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The science of bridging differences and the dialogic transformation of conflict: a case study from *This is Us*

Abstract

In a climate of increasing social and political polarisation, there is much interest in dialogue and bridging differences. This article investigates the dramatisation of dialogic conflict resolution, examining how the psychological science of bridging differences can be utilised to create realistic and emotionally engaging narratives that highlight the transformative impact of dialogue on character development and relational dynamics. Relational conflicts have long been recognised as possible catalysts for character transformation, and complex narratives (Mittell, 2015) are particularly appropriate for a nuanced representation of characters' psychological experiences throughout the process. This study draws upon extensive psychological and communication research on bridging differences compiled by Shigeoka *et al.* (2020) and UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center (2021). It reorganises this research into a horizontal timeline of behaviours, highlighting their practical application during the conflict resolution process. It then makes a cognitive poetics analysis of how these behaviours may be observed in a case study of relational conflict from the complex television series *This is Us* (NBC, 2016-2022). By observing the impact these behaviours have on the transformation of characters, the study explores how credible dialogic relational conflicts can lead to verisimilar character transformation on screen. In addition, it considers how an artistic interpretation of the science of bridging differences can contribute to our understanding of dialogue in practice.

Keywords
Diversity, bridging differences, screenwriting, complex tv, conflict, transformation arc.

1. Introduction

As strategies for improving dialogue across differences are sought in the educational, professional, and political arenas, research in psychology and communication is proposing behaviours and attitudes to facilitate the transformation from conflict to dialogue. Entrenched conflict or conflict avoidance stem from reflex, self-protective responses that generate collective dissonance and lack resolution. The dialogic response, however, not only fosters understanding, acceptance, collaboration, and creativity, but transforms those involved, leaving neither party the same after the interaction (Shigeoka *et al.*, 2020).

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Audiovisual screenwriting frequently employs conflict, including relational conflict, to drive the story and the development of characters. Yet, as in real life, not all dramatic conflict leads to transformation. More frequently, characters refuse to change, resulting in reactive behaviour that generates new and ongoing conflicts, the "ripple effects of events within the web of character relationships" (Mittell, 2015, p. 136). *Complex television*, a combination of serial narration and episodic form (Mittell, 2015), offers an ideal format for the development of multiple relationship subplots within an overarching series plot. In addition, the complex format involving multiple perspectives, non-linear storytelling, and the ability to portray ambiguous and complex realities resembles the richness and nuances of real-life relationships. Mittell argues that complex narratives dialogue with cultural contexts and modes of practice, providing rich material for poetics-focused study. He encourages a dual approach, examining both cognitive poetic aspects of how storytelling techniques influence viewer comprehension of and response to a text, and an awareness of the cultural context in which they are created and viewed (Bordwell *et al.*, 2017; Mittell, 2015).

The following study draws from the psychological science of bridging differences as explored in the syntheses of research made by Shigeoka *et al.* in the *Bridging Differences Playbook* (2020), and by UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center in the *Bridging Differences Course* (2021). These resources detail the science behind the principles and skills that facilitate transformation through a dialogic response to relational conflict. To study them in an event, the skills have been reorganised into a horizontal timeline to highlight their practical application at various stages of the conflict resolution process.

The dialogic behaviours are then explored in a cognitive poetics analysis of a particular case of relationship conflict from the complex television series *This is Us* (NBC, 2016-2022). Created by Dan Fogelman and aired on NBC, *This is Us* is a family melodrama that utilises complex narrative techniques to explore intergenerational relationships between parents, children, and grandchildren. The series has gained critical acclaim and a loyal fanbase, receiving 66 awards and 290 nominations (IMDb, 2023). It revolves around the Pearson family, siblings Kevin, Kate, and adopted Randall, and their parents Jack and Rebecca, with themes of family, love, loss, and identity portrayed through non-linear storytelling.

Among other themes, the pilot episode introduces key internal conflicts for each of the three siblings: Kevin's lack of fulfilment; Kate's insecurity; and Randall's search for identity and acceptance. Throughout the series these inner conflicts manifest in key relationship conflicts for each one: Kevin harbours jealousy toward his adopted brother Randall, Kate feels inferiority toward her mother Rebecca, and Randall blames his adopted mother, Rebecca, for hiding his identity. These relationships have been the focus of a larger case study which found that the incorporation of dialogic conflict behaviours had a directly transformative impact on both the characters and their relationships. In the interest of facilitating a deep analysis in a limited space, this article focuses on the climatic episode of one of these relationship conflicts, that of Randall and Rebecca in Season 1, Episode 9, "The Trip."

2. Conflict, dialogue, and transformation

2.1. *The psychological science of bridging differences*

In encounters between distinct and complex persons, it is inevitable that conflicts arise: whenever two people have opposing views around what is normal or desirable in a situation, there is conflict (Ripley, 2021). While it may seem preferable to avoid conflict, it can be either helpful or harmful for people and relationships, depending on the way it is handled. *Entrenched* or 'high' conflict leads to increased polarisation, employing physical or verbal force, displays of anger, demeaning others, retaliation, and revenge. One-sided or mutual *denial, withdrawal* or *avoidance* suppresses the expression of conflict to flee its discomfort. *Disengaged tolerance* sees conflicting parties dance around the edge of the conflict issue. And

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when one party *yields* to another's demand, a one-sided peace sacrifices integrity to avoid further conflict. These responses lead to ineffective and non-transformative conflict outcomes. Willingness to engage conflict through *dialogue*, however, can stimulate understanding, acceptance, and transformation. It becomes 'good conflict', containing moments of curiosity, humour, asking questions, and understanding (Ripley, 2021). A dialogic response opens the way for collaboration, creativity, and more rigorous and fair decision making, involving constructive, proactive behaviours (Gelfand *et al.*, 2012).

