Human Encounter at Work

by

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Dedication

To my parents,

who were my first world of encounter.

Your steadfast presence has been the guiding light of life.

To Yusoo,

my lifelong companion and greatest longing for deep encounter.

Your dear presence fills me with a longing to cherish every moment of our togetherness.

To Noah,

my little teacher of encounter.

Your pure presence, even before birth, has taught me the profound joy of being together,

in ways I have never imagined.

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Preface

Before I begin writing anything scholarly, I first want to acknowledge that I am deep into my own personal journey of discovering and recovering my own humanness. After 35 years of being in the world, I realize how I have treated others and myself and been treated by others in a less than ideal way. As I am writing this page, I am still struggling with my own fear, self-doubt and self-criticism, which altogether makes me see myself as less than who I am. Therefore, what I am about to explore in the rest of this dissertation proposal is not only my intellectual journey but also a very personal one with my deep longing for reconnecting with how our being was intended to be. In that sense, this draft will never be complete or perfect in any absolute sense since this journey should continue until the moment of my death. Thus, I make it clear before I write anything further that these are the thoughts I have put together from my best human effort so far. Whatever words I end up putting here, I look forward to expanding, elaborating and even challenging them—for the rest of my personal and scholarly journey—as I deepen my understanding of what it means to be human and what it means to encounter other beings.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Appendices

Abstract

The tendency of people in organizations to treat each other as impersonal objects is arguably one of the greatest sources of suffering in our modern world. My dissertation explores the ways organization members can break free from objectifying exchange relationships and instead experience *human encounter* at work. More specifically, in this dissertation, I explore *(1) what is human encounter? (2) how is human encounter experienced at work?* and *(3) what difference does human encounter make at work?*

In Chapter 1, I introduce the concept of human encounter and provide an overview of the dissertation. Importantly, I emphasize in this chapter that human encounter inevitably has metaphysical and spiritual dimensions, which defy a scientific way of knowing. Thus, I invite readers to engage with my dissertation in a holistic way beyond what is required in a mere intellectual inquiry.

With such an aim, in Chapter 2, I offer an autoethnographic essay detailing my personal experiences with human encounter and its absence. This narrative aims to bring to life the potentially abstract concept of human encounter, setting the stage for the literature review and empirical exploration of the topic in the subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 3, I venture beyond my personal experiences to examine how others have approached the idea of human encounter. I first review how social science has explored human relationality at work. Then, to gain a comprehensive understanding on the topic, I delve into philosophical and theological perspectives on the human relationality, tapping into their deep

contemplation of metaphysical existence and human encounter. I outline how these perspectives, along with insights from social scientific studies, inform our understanding of what human encounter is, how it is experienced, and what difference it makes at work.

In Chapter 4, I empirically explore human relationality at work in the research setting that used literary narratives to facilitate relational change among organizational members. Drawing on participant observations and interview data, I uncover a continuum of human encounter–the *emergent*, the *personizing*, and the *transcendent*—which reflects varying degrees of engagement, awareness and relationships. In contrast to the objectifying exchange, this continuum offers insight into the different levels of interactions among organizational members, from mere utilization for work-related purposes to the establishment of profound engagement that extends beyond the professional realm. Lastly, I illustrate how human encounter experience contributes to enhancing a work group's collaborative efforts and elevating their overall work dynamics.

In Chapter 5, I synthesize the insights gained about human encounter throughout the dissertation, offering its final description as a form of genuine relational experience in which organizational members engage with one another in their humanity. I establish that human encounter represents a qualitatively distinct relational state from objectifying exchange, which I define as a form of pseudo-relational experience in which organizational members treat each other as impersonal objects. I also highlight the contributions my dissertation makes to management scholarship. Finally, I conclude the chapter with additional reflections on the topic of human encounter.

I hope my dissertation addresses a persistent critique of business (i.e., its exploitive nature) and sheds light on a better way forward for managers, workers and business scholars

alike by encouraging us to revisit how we have thought about human existence and relationality in work contexts and, importantly, its forgotten, yet beautiful, possibility.

