. Information gained by participant observation, interviews and questionnaires are communicated in writing by means of field notes and record-keeping. Documentation ensures controlled recordings and documentation of observations. Thick descriptions of the nature of a specific group and its insiders shed light on their open and concealed interactions, thoughts, feelings and behaviour when involved in workplace conflicts (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Hammersley, 1998; Taylor, 2002;

Terre Blanche et al., 2006; Brown, 2008; Bantjes, 2011). Permission was obtained from some of the participants for the interviews to be recorded on tape, to then be transcribed, and the information thus obtained to be used in the research report. The tape recorder made provision for a much fuller record of information obtained from note-taking during the interview. It also allowed me to concentrate on the flow of the interview and the communication with the manager/employee (Greeff, 2002). In other cases, field notes about the interview or group sessions were made during or directly after the interview in order to capture my impressions, thoughts, experiences, observations and interpretations. These notes became a written account of my emotions, prejudices, expectations and preconceptions which made me not only a full participant, but also enabled me to write the final report. Other written material which I used were in the form of process notes, relevant e-mail correspondence and other documents, and written feedback about the process as received from the participants. The diverse content of the documentation was used to formulate interpretive theories, although this content was constantly subjected to redefinitions and interpretations (Jorgensen, 1989).

**Case studies and extractions from cases** – case studies focus on the understanding of the dynamics present within the relevant setting, and are directed to the thoughtful consideration of the uniqueness and idiosyncrasy of each case in all its complexities (Welman & Kruger, 2002). However, I will not make use of case studies as intensive investigations of particular individuals/groups, an approach that is regarded as a *strategy of inquiry* based on certain types of distinguished methodologies (Fouché, 2002, p. 275, italics original). Gladding (2000, p. 492) describes a case study as “... an attempt to understand one unit, such as a person, group, or program, through an intense and systematic investigation of that unit of longitudinally.”

Instead, I will make use of excerpts or extractions (see Strydom, 2002). This entails the identification of the concept which I would like to research. The identified concepts are intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management in a university (i.e. in a bounded system). I will attempt to understand some aspects of these forms of conflict management in depth. Although applicable to case studies per se, I will investigate the conflict phenomena as typical of systems of a social nature. These systems may be one person, a group of people or may even be a set of personal documents and diaries. Any social entity that can be bounded by parameters with “a specific dynamic and relevance,

revealing information that can be captured within these boundaries, may be a case study” (Henning, 2005, p. 32; Welman & Kruger, 2002).

The bounded system in this study is line managers and employees in a university. I went where the action was (Strydom, 2003) and therefore visited the employees and line managers in their departments, held group sessions and workshops, and had interviews and counselling sessions in my office. As mentioned the time frame in which all this took place was over a period of more or less fourteen years, from 1998 to 2012. I used the situations available for my research purposes. These included, for example, a group meeting, chaired by the research participant, where interpersonal misunderstandings between fellow employees were discussed and dealt with, and individual brief psychotherapy sessions in the intrapersonal conflict management context.

I had to formulate the concept within the human conflict systems that I wanted to explore by means of extractions and excerpts. Human conflicts arise within situations in everyday work life. The question can be asked: What is it about the conflict concept that creates a problem for me (Friedl, De Vos & Fouché, 2002)? My problem is that I am, in my capacity as counselling psychologist in the Human Resources department of our university, responsible for human conflict management services to employees and line managers. This is now a full-time profession, and one that places high demands on me; it also requires that I enhance my skills and knowledge and, together, all these factors impact on my identity as a counselling psychologist. By means of ethnographic and autoethnographic research methods I would like to ensure that my concept is explored in depth as far as possible by means of extractions from cases I dealt with in the context of a university. Practical application within the concrete situation is possible because this will guide me in my conflict management journey.

I combined data-collection methods such as interviews, questionnaires and observations in my extractions from cases I have dealt with. These limited units of analysis were studied in detail. (Auto)ethnographic research usually investigates only a small number of cases. It has many interacting variables and influences followed by in-depth descriptions of a number of cases, and all this goes to provide rich longitudinal information (Creswell, 2007; Pillay, 2006).



Hammersley (1998) directs our attention to the concept of *focus*. The data in this study relates to the extractions from conflict management situations focused on managers and employees working at a university. Reference will be made to altercations and arguments between these people. The *focus* is on their perceptions and ways of dealing with their conflicts, and on the content and impact of my conflict management interventions. I will not focus on the specific detail of these conflicts, but instead seek to understand the complexities and processes involved in these conflicts. I was looking for systematic connections, recurring patterns, and consistent regularities among observable behaviours, lived experiences, life stories, causes, treatments, relationships and dynamics (Henning, 2005).

Even though I am working in the same university as the manager and employee subgroup, I had to gain permission, as mentioned, to use these people as participants in my research study. Kelly (2006) refers to the people who have a say over who is allowed to making contact with the participants in a study as the *gatekeepers*. I was researching a sensitive topic and therefore needed the permission of our institution's gatekeepers, namely its executive management, who eventually granted me permission to proceed with the study. The objectives of the research were broadly described as investigating interpersonal conflict management.

The selection of cases from which the excerpts or extractions were taken is an important issue in research (Huberman & Miles, 2002). The diverse managerial, employee population and audience from which the extractions were selected consist of administrative, professional and academic staff in executive, managerial and supervisory positions (including decision-makers, senior administrators, deans, and heads of department, directors, and various frontline services staff). The qualifications of these people varied: some were senior academics, some first-level academics, and some staff members who participated in this study were poorly qualified. The paradox is that the diversity within this culture-sharing group captures core aspects of its culture, such as language, race, position in the institution, personality, and academic qualifications. All of these impacted on interpersonal relationships contributing to, for example, incompatibility or incapacity issues.

The following selection criteria were taken into account in selecting the cases from which excerpts were taken:

- Some of the research participants are senior line managers with subordinates.
- They are employees of the same university situated in South Africa.
- The line manager and/ or employee must have requested my conflict facilitation support in dealing with intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict issues in his/ her department.
- The conflict management issues under discussion are assumed to take place in the context of a university.
- Some of the managers and employees involved confirmed their willingness to participate in this research project, and gave me permission to use their stories in the narrative research report.
- In some cases it was not possible to contact the involved employee and/or manager because the situations referred to happened a few years ago and/or the participants no longer worked at the university (i.e. they had resigned). In these cases records/documentation in files were used. Strict ethical requirements were adhered to, as well as the requirement of confidentiality.

Where possible, I approached line managers and employees personally and asked them to participate and, obviously, assured them of confidentiality and the ethical prescriptions governing this form of research. Having made contact with potential research participants, I obtained their informed consent (this being one determinant of an ethical research study) (Wasserman, 2006).

The assessment of some of the employees and line managers involved took place in the context of brief psychotherapy, group facilitation, and strengths-based counselling. I needed to know a great deal about the client in order to provide him or her with support. People are, in general, not accurate self-reporters – “we cannot rely on what people tell us about themselves” (Peltier, 2001, p.2). Accurate assessment is essential to, for example, good brief psychotherapy. It should meet three criteria: accuracy, efficiency, and comprehensiveness. Psychologists use the clinical interview, (semi) structured interviews and standardised psychometric instruments to assess clients.

## 2.5 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis is a formidable task for the qualitative researcher who has to acquaint himself or herself with the strategies of analysing data. It includes the writing of notes and reflective passages in these notes, the use of metaphors, and the identification of patterns and themes in order to build a logical chain of evidence (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

Qualitative data analysis is a collaborative effort between the researcher and the research participants (Mouton, 2001). I engaged my research subjects via their participation and involvement. Mouton (2001, p.149) views this as a strength because it “enhances chances of high construct validity, low refusal rates” and “ownership of findings”. A limitation can be that the small number of case studies tends to encourage the researcher to generalise his or her research findings. In qualitative research, the parameters of a phenomenon are explored. The purpose of this research is not to generate knowledge about the larger system or to generalise the findings to big populations of managers dealing with interpersonal conflict in the workplace and employees involved in these conflicts. Instead, a purpose of this research is to indicate the contributions that can be made by counselling psychologists and to describe my identity development as a counselling psychologist specialising in intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management. This means that I am unable to generalise findings; it also means that nowhere do I imply that these case studies will represent a group or class of persons.

*The narrative analysis method*, as explained by Lindegger (2006), is based on the “notion of life as a narrative which seeks to reveal the way in which people construct narratives around particular experiences” (Terre Blanche et al, 2006, p.561). It is based on the assumption that people themselves construct their unique life narratives by which they live. I regarded narrative analysis through the use of thematic analysis as the “golden thread” running through the methods referred to above. Narrative analysis provided me with a novel set of procedures for understanding various aspects of the participants’ interpersonal conflict management stories and the impact of coaching and brief psychotherapy on their experiences. By inviting participants to tell me their stories, I encouraged them to discuss and reveal their implicit interpersonal conflict management stories, through which I also tried to discover the subjective meanings attached to these stories.

## 2.6 DATA RELIABILITY

Data reliability is obviously important. The burden of proof is on me, the qualitative researcher, to ensure that my study is carried out as carefully as possible and that the data is an accurate reflection of reality. The trustworthiness and credibility of the data discussed in the preceding sections need to be established, as does the trustworthiness of the procedures followed and the accuracy of my interpretation of the data – all of these which will influence the accuracy of the findings. Hammersley (1998) advocates a “subtle realism” in accepting trustworthiness and validity in ethnographic research. Although he acknowledges that we can never be absolutely sure about the validity of any knowledge claim, he suggests that we can still make reasonable judgments about the likely validity of such claims.

There are several ways of ensuring trustworthiness of qualitative research methods, specifically in the context of (auto)ethnographic studies (Duncan, 2004):

*Delineating the study boundaries.* This study covers almost 14 years of experience in counselling and conflict management. The study is located at a major South African university, across a wide spectrum of academic and administrative departments, and specifically focuses on managers and employees involved in interpersonal, intrapersonal and intra-group conflicts.

*Usefulness of this (auto)ethnographic study.* My aims are that this study: (i) will help readers to understand a situation that might otherwise be confusing; (ii) help readers to anticipate future possibilities and scenarios; and (iii) will act as a guide in highlighting particular aspects of the situation that might otherwise go unnoticed.

*Construct validity.* I used multiple sources of evidence in my (auto)ethnographic account; for example, interactive interviews, report writing, meetings and minutes of meetings, participants’ comments, and psychometric testing.

*External validity.* Participants are not a representative sample of some particular group. In autoethnography Ellis (2004) looks at validity in terms of what happens to readers as well

as what happens to research participants and researchers. In this, she seeks generalisability and intends to open up rather than close down conversation.

*Reliability.* My case study protocol is such that it allows other researchers to follow my procedures. However, ethnographic research differs from other forms of empirical research, in that it is not objective and it cannot be replicated. This is why Bantjes (2011) believes that the concepts of reliability, construct and external validity (see preceding paragraphs) have no real meaning in the context of ethnographic research. He cites five criteria proposed by Richardson (2000) that might be helpful to ensure trustworthiness of data: (i) Does the work make a substantive contribution to our understanding of the phenomenon? (ii) Does the work have aesthetic merit? (iii) Does the researcher demonstrate reflexivity? (iv) Does the work have an emotional and intellectual impact on me? (v) Does the work express a reality?

*Ensuring a scholarly account.* In this study, I have consciously tried not to rely too much on my personal writing style, and especially not to evoke only emotional responses in the reader. Instead, I have tried to follow an analytical approach that explains the relationship between personal experience and broader theoretical concepts. I took into account the fact that my research participants might sometimes tell lies, forget, exaggerate, get things wrong or become confused. However, they all shared their experiences according to the meanings they attached to these experiences.

Two other ways of achieving trustworthiness of data and findings are the following:

*Intercoder reliability measures* (Du Plooy, 2009; Neuman, 2006). A measure is reliable if coders agree with each other. In this study, however, the only coder and observer is me. I was the only researcher involved in this study; nobody else had access to my field notes and confidential records. In this study there was no official ethnographic teamwork where members of the team pass their notes back and forth to each other. My study leader, in his academic capacity and as the external person who had knowledge of the context of the university, acted as the reviewer/intercoder/advisor to ensure that misrepresentation and bias in the interpretation of data did not occur (Du Plooy, 2009). This might be seen as latent coding, also called semantic analysis, where the latent coder looks for the underlying, implicit meaning in the content of a text and, in so doing, adds alternative

perspectives and social characteristics. In this study I did not make use of a formal coding system, but instead used latent coding by looking at the meaning communicated by the participants “in many implicit ways that depend on context, not just in specific words” (Neuman, 2006, p. 326). The research process stretches over a considerable time period; given this, coding stability is not emphasised. I was more concerned to examine my own process of growth in conflict management in the university.

*Triangulation* is traditionally seen as a way of determining something's location using the locations of other things (as is the case with navigation). Surveyors measure distances between objects by making observations from multiple positions. The idea is that “looking at something from multiple points of view improves accuracy” (Neuman, 2006, p. 149). One single landmark on a map only indicates where you are situated, while two landmarks pinpoint one's exact position. Applied to social research, this principle indicates that it is better to look at something from different angles and positions than to look at it in one way – if one relies on a single piece of data, there is “the danger that undetected error in our inferences may render our analysis as incorrect” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 231). I therefore used more than one approach in my investigation, sought diverse types of sources and used more than one method of data collection that could provide insight about the same events and relationships (De Vos, 2002). In accordance with this reasoning, Du Plooy explains that in triangulation “two or more theories, types of sampling, investigators, sources of data, and/or data-collection methods” are used (2009, p. 40). Data source triangulation takes this principle further: the comparison of data relating to the same phenomenon is derived from different phases of the fieldwork. In this study, such comparison was done by combining multiple sources of information and by looking at the different points and cycles in the university setting over a period of years. A typical example of this was the use of mixed methods, where I asked participants to complete a questionnaire (psychometrics), after which the outcomes were discussed with them (in interviews): this, in effect, triangulated the results (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

The combination of multiple sources of information to obtain data is a distinguishing feature of ethnography that makes possible direct observation opportunities, as well as the analysis of behaviours and practices at both individual and group level. This allows information to be cross-validated or triangulated (Maher & Dixon, 2002). For example, the conduct of observations and analysis of data additionally obtained from interviews, and

confidential record-keeping (as documentation) were, in this study, combined with brief psychotherapy, psychometric testing, structured questionnaires and strengths-based counselling processes. This enabled me to study the functioning of the managers and employees in their interpersonal, intra group and intrapersonal conflict context from different angles and positions.

In the long run, however, I am prepared to state that “validity has a human face” (Richardson & Lockridge, 2002, p. 323). Writing (auto)ethnography involves experiencing, thinking, meta-thinking and reading over my field notes and my work critically. This was followed by writing and rewriting about the actualities of what was happening. I relied on my commitment to look deep into the intrinsic features of my findings and feedback processes, and to do this with the aid of the research participants themselves. The only meta-conversations I had were with my study leader and, occasionally, with my professional colleagues involved in the some of the cases I worked on. Together, we followed a multidisciplinary approach concerning the troubled employee, that is, the employee whose problems impacted negatively on his or her productivity, interpersonal relationships, and quality of work.

I also made use of *theory triangulation*, which is the analysis of data from multiple theoretical and conceptual perspectives in the planning stages of the study or when interpreting the data (Du Plooy, 2009; Neuman, 2006). In this study, theory triangulation is part of my eclectic approach, which focuses on psychodynamic perspectives, and cognitive and positive psychology.

O’Byrne (2007, p. 1385) warns that triangulation does not produce the complete truth, but instead a “probabilistic approximation” of truth. Triangulation helps to create enhanced confidence in the knowledge obtained, a confidence that can serve as a building block until this knowledge is flatly contradicted by the findings of other research. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) advise that any method of triangulation should be used with caution. Data must never be taken at face value. Even if the results of the different data sources tally, this provides no guarantee that the inferences and inductive conclusions are correct. Random error could lead to the same, but incorrect, conclusions. In order to address this danger, triangulation should be regarded as attempts to relate the different sorts of data in such a way as to counteract the threats to the validity of analysis. One kind of triangulation

is *respondent validation*, which concentrates on discovering what inferences from a certain set of data is valid (e.g. in the combination of participant observation and interviewing - as is the case in this study). In my *reflexive and spontaneous triangulation* I am aware of the fact that the aggregation of data from different sources may not necessarily produce a complete picture of the phenomenon of human conflict management.

## 2.7 ETHICAL ISSUES

Research ethics involves not only the protection of the welfare of research participants, but also extends into the areas of scientific misconduct and plagiarism. Each researcher in the social sciences has the fundamental ethical obligation to treat human research participants decently and not as objects that are only a means to an end (Terre Blanche, et al, 2006). Participants were therefore assured of their anonymity; they were also assured that their identity would not be disclosed sometime in the future. Indeed, I made a point of building up a position of trust with the participants. However, it was not always possible to do this because some of the cases used and incidents described in this study took place over a period of years, namely from 1998 to 2012. I had to use my discretion about which of these cases I could make the most of without violating promises of confidentiality.

I became aware of a few concerns. In the first place the development of possible intimacy issues between me and the participants is something which, I knew, could derail the research process. Given the nature of the research, participants shared intimate stories with me, that is, stories of the past, present and future. Also, the literature warns that researchers are not therapists and that they should be cautious not to convert the interview into a therapy session. In the context of this study, however, this was something I had to monitor carefully for two reasons. Firstly, I needed to take into account the ethical issue of not steering the interviews towards the confirmation of my expectation that psychotherapy is, at times, an essential forerunner for successful conflict management. Secondly, being a psychotherapist, it might be my natural inclination to guide the interview in the direction of, so to speak, my own professional world.

Muchinsky (2009, p.50) states that the participants in psychological research should be granted *five rights*, namely:



- *A right to informed consent* – participants have the right to know the purpose of the research and to withdraw at any time.
- *A right to privacy* – participants have the right to limit the amount of information they are prepared to reveal about themselves.
- *A right to confidentiality* – participants have the right to decide to whom they are prepared to reveal personal information.
- *A right to protection from deception* – a researcher should under no circumstances intentionally mislead participants.
- *A right to debriefing* – after the study is completed, participants have the right to ask questions about the research, and to receive debriefing in order to eliminate any (unintentional) harmful effects caused by their participation in the study.

There are also four widely accepted *philosophical principles* guiding ethical research, as indicated by Terre Blanche, et al (2006, pp.67-68):

- *Autonomy and respect for the dignity of persons* – I received voluntary informed consent from the research participants, and strove to protect individual and institutional confidentiality.
- *Non-maleficence* (*maxim primum non nocere*, directly translated from Latin: *first, do no harm* [www.enotes.com/public-health-encyclopedia/nonmaleficence](http://www.enotes.com/public-health-encyclopedia/nonmaleficence)) – the researcher has to ensure that no harm is intentionally visited upon the research participants, and that no participant is wronged in any way. Any intervention must result in more good than harm.
- *Beneficence* – the researcher attempts to maximise the benefits that the research will bring to the participants, and weighs up the relative risks against these benefits.
- *Justice* – the researcher continuously treats the participants with fairness and equity.

In my research, I have followed all these principles and obligatory requirements.

## **2.8 SUMMARY**

In this chapter I discussed the methodology of my research study. I discussed the principles of qualitative research, and the methods of ethnographic and autoethnographic

research used in this study. I then explained the rationale and content of extractions and excerpts from cases I utilised and the information-finding approaches I used. I made it clear that, in this study, I have taken an ethnographic and autoethnographic stance by sharing my experiences as a psychologist focusing on intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management within the context of a university. The focus of the narrative approach is on my own stories (autoethnography), and on those of the research participants (ethnography).

In the present study it will become evident that the combination of ethnography and autoethnography was the most suitable approach to use. The ethnographic process occurs in real situations where the managers and employees are themselves in their natural work environment: this is the context in which their behaviour in human conflict situations is studied and data obtained (from a variety of sources). I have interpreted these actions against the theoretical background of brief psychotherapy, conflict counselling, group facilitation, and strengths-based counselling. The autoethnographic approach used reflects my personal experiences, thoughts, feelings and actions.

## CHAPTER 3

### FORMING AN APPROACH TO CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a state of unresolved differences. *Intrapersonal conflict* occurs within the individual (e.g. when someone finds it impossible to make decisions). *Interpersonal conflict* takes place between two or more individuals (e.g. an argument between two or more colleagues). *Intra-group conflict* takes place within a group (e.g. between members of the same department working on the same task). *Intergroup conflict* happens between two or more groups (e.g. between two different departments in the institution, or between the institution and the unions). These types of conflict are not mutually exclusive and therefore an individual may be involved in more than one at a time. These conflicts happen in the context of interpersonal relationships, and interpersonal relationships can be regarded as an association between two or more people that ranges from the fleeting to the enduring (Augsburger, 1992; Buon, 2008; Bergh & Theron, 2008; De Bono 1985; Cloke & Goldsmith, 2005; Shapiro, 2004; Tillet, 1999; Van Epps, 1990; Wylie & Grothe, 1996; SDI Certification, 2011).

In this chapter I will describe how I developed my present stance as a counselling psychologist specialising in human conflict management within a university. I will begin by describing the culture in which I have to function. I will then discuss how I came to accept the theoretical stance of a number of different psychotherapeutic approaches, all of which I found to be useful. In the last section of the chapter I will describe how I came to use specific psychometric tests and various brief psychotherapies. The chapter will be autoethnographic because, in this chapter, I tell the story of the development of my identity as a counselling psychologist doing conflict management at a university.

## 3.2 CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND THE WORKPLACE

The university deals with conflicts in several phases. In the first phase, also called the soft approach (which is used in dealing with interpersonal conflicts), for which I am responsible, the purpose is to find solutions without taking legal action. This includes consultations, assessments, counselling, brief psychotherapy, group interventions, and report writing. The second phase is dealt with by another department – this department is responsible for legal actions such as grievance procedures, disciplinary hearings, written warnings and other labour relations activities, none of which are part of my portfolio.

The culture of the institution is competitive and achievement orientated. The *administrative and professional* staff focus on the support they provide to the academic departments. Amongst these staff members, competitiveness is seen, for example, in competing for appointments at higher post levels, high scores in performance appraisals in order to receive performance bonuses or, in some departments, in the desire to be chosen as employee of the year. These staff members nevertheless take pride in their task of ensuring that the university's administration functions effectively. The *academic* staff is globally, internationally, nationally and institutionally in a fiercely competitive market. In the academic world they have to compete for promotion and acknowledgement by means of research publications in accredited journals or by delivering papers at (inter)national congresses or conferences. In previous times, academics could focus on their academic tasks, namely, research, teaching and community participation. However, as higher education institutions' financial resources have become increasingly scarce, they are now forced to deal with financial constraints and budgeting. In some cases, restrictions are placed on the advertising of posts and new posts can only be created in extremely well-motivated cases. As a result, the lack of staff capacity has increasingly become a reality that has to be dealt with by heads of department and other line management functionaries. Some employees suffer from high stress levels and burnout as a result of their high workload and departmental dynamics. Stress and burnout are manifested in psycho-physical conditions such as hypertension, major depression and asthma, and in lifestyle-related diseases such as overweight and diabetes (Van der Merwe, 2004). Indeed, the presence of stress among staff is indicated in the annual reports received from the university's medical schemes. Some employees become distressed and emotionally tired which, in turn, contribute to intrapersonal, intra-group and interpersonal conflicts and, in some

cases, in absenteeism problems. Issues such as real or perceived unfair distribution of work contribute to high stress levels and conflict. When concerns of non-performance emerge, many members of staff take refuge behind claims of high work-load while, in fact, these staff members are by no means high performers. On the other hand, some staff members suffer from what I would call a *responsibility disorder*. By this, I mean they take on too many responsibilities. This means they end up working overtime – either to provide the university with a high quality of service or to meet the demands of their self inflicted work-related perfectionism.

In the working world of administrative/professional support services, there is occasionally awareness that many academics perceive non-academics as being inferior. Since I work in this section, I can vouch for this perception as occasionally being accurate: for the purposes of this study, I had to ‘convince’ academics that I am competent, skilled and professional enough to manage their conflicts and to help them cope with difficult circumstances. To substantiate my claims, I made use of the university’s employee benefits, for example, unlimited access to the Library, where I found academic literature that supported my work concerning the (psycho)dynamics of conflict. I also attended CPD (continuing professional development) workshops to stay abreast of the newest developments in psychotherapy, conflict management, group dynamics and counselling. I enjoyed all these workshops because I can honestly say that I am a lifelong learner. However, theory and practice need to merge. Theory is of little use without the practical skills required to deal with the complexities of conflict in the workplace.

I accept the obvious fact that I am not knowledgeable about the subject content of the different professional, administrative and especially academic departments. However, I also have a professional specialist knowledge field, i.e. I am a qualified counselling psychologist who is skilled in intrapersonal, intra-group and interpersonal conflict management. My professional status sometimes contributes to some employees’ and line managers’ feelings of ambivalence regarding my services: they feel threatened when they learn that conflict in their relationships or department necessitates intervention, especially intervention by a psychologist. Of course, nobody wants to stand accused of being responsible for strained and unhappy relationships in the workplace or to acknowledge that they are not skilled to manage their own conflicts. However, as raising consciousness is explicit in the work of counselling psychologists, I go along with “bringing the

unconscious to the conscious, making the implicit explicit, and calling forward that which has been marginalized” (Bantjes, 2011, p. 97).

Over time, I have gradually developed the ability to think critically about my role and the meaning of being a counselling psychologist in the university’s department of Human Resources. I have become consciously aware of the course and progress of my interpersonal conflict management activities and the various developments in the field of counselling psychology in an institutional context. I have, in fact, begun to ask questions, such as: What does interpersonal conflict management in organisations against the background of counselling psychology actually stand for? How do I reconcile the diverse approaches of counselling, positive psychology’s strengths-based counselling and brief psychotherapy? How do my personal preferences, dynamics, perceptions, experiences and characteristics influence the way in which I deal with interpersonal conflict management? What psychological interventions should be employed to manage intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict at an individual and group level? What is the depth of these interventions? What theoretical paradigms should be followed? Would an eclectic approach be a better option?

### **3.3 A JOURNEY BEGINS**

I was appointed as a counselling psychologist in 1997 in the then relatively new post which was previously held by another counselling psychologist. This person’s job description was focused on counselling (mostly) emotionally troubled employees, and included the need to deal with interpersonal conflicts. My work was gradually extended to include group work within departments, the focus being on diversity management. Occasionally, this work was an indirect way of dealing with interpersonal conflicts. During these (initial) years, I was not consciously concerned about what counselling implies and what the differences might be between counselling and psychotherapy. I was so involved in my own learning curve (i.e. on interpersonal conflict management) that I almost frenetically attended every course I could on the topic; at the same time, I read a plethora of ‘how-to’ books and academic literature which, I hoped, would guide me towards the ‘correct’ way of doing things. Gradually I realised that experience itself was one of the main preceptors.

The magnitude of the counselling and psychotherapeutic task of attending to so many employees' psychological, emotional and relationship problems is simply beyond the capabilities of any one person. The outsourcing of long-term counselling and psychotherapy services (coordinated by me in my capacity as Head of Counselling Services) to external service providers has proven to be a better option. The availability of these services is nevertheless an institutional acknowledgement that employees' counselling and psychotherapy needs should be addressed – something which could not be done by the industrial psychologists in the Department of Organisational Development where I was working at the time, that is, more or less between 1998 - 2006.

Perhaps I should make it clear that I mainly work with individuals and small groups and, occasionally, with bigger groups depending on whether a faculty as a whole is involved, several departments or a few individuals within these departments. My purpose is not to bring about fundamental changes in the institution at macro level, but instead to support employees at a grassroots level in coping with conflict situations that impact negatively on their work performance, productivity, and physical and mental health and wellness. One can say that these counselling services indirectly have (or have the potential to have) a positive impact on, for example, productivity and the prevention of absenteeism and mental illnesses. I have to clarify my role to myself, my fellow colleagues, the employees seeking my help, and management. I set my boundaries in order not to be 'abused' or expected by the involved role-players to line up with them as their personal supporter, information gatherer or advocate against the other parties in the context of their work-related interpersonal conflicts.

As mentioned, my task is neither to facilitate change at a macro institutional level nor to continuously report to management about institutional policies that have a direct effect on employees' emotional wellness (e.g. the effect of change and transformation). However, when requested to do so, I do report to management about certain issues as these directly relate to employee wellness. For example, I once had to report to management about the initial impact of the merger on employees, and this included my reporting on identified trends and patterns. In 2002 the Department of Education in South Africa announced the restructuring of the higher education landscape in South Africa with the implication that mergers had to take place between higher education institutions. These merger processes had an enormous impact on the higher education landscape. When entering such merger

processes, employees become confronted with major career and personal challenges, and these challenges had an especially stressful and dysfunctional impact on the employees involved (Fourie, 2008). The harsh reality manifested after the merger also had an impact on me. I became anxious and uncertain about the future of my own job. However, I did not have the luxury of finding emotional support for myself as I became the caregiver to many of the traumatised employees, especially those involved in conflicts flowing from the uncertainties of the merger. Fear and uncertainty bring about differences of opinion that are then manifested in intrapersonal and interpersonal clashes and conflicts. For some employees, the merger was the “trigger” for unresolved issues from their own past: these issues then became hard-core issues that impacted on their emotions, mindset, and interpersonal relationships at work. During this period, i.e. the acute phase more or less from 2002 to 2008, I often had to fulfil the role of an advice-giver, telling others how to deal with their emotional uncertainties or informing them about the merger processes as far as possible. Some of them harboured the unrealistic notion that I had the power to put an end to the processes they so vehemently opposed. For some employees, the merger involved relocation to another campus in another city with all its accompanying changes, which included travelling and housing costs, and the emotions of anger and uncertainty. Sometimes I had to advise employees that their feelings were normal under the circumstances, although these circumstances were undoubtedly very unpleasant. I had to explain the marked impact of change and transformation on people, change that eventually caused them to experience serious problems at intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group levels. Many of these employees did not want or request long-term psychotherapeutic processes. Giving advice was contradictory to my training as a counselling psychologist. The implication was that I had to add the roles of *advisor and coach and mentor* as other dimensions to my identity as a counselling psychologist and conflict management specialist.

However, the psychologist in me would not be placated; I kept feeling that there must be something more I could do, rather than simply being an adviser and caregiver. I knew that conflict is always the symptom of something deeper. I became intrigued by the processes of psychology, not only in its treatment paradigm, but also in its paradigm of positive psychology, which emphasises the enhancement of wellbeing and own inner strengths (which is a core element in this paradigm). One of my efforts to address my concern was that I co-developed and co-facilitated change management workshops with the purpose of



bringing the message that one can take charge of one's own feelings, actions, thoughts, and eventually one's career, with the support of one's inner strengths and the joint strengths of the group in which we function (Van Schoor & Van Niekerk, 2007). The joint strengths of the group will be discussed in chapter 6. I became inquisitive about the different dimensions in employees' psyches. How did they cope? What were their strengths? How could these strengths be utilised to enhance their wellness and coping skills? This, it seemed to me, was a better approach than solely focusing on treatment and the measurement of possible pathology.

### **3.4 BEING A COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGIST**

As a result of the above, my quest to deepen my understanding of counselling psychology began. Counselling as a profession grew from the guidance movement: this is a process of helping people to make important life choices and encouraging them to choose what they value most. This may be choosing a preferred lifestyle (e.g. career choice, refraining from drug abuse or accepting couple therapy). From these beginnings, counselling developed into an independent profession where counsellors work in areas that involve relationships. Generally speaking, counsellors help people with personal, social, educational and career concerns, as well as enabling them to make decisions, solve problems, and adjust to change (Gladding, 2000; Bor & Palmer, 2002; Van Niekerk & Prins, 2001; Swanepoel & Van Niekerk, 2002).

In October 1997, the American Counseling Association ([www.counseling.org](http://www.counseling.org)) found it necessary to accept the following definition of the practice of professional counselling:

The practice of professional counseling is the application of mental health, psychological or human development principles through cognitive, affective, behavioral or systemic interventions and strategies that address wellness, personal growth or career development, as well as pathology.

In 2010, a revised definition of counselling appeared, indicating that it is 'a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals' (<http://www.counseling.org>). In South Africa, counselling psychologists are registered as psychologists in the category of Counselling

Psychology according to the requirements of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) which is a statutory body established in terms of the [Health Professions Act 56 of 1974](#). The Professional Board for Psychology is one of twelve professional boards that operate under the jurisdiction of this Act. The HPCSA describes the counselling psychologist's scope of practice as follows:

Counselling psychologists assist relatively well-adjusted people in dealing with normal problems of life concerning all stages and aspects of a person's existence in order to facilitate desirable psychological adjustment, growth, and maturity. [www.hpcsa.co.za](http://www.hpcsa.co.za)

My understanding of the work of counselling psychologists is in line with the definitions and explanations given above. My purpose is to facilitate, in my clients, desirable psychological adjustment, growth, and maturity, and to optimise their psychological wellbeing. This includes the identification of intrapersonal issues, psychopathology, and a broad range of adjustment disorders. My personal understanding is that counselling psychologists are suitably qualified and empowered by their initial training and their continuous professional development (CPD) courses to work psycho-therapeutically with clients who present with a variety of mental health problems and life difficulties. In addition, Ivey, Ivey and Simek-Morgan (1997, p. 5) refer to psychodynamic counselling and therapy when they express their view that 'the past is often a prelude to the future'. Unknowingly, the person repeats his or her early childhood or extremely traumatic experiences in later life in his or her present relationships. The psychodynamic therapist believes that change will not be lasting unless the client has some sense of how his or her present actions and reactions relate to past experiences.

I have seen this in many of my counselling sessions with employees. In one case, the female employee was in almost permanent conflict with her line manager. Eventually we discovered that she had a conflict-ridden relationship with her abusive and domineering stepbrother. Her *there-and-then* emotional reactions were activated by the *here-and-now* situation with her direct line manager, whose actions and way of communicating unconsciously reminded her of her stepbrother. Her unresolved anger and re-experiencing of past occurrences "arrived in the relationship" with her line manager, that is, "something has arrived to replace the real relationship" (Brown, 2008, p. 67). In psychotherapeutic language, this is regarded as transference, which is the "impact that the other person's

communication has on us as therapists” (Brown, 2008, p.67). Although the manager-employee relationship is not therapeutic, I found the concept applicable to this situation. Only after creating awareness of and making her mindful about this transference could we work towards a solution whilst simultaneously referring her for long-term psychotherapy.

I do not involve myself in long-term psychotherapy with employees. I refer them, if necessary, to external service providers such as psychologists or psychiatrists. One of my ethical considerations is to explain to the employee that our discussions or counselling are often based on psychological therapeutic insights. I am careful not to take the therapeutic process too far because doing so might harm the employee’s psychological functioning. In cases where I am of the opinion that it might be detrimental to the client (because I might open up certain emotions without my then being available for long-term therapeutic follow-up) I discuss the necessity of long-term psychotherapy with the employee concerned.

Bantjes (2011) makes the point that it is not a simple task to describe the work of the counselling psychologist, since there is currently some confusion about the professional identity of counselling psychologists in South Africa, partly because they practise their profession in diverse settings and in a variety of ways. Given this, I decided that my starting point was the work I am currently doing. I use a holistic framework when working with my clients and assess issues within a wide context; these issues include relationship issues and mental health problems, especially anxiety, depression, trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder and, occasionally, psychosis. I work collaboratively in a multidisciplinary context in order to explore employees’ underlying issues in the hope to empower them to consider change. The focus is on personal insight and decision-making in order to improve their sense of personal wellbeing and alleviate distress, although I know that insight alone does not set in motion permanent change. I also focus on the application of psychological theories and techniques in my eclectic approach to help people deal with everyday problems in the workplace, and to help them deal with disturbing life events and mental health issues.

### 3.5 ECLECTIC APPROACH OR PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC INTEGRATION?

Human behaviour is so complex that no one school of thought in psychology, each with its own particular underlying assumptions, can explain it all. Any school of thought always misses some aspect of human behaviour. Two of the more recent developments in psychotherapy which try to address this problem are the approaches of eclectic and psychotherapeutic integration. *Psychotherapeutic integration* is an approach to psychotherapy that moves beyond a single-school approach towards obtaining input from other perspectives. It concentrates on the relationship between theory and technique. Integration implies the systematic use of concepts and techniques from different approaches, while refraining from the simplistic and impromptu application of any technique (Brown, 2008). The *eclectic approach* to psychotherapy focuses on techniques borrowed from different therapeutic approaches (Brown, 2008) and provides the best of all possible counselling and psychotherapeutic worlds; the strength of one system often balances the weaknesses of another (Ponzo, 1976). Depending on the client's problems, this approach uses techniques from various forms of psychotherapy based on multiple psychological perspectives. However, the common factors of and techniques in psychotherapy are present in most and cut across all theoretical paradigms (Stricker, 2005). In this study my focus is on the *eclectic approach* to psychotherapy.

Psychotherapists are trained in different and multiple methods, but frequently differ in the methods they apply when dealing with their clients' life's challenges, personal concerns or emotional problems. Corsini (1990) says that there has been a shift in opinion about staying in one of the major and well-known theories and modes of psychotherapy – today, an eclectic position has taken precedence. All psychotherapists are acquainted with many different paradigms and theories. They are often effectively eclectic, even if they choose to focus on specific methods associated with a particular approach. Technique and method should always be secondary to the present need of the client and the psychotherapist's sense of what is the right thing to do with a given client at a given moment in time. Each therapist eventually develops his or her own integrated approach and personal style. However, this approach can be limiting, simply because it often lacks consistency: two eclectic psychologists may well combine the same theories, and yet come up with completely different ideas. Maybe this lack of agreement will mean that the eclectic approach is unlikely to have very much support. On the other hand, this may prove to be

strength, because it means that theory will not limit psychology to one form of research or practice.

Bantjes (2011) explains the approach of *theoretical polygamy* as an attempt to integrate competing theories and thus to form the theoretical basis. They therefore do not align themselves exclusively with one theoretical approach e.g. for research projects. Psychology is practised because human behaviour has multiple and interrelated determinants, such as genetic factors, neurological processes, unconscious intra-psychic drives, needs, cognitive processes, intrapersonal and interpersonal factors, group dynamics and, even, metaphysical forces. Potentially, so many of these factors could play a role in conflict management that it becomes impossible to consider them all in a study such as this. Like Bantjes (2011), I believe that any attempt to formulate a psychological approach to conflict management will, at best, be a simplification of reality. However, the incompleteness of my ethnographic and autoethnographic approach, based on my eclectic theoretical and practical insights, does not invalidate the usefulness of this research study. Throughout this study, I used the narrative approach, which is based on my eclectic choice of psychological theories. I freely employed a variety of psychological concepts and theories which I regarded as helpful in clarifying the various dimensions of conflict management I have to deal with.

### **3.6 DEVELOPING AN ECLECTIC APPROACH**

The (brief) psychotherapy and counselling repertoire of each psychologist is diverse in nature. My own preferred eclectic approach refers to those skills I know best, and represents my choice of specific psychotherapeutic fields and techniques, some of which I have transformed into brief psychotherapeutic techniques. In the context of this study, my eclectic approach is directed to resolving major current conflicts and stumbling blocks and working towards relatively conflict-free intrapersonal dynamics as well as interpersonal and intra-group relationships, rather than attempting to change my clients' personality structures (Castelnuovo-Tedesco, 1967). The subject matter of the eclectic approach I follow includes a focused array of theoretical approaches or theoretical polygamy (Bantjes, 2011) as expressed via a specific *modus operandi*. My brief psychotherapy repertoire consists of the following approaches: psychodynamic and psychoanalytic perspective (including psychodynamic assessment), relationship enhancement, hypnotic

communication, transactional analysis, rational emotive behaviour therapy and cognitive behaviour therapy. These approaches and some of their techniques are utilised in combination with the theoretical paradigm of positive psychology and its psychodynamic assessment, as well as group interventions based on strengths-based counselling and coaching. Together, these various techniques reflect my own transformation and the road I have travelled in my work as a counsellor specialising in conflict management. I expand on this topic in chapters 4, 5 and 6, which also includes my personal narrative of growing from a human conflict management specialist towards becoming a counselling psychologist responsible for intra- and interpersonal and intra-group conflict management. My intention is not to develop a meta-theory which encourages assessments of complex concepts from a diverse range of models, and which allows for the simultaneous conceptualisation of clients' problems and intervention at construct levels that are conceptually separate (Brown, 2010). Instead, I would rather indicate the interplay between my techniques and the different ways of working with my clients. I do not regard my approach as being a 'bundle of tricks' or stand-alone techniques; instead, I believe that it provides me with a conceptual framework against which I can appraise my interventions as being meaningful for both myself and my clients.