Key to reaching transformative and collaborative conflict is learning to bridge differences, as highlighted by researchers at UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center (2021). Real dialogue across difference has been shown to improve health and wellbeing and reduce the stress that results from conflict (Marsh *et al.*, 2010). It reduces stereotypes and improves inter-personal relationships (Murrar & Brauer, 2017). It can lead to higher level reasoning, spur creativity and stimulate innovation, improving problem solving and generating growth and success (Stahl & Maznevski, 2021). It increases self-compassion, self-esteem, and resilience; it supports good government (Freedman & Goldstein, 1999), and can even be economically beneficial (Calabrese & Manello, 2021).

The transformative impact of dialogue is explained by Judi Neal and colleagues (2018b) as a changed experience of meaning, which opens up new ways of being in the same circumstances and relationships. Personal experiences, they explain, are based on internal interpretations of situations derived from past experiences (Stanford & Stanford, 2018). Negative past experiences predispose towards self-protection and generate reflexive relationship conflict, collective dissonance, comparison, and competition. Conversely, efforts to further individual agency and a growth response to challenges (rather than a protective, fear-based response) facilitate interdependent connections which generate collective resonance, synergy, and creativity (Neal, 2018a). Moving from protective-conflict to growth-dialogue allows an individual to move from isolation to a new, dynamic exploration of their own motives, thoughts, longings, and values in the light of another's ideas, and in the safety of their support (Subirana Vilanova, 2018).

2.1.1. Behaviours that favour a dialogic response to conflict

Scott Shigeoka and colleagues at UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center have conducted an extensive review of scientific literature, engaged in interviews with leaders and organisations, and assessed the scope of relevant, active programs. Their research identified 14 skills and strategies for bridging divides, whether political, racial, religious, or otherwise, summarised in a *Playbook* which mixes science and storytelling to help the work of Bridge Builders (Shigeoka *et al.*, 2020)[1]. Organised around intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup skills, the list is not intended as a formal curriculum or an inflexible set of prerequisites; rather, it is a series of adaptable principles to be modified in various contexts, from public debates and political discourses to more personal relationships. The *Playbook* was further developed by psychologists at UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center into an eight-session *Bridging Differences Course*[2]. It features "core research-based principles and strategies for fostering positive relationships, dialogue, and understanding across lines of difference," building on the *Playbook* which has been used by leaders in government, education, corporate, and other settings (2021). The course explains the theory of bridging and the science behind it, and suggests activities to put it into practice.

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[1] See the *Bridging Differences Playbook* (Shigeoka *et al.*, 2020) at
https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/Bridging_Differences_Playbook-Final.pdf, and the full list of skills as used in this study at https://www.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.22669879.
[2] See the *Bridging Differences Course* (GGSC, 2021) at https://www.edx.org/es/course/bridging-differences, and the full list of skills as used in this study at https://www.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.22669879.

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For the purpose of this study –analysing a relational conflict between characters in a television series– it is helpful to consider how these bridging skills might apply to a particular conflict. To this end we have regrouped the vertical lists into a loose horizontal *Bridging Differences Timeline*. The new organisation highlights the actionable, practical, and observable nature of the skills as they may be applied at each stage of the conflict resolution process, from self–awareness and emotion regulation to empathy, collaboration, and action towards the common good. The timeline has been organised into 7 stages: 1. Agency and choosing to engage; 2. Pausing to reduce emotional reactivity; 3. Seeking advice; 4. Seeking to understand deeply; 5. Searching for a common good; 6. Acting toward the common good; and 7. Circumstantial factors that favour dialogue[3]. Its loosely sequential order nevertheless allows for changes as the circumstances require. As in the original lists, not all skills are necessary in order for dialogue to be possible. These skills and the science behind them will be explained in more detail in the case analysis in Section 3.

Table 1. Summary of the Correlation between the *Bridging Differences Timeline*, the *Bridging Differences Playbook*, and the *Bridging Differences Course*[4].

	Bridging Differences Timeline (Cannon, 2023)	Bridging Differences Playbook (Shigeoka *et al.*, 2020)	Bridging Differences Course (GGSC, 2021)	Skill Group
1	Agency and choosing to engage	2. Practice mindfulness	a. Regular mindfulness practice	Intrapersonal
2	Pausing to reduce emotional reactivity	2. Practice mindfulness	a. Regular mindfulness practice	Intrapersonal
		1. Assume good intentions		
3	Seeking advice	3. Expand your activities, expand your views	2. Challenge your views	Intrapersonal
		4. Seek and promote counter-stereotypical information		
		5. Focus on individuality, not group identity		
		7. Put people before politics		
		11. Try self-distancing		Interpersonal
4	Seeking to understand deeply	6. Listen with compassion	3. Active listening	Interpersonal
		8. Perspective taking and giving		
		10. Understand their values		
5	Searching for a common good	9. Find shared identities	5. Recognise shared identities and values	Interpersonal
		13. Identify common goals	6. Identify common goals	Intergroup
		14. Focus on solutions, not identities		
6	Acting toward the common good	14. Focus on solutions, not identities	4. Compassionate speaking	Interpersonal
			8. Applying Bridging Differences to your life	Intergroup
7	Circumstantial factors that favour dialogue	12. Create the conditions for intergroup contact	7. Intergroup contact	Intergroup

Source: Own elaboration.

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[3] See the full *Bridging Differences Timeline* (Cannon, 2023) at https://www.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.22669879.
[4] For a more detailed table with sub-categories, refer to Cannon (2023) at
https://www.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.22669879.

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2.2. *Audiovisual representation, dramatic conflict, and character transformation*

Studies have shown that parasocial interaction with represented persons may be processed by the brain in a manner similar to real-life interactions, and can incite changes in audience perceptions and behaviours (Schiappa *et al.*, 2005). This is supported by Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory regarding observational learning, "By observing others, one forms rules of behaviour, and on future occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action" (Bandura, 1986, p. 47). Acknowledging that only positive, sustained, and non-superficial contact can lead to positive attitude change (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), Schiappa and colleagues recommend further research around what sort of interactions between characters might be beneficial (2005, p. 112). In a context of popular and critically acclaimed yet relationally conflictive antiheros[5], it is pertinent to consider alternative, prosocial representations.

In terms of narrative structure, Western narrative has long employed conflict to drive the story and the development of characters. H. Porter Abbott suggests that conflict provides a way for culture to talk about itself and its values, and possibly resolve the conflicts that threaten to fracture it. He argues that beyond specific character conflicts one finds larger conflicts "regarding values, ideas, feelings, and ways of seeing the world" (Abbott, 2008, p. 55). Consistent with the neurobiological research of Stanford and Stanford (2018), screenwriter John Truby and others propose that narrative structure should be constructed organically, following the stages of a character's response to challenges (ref. Marks, 2007; McKee, 1997; Myers, 2022; Truby, 2008; Weiland, 2016). *Weakness and Need* is a psychological and/or moral weakness that mark a character's state of disunity, fatal flaw, or the Lie they believe; a wound that causes fear, extreme hurt, inability to forgive, guilt, secrets, and shame (Ackerman & Puglisi, 2013). *Desire* is what a character wants and thinks they need, although it may be a manifestation of their Lie. The *Opponent* prevents the protagonist from achieving their Desire by treating the same moral problem in a different way, or according to different values. The *Plan* is the strategy the protagonist will use to overcome the Opponent and reach the desired goal. The *Battle* is the final conflict where the protagonist must either destroy or be destroyed by their Lie. The *Self-revelation* is the psychological and moral discovery of who the protagonist really is, and how they should act toward others. Finally, the *New Equilibrium*, or unity, is the New Normal which the protagonist has built by their hard-won Truth. It answers the thematic questions raised at the story's beginning, gives a preview into the protagonist's Lie-free life, and leaves the audience with the rising hope of a new day dawning (Weiland, 2016).

However, transformational arcs can take different directions. Writer K. M. Weiland applies the *Positive Change Arc* to the 'better-self' transformation detailed above (2016, p. 10). *The Flat* (or static) *Arc* applies to characters who do not require personal growth to defeat external antagonists, and who often serve as catalysts for change in the world around them. The *Negative Change Arc* is an inverted Positive Arc where the protagonist grows deeper into existing and new faults to end in a worse state than that in which they began. Again consistent with Stanford and Stanford (2018), Weiland considers the Positive Change Arc to be the most transformative since it requires agency and growth, facing a character's Truth and fears in order to develop something new. Negative change, on the other hand, is a process of victimisation and failure to grow, where characters are pushed along by their fears, holding on to their Lie and deepening into their worst aspects, siding with or even becoming their own true self's antagonist (2016).

Key to understanding a character's inner world is how they behave with those around them (Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2013). Each character may come into conflict with another when their relationships force comparisons regarding their weaknesses, their psychological and

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[5] For more information on television antiheroes, see Mittell (2015), sub-chapter: Lengthy Interactions with Hideous Men, pp. 142-163.

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moral needs, desires, values, power, status, and ability (Truby, 2008). Consistent with the relational psychology of Vilanova (2018), through their 'emotional collisions' with others a character can discover inner wounds that they did not previously know how to heal (Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2006).

2.3. *Transformation in complex narratives*

Complex television, as defined by Jason Mittell (2015), is particularly favourable towards ongoing character and relationship development. *Complex TV* refers to long-form television series spanning multiple episodes and seasons which combines episodic forms with serial narration. Characters in complex TV are constructs of real people, with viewers engaging with their experiences over time and developing parasocial relationships (Blanchet & Vaage, 2012). Mittell concurs that audiences engage with complex characters in the three stages defined by film theorist Murray Smith (1995): recognition (relatability of a character's emotions and beliefs); alignment (viewer attachment through immersion in a characters' experiences, emotions, thoughts, and moral framework), and allegiance (viewers' moral evaluation of characters' underlying beliefs and ethics). Following Roberta Pearson (2007), Mittell asserts that real character *transformation* provokes a change in viewer allegiance, while character *elaboration* is simply a change in how the audience perceives a character (2015, p. 13). In addition to a character's appearance and behaviour, audience allegiance is reinforced by theatrical properties such as evocative music, intimate close-ups, changes in speed and motion, symbolic lighting, and subjective camera angles (García, 2016).

Non-linear structures feature anachrony, analepses, and foreshadowing, helping to measure the impact of events, conflicts, and relationships on a character's transformation over time. Similarly, parallel storylines explore multiple perspectives and themes that transcend the progression of time. Cues trigger and play with viewer memories, inciting puzzle solving and active engagement, inviting participation in the tension and anxiety, longing, or uncertainty experienced by the characters. Non-traditional protagonists feature qualities that are not commonly the focus of cultural attention, and point of view storytelling creates a subjective sense of time, space and emotion, allowing viewers to devise a character's inner thoughts or emotions.

Complex series call for intellectual and emotional engagement, using visual, dialogic, and temporal strategies to enhance storytelling impact. Theatre scholar Robin Nelson suggests viewers are called to be attentive to the "resonances of significance" of what he terms "moments of affect": intense feeling-cognition experiences provoked by the text in the context of the viewer's real world (2016, p. 28). The antithesis of fast-paced media consumption, viewers are given time to "feel, take in, and reflect upon" the complexity of characters, story puzzles and story depth, semiotic references, reactions from other characters, and the relation of the story to a viewer's own experience (Nelson, 2016, p. 40). García and González explore how the emotions evoked by complex series are a source of self-knowledge for viewers, since emotions "unveil our values [...] Tell me which stories most incite a reaction, and I will tell you what you love and fear most, [...] who you are, or long, or fear to be" (García & González, 2016, pp. 13-18).

Mittell contrasts *complex*, appropriate detail for a multi-faceted and nuanced reality, with *complicated*, an artificially convoluted attempt to make something appear more nuanced than it is (2015, p. 216). Multiple perspectives may be presented as credible and sympathetic (Nelson, 2016), and Zeki suggests that this ambiguity is a mark of nuanced sophistication which more accurately represents the multi-layered complexity of reality (2004). Multiple stories, perspectives, and emotions are compatible within an overarching narrative, not only representing the fragmentation and diversity of interpersonal experiences, but prompting the exploration of complex ideas and themes.