My interest explains my spontaneous attention, motivation, attitude and positive feelings towards making the content of my eclectic approach operational (Oosthuizen, 1967). My passion for these methods in a professional relationship with employees does not allow me to use these methods rigidly and in a technical manner, that is, as clinical cold manoeuvres. Instead, these methods are my work skills which, according to Cook and Cripps (2005), constitutes the ability to do something efficiently and, if necessary, quickly – skills acquired by purposeful study and practice. My job satisfaction is derived from my intrinsic liking for my work, hence my perseverance in keep on doing what my job requires of me, despite periodic high levels of stress and moments of despondency in the face of possible failures or a workload that is simply overwhelming.

According to the online StrengthsFinder Questionnaire (Rath, 2007), my personal strengths are invaluable in my work in conflict management. My *lifelong learner* strength means that I have a mental outlook that seeks to learn and to continuously improve on my knowledge. I approve of the philosophy of the HPCSA concerning continuing professional development, which is defined as 'the acquisition of new, current knowledge and

measurable professional skills, with an end benefit to the patient or client'. My *individualisation* strength causes me to want to help people by finding out what the unique qualities of each person are and by thinking about how diverse people can work together productively. As a *maximiser*, I enjoy focusing on people's strengths as a way to stimulate personal and group excellence and to empower them to take control of their own wellness and destiny. My *restorative* strength helps me to determine what is wrong and to try to resolve problems, obviously in cooperation with the person(s) concerned. This particular strength confirms my awareness that I am skilful in dealing with problems, and I believe that this study will help to improve all these skills. Finally, these strengths are all enhanced by my *empathy*, which helps me not to be too idealistic and to sense the feelings and emotions of other people within their unique situations. Taken together, I feel that my strengths are unconsciously guiding me to undertake this study, that I am destined to do this work in order to reach my destination.

Narratives of the past, present and future are a good way to start interpersonal conflict management sessions. Our lives are embedded in different stories about our personal life and work, both of which include elements of conflict. Throughout the world, storytelling is a basic human activity and an important aspect of human interaction – it plays a central role in organising, maintaining and circulating knowledge of us and our worlds. It is self-revealing concerning our intentions, life experiences, understanding of life and the meanings we attach to life, our joys and griefs. Stories are told as a sequence of events through the spoken word or use of language with the purpose of educating, transferring information, influencing others, making sense of experience, and celebrating our joy or expressing our grief. This narration of our history (his-story) emphasises the importance of stories for understanding human nature and its social environment. It provides abundant material for studying the human psyche, because it opens a door to the understanding of complex dynamics in the makeup of our minds (Cramer, 1996; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Pauw, 2004a). Individual narratives develop through the process of what is known as 'storying' our life experiences, which refers to the continuous process of incorporating prominent parts and events in our self-narratives. Some of these events are important and very prominent in the person's mind, thoughts and actions. Sometimes, however, they are stored in his or her unconscious mind as dissociated material (in the case of, for example, severely traumatic experiences). Other events are insignificant and can be left behind,

even to the extent of being forgotten (Christie, 2009; Pauw, 2004a; Phillips & Frederick, 1995).

### **3.7 PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS: DEVELOPING AN ECLECTIC APPROACH**

An examination of someone's mental status (which includes psychological assessment and treatment) is based on the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects of human functioning, which are the dimensions in which all psychotherapeutic work is undertaken (Brown, 2008). My training as a counselling psychologist included the use of psychological assessment instruments, and these instruments became an intrinsic part of my identity as a counselling psychologist.

In the initial years of my work at the university, however, significant life-changing events occurred, as a result of the drastic transformation in the political landscape of South Africa in 1994, when the apartheid regime came to an end. During those years, there was an enormous and understandable sensitivity about the use of psychological assessment instruments that had been developed and used before 1994. This sensitivity was based on the conviction that these instruments were designed for the white population, that they were the result of our apartheid and colonial heritage, and that these instruments were based on research done by western countries. This viewpoint closely reflects the development of certain political ideologies and practices in South Africa (Coetzee & Schreuder, 2010).

In hindsight, this resistance to psychological assessment instruments contributed to my search for alternative instruments which, in turn, added to my psychological assessment 'repertoire', in that I started to include the tools of assessment instruments that focused on people's strengths (Rath, 2007) and coping strategies (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989). My search was authenticated by the positive psychology paradigm that teaches us not to get stuck in psychological pathology (although the paradigm does not deny the existence of pathologies). My focus therefore included the maintenance and enhancement of mental health as adaptive mental mechanisms (Seligman, 2002a, 2002b; Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007; Rath, 2007). Added to this is the opinion of Bantjes (2011), who argues that counselling psychology has an inherently positive focus on themes such as health,



wellbeing, solutions, and daily life adjustment issues such as work place and interpersonal difficulties. It is part of the work of counselling psychologists to access their clients' strengths, skills, and talents and to help them to see themselves as competent, powerful individuals who have the ability to solve problems. The focus on a person's strong points balances his (or her) negative perception and interpretation of his problematic situation with his ability to develop and maintain a positive attitude that focuses on the possibility of change. The positive reaction received from employees from all races, gender and walks of life in the university when we communicated these test results substantiated my belief that it is a tremendous relief for people to learn about the healing and empowering function of their positive characteristics.

In my conflict management sessions I always have to consider whether the use of psychometric testing (using questionnaires) will help to solve the specific employee's/manager's predicament, because testing is not a given for everyone. The psychological assessment or testing as referred to by Mouton (2001) is done by means of standardised projective techniques and psychological questionnaires. My choice indicates the type of information I regard as valuable in my interactions with the managers and employees who seek my help in interpersonal conflicts. These tests offer valuable analytical contributions based on their underlying theoretical paradigms. Areas of relevance in the client's psychological makeup to the study are identified, but the test results are part of a broader assessment of the person. Multiple methods of or resources for assessment are therefore used; in my case, I had to make use of psychological assessment instruments developed before 1994 simply owing to a lack of other suitable instruments. However, I integrated the assessment outcomes with information from interviews, discussions, observation, information about the person's history and context or setting into which the assessment results would be received. I nevertheless maintain, as Newmark (1985) recommends, some degree of scepticism about the role of testing. A test instrument is simply an objective and standardised measure of a sample of behaviour. Tests are open to human error and no test is magic. I use the test to augment understanding or to initiate communication with an employee who finds it difficult to face and/or discuss his or her problems. This catalyst provides in-depth information about the employee/ line manager that helps me to understand their inner and subjective experiences impacting on their conflict realities. That said, I always verify the content of the test results with the employee. Inner experiences refer to pleasant and unpleasant

thoughts, and/or feelings, and/or sensations, the latter as experienced by one of the five senses. Jung (1963, p. 19) says the following: “Outward circumstances are no substitute for inner experience ... I can understand myself only in the light of inner happenings.” Since there is interplay between a person’s inner and outer world, it is necessary, in these discussions, to take note of the client’s external experiences or outward circumstances that influence his or her functioning as well as, for example, his or her home, family, work, social, cultural and financial influences (Vorster, 2003).

A critical part of ethnography is the interpretive or ideographic approach as the rationale for psychometric testing. This approach provides a *thick description* of an event or person (Neuman, 2006, p 382, italics original) and is a methodological approach that involves the careful study of an individual case rather than the study of average tendencies of large groups (Welman & Kruger, 2002; Meyer et al., 1997). In this study I do not always go into such depth, but nevertheless use this in-depth information about a client because it provides valuable information about the unique human existence, psychological make-up, functioning and processes of the employee/manager.

The ideographic method is mainly employed in a psychoanalytic, humanistic and person-orientated approach. Meyer et al., (1997) identified four aspects of human existence according to the psychodynamic approach, namely:

- a The human being as an individual (individual existence); this involves depth psychology and the use of the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) for psychometric testing.
- b The individual in relation to other people (social existence); the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation (FIRO-B) is used for psychometric testing.
- c The individual in relation to his or her physical environment (physical existence).
- d The individual in relation to a transcendent environment (transcendental existence).

In this study I am interested in the individual and social existence of the manager/employee. The *human being as an individual* was originally studied from the perspective of depth psychology, depth psychology itself being based on psychodynamic theory. The psychodynamic approach emphasises the intrapersonal aspects of an individual’s functioning, and deals with all aspects of a person’s functioning, namely, beliefs, attitudes, cognitions, emotions, volition, and the symptoms manifesting in observable behaviour (Brown, 2008). It is, although controversial, probably the most widely known school of

psychological thought. In psychodynamic theory, the emphasis is on the important role ascribed to the deep unconscious aspects of the personality as determinants of behaviour. This emphasis is probably the only factor that the various depth psychologists have in common and which distinguishes them from psychologists who follow other schools of thought. Its emphasis is on the dual nature of consciousness. "The fundamental hypothesis of depth psychology is that a person's inner, subjective conscious consists of various layers that differ in their depth and in the extent to which they are conscious or unconscious" (Meyer et al., 1997, p. 43). See also Scott (1996) and Peltier (2001). I am of the opinion that these deeper layers of human functioning are of great importance in intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict management. In my context I use this approach (although with the utmost caution and care) because it addresses my concern about only 'telling' the person how to deal differently with his or her conflicts. In fact, changing one's behaviour is by no means easy. In this respect, the Thematic Apperception Test is used in order to gain insight into the possibly unconscious aspects of the employee's/manager's personality that impact on his or her interpersonal conflict management behaviour.

The study of the *individual in relation to other people* acknowledges that the social environment is an important variable that influences human functioning. In this study, I shall be referring to the work of the socially-orientated psychoanalytical perspective of Karen Horney, and her view of how personal needs influence a person's style of interpersonal relating. I also make use of the FIRO-B questionnaire, because this gives an indication of how a person typically interacts in interpersonal situations.

### **Thematic Apperception Test projection technique**

I must confess that I am personally intrigued by the storytelling orientated TAT projection technique and that I am interested in its use in an institution. My interest in this approach was triggered by my father, who was also a psychologist, and who occasionally used his professional knowledge in his vocation as a minister of religion as well. I helped him in his private practice where we often had discussions about the interpretation of TAT protocols. I became intrigued with the richness and depth of the information exhibited by the clients' stories. I sometimes wondered what my stories would reveal about myself, and I even tried to analyse my own stories. Furthermore, I used the TAT in my M.A. (Psychology) dissertation (Van Niekerk, 1991) and my study leader, Professor Du Toit, is regarded as

an authority on the subject (Du Toit, 1968; Du Toit & Piek, 1974, Du Toit, 1985). He taught me to regard every word as significant within the broader context, and to analyse people's stories holistically. The father of the TAT, Henry Murray (1943), a personality theorist, emphasises individual differences rather than group tendencies. These individual differences were eventually identified in technical terms as an *ideographic approach* to the study of persons – this science is concerned with understanding one particular event and/or person (Weiner & Greene, 2008).

What I particularly appreciate about TAT is that it is a projective medium and storytelling technique that expresses the narrative of the storyteller, and that it focuses on his or her experiences, feelings, thoughts, behaviour, desires, wishes and intentions as these have unfolded over a period of time. The narrative truth depends on how well the clinician captures the dynamics of the storyteller's stories – which, of course, is a profound task. The narrative refers to something deeper than the surface content, something that is often not consciously available to the storyteller, or with his or her intention to reveal this deeper truth. According to Dana (1985) and Bellak and Abrams (1997) Murray's need-press theory consists of various need dichotomies that elicit stories, stories which he regards as projections from past experiences. These stories are indications of a person's pressing underlying needs, such as nurturance, dominance, achievement, aggression and passivity. The TAT remains one of the most popular projective techniques with adults in a variety of situations and inter-cultural populations. Although there are concerns about the reliability of scales for scoring various measures associated with the TAT, historically it has formed part of sound and well-argued psychological research and clinical assessment. Adequate levels of reliability are attainable. Its narrative approach, which is based on psychodynamic features, has proven to be both reliable and valid (Morgan, 1995, Bellak & Abrams, 1997; Cramer, 1996; Cramer, 1999; Hibbard, Mitchell & Porcerelli, 2001; Jenkins, 2008).

I identify with Murray's intentions, as well as with later developments in the interpretation of the TAT stories, that is, exploring individual experiences and the manifestation of these experiences (i.e. rather than exploring the origins and development of a person's personality characteristics, such as assertiveness, rigidity and dependency). It is the manifestation of these past experiences in, for example, the workplace, that is of interest to me. This approach supports my belief that a person does not leave his or her personality, emotional issues, belief systems, political principles and so forth at home

when he or she comes to work – the fact is that our life stories influence our behaviour at work, including our conflict-related behaviour.

### **TAT pictures as stimuli**

In the interests of practicality and the stimulus they can provide, I use only four out of the 31 TAT cards available. These cards are: 1, 2, 3BM and 4. Indeed, sometimes I restrict myself to the use of card 1 alone. Separate sets of cards for male and female participants are not considered to be necessary, because research has indicated that gender does not make a significant difference in the responses obtained from men and women. The method of recording the responses is by means of machine recording, one of the most efficient methods known to research (Aranow, Weis & Reznikoff, 2001). I will discuss these cards and their stimulus values in some of the case studies in the chapters that follow.

*Card 1* is a picture of a young boy contemplating a violin that rests on a table in front of him. This card is considered to be the most useful in the TAT series. If only one card has to be used, card 1 will be the best to choose when attempting to make statements about the whole personality and the person's achievements. Common themes elicited that are applicable in this research context include those of: (i) achievement, (ii) conflict between parental (or the equivalent) demands and the desire of the boy in the picture, (iii) self-image revealing a sense of doing well or not functioning well, and (iv) aggression in ignoring or breaking the violin or bow. The person may well project (childhood) achievement dilemmas.

*Card 2* is a picture of a country scene. In the foreground a young woman holds books in her hand; in the background, a man is working in the fields and an older woman is looking on. I use this card because it can indicate possible gender issues and interactions, or lack thereof, between the three people in the picture.

*Card 3BM* displays the huddled form of a boy on the floor against a couch, with his head bowed on his right arm. Beside him on the floor is a revolver. This card is also considered as one of the most useful of the TAT cards. It brings to the fore the central value accounting for the posture of the figure, usually depressive themes, such as depression over loss of a relationship, difficult life circumstances or suicide. The intensity of feelings is

an indication of the person's emotional state of mind. It also evokes people's philosophy, or search for meaning (Newmark, 1985, Bellak and Abrams, 1997; Aranow, Weis & Reznikoff, 2001).

*Card 4* shows a woman clutching the shoulders of a man whose face and body are averted as if he is trying to pull away from her. I value this card because it focuses on male-female relationships, which elicit themes relevant to power issues in these relationships. Attitudes towards the person himself and towards the opposite sex are brought out into the open. Aspects of interest are also the woman being overly possessive, dependent or protective, trying to hold back the man from doing something, his reaction to this, and the woman's attitude toward the man's perceived aggressive behaviour (Newmark, 1985; Bellak & Abrams, 1997; Aranow, Weis & Reznikoff, 2001).

### **TAT interpretative strategies**

Several scoring techniques and interpretative strategies have been developed over the years in an effort to standardise the interpretation of the TAT protocols, although TAT interpretation has become a clinical art form. I have made equal use of the inspection technique, the ideographic method, and the main themes technique, because these bring to the fore the issues I regard as meaningful in intra- and interpersonal conflict.

The *inspection technique* focuses on the TAT pictures as a series of social situations and interpersonal relations which I regard as applicable to the interpersonal conflict situations of the employee/manager. It is the most straightforward and uncomplicated procedure for interpreting TAT narratives. This technique involves reading through the stories, viewing them as meaningful psychological communications, and simply underlying anything that seems significant, specific, or unique. I am on the lookout for recurring patterns and themes, or aspects of the different stories that form a meaningful whole (Bellak & Abrams, 1997; Dana, 1985; Rossini & Moretti, 1997; Aranow, Weis & Reznikoff, 2001; Jenkins, 2008). Eventually the accumulative data brings to the fore continuing interpersonal relation themes and patterns of personality dynamics which become a point of discussion between me and the employee/manager. The basic tone of a story is analysed for the following list (which is not exhaustive): underlying feelings, reactions after various emotions are evoked, assumptions, optimism or pessimism, logical thinking, thought processes, language,

treatment of time periods, omissions of relatively outstanding objects in the pictures, additions by including objects in their stories that are not in the pictures, unusual types of story structure, length and timing of stories. The *ideographic interpretation method* focuses on the uniqueness of the individual concerning the way in which someone sees himself (or herself). '*Understanding the personalized story is the crux of interpretation*' (Aranow et al., 2001, p.17, italics original). See also Colman (2001) and Rossini and Moretti (1997). The Bellak scoring system is known as the *main themes technique* (Bellak & Abrams, 1997) whereby the main theme of each story is analysed by moving through four levels, ranging from relatively concrete to more abstract. This technique is an attempt to reaffirm and paraphrase the essence of the story, thus enabling the clinician to make a transition from the primary data to diagnostic formulation. Aranow, et al, (2001) take the main themes technique and the diagnostic formulation accordingly through the *descriptive level* (manifest content of the story); the *interpretative level* (the underlying psychological meaning); and the *diagnostic level* (psychodynamic interpretation of themes such as conflicts, defences, anxieties, interpersonal patterns, psychiatric symptoms, and possible personality orientation).

## **Questionnaires**

Just as GPS is useful in finding a particular part of the city, questionnaires are valuable in navigating the "landscape" of our conflicts. Questionnaires guide me in my attempts to navigate the inner worlds of the employees and managers who seek my counselling help.

I selectively include standardised psychological questionnaires in my psychological assessment, because these are some of the most commonly used tools for collecting information in the social sciences (Terre Blanche et al, 2006). Questionnaires are interpreted by reference to each one's underlying psychological theory. According to the British Psychological Society (BPS), as quoted by Cook and Cripps (2005), psychometric tests are a procedure for the evaluation of interpersonal relationships and psychological functions. The latter can refer to underlying dispositions, namely to think, to feel and to behave in particular ways. The instruments used in this study have already been constructed and have also been standardised. The validity and reliability of these questionnaires are confirmed and internationally recognised. *Validity* focuses on what the

questionnaire measures and *reliability* focuses on the accuracy of this measurement (Leedy, 2005).

In this study questionnaires offer, in effect, a short cut to the information needed. The same information could have been obtained via the longer and more time-consuming process of interviewing the participants. However, given the need expressed in literature for brief psychotherapy and coaching to be to the point, and knowing that the institutional culture is such that participants would have had neither the time nor the patience for extended and comprehensive interviews, questionnaires were my preferred choice. The information obtained by the questionnaires only serves as a catalyst for in-depth discussions in counselling, strength-based coaching, group sessions and brief psychotherapies (should the need arise).

Several questionnaires were considered suitable for analytical use in this study, although only some of them were used. These questionnaires were used according to my discretion and during the course of interpersonal conflict management and coaching processes. The questionnaires used in this study were:

FIRO-B: to measure interpersonal needs at a behavioural level on three dimensions: *inclusion, control* and *affection* (Schutz, 1992; Meshot & Leistner, 1993).

COPE inventory: to assess, by means of a multidimensional coping inventory, the different ways people respond to stressful events and/ or a specific stressful episode, and the coping strategies they use (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989).

Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument: to measure conflict management styles (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974; De Clerk, 1991; Van Epps, 1990; SDI, 2011).

Sense of Coherence (SOC) - to measure those personality factors that promote coping and wellbeing (Antonovsky, 1979 and 1987; Strümpfer, 2006c; Van Jaarsveld, 2005).

The Clifton StrengthsFinder 2.0 - to measure talents and strengths by means of an online assessment via a self-report questionnaire (Clifton, 2003; Hodges & Clifton, 2004; Rath, 2007).

For the most part I made use of the FIRO-B, COPE, the Thomas Kilmann Instrument and the StrengthsFinder 2.0. The first two instruments are now discussed in more detail, while the others will be referred to in the chapters where they were applied.



## **Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation-Behavior (FIRO-B)**

I am interested in the theory that claims that interpersonal behaviour can be assessed by using the FIRO-B as an intrapersonal method. In discussing the FIRO-B, I am again aware of my father's influence on my development as a counselling psychologist, and I am also aware that, over the years, I have integrated his teachings into what I can only describe as my own being. It was my father who guided me into viewing, personalising and operationalising the results in the holistic context of the client. The FIRO-B measures how a person typically interacts in interpersonal situations, that is, how that person behaves with other people, as well as how that person expects others to act towards him or her. I expected the FIRO-B results to increase my clients' understanding of their behaviour and interactions, and the impact of both on their colleagues (Waterman & Rogers, 1996). People often do not know how they 'come across' to others, why their feelings of conflict build up, and how they characteristically relate to other people; in fact, they are sometimes totally unaware of their patterns of interpersonal behaviour and interactions. This instrument opens discussions for finding alternative, more effective behaviour patterns, because it is our behaviour in interpersonal relationships that make us susceptible to conflicts, but that also simultaneously improves our ability to cope and discover our strengths. I linked the FIRO-B results concerning patterns of interpersonal behaviour and interactions to psychotherapeutic interventions discussed under heading 3.9, such as process-work (Rose & Schwartz, 2003a & Rose & Schwartz, 2003b) and Karen Horney's personal needs and relating styles (Viljoen, 1997).

The FIRO-B is a self-reporting personality instrument with 54 items that measure interpersonal needs at a behavioural level. It is based on a three-dimensional theory of interpersonal behaviour, as developed by Schutz in 1958 (Schutz, 1992). The questionnaire identifies three areas of interpersonal needs, the rationale being that people's behaviour in interpersonal relationships is based on the three dimensions: *inclusion* (the need for belonging and interaction – the issue of acceptance or rejection by others); *control* (the need for power and influence – the issue of power and authority); and *affection* (the need for intimacy and friendship, which includes openness to sharing thoughts and feelings with others). Each dimension has two manifestations, namely, *expressed needs* (how we behave toward others and how much one prefers to initiate the

behaviour related to each need) and *wanted needs* (how one wants others to behave towards one, and how much one prefers others to initiate the behaviour related to each need towards one). During human conflict situations each person's unique interpersonal needs according to the abovementioned three dimensions strongly motivate the way he (she) behaves. People become uncomfortable and anxious if their sets of psychic needs are not being met. The FIRO-B results can be used to raise awareness and mindfulness about each person's interpersonal patterns and expectations, to raise questions about how satisfied or dissatisfied he (her) is with these patterns and the impact on others, and to discuss alternative ways of behaving, especially in view of human conflict interactions. The six scales that measure these dimensions are: Expressed-Inclusion and Wanted-Inclusion; Expressed-Control and Wanted-Control; and Expressed-Affection and Wanted-Affection. Scores for each scale can range from 0 to 9 (Meshot & Leistner, 1993; Schutz, 1992; Waterman & Rogers, 1996; Fisher, Macrosson & Walker, 1995).

Significant research and changes in some aspects of the theory led to a revision and expansion of the measuring instruments, eventually constituting three new instruments known as the '*second generation instruments*' (Schutz, 1992, p.916, italics original). In a study about the FIRO-B's validity, Hurley (1990) refers to Baum (1988) who questions the reliability of the affection scales of the instrument and concludes that there are limits to the FIRO-B's ability to predict behaviour (e.g. in selection procedures). Mahoney and Stasson (2005) find it difficult to support the three dimensions of the FIRO-B for use with the general population in America, although they indicate that it might be appropriate within relatively homogeneous groups. However, despite the existence of data that queries the validity and reliability of the FIRO-B, it is still a widely used instrument. This is because it is a relatively simple way of assessing interpersonal efficacy in structured and unstructured situations (Sayeed & Ravindra, 2000) and in assessing some psychological dimensions of executive coaching (Bluckert, 2006). The Control dimension (particularly the Expressed-Control) is regarded as unique to this instrument. The expressed-control dimension also correlates with other personality traits, strategies and cognitive abilities, as shown by other research findings, and is considered to be the best predictor of success at work (Furnham, 2008).

## COPE Questionnaire

It would be tempting for me to claim that I have always been skilled in conflict management and that I also possess high levels of coping skills. Neither of these claims would be true. As far as conflict management is concerned, although I have always been able to recognise conflict and even understand its dynamics, I have not been eager to become involved in conflict – even when I was directly connected with this conflict. My childhood years were relatively peaceful and my parents were skilled – possibly too skilled – in ‘catching’ their children’s feelings and emotions. As a result, when I entered the adult world, I was caught unawares by the intensity of people’s misunderstandings and the role played by negative attitudes and sick value systems. It surprised me that my own feelings were not always understood. Indeed, as an adult, I actually tried to move away from conflict, and adopted the unrealistic attitude of only being prepared to focus on the positives in the situation. Fortunately, I had at my disposal certain emotional strengths, wisdom, and the ability to adjust and learn. Also, it so happened that, later in my work life, I had to go through the emotional pain of working in a department where the abusive behaviour of our then head of department contributed to a toxic working environment and high levels of tension and conflict. In hindsight, this situation contributed to my emotional and cognitive growth in the field of conflict at work. I survived and was in a position to say: *my conflict awareness, mindfulness and survival are not simply based on hearsay or my academic studies.*

I often have to listen to the stories of managers and employees who have to face the challenge of dealing with conflicts, and who sometimes explicitly express the view that they are *helpless and useless*, or that I am in the position to take away or manage their conflicts. Some of them were too much part of the system in which the conflicts took place, which meant that they could not bring about the necessary changes, while others realised that the complexity of their conflicts was beyond their comprehension. These people included those who were emotionally troubled and desperately in need of support and who found it extremely difficult to handle their conflict management stressors. On the other hand, I could also see that there were many other persons who successfully coped with these same stressors, and who even enjoyed trying to address these problems. I was knowledgeable enough to understand that everyone should have the intrinsic ability to cope with difficult situations while, at the same time, I realised that some people were

apparently lacking in these abilities. However, I also observed that those who experienced themselves as incompetent actually displayed a number of valuable coping strategies without being consciously aware that this is what they were doing. The main reason why they resisted trying new ways of conflict management was their fear of failure.

When I came across the COPE Questionnaire I was pleased to find a way that assessed both my own and other people's ways of responding to difficult and stressful events in their lives (Carver, et al, 1989). The COPE is a self-report coping questionnaire that measures 14 different coping strategies and consists of the following sub-scales: problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidance coping. The questionnaire distinguishes between *functional coping* and *dysfunctional coping* strategies. Functional coping strategies are appropriate where stressors are unavoidable and unmanageable. They permit the regulation of negative mood states that arise from exposure to stress. Dysfunctional coping strategies may lead to short-term relief but, in the long-term, they tend to maintain rather than resolve stress-related problems (Carr, 2004a). The COPE questionnaire progressively developed into a multidimensional coping inventory that measures different coping strategies. The final edition includes 13 sub-scales with four items each. The 14<sup>th</sup> sub-scale is made up of only one item and measures alcohol and drug disengagement (Carver, et al, 1989).

### **3.8 THE PERSON-CENTRED APPROACH: CARL ROGERS**

Carl Rogers's person-centred approach is based on the belief that the client is central and must take responsibility for his or her own change and growth. As such, this theory resonates with one of the purposes of this study, which is to empower the employee so that he or she can manage human conflict at work. I strongly believe in empowering the client. During my social work studies we were taught by our lecturers that "eie hulp is die beste hulp" – freely translated "one's own help is the best form of help". One reason for this was that we should not deprive the client of the opportunity to take responsibility and accountability (i.e. by doing things for him). Instead, the therapist should be the facilitator of growth, the person "who creates a climate of unconditional positive regard, warmth and empathy in which the client feels safe to allow change and to strive towards congruence and the actualization of his or her potential" (Moore, 1997, p. 484). See also Grobler, Schenck and Du Toit (2006), as well as Raskin and Rogers (1995). In the person-centred

approach, three basic concepts are core conditions in creating a growth-facilitating climate: *congruence* (genuineness and authenticity of the facilitator/therapist); *unconditional acceptance and positive regard* (accepting the person's thoughts, feelings and actions as given, without judging and condemning him or – although this does not necessarily imply approval); and *empathy* (attitude of profound interest in and an understanding of the client's world of meanings and feelings).

The needs of the managers and subordinates include the clarification of their facts or emotions, and someone who can observe the world as they see and experience it. The person-centred approach paved the way for me to be able to see the client as the client sees himself (or herself). I tried to communicate my empathetic understanding and reflect on their unique assertions, which is another concept of Rogers. Assertions are indications of the client's expressions of himself/herself in the course of the therapy. The emphasis on the search for a deeper understanding of human functioning makes this approach vital for this study; indeed, this is the approach I adopt continuously in counselling sessions with my clients, and I used this approach when interviewing participants for this research study. When the other person felt that I understood him or her both conceptually and emotionally, the possibility was there that trust increased cooperation and allowed him or her to reveal important information needed to resolve conflicts. Therefore, my purpose in using the person-centred approach was to allow the person to talk freely, gradually moving towards deeper levels of trust between me and the client, and arriving at deeper levels of consciousness and awareness of the self. I tried to facilitate the "client's discoveries of the meanings of his own current inner experiencing, hopefully marked by a change in the client's experiencing, with increasing ability to live more fully in the moment" (Raskin & Rogers, 1995, p. 31).

### **3.9 BRIEF PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC PROCESSES AND INTERVENTIONS**

Rogers's approach was the starting point from which I progressively started to implement different interventions in order to deal with intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflicts. This approach is based on my belief that a true resolution of conflict can only be achieved by acknowledging the contributing factors that arise from the person's internal and emotional experience of conflict. Sometimes, an intervention was very much a trial-and-error approach. At other times, I consciously searched for an intervention that would

be appropriate for a specific person or group. I deliberately considered the advantages and disadvantages of the different types of interventions. I sometimes experienced “aha” moments whilst participating in CPD workshops or when studying the literature. I often made marginal notes in order to personalise what I was reading or to link some of the insights and techniques to conflict management interventions. Also, of course, I sometimes used interventions only to be disappointed when I felt that an intervention didn’t work.

My training as a psychologist was mainly based on the psychoanalytic paradigm although not exclusively so. I would, however, not deem my training to be a *one-size-fits-all approach* or to be based solely on the paradigm of Sigmund Freud. I appreciate the later developments in this field, for example, some of the contributions of Karen Horney as discussed by Viljoen (1997) or to understand individual differences and psychopathology according to a psychoanalytic model (McWilliams, 1994). I also made selective use of the therapeutic insights of all these people. In the workplace, psychoanalytic therapy was, however, not always appropriate because of its in-depth nature and the lengthy time needed for it to be effective. I explored other horizons, partly because the role of reason and emotion in conflict and conflict management cannot be ignored. I therefore considered, for example, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT), knowing these to be effective in a wide range of dilemmas in inter- and intrapersonal conflicts. CBT emphasises people’s cognitive processes, whilst REBT emphasises that people use rational means to predict the future, and are capable of making profound philosophic changes that will influence their future and present emotions, and their behaviours (DiGiuseppe & Dryden, 1990; Ellis, 1994). My focus, however, was not only on pathology but also on the enhancement of psychological wellbeing by focusing on, among other things, the insights gained from a positive psychology paradigm.

My professional life has revolved around the theme of helping and supporting people who are suffering from emotional and psychological distress. The contexts of this distress were different, and each had its own unique demands. The enhancement of my knowledge, skills and choices of counselling and psychotherapeutic interventions are aligned with these demands. As I said at the very beginning of this thesis, my current context includes dealing with human conflicts in a university. My thoughts about these conflicts and the employees who are in severe distress have developed, as mentioned before, over a period of approximately fourteen years. I learn by trial and error, systematically and experientially.

My systematic learning has been planned, by which I mean my original training as a counselling psychologist, my in-depth research into human conflict, my reading, and my presenting of workshops and attending continuous professional development (CPD) courses and workshops. This has taken place in conjunction with my experiential learning in the performance of my daily tasks. I have come to realise that, roughly speaking, very little will improve until the employees and line managers understand their workplace conflict-related problems and their dynamics – and this depends on their internalising this understanding, which is the only form of understanding that leads to behavioural change.

I will now conclude by briefly discussing how I accepted the theoretical stance of some of the various psychotherapeutic approaches which I found to be useful in my daily work and in the development of my professional identity. Each approach has its own underlying assumptions and associated techniques. I would like, however, to mention that I do not regard any technique as a rigid and standardised procedure: to do this would be to ignore individual differences. Instead, I have used both approaches and techniques in such a way that they help the interactions between me and the employee or group to become focused and meaningful. I also use what I can only call a “mix and match” or eclectic approach. For the purposes of clarification, I will now in the next paragraphs briefly discuss some of my approaches one by one.

*Many of the real-life human conflict incidents unfold as stories* – sometimes as intensely personal dramas. The employees tell and retell the ‘sacred’ experiences of their lives, and these tales go to make up an array of extraordinary stories of ordinary people. This was the stimulus of my interest in the narrative approach to psychology, especially when I began to realise that employees were comfortable with my use of storytelling as the framework or springboard for interviews or group sessions. The narrative approach has become a catalyst for the operationalisation of my human conflict management interventions and processes. I need to say, at this point, that storytelling does not mean the type of dialogue about an employee’s life story which may confirm or even enhance some form of pathology. Instead, the focus is on resolving problems of living (Christie, 2009; Freedman and Combs, 1996; Carr, 1998; Carlson & Erickson, 2001).

Added to my conflict management skills is the insight gained from Karen Horney’s view about a person’s *personal needs and relating style* that is based on her socially-oriented

psychoanalytical theory (Viljoen, 1997). She develops this theory as an attempt to understand the neurotic personality and unhealthy relationships linked with particular ways of reacting or relating to others. These ways can be expressed in a normal or neurotic manner. This, for me, partly explains many employees' methods of dealing with their personal needs. Horney's view makes reference to three interpersonal coping styles as a means of dealing with hostility and anxiety, namely, movement towards others, movement against others, and movement away from others. Although I acknowledge that it may be an oversimplification of complex phenomena, I indeed recognise these movements in almost all of the employees involved in human conflicts; especially so when these three coping styles are overused or intensified by conflict incidents. It is then that the coping style becomes destructive and causes the employee to become estranged from others. I will elaborate on these movements in the chapters to follow.

I find the practical application flowing from the theory of the *unilateral psychological contract with another person in a "blink"* fascinating. I initially utilised this approach in couple therapy in my private practice as a counselling psychologist and, eventually, I came to use it in human conflict management as well. The theory postulates the following: when we meet another person for the first time, we enter into a one-sided unconscious psychological contract of expectation within the *blink* of an eye. This instantaneous impression and expectation stays with us almost forever, whether it is positive or negative, and spontaneously manifests itself in future encounters. The focus is on "the mutual expectations and obligations in the context of a relationship". This belief also shapes the relationship, and governs behaviour, thus limiting the psychological contract to an intra-individual perception which unconsciously influences our behaviour (Freese & Schalk, 2008, p. 270). In addition, Gladwell (2005) uses the term "blink" when discussing how we think without thinking, that is, when we unconsciously consider only what can be gathered in a glance, during which in brief time a part of our brain jumps to conclusions. Gladwell (2005, p. 241) concludes that every blink-moment is composed of a series of discrete moving parts which offers an opportunity "for intervention, for reform, for correction". I use the concept of the blink-moment in the contexts of intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management. The focus is on expanding the employees' conscious knowledge about largely unconscious dynamics. For example: a young employee came to my office one day and I could immediately spot his tremendous need for a specific task to be assigned to him. He was upset by the way his head of department dealt with the situation, saying that



the head of department was “a stiff and rigid person – unapproachable to me.” I must confess, however, that I sometimes question my crusade to put into action my (new) knowledge (as in this case). Will it really be to the benefit of the employee? During our counselling session, I indeed found that his remark had direct relevance to the unilateral psychological contract with another person in a “blink”. His “blink” moment and psychological contract could be regarded as a frozen impression that needed to become unfrozen. In this case, the interpersonal conflict between this employee and his head of department contributed to a situation where communication had become frozen, even toxic.

The theory of *process work* (also known as *process-oriented psychology*) resonates with my thinking that it is possible to unfreeze a situation of stalemate and to create a state in which communication about something positive in the relationship becomes a readily accessible dialogue. The theory of process work indicates that the persons involved become willing participants in efforts to change unhealthy behaviours, ways of coping and communication patterns. It calls attention to individual feelings and experiences impacting on interpersonal communication. During 2003 I attended a workshop about process work (Rose & Schwarz, 2003) and became mindfully aware of the impact of the interpersonal relationship awareness practice, with its roots in Jungian psychology (Schuitevoerder, 2000; Rose & Schwarz, 2003a, 2003b). Process work emphasises the awareness of the client on, for example, his painful relationship problems that contribute to his conflicts and tensions. It assumes that the solution of the problem is contained within the disturbance itself. The person’s *relationship disturber* refers to actions, emotions and negative thoughts impacting negatively on his interpersonal relationships (Rose & Schwarz, 2003a). I believe that the relationship disturber can be replaced, via brief psychotherapy, by the *relationship smoother* which refers to actions, emotions and positive thoughts with a conciliatory impact (Van Niekerk, 2008). This related concept has been developed by me over years of applying it in private practice as a counselling psychologist. I often use process work to smooth the progress towards an altered, conscious way of approaching relationships. Process work offers new possibilities for forging new pathways in difficult interpersonal relationships. Process work’s teleological view maintains that the conflict itself brings about something that is both meaningful and useful.

I often link the relationship disturber and smoother concepts with another psychotherapeutic intervention of great value to me, namely, the *parent-adult-child ego states central to the transactional analysis (TA) theory*. Berne (1964) says that within us there are active, observable and connected ego states, namely the parent, adult and child, all of which are integral parts of our personalities. Berne noticed that his clients sometimes thought, felt and behaved like children, at other times like rational adults, and at other times like parents. Transactional analysis is an exceptional conflict management tool and I personally have witnessed how it contributes to self-insight, behaviour change and the improvement of communication at all levels (Jude, 2006). It is within the reach of many people to internalise this concept and to become mindfully aware of his or her parent, adult and child ego states and those of others. The relationship disturber can be the consequence of the negative use of these three ego states. I will elaborate on ego states in the chapters to follow, when I discuss some of the cases I dealt with (and where I used this concept).

In my work, I came to realise that it is a necessity for the persons I worked with “to develop a wider range of thinking and feeling towards the “other” in order to develop a different relationship with the “other” (Vasconcelos & Neto, 2003). For me the *Internalised Other Interviewing (IOI) technique* facilitates this course of action, which is described by Paré (2001, p. 21) as a “conversational process that invites clients to get in touch with their internalized version of someone they know in order to promote further understanding of and empathy for that person”. I apply this technique to wide range (brief) therapeutic contexts. This technique promotes a sense of “otherness” and gives the person the ability to “walk a mile in someone else’s moccasins”. Vasconcelos and Neto (2003) say the person is interviewed not only as another person, but also as an emotion or an idea (the latter can be referred to as ego states). I find it valuable to use the IOI and link it with the therapeutic system known as *ego state therapy*. This technique promises rapid, long-lasting results in a much shorter time; indeed, it gives the therapist an opportunity to go the shortest distance between two points, namely, the goal and the solution (Emmerson, 2003).

Another remarkable psychotherapeutic intervention is *hypnotic communication*. Whilst learning the rudiments of clinical hypnosis in some of my CPD courses, I became interested in its strategic therapeutic input. With hindsight I know that this was one of the

most significant influences in my growth as a counselling psychologist. In fact, I became interested in using hypnotic communication as brief psychotherapy even in the setting of an institution (Scott, 1996). I agree with the stance of Havens and Walters (2002) that hypnotic trance is a common everyday phenomenon and that it is not a strange or exceedingly difficult process. Milton H. Erickson (Havens & Walters, 2002; Battino & South, 1999) believes that hypnosis as a therapeutic tool enhances clients' self-awareness and therapeutic communications whereby they assume responsibility for healing themselves. It also empowers them towards becoming problem-solvers, on the basis of their own potentials. Peltier (2001, p.124) describes hypnosis as "communication that bypasses critical-analytic thought." He believes that we are often in a world of non-trance hypnosis without us being aware of this. In this study I use hypnotic communication techniques as one way of evolving the client's inner abilities to change and to overcome his or her perceptual boundaries, the latter being those boundaries prevent the client from successfully managing intrapersonal conflict. These techniques, that form part of hypnotic communication, include storytelling, imagery, metaphors, reframing and modelling. I will elaborate on hypnotic communication in the chapters to follow, where I make use of it in some of the cases I deal with.