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3. Case study of dramatic dialogic conflict from *This is Us*

This is Us (2016-2022) was created by Dan Fogelman and aired on NBC (National Broadcasting Company, USA). It is a family melodrama which applies complex narrative techniques to highlight the relationships between parents, children, and grandchildren from the 1950s to the present day. The series has been lauded for its emotional depth, strong ensemble cast, and relatable themes, earning critical acclaim and a devoted fanbase. It has won 66 awards with 290 nominations in outstanding drama series, outstanding performance, outstanding writing, and outstanding directing (IMDb, 2023). It follows the lives of the Pearson family across different time periods, primarily focusing on three siblings –Kevin, Kate, and Randall– and their parents, Jack and Rebecca. The show's non-linear structure allows for nuanced character and relationship development through the family's joys and struggles, revealing the connections that bind them together as they work through conflict to "look forward in the same direction" (García, 2017).

Published studies speak of the authenticity of the representation of characters and their relationships, and the complexity of the storytelling. Unconventional flashbacks show the evolution of characters' relationships over time (Zuberbuehler, 2018, p. 20), and individual characters have unique personal and social identities (Chi, 2020, p. 521). A diverse perspective on Black identity challenges stereotypes around masculinity, adoption, and mental health (Luisi *et al.*, 2020, p. 82), and a fluid-gender portrayal of "paternal melodrama" associates masculinity with humanistic sensitivity and care (Amaral & Baltar, 2021, p. 647). Nuanced representation of communication around loss, grief, trauma, addiction, anxiety, and depression goes beyond stereotypes, creates family identity, and strengthens family culture (Gattoni, 2021, p. 51), and complex representation of end-of-life communication reflects family systems theory and provides useful teachable moments (Nickels *et al.*, 2021, p. 15). An early study concluded that fatness was represented as a problem to be solved (Tingle, 2021), though later episodes shift the focus to the character's personal agency (ref. Season 6, Episode 9, "The Hill"). Parasocial grief led audiences to blame a real-life company for a fictional character's death (Foss, 2020), and the nuanced perception of caregiving options for Alzheimer's disease was found to reduce stigma toward people with early symptoms (Hoffman *et al.*, 2022, p. 7).

Among other themes, the pilot episode plants seeds of a primary internal conflict for each of the three siblings: Kevin struggles with discontent in his professional and personal life; Kate struggles with issues of weight and self-esteem; and Randall struggles with identity and acceptance from having been abandoned by his birth parents and adopted by the Pearsons. Each internal conflict is manifested in a key relationship conflict throughout the series. Kevin resents Randall for dominating their parents' attention, and for finding the personal and professional fulfilment that eludes Kevin. Kate's insecurity stems from a comparative inferiority toward her mother, Rebecca. And Randall resents Rebecca for hiding the identity of his birth father. In the interest of facilitating a deep analysis within a limited space, this article focuses on a particular case study of the climatic episode of the relationship conflict between Randall and Rebecca in Season 1, Episode 9, "The Trip."

The episode is directed by Uta Briesewitz and written by series creator Dan Fogelman, together with Vera Herbert and Aurin Squire (story editor). It features a now grown Randall, an African American businessman, husband, and father of two girls, dealing with his recent discovery that his adoptive white mother (Rebecca) hid from him the identity of his African American birth father (William) since he was an infant. After a long search Randall found William with the help of an investigator, and is shocked that his beloved adoptive mother would have intentionally caused him pain. As he deals with the discovery, he moves through the various stages of conflict-dialogue, analysed here in light of the *Bridging Differences Timeline*. Each dialogic behaviour has been studied for its impact on both the character's inner transformation and the relationship conflict.

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3.1. *Behaviour 1: Agency and choosing to engage*

For dialogue to be possible, the protagonist (of the encounter) must recognise the reality of the difference or conflict. The greater the person's sense of *agency* –the free recognition of the conflict and how it affects them– the greater the potential for transformation (SimanTov-Nachlieli *et al*., 2018). While anyone can attempt to dialogue through conflict, the protagonist should determine if it is fitting and desirable to do so in this instance.

In the script. Before reaching this first stage in a dialogic conflict, the audience has already seen the character's "before" state that hints at their Weakness and Need (their Lie and the Truth they feel compelled to move toward), their Desire, their Opponent and possibly part of their Plan to move forward. In entering a conflict, a character demonstrates self-awareness in choosing to engage, but in trying to fulfil their Desire their initial response is defensive and protective of their Lie. Despite this, choosing to engage is a significant step toward transformation, and they are closer to confronting their Lie than they were before.

3.1.1. *The Trip*, 00:00-05:21

The scene opens with Randall confronting William to find out what Rebecca knew about his birth father. Randall demonstrates psychological prowess by making a list of 22 ways that Rebecca's deceit has hurt him, drawing a direct connection between the relational conflict and the character's inner wound. A semi-subjective flashback shows young Randall in a supermarket looking for his birth parents, asking chance African American adults if they share his genetic trait of being able to roll his tongue. The shot begins at child-height, and we look up into the bewildered faces of the unfamiliar couple.

Another flashback shows Rebecca affirming to Jack (Rebecca's husband and Randall's adoptive white father) that "we are his parents," and keeping the secret. Jack corroborates Randall's perspective by restating Randall's questions. Even without Randall's presence in the scene we see Rebecca from his moral perspective, defiant and defensive, and are thus aligned with his point of view. Psychologically speaking, it is reasonable to be immersed in the protagonist's perspective at the beginning of a conflict. As more detail is elaborated around Randall's pain, the viewer develops empathy with him as the main character of the episode. Back to the present day, Kate and Kevin (Randall's adoptive white siblings) show disbelief at Rebecca's concealment, corroborating Randall's reaction.

The first five minutes demonstrate Randall's agency in recognising the impact of the conflict both past and present. Jack, Kate, and Kevin take Randall's side, and Rebecca's defensiveness makes her guilt ring true. Four different scenes (two present and two past) present the perspectives of present-day Randall, young Randall, past Rebecca and Jack, and present-day Kate and Kevin. Through time and perspective jumps, in addition to impassioned screenwriting and acting (Randall's raised voice, and angry pacing and facial expressions), the audience is vicariously placed in the thick of a relationship conflict involving multiple perspectives from past and present. The foundation is set for possible future transformation.

3.2. *Behaviour 2: Pausing to reduce emotional reactivity*

The threat of conflict often stimulates a self-defensive reaction to fight, fly or freeze, and the intention to dialogue requires pausing reactivity to engage in conscious, open communication (Ripley, 2021). *Mindfulness*, an awareness of one's thoughts, feelings, and surroundings in the present moment, helps to slow reactivity and manage emotions before they dominate behaviour. It facilitates assuming good intentions in the other, reduces unconscious bias and reactive judgements, and strengthens feelings of kindness and connection (Kiken & Shook, 2011). Mindfulness replaces fear with observation, and awakens curiosity. Humour and playfulness can help to reframe issues and open new avenues for consensus building and resolution (Sclavi, 2008). While the habit of mindfulness can be cultivated in daily life, a

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particular conflict may require a 'time out' to gain perspective and remove oneself from emotional reactivity.

In the script. Engaging in conflict, a character feels the full emotional impact of an attack on their Weakness. Taking time out helps build the emotional resources to manage this stress. By mentally or physically distancing themselves from the turmoil, the character allows defensive emotions to subside and more rational emotional capacities –including deeply held values, motivation, and curiosity– to be restored. In the event that the character is unable to take time out, supportive characters may intervene to bring them into a reflective, safe space. Here, the character can shift from defence to observation, marking a significant step towards positive transformation.

3.2.1. *The Trip*, 05:22-11:31

The following scene shows Randall, Kevin and Kate going to 'The Cabin', a family holiday house in a natural setting outside the city, where they traditionally spent Thanksgiving. Kate and Kevin remove Randall from the emotional chaos of his home, his memories, and his troubled relationship with Rebecca, to a place surrounded by nature. Kevin, trying to comprehend a picture puzzle on the wall, introduces a new metaphor for conflict resolution, remembering his father's advice to "relax your eyes, look through it, and it's right there in front of you." Another narrative device has the siblings looking through an old photo album discussing 'What is real?' about the family's past. Kate says, "Our family is real, Mom's love for you is real," but Randall responds: "That's Mom lying to me about not finding my birth father." Taken at face value, the photographs –like the picture puzzle– do not reveal the whole story. Rebecca's photographed smile is contrasted with Randall's frown.

We again flash back to Jack and Rebecca talking to an African American friend, learning that Randall needs black role models. The flashback elaborates backstory around Randall's search, Jack's efforts to help him, and Rebecca's continued deceit. Although the process has begun, there is, as yet, no transformation in Randall or in his relationship with Rebecca. Returning to the present, Randall goes deeper into his 'time-out' when he unknowingly drinks a beverage containing hallucinatory mushrooms. This introduces a comic element that helps both Randall and the audience change their mood around the serious theme. The close-up of a high Randall's wide-eyed expression draws a laugh from the audience, and Kevin's dry response (snapping a picture of his responsible brother) emphasises the unexpected humour of the scene. In his dream state, Randall has a conversation with long-deceased Jack, initiating the next step towards dialogue: seeking advice from a respected authority.

3.3. *Behaviour 3: Seeking advice*

Intellectual humility, an essential prerequisite for genuine dialogue, requires looking beyond oneself and asking advice with an openness to learn and possibly change (Shigeoka *et al.*, 2020). Exposure to new people, events, and experiences can broaden one's sense of what is comfortable and familiar, seeking counter-stereotypical information and replacing general impressions with real, first-hand experiences and understanding. *Self-distancing*, thinking or talking to oneself in the third person, can also reduce emotion and remove the sense of threat.

In the script. Once a character is removed from reactive emotions, they are better equipped to seek and heed advice form a trusted authority. The relationship roles of Mentor, Attractor, and Wise Magician (Myers, 2022; Truby, 2008) can help the protagonist comprehend the root of the conflict, that is, their Weakness and Need, and choose how they wish to respond. Replacing the protagonist's fear-based beliefs with the beneficial perspectives of a respected authority (Stanford & Stanford, 2018) moves the conflict closer to dialogue, and the protagonist closer to transformation.

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3.3.1. *The Trip*, 11:32-35:11

Randall, high on mushrooms, has a conversation with Jack, his deceased and beloved adoptive white father. Jack explains "we went through a lot for you," and taking Jack's perspective in a flashback, we walk behind him and young Randall into a martial arts class led by an African American teacher. Another flashback shows Jack suggesting to Rebecca the possibility of hiring an investigator to find Randall's birth parents. Jumping to a memory within the flashback, Rebecca visits William. The dreary, grey-blue clip from a longer scene shows Rebecca entering William's apartment, about to have a conversation. The audience, aware of present-day Randall's prior ignorance of his birth father, knows this visit did not turn out in his favour, building curiosity around what went wrong.

Back to the hallucinatory present, Randall confronts Jack, "the truth is, you never wanted me either, [...] I was a replacement for your dead baby," referring to Rebecca and Jack's third, stillborn child. "I spent my life striving for perfection [...] because I live in fear that if I let up for a moment, I will remember that I am unwanted. And then what'll happen to me?" Randall's conflict with Rebecca has revealed his deeply rooted insecurity not only about his black identity in a white family, but about whether he is wanted at all. The scene recognises the complex interrelation between an individual's self-awareness (and their subsequent choice for protection or growth) and their relational response to another (in protective conflict –whether necessary or merely habitual– or free, dialogic growth).

The conversation continues with emotive closeups and resonant pauses, as Jack says, "You aren't a choice, Randall, you are a fact. You were never a replacement son." But Randall tearfully responds, "If I had known that the man who abandoned me regretted it, that he wanted me back, that would've made all the difference in the world." After a pause, Jack offers: "I'm sorry that she lied to you, but we can't change that, so what do you want to do now?" Randall, looking in through the Cabin window to a young Rebecca playing a boardgame with Jack and the children, responds, "I want her to hurt as much as I do." Randall is not yet ready for growth.