### **3.10 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I have discussed my development, over the past fourteen years, as a counselling psychologist specialising in conflict management. During this time, I have become conscious of the enormous role of subjacent psychodynamic causes in intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflicts. This has motivated me to broaden and extend my knowledge and therapeutic skills. I have also discussed, in broad terms, my *modus operandi* when dealing with different types of conflicts. I also tried to indicate my particular way of understanding and dealing with the intrapersonal dynamics of subordinates and managers, dynamics that contribute to or worsen interpersonal conflicts. I indicated how the deep-seated reasons causing/contributing to intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts could be addressed using the eclectic approach which I have developed over many years of experience in this field. Conflict management is an important function, simply because disruptive conflicts impact negatively on many work-related aspects of the institution and on employee wellness generally. The harmful effects of conflict become visible in issues such as absenteeism, low work performance, stress-

related illnesses and poor behaviour, behaviour that one does not expect from adults in such a sophisticated academic environment. That said, it is worth bearing in mind that even the best of us can become involved in traumatic conflicts and that, when this happens, we all need professional and empathetic support. Conflict is often the visible symptom of deep-seated psychological causes which should be addressed creatively by utilising therapeutic insights. The focus of this research, however, is not only on pathology, but also on the enhancement of psychological wellbeing by focusing on, among other things, some of the insights gained from the paradigm of positive psychology.

## CHAPTER 4

### INTRAPERSONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The focus of this chapter is on intrapersonal conflict management. Maccoby and Scudder (2011) believe that, during or after interpersonal conflict, people try to restore feelings of self-worth, address the immediate emotional experience of interpersonal conflict, and focus on the issues that provoked the conflict in the first place. The purpose of intrapersonal conflict management is to enable an individual not only to resolve these issues, but also to focus on his or her personal intrapersonal issues that may contribute to other work-related conflicts. Emotion cannot be avoided during conflict, and a true resolution cannot be achieved without recognising the internal, emotional experience of conflict, that is, without recognizing the reality of intrapersonal conflict. Although this chapter's focus is on intrapersonal issues as these influence individuals, I will occasionally also discuss contextual and multi-cultural issues, the necessity thereof as indicated by Ivey, et al (1997). During each counselling session or brief psychotherapeutic course of action, I am mindful of the multicultural context and environment, as implied by my ethnographic research (De Vos, et al, 2000). I am also mindful of the wounded storytellers (Flemons & Green, 2002, p. 87).

The time-frame during which I have practised intrapersonal conflict management is from about 2000 to 2012. During this period, my counselling services to the troubled employee gradually came to include intrapersonal conflict management, and since about 2004, I have added the concept *intrapersonal* to my counselling 'repertoire'.

This chapter describes my transition from being a conflict management specialist focusing on counselling to being a counselling psychologist specialising in intrapersonal conflict management. I will use the data obtained over a period of twelve years to indicate the nature and scope of my activities in my approach to handling intrapersonal conflicts.

The process of conflict management starts when an employee or a manager asks for support in coping with a specific conflict predicament. The problems often prove to be

related to the employee's intrapersonal issues, or those of the other party involved in the specific conflict. The client often regards this as interpersonal conflict, since it is manifested in interpersonal relationships, and believes that the other person is responsible for all the misunderstandings. In fact, intrapersonal conflict either contributes to or provokes interpersonal conflicts (Cox, 2003). The reverse can also be true: a person develops intrapersonal conflict in response to interpersonal conflict. The individual conflict management process then resides in the intrapersonal conflict management domain. For some of these employees, the outer appearance of intrapersonal conflicts in the form of interpersonal conflict becomes unbearable owing to the turmoil of emotions such as unhappiness, stress, distress, aggression, frustration and anger. Other employees, especially the managers, recognise the symptoms of conflict-to-come and need advice about its management before an intolerable, and sometimes hideous, situation arises.

The reason for frequently focusing only on the individual resides in the fact that these clients explicitly do not want others to become involved in the conflict management situation. I respect their preferences and need for confidentiality. Indeed, these employees' assertions provided the justification for their requests. Assertions are indications of the person's expressions of himself or herself in the course of discussions and counselling (Rogers, 1961).

The following assertions indicate the reasons why the subordinates asked for support:

I cannot talk to my line manager. She becomes abusive, and she is not a person who listens to people.

My line manager overloads me with work and when I complain he says I can resign because there are many people outside who would like to have my job.

I am stuck, my stress levels are sky high. I cannot sleep and even my colleagues are upset with me because of my up and down emotions.

He is a powerful man in this institution and can get rid of me – when I was appointed he told me that I am not allowed to talk out of our office.

When we have differences of opinion or if I try to explain my viewpoint ever so many times, she simply ignores me for days on end. The atmosphere is unbearable.

I don't like the threatening undertone in his e-mails to me – I feel emotionally unsafe, my credibility and honesty are doubted.

I cannot follow the grievance procedure route because I will forever be under his attack.

I know that a joint discussion might be a better option but I would rather that you tell me what to do.

I desperately need to be redeployed to another department.

When a manager requests support, this is usually because he or she needs advice on how to deal with the *difficult employee* without involving that employee. Assertions here include the following:

She does not perform up to standard and, when I try to discuss it with her, she accuses me of workplace bullying.

She comes late – she seldom adheres to the formal working hours, always telling stories about a dog that has to be taken to the vet, or a sick child, or the geyser has burst, or a broken car, the stories are endless. The other staff members accuse me of not taking action and now some of them are also coming late.

The chronic late submission of his work is a source of conflict in the group he is working in and now they expect me to address the situation.

I was angry when I wrote the e-mail to him; I should have waited until the next day.

These two staff members are always at loggerheads with one another and want me to take sides.

I am incompetent when it comes to interpersonal conflict management. Please tell me how to do it – maybe there is something wrong with me that needs to be rectified.

A constant theme is the serious impact that the conflict situation has on a person as the situation becomes more and more unbearable. This unbearable situation is exacerbated by other reasons. Some of employees unconsciously or deliberately provoke conflict as a result of their own intrapersonal issues. For example, some suffer from psychological problems or psychiatric disorders: this includes being histrionic, major depression or bipolar disorder, paranoia, or schizophrenia. Some lack any emotional intelligence. Another group of employees are caught unawares and unexpectedly by incidents, which result in trauma or the stirring up of strong and unmanageable emotions – in both cases, these employees find themselves desperately seeking help. Others try to cope on their own for months on end, but a sudden serious misunderstanding takes place one day that pushes them over the limits of their resilience. Sometimes this push is the result of a minor incident – the last straw on the camel's back. In reflecting on this data collected over the

years, I have become aware of how my own way of supporting these employees has changed and matured over time.

In my personal transformation, I am continuously trying to improve my psychological support services and interventions (e.g. I decided not to stay in the reactive mode). Over the years, I have come to prefer proactive interventions, which can be employed before the impact of conflict becomes pathological.

## **4.2 CONFLICT FROM WITHIN**

Intrapersonal conflict implies “the existence of simultaneous, opposing and conflicting thoughts, feelings and activities within a person” (Geldenhuis, et al, 2008, p. 220). Internal conflict occurs in the individual's mind, as a result of, inter alia, his psychodynamics, personality disorder, mood disorder, difficult work circumstances or unresolved interpersonal conflicts. Intrapersonal conflict involves an internal struggle to clarify contradictory values, and exists in both the cognitive and affective realm (Cox, 2003). These simultaneous and opposing forces of about equal strength are a major source of human stress (Lauterbach & Newman, 1999). There are five sources of intrapersonal conflict as indicated by Cox (2003). Firstly, intrapersonal conflict is the result of misassignment and frustration, because the person does not have appropriate expertise, aptitude and commitment to do the work he or she is paid to do. Secondly, it arises out of inappropriate demands on the person's capacity (e.g. work overload or the inherent demands of the position). Other sources are organisational structures, managerial style, and the person's position in the institution. Intra-psychodynamic issues are also an important source of intrapersonal conflict because some of a person's intrapersonal issues are the cause of human conflicts or the intra-obstacle in achieving healthy interpersonal relationships.

Some of the characteristics of intrapersonal conflict are uncertainty, hesitation, stress, anxiety, frustration, anger, depression and sleeplessness. The emphasis is therefore on the individual's feelings and ideas, which Sundberg, et al refer as an intrapsychic approach which “would attempt to help the client to understand his own feelings and motives as they had developed over the years and to enable him or her to replace unsound attitudes with sound ones” (1983, p.9). This is, however, likely to become time-consuming because it



requires long-term psychotherapy. In my institutional and human resources environment it is not a suitable undertaking although, initially, I was tempted to adopt this approach. However, the reality is that I am simply not able to offer long-term psychotherapy to the institution's large staff complement. Should intrapsychic issues prove to be the main source of the employee's interpersonal conflicts, and should brief psychotherapeutic interventions fail to successfully deal with these issues, I address them by means of an awareness-making processes and therapeutic support until such time that I decide to refer the client to external service providers (e.g. psychiatrists or psychologists). In my assessment, I also keep in mind the situational approach which is, according to Sundberg, Taplin and Tyler (1983), the outer environment and the manifestation of the client's intrapersonal conflict (i.e. his/her actions, attitudes and behaviour) in relation to that outer environment. There are, however, many different ways to address these situations (O'Conner, De Dreu, Schroth, Barry, Lituchy, & Bazerman, 2002).

The behaviour of the employee/manager, whilst focusing on the issues within the conflict situation itself, could either be a *want response*, which is emotional, or a *should response* which, according to Maccoby and Scudder's (2011) conceptual definition, is more rational. The *want response* refers to the person's 'acting out' behaviour, that is, the person does not conceal his or her emotions (such as anger). This happens either because the person has an urgent need to make the emotion known or because the emotion is an intense, impulsive and automatic response – which in itself worsens the situation. The *should response* is based on reason. It could be an indication of the person's wish not to aggravate the conflict or be based on a fear of the consequences if the person does display his or her real feelings.

### **4.3 BRIEF PSYCHOTHERAPY**

Psychotherapy per se focuses on healing past emotional injuries and on dealing with present intrapsychic and emotional disorders, such as mood disorders and psychotic disorders. Some therapies deal with unconscious issues and repairing damage from earlier experiences by means of specific, but diverse, psychotherapeutic techniques. Corsini & Wedding (1990) concludes that, essentially, all therapies attempt to change people in order to enable them to think differently (cognition), to feel differently (affection) and to act differently (behaviour). Schuyler (2000) states that the wide range of extensive

theoretical models of (brief) psychotherapies can be placed into three categories: *cognitive therapies*, which focus on meanings, thoughts and reframing; *dynamic therapy*, which accentuates insight communicated by understanding the present in the light of past conflict and origins; and *behavioural therapy*, which focuses on habits, exposure and teaching skills.

My intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict management tasks do not include a constant focus on intra-psychodynamic issues. There are, however, situations where such a focus is a viable option when I am of the opinion that the client needs brief psychotherapy (because some of his/her personal issues are proving to be obstacles in the 'healing' of toxic conflict). Also, I sometimes have to deal immediately with conflicts because of their urgency in the broader organisational context. I then discuss the brief psychotherapy option with the employee; in these cases, this is the ethical way of doing things. There are, however, times when counselling is going in a certain direction. Here, I make almost 'spur of the moment' decisions to use a brief psychotherapy intervention (according to my eclectic approach). My focus is then on a crucial component of the employee and his or her problem.

Brief psychotherapy is regarded as clinical intervention that is highly beneficial to previously well-functioning individuals who have become involved in a situational crisis. It focuses on disturbances of moderate severity, and is aimed at relieving the client's major current conflicts, conflicts that are usually exacerbated and intensified by intrapsychic issues. Brief psychotherapy is not aimed at changing the client's personality structure: this requires long-term psychotherapy (Castelnuovo-Tedesco, 1967). Wells and Giannetti (1993) indicate that brief psychotherapy is suitable for clients who have difficulties in managing certain important aspects of interpersonal relationships, and who experience moderate to severe problems with troublesome emotions such as severe anger, depression and anxiety. These pointers describe my clients' problems and the way I view my role; they also resonate with the counselling psychologists' scope of practice as described by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), namely, that counselling psychologists help relatively well-adjusted people to deal with the normal problems of life.

Wells and Giannetti (1993) refer to three critical dimensions in the course of brief psychotherapy, namely, *engagement* (teaching the client about therapy), *intervention* (setting the client to work), and *termination* (releasing the client). The achievement of clinical depth in brief psychotherapy is situated within the intervention dimension. It is based on strategies that are suitable for dealing with the situation in the judgment of the psychologist or conflict management specialist. It is in line with identifying the problem(s) the client wants to engage with in brief therapy, and the psychotherapist's immediate desire to create an optimal relationship base that is conducive to therapy. Wells and Giannetti (1993) believe that an important problem "qualifying" for brief psychotherapy is any difficulty in managing important aspects of social and interpersonal relationships, including emergent or chronic conflict. Brief psychotherapy may only be a single-session intervention (this is the simplest, most immediate intervention) centred on a crucial component of the client and his or her problem. A brief, focused treatment may be all that is needed to resolve complex difficulties. Nevertheless, no matter how structured, unstructured and directive the immediate process of brief therapy may be, it is still the client's own efforts outside the therapy session that makes change possible. I regard brief psychotherapy as a bridge that enables the client to utilise elements of either intrapersonal therapy or coaching in the effective management of interpersonal conflict.

The brief psychotherapy repertoire of each psychologist is obviously very diverse. My preferred eclectic approach refers to those skills I am most familiar with, and reflects my collective learning in specific psychotherapeutic fields, some of which I have transformed into brief psychotherapeutic techniques. Rather than attempting to change the client's personality structure (Castelnuovo-Tedesco, 1967), my approach is aimed at relieving major (current) conflicts and eliminating stumbling blocks with a view to achieving relatively conflict-free interpersonal relationships.

My brief psychotherapy repertoire consists of the following approaches: (i) a psychodynamic view, including psychodynamic assessment (Schutz, 1992; Carver, et al, 1989; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974; SDI, 2011; Strümpfer 2006b; Rath, 2007; Raskin & Rogers, 1995; Meyer, et al, 1997; Havens and Walters, 2002; Paré, 2001); (ii) relationship enhancement (Schuitevoerder, 2000; Rose & Schwarz, 2003a, 2003b; Van Niekerk, 2008); (iii) unilateral psychological contract with another person in a 'blink' (Gladwell, 2005; Freese & Schalk, 2008); (iv) hypnotic communication (Peltier (2001:124; Havens &

Walters, 2002); (v) transactional analysis (Berne, 1964; Dusay & Dusay, 1989; Jude, 2006); (vi) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2002) and (vii) cognitive and REBT therapy (DiGuiseppe & Dryden, 1990; Ellis, 1994). These approaches are utilised in combination with positive psychological and psychodynamic assessment (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), group interventions (Corey & Corey, 1987) and strengths-based counselling as adapted from coaching literature (Stern, 2004, 2007; Biswas-Diener, 2007; and Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007).

Psychologists as psychotherapists receive specific training in more than one mode of psychotherapy, but they tend to differ in the approaches they adopt to these methods when dealing with their clients' life's challenges, personal concerns or emotional problems. Corsini & Wedding (1990) view the opinion that there has been a shift in opinion as far as psychological methods are concerned: psychologists no longer stay within the confines of one of the major theories and modes of psychotherapy, but have adopted an eclectic position (which, as I have said, is my own position). Indeed, Corsini believes that all good psychotherapists are eclectic even if they follow specific methods associated with a particular approach. Technique and method are always secondary to the psychotherapist's sense of what is the right thing to do with a given client at a given moment in time. In order to be effectively eclectic a psychotherapist needs to know as many different theories as possible. From this it is possible to develop a personal theory and an integrated approach and, eventually, one's own individual style of psychotherapy.

#### **4.4 SIGNIFICANT EXTRACTIONS FROM CASES AND INTERVENTIONS FROM A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The cases that I have selected are typical of many similar situations in which the intrapersonal theme unfolded itself. Some of these cases often 'selected themselves' because they were stamped on my memory. When I was planning this study (and in particular this chapter), I thought very carefully about the cases I have worked with over the years. Indeed, I thought so intensively about these cases that thoughts, memories and images automatically came to my mind, similar to the experiences of people in a diagnostic trance (Havens & Walters, 2002). Another more cognitive way of selecting cases was to work through my files and to link the practical situation to my theoretical knowledge in order to draw up the final collection for this study.

I present the cases in a way that makes sense to me and my reality. Excessive and penetrating analysis of one or two cases will not do justice to the diversity and many-sidedness of my intrapersonal conflict management journey. Instead, I link the insights brought about by extractions from the chosen cases with the purpose of this study and with the insights gained from these cases. The cases selected are not discussed in detail, because my focus is on those aspects of the cases that are relevant to the purpose of this chapter. There is no quest to 'prove' that my way of handling these cases is and was the only correct approach. Instead, my intention is to explain how it works for me (which is always a developing process) and my clients in my unique circumstances. Through this presentation I also try to achieve some distance and to create an opportunity to see where I could have done things differently or to reflect on whether I was on the right track. By doing this, it almost feels if I am sitting in space, looking down on things in order to gain a better perspective. Sometimes I feel good about what I have done, other times I doubt myself and this reflects my own intrapersonal conflict. In all of this, I build the road while travelling along it. It is a lonely journey.

### **Tony: the angry, self-righteous person**

One of my first interviews shortly after being appointed was with Tony, who was angry with one of his co-workers. He wanted me to take his side and to advise him on how he could go about "putting Mr Z in his place and telling him where to get off." He presented himself as a victim who was helpless in a battle with an enemy (Mosak & LeFevre, 1976). His appeal was that I should enable him to gain the upper hand in order to be the 'winner of it all'. He was not aware of his own contribution to the conflict in their work-relationship; he was also completely unaware of his aggressive stance. He rejected the suggestion that his belligerent remarks contributed to their misunderstandings and shrugged his conduct off as 'normal behaviour when someone provokes you.' This acting out behaviour, accompanied by his anger, became an effective barrier to the solution of their conflicts. His interpersonal style was driven by his intrapersonal issues, which caused his coping style to be an aggressive movement against others, as described by Horney (Viljoen, 1997).

At first, I gave active-listening feedback to let him know that I understood what lay behind his words and deeds and that I was trying to make sense of his words and deeds (Egan,

1990; Kadushin, 1990; Tubbs & Moss, 1991; DeVito, 2004). This had a soothing effect on Tony, who eventually calmed down and apologised for his acting out behaviour. I knew, however, that this was only a temporary gesture and that he had not changed his mind about Mr Z, although he could speak more rationally about their issues. I also believed that, in the heat of the moment, he was likely to divert to his old way of doing things. My idea was to focus on the interpersonal conflict pattern and to identify Mr Z's behaviour (which triggered Tony's anger). Tony complained that Mr Z was "stubborn and persists in late-coming to work and then I have to wait until he arrives as we work in shifts; I cannot leave before he reports to work." Tony believed that Mr Z and their supervisor were in cahoots with one another and that it was "a hopeless case to talk to the supervisor". He accused Mr Z of manipulating the system.

Tony did not want to include Mr Z or his line manager in the conflict management process; he wanted to deal with it himself. I therefore made use of the concept of circularity embedded in the circular questioning technique, which is used by family therapists to indicate that the type of interactions between people are part of ongoing circular sequences of behaviour (Swanepoel & Van Niekerk, 1992). The purpose was to help Tony to move away from his linear cause-and-effect thinking, namely, that his anger was caused by the actions of Mr Z. (Any behaviour is simultaneously a cause and an effect in relation to all other behaviours in that particular context.) I asked him, for example, "If Mr Z could be here, and I ask him what his perceptions are about the things that you do and say, what do you think his answer would be?" He struggled to answer these questions because he was not motivated or emotionally ready to view the pattern from another perspective, and especially not from his opponent's viewpoint. After a few sessions, Tony terminated the process. I believed that it was because he did not achieve what he wanted to via the counselling process or that I moved too quickly to *the other side of the story*.

In hindsight, I can see that my counselling was mainly focused on listening skills, looking for alternatives and circular questioning. This proved to be a trial-and-error approach in my newly appointed position – one I still had to get used to and grow into. I had to transform my therapeutic skills and orientation in the setup of my private practice as a counselling psychologist into an institutional context, without any training in industrial psychology paradigms. With the wisdom gained from experience, I should have moved away from too much in-depth exploring and analysis of these conflict incidents. The pitfall was that I got

entangled in detail and was eventually sidetracked into looking for other ways to manage similar situations.

Should Tony ask for my support today, I would make use – in agreement with him – of brief psychotherapy concerning his intrapersonal conflicts. For example, I would explore the following: the impact of his unilateral psychological contract with another person (Mr Z) in a “blink” (Gladwell, 2005; Freese & Schalk, 2008); process work with his relationship disturber and relationship smoother (Schuitevoerder, 2000; Rose & Schwarz, 2003a, 2003b; Van Niekerk, 2008); and his parent-adult-child ego states according to the paradigm of transactional analysis (Berne, 1964; Dusay & Dusay, 1989; Jude, 2006). I believe that his relationship disturber might have been his short-tempered behaviour, and his anger and belligerent remarks. I also believe that he was communicating from his critical and angry parent ego state with - in his eyes – the other employee as the ‘naughty and disobedient little boy who has to be punished and reprimanded’. I cannot, however, speculate about his psychological contract with his co-worker apart from the possibility that his unconscious expectation might have been that Mr Z would be a *walk-over* and definitely not someone who could stand up against him. As far as my own emotional experiences were concerned, I now realise that I needed to work with my own intrapersonal dynamics as far as this person’s visible anger, rigid behaviour and aggressive remarks were concerned. In the situation, I acted professionally and in the way that was expected of me: I remained in control of my own emotions – indeed, to such an extent that I succeeded in calming Tony down. That said, Tony’s rigidity was one of the reasons why I did not follow up after his termination of the counselling process. Inside me there was an aversion and intense dislike at the thought of having to deal with his rigid views and his unwillingness to look at the other side of the picture. Today I can state that I worked through these internal issues, and I no longer avoid dealing with rigidity that is linked to high levels of aggression and anger.

### **Dorothy: the unhappy person with unrealistic expectations**

Dorothy worked in a department that was so dysfunctional that management’s only answer was to drastically restructure the department to such an extent that it practically became a new department with a new name. In the process, some employees needed to be redeployed to other departments, and this included Dorothy. This made her extremely

unhappy and contributed to the breakdown of trust between her and Mr Y, the head of the old and new department. Consequently, they were in constant conflict with each other. Both accused the other person of being the culprit. She was upset about her redeployment because she was 'the minor who was forced to do what I did not want to do'. She felt that people in senior management positions 'always get the better deal even if they are in the wrong'.

I focused on her needs and concerns, using Roger's methods (Grobler, et al, 2001; Rogers, 1951, 1983) and did a good deal of active listening and advanced empathy. For the first time she felt really someone was listening to her, and this calmed her down and helped her to be prepared to *see the other side of the story*. However, it did not change her situation – 'I have to stand back for a person I have no respect for' and who is 'responsible for the deterioration of the department and all the interpersonal conflicts'. She disapproved of the fact that I had discussions with other members of her department, and the fact that I was not prepared to divert myself to the moral ground of exploring meaning in her suffering (Frankl, 1964, 1973, 1980) as the only way of dealing with this situation.

Her anger and dismay were visible and she was adamant that she was not responsible for the interpersonal conflicts between her and Mr Y; she talked mainly about his 'blunders and slip-ups'. She therefore regarded herself as the victim and was good at playing the blaming game. There were, however, valid reasons for making him responsible for at least some of the problems in the department. Contributing to her intrapersonal conflict was the frustration she experienced about Mr Y's inappropriate demands concerning her availability during lunch hours and after working hours (i.e. until he was ready to leave). She also had to perform duties she was not trained for, such as doing the administrative project planning for projects. Cox (2003) describes this as inappropriate demand on capacity which, in itself, is a source for intrapersonal conflict. Dorothy believed that management did not take her concerns seriously. However, when asked whether she was the only person complaining, she had to admit that this was not the case and that management had indeed taken steps to deal with the Head of Department's incompetent management style, although not to her satisfaction.

She experienced a mismatch (Cox 2003) between the role she expected to perform (to maintain her status as the personal assistant to a Head of Department) and the new role



that was expected from her by the institution after redeployment (to become an administrative assistant in a pool of other administrative workers). She conveyed her frustration and dismay. My *advanced empathic* understanding of her implied messages was that her self-structure as an effective and responsible worker was seriously violated, that her status within the university was in jeopardy and that she was afraid that people in the other department would also reject her. I tried to see the connections between these implied messages so that I could communicate this deeper understanding to Dorothy. She had suffered many losses as a result of the dynamics within this unhappy department. She mourned her losses, and nobody realised how much misery and pain she was experiencing. All of these feelings were aggravated by her fear of being alone, of losing face in the eyes of other people, and her fear she would no longer be regarded as worthwhile. When I communicated this deeper understanding to her, she wept (Grobler, et al; Gladding, 2000; Bor & Palmer, 2002).

I still found it difficult to resist my need to talk to other people in the department in order to listen to the other side of the story. Maybe I was too driven by this way of thinking and too inclined to fall back on my systems orientation (which was a major component of my internship). Today I realise that speaking to other people in the department was not necessary and that the focus on emotional support, which was what Dorothy asked for, and dealing with intrapersonal issues, would have been sufficient.

She eventually gave me her informed consent to discuss the department with management without mentioning her name in order to protect her identity and comply with the ethical obligation of confidentiality. I went along with the culture of the institution which, at the time, permitted discussions with high-level management functionaries about decisions taken by them when this was relevant to my work. My discussions with management subsequently led me to have a more extensive understanding of what was happening, which satisfied my need to see the problem against the meso-system (the department as a group), and the macro-system (the institution [Cilliers, 2008]). In this case, management had acted according to the requirements of the Labour Act and internal institutional policies.

In retrospect, I could have focused on the implied incompatibility problems, by which I mean the fact that the conflict between Dorothy and her direct line manager contributed to

the problem. Both Dorothy and her line manager displayed relational and emotional problems, and were behaving in ways that negatively influenced their own and other colleagues' work performance. I could also have tried to create awareness about her own contribution in order to prevent her from maintaining unhealthy interactional patterns. I also could have suggested that we should include discussions about her interpersonal conflict management style (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974) as well as her character strengths (Rath, 2007) – this, I believe, would have helped her to deal proactively with difficult situations. I would have done this without implicating her as the 'culprit', but by getting her to see what she could do or how she could think differently. As it was, she unrealistically believed that I was in a position to intervene in the institutional processes so that the decision about her redeployment could be overturned. She was disappointed that I was unable to effect a turnaround in management's decisions although, in fact, they had made a thorough investigation of the department's affairs. In retrospect, I now realise that, at the time, I was also somewhat unclear about my conflict management role within the institution. The clarification of my role of counselling psychologist specializing in conflict management remained a gradual and ongoing process.

### **Brian: the academic survivor**

By the time he came to see me, Brian had applied several times for the position of associate professor, a position he was determined to attain. His research output met the prescribed academic standards and he regarded himself as a good lecturer who received positive feedback from his students. In short, he met the requirements for an associate professor. For a few consecutive years he applied several times for this position and, even while knowing that somebody else was the favourite, he kept on hoping and trying. "I exposed myself again and again; the selection committees were torture – with no avail, I have achieved nothing." After his "last failure", he had had a quarrel with his Head of Department about the selection procedures. Since then both of them had been in a continuous state of "civil cold war". Brian underestimated the degree to which he responded emotionally according to his *want response* as explained by Maccoby and Scudder (2011) when he decided to discuss his issues with his Head of Department. As a result of the prolonged period of stress he had endured, he failed to control his emotions of frustration and anger which he, with hindsight, acknowledged with regret. Throughout the years, he had been able to act according to his rational *should response*. In retrospect, I

realise that I should have discussed this distinction with him because this might have enabled him to make different decisions in the future should he be involved in other similar conflict situations.

Brian was not in need of therapy – he only called for an ear to listen. He wanted to talk to someone who was familiar with the academic culture of the institution, but who was not in the “academic rat race”. The promotion procedures within the institution caused many intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts. He lost trust in himself and the system, and struggled with his emotional hurt and feelings of rejection. His opinion was that “friendships lead to promotion - jobs for pals.”

After almost two years since he had first contacted me for support he came to see me without an appointment. There was another opportunity to apply for the position as an associate professor and he struggled with the question of whether he should apply again. Everything was ready – his application form completed and his curriculum vitae updated. He just needed to submit these documents to the Department of Human Resources, which he eventually did, although he had to struggle with feelings of anxiety.

With hindsight I cannot really pin down what I did or said to make him feel better, or that encouraged him to try again. However, a partial answer to this question came when he informed me in person that he was finally appointed as an associate professor. Apparently his turning point came when I asked the question: “and you allowed him to do it?” This triggered his memory, and many things fell in place. He saw the picture of his “allowing people to influence me to such an extent that I kept on doubting myself, questioning myself. I decided to believe in myself because I know that I am capable of being a good academic.” He used his power of choice to decide that he was not the victim anymore and that he could take control of his life, which he successfully did when he appeared in front of the selection committee and later, when he developed in his academic career.

## **Alex: the genuine one**

Alex described Grant, a fellow colleague, as being a friendly and pleasant person until there was a difference of opinion about something – then Grant insisted that things should be done his way. It seemed as if Grant became tremendously energised by opposition. ‘He fights with every method until he wins – he does not stop, he even becomes abusive. Meeting after meeting is derailed by arguments about his issues. For him it is “my way or the highway”.’ Eventually Alex and the other people involved were ‘emotionally exhausted – “I am totally depleted after such interactions with him because it always turns into altercations, irrespective of how reasonable I try to be”. Apparently, Grant was not above diverting to surreptitious and not above-board actions (e.g. by manipulative behaviour or by deliberately giving incorrect information to managers higher up the hierarchy, who then ruled in his favour). Sometimes Grant wrote unpleasant e-mails. They were not really offensive, but they had a subtly negative message aimed at the other person (e.g. ‘rather focus on your task to make the study material comprehensible to your students’). I experienced Alex as genuine and worried. The way in which he described Grant led me to believe that Grant displayed narcissistic characteristics. However, I kept this to myself and deliberately did not allow myself to label someone I had not even met.

The crux of the matter for Alex was how to deal with his own personal frustrations and with Grant’s unacceptable behaviour when they had to work together (e.g. being on the same team responsible for study material for a specific module). Alex was a soft-spoken person who could not understand why he got so upset and disturbed by Grant and why he kept on ‘opposing and fighting’ him in an effort to change Grant’s ways of doing things.

Alex’s life script programmed him to value active listening, to be heard and to be listened to in order to feel ‘in touch with the other person, ‘it enriches my life, I feel accepted and wanted’. He was used to sharing his thoughts, opinions and feelings with others without criticism. He had a need to be understood at an almost ‘bottomless’ level. Unconsciously, he diverted to his critical parent ego state in order to rectify Grant’s overbearing behaviour and, in the process, became judgmental (Jude, 2006). The series of transactions between them took place from Alex’s critical parent ego state, which repudiated Grant as if he were a naughty child (Berne, 1964). These underlying dynamics were an eye-opener to Alex and he was relieved that the solution was within his power to implement. He learned that

the adult part would be his best 'conflict manager', the adult who could be activated by him to do the data processing linked to the conflict and who would give advice about appropriate and suitable emotions, behaviour and communication. Alex acknowledged that it would not be an easy task to think and act differently. When he discussed the conflict situation with his direct line manager, it became apparent that he and other people in the system were aware of Grant's behaviour. Alex then decided not to participate in the controversies caused by Grant – as far as possible – but instead to stand back in the hope that the 'system will call Grant to order'.

In a way, it was easy to deal with Alex's situation because his genuineness enhanced his motivation to look into his own psychodynamics. His eagerness contributed to his self-insight, even while acknowledging that it was not within his power to change the other person's ways and that he had to face this situation each time he went to work. For me, it was a relief not to have to face up to an employee's hostility-inducing actions, which is what usually happens between role players in a conflict situation. In retrospect, I realised that my relief indicated how tiring and emotionally draining my task as a conflict management counselling psychologist could be. In a sense I am a caregiver, but a caregiver can also become exhausted; fortunately, a caregiver is also energised by unexpected mercies such as this situation.

### **Rory: the activist, tired of conflict, unlocking his potential**

Conflict counselling interventions sometimes lead, unintentionally, to brief psychotherapy. This is what happened with Rory, a director. Rory found it difficult to deal with the interpersonal conflicts between some of his staff members. At his request I did some individual and group intervention sessions in his directorate which, according to the feedback I received from employees in this directorate, proved to be successful. Rory and I also went through a conflict coaching process whereby he hoped to be mentored towards successful interpersonal conflict management. However, at the time it always seemed as if we were working with the symptoms and not the crux of the matter. Rory could not come to a state of closure as a result of his incapacitating emotions and hidden anger. He had an intense dislike of his department's executive management because they wanted to 'control my life - I shall appreciate it if they could ask me to do something instead of giving

orders. They ask me to perform some of their duties. I write the memorandums and then they send it in their names as if it was written by them.'

In South Africa's previous political regime, Rory had been an activist who opposed the apartheid system. During those years he was deeply affected by situations that caused people terrible humiliation, suffering, pain and anger. Rory himself did also suffer most of these. After 1994, and as the years went by in the new political landscape, Rory outgrew his activist way of doing things and found, in varying degrees, sources of healing for his past experiences through, among other things, literature, music and the pleasure of his work at Unisa. However, as time went by, he found himself disliking his work. He only partially understood why he became so upset with his executive management unit and why he lost his enthusiasm for his work, and why he found it difficult to overcome these feelings. Previously, he had been perfectly capable of dealing with his staff members' issues and conflicts, but he gradually stopped caring. His resilience score, according to the SOC questionnaire (Antonovsky, 1987; Strümpfer, 2006a & 2006b; Van Jaarsveld, 2005) was low, which indicated that his motive to be strong in the face of inordinate demands had faded away. His TAT protocols of Cards 1 and 3BM (Bellak & Abrams, 1997) indicated that, although he was aware of demands of life and work, his unenthusiastic, despondent and discouraged feelings had become dominant and, indeed, incapacitating. He was more involved with his inner experiences than with his work reality. He did not know how to manage these feelings and had serious doubts whether he was capable of performing his duties or to being accepted by others.

Rory was stuck in his perceptions and way of reasoning; he was also probably limited by the boundaries of his conscious and unconscious memories from the past and his current experiences. His old activist mindset was his familiar way of dealing with, for him, unacceptable issues, but he had outgrown this way of approaching things and was, in any case, without the emotional energy required to fight for his cause. One positive concept in Card 1 of the TAT, however, was that he was drawn to the activity of *reading*, the conceptual meaning of which was the desire to unlock the door that would enable him to lead a more fulfilling and inspiring life. Our counselling session about this strengthened his new ways of thinking, and encouraged him to unlock his potential accordingly.

In one of our last sessions I spontaneously used hypnotic communication without putting Rory in an explicit and obvious deep trance state (Peltier, 2001). He agreed to go along with the hypnotic process, which would enable him to identify *the problem* and *the solution* to the problem by focusing on his hand movements. This process was carried out according to Rossi's *fail-safe* use of hands (Battino & South, 2001; Emmerson, 2003; Milton Erickson, 2006 and 2012). Initially he found it difficult to find a solution for the identified problem, after which I brought together his strengths revealed in the hypnotic process as identified through his earlier completion of the StrengthsFinder Questionnaire (Clifton, 2003; Rath, 2007). His strengths were *learner* (desire to learn, acquire additional knowledge and gain new skills), *input* (shares his knowledge with others and looks for a better way to deal with complicated procedures), *achiever* (has a great deal of stamina and works hard), *responsibility* (takes psychological ownership of what he says he will do), and *connectedness* (understands how people and experiences are linked across time, distance race, ethnicity, religion or cultures). The idea was that he should utilise his potential to solve his problems in his own, unique way (Havens & Walters, 2002; Battino & South, 2001).

It was an *eureka moment* when he identified his problem as still having serious issues with people in "..... authority positions who discriminatorily, unjustly and undeservedly came into these positions – as they did. The merger was not fair, and they were unjustly placed over me. Now they abuse their power against me because they know I should have been appointed in the senior position because of my skills, and not because of favouritism. I am constantly comparing their ways of doing with mine should I have been appointed in that position. They treat me as if I was picked up from the streets."

He was tired of conflict, since most of his life had been embedded in conflict and he had become despondent and helpless when his efforts to reach out to these people were unsuccessful. According to the Thomas Kilmann questionnaire, his conflict management style of avoidance as manifested in practice (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974) was therefore a conscious decision. His solution to his problem was to 'discuss my issues for the last time in detail with you and then to let it go' – which we did.

Almost two weeks later I received an e-mail from Rory to thank me for the opportunity to revisit his past and to deal with his incapacitating emotions about the here and now, which

opened the door to enjoy his present circumstances and to look forward to the future. “Thank you for placing these things in perspective – I cannot exactly tell what is different but I feel disburdened and free.” This experience is in line with Rossi’s explanation that there is, in hypnosis, healing without cognition “and that the symptoms somehow go away and nobody knows the reason why, not even the therapist” (2001, p. vii).

Previously I was cautious of making use of hypnotherapy or hypnotic communication techniques within an institution. Not only are there numerous myths and many misconceptions about hypnosis, which are held by a wide variety of professionals as well as the general public (Battino & South, 2001) but, of course, the institutional set-up itself has to be taken into consideration. Since misconceptions can be a hindrance to the practice of effective hypnosis, I had to be careful not to force my positive attitude concerning hypnosis on the employees or managers. However, in Rory’s case, I applied my usual conflict management interventions over an extended period of time, with he was still not at ease. I became conscious of the possibility that he might have been limited by the boundaries of his perceptual world and the psychodynamics of the stories of his past. The positive outcome of this hypnotic intervention not only freed me to utilise it as a conflict management intervention, but also contributed to the progress of my identity as a counselling psychologist specialising in interpersonal conflict management.

### **Arina: my co-traveller in becoming a counselling psychologist specialising in conflict management**

Arina voluntarily entered the intrapersonal conflict management sessions in order to deal with her high stress levels related to the demanding and tense environment in which she worked. Over a lengthy period of time she had been serving as the personal administrative assistant for a few managers in executive positions. With all of these people, she experienced high stress levels because she had to ‘live with their difficult personalities’. She ‘allowed’ them turn her peaceful emotional ‘state of mind into unhappiness, stress, frustration and anger’. Her work performance was of a high standard, but she could no longer handle the intensity of her emotions as evoked by her managers’ conflict-provoking management styles. I also knew these managers and I realised that they were indeed demanding people to work with, and so I could empathise with her. Our understanding was that she could contact me every time she felt the need to do so. This contact lasted over a



period of more or less nine years. In the text below I will describe how I tried to help Arina cope with each of her three managers.

#### Arina's relationship with line manager A

The content of my one-on-one support was focused on counselling while, at the same time, I listened to her narratives. In Arina's case, there was no specific method used: I was simply available for support. I should also say that, at the time, her relationships at home were difficult and full of conflict and I referred her and her husband to a psychologist for couple therapy. We discussed the role of her childhood years and their impact on the here and now. She developed some sense of how her present actions and reactions related to her past experiences. She was an only child whose mother had mood swings that made her unpredictable. Arina never knew what to expect from her mother and felt "one day rejected and the next day accepted." As a result, she seldom felt emotional safe in her relationship with her mother whom she tried to please by doing things for her. Her father dealt with the situation by escaping into his work. Arina received his attention when she performed well at school and in other areas of her life. The content of her life script was to work hard as way of getting approval and escaping from hurtful circumstances. The vacuum left by this approach was that insight alone did not bring about change. Over the course of time Arina could see the similarities between her relationship with Manager A and the relationship she had with her father.