We flash back to Rebecca's visit to William, where she discovers he's been drug-free and working for the last five years. William's enthusiasm to meet his son provokes Rebecca to walk out on their conversation, leaving a disappointed William contemplating the open door. Back with Jack, Rebecca justifies her actions, "What if [Randall's birth parents] are great, what if they regret abandoning him and they want him back? [...] I cannot lose my son." Rebecca's perspective is voiced for the first time: her fear, her love for Randall, and her desperation to keep her family together.

In the present, Randall, still high from the mushroom drink, walks into the past cabin scene and yells at Rebecca. He begins to read his list of hurts, as she, oblivious to his words and absorbed within the past scene, gazes lovingly at her family. The scene sets up an impossible juxtaposition: an angry present-day Randall accuses past Rebecca of denying him love and affection, while past Rebecca gazes at her young family, Randall included, with love and affection.

Outside, Jack encourages Randall to go further: "...these things aren't that simple [...] relax your eyes and look through it, it's right there in front of you." The invitation to understand what lies beneath the other's perspective is the next step in the dialogue process.

3.4. *Behaviour 4: Seeking to understand deeply*

Effective dialogue requires a shift from trying to convince the other to trying to understand them, bringing the dialogic focus to empathy and connection (Shigeoka *et al.*, 2020). This involves listening with compassion, seeking to understand where the other person is coming from, and why they developed their perspective. It requires affirming feelings and opinions, being curious and asking questions to clarify understanding. It helps to use engaged body language, take turns listening and speaking, and avoid expressing judgements or giving

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advice. Storytelling can provide context, and perspective taking –imagining seeing the world through their eyes– can help to develop intellectual empathy rather than emotional empathy, permitting one to understand without being unduly influenced by emotions (Bloom, 2016). One can seek to understand their values and how they might be similar or different from one's own, without necessarily agreeing or trying to persuade them.

In the script. The character is now at a crossroads in their journey from need to attainment, Lie to Truth. With newfound tools to recognise and combat their Lie– derived from their calmer state and from the advice received –they shift from reactive to active and experience a "moment of enlightenment" (Marks, 2007, p. 239). They act outside their comfort zone, trying to understand even when they don't fully comprehend, speaking kindly to avoid causing harm. They are divided between defending themselves against the Opponent to protect their Lie-hurt, and trying to understand the Opponent and let go of their Lie. They may be clumsy rather than confident in their efforts to dialogue, but it is a giant step towards transformation. Audiovisual has great potential for visualising perspective taking, selectively portraying the Opponent's values in a way that allows the protagonist and audience to understand, even though they may not agree.

3.4.1. *The Trip*, 35:12-36:00

At 35 minutes into the episode, Randall finally looks through the picture to understand what lies behind Rebecca's smiling face. A new, non-diegetic song builds the emotional impact of Randall's revelation, "The Calvary Cross" by Richard and Linda Thompson, with lyrics, "Everything you do, you do for me." We see Rebecca through a filter of dark purples and blues, a silhouette outlined by a harsh light coming from outside a window. A close-up of her fearful face shows her anxiously turning the three locks on the Cabin door, and struggling to shut the window to protect her family. Jack's voice explains her troubles: three different children, each with their own problems, her not-always-perfect marriage, her own problems, and her efforts to keep them all safe.

A fast-changing sequence shows Randall watching a frantic Rebecca through the Cabin window, interspersed with quick, naturalistic flashbacks to Rebecca holding baby Randall, Rebecca kissing child Randall goodnight, and Rebecca with her young family at the pool. Randall sees Rebecca's perspective in context. He bangs on the window, exclaiming, "Mom, we're here, we're right here!" Past Rebecca stops her movement and looks out toward Randall and the viewer. Randall's face has changed, his eyes "see through," and he understands *why* Rebecca acted as she did.

3.5. *Behaviour 5: Searching for a common good*

After understanding the other's perspective, one is better able to find shared identities, groups, or roles, being conscious of not suppressing differences (Shigeoka *et al.*, 2020). It is helpful to look for common values, goals, purpose, or objectives to identify a common good towards which both parties wish to move forward, even detailing the practical steps required to achieve it. Shifting perceptions of 'the other' from adversaries to collaborators is a powerful enabler for dialogue and allows both parties to focus on solutions.

In the script. In the relational or inner conflicts which lead up to the main Battle, the character must choose to either destroy their Weakness or be destroyed by it. They pass through a death-to-self experience to abandon their fatal flaw in order continue on with their life. In searching for a common good with their Opponent, they move away from protecting their Lie and toward a solution, which helps them discover their true need. Without a Weakness-Lie to attack, the Opponent's threat is no longer dangerous, even if the new collaboration with a prior enemy is frightening and uncertain. The protagonist is preparing to take the final test which their growth-dialogue decision implies.

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3.5.1. *The Trip*, 37:01-40:59

In the present-day aftermath of the mushroom trip and his conversation with Jack, Randall is fixing the roof of The Cabin. He encounters two toy figurines earlier discovered by hallucinated-Jack, blending the real and imaginary and serving to validate Jack's advice. Randall makes it clear he is not fixing the roof for Rebecca, but for Jack. Yet it represents a shift in his perspective, since Jack was fixing the roof for Rebecca, and although Randall is still not talking to Rebecca, he is helping to repair her house. With this action, Randall separates Rebecca's deceit from his own insecurity about being loved and accepted.

Another flashback shows the martial arts teacher talking to Jack and the other fathers: "When things get tough, we are the ones who are going to hold each other up." Jack exceeds the required number of push-ups with young Randall on his back, encouraged by a smiling Rebecca watching from the side. Flashing back to the bedroom, Rebecca says to Jack, "We need to be enough for him."

The core motive for the relationship conflict has evaporated once new light has been shed on Randall's inner conflict. In realising he is loved and wanted, he no longer needs to protect himself. In trying to understand Rebecca's motives and choosing to help her –even indirectly by fixing the roof of her Cabin– he is able to let go of his Lie. Psychology and narrative theory both demonstrate the connection between a growth-dialogue response to conflict and a character's inner transformation. Complex storytelling adds the history, context, and multiple perspectives to convey the ambiguity, nuance, and open-endedness of this slow and intricate process.