#### Arina's relationship with line manager B

My counselling included identifying her conflict management patterns as revealed by psychometric testing, which included the Thomas Kilmann conflict management questionnaire (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Her style of choice was to *collaborate*, whereby she attempted to find some solution which would fully satisfy both her and her line manager's concerns. When this proved unsuccessful, she diverted to the *avoiding style* by not pursuing her own concerns. She did not address the conflict issues: instead, she sidestepped them diplomatically. She became *accommodating* by neglecting her own concerns, and capitulated to his way of doing things and tried to live with his short-tempered behaviour. Eventually these elements of self-sacrifice became too much of an effort, even in view of her high SOC (Sense of Coherence) score, which was 134 (High). This score was an indication of her feeling that there was a high probability that things will work out as well as reasonably can be expected. She had a strong motive to be strong in

the face of inordinate demands but found it increasingly difficult to do so (Antonovsky, 1983; Strümpfer, 2006a, 2006b & 2006c). She therefore found out about her coping strategies according to the COPE Questionnaire (Carver, et al, 1989) – this was empowering to her. Her main problem-focused coping strategies were *planning* (thinking about various strategies which could be used to solve a problem) and *seeking social support for instrumental reasons* (looking for advice, support or information). Her emotion-focused coping strategies were *turning to religion* (focusing on religion to facilitate emotional support), *positive reinterpretation* (managing stress emotions rather than the stressors themselves), and *seeking social support for emotional reasons* (reaching out to others for moral support, sympathy and understanding). We also identified her character strengths in an informal way by: discussing one task she had completed successfully; a famous person whom she admired; the characteristics of her favourite animal; and the qualities of her favourite tree. I transformed our counselling session into hypnotic communication (Peltier, 2001) by asking her to close her eyes while internalising these strengths, which included commitment, tough-mindedness, determination and a sense of humour. She reported at a later stage that she had succeeded in being assertive by not neglecting her own concerns: “I was anxious, but I took a deep breath and, to my surprise, heard myself asking him to rather ask the same question in a more relaxed manner. Both of us were caught by surprise ...” She still had a long way to go, but could at least identify a turning point. I was happy because I could safely say that psychological strengths (such as Arina’s sense of coherence) are related to coping strategies (such as Arina’s problem-solving and positive reinterpretation) (Rothman, 2004).

#### Arina’s relationship with line manager C

This line manager’s inconsistent manner in which she expected Arina to perform her duties made life difficult, but when she tried to discuss the issue “I was told it is not my problem”. The atmosphere between them deteriorated owing to her line manager’s unpredictable emotions by being ‘one day antagonistic and the next day sociable and pleasant’. Arina became distressed and anxious because “it seems to me that I lost my ability to deal with all these, despite all our sessions over the years”. She remembered that we had previously talked about the idea that every one of us has our own concentration camp (Fabry, 1988) and “now I am back in mine.” She found it difficult to believe that she was “again too scared” for her own position if I was to approach the line manager with an invitation to consult her about the conflict situation as the latter ‘builds evidence against the employees

in her department – she files everything that we do wrong in her eyes’. Arina was distressed and hyper-reflected on how she should deal with the situation. Her past experiences left her with depleted energy levels and she was conflict-saturated (Christie, 2009; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Carlson & Erickson, 2001). Throughout our discussions she focused on what actions were in her power to take; in this case, this was to do something to revitalise herself. She decided to create a special place at home and in her garden where she could relax. Using the imagery technique of creating one’s favourite place in your mind, Arina found this favourite place as nature itself (Milton Erickson, 2006). According to the techniques of transactional analysis (Berne, 1964; Jude, 2006), she also discovered that her nurturing parent could help her uncertain and unhappy little girl ego state that became anxious and lonely in conflict situations. Indeed, to her surprise, she realised that her adult ego state was actually the stronger ego state and that this controlling ego state could provide her with the wisdom she needed in interpersonal conflict situations.

The Internalised Other Interviewing Technique (IOI) (Vasconcelos & Neto, 2003) enabled Arina to consider her issues from the position of her line manager. She could imagine why her line manager was acting in the way she did and what she was feeling and thinking (although this did not mean that Arina agreed with her). She realised that she actually had not taken into account her line manager’s personality and that she wanted to change her – which she couldn’t do. This was the turning point of the counselling session. She was affirmed for her ability, throughout the years, to have empathy for others and for her positive attitude and resilience in the midst of stressful situations. This is in line with Frankl’s assumption that “meaning can be found not only in activities and experiences but also through one’s positive attitude toward a distressing situation” (Lukas, 1984, p.12).

Arina’s progress in the intrapersonal conflict management sessions consisted partially in transforming her understanding of the impact of specific situations on her as a result of the brief psychotherapeutic input – which was reflected in her decrease in stress levels. We succeeded in changing the meaning she attached to these situations and by empowering her to successfully deal with her intrapersonal conflicts.

In retrospect I can say that, without either of us being aware of it, Arina participated in my journey over a period of almost nine years regarding my holistic way of facilitating

intrapersonal conflict management from a counselling psychologist's perspective. This was partially because we both had the luxury of having enough time.

### **Abel: the person whose past experiences came to the fore as a result of the merger**

In January 2004, the university became a merged institution and was therefore deeply involved in a number of challenging merger processes (we had to merge with two other higher education institutions). Fourie (2008) says that, in such circumstances, it is not only the institutions themselves that are challenged when it comes to issues such as autonomy, systems, culture, properties, and transformation in general. The employees of these institutions also become confronted with major career and personal challenges, which Fourie (2008, p.30) refers to as "people issues". Unfortunately, this human side of mergers is not high on the priority list of executive management.

As it was, I found that the merger exacerbated employees' intrapersonal conflict; this was certainly true of Abel, an employee in his early fifties. His interpersonal conflict occurred in the midst of the merger processes, but actually originated from his intrapersonal issues. Abel's Head of Department requested my help because Abel 'is the cause of major conflicts between them, within the department and with management' because he bluntly and angrily refused to go along with management's decision about the relocation of their department to another campus in line with the confirmation of new structures and physical facilities. Abel was upset about the perceived incorrectness of processes followed by management concerning the relocation of offices and about the finality of their decisions. 'No consultation processes were followed between management and us, the decent thing to do.' Eventually 'we were just informed that we have to relocate'. Abel said that nobody took into account the emotional impact on the staff members, and even if this had been taken into account, 'it would have been disregarded by management who abuses its power and always acts in a dictatorial way'. There were, however, according to the Head of Department, communication efforts from management's side, 'but although we were listened to, the final decision powers are in Management's hands. All of us understand Management's position, even if we disagree – why can't Abel do the same and stop acting like this?' Abel was adamant about his decision and he insisted that he could work from his current office without relocating with the rest of the department 'especially in view of the advanced technology of this century'. Abel declared that he was prepared 'to travel

between the campuses when necessary for meetings, and the classes and workshops I am responsible for'. In fact, Abel stayed in his current office without the approval of line management hierarchy whilst his co-employees moved to the new campus.

Management had the opportunity to go into a head-on collision with Abel by, for example, 'changing his office's door locks or starting disciplinary procedures for dismissal due to his insubordination'. They decided, however, to refer him for counselling. He reluctantly entered the counselling sessions and, eventually, brief psychotherapy. The purpose as stated by his line manager was to change Abel's mind concerning his refusal to relocate. I intended also to try to deal with Abel's accompanying intrapersonal conflicts and the interpersonal conflict between him and line management. Abel complied in order to remain in his office whilst performing his duties. All of these objectives were in conflict with one another.

I had a blink moment (Gladwell, 2005) with Abel when I met him for the first time: he was reserved, anxious and unfriendly with an aura of 'leave me alone'. His weary, fatigued and listless body language suggested that he was also depressed (Addis & Martell, 2004; APA, 1995 & 2002 (DSM IV-TR, 1995); Yapko, 1988, 1995, 1997). He told me immediately that if my purpose was to convince him to relocate it would be a waste of time, whereupon I indicated that I would like to listen to his side of the story. I guided his narrative by questions because, as I have said, he was not keen to talk. Initially he tried to convince me of the correctness of his attitude and behaviour, but I mainly responded by means of active listening. I soon realised that anxiety and depression as well as voices from the past were at the root of his relocation problem. As a child, his parents' continuous moving from one place to another caused him to be a lonely outsider at the different schools he had to attend. His emotionally absent parents did not understand his rebellious behaviour, which was actually a symptom of depression. He rarely felt secure – either interpersonally or intrapersonally. He managed his anxiety, anger and depression through rebellious and disruptive behaviour that eventually became a huge problem, a problem that his parents could no longer ignore. They tried to cope by asking his step-grandmother (who was a widow) to look after Abel while they proceeded with their busy lives. The positive influence of his grandmother prevented him from becoming a school drop-out. Her stable presence, acceptance of Abel and good judgment in dealing with a rebellious teenager helped him to improve in his schoolwork and to eventually graduate in his specific academic field.

Through the years he expanded his academic career at the university and gradually settled in his work environment. This kept him so busy for many years that he succeeded in suppressing his depression and spells of anxiety. As is so often the case when people reach their middle years, Abel eventually could no longer suppress his depression and it became debilitating. He struggled to contain his emotional energy and to constantly put on a façade. One of the predictabilities in his life was at his workplace, because this environment helped him to feel safe.

The university's transformation did not really distress Abel. Rumours of the coming merger made Abel uncomfortable, but he did not regard it as something that concerned him. He took it for granted that his department was safely settled on the main campus of the university. The harsher reality of the merger came as a tremendous shock to him when he was informed about his department's relocation. The relocation disrupted his life and his refusal to move was a desperate effort to maintain the status quo. The merger and relocation were external triggers (Addis & Martell, 2004) for his avoidance and opposing behaviour. He denied his inner voice which said that, eventually, his only choice would be to comply with the relocation. This contributed to his anxiety and the move unconsciously also activated internal triggers (Addis & Martell, 2004), namely, his unfinished business with his parents who ignored his emotional turmoil during the relocations of his childhood years. "Management only cares about themselves and their big salaries" became his mantra.

My role was not to give long-term psychotherapy for his intrapersonal issues and conflicts. Nor was time on my side – I simply was not in a position to refer him to an external psychologist. The culture of the institution had to be kept in mind, namely, the finalisation of the merger structures and the need to find immediate solutions.

I explained to Abel that I might be able to help him make a 'decision of (his) choice'. He took pride in his work and wanted to continue in his job, but avoided the responsibility to relocate that would enable him to do just this. Should he be forced to relocate, he could wash his hands in innocence while proceeding with his rebellious and blaming game if things turned out badly. He was stuck in his need to make the statement that 'I will not be ordered around as it pleases anybody, even management'. However, the real conflicting choice for him was between *his desire to meet life's expectations* (i.e. his academic work)

*and his unwillingness to do so* as a result of the relocation demands and, more specifically, his depression which left him without the inner resources required to deal with these demands. It is worth stating that conflict is a subjective feeling which involves a course of action and implies a change in behaviour (Mosak & LeFevre, 1976). It actually did not matter which choice he made, whether to stay in his old office or to move, because any choice leads to action which, in itself, alters the situation (Mosak & LeFevre, 1976). The consequences of each of his choices were eventually so powerful that he knew he had to revisit his choice not to move. Should he decide not to move he had to face possible charges which could lead to his dismissal. On the other hand, should he adapt to the changes, this would bring him into conflict with himself as he had to surrender to a system he despised.

I dealt with the situation by combining the *game of probabilities* and *empty chair technique* as described by Mosak and LeFevre (1976, p. 23) with the parent-child-adult of transactional analysis (Jude, 2006; Berne, 1964). I asked Abel: "If I were to meet you somewhere in the corridors of our university, six months from now, what are the chances, based on a scale of one to ten that you will be sitting in your new office on the other campus?" His answer was that it would be a zero – "if it depends on me." The "if" opened the door for me to move to the empty chair technique, which is helpful in getting people to make choices and to resolve conflicts (Mosak & LeFevre, 1976). In Chair 1, the reasons to stay in his old office and the consequences of this were examined, and in Chair 2 the reasons for the possibility of relocating were explored. Initially he was sceptical about this. It was easier for Abel to only answer the questions in the *game of probabilities* than to physically move between the two chairs. An added value was that the physical and emotional energy attached to his movement between the two chairs could also initiate an intra-movement. Chair 1 led to the insight that his working circumstances would, in any case, never be the same again and that the inner part compelling him to refuse to move was his anxious and despondent child (these are my words, not his).

Chair 2 conveyed the truth that he had at his disposal the ability to see the other side of the story; the broader picture of the institution's compulsory participation in the merger (which was an external decision made by the government). He acknowledged that he would miss the company and support of his co-workers. His real intention was to stay in his comfort zone because he did not have the emotional energy to live with the disruption following the execution of institutional decisions, all of which had damaging implications for his personal wellbeing and security. The threat to his lifestyle left him anxious and self-protective, unconsciously amplified by the experiences of his childhood. He found it difficult to leave the old and familiar behind, a mindset that was exacerbated by his depressive mood disorder. While acknowledging his depression and anxiety, I returned to the *game of probabilities*; this time he experienced himself as being on a scale of 4, which indicated the direction that he expected to take was to move with the rest of his department. He eventually decided to move to the other campus. This decision certainly solved the problem, but did not address his long-term psychodynamic issues. I therefore referred Abel to an external psychologist and psychiatrist who could address his underlying anxiety and depression that was triggered and exacerbated by the disruptive changes he was confronted with as a result of the merger.

When I apply the principles of the abovementioned *game of probabilities* and the *empty chair technique* to the development of my identity, it unambiguously indicates that I am a counselling psychologist specialising in intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict management. The situations that I have had to deal with called for psychotherapeutic knowledge and skills that eventually facilitate the finding of solutions.

#### **4.5 EMERGING THEMES FROM THE INTRAPERSONAL CONFLICT CASES AND MY IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AS A COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGIST**

I will now consider some of the emerging themes and patterns of the intrapersonal conflict stories; these themes and patterns typify my work in dealing with intra-personal conflict and I have to take them into consideration when dealing with intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts.



### **Intrapersonal conflict: warning symptoms**

Conflict is often the visible symptom of deep-seated psychological problems. The causes of conflict are related to, among other things, the impact of emotional and power abuse on the victim employee; the mismatch between the employee and the demands of his or her work; and threats by the employee perpetrator and his or her psychopathology. The consequences of intrapersonal conflicts are (among other things) emotional flooding such as excessive crying, as well as mourning of losses suffered, symptoms of anxiety, depression and distress, incapacitating emotions and thoughts, insubordination, and absenteeism.

### **The type of support needed**

The type of support needed by the managers and subordinates can be placed in four categories based on the severity of the intrapersonal conflict and the level of support they request.

*Guidance and advice:* Employees in this category were simply in need of advice and guidance from me as an objective and professional person. They were struggling with something, and had become stuck in their emotions and thoughts. Some of them experienced difficulties in making decisions. They needed a soundboard to help them find their way forward.

*Counselling:* Sometimes their emotional difficulties became too heavy a burden and they needed somebody who would accept them with empathy and confirm their struggles, without the possibility of rejection and humiliation. Sometimes the affirmation of their feelings and thoughts empowered them to keep on trying and doing the correct thing under circumstances. They also needed a psychologist with the relevant counselling skills. Their difficulties were sometimes resolved through a change of attitude.

*Brief psychotherapy and/or referral for long-term psychotherapy:* The employees in this group were in need of a deeper level of therapeutic involvement, sometimes it was only to overcome psychological obstacles which were the cause of their distress and conflicts. At other times, they needed to be referred to external psychologists and psychiatrists for treatment.

*Medical boarding:* Only a few employees were medically boarded based on the psychiatric reason of incapacity. These cases included conditions of severe mood disorders, personality disorders, and psychosis.

### **Employees' perceptions**

Many of the employees struggled with the perception of *the power of the line managers*, which resulted in a fear of being targeted. The main reason for their conflicts with their line managers was one of incompatibility. The feelings that surfaced were helplessness, misery, despondency, anger and/or depression, and distress, which sometimes ended in excessive crying and feelings of being traumatised. Their main proposed solution was to be redeployed – which was rather irrational, because it was very difficult for them to be redeployed without the approval of their line managers, who were exactly the people they did not want to involve in the conflict management process. However, there were cases where redeployment was considered as a solution for the best. Given their vulnerable and emotional state of mind, I often referred these employees to psychologists and psychiatrists as external service providers for long-term psychotherapy. Contributing to these referrals was my assessment that there were hidden psychiatric conditions involved – either as a consequence of the intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts or as a direct contributing factor to these conflicts. In some cases, employees had to be admitted to a psychiatric clinic.

Some of the managers and employees gave up hope of any form of *organisational support* other than that which came from my office. Others displayed anger because of their experience or perception that management did not want to intervene unless they absolutely had to. Others did not expect management to intervene for the simple reason that they did not regard it as management's responsibility to do so. It is worth pointing out that this group of employees took responsibility for their own wellbeing and were not waiting for their external circumstances to change.

Some individuals *expected positive change* to occur owing to my intervention. I had to deal with this expectation carefully because, if I started off by making it clear that this was not likely to happen, then these employees were not likely to continue with the conflict management process or any form of brief psychotherapy. This group of employees tended to hope that the person who, according to them, was responsible for their conflicts would

change; they were not seeking change from within themselves. The mindset in this scenario was “I’m OK – You’re not OK” (Harris, 1973), a mindset that reflects an attitude of superiority. These employees sometimes acknowledged that they had also made mistakes, but they insisted that the other party was actually the real culprit. Because they refused to allow me to involve the other party, I had to be careful not to be tricked into taking sides myself – hence my utilisation of counselling or brief psychotherapy.

### **The basics: acknowledge, but move beyond**

Stricker (2005) refers to the basics as being the common factors that are present in most, if not all, approaches to therapy and which cut across all theoretical boundaries. The basics of psychologists’ training will always be required in any therapeutic situation: these basics include listening skills, empathy, congruence and warmth (Rogers, 1951). One should listen carefully and not jump too quickly to so-called therapeutic techniques or advice-giving before meeting the employee in his or her world. I agree with Maccoby and Scudder (2011) who believe that, if we take the time to learn what is important to people, the resolution of the conflict has already begun. There cannot be a resolution without sincere understanding and respect for the employee, and also the protection, validation, or restoration of values within a non-threatening and accepting environment. This is desperately needed by employees trapped in a conflict-ridden environment. Acceptance of their values, thoughts and emotions, however, does not imply approval and validation (Benjamin, 1981), but instead serves as the starting point for moving deeper into the conflict issues. Without acceptance, the employee will suspect that I am judging him or her, asking him or her to feel and think as I do. However, I have to be careful not to get stuck in the situation. I therefore progress to a position of advanced empathy, which involves helping the employee explore themes, issues and emotions new to his or her awareness (Grobler, et al, 2006). However, no matter how valuable Roger’s client-centred therapy might be, this approach does not allow therapists to use active-directive therapy to help the client identify and change dysfunctional thoughts and behaviours. Occasionally I find it therefore valuable to make use of psychotherapeutic techniques, such as REBT by challenging a person’s musts (e.g. “you must treat me well” or “my life conditions must be good”) by facilitating the answer that these musts are unrealistic expectations and over simplifications of how life should be (Ellis, 1994, p. 147). *Musts* also contribute to negative self-talk which, in turn, contributes to stress and unhappiness. Research has shown that, by countering this negative self-talk, the person realises that he or she has the ability to

withstand difficult life circumstances (Bourne, 2010). However, I do not want to tell the employee what to think, but I can challenge him (or her) accordingly.

Another common factor mentioned by Stricker (2005) which I always find valuable is the therapeutic alliance as established between the employee and myself: this allows the employee to share issues he or she is usually not willing to disclose. Exposing the employee to past difficulties is also relevant, of course, but this needs to be handled with care. In fact, it is often unnecessary to deal with difficulties of a client's past or personal life. In these cases I prefer to focus on specific difficulties within the work context. The employee's new corrective emotional experiences are achieved by, among other things, a new way of thinking about him- or herself and the other, and personal empowerment by means of brief psychotherapy.

### **Role of emotions in intrapersonal conflict**

Emotions are an integral part of intrapersonal conflict, especially because the display of strong emotions is not acceptable in the work environment and such emotions are therefore often concealed. Any emotion has its own corresponding bodily behaviour, such as clenching the fists, or tightening and loosening the jaw. Emotions can also be seen as means of cognition, that is, our mental activities involved in acquiring and processing information. Emotions are the way we become aware of the appropriateness of our concerns (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 2003). By reflecting feelings and helping the employee to understand his or her emotional reactions, I not only help the employee to vent strong emotions such as anger, sadness and helplessness (Long & Young, 2007), but I also help the employee to become cognitively aware of his or her cognitions. Anger and irritation, for example, are often suppressed feelings. Many employees do not feel safe in disclosing their real emotions to their line managers during or after a conflict situation, especially because doing so may well be regarded as insubordination or, at least, is likely to cause trouble and unhappiness. Of course, the employees concerned would rather express their anger and frustrations but, out of fear for the consequences, they realise that a show of negative emotion is unwise. They therefore keep up a front of cooperation and do what is expected from them, although they are sometimes simmering inside, which causes them emotional discomfort and misery. For example, Arina and Rory considered the consequences of emotional responses and deliberately decided to act rationally and reasonably. Some employees, on the other hand, allow their emotional reactions to take

over. The force of Tony's and Abel's emotions during and about their respective conflict situations compelled them to respond hot-headedly and fiercely without controlling their emotions. Their emotional responses dominated their actions. This is in line with the findings of O'Conner, et al (2002, p. 416) who refer to "should self and want self". When they "think about how they should react when they face an interpersonal disagreement, they consider rational, thoughtful, cool-headed responses. When they think about what they want to do, however, their reactions are more emotional, impulsive and hot-headed". The authors conclude that *want* and *should* responses differ conceptually and that the distinction is rooted in the emotionality of the reactions. However, in the heat of the moment, even intentional and planned rational reactions disappear in the force of emotion.

### **What does the client want?**

I need to identify what the client's needs are and what he or she expects and wants from me. It is not ethical for me to act according to my need to bring about a specific type of change in his or her life (Benjamin, 1981). If the employee only comes for advice, then this is what I have to give, although I do have the freedom to make suggestions concerning the way forward.

### **Psychopathology and psychotherapy**

It is not my place to somehow force the employee into psychotherapeutic processes or psychotherapy, even if I know that this is necessary. I take cognition of the fact that the psychopathology within the client is sometimes so severe that the client cannot find ways of making his or her beliefs fit conventional notions of reality; for example, the paranoid schizophrenic may be quite convinced that he is the only one in the world that sees the threat and that he has to act accordingly (McWilliams, 1994). In really serious cases, however, I do use external psychiatrists for the diagnosis and recommendation that the involved employee should be hospitalised or medically boarded for psychiatric reasons.

### **Situations involving the danger of physical and emotional abuse**

If there is the possibility that physical harm could be done to the line manager or other employees the client is unhappy with, I have to clarify for myself whether this is an empty threat or a reality that could, in fact, occur. Needless to say, management does not tolerate any form of physical violence. When it is necessary for me to act in cases where the person might physically harm himself or other persons, it is my ethical and legal

responsibility to report the matter to the relevant authorities, even without the employee's consent. I do this by either explaining the reason for obligatory referral for psychiatric treatment or, should the client refuse, explain that I am bound by South African law to report the matter to the authorities, who will then take appropriate action. Fortunately, in all my years of working in this field, this has only happened twice. In one of these cases protection from our security services department was required. One way of effectively defusing the situation is to redeploy the employee to another department or to get him to report to another line manager.

### **The need not to disturb unconscious material**

I always have to be on the alert not to activate psychological material that may cause confusion. Sometimes there might be a latent mood or personality disorder which the person has succeeded in concealing or has dealt with, sometimes via conscious processes (i.e. a conscious appraisal of what is possible or impossible to do), sometimes via unconscious processes (influences from past experiences or personality dynamics that are largely unconscious, and that exert an influence on the client's behaviour). I have to ensure that I do not push the employee in a direction or confront him or her with something that the employee is not ready to deal with. If too much comes in at once, the client's mind selectively attends to whatever is given high priority. However, not all of them succeed in reducing their worlds to manageable levels (Yapko, 1997). Warning signals may be breathing heavily or shortness of breath, restless body movements, or the client abruptly ending the session. Sometimes I recognise symptoms of depression, such as anxiety and tiredness, lethargy, hyperactivity and the inability to concentrate. These symptoms may be the result of a mood disorder and/or circumstances at work that can very often precipitate, perpetuate, and compound existing depression and anxiety (Shamos, 2011).

### **My own subjective perceptions and intrapersonal dynamics**

When I become aware of the necessity to "care for myself" or become emotionally exhausted I cope by setting my own boundaries, by not taking on too much, and making sure that I take leave or escape into nature, for example, going for walks. Sometimes, I cope by seeking guidance from, and having supervisory discussions with, another psychologist. However, it may sound that I am more than often emotionally exhausted, which is not the case. There are many happy times as a result of, for example, being

contended with the processes and outcomes thereof and my way of looking for positives in situations.

### **Past, present and future**

It is not always possible to mainly focus on the present situation in order to solve a client's intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict. Instead, it is sometimes wise to take into consideration stories of the past as a springboard to dealing with the present (i.e. in a different way) and then, with the client, to move forwards. Critical stocktaking of the past brings hope for the future, even if the looking back painfully reminds one of the miseries of the past. In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the mean-spirited and heartless Scrooge changes his ways after being confronted with three ghostly visions: the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present and the Ghost of Christmas Future. It is only because of these visits that Scrooge is able to change both himself and his future. People who use reminiscence for self-understanding show ego-integrity and a movement towards mental health (Papalia, Sterns, Feldman & Camp, 2002). The fact that the journey to the past happens within the work context and institutional culture complicates my task and the employee's readiness to participate. I believe that intrapersonal issues, with their roots in the past, need to be addressed either via brief psychotherapies in order to get to the bottom of workplace conflict or via referral to external service providers (e.g. psychologists). This activates the inner healing process in terms of enabling the client to face his or her emotional pain and trauma from the past. This process is enhanced by helping the employee become aware of and use his or her inner strengths and by helping the employee develop sound coping strategies.

### **One side of the story**

One should be careful not to take for granted that what the employee says *is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth*. How to get *the other side of his story* is sometimes difficult, but can be achieved by means of the following: (i) one's own gut feeling (Gladwell, 2005); (ii) circular questions (Schwartz, 1995); (iii) utilising the technique of the *internalised other interviewing* (Vasconcelos & Neto, 2003; Paré, 2001); and (iv) one's own awareness of other information about the circumstances in that specific department that the aggrieved employee is often unaware of. This brings about ethical considerations – should I share my knowledge or not? How should I treat this knowledge? How do I make sure that I am

not prejudiced and biased, especially when the person in my office presents his or her case with authenticity?

### **The details of the conflict situation: avoid getting stuck**

It is easy to become so entangled with the details of the interpersonal conflict incidents that one loses perspective of the picture as a whole; indeed, it is possible to allow the client to keep on *swimming in his or her mud pool*. The question then is how to avoid this *mud pool* situation. I have to acknowledge employees' overwhelming need to share their issues and feelings about the conflict situation, albeit often with a victim mindset that they either enjoy or are simply unaware of. Many of my clients do not even consider the option that there might be another side to the story. To guide them out of this situation, I divert to cognitive restructuring (Walen, DiGuiseppe & Dryden, 1992) by asking, for example, the following: "is it just possible that there might be another side to this story?" It may be necessary to dispute underlying irrational beliefs, such as the client's implicit belief that his or her way is the best way of dealing with conflict (Ellis, 1994). The client and I can cognitively explore his perceptions and eventually move towards cognitive restructuring and behaviour modification. Doing this sometimes involves *shifting gears* if my attempts to bring in the other side of the story are met with resistance or flooded responses. According to Gordon (1975), the latter is a result of emotional flooding: when one becomes so overloaded with feelings that one's thoughts and feelings go out of balance. Shifting gears is essentially an active listening response (Gordon, 1975); at the same time, I help the employee to express his or her flood of feelings by commuting between *my side-the other side*.

### **Use each opportunity to the full**

Sometimes one session is enough to help the client, possibly because he or she is satisfied with what has been said during this session (of course, it may be because the client simply does not want to take the matter further). This means that, occasionally, I do not have the 'luxury' of a few sessions with the aggrieved employee. I therefore have to use each opportunity to the full. Given that brief psychotherapy implies at least a few sessions, I also have to be cautious not to impose a brief psychotherapy intervention on the employee.



## **Ethical considerations**

Needless to say, I have to consider the impact of my personal power, responsibility, accountability and influence on the employees who seek my support. I cannot decide for the employee what needs to be done. When an employee requests support, the ethical thing to do is to act immediately, if only to indicate my availability to deal with the employee's concerns. I take into account the impact of my eclectic approach, and cannot get stuck in any one approach. Furthermore, confidentiality is of the utmost importance not only because of my client's position, but also because I know that, in my profession, any breach of confidentiality could result in legal action being taken against me. I take great care not to present cases in such a way that my clients can be identified, and I make sure that I never do them an injustice or harm them in any way. I safeguard their privacy and present the material in a way that is respectful – not only to the clients, but also to the institution and management.

## **4.6 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I have focused on the intrapersonal processes within a person that contribute to the employee's interpersonal conflicts in his or her work environment. I discussed my brief psychotherapeutic approach of dealing with intrapersonal issues as this has developed over the years. I have made it clear that I do not identify with only one school of thought or approach, but that I describe myself as being eclectic or integrative. I often prefer the term *integration* rather than *eclecticism* because integration implies a more systematic use of the various concepts and techniques found in different approaches (Brown, 2008).

Ascribing intrapersonal conflict to the dynamics of an interpersonal conflict implies that some employees were in a state of psychological distress that was not fully understood. As a result, these employees were not being given the support or management they required. Insufficient attention was being paid to employees' psychology, which meant that, very often, intrapersonal conflict eventually was impacting on their interpersonal relationships at work. The employees themselves had not even considered this possibility as being a contributing factor in their conflicts. Nor was this part of the mindset of the line managers who had to manage these employees or the co-workers who had to work with them. For the troubled employee, it was a relief to realise that there was a reason for his or

her actions and that he or she had been empowered by the brief psychotherapeutic process.

The brief psychotherapy support offered by me implies that these interventions are available and effective, although not always visible to the university community. I have often felt that I work 'under the radar'. However, in some cases, management has been aware of the role of counselling psychology interventions, and has referred difficult and troubled employees to me for assessment and support, sometimes with request to make recommendations about the way forward. In these cases, I felt that my message about the effectiveness of intrapersonal psychological intervention has been heard and, indeed, has become part of the university's culture and procedures.

## CHAPTER 5

### INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

High levels of workplace conflict between individuals within departments will derail the performance of both line managers and employees, often with distressing consequences. I believe that any form of conflict should be addressed timeously, especially when it seems as if the staff members involved are unable to resolve their conflicts. Perhaps I should make it clear that there are many line managers who succeed in dealing with conflict and who are able to implement acceptable solutions. However, and unfortunately, there are also those who either contribute to the conflict or whose interventions do not adequately address the underlying dynamics of the conflict (Corey & Corey, 1987). During or after any form of interpersonal conflict, there are many psychodynamics involved, and these psychodynamics very often include disconcerting emotional experiences (Maccoby & Scudder, 2011). To deal with these emotional experiences is frequently my most challenging task. The intensity of emotional turmoil, stress, anxiety and anger can often not be objectively dealt with by the staff members themselves. This is partially because their emotions are just not directed to each other, but also towards management “who do not worry about our problems, they don’t care about us; they only say we have to work together as we are not supposed to be friends”. Of course, this view is often unjust, because the people involved expect management to take sides, which management obviously prefer not to do. Occasionally, in order to take decisive action or to deal objectively with some of the cases management is aware of, I am asked to submit a report to management about my assessment and recommendations.

Porter (1996, 1971) states that, although a number of conflict management theories suggest that emotion should be taken out of the conflict, he differs on this point. His *Relationship Awareness Theory* suggests that true conflict resolution cannot be achieved without recognising the internal, emotional experience of conflict. Porter’s approach of taking time to learn what is important to people on the way into and out of conflict is one of the building blocks of my own beliefs, namely, that when this happens, the resolution of conflict has begun. Indeed, I would state that there cannot be a resolution without the

protection, validation, or restoration of appropriate values because doing this contributes to the healing of emotional wounds. Once the interpersonal aspects of conflict are resolved, leaders can focus on motivating and empowering the people they lead.

The focus of this chapter is on interpersonal conflict management. I will begin by describing the concepts *interpersonal*, *group* and *intra-group* against the background within which I have to function. Then I will discuss how I accepted the theoretical stance of different approaches which I found to be useful in this environment, and added this stance to my eclectic repertoire of counselling skills. I will discuss interpersonal conflict by referring to a few selected cases' extractions involving interpersonal conflict. In the last section of the chapter I will focus on emerging themes in the processes of interpersonal conflict management, which will also illustrate my own growth process in terms of interpersonal conflict management. This chapter will essentially be autoethnographic, because I shall be telling the story of the development of my identity as a counselling psychologist doing interpersonal conflict management in a university.

The time-frame during which I have worked in interpersonal conflict management is from 1998 until the present. My counselling services to the troubled employee have always included interpersonal conflict management.

## **5.2 THE CONCEPTS: INTERPERSONAL, GROUP AND INTRA-GROUP**

Plug, Meyer, Louw and Gouws focus on *interpersonal* (1988, p. 161, freely translated) as a single concept referring to processes in which one or more persons are involved (e.g. when working together and their subsequent relationships). It can also refer to a perspective that focuses on these processes. Geldenhuys, et al (2008, p. 220) link the concepts *interpersonal and conflict*, by describing these concepts as the "existence of simultaneous, opposing and conflicting thoughts, feelings and activities between people in the same environment."

For the purposes of this study, I deal with *interpersonal conflict* as conflict that manifests itself in the direct interactions between only two people in the same department, although this conflict might have an impact on other staff members on the periphery. The two employees directly involved in the reciprocal conflict are, so to speak, in the eye of the

storm. *Intra-group conflict* refers to conflict that occurs in a group of three or more persons who are working on the same project (e.g. working on the same study guide). In chapter 6, the concepts *group conflict*, *intra-group conflict* and *organisational conflict* will be discussed in more detail.

Facilitating conflict management in these contexts contributed significantly to my own growth as a counselling psychologist specialising in conflict management. It also facilitated my emotional growth and my search for the meaning of life and, indeed, suffering itself. To deal with conflicts of this magnitude is not an easy task. At times it left me emotionally exhausted, but I had to put my personal desolation on hold while dealing with these distressing situations. In hindsight, I now realise that I needed a mentor to help me cope with my emotional tiredness, a tiredness that was particularly debilitating at the end of the year. On the other hand, doing this work energised me, because it enabled me to experience real growth at an emotional, spiritual and intellectual level.

The demands or requests for support came via telephone calls, e-mails, and personal visits to my office. Some of these visits were scheduled in advance, others were unannounced. Sometimes, when I *failed* to guide people out of their misery, I doubted my ability as a conflict management specialist and I doubted my ability to resolve conflict. Fortunately, over the years, reality and common sense prevailed. I knew that ultimately it was not my responsibility to rescue these employees from the consequences of their own or other people's actions. Instead, I realised I had to get to the bottom of what was really happening and then seek ways to empower and strengthen people from within in order to empower them to deal with and to face their conflicts. While doing this, I had to ensure that they accepted their own accountability to actively participate in efforts to find a workable solution and emotional healing.

In my journey of personal transformation, I continuously work towards improving psychological support services and interventions, especially via proactive interventions that can be employed before the impact of the conflict becomes pathological to those involved. However, it is not possible to always be proactive. Reactive interventions are often necessary, not only as a means of finding solutions, but also as a means of working towards healing.

Again, I selected those cases that provided me with insights that I found useful in my personal growth and the development of my identity as a counselling psychologist. In referring to these cases, I take into consideration the *stories of the past, present and future* as workplace conflict stories, as well as employees' personal stories (if necessary).

### 5.3 STORYTELLING

Postmodern social constructionist and narrative psychology is regarded as an alternative theoretical perspective to scientific inquiry, in that it emphasises the social context of human behaviour. The social processes between people are viewed as the basic creating force of our realities (Bergh, 2011a). Storytelling is thus a basic human activity, while shared stories are an important aspect of human interaction that we use to construct meaning in our lives (Cramer, 1996; Pauw, 2004b). Each person has his or her own stories that are based on his or her own social constructions, interactions and social realities. Perceptions, memories and other mental structures are actively built by the mind, rather than being passively acquired (Bergh, 2008; Christi, 2009; Cramer, 1996; Pauw, 2004b).

Each time I listen to staff members' account of their conflict issues, I realise that their narratives have a central role in organising, maintaining and circulating knowledge of themselves and their worlds. Their stories eventually turn out to be constructions that reveal what they consider to be important and significant, both in terms of their conflict and other events in their social contexts. The purpose of their narratives is to serve as explanations of these crucial events (Cebick, 1986). Christie (2009) views many life stories as intensely personal dramas, given that each life story is unique. Sometimes the storyteller struggles with the process of uncovering the mysteries of his or her own life. In the context of this study I am the person listening to the employee's life story, obviously not in detail, and I mainly focus on conflict stories. It is not only a privilege to share the storyteller's story, but it also enables me to find myself in the other person's story. Initially, listening to these employees' stories reminded me of a time in my work life when I and my colleagues had to struggle through a painful period of workplace conflict. Gradually, however, I became a survivor as I worked through my own thoughts and feelings, eventually knowing that situations like these can be addressed creatively. In fact, living

through this experience helped me to keep on believing that there will always be a solution to a problem, although not always the solution we expect.

The value of storytelling lies in the meanings attached by the person to his or her stories. These meanings are the springboard, so to speak, towards that person gaining a better understanding of himself or herself, and also contribute to that person's meaning-making process.

In the cases selected I did not make use of the narrative techniques in detail because I was mainly in need of a narrative analysis, that is, an analysis of stories and themes of communication that we need to be mindfully aware of. My purpose was to jointly discover relevant interactions and social realities impacting on the reality of the employee's interpersonal conflict management. This included the stories of the human drama that unfolds when people work together within a specific departmental and institutional context. Organisations and institutions are big storybooks in themselves, storybooks that are shared with their employees and the employees' life stories. The social processes between people in this context are viewed as the basic creating force of our realities. Each person has his or her own stories flowing from that person's social constructions about his or her interactions, social realities and the meaning attached to these. Storytelling and the shared stories of individuals are used to construct meaning in our lives (Cramer, 1996; Pauw, 2004b).

Pauw (2004b, p. 149) summarises the basic assumptions as follows: "All behaviour is seen within the social context or social domain in which it takes place and all knowledge (including scientific knowledge) is understood and interpreted by understanding the social context in which it was created."

Long-lasting meanings are attached to people's stories, sometimes with far-reaching influence on people's lives. Problems (such as conflict), problem behaviour and the process of changing those behaviours are therefore seen as being influenced by people's social context. This view is grounded in the notion that people and problems can be distanced from one another since problems cannot define a person's entire being (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Kilburg, 2007a; Pauw, 2004b).

The narrative sub-processes include stories of the past, present and future. Telling *the story of the past* offers the opportunity for the person to share his or her unique stories of the past and, in doing so, allows a limited amount of catharsis to take place (Pennington, 2003). The focus is also on what worked well in the past in order to help the person to construct his or her present reality accordingly. Telling *the story of the present* helps a person to share his or her interpersonal conflict stories and it may help that person to gain an understanding of his or her own contribution to and influence on the process of interpersonal conflict management. It also clarifies the impact of this person's story of the past on the story of the present. The person becomes self-knowledgeable about the 'tools' for future success in interpersonal conflicts, such as coping strategies and strengths performance skills. Focusing on the *story of the future* encourages the employee to participate in creating a "new story" and to sustain momentum for ongoing positive change and optimal performance in interpersonal conflict management (Pauw, 2004a, 2004b).

#### **5.4 SIGNIFICANT CASE EXTRACTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS FROM A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

It is impossible to include all the interpersonal dynamics of the employees' and managers' interpersonal conflict stories. I shall therefore highlight only those aspects of the stories that shed light on worthwhile interventions.

##### **Thabang and Gerald: men fighting**

For many years, Thabang (a black man) and Gerald (a white man) worked together in the same non-academic department. They had a good relationship with each other and enjoyed one another's company and would, for example, chose to work together when two or more employees were necessary for the completion of a task. The other people in the department made good natured jokes about the bond between them, such as telling stories about their preference for the same brand of beer during end-of-the-year functions. This happy state of affairs ended when, one day, Gerald lost his temper with Thabang. At the time, Gerald had serious personal troubles and Thabang's actions were (for him) the last straw on the camel's back. In this outburst of temper, Gerald threatened to kill Thabang and, in fact, menaced Thabang with a *weapon* (as perceived by Thabang). For



Thabang, this was a betrayal of their relationship, because it seriously violated his human dignity.

This incident happened during a difficult transformation period in our country's history, a few years after the apartheid regime in South Africa had come to an end; and so the incident became a racial issue. The other employees who witnessed the situation were initially united in their disapproval of Gerald's behaviour but, ultimately, the strong cultural dynamics of race caused them to become divided along racial ranks and defences. As a result, the functioning of the whole department was placed in jeopardy. The suppressed feelings about the *old South Africa* and the *new South Africa* flared up between the two sides, together with accusations of racism, to such an extent that conflict-ridden interpersonal relationships became problem-saturated (Pauw, 2004a, 2000b). Apart from the usual dynamics of conflict, in this case I also had to take into account racism's extremities of affect, given that racism may be routed through affective channels and its symptoms are avoidance and aversion (Hook, 2004).

After consulting with me, the Head of Department informed the involved parties that I would take the matter further in a conflict management programme. However, this conflict escalated into a formal grievance because Thabang, with the support of his union, insisted on lodging a grievance procedure against Gerald. The formal conflict management structures of the university came into operation. I had to deal carefully with the situation in order not to be accused of taking sides or manipulating the situation in some way. I nevertheless continued with my interventions and played my part in keeping the conflict management process going. I did this partly to gain an understanding of the individual life stories of the employees involved in this conflict, although not to the same extent as I would have done had it not been for the pending grievance procedure. I communicated my intentions to conduct separate interviews with the two men and took care not to take sides or to be hijacked as a representative for their respective purposes. Eventually the grievance procedure committee also referred the case to me for a conflict management programme, after which I had to submit a report about the outcomes. I chaired the subsequent joint meeting that was attended by Thabang and Gerald, their Head of Department, various union representatives, and the line managers. The purpose of this meeting was to see to what extent reconciliation could be attained. The influence of the

state of affairs in South Africa at the time could not be ignored and nor could the multi-cultural nature of the attendees.

Needless to say, this was a difficult meeting to chair simply because the situation was so volatile. I deliberately had to move away from my spontaneous mode of listening rather than talking, while realising that a *firm but egalitarian hand* was necessary. An obligatory code of conduct was therefore agreed upon by everybody involved. It included: “everybody speaks for himself, no interruptions while another person is talking, respect for another person’s opinion even if one strongly disagrees, no inflammatory remarks, nobody will leave the room because he is upset about something, and no shouting and screaming at one another.” I had to clarify my own as well as the different role-players’ goals. Gerald wanted to apologise (again), while Thabang wanted a platform from which he could state his annoyance with Gerald. From time to time I had to play the role of an *interpreter* to make sure that the correct message was conveyed. In retrospect, I regard this as an example of the *relationship enhancement approach* (Snyder & Guernsey, 1993). The purpose of the interpretations was to improve the interpersonal interaction between the attendees when speaking about their relationship problems.

Eventually a remarkable shift in the attitude of both groups occurred and, strangely enough, it caught me by surprise. It was all a bit too smooth. What happened to all the racial issues that had flared up earlier? Were they suppressed? In hindsight there must have been a few factors influencing the processes (e.g. the fact that the misunderstanding actually took place between Gerald and Thabang). The others were almost accidentally drawn into the two men’s issues, about which they all felt that *this too shall pass*. They had reached a saturation-point (unconsciously or spontaneously) and maybe preferred to stay in a rational discourse rather than functioning in the emotional mode which had contributed to the flare-ups experienced in this department. The various union representatives in the meeting had the opportunity to voice their issues while, at the same time, trying to *do the correct thing*, which was to bring about reconciliation and reciprocal understanding. The verdict of the grievance committee at an earlier stage also calmed things down and, as a result, the people involved were satisfied that justice had taken its course. The grievance committee had resolved that Gerald’s behaviour was offensive. The ruling (among others) was that he had to undergo anger management counselling. Another contributing factor was the philosophy of one wise elderly person, a philosophy that could not be discounted.

This person pointed out that this “whole story is actually a men-thing – men sometimes fight and must be prepared to take the hammering”. This viewpoint was cross-culturally acknowledged, and confirmed the fact that there were many dynamics involved that had influenced the process. It also accentuated the role played by personalities and value systems (Hook, 2004).

Thabang, however, bluntly refused to forgive, forget and move on. When his representative tried to talk him into doing so, he got irritated. I found it best not to enforce the process. The decision was made that I would follow up with counselling sessions with both Gerald and Thabang. When I tried to schedule these sessions, Thabang was still reluctant to participate, and again I did not enforce the process apart from indicating the benefits of such sessions. After a while I met him by chance at a meeting, and he indicated his willingness to participate. During these two sessions the incident was not referred to again – only the accompanying feelings and ideas for the way forward. I focused on storytelling, that is, stories of the past, present and future, although not in detail. The purpose was to help both Gerald and Thabang make sense of their actions and experiences, and the meaning-making of these experiences in the context of the incident. During the first session the atmosphere was somewhat uncomfortable for both men. After the second session there was an improved understanding of each other and even humour when remarks were made (in passing) about what had happened.

Today I would have consciously added the *relationship enhancement technique* (Snyder & Guerney, 1993), because I regard this technique as suitable when persons are stuck in, for example, blaming patterns and a tendency to withdraw. With regard to Gerald’s anger management sessions I could have, in view of the growth in my skills and expansion of my knowledge base, made use of counselling for impulse control and self-regulation, which is the ability to remain composed in spite of our emotional state, and which is linked to both anger management and self-management. Self-regulation is the ability to manage both positive and negative emotions, control one’s impulses, deal effectively with stress, and stay clear-minded – abilities to handle feelings that will determine our success and happiness in all walks of life (Prins, 2011b). I would also have involved Thabang in individual sessions, focusing on his awareness of automatic thoughts, self-talk processes and cognitive distortions such as dwelling on the negative incident and not being able to let

go. The implication would have been that one has to work towards changes in his thinking habits (Beck & Weishaar, 1989; Ellis, 1994; Van Niekerk, 2011).

### **Yvette and Mary: the emotionally wounded lecturer and the line manager who got tired of listening**

Mental states of mind, especially depression, often contribute to interpersonal conflicts at work. These situations are complicated by the reluctance of the employee's colleagues to complain about the impact of the person's depressive behaviour on the work situation. However, when things become too difficult for them, they indeed seek help. In these cases, the conflict is the symptom of a deep-seated psychopathology, as in this case where Yvette's depression features as a mood disorder. Normal depression is seen as part of the normal range of human experience where people experience feelings of sadness, discouragement, pessimism and hopelessness. This experience of depression is normal, as it is brief and mild. However, at a certain point normal depression becomes a mood disorder where it is associated with significant functional impairment as in the case of Yvette (Vogel, 2006).

Mary requested an urgent consultation with me about Yvette's "absenteeism pattern and poor work performance." What Mary was not aware of was that Yvette had also come to my office earlier that day after their quarrel about this situation. Yvette was in a bad emotional state of mind, crying and sobbing to such an extent that she was overheard by people passing my office. When listening to the two women's account of what happened, it sounded as if they were describing two totally different situations. Without either of them being aware of it, they simultaneously displayed their characteristic ways of dealing with life in general. Put very simplistically: Yvette came across as expressively emotional and Mary as predominantly analytical.

Mary initially accommodated Yvette's absenteeism and late-coming out of empathy with her depression and difficult personal circumstances in the belief that Yvette would eventually "get over it – which did not happen." She tried to discuss the work-related problems arising from Yvette not "performing her duties as was expected from her, but she either made promises to improve or started to cry." Mary felt manipulated "because one can fight against an angry person, but how can you get upset with someone who is in

tears?” Mary eventually became impatient and irritated and this contributed to the increased conflict between the two women. She felt that Yvette abused her and the other colleagues’ goodwill. The other staff members also became upset since they had to complete Yvette’s tasks, which caused ‘a tremendous extra work-load to all of us’. Apparently Yvette wanted to ‘pick and choose’ the work that she was prepared to do under the “smokescreen of poor little me.” Things got out of hand owing to interpersonal conflicts and the tense atmosphere between Yvette and her colleagues, and also because the department started getting complaints from the students.

Yvette’s occupational functioning was impaired due to her major depression with anxiety. The harsh “world-in-work-context” became a threat to Yvette and eventually she went back for psychotherapy (by a psychologist and psychiatrist). Yvette needed to come to an understanding and acceptance of the fact that she could not, ad infinitum, stay in her dysfunctional way of doing things, as there was hope that her depression could be managed and that she would be supported in her attempts to deal with her problem in new ways. It might sound harsh but, eventually, the world-of-work choice for her was to become fully functional again or to resign should she not be declared medically disabled as a result of mental illness – and the latter was not regarded as a viable option. Eventually, with external psychotherapy, acceptance and the emotional support of a colleague, counselling to monitor her progress and the input of other HR support systems (in this case the performance management division), Yvette gradually became fully functional again – although there were occasional setbacks. She realised that her depressive illness was a condition that should always consciously be managed in order for her to cope and survive, and to avoid similar interpersonal conflicts.

#### **April and Gerry: the influence of stories of the past on stories of the present**

Gerry was a line manager in an administrative department and April one of his employees. Gerry became upset that April was late for work almost every day, a situation that impacted negatively on the operational functions of the department. All Gerry’s efforts to manage the situation amicably were unsuccessful and, when Gerry reprimanded him, April reacted with antagonism. The interpersonal conflict between them developed into an explosive situation. Gerry viewed April’s behaviour as insubordination and eventually lodged a disciplinary case against him. The committee referred both men for interpersonal

conflict counselling. I held individual interviews with each one, and then joint counselling sessions. In the stories to follow, I concentrate on aspects relevant to the interpersonal relationship between April and Gerry.

Both men's stories of the past offered a possible explanation for their conflicts. April grew up with his grandparents. His grandfather was often unyielding and obdurate about the things he expected from April, who, as a teenager, became extremely rebellious about this authoritarian behaviour. For example, April had to get up early in the mornings to do some household chores before he went to school, such as sweeping the backyard – every day throughout the week, a task he did not regard as urgent or necessary. Gerry's father, on the other hand, was punctual to the extreme, and became hot-tempered when his children failed to meet his demands for punctuality. His children had to be obedient and their father's word was law. The reason why I "confronted" them with their past was to gain perspective on the influence and impact of the past on their current interactions.

After their quarrel, both refused to talk to each other. This is typical of employees in conflict. They would rather ask somebody else to intervene – usually with the expectation that this third person will reprimand the other person on the wronged employee's behalf. Some of the reasons for this are that they do not have the courage and strength to face a direct conversation, do not trust one another anymore, and because they feel unsafe (Buon, 2008). It was necessary for Gerry and April to gain perspective on their current actions and the impact of these actions on each other in the hope that this would bring about the will to change. This was done by applying the *relationship enhancement technique* (Snyder & Guerney, 1993). The benefits of this technique are that it has the potential to bring about the following: (i) changes in interpersonal interaction; (ii) awareness of the other person's intrapsychic dynamics; (iii) empowerment when I as a third person paraphrase their thoughts, feelings and actions (empower the disempowered); and (iv) constructive interactions between them even while unspoken thoughts and feelings were present. Communication skills are simultaneously "taught" when engaging in open discussions about the specific problematic behaviours (Snyder & Guerney, 1993).

I acknowledge that specific stories from the past were not the sole contributory factors to their misunderstandings: other dynamics may also have played a role in this conflict. However, becoming aware of the other person's story helped to establish a mutual

understanding about them and the situation they were involved in. Unfortunately, a *better understanding* in itself does not guarantee an improvement in relationships or bring about the necessary change. It was, however, necessary for both to gain perspective on their current actions and the impact they were having on one another in the hope that it would bring about the will to change. The *relationship enhancement technique* also facilitates the acknowledgement that ongoing and open-ended communication is a necessity for the improvement of interpersonal relationships (DeVito, 2004; Buon, 2008), as well as to develop a mental picture of future interactions (Snyder & Guerney, 1993). In retrospect, I should have followed up on the agreed actions so that this process of communication gained permanent credibility and so that this approach of interpersonal conflict resolution could have been internalised and maintained.

### **Margo and Bill: trapped in perceptions and remoteness**

Bill was for many years the Head of Department of this particular department. Occasionally some of his staff members were unhappy about his detached management style, and portrayed him as *cold, distant and focused on his own interests* in the context of the university. Bill was an introvert and loner and his need for privacy and his aversion to emotional communications built walls between him and his staff members (Schutz, 1992; Meshot & Leistner, 1993). These dynamics became barriers to trust and communication (Covey, 2011). He was distant, even though an amount of closeness was appropriate. In the process he lost touch with what was going on in his subordinates' minds; his remoteness cut him off from the "soft human data" that would have made him more effective in his managerial tasks. However, in his attempts to overcome his almost painful remoteness, Bill became emotionally exhausted. He was an analytical person who preferred to focus on facts and figures despite his qualifications in the human sciences.

Margo was a perfectionist who had time-consuming ways of doing tasks that impacted on both the department's schedule and the quantity of her output. She was unconsciously and continuously in need of approval by authority figures and experienced her Head of Department's aloofness as rejection. Her childhood years were ridden with conflict, and the memories of her childhood influenced her interpersonal relationships as an adult. Unfortunately, her childhood conflict was kept alive by some of her typical behaviours,

such as her personal style of relating. Relationship experiences in a person's formative childhood years play an important role in his or her adult relationships (Bergh, 2011).

I did not have information about Bill's childhood years; this proved not to be a hindrance in my understanding of their interactions. Margo moved *against others* as she met (perceived) antagonism with antagonism (Viljoen, 1997; Bergh, 2011a). She did not trust Bill's intentions and wanted to achieve her goals in which she rigidly believed, sometimes at all costs. She was not prepared to accept his way of doing things, and communicated from her critical and judgmental parent ego state with the other person as if he was a naughty child. Indeed, she became prescriptive and told him what to do – a way of functioning that contributed to the intensity of the misunderstandings.

Initially, Bill tried to create positive communication opportunities because, as the line manager, he wanted to do the correct thing by listening and answering questions. When it did not bring about the changes he was looking for he requested my interventions. When these interventions only brought about slight changes in Margo's behaviour (in the long term), Bill gave up and diverted to his preferred style of moving away from others (Viljoen 1997), apparently in an effort to create emotional distance from a situation he sincerely disliked. Margo was no longer so confrontational, but started to deal with their misunderstandings by being sulky and moody – something Bill could endure because he could ignore it.

In retrospect, I think that a person's mindset can interfere with effective problem-solving because it contributes to a person's persistence in old patterns of behaviour – as was the case with Margo and Bill (Prins, 2011a). Even my efforts to apply the relationship enhancement technique were only partially successful, although my facilitation of this technique indeed forced Bill and Margo to listen to and communicate about the other person's side of the story. Maybe my own mindset also contributed to the fact that there were only slight changes in their relating styles in the sense that I may have been in a fixed pattern myself in my attempts to facilitate problem-solving. However, and hopefully to my credit, I have to mention the fact that Margo received long-term psychotherapy (externally) (which also failed to bring about significant changes in her interpersonal style). Furthermore, the clashes between Margo and Bill almost disappeared because they kept



their distance from each other, albeit sometimes in an atmosphere of resentment, and also because they limited their interactions to the bare minimum.

### **Mary and Sarah: irrevocably incompatible**

Mary and Sarah had to share an office as they performed the same confidential duties in the same specialised positions. They had a generic job description and key performance areas. Both were on the same post level. John was their Head of Department, and William their direct line manager. In terms of working years in the position was Mary the senior, a fact she constantly brought to the attention of Sarah, William and John. As far as she was concerned, this placed her in a leadership role that entitled her, for example, to make decisions about how the work should be done in the belief that her way was the best way. This viewpoint was rejected by Sarah, who claimed that she was just as knowledgeable and did not need Mary telling her what to do. The conflict simmered over a lengthy period of time with occasional flare-ups. John and William worked as a team to manage these conflicts in many ways, for example, by e-mail correspondence, having individual and joint discussions with them, separating their duties where possible, and by getting irritated and telling that they were irritated. In his capacity as Head of Department, John had to deal, reluctantly, with the interference of both women's husbands who complained about the impact of the interpersonal conflicts on their wives (to the dismay of both Mary and Sarah). Mary's husband even went further by coming in person to the Head of Department's office, and by then demanding 'immediate action' which, as far as he was concerned, was to remove Sarah. Ironically enough, their dismay with their husbands' behaviour, was the only thing about which Sarah and Mary agreed. The picture as described might create the impression that Sarah and Mary were hysterical and uncontrollable – which was not the case. Both women were actually pleasant and educated persons whose incompatibility meant they brought out the worst in each other.

After requesting my services, we had a group meeting where Sarah and Mary were informed by John and William that it was compulsory for them to participate in the interpersonal conflict management activities. My interventions included having individual and joint sessions with them. Unfortunately, these interventions were successful for only a week or two, after which both Mary and Sarah reverted to their conflict patterns.

Their protocols according to the FIRO-B questionnaire (Schutz, 1992) and COPE questionnaire (Carver, et al, 1989) disclosed amazingly similar profiles, especially on their expressed and wanted control dimensions (FIRO-B), and dysfunctional coping tendencies (they became over emotional in response to stressful events [COPE]). I used the FIRO-B because it is a widely utilised instrument despite the existence of data that questions its validity and reliability. The reason why I chose this instrument was because it is simple in its assessment of interpersonal efficacy in structured and unstructured situations (Sayeed & Ravindra, 2000) and in its assessment of certain psychological dimensions of executive coaching (Bluckert, 2006). Its Control dimension (particularly Expressed-Control) is unique. It also correlates with other personality traits, strategies and cognitive abilities as demonstrated by other research findings, and is considered to be the best predictor of success at work (Furnham, 2008). The protocols of the COPE questionnaires brought to the fore that both Mary and Sarah diverted to outdated ways of coping and persisted in old patterns of problem-solving (Prins, 2011a). Both Mary and Sarah made use of dysfunctional coping strategies that only led to short-term relief; in the long-term they maintained rather than resolved their problems (Carr, 1998). Even their functional coping strategies (by seeking social support for instrumental reasons, that is, looking for advice, support or information in order to cope and in their plans to deal with the problem) were similar. Unfortunately, both seriously overused the method of *seeking of social support for emotional and instrumental reasons* to the extent that it became dysfunctional. The advice they sought was: how can I overpower the other person? Their *planning strategy* resulted in developing unrealistic plans such as taking the other's tasks away from her, or was directed at making other people take their side. However, as they were both very much stuck, they accepted the conflict management programme (which helped to calm them both down). The programme was regarded as having the potential to regulate their negative mood states in future. The way their husbands dealt with their wives' work issues was also remarkably comparable. Both of them interfered by phoning the Head of Department, and one husband came to office and personally accused John of taking sides in the conflict.

During one of our joint interviews Mary, in a moment of anger, made the following comment: "the very first day when I saw you I knew that you were the bossy type." During one of my individual sessions with Mary, I followed up on this remark, suggesting that this had been a blink moment (Gladwell, 2005). I occasionally found the use of blink moments

useful in the process of examining a person's unconscious thoughts, feelings and behaviour – and also the unconscious psychological contract with other people we enter into as a result of this blink moment.

All my efforts were in vain: it was clear that Mary and Sarah were *incompatible* and were unable to work in harmony. They displayed relational and emotional problems and were behaving in ways that negatively influenced their work, the department's sound functioning, and their work performance. *Structural variables* (Van de Vliert, 1997) also played an enormous role, which included the work system and allocation of work. Both women held incompatible beliefs regarding their individual work performance. *Personal variables* (Van de Vliert, 1997) included value systems (Mary was often late for work which, in Sarah's eyes, was a disgrace and which she described as "irresponsible work behaviour") and personality characteristics that accounted for their individual idiosyncrasies and differences. Sarah's punctuality and rigidity were sometimes being taken to the extreme, and Mary's flexibility was sometimes over done. This can be regarded as a clash in both value systems and personality traits and, obviously, this clash impacted on their work behaviour.

Eventually it was decided to redeploy one of them to another section. Luckily Mary was willing to be redeployed. And so this difficult story came to an end. In retrospect, however, I knew from their feedback that my interventions contributed, at an individual level, to each woman's emotional growth. I should have given more attention to trauma debriefing and counselling after the redeployment had been finalised. Both Mary and Sarah experienced high levels of emotional suffering, especially because many of their co-employees regarded it as the result of their own doing. The serious interpersonal conflicts that had ensued, and that had occurred over a lengthy period of time were traumatic, not only to the two people directly involved, but also to the other employees who were exposed to the intensity of the disturbed relationships. Emotional healing takes time and both parties were in need of support (Van Niekerk, 2006).

### **Barry and Carla: drama-king versus perfectionist**

Barry and Carla were co-responsible for a specific course module of which Carla was the module leader. Work events between Barry and Carla generated strong affective reactions

by both employees which, in turn, gave rise to affect- and judgement-driven behaviours – based on Barry and Carla’s perceptions and interpretations of the other person’s actions. They were referred to me for conflict management by their Head of Department, who had failed to change their behaviour. I held individual sessions with Carla and Barry, and eventually joint sessions (with the Head of Department also present). By doing so I tried to convey the message to Carla and Barry that they could not send different messages to the Head of Department about what happened during the sessions. I also hoped that they would accept that he expected change from both sides. In the joint sessions I made (amongst others) use of the relationship enhancement technique (Snyder & Guerney, 1993).

While dealing with their conflict issues, I often thought and read about the concept “emotional labour” (Robbins, 2003; Prins, 2011b, p. 40). The work environment requires emotional labour from all of us; we are all required to express organisationally desired and politically correct emotions during our interpersonal interactions and to act according to institutionally appropriate scripts. Employees are expected to be friendly and courteous and not angry or hostile in their interactions with others, even in the face of serious misunderstandings and repeated interpersonal conflicts. Employees often have to show emotions that are incongruous with their actual feelings owing to circumstances that force them to feign acceptable workplace behaviour. There is a difference between felt emotions (which are the actual emotions) and displayed emotions (which are organisationally and politically required emotions as considered appropriate). It is worth stating that continually having to give preference to displayed emotions can be very tiring.

Barry was clearly not capable of doing this – especially when he was upset by Carla’s demands for meticulousness in his work. For him, the critical activating events in their workplace interactions were her continuous requests to improve on the modules and other academic work for which he was responsible. He was fervently opposed to the fact that she often referred the study material written by him back to be reconsidered. The consequence of this was a mixture of emotions, but his main negative emotion was an unhealthy anger which, in turn, gave rise to a few irrational beliefs. One was his negative rating of Carla as being a “typical recalcitrant and spiteful woman who is deliberately trying to make life difficult for me.” Another irrational belief was that he “couldn’t stand such nonsense”, which was an indication of his intolerance of any form of frustration. This

intolerance came to the fore in other aspects of both his work and personal life (Dryden & Branch, 2008). He denied that his occasional inappropriate and excessive emotions - manifesting in shouting, storming out of meetings and slamming doors – were offensive to Carla and other employees. His poor impulse control in circumstances that tended to provoke anger manifested in impulsiveness (sending hectic e-mails about her request for him to re-write a chapter in the study guide), lack of anger control (shouted at Carla in a meeting) and explosive behaviour problems (stormed out of her office after a disagreement) (Dryden & Branch, 2008). In short, Barry was not skilled at practising self-management under stressful circumstances, which is the key to managing stress, anger and impulse control (Prins, 2011a, 2011b). I had to acknowledge that I sometimes experienced a sense of renunciation and a casting off of Barry's melodramatic ways when he visited my office to complain about Carla and to dramatically imitate the communication between them. Eventually, however, my sense of humour came to the fore and I had many moments of "amusement" whilst listening to him – although always respectfully so. I referred him to an external psychiatrist and psychologist for long-term psychiatric treatment and psychotherapy because I recognised, in Barry, the symptoms of mood swings and bipolar disorder.

On the other hand, Carla was not the helpless victim she wanted us to believe. Her quest for quality work was valid, but she had very fixed ideas about how to go about achieving this, and was unmindful of the impact of her demands on Barry. The critical activating events for Carla were Barry's melodramatic emotional outbursts, outbursts that she experienced as extremely stressful. These outbursts threatened her emotional and physical safety. Her irrational beliefs were that "bossy and melodramatic males were too ghastly to contemplate" (negative rating of others and awfulising – which is also a bit melodramatic – and her demand that work *must* be perfect). As a result she became extremely analytically focused on – according to her perception – the "correct way of doing things". She would, for example, say in a soft-spoken but ice-cold manner that Barry knew what the correct thing to do was. Carla's tendency towards perfectionism certainly contributed to the interpersonal conflict. She was also angry at herself when she got emotionally upset about the situation because she felt this was to be out of control (Dryden & Branch, 2008).

Both Carla and Barry held strongly and rigidly to their ideas. I regarded REBT as a suitable intervention in individual counselling, especially since Barry was receptive to the vigorous pressure of REBT and its disputation techniques in challenging irrational beliefs. Barry and Carla's beliefs lead to dysfunctional emotions and self-defeating behaviours that proved to be the main cause of their disturbed working relationship (Ellis, 1994; Walen, DiGuiseppe & Dryden, 1990; Dryden & Branch 2008). I could have asked Barry and Carla disputation questions and Carla about the cognitive processes underlying her actions (Beck & Weishaar, 1989; Ellis 1994). With Barry I had to be very direct in order to get the message across that his excessive display of emotions was unacceptable in an institutional set-up, and I also focused on his absolutist, irrational beliefs. For example, he believed that he was always right. When he found one of those self-help books that diagnosed people according to self-scoring questionnaires linked to behaviour, he "diagnosed" Carla as being someone who was "in urgent need of psychotherapy". Carla's irrational belief was that everything should always be done in a faultless manner. Fortunately, she preferred other people to be straightforward, and this made her receptive to the possibility of modifying her thoughts, feelings and behaviours. It was mainly Barry's excessive emotionality that exacerbated her perfectionism to the extreme – in fact, Carla used her perfectionism as a form of self-protection. We discussed the reasons for her need for self-protection and new ways of dealing with this so that she would be more composed and less upset if these things happened again (Ellis, 1994). With Barry, things were more difficult and I had to settle on symptom removal rather than personality change (Ellis, 1994). The success of my symptom removal approach could have been indicated by his behaviour change in reaction on my indication that his behaviour might cause Carla to lodge a grievance procedure against him, and because I knew from experience that the university would not tolerate institutionally inappropriate behaviour. The confrontational stance I was forced to adopt in this scenario also contributed to my personal growth as well as my growth as a counselling psychologist focusing on interpersonal conflict management: I say this because being confrontational was something that I had to learn to do.

## **5.5 CONFLICT STORIES: EMERGING THEMES AND MY IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AS A COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGIST**

### **Symptoms**

Employees who have been subject to conflict tend to display the following symptoms: a crippled ability to function normally; incompatibility; impaired work performance; pessimistic moods and mood swings; depression and anxiety; emotional distress and physical complaints; irretrievable breakdown of relationships; absenteeism and presenteeism; impaired coping strategies; psychological breakdown; and a resistance to any form of counselling.

### **Creating trust**

As far as being referred by line management to the university's conflict management services is concerned there are, broadly speaking, two groups of employees. For some employees, this referral is unpleasant and they resent the process. They feel exposed, uncomfortable and on the alert: they do not know what to expect. The other group, however, is only too relieved to have the opportunity to state their case. It is up to me to create a context of trust that is conducive to optimal utilisation, personal growth and rewarding interactions for both of these sets of clients. If I succeed in creating trust between us, this has a profound influence on our ability to achieve the goals set for the outcomes of the conflict management process.

### **Impact of line managers' ineffective conflict management skills**

Conflicts resulting from the poor management skills of line managers – or because the person is a difficult employee – contribute to negative moods, stress and physical complaints, all of which may lead to absenteeism and/or presenteeism (Prins, 2011a). The resultant distress impacts negatively on the employee's productivity, quality of work performance, perception of the university and their attitude to their job and the university. In an effort to manage their interpersonal conflicts, employees spend too much time in, for example, continuous discussions about their issues with each other, preparing documents as evidence for their case, or getting involved in endless e-mail correspondence. I cannot deal with these issues in isolation. I therefore occasionally find it appropriate, with the employees' permission, to discuss the situation with the relevant authorities in order to find

a solution, or to make use of other available resources (e.g. the performance management division).

### **Personal resilience**

The intensity of the conflicts that I have to deal with varies. In my mind I often place the intensity on a scale from 0 (low intensity) to 10 (high intensity). Conflicts of low intensity include straightforward annoyance with other colleagues. Conflicts of high intensity include, for example, colleagues shouting at each other. I would like to pretend that I am always eager to deal with these conflicts, guided by reason, respectability and civility but, regrettably, this is not always the case. Sometimes I am emotionally exhausted, even to the extent that I am averse to getting involved and by possessing the unspoken desire to avoid my responsibility (which is to deal with these conflicts). I have learnt to recognise these signals; one of them is that I do not feel much empathy for the troubled and difficult employee in front of me. Watson and Indinopulos (2007) suggest that it is much better to accept and address the dualities in our human make-up rather than to oppose these dualities – and doing this certainly contributes to my personal resilience.

### **Courage in difficult times**

Many employees experience intense painful and negative feelings while struggling to survive emotionally as they work through their interpersonal conflict processes, especially when they are despondent about the possibility of resolving these conflicts. To counter such despondency, I find that sharing the “courage philosophy” of Tillich (1961) contributes to cognitive restructuring and new ways of thinking about the situation. The experience of meaninglessness, misery and agony about their severe conflicts certainly makes for a bleak existence. When I reframe this misery as the “courage of despair”, they view their inner experiences (which many of them label as inherent weaknesses) with new eyes. In order to survive we have to acknowledge and accept our despair, something that is actually brave and one of the positive acts of life. It takes courage to do this and may appear contradictory to the healing purpose of counselling (because most of us try to get away from our despair and misery). This act is therefore positive in its negativity. This is eventually transcended by the “courage to be”, which includes new ways of thinking, and acts of courage in facing life and its problems. This in itself releases the power of self-affirmation and being (even in difficult circumstances) on the basis of faith (Tillich, 1961). When employees grasp the richness of this approach, they are often pleasantly surprised



and encouraged because many of them consider their anguish in the face of conflict as a failure about a situation they desperately want to end. The idea that “pain is a gift that nobody wants” is also met with amazement (Brand & Yancey, 1993). Pain is one of the body’s most effective ways of communicating that something is wrong; in my view it can be applicable to emotional pain as well. If we learn to listen and respond appropriately to pain, it can become a loyal friend.

### **The game of possibilities**

Many of the employees I work with regard the unpleasant things that are happening to them as disasters that are causing nothing but chaos in their lives, minds and interpersonal relationships. By the time they come to me for counselling, many of them are physically and emotionally drained, sometimes to the extent that they simply ask me for sick leave. They cannot imagine the possibility of change.

Within this chaos, however, one can find order, because there is a movement from chaos to order based on the physical laws of nature and the human mind (Chang, 2000; Shelton & Darling, 2004). For example, the disasters of tsunamis cause havoc in coastal areas but, nevertheless, according to the physical laws of nature, there is order within this chaos.

As the earth's way of releasing stress, earthquakes (in coastal areas sometimes followed by tsunamis) can serve as a *metaphor* for the chaos created by the outbursts that are the result of interpersonal conflict. These outbursts are a way of releasing the stress caused by conflict. Conflict is caused by human nature itself. However, conflict forces people to change, and this change can be embraced and used for continuous transformation, based on the premises of quantum mechanics. The theories of chaos and quantum mechanics state that life does not exist in a stable mode of reality, but only of possibility, either good or bad. This possibility becomes good or bad depending on how we react to it. Thinking about change followed by transformation is the beginning of a healthy reaction to possibility. Every decision made thus causes a split in reality: a decision can change reality into the possibility of making conflict manageable, based on the “premise that humans are composed of the same quantum energy as the rest of the universe and are, therefore subject to universal laws of energy excitation” (Shelton & Darling, 2004, p.15). In other words, possibility is converted into actuality by using the paradoxes of quantum physics,

namely, free will, choice, unconsciousness, creativity and spiritual growth (Chang, 2000). With this in mind, I keep on hoping and working towards the possibility of healing using these inner powers, which may contribute to the successful resolution of human conflicts and the renewal of personal energy. I try to convey this message to the line managers and employees in a hands-on and practical way for the obvious reason that, when people are in distress, this is not the time to launch into academic explanations.

### **On the need to stay focused**

I am sometimes tempted to divert myself away from interpersonal conflict management, especially when there are 'new' issues coming to the fore that impact on the conflict situation and that are of equal importance. In this case, I confer with them to check on the way forward with this new issue and whether we are still on track with the "old" issues. Apart from this, every now and then employees and managers come forward with a minor problem which they use as a *ticket* to enter the employee wellness and assistance programme.

### **Psychological disorders and interpersonal conflict**

Psychological disorders, such as depressive disorders, cause significant impairment in the employee's capacity to work or to maintain good interpersonal relationships. The disorder influences his or her thoughts, perceptions, feelings, attitudes, behaviours and interactions (Bergh, 2011b). Globally, nationally and institutionally, depression is on the increase (Yapko, 1997; Wright, 2008; Bergh, 2011b) and, unsurprisingly, it is also found in the university's workplace. Many line managers display uneasiness and discomfort when they have to deal with this phenomenon. The negative reactions of colleagues towards the work dysfunctionality of the severely depressed person are typical of many similar reactions I have encountered during the years I have worked in this field. By this, I mean that, initially, sympathy is shown to the sufferer, accompanied by assurances that he or she will receive assistance wherever necessary – the unspoken expectation here is that the depression is not a long-term problem. However, when the depression is still not "cured" after a few weeks, colleagues get irritated, especially when they have to do the depressed person's duties or do "quality control" for work that is not up to standard. Furthermore, colleagues get upset by the somatisation patterns of depression, that is, when the employee hides behind physical aches and pains, and often leaves the work station to consult with medical

practitioners. Eventually, this all leads to anger, irritation and frustration and, in the end, interpersonal conflict.

### **Intense emotional displays: the result of interpersonal conflict**

Negative emotions and emotional behaviour caused by serious interpersonal conflict include anger, dismay, consternation, excessive crying, disappointment, fear, anxiety and depression. Needless to say, these emotions cripple or poison interpersonal and intra-group relationships. I make room for employees (the majority) and managers to share their stories and to ventilate their strong emotions, emotions of which many feel ashamed after they have recovered (although, at the end of the session, employees frequently say: "Now I feel better." I should state that negative emotions are exhausting and positive emotions are energising (Shelton & Darling, 2004).

Interpersonal conflict incidents can be extremely provoking and infuriating, especially when the employee feels helpless and powerless against the person who, in his or her view, is the cause of the employee's suffering and misery. The social culture of our work environment does not allow intense emotional displays and emotional breakdowns. That said, it is extremely difficult for employees in distress to mask their emotions and to appear calm when, in fact, they are seething with anger internally. In rare cases, this emotion erupts in displays of physical anger (e.g. screaming in the passage or physical assault). By the time they arrive at my office, their emotions may well be running rampant. In these cases, I find that providing guidance on impulse control is important and that this can be achieved via the person's logical thinking processes.

### **Emotional healing and healing resources**

The attainment of inner healing after traumatic interpersonal conflict is a necessity for the health and wellbeing of the employees and managers involved. Apart from anything else, unresolved emotional issues consume a tremendous amount of energy. Of course, facing emotional issues in interpersonal conflict at work can be extremely painful and takes a great deal of courage. Indeed, some employees and managers suppress their emotions or try to create an image of machismo. However, unless we face the truth, our healing processes take much longer. Sometimes debriefing sessions are necessary in order to get rid of the distress imposed upon the employee or to deal with unresolved issues. However, after solutions (if only partial) have been found, many of the employees I have dealt with

prefer not to make use of these services. They just want to get on with their work lives. When this happens, I follow the advice given by Battino & South (2001), Strümpfer (2006a) and Ellis (1994), and leave the matter as it is. Battino refers to inner healing and the resources of the body and mind: it is well known that both the body and the mind have resources that are continually available to us and that help us to maintain and restore our physical and mental health. Strümpfer is of the opinion that resilient behaviour manifests itself at all levels of human functioning. Ellis believes in our ability to restructure and renew our thoughts – this, he says, is a healing resource that can be consciously activated.

### **Psychological intervention strategies**

In the words of Grieve and Van Deventer (2005, p.22) it is necessary to “... look at the way people behave .... and then try to look beyond their behaviour patterns to try to see the psychology that explains the behaviour”. It is followed up by designing intervention strategies “... in terms of the psychology behind the behaviour, and not in terms of the behaviour itself. A psychological intervention strategy aims to change people at a psychological level. If a person’s psychology changes, then his or her behaviour changes. One has to understand the psychology behind the behaviour if one wishes to design an intervention strategy.”

A question I ask myself in view of the above is whether my intervention strategies are really aimed at *changing people’s psychology, i.e. at psychological level* and, if so, are they successful? In all honesty, I cannot answer this question. When reflecting on some of the cases I have encountered, I can say that I have indeed addressed the psychology behind the behaviour (see my discussion of brief psychotherapy in chapter 4). In other cases, my purpose was to change behaviour in that I knew the person’s behaviour patterns were contributing to the interpersonal conflict. I think for me to state that employees’ and managers’ psychology changed might be a too easy acceptance of this possibility. More research is necessary and, even then, the kind of change that might have taken place depends on the paradigm and criteria used by the researcher. Perhaps the process of situational adjustment suggests an explanation of change, and perhaps commitment leads to stability (Becker, 1964). In my conflict management counselling, I always keep in mind the fact that behaviour related to conflict has a purpose; the behaviour may be directed to restoring feelings of self-worth, addressing the immediate, emotional experience of the conflict and focusing on the substantive issues that frame this

conflict. During interviews, both the employee/manager and I sometimes discuss planned behaviour change and how this can become a reality for my client, that is, how he or she can act differently to move away from his or her conflict-causing behaviour. My experience is that intentions indeed contribute to behaviour change, but then the next question is whether these new intentions will last, and for how long. This opens up another research possibility.

## 5.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have reflected on interpersonal conflict management. The concept of interpersonal conflict was defined and placed in the context of cases that served as examples of the many situations I have had to deal with over the years. Each of these cases emphasised specific themes, processes or patterns which were typical of the many cases I have dealt with. I explained my emphasis on storytelling: a person's narrative turns out to be a construction that reveals what he or she considers to be important and significant as far as the conflict is concerned. The purpose of these narratives is to serve as explanations of the crucial events as captured in employees' stories of the past, present and future. I then discussed the *emerging themes* in order to convey my understanding of the complexities and interpersonal dynamics within the wide variety of interpersonal conflicts. Although the neurological and chemical substrates of emotion were only referred to briefly in chapter 6, this brief reference revealed the interwoven nature of affect, body and cognition. The themes and patterns identified and presented under the headings and excerpts were discussed in some detail. I explained how each theme or pattern has impacted on my current way of dealing with interpersonal conflict. In other words, I explained how I link the theory of these themes and insights with the practical situation and how it can be implemented. I also explained my understanding of how I grasped the generic themes and patterns that have since become part of my interpersonal conflict management skills. I also made it clear that no technique can be used as a *recipe*, but should instead be treated as a theoretical guideline of how I approach interpersonal conflict management. I also attempted to indicate how conflict management impacts on me personally. Within the framework of ethnography this chapter dealt with the threats to people's psychological wellbeing and the intense emotional painful experience of conflict while, at the same time, these people are struggling to survive. I also referred to possibility responses as opposed to giving-up responses. The impact of psychological ill-health on

interpersonal relationships was emphasised, especially in the context of conflict caused by depression. I also asked questions about the possibility of changing a person's psychology by means of interpersonal conflict management interventions, and the importance of emotional healing.

## CHAPTER 6

### INTRA-GROUP CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

#### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

Members of the same group often avoid, downplay, suppress or ignore the conflicts and unpleasant feelings that exist between them, thus allowing these feelings to “simmer” – sometimes over a prolonged period of time. It is not easy to express intensely unpleasant feelings, especially in an environment that is dominated by mistrust and where employees do not experience the group as a safe place to vent these feelings or to openly disagree with each other. Sometimes, of course, this simmering unpleasantness erupts into open clashes that are extremely disturbing (Littlejohn, 2004). Despite what the literature says (i.e. that conflict can be beneficial), conflict usually has negative connotations and, indeed, the traditional view is that conflict is always harmful and is to be avoided at all costs (Corey & Corey, 1987). Other views, such as the interactionist view of conflict, indicate that conflict is not only a positive force in a group, but that it is actually necessary for a group to perform effectively. This view of conflict believes that a harmonious, cooperative and peaceful group is inclined to become static and non-responsive to the need for innovation and change (Robbins, 2003).