Back to the martial arts scene, Rebecca's voice is heard reading a letter she wrote to William explaining that he cannot see Randall. We flash to William, tearfully reading the letter, and storing it between the pages of a written manuscript, "Poems for My Son, by William Hill," which he had thought to give to Randall. The poignant impact of Rebecca's decision continues to elaborate her unchanged part in the relationship conflict, contrasted with the transformation witnessed in Randall.

3.6. *Behaviour 6: Acting toward the common good*

After identifying a common goal, it is necessary to apply courage (and if necessary, heroism) to overcome the temptation to avoid dealing with an issue, with a willingness to engage in productive tension (Shigeoka *et al.*, 2020). It is important to create a sense of interdependence and mutual benefit from the interaction (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), which requires vulnerability and a willingness to take risks, offering something that may be freely accepted or rejected by the other party. A sense of humour, playfulness, and experimentation can help to allow for mistakes and rectifications on both sides. The most effective dialogue is carried out with an attitude of love and forgiveness, 'calling in' with empathy and understanding rather than 'calling out' with anger, which often leads to greater polarisation (Ross, 2016). True dialogue is a fine balance which does not try to change the other's mind, nor indeed compromise one's own values. The goal is to understand and be understood, without necessarily coming to agreement. It is a two-way exchange which faces the underlying needs of both parties (Rosenberg, 2003). In some cases, simply talking may become the objective, especially where a solution doesn't readily exist, enabling deeper discussions that could offer new insights and approaches that would otherwise never be explored.

In the script. The protagonist's Battle is not necessarily directed against the Opponent, but primarily against their own Weakness, which they must overcome in order to achieve self-fulfilment. The protagonist must defend their choice against their Lie while not betraying their own values. They no longer act automatically in reflexive self-defence, making the other into an opponent. They are free and vulnerable, consistent with the values at the core of their identity. In collaborating to build something good with an opponent who up until now represented danger, they discover they are able to respect the opponent's free, still uncertain response. Even if the opponent does not respond favourably, the protagonist has already

achieved their own transformation, becoming their authentic self. There is a New Equilibrium in which the protagonist has moved to a higher level through their experience of the crucible. A denouement may follow which shows what the journey has meant to the protagonist and how their life has changed.

We contrast the character at the beginning of the conflict living in the Normal World shaped by the Lie, and now at its end living in the new Normal World built by their hard-won Truth (Weiland, 2016). Yet this new world is not perfectly defined, as the very nature of dialogue leaves it open-ended, a vague, rising hope of a new day dawning. Multiple protagonists may lead to a "double reversal" where both the hero and opponent have a Self-revelation (Truby, 2008, p. 44). Yet even where an opponent has rejected efforts to build bridges, the process opens the way for other, unexpected creative outcomes. The deadlock of conflict has been overcome, and transformation remains open and active.

3.6.1. *The Trip*, 41:00-41:57

At minute 41, just before the episode ends, Randall visits Rebecca at her home. "I have here a list of all the reasons […] why you have destroyed me by keeping William a secret…," he tells her. Rebecca replies, "Let me explain," but Randall has already understood her perspective. He looks at her with honesty, hurt, and love, and continues off-script from the spiel he had prepared, "You kept that secret for 36 years…". A long pause heightens emotion and makes his transformation resonate deeply with the audience, "That must have been incredibly lonely." Randall is no longer self-protective and demonstrates extraordinary empathy toward Rebecca. Rebecca bursts into tears (likely accompanied by the viewer), overwhelmed by the understanding that Randall is showing her. She moves to embrace him, but he tells her he will see her at Christmas. He does not give her the list.

Rebecca's emotion reflects a sense of what it means to be understood rather than judged, a recognition of the struggle she has been through. Yet full reconciliation requires time. Rebecca's participation in the conflict so far has been elaborated but not transformed, seen in Randall's subjective flashbacks to her past actions. Her conflict with Randall –the secret she long held from him– reveals her own long inner struggle and fatal flaw: her desperate efforts to protect her family and keep them together, stemming from her insecurity around "being enough" for them. Yet the power of dialogic bridging can be seen in that Randall's progress toward understanding Rebecca begins the healing of Rebecca's Weakness, freeing her from a painful bond (her silence about Randall's parentage), and preparing the way for her own evolution.

3.7. *Circumstantial factors that favour dialogue and transformation through conflict*

If the *environment* –other people and institutions– favours collaboration and tolerates its often-unexpected tensions, individuals are more likely to do the same (Shigeoka *et al.*, 2020). It may be necessary to reassess the *broader narrative* around a difficult theme, to determine whether understanding corresponds with reality. *Time* can play an important role in helping to fathom the true significance of events for one's long-term identity and relationships. Activating memory gives a future to the past (Kearney, 2017), sifting through recollections to recognise what matters, and drawing guidance for the future. It also helps to balance the sense of history by acknowledging not only the bad –the wars and conflicts– but also the good, especially the efforts to build peace.

In the script. Supporting characters may help a protagonist deal with the tensions of a conflict-dialogue. They may serve as a bridge between the protagonist and the opponent, demonstrating the myriad of positions in-between the polarities of "us" and "them," helping the protagonist to do the same. If they soften emotional reactions by offering support, humour to diffuse tension, or company through uncertainty, the main character has a higher chance of transforming the conflict into dialogue. Bigger themes may be explored through actions

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and conversations, influencing a character's perception. A narrative can jump back and forward, circle around, repeat from different perspectives, skip over, slow down, speed up and turn back time, focusing on the true significance of events for a character's identity and relationships. Additionally, time between episodes allows the audience to process themes and consider them in relation to their own lives. Finally, a script is always selective about which aspects of history to show in order to build its narrative, and in order to assist dialogue it should include references to both the good and the bad with as much context as possible. Recognising past efforts to build peace provides a contextual foundation upon which to construct present and future dialogue.