Since occasional conflict is unpreventable and a necessary consequence of relationships it is the avoidance rather than the facing of conflict that makes it destructive (Corey & Corey, 1987). Unexplored conflict is revealed by means of, for example, defensive behaviour, hostility, suppressed anger, passive aggression, resistance, irritation, and lack of trust. It is also displayed by non-verbal communication, such as deafening silences or simply not doing what has been asked. Constructively dealing with conflict involves exploring the underlying dynamics of what has been said or not been said. However, it may be dangerous to reveal these dynamics unless they are specifically directed to creating constructive solutions to the emotional benefit of the employees involved. McFadzean (2002) says that many organisations use teams/groups to solve their conflicts and problems in order to improve processes and services. One method of utilising groups for enhancing group effectiveness is to make use of a neutral person as the facilitator. The facilitator supports the group throughout the problem-solving process, and should be

aware of and equipped with the necessary sophisticated competencies and skills regarding working with groups, especially those groups that are highly skilled, experienced and well-developed in their professional and academic tasks.

This chapter outlines only a few vital aspects of intra-group conflict management and presents my perspective on theory as it is applied to practice; I also discuss my identity development as a counselling psychologist specialising in human conflict management. I will begin by describing the concepts *group* and *intra-group* against the background in which I have to function. I will also highlight my views on what I regard as suitable interventions in practice (as aligned with certain theoretical stances). The interventions *storytelling* and the use of *metaphors/images* will be elucidated within the context of excerpts taken from a few selected cases that involved intra-group conflict. My intention is to offer support to relatively healthy people to enable them to function better at an intra-group level. The ultimate objective is to restore their occupational functioning (which has been impaired by their intra-group conflict). In the last section of this chapter my focus will be on the emerging themes of intra-group conflict. This has contributed to an understanding of my own transformation and growth processes in the way I have come to deal with intra-group conflict. The chapter will also be autoethnographic: I portray the development of my identity as a counselling psychologist doing intra-group conflict management in a university.

As I have mentioned already: over the past fourteen years, I have become increasingly involved in intra-group conflict management. Initially, this started as diversity management workshops, then escalated to change management and, finally, became conflict management. Since 2008, I have added the management of intra-group conflict to my 'repertoire'.

## **6.2 THE CONCEPTS OF GROUP AND INTRA-GROUP CONFLICTS**

*Group and group conflict:* there are differences of opinion about the number of people who form a group. Plug, Meyer, Louw and Gouws describes a group as 'consisting out of two or more people who are united by a common goal, characteristic, bond or connectedness and whose activities influence each other' (1988, p.129, freely translated). Robbins (2003, p. 219) is in agreement and defines a group as 'two or more individuals, interacting and



interdependent, who have come together to achieve particular objectives'. Van Rheede van Oudtshoorn (2004) believes that the number of people in a group can range between three and twelve people (according to him, two people do not constitute a group). For the purposes of this study, I agree with Van Oudtshoorn and consider a group as consisting of three and more people. Van Rheede van Oudtshoorn (2004) also makes a clear distinction between a group and a team. Although he acknowledges that the distinction is often semantic, he states that all teams start out as groups. For him the distinction lies in the level of cohesion reached – as time goes by, the group turns into a team: it shares resources and, at the same time, its members become increasingly aware of their cohesion and interdependence. My experience is that this cohesion can be disrupted by conflicts, misunderstandings not dealt with constructively and the distinctive attributes of the employees involved. The emphasis in groups is on common interests that form the basis for people to work together which thus calls attention to group members' interactions with each other (Plug et al., 1988; Robbins, 2003). The concept of work now also comes to the fore and can be described in terms of psychological theory "as purposeful and meaningful activities which people execute in order to meet and fulfill various physical and psychosocial needs" (Bergh & Theron, 1998, p. 417). It is in the context of these interests, interactions and activities that I have had to deal with intra-group conflicts.

Plug et al. refer to the *intra* as a "prefix which means inside" (1988, p.163, freely translated). In this study *intra* applies to *conflict inside the group* or *conflict from within* between members of the same group within the same department, working on corresponding tasks. The groups in this study were formal groups as defined by the university's structures, designated assignments and established tasks (Cilliers & Koortzen, 2003; Robbins, 2003; Cilliers, 2008). In the context of the university it includes academic and/or professional and/or administrative tasks. The employees and managers are united by a common interest, activities, input and output. In these contexts there are many potential contributing factors to the phenomenon of intra-group conflict. It is generated from, among other things, task interdependence, scarce resources, system differentiation, competition, incompatibility of personalities and values, inability to carry out tasks, differences in perceptions about the quality and quantity of work output, lying about hours worked, intentionally working slow, gossiping and spreading rumours, and having to share work activities against the background of differences in values, work ethics and meticulousness. When dealing with intra-group conflicts, I also had to consider the impact

of some employees' intrapersonal conflicts owing to the directly negative impact of these conflicts on intra-group conflict, job satisfaction and work performance (Cox, 2003).

For the purpose of this study, I will use the concept *intra-group conflict* where there are three or more persons involved within the same group whilst sharing responsibilities for corresponding tasks.

### **6.3 GROUP FACILITATION WITHIN THE WORK CONTEXT**

The functioning and performance of organisations are primarily achieved through work groups and teams that do not exist in isolation. Our university's unique culture, systems, processes and procedures, authority structures, resources, reward systems and physical work setting dictate the *who, what, when and how*. The vision, mission and overall strategy are put in place by our top management who designate functions on a continuous basis to achieve a common set of goals (e.g. to be of service to students and to support employees at various levels). The functions are based on the university's strategy, translated into institutional and departmental operational plans. The authority structures define line management functions and who reports to whom. These structures determine where a given work group is placed in the university's hierarchy, who the formal group leaders are, and the formal relationships within and between these groups. They also broadly determine the tasks delegated to these groups.

Teams and groups are made up of individuals who collectively contribute to the group dynamics, corporate culture, and organisational effectiveness (Robbins, 2003). The employees as group members within a specific department come from different backgrounds and cultures – and these impact on interactions and ways of dealing with intra-group conflicts. However, at work, all employees are primarily members of the university. The criteria used in its selection processes determine the kind of people who will make up the university's work groups (Robbins, 2003). In our university these people are academic, professional and administrative staff members who have to meet the requirements of their specific tasks. The collective word for staff members in managerial positions is managers, irrespective of their positions in either the academic or administrative sections of the institution but with the distinction of executive management.

Executive management includes executive deans, executive directors, and middle management includes heads of department, directors and supervisors.

Managers are people who direct and oversee the activities of others and who are responsible for attaining the goals of any organisation. They get things done through other people, make decisions and allocate resources. Managers perform different functions such as planning, organising, leading and controlling, and fulfil roles such as managerial and interpersonal roles. One common thread runs through managers' activities, and that is that they need to develop their people skills if they are going to be effective and successful (Robbins, 2003). Managerial performance is influenced by several factors, such as a consistent set of behaviours arising from values, perceptions, beliefs and thought processes (Laferla, 2003). It has been said that the reason why a considerable number of employees resign is the result of serious conflicts between the employee and the manager (Robbins, 2003). There are continuous formal work-related interactions between managers and staff members via, for example, formal communication procedures, meetings and one-on-one discussions. Informal interaction and communication take place in the corridors, tea rooms and offices. In this environment and context, task-related and relationship-related conflicts often emerge. Moderate *task-related conflicts* are frequently associated with disagreements and disputes that can, in fact, be beneficial (since these result in creativity and superior decision-making outcomes). *Relationship-related conflicts* are associated with negative moods and emotions, and impact significantly on organisational and task outcomes (Ismail, et al, 2012).

Cilliers (2008, p. 230) believes that "work groups are powerful sources for employees' identification, need satisfaction and organizational effectiveness but may also contribute to employee stress and frustrations". Many authors and researchers have reported, however, that the presence of interpersonal and intra-group conflicts detracts from the positive attributes of groups, and state that conflict contributes to employees' lack of emotional wellbeing (Bacal, 1998; Bergh & Theron, 1998; Clarke, 1995; Fisher, Sharp & Steven, 2004; Masters & Albright, 2002; Mol, 1997; Robbins, 2003; Van Epps, 1990). This situation necessitates diverse interventions. A fundamental requirement for me as a counselling psychologist is to have at my disposal relevant knowledge and competencies related to group functioning, group dynamics and group facilitation. Facilitation in my context is not the traditional classroom teaching and group therapy, although I attempt to make

“available a process of learning and growth in the group ... with the goal of enhancing the quality of life, as manifested in psychological optimal functioning” (Cilliers, 2008, p. 246).

My purpose is to enable the employees and/or managers to be in a position to explore their own issues and skills for future problem-solving, that is, they should become aware of their own processes and dynamics if they are to progress to self-management, maturity and productivity. People’s feelings and moods play an important role in the judgements they make, their perceptions, behaviours and attitudes – all of which influence the causes and outcomes of relationship conflicts (Ismail, Richard & Taylor, 2012). However, I also know that this is not always the final answer, and nor is it even possible. It is difficult for a person who is a member of the group in conflict to drastically change his or her intrapersonal processes, and the intra-group systems and dynamics without external professional support or facilitation procedures. The important issue, for me, is to at least encourage awareness or mindfulness. This will simplify my task as the facilitator.

In our university the work groups within departments and colleges concentrate on academic tasks. Academics are appointed to teach, conduct research and be involved in community participation activities linked to their disciplines. They develop, for example, curriculum content and study material. The administrative and professional staff offer support services to the students and academic staff complement. Some of the hard-core obstacles contributing to interpersonal conflicts in this context are work overload, lack of competencies and skills, incompatibility issues (which are often related to personality clashes or differences in work ethics and values), high levels of stress due to high workload or transformation issues, and a lack of adequate resources and effective leadership.

My experience is that motivated individuals and teams are generally willing to tackle these barriers with the attitude of ‘let us work hard to do something about it’. However, it so happens that when some of these groups are confronted with highly complicated interpersonal and intra-group conflicts, they are unsuccessful in their efforts to resolve their issues. Work-related conflicts include differences of opinion about things such as resource allocation, role responsibility, dissimilarity in workload and, in particular, ineffective work performance. Personality clashes are more difficult to resolve than work-related conflicts. These clashes become visible via behaviour, such as being short-tempered, verbal

assaults via, for example, e-mails, passivity, withdrawal, impatience, accusations, passive aggressive actions, sarcastic and cynical remarks, and/ or absenteeism.

In the present study the abovementioned intra-group conflicts are seen from an ethnographic and autoethnographic perspective (Kelly, 2006; Hammersley, 1998; Creswell, 2007). This means that people's behaviour in groups has been studied in everyday contexts and that these groups are regarded as a subculture in the institution. The focus will initially be on the group members' particular ways of interaction during conflicts. Eventually the focus will shift towards exploring the group's hidden strengths, which will enable them to constructively address their conflicts and challenges. As an ethnographic researcher, I have seen the *culture at work*, which is visible in research participants' behaviour, such as language, mannerisms, traditions and ways of life (Creswell, 2007). I have made available descriptions and interpretations of my observations when interacting with group members. One way of achieving this is to pay attention to the specific group's narratives. Autoethnographically speaking, I will not only share with you my personal growth as a counselling psychologist specialising in conflict management, but also my range of experiences and perceptions while performing my work in this capacity.

#### **6.4 METAPHORS**

Against the background of a group's narratives, I became interested in the impact of metaphors in dealing with a group's disturbed relationships. Change is often needed to restore peace, but the question is: how should this change begin? For me, it is difficult for group members to bring about change when the focus is, for example, on 'telling or teaching' them what the definition of conflict is, what their individual conflict management styles entail, what they can do to bring an end to the conflicts and how their interactions with one another have to change. Initially, my interventions were focused on low levels of conflict management, that is, low levels of cognitive knowledge about intrapersonal characteristics (personal qualities such as empathy and intuition), communication skills (e.g. active listening and authentic body language), interpersonal skills (e.g. greeting, smiling, assertiveness, conversation starters, negotiation and networking) and behaviour evaluation (e.g. reactions and responses). When I present workshops, I occasionally observe that some employees switch between being interested and getting bored. The

essence of what I ‘tell’ them is actually general knowledge although, usually, this general knowledge is not being put into practice. However, over the years, I progressively became dissatisfied with these “low levels of theory construction and practical utilisation’, where one can get stuck ‘on the bottom range of the theoretical ladder” (Van de Vliert, 1997, p. 150, italics original). I am on the look-out for methods to transform communication and conversation in difficult conflicts, i.e. a deep-seated awareness about how we view ourselves, others and the relationship. Littlejohn (2004) refers to this process as productive dialogue, which aims at second-order change that brings about constructive transformation of the relationship.

In my search for something that could meet my expectation for the onset of constructive transformation, I came across interventions based on metaphors. Such interventions may only be a drop in the ocean of therapy but, for me, this discovery was a turning point, even given the possible limitations on the trustworthiness of the processes of metaphor analysis. Metaphors are neither unanimously interpreted nor understood – there is actually no single interpretation possible for any metaphor. However, “metaphors do provide rich information about a person’s conceptualization of a given topic and within a given situation, and are thus extremely valuable to researchers” (Armstrong, Davis & Paulson, 2011, p. 5). It seems therefore that the use of metaphor is beneficial in enhancing understanding and retention of key learning points. This makes it more likely that the involved persons will put their skills and abilities into practice.

Metaphors allow interactive exchanges between conflicting parties as they move to neutral opinions/ground that lessens the tension caused by the overwhelming differences of the people in the group (Haen, 2005; Shapiro, 2010). My intention in using metaphors is to construct cognitive (thoughts) and affective (emotions) frameworks for the group’s collective strengths which, in turn, can influence their interpretation of future events that have the potential to provoke conflict. Howard (1996) says that metaphors address both thoughts and emotions. He also states that thinking depends on metaphors: many scientific theories are built on the consistent use of metaphors. For example, in physics *space* as a metaphor is used to represent time.

## **6.5 SIGNIFICANT CASE EXTRACTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS FROM A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Again, I have selected a few cases to illustrate how my intervention has developed throughout my years as a counselling psychologist. I will present these in the form of extractions or excerpts. These excerpts are obviously not exhaustive, but provide examples of intra-group conflict management that has enriched my understanding of what these conflicts and their dynamics entail, and which were milestones in my identity development as a counselling psychologist. I will not do justice to the dynamics, diversity and many-sidedness of the intra-group conflicts that I have dealt with, but at least the essence of my intra-group conflict management journey is partly revealed. The cases chosen are rich in subject matter but, for the purposes of this study, I prefer not to get stuck in excessive detail and a penetrating analysis of group dynamics or stages of group development. I will only refer to these issues where they are relevant.

### **Group 1 – the group whose storytelling makes a difference in their world of change and conflict**

#### **Background**

Employees from the three merged higher education institutions had to unite at a grassroots level in departments, work stations and newly instituted structures. Across the university, the wide-ranging phenomenon at that point in time was that employees from these three groupings were inclined to assemble with those who came from the same institution. There was and is a strong perception on the part of those from the two smaller institutions that the bigger university had made an aggressive ‘takeover bid’ in that it had retained its own systems, procedures and processes – to the disadvantage of those who came from the two smaller institutions. Their work-related identity was at stake and they had to protect themselves, their values and their ways of doing things. Each person in the different groupings had his or her own perceptions of what it meant to be what the group was, is and will be. These perceptions still evoke strong emotions, especially when the differences of opinion are reinforced by interactive exchanges between parties. According to the five stages of group development, the group under discussion (i.e. group 1) is in the forming and storming stages (Geldenhuis, Naidoo & May, 2008). The people in this group are in the early forming stage of considering themselves as part of a new group, even if

reluctantly – there is no other way, and they have no choice. The storming stage is characterised by intra-group conflicts. At the institution where I work, at the time of the merger there was unspoken rivalry about which one of the three institutions involved in the merger would control the identity of the group. Some of the conflicts were based on differences in value judgements (e.g. the acceptability of arriving late at work), or ethnocentrism (one sub-group was regarded as superior to another). Although there were regular and significant slips into tension and friction, these groups were still attempting at surface and cognitive levels to cooperate with each other. At the emotional level, however, the situation was far more complex. They were caught between two poles. The anger against and frustration with management were a linking factor that occasionally brought all groups on to the same wavelength. They believed that management lacked the ability and empathy to effectively manage the merger at grassroots level, because they did 'not take our concerns into account'. At the other end of the pole was the stereotype position: they felt they had to be against the other grouping, which threatened the continued existence of the culture, unique set of values, and priorities of their institutions of origin. The situation became unbearable and, as a result, they were willing to cooperate with efforts directed to resolving their issues (i.e. the workshop).

I was the co-facilitator of the workshop. This workshop had two facilitators; its procedure and contents had been developed by others. In my journey I sometimes work in coordination with an industrial psychologist where both of us bring certain skills and perspectives on board. Therefore the other facilitator was an industrial psychologist. Originally, we were requested to intervene under the umbrella of change management. We soon realised, however, that the situation could also be viewed from the perspective of intra-group conflicts. More often than not, conflict and change occur simultaneously because change in the workplace usually leads to conflict. For many employees, the merger change processes were overwhelming and the conflict disconcerting. Their fears (e.g. job loss), perspectives (e.g. awfulising the consequences of change), and differences in hopes and ideas about how they might survive contributed to controversial incidents. The heartbreaking reality was that these employees were not pretending – for many of them it was a case of, metaphorically speaking, life and death.

The purpose of this intra-group facilitation was, among other things, to improve the way the employees dealt with change and intra-group conflicts in the hope that this would



reduce the conflict they were experiencing. Another purpose was to use storytelling in order to break down resistance to change that resulted in intra-group conflicts at a primary level. The third aim was to build skills and knowledge at secondary level through this workshop, thus enabling employees to deal with future events.

### Storytelling – yesterday, today, tomorrow

I am convinced that our purpose in doing conflict management can be facilitated through, among other things, the processes of storytelling. I came to this conclusion when I realised that many stories about workplace change and conflicts as told by employees included the flow of past and present events as well as their expectations of what the future should entail. Employees' stories revealed what they considered as significant in their understanding of the external environment, which was characterised by turmoil, transformation and conflict, all of which was 'the result of the merger'. Employees' storytelling occurs through the medium of language which, in the case of the university, was English. In the university, English is the medium of communication and accustomed to using English as our normal mode of communication. It is not the mother tongue of the diverse majority, but is the only language understood by everybody. It is through English that we indicate the meaning attached to our experiences, through which we try to create new meanings and reinterpret previous incidents. However, when we share our feelings, we rely on our mother tongue. This is why some of the group members fell back on their language of origin, only to repeat themselves immediately afterwards in English. This way of communicating was accepted by all the group members, which is an indication of the goodwill and empathy that gradually developed amongst them.

### Stories of the past

These narratives confronted them with their past (workplace) stories in order to gain perspective on the influence and impact of these stories on their current thoughts, feelings and actions. The sharing of their losses, sadness and happiness of the past was cathartic and, at the same time, enabled them to vent their negative feelings. Parlamis (2012) describes venting as the verbal or written expression of thoughts and feelings that surround anger-provoking events. From experience I know that giving people the opportunity to vent their emotions has one of two consequences – it either provokes more annoyance and resentment or serves as an important first step in gaining a more objective view of the problem. It also smoothes the progress of group processes, provided that the

facilitator is in control. Without the opportunity of catharsis, participants get stuck in their need to share their issues – with the danger that these emotional factors may form a barrier to change (Pennington, 2003) and constructive conflict management. The workshop participants' storytelling about conflict provoking workplace incidents that happened in the past was an "anger recall" way of acting that contributed to the release of anger and negative emotions against one another (Parlami, 2012, p. 77). However, it is only in retrospect that I use this phrase. It is also only with hindsight that I view catharsis as including "venting as emotion regulation" (Parlami, 2012, p. 77). I remember how, at the time, I sometimes had to tread carefully between allowing venting and protecting the person(s) it was aimed at.

The employees' stories of the past also promoted empathy across different workplace and cultural locations (Pennington, 2003). "I listened with new ears to your memories, but I still get upset when you repeatedly insist that your university's processes should be followed." They learned from one another about the past and the subcultures in the different merging institutions, and that *outsiders* also experienced losses, anxiety and anger. The mutual sharing contributed to the creation of the preconditions for the building of future relationships would be essential for teamwork and the acceptance of a common vision as a group. This sub-process, with its potential of bringing group members more closely together, gradually came to be practised as group members opened up to each other in terms of their fears, hopes and forming influences. "To tell my story to someone who is truly interested and willing to listen feels like balm to my soul." Their stories of conflict address the harm inflicted on "us against my will and without my consent." For some it was an eye-opener to become aware of the impact of their contributions to and reactions to the conflict that had exacerbated the situation.

### Stories of the present

The cognitive purpose of the workshop was to analyse the present situation and to identify the conflict areas that needed to be addressed. Once more I, as the facilitator, had to be mindful of the danger that 'fools rush in where angels fear to tread'. I had to be consciously and continuously mindful of group, interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics. This sub-process had the potential to bring people closely together as they opened up to each other in terms of their fears, hopes and stories of the past manifested in the here and now. "Those who face their problems and difficulties eventually learn to manage them, cope

with them, and grow from them” *according to* Ivey & Van Hesteren (1990, p. 535). Group members shared information about individual experiences of the current functioning of the group and each other’s personal experience of the tension and conflict brought about by the merger. The sharing of feelings, aspirations and the highs and the lows of their careers was a springboard towards healing. There was a sense of mourning and sadness over their losses as a result of the disbandment of their groups prior to the merger, and the letting go of their previous identities and camaraderie. They had to comprehend why some of their intra-group conflicts were so intense and, in addition, what each person’s unique contribution could be in terms of giving shape to their new department, its functioning and identity. The impact of personalities and personal circumstances in the group was not discussed in detail. I did not regard in depth discussions about other people as a safe way of proceeding due to the possibility that some of them might have exploited their limited knowledge of other people in the group. It might also have stirred up anxiety in some employees about the impact of their personalities or the façade that some of them were trying to maintain. The success of this sub-process was signalled by early signs of a new sense of camaraderie. I regarded this as the catalyst for the wearisome process of building relationships and developing a willingness to address the common issues that confronted them as a group with a new emerging identity. The employees gained an understanding of the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics in their department that were contributing to the intra-group conflicts.

### Stories of the future

Some people may regard the abovementioned story-of-the-present process as significant enough to end the group sessions. However, one also needs to open a window to the future. I believe that a way to create and establish their commitment to build the group identity needed to be found in order to address change management and intra-group conflicts. The participants were engaged in a creative activity in order to generate a collective construction of the *story of the future*. We facilitators initially had to set an example and encourage the group members to unleash their inner creativity to think, feel and act differently to help their story of the future to unfold. In the beginning, participants were hesitant and out of their depth. It was much easier to dwell on the issues and feelings of the past and present. They understood, however, that what we were asking them to do did not imply a personality change, but instead that we were inviting them to make a voluntary choice to act differently or to deliberately steer their actions towards positive

change management and, subsequently, towards a positive conflict management style. Their jointly created story of the future enabled them to direct their future interpersonal conflict management behaviour. It gave them a bird's-eye view of the future that would enable them to influence and direct their future. Their own vision of the future gave them a purpose and direction for their survival and existence (Freedman & Combs, 1996). The insight communicated is by understanding the present in the light of past conflict and origins, and is followed up by attempts towards behavioural change to be implemented in the future – a psychodynamic process described by Schuyler (2000). We facilitators started by giving a short introduction to a newly created future story and left this story open-ended. The next participant proceeded by adding his or her individual content. This process continued until all the participants had the opportunity to co-construct the future workplace story – the new vision for the group (Bryant & Cox, 2004). What is interesting is that the group members spontaneously included attitudes, skills and knowledge that they regarded as functional in the new work environment. This collective construction conveyed the message that it was in their power to move from *storytelling to storymaking*. The empathetic listening by co-employees and facilitators enabled them to attach new meanings to the story of the past by means of new ways of thinking and new meanings attached to their concerns. We facilitators tried to pave the way for them to work on a better future. Hopefully, this storymaking process made a difference in participants' lives. The session ended by the group members forming a circle, hand in hand, heads bowed, eyes closed in a moment of silence. We considered this to be a way for group members to internalise the group processes as they had uniquely experienced these processes. It was also a way of symbolically attaching themselves to their mutual discovered capacities with a view to overcoming their personal struggles. The aim of the circle is, among other things, to reinforce participants' experience of the group as a support system and to achieve collective closure to the group process. The circle ends with any member saying, in one or two words, what they are taking with him or her – major change can have small beginnings and it starts with me (Zeig, 2006; Myers, Speight, Highlen, Cox, Reynolds, Adams & Hanley, 1991; Milner & O'Byrne, 2002).

At the end of the workshop, the group members broke away from the impasse brought about by their stories of the past and especially their stories of the present, that is, the experience of being powerless in the face of the merger and the emotions it had created in them.

In hindsight, I would like to emphasise that I now realise that it is very difficult to achieve goals when group members are irrationally angry or anxious. In the workshop referred to above, I could also have made use of the REBT approach and cognitive disputation strategies to help participants transform their irrational beliefs to rational beliefs (e.g. anger into annoyance, depression into sadness, anxiety into concern, guilt into regret, and aggression into assertiveness).

## **Group 2: the live anger setting**

I was requested to assist with the conflict situation between some of the staff members in Department A in order to reconcile their differences. My conflict management interventions included the current session from which this extraction was taken. In many cases, as in this one, it is essential that the facilitator have some knowledge beforehand about the departmental culture in order to plan the way ahead. This session therefore took the format of a formal meeting because I know that the participants would not agree to a group session (which has a connotation of group work and thus suggests that participants require counselling). In the case of a formal meeting, the ethical way to proceed is to 'put one's cards on the table beforehand' about the content of the meeting. This serves a double purpose – on the one hand, it enables participants to deal with their issues and anger about the anger-provoking incidents and, on the other hand, it enables the facilitator to plan the way forward. Notwithstanding the setting of a formal meeting, it is necessary to include the process of self-knowledge about each participant's personal contribution to the conflict. The self-knowledge part of the workshop is not discussed in this extraction/excerpt. I chaired the meeting, with the Head of Department, Dave, as the co-chair (an arrangement that had participants' agreement). Not all the departmental staff were involved and only the nine staff members who were caught up in the conflict attended the meeting.

Initially, the group conversation took place on a relatively cognitive level and was quite easy to facilitate. The code of conduct, as compiled by the group, contributed to their willingness to adhere to this code. Their overall goal was to solve their intra-group conflict and to improve the relationships and communication processes between academics and administrative staff. Another goal was to improve the department's service delivery. Once

we had established this, we proceeded to identify and address the conflict issues/problems of which an understanding and planning for the way forward was essential. Dave and the participants therefore briefly explained the existing constraints in their system, how these contributed to intense intra-group conflict, and why they experienced the conflict as such (i.e. intense). Participants agreed that the academic and administrative staff were in conflict with each other about a few specific tasks. The academic personnel complained that they were not supported at an administrative level in these tasks. The administrative personnel complained that unnecessary tasks were given to them and that they were not respected in their capacity as administrative staff. They were made out to be the “black sheep” of the Department, and regarded as having a lower status than the academic staff. The differences of opinion are discerned, i.e. they initially only have to put on the table what their issues are without moving to deeper emotional levels (the latter referring to deal with their intense negative feelings). Although there was a willingness to work together and to move away from differences, their efforts to do so were proving to be ineffective owing to the network of relationships that existed in the department.

Two staff members, in particular, had patterns of interaction that had gradually become habitually conflict-ridden. The dispute between Gail and Retha reached the point that it had eventually put strain on the smooth functioning of the entire department. It also caused occasional outbursts in the Head of Department’s office on the part of some staff members, especially Gail, who wanted to force Dave to take action against Retha. After one such altercation, Dave had asked for my services as a conflict facilitator, even though he was receiving training in effective conflict management. I should say that Dave was struggling with his tendency to avoid conflict and his belief that he lacked the skills required to manage human conflict. This session therefore also served as a form of mentoring and coaching, which I regarded as a practical way of giving Dave the support and guidance he needed.

Retha and Gail represented the two groupings *lined up against each other*. Retha was an administrative assistant and Gail was a full professor. In fact, Retha and Gail were initially the *spokespersons* of the two sides, because both women were in the front line of the work-related conflict problems in this particular department. There was also the possibility that personal issues were involved in the conflict between Retha and Gail – which, if the meeting failed to deliver the desired results, were going to be followed up by the facilitator.

Regardless of the code of conduct, Gail offensively accused the administrative staff, and Retha in particular, of a list of wrongdoings and misdemeanours while, at the same time, demanding an explanation. Her behaviour confirmed my belief that *talking and telling* is not enough to solve intra-group conflict. Gail, in turn, was supported by Lizette, whose focus was on the lack of trust between the staff as a result of these issues – “no courtesy, no respect and integrity; the staff in our department hardly greet each other”. At these remarks, Retha became upset, close to tears and rejected Gail’s allegations – she claimed she could not “be held responsible” for the problems mentioned by Lizette. After this, Retha indulges in passive aggression by refusing to speak her mind, something which Gail obviously found extremely frustrating (Gail, I noted, showed little compassion for Retha’s distress). One of the other participants remarked that this is “typical of you Gail – can’t you see what the impact of your way of doing is?” Gail’s verbal emotional venting of her frustration and anger produced the opposite of what she expected. Retha continued to retaliate by keeping her silence. Tebogo, one of the other administrative staff members, then angrily explained, at length, the administrative staff members’ issues with some academics - “they treat us in a superior and big-headed manner – as if we are their servants, giving orders.” I allowed the venting of the strong emotions for a while because it at least requires interaction in a controlled environment. In this meeting, participants were brought face to face and confronted with the hard facts of and feelings attached to their conflicts. This situation resulted in visible anger (Gail and Tebogo) and passive aggression by means of withdrawal and tears (Retha). In this meeting, real feelings were disclosed; participants’ anger became visible and acted out: “the live anger setting” (Parlamiš, 2012, p. 77).

There was also a typical interplay between *task conflict*, which includes disagreements about the content of tasks due to different viewpoints, and *relationship conflict*, which includes interpersonal incompatibilities and frictions among group members resulting in tension, annoyance and animosity (Curşeu, Boroş & Oerlemans, 2012). Factors playing a role in this group’s interplay were, among other things, ‘grey areas’ – in this case, it was not clear what constituted academic and what constituted administrative duties. For example, our university’s online query system, which provides students with the information they require, had been upgraded. As a result, both academic and administrative staff are in a position to provide this information, but some academic staff

regard this as an “inferior task which should be done by the administrative staff”. This situation resulted, not only in a lack of clarity about the work distribution, but also revealed a superior attitude on the part of the academic staff, something that angered the administrative staff intensely. These issues had not been timeously addressed by the Head of Department and this, of course, had made the situation worse. Both groupings were upset about the situation, and had tried to convince him to face up to this issue. Another factor was the negative perceptions and unspoken emotions about the lack of trust and perceived status between some of the members in the two groupings. This was an example of the way in which task conflicts evolve into *relationship conflicts*, especially when there is a lack of emotional regulation, i.e. a failure to attend to the ineffective process of solving discrepancies between current negative emotional states and the group’s desired positive emotional state (Curşeu, Boroş & Oerlemans, 2012).

The feedback conversation ultimately contributed to a toning down of emotions and members of the group having a better understanding of themselves and each other. Venting, active listening and engaging in perspective talking contributes to the reduction of negative and hectic emotions. For example, it was acknowledged that the academic staff should do some introspection about “their superior attitude” (as indicated by Tebogo) and the administrative staff (as mentioned by Dave) “should contain their occasional annoyance when requested to do something for the academics”. The perception that the two groupings were in constant conflict with one another proved, however, not to be the truth. Retha and Gail’s experience of task conflicts, exacerbated by differences in their personality traits and personal circumstances, certainly ended up in a relationship conflict. Since this affected the whole department, an incorrect perception was created. These perceptions were discussed and it was agreed that, basically, the staff were willing to work together. In fact, in the aftermath of expressing and venting their negative emotions and moods, the staff in this department eventually succeeds in moving away from being stuck in their differences towards all of them adopting a more flexible attitude. In fact, the meeting enabled them to focus on the way forward. However, there might have been other inherent human factors contributing to this positive movement towards finding a solution. Therefore to bring balance in the interplay between, for example, indirect physical results as a result of psychological interventions it can be said that, from a physical perspective, the hectic feelings of some of them might have been stuck in the reptilian brain that governs, amongst others, our basic physical responses to stress or threats, i.e., our fight,



flight and freeze reflexes. Solutions cannot be found in the reptilian brain because, during periods of serious stress and trauma, this brain is in a state of constant activation. The neo-cortex (thinking brain) and limbic brain (emotional brain) must be re-engaged in order to restore, as in this case, communication skills, reasoning, planning and flexibility, as well as the brain's overall ability to assess the emotional relevance of experiences (Milton Erikson, 2012). I assume that my workshops/ group sessions contribute to this restoration of sound reasoning and the calming down of emotions. I acknowledge, however, that this assumption has to be confirmed by further research.

In this case, suggestions were made about amenable ways of dealing with future issues for working, as said by Lizette, "happily and constructively together." This included the development of collective norms for dealing with disagreements and negative emotions, and standard operating procedures for the execution of administrative tasks between the two groupings. The group felt capable of taking this further on their own, and it was agreed that a staff meeting must be scheduled (to be chaired by Dave). The group was on the edge of emerging from conflict towards a willingness to trust one another towards cohesion, although it (i.e. the group) still had a long way to go. One of the group members wanted to recapture the "rich values in our Department", which were identified as *respect, integrity, trust, courtesy and honesty*. Hopefully, this attitude strengthened the impact of the newly developed positive mood interaction in the group (Ismail, Richard & Taylor, 2012). Both groupings wanted to engage in motivational mood repair, although their preference was to focus on tasks rather than relationships. Presumably the (un)conscious reasoning here was that clarity about tasks would eventually contribute to improved relationships, an easier way to proceed than to deal with emotional and relationship issues. This process might also "direct their conversations into a place where constructive relationships can be built; where differences can be viewed as a positive resource; and where human creativity, honor, and wholeness can be realized" (Littlejohn, 2004, p. 347).

In hindsight: the most challenging part of intra-group conflict management for me was the *live anger setting with venting as emotion regulation in relationship conflicts* – although it is only now that I knowingly refer to it as such. I do not avoid the live anger setting, but it is not an easy setting to deal with. Sometimes I am stressed, even in distress, before intra-group sessions because of the profound influence of negative affect and emotions in *relationship conflicts*. However, expression of these emotions is a way to relieve the

employees' stress, tension, anger and anxiety. I associate it with the hypnotic phenomenon *abreaction* brought about by discussions in a safe atmosphere. I have often witnessed the fact that, after such a display of live anger, the person's cognitive and mental processes are restructured. A more complete and comprehensive view of the situation becomes possible when both parties become aware of each other's perceptions. This sometimes becomes visible in a change of attitude, hope for the future, and a decrease in the intensity of anger. Again, more follow-up research is necessary to confirm or reject my assumption. *Task conflicts* are associated with disagreements and heated discussions but, if not managed properly, can result in *relationship conflicts*. The interplay between my practical experiences, training, theoretical knowledge and personal attributes (e.g. resilience, ability to stay calm in the midst of turbulent emotions, ability to think on my feet and strength of character or stamina) are and have been of tremendous use in my intra-group conflict management actions. I recognise the altered patterns in my emotional life - my emotional growth has become evident and has endowed me with increasing self-confidence and tranquility.

### **Group 3: the despondent supervisors and the joint animal metaphor**

#### Background

The high levels of tension in one of the university's Centres manifest as *intra-group conflict* between employees working on different job levels or post grades in the same environment (Bergh & Theron, 2008; SDI Certification Coursebook, 2011). These serious conflicts are derailing the performance of both the supervisors and their subordinates in this Centre. Furthermore, the high rate of absenteeism and the problem-behaviour of the employees are undermining the supervisors' efforts to effectively fulfill their managerial tasks. I should make it clear that these supervisors are all well intentioned, but their efforts to manage range from effective to extremely ineffective. I ascribe this lack of effectiveness to their need to develop their managerial skills and their own psychological growth, and to the fact that they need training in the skills needed to deal with the impact of the university's transformation procedures. As it is, these supervisors feel disempowered and despondent. To make matters worse, there are also disagreements and conflicts between the supervisors themselves. As a result, this is an extremely dysfunctional group of supervisors.

Some of the external contributory causes of these conflicts are the restructuring of the higher education landscape in South Africa and the finalisation of this process in 2002. The impact on the Centre's employees, for example, is that many of them have reluctantly had to relocate to a satellite campus in another city, which has disrupted their life circumstances (because it involves time-consuming commuting between the two campuses). To get to work on time, the staff in this Centre has to leave their homes much earlier in the morning and they arrive home much later in the afternoons. Some of the mothers, for example, are confronted with the problem that the schools/nursery schools do not open their doors until 6:30 am and yet they have to be on time for the shuttle on the main campus (in order to get to work on time at the other campus). The subordinates are intensely upset and unhappy about the loss of previous certainties and comfort zones and their supervisors' ineffective managerial styles, all of these which have disrupted and continue to disrupt their work output. They are not emotionally ready to understand the predicament management is in - the merger processes is a government decision which the universities' management structures are compelled to implement. As it is, the subordinates' needs are that their supervisors should display empathy for their difficult circumstances and emotional struggles. The supervisors, however, are so engrossed in their own problems and feelings that they simply cannot meet these expectations.

The supervisors' and employees' transformation and change fatigue cannot be ignored. Our university has been in a state of transition for almost twelve years. Eventually, the fatigue I have referred to becomes exhaustion - a chronic physical and emotional tiredness that is not caused by unusual exertion, hard work or physical activities and that is not relieved by rest, vacation or sick leave. This exhaustion sometimes results in distress and trauma reactions, as well as in a marked decline in staff members' occupational, educational, social and personal activities. In fact, there is a (temporary) inability for people's positive responses to change a situation simply because these same people have been over-exposed to the situation.

In this case, management eventually requested for interventions to address the constraints specific to the supervisors of this Centre. There are, however, other issues at stake apart from this group's internal conflicts which I, in my substantive position as a counselling psychologist focusing on conflict management, am simply not allowed to address. The multi-disciplinary team consists of me as the counselling psychologist and two other

industrial psychologists, Alexis and Nelly – also employees of the university. This co-action process has become typical of my conflict management pattern.

#### Preparation phase and pre-group insights

A pre-workshop meeting with the supervisors took place on campus to discuss the proposed intervention and to clarify the roles of the three facilitators. Their expectations were discussed and we enlightened them about what they can expect. The purpose of this meeting was also to demystify the group processes in the hope that it would accelerate their productive involvement and participation – contributing to positive intra-group, interpersonal and intra-personal experiences (Sklare, Keener & Mas, in Reader, 2003). The following aims were identified: (i) to provide the supervisors with psychometric information, including the SDI, as a nodal point from where their wellbeing can be improved and (ii) to empower them with tools to address the concerns pertaining to their trauma and wellbeing and to thus enable them to function at a higher optimal level. The focus was to facilitate the supervisors' self-development. My reasoning for this focus is that a high level of self-development in the supervisor may facilitate growth in the subordinate, whereas a low level of self-development may bring about deterioration in the subordinate. I hope that, once the intra-group conflicts amongst them are resolved, this will pave the way for them to shift their focus on motivating and empowering the staff members they lead. Another focus was to enlighten the supervisors about their inner skills and strengths as it can contribute to their empowerment towards successful intrapersonal functioning and interpersonal relationships, also to the prevention of their helplessness in the face of difficult intra-group conflicts at work (Porter, 1996, 1971; Cilliers & Koortzen, 2003).

It is evident that the behaviour of the supervisors and their subordinates, in the midst of their conflicts, seems either to be a *want response* which is emotional, or a *should response*, which is more rational (see Maccoby & Scudder, 2011). The *acting out behaviour* of the *want response* is visible in high levels of absenteeism, presenteeism and incidents where employees openly display emotions such as anger, rebelliousness and irritation. This happens either because of their increasing need to make their feelings known (in an attempt to manage their difficult circumstances) or because such displays are impulsive and automatic responses – either way, these displays worsen the situation. However, some of the supervisors in this Centre try to act according to the *should response* (which, as I have said, is based on reason). Some do not want to aggravate the

conflict, and some fear the consequences of displaying their real feelings. As I have said, in this case, I take special interest in the possible empowerment of the supervisors when I concentrate on their personal and group strengths. My focus in this excerpt is therefore on the joint animal metaphor for group strengths (Van Niekerk, 2009) and the contributions of the SDI for personal strengths (Porter, 1971, 1996, 2005).

The workshop kicks off

The two-and-a-half day workshop took place in a country lodge away from campus, partially because a change of scenery might contribute to the improvement of supervisors' morale and partially because this would prevent them from missing the sessions. This last point is important: it would have had a negative impact on the outcomes of the sessions if only a few supervisors' were present when dealing with intra-group issues. The intra-group conflicts and emotional issues were addressed during the first day of the workshop – for which I am accountable. The focus of my industrial psychology co-facilitators, who were responsible for the second day's activities, was on issues such as job demands, job resources, competencies, and risk and job profiles. Although we made this distinction, we knew that it is always impossible to deal with these issues as if they are watertight compartments. We therefore decided that all three of us would attend all the sessions and discussions. On the third day we came to closure.

However, I was continuously aware of the fact that the high intensity of this conflict had become inherent to this very dysfunctional department and I was uncertain about the possible success of our interventions. I knew that it was not in the power of any of the facilitators to change these employees' circumstances which, originally, was their expectation. I could only hope to facilitate the process on day 1 towards a change of attitude on the part of everyone involved. However, this is not what the supervisors had in mind. They wanted their work circumstances to change and they believed that it was management's responsibility to address the impact of the merger on their lives – then they will become “good quality workers again”. They were upset and angry with management because “they come to listen to what our problems are, making empty promises and then disappear.” In view of this, I also took into consideration the impact of managing intra-group conflict in an *anger recall* setting – however, I had to be careful that it is dealt with in such a manner that it does not aggravate current emotions or create new feelings of antagonism and resentment.

Initially, participants perceived my contribution as a counselling psychologist as just another source of information and as a contact person who could convince management about their competence and eagerness to serve the institution, rather than as someone who was offering them the opportunity to become psychologically empowered in order to successfully deal with changes that could not be reversed. And, indeed, it occurred to me that this would be an easy way out for me: simply take cognisance of their information need – after all, I knew that their emotions would only complicate my already complex and difficult task. My response to this “temptation” was knowing that, if I only succeeded in making them mindful of their own strengths in difficult circumstances, I could regard the exercise as a success.

The supervisors, as expected, were initially so occupied by their conflicts and emotional experiences that they continuously deviated from our schedule to complain about their issues. This, of course, was a perpetuation of a pattern that had become their last resort (because their efforts to solve their problems had not brought about the expected change). I spent ample time on their conflict *stories of the past*, but with a different focus – through their narratives they were given the opportunity to objectify stress-provoking conflict incidents in the present. I acknowledged the staff members’ internal and emotional experiences, and took the time to learn what was of importance to them on the way into conflict; by doing so, the resolution of the conflict had already begun. Eventually, it was time to move on to the *stories of the present*, even to create new stories of the present because, in the workshop, I had to foster a here and now culture. This, however, is a skill that I have to actively cultivate. Sometimes I am so tolerant of other people’s needs and feelings that I allow them to take too much of their time to freely share and talk – even though it is true that emotion should not be taken out of the conflict (Porter, 1971, 1996, 2005).

#### Worry list and happiness list

In order to find balance and to structure the need for sharing in a meaningful exercise, we created a *worry list* about their concerns and emotional issues; these concerns and issues were then grouped into themes. We flagged these themes for attention during the workshop. We then created a *happiness list* about the things they could still appreciate, notwithstanding their unhappiness. The reason for doing this was to make the participants

aware that life does not consist solely of miserable experiences. Drawing up these two lists was actually an empathetic way of laying the groundwork for what is to come. They found it difficult to draw up a happiness list, but eventually we succeeded in compiling this list. In hindsight, I think I could have used some of the REBT and CBT disputing techniques in order to focus on ways of self-disputing and testing workshop participants' irrational thinking: this might have shortened the process (Ellis, 1994).

#### Joint animal metaphor

In order to identify the strengths within the group of supervisors I made use of the animal metaphor. Pennington (2003) views this as a projective technique providing information on how people may react to change, i.e. whether they are rational adapters, pragmatic sceptics or resister/defenders. My focus, however, is on the strengths portrayed through animals of choice. Each of the supervisors chose an animal with which he/she most closely identified, and because of its most valuable characteristics. I took the animal metaphor further by engaging them creatively in the *collective construction of their unique joint animal*, which consists of selected parts of each chosen animal. A *new animal* was created and made visible by means of a drawing to which they had to give a name – this name is made up of syllables taken from the featured animals. Each participant added individual content by sharing one characteristic as an example of the strength of his chosen animal. The process continued until all the supervisors had the opportunity to be part of the construction of the *new unique animal* (Van Niekerk, 2009). This informal way of assessing group strengths that can be used for survival skills had a stimulating effect on the group members. It was amusing and enjoyable and placed them in a position of having fun – away from the 'doom and gloom' of their intra-group conflicts and unhappiness at work. The characteristics, grouped into strengths or survival skills, of the featured animals were made alive by linking it to their 'here and now' situation.

The co-constructed animal is recorded as visible evidence of how they are empowered and recuperated by joining forces – strengths to be used as functional survival skills in their difficult work environment. The empowerment process begins when the members connect with one another, thus making them feel less isolated (Haen, 2005). The group members do not respond negatively to their differences while developing their metaphor. On the contrary – it creates positive emotional energy and a new way of looking at themselves as a group. One can say that the metaphor finds the group (Haen, 2005). A

door is opened for the members of the group to hope for a better future based on their own input and joint efforts to overcome adversity, even if circumstances do not change. In hindsight, I can say that the metaphor *finds me* as well as I enjoy the process as much as the supervisors. The metaphor leads to lively discussions – their sense of humour brings about happiness and radiance. It gives them the opportunity to engage in personal and group awareness, which eventually helps them to experience towards positive emotions. For the time being at least, the lingering, negative emotions disappear. Their responses convey that this experience of positive emotions contributes to the broadening of momentary thought-action repertoires, even if only temporarily (Frederickson, 2001). For example, participants become visibly more motivated about engaging in the workshop activities with a view to improving intra-group relationships.

The shared meaning attached to the combined animal indicated which hidden strengths are available to and valued by each individual. By making these strengths accessible to the rest of the group, each group member developed an enriched identity in the face of conflict: they realised that, together, they could make a difference. “It facilitates a shift in core perceptions of the group and its conflict” (Denton, 2002/2003, p. 51) concerning their powers to act in the face of difficult conversations and relationships.

#### Individual and overdone strengths

I also focused on their individual strengths. As part of preparation for the workshop, participants completed the Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI) developed by Porter (1971, 1996 and 2005). The SDI is based on Porter’s Relationship Awareness Theory. The SDI measures a person’s strengths, overdone strengths (see below for an explanation of this term) and conflict management patterns (Maccoby & Scudder, 2011; Scudder, in SDI Coursebook, 2011; Gallon & Scudder, 2009). The SDI is a proven, useful tool for enhancing your ability to communicate more effectively and handle conflict more productively. The awareness of self and others gained from the SDI helps people to improve all types of relationships. Usually I make use of the StrengthsFinder (Rath, 2007), but in this case I switched to the SDI because it offers insights that the StrengthsFinder does not. Doing this proved to be a significant turning point in both my personal life and identity development as a counselling psychologist. I developed an enriched repertoire as more facets come to light. The SDI is linked to the positive psychology paradigm, which supports my view that one should also focus on people’s strengths and on what they do



right and well, rather than mainly on what they struggle with or do incorrectly (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

An individual sometimes struggles with certain things as a result of the impact of his or her *overdone strengths* on other people and/or his or her work-related duties. I find this concept of particular value for both the group members and myself. *Strengths*, when overdone, can be perceived as weaknesses. A *personal strength* is expressed in behaviour that enhances one's functioning and self-worth and those of others. An *overdone strength* is a behaviour intended as strength, but which is perceived negatively by oneself or others. Conflicts may be generated by overdoing one of your strengths – a strength can be overdone by frequency, duration, intensity and context, and it decreases the probability of productive relationships (Porter, 1971, 1996, 2005). The SDI not only provides a portrait of an individual's overdone strengths, but also a portrait of the group's overdone strengths. This group's portrait indicated that they are: (i) unbending, i.e. they do not give in even if the issue is a minor one; (ii) nit-picking, i.e. too analytical; and (iii) stubborn, i.e. too persevering. One of my own overdone strengths is that I am sometimes too analytical in the sense that I occasionally get lost in tiny details, at times to the extent of being nit-picking. It happens, for example, in my writing – my train of thought takes me on interesting routes that actually turn out to be detours. Although I consciously attempted to overcome this *weakness* while writing this thesis, I still had to make a conscious endeavour to move away from this *overdone strength*. This alerts me to the fact that a person cannot be expected to drastically change his or her ways within a short period of time. It also reveals my hope that using the SDI will help people to almost effortlessly change their behaviour to be an irrational hope. All of us have to practise our new ways of doing. Nevertheless, at the time my hope was that I would succeed in helping these supervisors to move away from a position of helplessness in the face of inordinate demands to a situation where they had internalised and 'rolled out' their adaptive strengths and coping skills (Strümpfer, 2004, 2006a).

I recognise in the supervisors' behaviour a few premises of Porter's theory (1971, 1996, 2005). They are action-driven by their motivation to achieve self-worth (premise 1). They experience themselves as worthless in the eyes of management, and that all their intentions and efforts to improve are regarded as "too little too late and not valued". Management's perception of their doings is, among other things, based on their lack of

progress regarding work-related tasks and the unremitting relationship and task conflicts that has come to characterise this department. They base their self-perception on their internal motivation to give their best and the belief that they are capable of doing so. However, the continuous conflict has caused their motivation to be the best to change (premise 2) and this motivation has been replaced by self-doubt and anger that has become visible in their behaviour (e.g. absenteeism, high rate of sick leave, withdrawal, irritation with others, seeking for help and the formation of *gossiping groups*. 'We tried so hard – in vain.')

There is an atmosphere of sadness when they grasp the fact that, underneath all their frustration, conflict and anger with each other and management is a heartfelt pain about the cul-de-sac in which they find themselves. Some of them weep quietly, while others remain silent. As individuals, each one consciously gets in touch with his or her feelings whilst simultaneously realising that most of these feelings are experienced by the others in the group as well. Insight into their personal emotions leads to an awareness of the other supervisors' feelings, which in itself paves the way to compassion and empathy. Finally, it becomes possible for these participants to get in touch with each other on another level.

The follow-up meeting with the supervisors about three months later confirms my hope that the workshop has been useful, even if their circumstances have not changed to the extent they had hoped for. (Note that, after a week, people's enthusiasm and memories will still be observable. After three months, however, one can more accurately detect whether the workshop has contributed to employees' personal growth and become part of their integrated knowledge.) During this follow-up meeting, I sensed that there had been a turnaround and that most of them were busy climbing the mountain and that their healing processes had started from within. The employees concerned had moved away from anger and a rejection of the changes towards accepting the inevitable. At the same time, they report that their intra-group conflicts has lessened to such an extent that they, as the supervisors, can now present a united front. Contributing to this vastly improved situation were workplace changes resulting from the input of the two industrial psychologists and, eventually, from management's restructuring exercise.

#### **Group 4: Lengthy involvement with a group impaired by internal conflicts**

My involvement with Department X starts when Botsile, the portfolio manager, requests me to intervene in the conflict between Mara and Louise. I learn that the conflicts between these two women have interfered with their daily work performance, causing a decrease in productivity levels, and have also affected the department's morale. Initially, the departmental management committee rejected my involvement. However, ultimately the interpersonal and intra-group conflicts in this department turned out to be so painful and disruptive that my services were reluctantly accepted. I am apprehensive. What will happen if my interventions prove to be unsuccessful? I decide to 'go with the flow' while being mindful of what happens.

I start the intra-group conflict management process by conducting individual interviews with Botsile, the portfolio manager, Hannes, the Head of Department, the employees in conflict, Mara and Louise, and eventually with all the other 14 staff members. The reason for this is because, as we proceed, I become mindfully aware of the poisonous departmental atmosphere, the fact that the conflict between Mara and Louise has escalated to involve the other employees also, and the fact that staff members do not have the freedom of mind to openly share their honest thoughts and feelings in front of their colleagues. Since the focus in this thesis is on my choice of extractions or excerpts from cases and on intra-group conflict and interventions, I will not discuss the detail of my individual and joint counselling sessions with Mara and Louise, apart from saying that both accuse each other of being the culprit. They refuse to take responsibility for their own actions and feelings, and make it clear that the other party has to change her ways before peace and trust can be restored. Both are, figuratively speaking, blindfolded and lack the ability to ascertain what the other side of the story is, not even when I confront them with the need to do this. They shrug off this suggestion in an effort to convince me that *they* are 'correct in my way of doing', while using perception-based arguments against one another. Irrational beliefs here are the demand that *someone else must change*. There is also frustration intolerance, because neither woman can stand the other woman's behaviour, and there is also a negative rating of the other one "her ways of doing are dreadful" and therefore the other woman is an intolerable person.

My interviews with the other staff members cause some interesting information to surface. Unfortunately, this information only complicates the situation. There are two groupings, namely *old staff* (appointed many years ago, with two sub-groupings) versus *new staff* (recently appointed). However, both groups are united in their repugnance for the interpersonal conflicts between Mara and Louise. For example, I am told that the work atmosphere is poisoned because Mara and Louise both try to expropriate staff meetings to their own advantage, while trying to convince the other staff members to 'take sides'. Their power struggle, back stabbing and gossiping, blaming games are mind-boggling, as is their eagerness to discuss their issues with employees in other departments. The latter is condemned by most of the staff as being unprofessional and creating a negative impression of Department X. All the staff members are concerned that the two women's conflict will contaminate all of them. Initially there were two camps – one for Mara and one for Louise – but eventually everybody turned against these two staff members, some even refusing to work with them on the same modules. Louise and Mara are extremely aware of people moving in and out the other woman's office. When Ms A, for example, goes into either women's office, the other woman comes in to hear what they are talking about, or goes afterwards to Ms A's office, nosily trying to find out what was discussed. The dysfunctional behaviour of Mara and Louise are endangering the sound functioning of Department X and, to make matters worse, this Department is already vulnerable (for various reasons unrelated to this account).

The old staff members are divided into two groups concerning other issues such as the management style of Hannes, the Head of Department. The *inner group* is not opposed to his alleged favouritism and occasional empire building, whilst the *outer group* is strongly opposed to his rigid ideas and inability to move along with academic changes in their field of study. The new staff grouping is not impressed with the way he has dealt with the conflict between Mara and Louise, as well as with his *closed door policy*. If they want to discuss something with him, he refers them to their direct line managers who then have to inform him accordingly. They are also upset by his attitude of managerialism because he increasingly wants to control how and when work has to be performed (Riordan, 2007). This managerial value is in direct contradiction to their expressed need for autonomy, independence and individual expression.

Recognising the need of all the employees to be listened to, I know that I have to create a space where their voices can be heard by each other also and not only by me. This means that I have to bring them together in such a way that they will be prepared to share their feelings and thoughts about the toxic situation, without realigning them into their separate, informal groupings or into head-on collisions with one another, Mara, Louise and Hannes. In this situation, it is necessary to create relationships of co-participation towards making peace and healing. Nor can I expose them to one another by asking them to share in detail the stories of their personal pasts, but I can create the opportunity for them to share their stories of the past (the past scenario) about the work conflicts, and their stories of the present (the current scenario), with the focus on intra-group conflict and its impact on their relationships and work performance. This is a somewhat guided and structured way of sharing stories which I regard as the safer way to go about things, without having to prohibit these employees from sharing what they want to share. On the other hand, I cannot allow unrestrained anger and criticism. I hope that they will share their unheard of feelings and thoughts about the situation with one another in a safe environment. This can become a way of making sense of their world of work and of one another (Pauw, 2004a, 2004b). The difficult part is to smooth the process of their criticism against their Head of Department so that his authority is not challenged in such a way that he will be disempowered or, alternatively, so that he can retaliate. The culture in our university is to not expose line managers to their subordinates' criticism in the presence of the subordinates. In other words, the culture is to protect the authority of line managers even if this means that the unhappy employees' problems are not fully addressed. In hindsight, I now realise that I actually entered a situation characterised by the expression 'fools rush in where angels fear to tread'. Luckily, the Head of Department had already communicated to me that he was aware of some of his staff members' issues, although he disagreed with their views. In preparation for the sessions I made him aware of possible challenges. He was newly appointed in this senior position and at the time I was of the opinion that his youth, inexperience and emotional uncertainties contributed to his management style. He was, in fact, a candidate for coaching and mentoring.

However, I was excited about what happened during the group sessions. I began with a brief PowerPoint presentation about my observations of the group's strengths, and I gave them positive feedback about these strengths: they were successful, creative and intelligent people who were leaders in own right, individualistic, strong-headed and

opinionated, and prepared to openly express themselves. I then focused on the areas of conflict, as well as on themes and patterns identified during the individual sessions, including both positive and negative feedback about the contentious staff members (Mara and Louise). This risky undertaking was done deliberately because I regarded it as an icebreaker. Staff members could safely respond to what I placed on the table. The other areas of conflict concerning the Department as a whole were management style, conflicting perceptions about change and new developments versus the traditional ways of doing things, people building empires for themselves at the cost of other activities, and incompatible personalities.

The employees shared their issues concerning the interpersonal conflicts between Mara and Louise and made it clear that they refused to be exposed to their personal issues. They also made it clear that the two women have no respect for the other staff members, that they rob other staff members of the opportunity to freely associate with each other, and that they all experience Mara and Louise's conflicts as undignified and humiliating. I did not stop them sharing this with the group in the presence of Mara and Louise because I sensed that this *reality shock* was necessary for both women to become consciously and acutely aware of the severe impact of their conflict on their colleagues. I carefully observed them and their non-verbal communication by means of their facial expressions (astonishment – Mara) and disbelief (Louise). They were speechless. However, I also had to protect Mara and Louise – it was not right to expose them to extreme criticism. The follow-up individual sessions with them were therefore debriefing sessions. My risky undertaking ended in a positive way because there were notable changes in the behaviour of both Mara and Louise.

The group discussion turned to the other issues which have surfaced in the individual interviews. The staff members' concerns about the consequences of the Head of Department's management style were discussed in an adult way (Jude, 2006) – they did not attack him, but only share their needs accordingly. However, the *inner group*, who may have benefited by his *empire building*, defended some of his actions. As a result of his acceptance of what had been said, they did not take the matter further. The staff members were amazingly open and receptive while sharing their conflict stories.

I took the process further by moving away from the conflicts towards the group members' conscious appraisal of their individual and, eventually, collective strengths, strengths that could be utilised to deal with future challenges. The process was then concluded by suggesting how their unique combination of strengths could fit into their work environment and the working sub-teams each employee might have been a part of.

In an informal way I accessed *each person's strengths* via image and metaphor. Images not only unlock the doors of our conceptual systems, but also provide us with alternative methods of experience and new realities (Denton, 2002/2003). It takes courage to become involved in imagery exercises and, in view of my knowledge of our university's culture, I am aware that the cognitively orientated contingent of staff may show resistance when I ask them to participate in these exercises. I agree, however, with Shapiro (2010) that, when people become aware of their own intrapersonal processes, there is an increase in their connection to unconscious processes with, as a result, alternative expectations and projected outcomes. I therefore requested the group members to individually visualise a *famous person* he/she admired and to indicate what specific characteristics of this person he/she admired. A similar process was followed with a *favourite animal and plant*. Each group member also had to share a *success story*, indicating the reasons for achieving these successes. In the feedback session, these strengths were clustered together to eventually become a *pool of group strengths*. This exercise made them aware of their individual strengths and empowered them as a group with skills and strengths to work with their problems and to deal with their issues as a group, to restore their memories about the good times, and to thus move away from their amnesia of these good times.

It was an "aha moment" when the group members grasped the meaning of this exercise and spontaneously clapped their hands. I was energised and happy; at last we had come to closure after all the months of hard work. Their emotional healing processes were initiated, and they could continue on their own. By telling their individual success stories they actually provided building blocks for themselves upon which their stories of the future can be built. When we started this exercise, they were problem-saturated and yet ready to use this unique outcome – which was an unexpected turn for the better. In fact, the ending was almost miraculous - the potential for transformation and change were found to be available within themselves (Müller, 2000).

The group was remarkably energised by this and there was hope for the future. In retrospect, I think that this relatively straightforward exercise is sufficient to reach the goals of identifying individual and group strengths – sometimes even more effective than the more complicated SDI. For a start, it had an immediate impact on the group. The time together in the group sessions helped colleagues to move from their individual stories towards joint storymaking and to make sense of who they are together and the impact of their actions on one another.

I believe that one of my strengths, perseverance, helps me through my occasional moments of distress. Realising this was a milestone in my conflict management journey. Autoethnographically speaking, I entered into participants' world of work by engaging actively with them while they shared their stories. This eventually contributed to my written personal narrative, and enabled me to put my experiences into words (the thesis you are reading now). I believe that the success of the group sessions can be ascribed to many factors, such as the safe atmosphere in which the sessions took place, the fact that the individual sessions prepared them for the group sessions, and my facilitation skills – I say this without being bigheaded and over-confident. The relative successful outcome of this group reflected my growth as a counselling psychologist. In hindsight, I am happy and proud that I linked the way that I have dealt with the group sessions to literature about facilitator competencies (McFadzean, 2002). Personally, I now know that I am able to deal with complex people in difficult intra-group circumstances.

For example: In hindsight, I would like to reflect on how my processes contributed to my growth as a counseling psychologist which eventually paved the way for me to state that I am capable to deal with complex human conflict situations:

- Owing to the *pre-session planning* I was able to understand their problems, and achieve some contracting with the line manager and employees. In this session we also discussed the “solutions” they had previously tried and those that had failed. All of us are committed to the conditions that govern our working relationship, the objectives of the individual and group sessions, issues of confidentiality and the ground rules. We had a one-hour pre-group session in which I facilitate the agreed upon format for the sessions to come. I made them aware of the fact that all of them may be subject to hearing criticism. In answering this question, a general theme



that the Head of Department and most of the employees display is a willingness to put themselves at risk even if it hurts. At the time, I was caught by surprise, because this is an atypical way of participating in conflict management groups. In retrospect I should have asked them “why?”. It might have been that they were prepared to take the risk “just so that we can move on”. Perhaps they regarded our sessions as the only opportunity for them to voice their issues with one another. However, two employees, Joe and Martin, are not happy about this way of doing things: they expect to come *under attack* as well. Martin accuses Joe of building his own empire concerning new developments in their field of expertise, while Joe accuses Martin of being stuck in the traditional ways of doing. While writing down the details of all these dynamics, the phrase “fools rush in where angels fear to tread” comes to my mind again. Why am I so ready and willing to deal with these difficult group sessions? Maybe the stories of my past could provide the answers.

- In the *actual joint sessions* (of which there was one morning session, one whole day session and, after a few weeks, a brief follow-up session) my role was to ensure that the group’s behaviour and processes are as effective as possible. McFadzean (2002) says that the facilitator’s interventions will depend on the level of the group’s development. This group functioned on levels four and five. Fourth-level groups are attentive to their tasks, roles and responsibilities, and mindfully aware of their group dynamics and relationships, even in the presence of negative dynamics. My interventions at this level include not only making the group aware of the negatives in their midst, but also facilitating the opportunity for them to openly address these issues. Fifth-level groups are attentive to each other’s thoughts, feelings and emotions, although the focus at the start of our sessions was on the negatives. They were initially hesitant to talk about contentious issues openly and honestly but, eventually, they did exactly that. I observed and managed any discomfort or dissatisfaction and provided a safe environment for conflict to surface. I encouraged positive regard for the experience and perception of all members, even if there are differences of opinion. The most challenging task was to manage the relationships between the competing factions (McFadzean, 2002).

## 6.5 EMERGING THEMES FROM THE EXTRACTIONS OF INTRA-GROUP CONFLICT STORIES AND MY IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AS A COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGIST

In the section below I will briefly discuss some general issues pertaining to dealing with intra-group conflict management. I will also give some attention to the development of my own identity.

### **A few alarming indicators of intra-group conflicts**

Negative intra-psychological content has a serious impact on intra-group relationships, and certainly contributes to the phenomena of dysfunctional groups or departments. It becomes visible in, among other things, the following: decline in work performance; power and control struggles; negative interactions and harmful behaviours; irretrievable breakdown of relationships and trust; high levels of stress, tension, anger, anxiety and depression; frustration intolerance; and time-consuming gossiping.

### **Line managers**

A number of *line managers* avoid their line function of engaging in relationship conflict management and expect me to perform this function on their behalf. Some of the reasons for this are as follows: the line manager himself (or herself) contributes to the conflicts and does not want to *face the conflict management music*; the line manager is wary of the conflict that may follow should he or she address the situation; the line manager has a sense of incompetency or a lack of know-how; or, sometimes, he or she simply does not want to do this function. However, the fact remains that, if the line manager is to develop his or her skills, exposure to conflict management is necessary. That said, in situations characterised by serious conflict, it is often necessary to contact an external service provider, that is, someone who is not part of the conflict system within the department.

### **My role**

To a certain extent, my role can be regarded as analogous to those of external consultants whose focal point is on the *human side* of intra-group conflicts. I have the ethical obligation of being objective (as far possible) while exploring, among other things, the set of connections between the different groupings and their roles in the intra-group conflicts, and the way relationships are structured. I identify themes and patterns, give feedback

accordingly, and facilitate group sessions. Since the beginning of my conflict management journey, I have taken care not to be involved in *internal audits* regarding, for example, processes, structures, financial matters, formal procedures and subject matters. As a counselling psychologist, I do not have the knowledge and skills to do any of this. Instead, I make referrals to relevant role-players if necessary. Initially, I used to clarify my role as the process unfolded because I, too, was on a learning curve. Currently, part of my structuring beforehand (i.e. before any counselling session) is to explain what can be expected from me as a facilitator. This avoids employees trying to pull me in as their 'speaking-tube' in the sense that I am expected to take sides. Other unrealistic expectations that I avoid are to intervene in institutional processes such as selection committees, disciplinary hearings, change of line management functions, and grievance procedures.

### **Preparation**

When I first started my work as a counselling psychologist specialising in conflict management, I used to make my preparations long before the group sessions because there is always a lot of work to be done while one is in the process of individualising the group. By doing this, I gradually created and established my repertoire of interventions. This repertoire now ranges from taking a relatively simplistic approach to using more sophisticated interventions and group processes. There are many potential interventions and I give a great deal of thought to choosing which one when I am in the process of considering the most suitable options for a specific group. In addition to this, there are sometimes pre-group activities such as completing questionnaires, conducting focus groups and doing individual interviews.

Although I still consider preparation as important, I am aware of the fact that there is no *recipe that fits all* and that it is always necessary to adopt a flexible approach during the sessions. Nowadays, I can get involved in conflict management at short notice because, over the years, I have matured in terms of knowledge, wisdom and skills. In fact, I enjoy unplanned and spontaneous group sessions because they allow me to think on my feet. These impromptu interventions can usually be regarded as crisis management and the nodal point for follow-up sessions. Our university's culture, on the other hand, does not always allow impromptu sessions. Staff members are busy and some regard themselves

as knowledgeable enough, or tend to be cautious about the purpose of the group sessions and they tend to insist on clarity before committing themselves to such sessions.

### **Purpose of workshops/ group facilitation**

I have moved away from telling employees what to do because advice-giving can explode in one's face. Instead, I prefer to empower the line manager and employee from within – within the employee himself or herself as a person, including individual strengths and weaknesses. For some employees, it is often a strange idea to focus on one's intra-psychological content (which, as I have shown, impacts on interpersonal and intra-group relationships), especially in the work environment which, in our university, is very much cognitively orientated. I explain to them that the solution to conflicts and the mastery of skills and techniques can better be utilised if both are grounded on self-knowledge.

### **Typical problems**

These are a *few general problems* that featured in the groups I dealt with: *struggles over control* are common during a time of change and transformation. Warning signs are, amongst others, unhealthy competition, jealousies and hidden agendas. Ineffective and bad *communication* is a quick way for a group to be unproductive and ineffective. Systems of negative interactions are illustrative of *harmful behaviours and psychological processes* occurring from within. *Incompatibility* and *lack of enabling structures* both contribute to psychological distress.

### **Group characteristics concerning emotions and affective moods**

Severe uncertainties and conflicts in the workplace diminish people's happiness, satisfaction and their enthusiasm in performing their daily tasks at work. Employees do not want these unhappy circumstances – understandably so - and many of their actions are based on their efforts to get away from these circumstances. However, and to reiterate, I am in agreement with Brand and Yancey (1993), who say that pain (physical and psychological) is actually a gift, albeit a gift that nobody wants. Pain is a warning signal that something is wrong and which forces one to act by, for example, consulting with a medical doctor, psychiatrist or even a co-employee, line manager, workplace counsellor, friend or religious minister as a starting point towards healing. Employees should not, however, expect to recover from hardship and difficulty within a short period of time. They

do have, however, individual control and personal choice at hand, and these are powerful tools to bring to closure (Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007).

The affective tones of the group improve as soon as they share their emotions and moods about their conflicts in the safe environment of counselling group sessions, where effective sharing is mediated. My experience is that group sessions create the possibility of actively enhancing a positive mood, especially when the group members realise that there is a way out of the circumstances they were stranded in, and where they can engage in co-ordinated conflict management efforts. The implication is that one person's mood – regardless whether it is positive or negative, can induce a similar mood in another via conscious and non-conscious contagion. Mood changes may then become synchronised over time. Prins (2011b, p.39) is of the opinion that positive affect is eventually more transmittable. Positive thoughts contribute to positive emotions. I want to offer the group members the opportunity for personal and group awareness, which eventually contribute to progression towards positive emotions - for the time being lingering, negative emotions are not prominent. Many of the responses of employees I am working with conveyed that this experience of positive emotions contributed to the broadening of momentary thought-action repertoires even if only temporarily (Frederickson, 2001). They become, for example, visibly more motivated to engage in the conflict management activities, activities that are directed to improving relationships.

### **Shared affect in groups**

The consequences of shared affect include mood contagion, because people's moods are affected by their co-employees. Employees tend to feel happy when others are happy and angry when others are angry. My experience is that positive emotions 'roll over' on to others, resulting in the enhancement of group affect.

## **6.6 ANALYSING THE SUCCESS OF GROUP INTERVENTIONS**

My follow-up procedures for analysing the success of the group interventions were, in most cases, focused on the person(s) who took the initiative in seeking help, as well as the person(s) who found themselves on the *other side*. I inquire about *the before and after* state of affairs. My reasoning behind this is that if these employees were satisfied with the situation after the group intervention(s), I could consider it either as a job well done or that

the employees' resilience and skills had surfaced to a satisfactory level and that this would enable them to face conflict in future. If employees are not satisfied, however, I do some introspection. Sometimes, other HR procedures have come into play (e.g. grievance or disciplinary hearings). It has also happened, of course that, as time goes by, the problems that I was called upon to help solve gradually faded away. In these cases, I got the impression that the employees had gradually come to peace with a situation that they could not change. In other words, the employees 'simply' had to change their attitudes because this was the only variable they could control (Frankl, 1964).

## **6.7 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I have explored intra-group conflict management from the perspective of counselling psychology in different settings within a university. This chapter has shown that management is aware of the disruptive consequences of intra-group conflicts and therefore values healthy intra-group functioning. In fact, management are prepared to make services available to deal with unsettling conflicts at a psychological level and in interpersonal relationships. This chapter has also made it clear that it is necessary to manage conflicts within groups and that it requires deliberate efforts and intervention strategies to overcome identified obstacles and to work towards healing. The development and maintenance of functional intra-group relations is mainly the responsibility of the employees and line managers. However, there are interdependencies with management's sound governance of the university which need to be addressed at other levels and in other forums.

Four groups were discussed – as we saw, each of them had its own approach, although the aim of all groups was to resolve an intra-group conflict.

In Group 1, storytelling made a difference in their world of change and conflict. Stories create messages and have the potential to help draw out perceptions around the meaning(s) of the employees' diverse stories. In Group 1, we used storytelling to facilitate discussions about the barriers contributing to their dysfunctional intra-group conflicts. The unpacking of their stories also offered different perspectives about their stories of the past, present and future. Eventually the stories were used to create hooks for the employees to engage with efforts to resolve their conflicts and to prevent future conflicts. The aim in

Group 1 was for all group members to consider the possibility of regeneration of the here and now, but also to think about how they could progress from storytelling to storymaking. The group members turned their past and present experiences and expectations for the future into narratives, and indicated that this process enabled them to achieve mastery and to take control of the meanings attached to their stories. I therefore believe that the use of past, present and future narratives in conflict management combined with change facilitation has several advantages: the use of narratives allows for individual voices to be heard and to increase the sense of participation in creating a new future. The stories create messages and reflection about the meanings attached to present stories about change and conflict. The change and conflict facilitation processes described in this chapter were based on the notion that change occurs as a result of raised awareness. The processes were designed to serve two purposes. The first was to bring about an awareness of the link between change and conflict in the hope that there would be change at a primary level through storytelling. The second was to build skills and knowledge at a secondary level through the content of the workshop to equip people so that they could deal with future change and conflict events. The focus of this research is on the primary process delivered through a storytelling workshop, consisting of the three sub-stories of the past, present and future.

In Group 2, the employees struggled with an impasse in their relationships, an impasse caused by a number of reasons. They had sought support from each other and from their Head of Department, but without success. In this case, the intra-group session described in this chapter was the last resort and moved from communication about task conflict towards relationship conflict, eventually becoming the live anger situation. What happened in Group 2 showed me that, in the live anger situation, there is a place for the cognitive-emotive approach in conflict management.

Group 3 illustrated the value of using the metaphor and strengths deployment approach in the defusing of conflict and tension. I described how the symbolic and metaphorical image of the combined animal was an effort towards modification of perceptions via imagery, which is a powerful technique. The visible image of the joint animal and discussions therefore added another dimension to their functioning as a team. I also indicated how the metaphor can be a medium through which the message is conveyed that Group 3 was a team consisting of individuals who had strengths at their disposal, and that these

combined strengths can be used to deal constructively with intra-group conflicts. The message was conveyed that the co-construction of their future concerning conflict management would not eliminate their differences, but would help them to stop being despondent and helpless and to become, instead, positive and willing to engage in self-reliant behaviour. Hopefully, my intervention enhanced their ability to be resilient in the face of inordinate demands.

In Group 4, I described the process of a lengthy involvement with a group. This process started with intrapersonal conflict management, followed by interpersonal conflict management and eventually intra-group conflict management. It was a rewarding task to deal with employees' emotions, anxieties and fears, as it enabled them to give voice to their distress, experience and inner reality. Bantjes (2011, p. 99) says that these issues are central to the work of a counselling psychologist.

The intra-group interventions described in this chapter helped to achieve a number of objectives:

- (i) Each group member was allowed and encouraged to share his or her views and concerns about the change brought about by the merger, the subsequent intra-group conflicts and the impact on him or her.
- (ii) They could share their dismay about management's expectations that they either had to *adapt or die*, the implication being that they could resign if they were not satisfied with the changes brought about by transformation.
- (iii) They were guided to become aware of the fact that their (un)spoken concerns and experiences were, in many ways, a mirror or reflection of their co-employees' issues, given that there were many shared experiences (without ignoring the uniqueness of each employee).
- (iv) The message was conveyed that each person had to take responsibility for his or her own thoughts, feelings and actions.
- (v) They could actually be a support system for one another, even while there were still emotionally loaded issues at stake.

This chapter has made it clear that diverse psychological knowledge and psychotherapeutic interventions can be applied to a group setting within a university where a group's main task is to deliver professional, academic and administrative services to staff



and students. As I have shown, my interventions were grounded in counselling psychology which I deliberately linked with my work environment. My interventions therefore reflect interconnectedness with our institutional set-up whilst also being mindful of the influence of our social, academic and cultural milieu. On the basis of my discussion of the different groups it can safely be said that the employees accepted the psychological approach and counselling knowledge as applied to intra-group conflict management. When they sought my intervention, all these groups were caught up in uncomfortable situations from which they wanted to remove themselves. It is, however, also clear that they did not want their groups to be labelled as 'psychotherapeutic groups' owing to possible perceptions that the group was suffering from some sort of psychopathology that required counselling and psychotherapy. The main focus had to be on their intra-group conflicts and any psychological information had to be linked to the solution-finding process. This "balancing act" enabled me to be an independent free-thinker. In other words, I was not bound by the inflexibility of the traditional tasks of a counselling psychologist. Instead, I could involve myself in a voyage of discovery and, in the process, create new ways of being and doing.

The discussion of these intra-group conflict management approaches suggests that an array of services can be offered by a counselling psychologist in this context. It is also clear that a single counselling psychologist cannot address the need for intra-group conflict management from this perspective and that more resources should be allocated to this undertaking. However, management is aware of the need for intra-group conflict management and makes resources available, for example, by contracting external service providers to perform this function.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

#### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

In this concluding chapter I will reflect on the purpose of my work, and I will also provide a synopsis of the core elements of my conclusions and reflections. Needless to say, I do not believe that I have said the final word on this subject, I will keep in mind the context and ethos of ethnographic and autoethnographic research within which my study developed. In retrospect I have no doubt that ethnography and autoethnography, as the methodologies in this study, have been an appropriate choice. This stance has enabled me to explore my journey (over 14 years) of becoming a counselling psychologist specialising in intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management within a university setting. I have been not only an observer of the unfolding complexities over an extended period of time, but also a participant. It was therefore possible for me to understand and to have empathy, to share and to care, to experience and to feel, and to be mindful of others, myself and our university.

The intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflicts portrayed in this study should not create the impression that the institution in which I work is conflict-ridden and unhappy. This would not be true. I believe, however, that intrapersonal and interpersonal differences inevitably lead to interpersonal and intra-group conflicts, although the intensity of these conflicts varies greatly. It is therefore inevitable that there will occasionally be high levels of physiological, psychological and behavioural hardship in any organisation and that conflict will occur between some of the people who work for this organisation (Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Barsky & Wood, 2005; Van der Merwe, 2004). No organisation enjoys interpersonal relationships that are entirely free of conflict. In short, conflict is a normal phenomenon in workplace relationships and, indeed, is part of what may be described as 'the human condition'. Such conflict should, however, not hamper effective functioning in the workplace. The impact of conflicts on productivity and levels of employee satisfaction, happiness and sense of fulfillment is often underestimated, especially during times of major change and transformation. Looking back, I think it is fair to say that management and middle management were so involved in the strategic planning and operational

implementation of change that human conflict was simply not high on their priority lists. It was only after the last phases of transformation that the reality of human conflict in the institution became sufficiently urgent to warrant their attention.

The many good and positive things in the institution remain mostly unmentioned in this study, although I should say that there were many encouraging incidents in my journey of dealing with conflicts. I found that, even in the midst of unpleasant incidents and confrontations, the magnanimity of human nature was always at hand to facilitate the process of finding a solution. I should also say that concerned and caring co-workers sometimes went out of their way to support the aggrieved employee. I would also like to mention the fact that the support I received from the different stakeholders was always greatly appreciated. In this study a helping relationship was formed between me and the research participants. Some of them have managerial authorities and responsibilities in the institution, whilst others are subordinates.

## **7.2 TIME FRAMES AND BACKGROUND**

Initially, I began this research in an informal way. At that stage I was unaware that my conflict management task as a counselling psychologist situated within the Human Resources environment of a university might eventually form the basis of this study. The time frame stretches from more or less 1998 to 2012. Many of these 14 years are characterised by change, transition and transformation at many levels, and also by the unhappiness and emotional pain that will always be a phenomenon in the workplace. Initially, of course, the transformation of the university was linked with political changes in the South African landscape. Eventually the merger between universities, technikons and other tertiary institutions became the distinguishing mark of our university as well.

In retrospect, and as I reflect on what I have written, it remains clear to me that the contributions and psychological knowledge of a counselling psychologist operating in the Human Resources environment within a university are extremely valuable. The work done by a counselling psychologist not only benefits employees and line managers, but also the members of the multi-disciplinary team that focuses on the troubled employee, such as industrial psychologists, EAP specialists, HR practitioners, Occupational Health and Safety practitioners, Emergency Response Practitioners and Performance Management

Specialists. Counselling psychology is subject to a Code of Ethics administered by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and the Professional Board of Psychology. Our professional conduct, ethics, values, knowledge and adherence to confidentiality are indispensable and our authenticity is communicated to other role-players.