3.7.1. *The Trip*, 00:00-41:57

Randall may not have been able to distance himself from his emotional response to the conflict without the help of Kate and Kevin, who physically took him out of the turbulent space he was in. They were patient, tolerating the uncertainty and tensions that Randall felt during the transformation process, allowing him to take the time he needed. The broader narrative around adoption versus natural parents, and whether the right decisions were made or not made, are suspended with the recognition that it is not possible to change the past, and may be more helpful to choose how one wishes to move forward (Bennett & Oliver, 2019).

Complex flashbacks and flashforwards present the temporal dimensions of the struggle on both sides, helping to understand the full significance of actions. We hear the words spoken and witness the different perspectives of the parties involved. In particular, this episode shows how selected memories can portray a comprehensive picture, looking not only at the bad –Rebecca's deceit– but also at the efforts for peace, when she tried to be enough for Randall.

4. Discussion

"The Trip," an episode within a centripetal complex series, delves into the psychological depths of its characters, primarily focusing on the development and impact of their relationships. The psychology behind dialogic relationship conflict and individual transformation is central to the narrative theory of character development and relational conflict dynamics. While transformative narratives may follow a simple linear progression, a complex narrative enriches the portrayal of agency, conflict, dialogue, and transformation, mirroring the vacillating, intricate, multi-directional psychological experiences of the characters. The fragmented yet coherent non-linear narrative conveys a gradual change in the characters' experience of meaning, opening up new ways of being in the same circumstances and relationships. The transformation is less like a linear arc and more like the gradual solidification of an image which gains definition, depth, and richness.

Randall has faced an inner conflict regarding his identity and acceptance within his adoptive and birth families. As he passes through the stages of conflict-dialogue, his existential insecurities are exposed, serving as a catalyst for his personal growth and the resolution of the conflict with his mother. The audience reaches deep emotional engagement through close-ups, poignant music, and moments of affect that ponder the resonances of experiences, motivations, and perspectives. The viewer is guided to feel, take in, and reflect upon Randall's doubts and realisations about Rebecca's motivations, as well as his surprising decision to forgive her, prompting them to wonder what they might do in his place.

The non-linear, puzzle-based structure takes the viewer through 22 time jumps between ongoing present, non-sequential flashbacks, and a dream-like alternate present. Further sub-scene jumps reference the reactions or parallel storylines of different characters. Temporal complexity enables the audience to appreciate the full scope of each character's journey and growth, their motivations and emotions, the impact of their decisions over time, and the evolution of their perspectives. An intentionally selective and gradual revealing of character backstory shifts the viewer's moral alignment, initially presenting Rebecca as defensive and

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defiant, and later revealing her as loving and fearfully protective. Thus, visual storytelling facilitates a deeper understanding of the complex emotions and decisions shaping Rebecca's actions, ultimately promoting empathy toward her.

The Cabin 'time-out' setting, as a neutral and calming space, also symbolises family traditions and memories, connecting Randall to a broader past beyond his binary conflict with Rebecca. Complex metaphors such as the picture puzzle symbolise the counter-intuitive process of gaining new perspectives on conflict through relaxing one's efforts. Photographs serve as a narrative device to challenge objective reality and introduce the complexity of multi-perspective family dynamics. Hallucination, another narrative device, provides comic relief, facilitating Randall's exploration of difficult themes while also enabling him to converse with his deceased father.

The balance of humour and serious themes allows the audience to relax, engage, and empathise with the characters. The episode highlights the strong emotions that drive conflict, as well as the importance of waiting them out to facilitate growth and dialogue. By juxtaposing perspectives that are impossible to visualise in real life, such as angry, present-day Randall confronting loving, past Rebecca, the complexity of conflict emotion is understood as resentment built up over time. Similarly, voice-over narration bridges the gap between external actions and characters' internal motivations, such as William's tearful receipt of Rebecca's letter accompanied by her gentle explanations of why he cannot meet Randall. Yet it also reveals the equivocality of human relationships when one person's intention differs from the other person's experience.

Visual storytelling through colour and lighting creates representations of emotional states. The transformative moment for Randall occurs when he sees through the warm tones accompanying young Rebecca's smile, to the cold, grey fears she hides beneath. Jack's voiceover explains her worries, reinforcing the value of storytelling in fostering understanding and empathy. Pacing and editing move from slow, introspective reflection, to faster, emotion building sequences that evoke the tension of Rebecca's concern. Parallel storylines show the interconnectedness of each character's experiences, yet contrasting character arcs show different stages of transformative development even within one relationship.

Complex narrative techniques convey characters' inner conflicts over time, implying their thoughts and emotions and prompting the consideration of multiple perspectives necessary for dialogic bridging. Their combined effect artfully conveys the gradual building of a nuanced self-awareness resulting from dialogue, perspective taking, and repeated efforts to understand the other, a process which stimulates growth and transformation. Ultimately, the narrative leaves viewers with a sense of hope, a complex "felt good" (Williams, 2012, p. 529) that opens their hearts to the beauty of hard-earned forgiveness, and the transformative potential of dialogue.

5. Conclusion and further research

Research in psychology indicates stages for a credible transformation from conflict to dialogue, incorporating behaviours proven to enable a true, deep encounter which helps people engage in a free and unbiased way. This complex television case study would benefit from further analysis of other narrative relationship conflicts to continue exploring the connection between conflict-dialogue and verisimilar character transformation. On the other hand, the study of the dramatisation of the seven conflict-dialogue elements reveals dimensions which cannot be readily seen in real life. We witness the context of conflict throughout time, and see interior pauses and struggles which we may not be otherwise evident. We understand emotional climates through colour, music, and close-ups. We pay attention to details, facial expressions and gestures that would normally go unnoticed. We skip ahead to the denouement of the conflict after identifying the true inner struggle of the character, and in less than 42 minutes we understand the direct link between the conversion

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of conflict into dialogue and the inner transformation from protection to growth. The combination of psychology, narrative conflict dynamics, and complex narrative techniques creates a participatory, appropriately ambiguous, and life-resonant experience of the science of bridging differences and the transformative impact of dialogue.

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Annex

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