### **7.3 MANAGEMENT AND HUMAN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

In retrospect, I sometimes think I have a love-hate relationship with management. On the one hand, I expect members of management to have the same concern that I have about employees in distress. On the other hand, I know that crisis management is an essential part of their daily task, simply because they have to deal with enormous strategic, managerial and organisational responsibilities and accountabilities. As I have become more consciously aware of the content of these thoughts and feelings, my pendulum between “love and hate” becomes something that I address consciously by means of reflection and by exchanging views with people I trust. Some employees occasionally put into words their empathy for my difficult, but nevertheless enjoyable task, while only a few members of management have ever expressed similar sentiments. On the other hand, when I am requested to submit a report (within the parameters of confidentiality) about human conflict situations, management’s acceptance of my analytical and psychodynamic interpretation clearly indicate their willingness to take these issues into account. My intention, in any case, is to deal with the human conflict problems and not to adopt a confrontational stance with management and other role-players. I should also say that, at present, management takes the task of recognising employees’ needs and feelings at an emotional/psychological level seriously, and this concern has become visible in the university’s various ‘road shows’ and staff assemblies. In addition, I do realise that the running of a university does not centre on employees’ emotions. Employees have to take responsibility for their own wellness, and this includes ensuring that they can manage conflict effectively.

## **7.4 RESEARCH SETTING**

This study was conducted in a university setting and involved employees and line managers. The purpose of this study is to describe the development of my growth as a counselling psychologist specialising in intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management according to the research methodology of ethnography and autoethnography.

Given that the sample of participants is small and not representative of other universities, this study can only be used as a guideline by other counselling psychologists performing the same function (human conflict management). In short, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to a larger population.

## **7.5 BASIC PSYCHODYNAMIC PERSPECTIVES AS THE SPRINGBOARD TOWARDS ADOPTING OTHER THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES**

In the context of this study my focus on psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic theory may come as a surprise, even to me. The historical image of psychoanalysis consists of a psychologist sitting next to a patient who is lying on a couch, engaged in a lengthy process of psychotherapy, over a period of many years. I do not fully agree with the historical context of psychoanalysis apart from Freud's notion that a part of our minds is beyond our awareness (i.e. the unconscious). I agree with some of the content of the socially-oriented psychoanalytical theories of Sullivan and Horney because, in some respects, these theories are relevant to my understanding of interpersonal conflict. I shall refer to this issue in more detail later on, under the heading 'Interpersonal conflicts'.

I admit that I take from psychoanalytic theory those things that I subjectively consider to be relevant to employees who are involved in conflict. Contemporary psychoanalytic thinking includes valuable ideas and concepts that have eventually become an integral part of my thought processes, and upon which some of my conflict management interventions are based. With hindsight, these ideas and concepts have also influenced my identity as a counselling psychologist. I should also say that, occasionally, I prefer psychoanalytic reasoning. Some of the ideas and concepts that I find particularly valuable are the following (Albertyn & Koortzen, 2008):

*Unconscious mental processes generate behaviour*, for example, in the case of Rory (discussed in chapter 4). In Rory's case, it was not that he lacked knowledge about effective conflict management, but something else. It is this *something else* that triggers my psychoanalytic endeavours to understand what is happening.

*Some unconscious mental activity is having an impact on emotion and emotional processes*, for example, in the case of Abel's intrapersonal conflicts (also discussed in chapter 4).

*Patterns of early attachment behaviours might come to the fore in adulthood*, and therefore also in a person's way of dealing with conflicts. The example here is Margo, discussed in chapter 5.

*Individuals differ in the extent to which they are able to regulate their feelings in socially acceptable ways*, for example, in the case of Barry, as discussed in chapter 5. Barry shouts and screams at his fellow employees, and sometimes storms out of meetings.

Human existence and experience include both the pleasurable and the deeply painful, whether it is in one's personal life or work life. The painful parts of life lead to emotional experiences, feelings and memories which we sometimes find extremely difficult to tolerate. Psychoanalytic thinking offers – for me – explanations of these unwanted parts of our existence. When reflecting on my own interest in psychoanalytical approaches, it illustrates my growing efforts to make sense of behaviour according to what happens inside the employees and me at emotional level – in this study related to human conflicts. Our strong emotional responses to conflicts influence our (un)conscious actions and reactions and vice versa. Sometimes one does and says things that one cannot explain at either a rational or conscious level. An example here was one employee who continuously acted aggressively towards her Head of Department; understandably, this Head of Department eventually considered taking disciplinary action against the staff member for insubordination and this, in turn, infuriated her. Why does the employee act this way? Was it because the Head of Department unconsciously reminds her of her militant and bossy father? Although, in psychology, this sort of observation may be almost trite, the fact remains that I have come across a number of similar situations in the workplace. For these employees it is, however, new knowledge that contributes to new ways of thinking, feeling and doing.

Narrative psychology offers a qualitative approach to research and I regard it as one of the methods that can be used to generate thoughtful understanding of interpersonal conflict while, at the same time, keeping in mind the psychodynamic approach. However, I have to remember that narrative theory stipulates that I, as the therapist, should not focus on the past as evidence for the validation of my own interpretations and “diagnoses” of the employee(s). In the interpretation process I therefore take care to act in line with the criterion for a “good” interpretation by both me and the employee(s), namely, “whether it will produce new meanings, clarify current puzzles, or demonstrate new relationships as yet unknown” (Cramer, 1996, p. 34). These new meanings will then serve the process of verification about what lies ahead, that is, the understanding and prediction of the story of the future.

## **7.6 ROLE OF PSYCHOMETRIC TESTING AND BRIEF PSYCHOTHERAPIES**

Psychometric testing has a role to play in intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management interventions. My choice of psychometric tests correlates with my psychodynamic point of departure. My main concern about the testing processes is that a great deal of effort is usually made to put the people through psychometric tests and obtain feedback on the results. Here I agree with Caplan (2003), who says that he seldom sees any changes in behaviour among senior management who go through psychometric processes, despite the fact that certain goals have been set. My view is that the desired behaviour change might have been blocked by preconscious issues that could have been successfully addressed by brief psychotherapy and depth psychology interventions. I have therefore moved away from a mainly psychometric process towards one that mainly explores contributions from brief psychotherapy and sometimes psychometric testing as well – should the need arise.

In some instances, however, the use of psychometric testing and its results serve as a springboard and conversation starter. The testing is then followed by brief psychotherapy processes, where goals are individualised according to each participant’s needs and psychologically based stumbling blocks in his/her interpersonal relationships. These stumbling blocks are addressed via referrals to external service providers or by means of brief psychotherapy. I regard the latter as an element of psychotherapy that can be utilised creatively.

My choice of brief psychotherapy reflects my psychodynamic approach as discussed. However, there are a number of schools of psychotherapies, specific techniques, and concepts of how therapy should proceed. What I ought to do as a therapist is important, but it neither a critical issue nor a deciding factor (Corsini & Wedding, 1990). Of crucial importance for me, instead, is the outcomes of the brief psychotherapy and that I, as a therapist, do not stand in the way of the therapeutic processes and the person's progress.

I view the following as significant goals relating to my brief psychotherapies with both employees and line managers:

As a therapist, be mindful of the need to engage with the employee, and to deal with the intervention strategies. Also make sure that involvement is terminated after goals are attained or even not attained – this is especially important in view of my short-term psychotherapeutic involvement.

Deal with coping as an evolving process concerning the impact of intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflicts on the employee who is a unique but distressed person, and also enable him or her to cope with harmful, threatening and challenging factors in the situation.

Manage environmental constraints as well as the employee's personal constraints while encouraging the employee to utilise his or her inner resources so that the employee can eventually take responsibility for his or her own wellbeing.

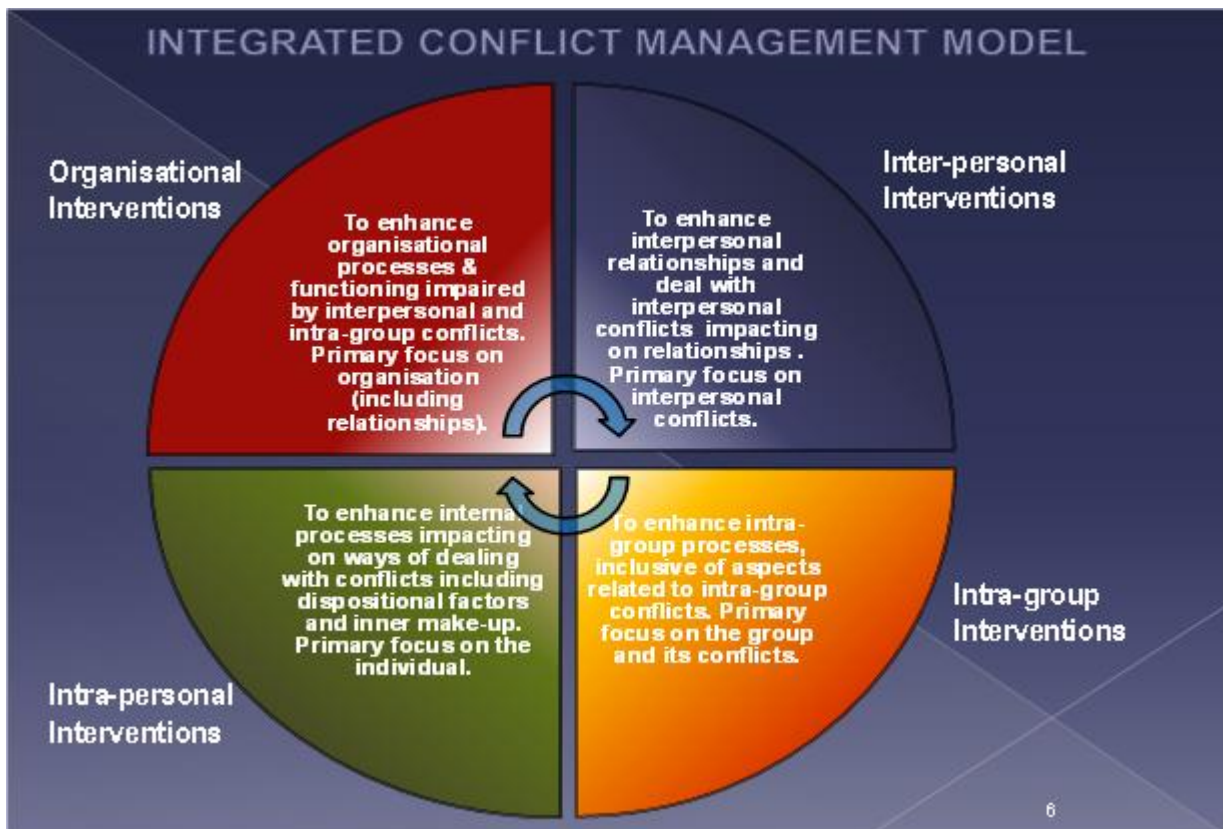
Establish therapeutic goals as the process unfolds.

## **7.7 AN INTEGRATED CONFLICT MANAGEMENT MODEL FOR INTRAPERSONAL, INTERPERSONAL AND INTRA-GROUP CONFLICTS IN AN ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT**

On the basis of Figure 7.1 below, I would like to reflect on my thoughts about an “integrated conflict management model for intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflicts in an organisational context”. Intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflicts include an enormous number of issues, nuances and distinctions, all of which have to be taken into account. In the context of this study, however, only some of these can be addressed.



Figure 7.1. An integrated conflict management model.



Adapted from Grobler, A. (2010). *Integrated EAP service model*.

To explore the dynamics of our university with its huge complement of staff and students against the diversity of contemporary South Africa is a task that is obviously impossible in the context of this study. All I can say is that these dynamics play a role in staff conflicts and that they cannot be simply ignored. Also, and although this subject is beyond the scope of this study, I have to acknowledge that employees in conflict are occasionally victims of organisational dynamics that are beyond their control. I also acknowledge that a *victim* can become a *survivor* and this process, from becoming victim to survivor, is my contribution to the enhancement of organisational processes and functioning in the institution.

Organisational dynamics that are causative to conflicts include the emotional impact of management decisions about, for example, the merger, restructuring processes, structures, policies, rating of post levels, selection committees and procedures, appointment of heads of department etc. The interaction between all of these and the interpersonal dynamics involved impacts on (un)conscious intra-group and interpersonal

processes. I seldom participate in the deliberations about and finalisation of institutional decisions made by management but, at times, I have to deal with the impact of these decisions on employees. Successful interventions in intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflicts therefore contribute, albeit indirectly, to organisational wellness. The effectiveness of conflict management at these four levels is not only influenced by counselling psychology interventions, but also by the characteristics and cooperation of the employees themselves, the nature, complexity, degree of intensity and duration of the conflicts, the possibility of the successful development and attainment of a new group identity (post-merger), and the dynamics of the cognitive and emotional components involved.

### **Intrapersonal conflict management**

I discussed intrapersonal conflict in chapter 4. My focus was on the intrapersonal processes within a person that contribute to interpersonal conflict in his or her work environment. I also explained my brief psychotherapeutic approach when dealing with intrapersonal issues – as this has unfolded over the years. I have to take into account that I am not dealing with a person who has been subjected to psychological pathology and disturbances, but somebody who is experiencing stumbling blocks in his/her interactional conflict management patterns. The brief psychotherapy support that I make available implies that these interventions are available and effective.

However, I would like to delineate a few limits to the use of brief psychotherapy in the context of conflict management in a university. First of all, it is unsafe to disregard the possible impact of brief psychotherapy on the participant's psychological stability. The troubled employee is suffering distress at some level, and this distress has either been exacerbated by the conflict or is a consequence of the conflict. The psychologist therefore has to assess the situation and establish, in some way, a baseline for the brief psychology intervention (if this is at all possible). Possible considerations here may be an awareness of the following: does the employee have the necessary resources, emotional energy and emotional modulation for focusing on his or her distress? Alternatively, are there significant indications to suspect severe depression or even psychotic conditions and personality/ mood/ dissociative disorders? Also: are there underlying medical conditions/ health problems that might cause physical reactions such as epileptic fits, nausea and rapid heartbeat?

Furthermore, in anticipation of employees' reactions to brief psychotherapy, I have to take into account that the employee may display coping strategies to accommodate his or her issues with conflicts or to deal with life's difficulties; these strategies may enable the employee to function during conflict situations, even if (somewhat) ineffectively. For these only to be identified for the sake of making him aware of inefficiencies in his or her coping strategies may be contradictory to the psychologist's expectations. It would be unprofessional for the psychologist to make the employee aware of his/her inefficient coping strategies without monitoring the process. Psychological forces can be set in motion which may lead to extreme actions with catastrophic end results. For example, based on a new sense of self, the employee might move to the other end of the spectrum – instead of avoiding conflict, he or she has head-on collisions that the employee is simply not equipped to deal with, and that have serious consequences as far as the institution itself is concerned. At other times, I need to ensure that the employee will not maintain ineffective or extreme coping strategies simply out of habit.

I also have to assess whether there are other concurrent problems and aspects of the employee's life that may also require attention, such as the need for couple therapy, unresolved traumas from the past, a parent's death, psychiatric problems, financial problems or high medical expenditure. Although the focus is on the conflict problems the employee presents with, we cannot exclude other parts of the employee's total psychological networking system and support networks he or she can use, and nor can the counselling psychologist ignore the possibility of referring the employee to external support systems.

### **Interpersonal conflict management**

I reflected on interpersonal conflict management in chapter 5. From my discussion of eight interpersonal conflict management cases in this chapter, I have come to the conclusion that an array of services can be offered by a counselling psychologist in this context.

As I have indicated already, no human being can avoid interpersonal relationships. Here I will briefly discuss certain aspects of my psychodynamic view, on the basis of the theories of Harry Stack Sullivan and Karen Horney as discussed by Viljoen (1997). Many of Sullivan's and Horney's ideas play a fundamental role in my approach. Sullivan claims

that, from the moment of birth, people function in an interpersonal context and that personality is the product of the social context in which the individual develops and functions. The unconscious is therefore enmeshed in interpersonal experiences that a person excludes from his or her consciousness. Healthy interpersonal relationships in adulthood are characterised by the ability to cooperate with others in a healthy way. I also appreciate Sullivan's view of the therapeutic process for interpersonal relationships. He says that a person in therapy must be supported by the therapist to become aware of his or her interpersonal relationships with a view to attaining mental health. Horney maintains that conflicts from which interpersonal problems arise could be sought in the interaction between the person and his or her unhealthy relationships with the self and others. Her focus is on the psychodynamics of the personality and she links our (un)conscious emotional needs with our particular ways of reacting and relating to others. These ways eventually constitute a person's typical interpersonal style as a coping mechanism in difficult circumstances. She focuses on three interpersonal styles or ways of relating to other people: a movement towards others, against others, and away from others. The normal person is capable of alternating between these styles, whereas the neurotic person tends to become fixated on one style that he or she uses in relation to everyone, regardless of how appropriate or inappropriate this style may be.

Employees involved in interpersonal conflict need an opportunity to share their painful experiences about this interpersonal conflict. They have, however, more than a need for sharing – some of them also need brief psychotherapy. I still sometimes find it difficult to believe how serious these threats to people's psychological wellbeing can be, and how intense and painful their emotional experiences are. The broad spectrum of themes seen in the case excerpts indicate just how traumatic these incidents can be.

### **Intra-group conflict management**

In chapter 6, I explored intra-group conflict management in different settings within a university from the perspective of counselling psychology. I discussed extractions or excerpts from four cases. These excerpts serve as examples of typical intra-group conflict issues in our university and reveal the story of my choice of interventions. Writing chapter 6 was also an opportunity for me to get an idea about what is really, at grassroots level, going on in the world of intra-group conflicts. Stories are told from different perspectives,

through employees' eyes and my own. Of significant interest to me was the anger recall setting and the live anger setting.

One of the themes elicited from the intra-group conflict management processes and interventions are the willingness of employees to become involved – sometimes owing to their conflict fatigue, and sometimes despite their initial reluctance to participate. Their narratives enriched my understanding of my task as a counselling psychologist within a university. When I give individual therapy I have a limited scope of practice in the university (because the university has such a high staff complement). As soon as group interventions are included and I am involved in intense conflict dynamics at an institutional level, however, my role as a counselling psychologist becomes very evident.

This study also has implications for dealing with task conflicts and emotional conflicts. Task conflicts can be constructive and are usually driven by differences in thinking and opinion about the *how-to-do* of tasks at hand. However, task conflicts can escalate into emotional conflicts as soon as a person takes these differences as being offensive towards him or her as a person, and believes that his or her ideas are being belittled. My experience is that emotional conflicts are characterised by extremely intense feelings, such as rejection, mistrust, anger, depression, frustration and helplessness, and that these feelings can create a toxic working atmosphere. This, of course, has managerial implications – when intra-group conflicts escalate to a level where interpersonal communication and reciprocal trust are seriously damaged, counselling psychology interventions can help to prevent the irreversible breakdown of the group. The impact on productivity, job satisfaction and an increase in absenteeism are obviously matters of concern to management. The emotional consequences sometimes annoy management but, at present, management is showing a greater sensitivity about this issue.

The intra-group interventions I have been involved in helped to achieve several objectives:

- (i) Change can escalate into severe intra-group conflicts. Each group member therefore has to be encouraged to share his or her views and concerns about the change brought about by the merger, the subsequent intra-group conflicts and the impact of these conflicts on him or her.
- (ii) Employees have the opportunity to share their feelings about change, transformation, incompatibility and conflicts openly without fear of being disciplined or rejected.

- (iii) Once they are brought out into the open, unspoken concerns and experiences are, in many ways, a mirror or reflection of co-employees' issues – I say this without ignoring the uniqueness of each employee.
- (iv) Each employee has to take responsibility for his or her own thoughts, feelings and actions.
- (v) Employees can serve as support systems for each other.
- (vi) Recognition is necessary for each group member's subjective perceptions of the outcomes of the intra-group management process.
- (vii) It is also necessary to take into account “that the group-as-a-whole partly explains the behaviour of group members and that intervening from this perspective could improve negative relationships” (Geldenhuys, 2012, pp.1). It contributes my understanding about the behaviour of individual group members.

## **7.8 MY PERSONAL GROWTH, TRANSFORMATION AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AS A COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGIST SPECIALISING IN HUMAN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

I speak in my own voice which is unavoidably personal, subjective and specific – “to demonstrate how my life has led me to the way I think. By doing so I also take into account the fact “how, as counseling psychologists, our lives and thoughts form counseling psychology; and how our imagined possible futures ..... can serve as springboards that might be used .... to construct the future of counseling psychology” (Howard, 1992, p. 419).

There is the dangerous possibility of my using this space to present an over-simplistic understanding of my identity development; this would be an easy route for me to take owing to the sheer complexities of my own developing identity. However, I know that I do not want to oversimplify. My personal stories have been – and are – the catalyst for my understanding of the complex conflict situations that I have witnessed unfolding in the diverse realities of the university. My own narrative and identity have unfolded along the diverse content of the human conflicts I dealt with, that is, intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management and interventions accordingly. In each of these specific groupings, my narrative and identity has gradually moved from being relatively straightforward towards becoming significantly more complex. My transition has also

involved moving away from focusing purely on individuals and groups towards an examination of the macro systems and events within which conflicts are embedded. These macro systems include diversity issues, changes in the higher education landscape, transformation of the university itself and the impact of these drastic changes on the employees. What happens in the country and the university has a profound influence not only on human conflicts, but also on my personal journey towards becoming an integrated counselling psychologist. My learning curve in becoming involved with the different psychodynamic issues of individuals and groups has certainly contributed to my understanding of myself, others and human behaviour.

My journey has been influenced by a number of the following variables, and it is these variables I would now like to focus on:

*Interventions* - I have to deal with the damage done to staff members in the midst of their unique, unfolding conflict stories or in the aftermath of their conflicts. I also have the opportunity to intervene in their scenarios by using my developing approaches and skills, and by my focus on reactive and proactive interventions. I realise that expanding and reflecting on my cognitive and theoretical knowledge are an integral part of my identity, as is the practical implementation of this reflection. My practical understanding of *reactive (response)* and *proactive (prevention)* service delivery has gradually come to summarise the basis of my thought processes and interventions. My *proactive interventions* include training workshops and enhancing my clients' strengths, coping skills and abilities to deal proactively with their stressors and conflicts, with the emphasis on finding solutions. My *reactive interventions* include remediation of problems, therapeutic interventions and clinical work towards healing of the pathology caused by these conflicts. I enjoy both approaches - I like giving psychotherapy, but I also enjoy the *prevention is better than cure* approach. These two approaches have to alternate, depending on the problem at hand.

*Emotional growth in times of stress* - My involvement in individual counselling and facilitating of workshops/group sessions in these contexts forms the basis of my identity development, emotional growth and, indeed, search for meaning. Dealing with conflicts of this magnitude within the group context is not an easy task. At times I have become emotionally exhausted but, of course, in these confused situations there is little time to spare in feeling wretched. I believe that my emotional stability, openness to experience

and conscientiousness eventually contributed to my lower levels of emotional exhaustion (Storm & Rothman, 2003). This situation helped me to deal with the demands for support that came via telephone, e-mails, and personal visits to my office. Sometimes I experienced the heroic feeling that it was my vocation to guide these people out of their misery; when this did not happen, I initially blamed myself. Was I skilled enough to do conflict management and to resolve these conflicts? Fortunately, reality and common sense called me to order. I knew that it was not my responsibility to rescue these employees from the consequences of their own actions or other people's actions. On the contrary, I had to get to the bottom of what was really happening and, with their collaboration, seek for ways to strengthen them from within in order to help them face their conflicts. My clients have to accept that it is their responsibility to actively participate in efforts to find a workable solution and emotional healing, although it is also a shared responsibility. It also drew my attention to the following question: am I an individualist or a team player? In many ways, I am someone who enjoys being an individualist and working in solitude. I do not want to be the centre of attention and nor do I need the constant company of other people. In one sense, then, I am an introvert who needs to be energised from within. In another sense, I am a team player who enjoys being with other people. In my capacity as a co-facilitator, I experienced workshops as a process of integrating and expanding my sense of self. Although facilitators approach the content of workshops from different theoretical perspectives it surely blend together to such an extent that synchronicity becomes a pleasant experience.

*Enrichment* - Contributing to my personal and professional transformation and identity development is the fact that I continuously work towards enrichment of my psychological knowledge, support services and interventions. This is particularly true of my proactive interventions: these interventions can be used before the impact of conflict becomes pathological. These interventions sometimes include what, for me, are very small but important pieces of new information that I familiarise myself with – in fact, this add-on knowledge often becomes a turning point in my interventions. I find it surprising that we psychologists tend to believe that any significant new knowledge can only be found in articles in accredited journals. Given what I have discovered about “add-on knowledge”, I can only say that, for me, this type of knowledge “works” – I do not know whether this same, apparently insignificant, knowledge will be valued by other counselling psychologists. For example, the *conflict triangle* includes three modes of dealing with



conflicts: *victim* (poor little me), *persecutor* (consistently telling others when and where they are in the wrong) or *rescuer* (save others). This almost simplistic perspective triggers thoughts and emotions that create many opportunities for counselling. Personally, I tend to be a rescuer (which, in itself, is a heavy load to carry). Over time, the realisation that this stance is not sustainable has come to *my* rescue. Another example is what my father, during his years as a practicing psychologist, used to call *the trinity of depression*. This entails the following: experience of the *self* as incompetent and a failure, experience of the *present* as disastrous, and the *future* as without any hope for happiness and peace.

*Multi-facet identity and clarification of my role* – here I speak the same language as Young and Nicol (2007), who say that the profession of counselling psychology has become endangered by allowing others to define our professional identity and practice as counselling psychologists. In my work context I continuously have to clarify my identity and role – not only to myself, but also to the people I am working with as a colleague and the employees seeking my help. In order to do this there are several questions to be answered. What are the sources of my identity? What are the conceptual and theoretical models on which I base my interventions? Who am I – a therapist for psychiatric disorders, a therapist for ‘normal’ people in need of support, a counsellor, facilitator, assessor, helper or a limited contributor to qualitative conflict management research in the context of a university? The range of work in which I am involved covers all of the above. Does this inclusivity make me *jack of all trades and master of none*? I would rather say that it offers me the opportunity of making counselling psychology available to a diverse range of scenarios within the university. Implicit in the work of counselling psychologists is raising consciousness, i.e. “bringing the unconscious to the conscious, making the implicit explicit and calling forward that which has been marginalised” (Bantjes, 2011, p. 97). This process features at both the macro and micro level in our university; it is sometimes acceptable and sometimes unacceptable to those involved. For example, the forces involved in the merger created hectic emotions, psychological discomfort, stress, personal difficulties and unhappiness about the loss of previous certainties amongst employees. Management therefore requested a report in which I covered, at the macro level, some of these issues from a purely psychological viewpoint. However, not all my remarks in this report went down well with certain members of management (who claimed they experienced the report as “negative criticism”); others, however, expressed their appreciation. Initially these multi-facet tasks were like a labyrinth through which I had to

find my way. Gradually, as I got settled in my identity and self-assurance as a result of emotional growth, I succeeded in letting go of these “labyrinth issues”, although I was sure not to compromise the ethical standards and sound values of the profession (counselling psychology). This included, and continues to include, setting boundaries in the multi-disciplinary teams I work with. Today I can state that my expertise as a counselling psychologist is valued for its ability to help formulate solutions at a psychological level, and is no longer regarded as simply another source of information from which management or employees may or may not benefit. It is a rewarding task to deal with employees’ emotions, anxieties and fears, because this enables them to “give voice to their distress, experience and inner-reality”, as Bantjes (2011, p. 99) refers to this process when explaining that allowing this to happen is central to the work of a counselling psychologist.

*My position in established schools of psychology* - When I reflect on my conflict management tasks within the university, I come to the conclusion that the process of my identity development is, to a certain extent, located outside the established schools of psychology and psychotherapies. This does not mean that I lack knowledge of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks from which to construct my choice of psychology and psychotherapy. I would rather say that my point of reference is the result of social constructions created by me when generating suitable intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict interventions. I do this work of construction in my daily endeavours and while performing my diverse tasks. My understanding of the different types of conflicts is the product of the social processes within and human interactions in our university. The meanings attached to the conflicts and differences in workday transactions have become my social reality. It is in this reality that I implement my conflict management interventions moulded by my choice of schools of psychology and psychotherapies (Bergh, 2008; Pauw, 2004b). Having said all this, I also support Ivey and Van Hesteren’s view (1990) of the different models underlying human functioning. In my context, I like to use the mental/psychological model that emphasises the mind and behaviour and that recognises groups, organisations and culture while also focusing on the interdependence of individuals and human systems. Another valued spiritual dimension in my identity development is to find transcended meaning in the suffering caused by serious human conflicts: “Those who face their problems and difficulties eventually learn to manage them, cope with them, and grow from them” (Ivey & Van Hesteren, 1990, p. 535). This is a task of spiritual development.

*Position of counselling psychology in my cultural context* - Savickas (2007) is of the opinion that counselling psychology cannot be the same in every country. This is because its theory, research and practical implementation should be grounded in the specific cultural context in which it is practised. My specific cultural context is very diverse. South Africa is characterised by its possession of many culture variables, such as the diversity issues concerning race, language, gender, value systems, educational and political differences, and economic status. External systems playing a role are our national milieu since 1994. The far-reaching changes in South Africa at the political, economic and social level have also spilled over into the workplace as well. I am from a different culture, race and language group than many of the employees that I have to deal with. I therefore have to carry out my duties in such a way that these diversities do not become barriers, but instead opportunities for growth and enrichment. Fortunately, the values and ethical standards of psychology facilitate this process enormously.

*Identity in an organisational setting* - Another point in considering my professional identity as a counselling psychologist is that I do not cease to be a counselling psychologist when I work in organisational settings where conflicts arise about, for example, restructuring, new job descriptions and post level assessments. Professional identity is defined here as a sense of connection to the values and emphases of counselling psychology (Mrdjenovich & Moore, 2004). In my working environment my professional knowledge of counselling psychology is focused on conflict interventions with the intention of creating psycho-therapeutic knowledge in my clients, knowledge that is essential for healing processes to be set in motion. My unique contributions focus on interventions that have an emotional and psychological impact. It includes assessing, diagnosing and intervening in intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group functioning in human conflict situations in the workplace whilst applying psychological interventions in order to improve psychological well-being and relational wellness. I believe that my conceptualisations and the quality of my services as a counselling psychologist are valued: I say this because I am constantly approached by employees, line managers and industrial psychologists for my conflict management services. However, the culture in our university is such that many employees do not want to be associated with a psychologist: the implication is that *there is something seriously wrong at a psychological level*. Part of my work, therefore, involves my continuously having to communicate the message that a counselling psychologist's task is

almost always to help reasonable, well-adjusted people solve specific problems, make decisions and cope with the stressors of everyday life (Young & Nicol, 2007).

*Critical identity consequences of change and transformation* - The turmoil of our university's change and transformation processes have played, and continue to play, an enormous role in my personal and identity development. Many of the intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflicts are actually symptoms of the tremendous emotional and psychological impact, on employees, of the university's transformation processes. Indeed, this fact has forced me, as a counselling psychologist, to familiarise myself with the consequences of change and transformation. Change is not easy, and does not happen overnight; sometimes it is a process rather than an event. In our university, the processes of restructuring and transformation are now entering their 10th year. Originally, the emotional impact was for many employees at a conscious level; they talked and discussed this openly and continuously. However, the whole process eventually became part of daily life, and many people became somewhat apathetic about it. However, the cumulative effect of the transformation process should not be underestimated. Before change, restructuring and transformation, people experienced a period of expectation: something was going to happen and change would occur. The impact of this change then came upon almost everybody, and employees had to deal with this change according to their own unique personal make-up and circumstances. At a certain point in time, the idea surfaced that everything was at last finalised, but then the next process came to the fore and, with it, the realisation that change is a never-ending process. There are still uncertainties about operational issues and the safety of their jobs, demands that change and transformation must take place according to higher authorities' perceptions and demands, coupled with feelings of helplessness as the realisation came that their input is neither valued nor taken into account, etc. People began to realise that there has been a permanent change, even disruption in their lives. Feelings of anger, resentment and frustration surfaced. Questions asked by staff members are about the consequences of change for them personally. Questions asked by management are about the consequences of not changing. In the context of this study, these two opposites can be seen to develop, at times, into serious conflict. Also, as we have seen, employees' transformation fatigue has, at times, become exhausting. As I have already indicated it is a chronic physical and emotional tiredness not resulting from unusual exertion, hard work or physical activities. It is not relieved by rest or even vacation leave, resulting sometimes in

stress and trauma reactions, as well as a marked decline in occupational, educational, social and personal activities. Sometimes there is a temporary inability to respond to change situations resulting from over-exposure to it.

As it was, in my work as a counselling psychologist, I had to develop a sound understanding of the nature of my clients' difficulties and conflicts in the change and transformation environment of our university. I also had to 'marry' my change management knowledge with my knowledge of conflict management and counselling psychology. As a result, I have expanded my toolbox of counselling psychology strategies (Neimeyer, 2006) by studying and implementing those 'tools' that were available to me – more often than not, these tools were tailor-made for the specific person or group or created by myself. In my involvement with employees and managers, I have extended and refined relevant concepts and methods seeking a fresh possibility in relating to the "complexity of their selves and their lives" (Neimeyer, 2006, p. 118). My work not only focused on the facilitation of change contributing to intra-personal, interpersonal and intra-group conflicts, but also on the assessment of these conflicts and change.

*Self-image, self-identity and life scripts* - I believe that my self-identity is integrated in my development as the counselling psychologist I am today. This development first began in my childhood, and then continued in adulthood (within the context of a family and extended family, with their own unique characteristics). My childhood years and upbringing were, without my being consciously aware of it at the time, the basis for me to eventually become not only a counselling psychologist per se, but one with unique value and belief systems. Self-image also plays a role in my identity development. For example, I am exposed to the opinions of other people concerning the success (or otherwise) of my sessions, and I also know whether or not my clients are satisfied or dissatisfied with the outcomes of these sessions. There are times when I am doubtful, and I have questioned myself even while walking back to my office (could I have dealt with the issues differently?). At the same time, this self-doubt also makes me concerned about some of the employees involved. With hindsight, however, I can say that my intrinsic feelings of worth and value have come to my rescue. If I only validate myself on the basis of what I have or have not achieved, I know that my work will leave me in a state of constant emotional turmoil. The critical events that I have described in this thesis have caused me to become more mature and more experienced, and have eventually increased my own self-trust and belief in my professional identity as a counselling psychologist – even if there

is always space for improvement in my highly competitive and criticism-orientated work environment. Without personal development to enhance my skills and knowledge, my identity development and expanding sense of self would be impaired. I entered the conflict management scenario without being consciously aware of the role that a person's life script plays. Its premise is (among others) that one's *basic life script* develops in childhood years and is influenced by what has happened in one's past. When I first started work, I paid little attention to this premise, but over the years, I have gradually become more mindful of what it entails: many years later, in adulthood, the basic life script becomes observable in people's lives and is even staunchly defended. However, "one has the potential to grow and change in order to function effectively in an authentic reality, rather than the reality he or she has learned in the past" (Dusay & Dusay, 1989, p. 408). Lee and Mitchell (1994, p. 61) make the point that, when a person experiences a shock or severe discomfort in his or her working environment, the person becomes involved in an *engaged script*. This involves the person searching his or her memory for a pre-existing plan or response based on prior decisions, rules, learned responses and circumstances surrounding similar discomforts in the past. If the person finds a matching script, the script is put into effect quite rapidly. If the basic script cannot be of guidance, the engaged script comes to life. When I compare this theoretical reasoning with individual reactions and group interactions I have encountered in my journey, a few things come to my mind. First of all, some employees' engaged script results in them not remaining composed when in the centre of conflict. When I compare my own experiences with this reasoning, I try to identify my own life script and engaged script, and it is these scripts that I shall now describe, albeit in a somewhat oversimplified manner. My *basic life script* is to be of support to others, to show them heartfelt empathy, and to demonstrate my understanding for their issues/problems. Sometimes this almost automatic reaction can be exhausting. I grew up in an environment that was dominated by my parents' example: this, I know, explains my lifelong engagement with our church and Christian religion. However, during the merger and the conflict management circumstances I found myself in, there were times when I became tired and not nearly as energetic as usual – and I could not understand these reactions. I now realise that the merger's impact on me is twofold, and this guides the way to my *engaged script*. On the one hand I am also concerned about the drastic merger changes which were at that point of time complicated by my very reluctant involvement in intra-group conflicts within my own department. This, in itself, was emotionally draining – I had to work through it myself, and it proved to be a growth process

that led to increased resilience. There was no Ms van Niekerk to come to my rescue! On the other hand, I had to be the strong and sensible helper who only sometimes shared, on a cognitive level, some of my own concerns and emotional experiences with a view to demonstrating that people in the helping professions are not immune to the realities of emotion.

*Progressive growth, experience and self-efficacy* - I perceive my identity and my progression as a counselling psychologist from a developmental perspective. My experience, many years ago, as a practicing social worker laid the groundwork for my progressive growth towards becoming, eventually, a counselling psychologist specialising in conflict management. Over the years, I have learned how to deal with complex conflict problems in progressive ways – for example, in the sense of moving from individual and group counselling towards brief psychotherapy, then towards strengths-based counselling, towards positive psychology and, eventually, alternating between these paradigms within the university context. Today, I can say that I am on my way towards becoming a more integrated person and I can sense my growth in self-efficacy. My tasks involve varying elements of difficulty and this, too, contributes to my growth by enhancing my resilience and ability to persevere. My diverse experiences have led to mindfulness on my part, and have contributed to performance expertise, good judgement and professionalism – although, obviously, one should not rest on one's laurels. There is a difference in emphasis and focus when counselling psychology is practised in a psychotherapeutic context (in a private practice) and when it is practised in an organisation (e.g. in an institution). Both practitioners draw on the same knowledge, but their application of this knowledge differs. In my case, I have to move outside the consulting room into a higher education environment, where I have to engage in a much more focused way with relationship issues on different levels and in different contexts. The relationship problems are manifested in intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group contexts against the background of serious conflicts between staff members. I perceive the development of my identity as a counselling psychologist as “multiplistic, shifting and interpenetrated” by my personal, emotional, intellectual, academic, social and workplace worlds (Neimeyer, 2006, p.106). This identity is grounded in our country's and my university's specific cultural context, where theory, research and practical implementation are practised.

## 7.9 CONCLUSION

What wisdom do I have after all these years? Can I say that I have gleaned enough wisdom to be able to manage intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflicts? Has my personal journey increased my ability to resolve conflicts? Have my interventions lead to conflict solutions? Do my interventions enable managers and employees to manage their conflicts or, at least, do they enable managers and employees to show a resilience and willingness to address their conflicts in a positive way? The answer is a qualified 'yes' as I will explain by making the following comments:

(i) A great deal more research has to be done into my procedures and methods, and these procedures and methods have to be practised more widely.

(ii) The application of my *modus operandi* needs to be personalised by other facilitators for themselves, for the specific client, or for the specific group. I (and others) still need to be creative in our application of any method in order to properly take into account the unique characteristics of each person, group or situation. One solution does not fit all. My way of doing may work for me, but not for other counselling psychologists (although I firmly believe that that it will contribute to their overall knowledge base).

(iii) My workshops and individual experiences included some important considerations. Storytelling, the use of metaphors and brief psychotherapy are indeed effective ways of learning about creative conflict management. They force me to do convergent thinking, to go with my gut feeling, and to build on and use my theoretical and practical knowledge as well.

(iv) However, my research and human conflict management journey have ultimately culminated into a diverse intrapersonal, interpersonal and intra-group conflict management 'model' with a psychologically based approach and interventions that work for me.

Another question is whether my personal journey has contributed to my growth as a counselling psychologist specialising in conflict management. The answer is an unqualified 'yes'. I wanted to stay abreast of developments in my professional field of expertise. Through this study my expertise has become focused as being that of human conflict management. This study has also increased my proficiency in these types of human conflict management, because I had to ponder my own actions. One cannot become 'conflict-management-wise' overnight. There is no short-cut, no magic stick, and no infallible recipe. Experience combined with knowledge and mindfulness is necessary. It



takes time, commitment and willingness to become involved in the hard work of one's own skills development, even to the extent of multi-competence. Human conflict management then becomes a choice of activities that works for you. It is like a GPS – there are many routes towards the same destination, although often, in GPS language, by means of recalculation.

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