Chapter 1 Introduction and Overview

I invite you to embark on a journey into human encounter, a phenomenon that beckons us towards an understanding that may forever elude our grasp. What does it mean to encounter another being? Animal ecologist Stephan Harding recounted an encounter[1] he experienced during his doctoral research on muntjac deer:

> Well, I had many experiences of this kind of encounter with the muntjac deer that I studied for my doctorate. And some of the moments I most remember would be when I was just waiting. For many minutes, or even an hour or more, nothing would happen. And then if I was lucky, a muntjac would appear and just stand even just for a few seconds. And if I was lucky, it'd look in my direction. Then time stood still, time stopped. And there was this **infinite moment of meeting between myself and the muntjac[2]**. There was a sense of the being of the muntjac as a revelation, as if some kind of syrupy smoke was moving from the muntjac to me, infusing my whole being with muntjac-ness so I could immediately understand the wholeness of the muntjac and how they relate to the entire world… there was encounter when what you've been studying looks back at you. It's not understanding that hangs in the air, but a "hello." There is a conversation. You are not alone. (Encountering another being, October 2017)

Encounter experiences among humans are often depicted in literature. In the short story *Flight Patterns* (Alexie, 2004), a post 9-11 taxi ride to the airport facilitates human encounter

[1] In this dissertation, the terms 'encounter' and 'human encounter' are used interchangeably.
[2] In this dissertation, I have used bold style in some quoted sentences to signify my added emphasis.

between William, a sales rep, and Fekadu, the driver. For much of the trip, William tries to avoid conversation. He is preoccupied with his own worries. But Fekadu's query, "You are a family man, yes?" (p. 206), prompts deeper sharing. William talks about the pain of leaving his wife and daughter while he travels; Fekadu talks about the pain of leaving his wife and sons behind in Ethiopia. They swap experiences about being racially misidentified. As Fekadu tells more of his story, William wonders how much this "short and thin black man" (p. 199-200) is exaggerating in hopes of a higher tip. Still, he finds himself wanting to believe. Approaching the airport,

> William was surprised to discover that he didn't want this journey to end so soon. He wondered if he should invite Fekadu for coffee and a sandwich, for a slice of pie, for brotherhood. William wanted to hear more of this man's stories and learn from them, whether they were true or not. Perhaps it didn't matter if any one man's stories were true... If Fekadu wasn't describing his own true pain and loneliness, then he might have been accidentally describing the pain of a real and lonely man. (p. 219-220)

William, who is acquainted with sacred ritual as member of the Spokane Indian tribe, steps away from the cab feeling that he and Fekadu have participated in a kind of "religious moment…a ceremony" (p. 217, 221). William leaves Fekadu, speaking his last words: "Your stories, I want to believe you" (p. 223).

Encounter is "the act of recognizing something—a person, a practice, a system—on its own terms [in which] the particular character and wholeness of the other is acknowledged" (Fleming, 2016, para. 1). Above all, it starts with the acknowledgement that there is a gift of life in someone or something that you face. Stephan Harding, the ecologist who encountered the

being of muntjac deer, helps us further understand what encounter is (and, importantly, what it is not):

> Well, **encountering means really meeting something in a way that goes beyond one's intellectual process**. So normally in the West, particularly as a scientist as I am, one is taught to encounter say a tree through one's idea. So how did the shape of that tree come about through the process of natural selection? What might the forces have been that made, say the sycamore leaf, the shape it is, and you know, it becomes a sort of instinct, when you're a scientist and an ecologist, to look at nature in that sort of way. That's **not** encounter. **Encounter is when that conceptual structure vanishes**. And you actually meet the being, as the being coming forth from itself as itself, revealing itself to you in a way that's beyond your intellect. In a way, it's much more deeply intuitive and much harder to express. In fact, scientific language isn't appropriate for this kind of encounter. It's poetry that does it. It's a poetic encounter. (Encountering another being, October 2017)

As Harding so eloquently puts it, encounter is a pure mystery beyond our human reason and intellect, yet a profoundly beautiful one. Thus, it rightfully escapes our scientific endeavors to operationalize, predict, manipulate and explain it. Rather, it is there to be joyfully experienced, humbly understood, quietly beheld, and graciously respected. Yet, captivated by its beauty when it is graciously revealed to us and still longing to experience more of its beauty, I am compelled to feel hungry to understand what human encounter is and how we experience it, which has motivated me to write this dissertation.

One thing that seems true and clear about the experience of encountering another being is that it is fundamentally about “the experience of not being alone” (Fleming, 2016, para. 3).

However, our modern world is plagued with an epidemic of loneliness. According to a recent survey from Cigna in 2021, more than half (58%) of Americans report sometimes or always feeling alone (Cigna, 2021), attesting to the severity of the epidemic of loneliness in the country. In fact, the epidemic of loneliness has been identified as a public health threat even before the outbreak of COVID19. In 2018, according to Cigna's 2018 U.S. Loneliness Index, a little less than half of American adults felt left out (47%), their relationships are not meaningful (43%) and that they are isolated from others (43%) (Cigna, 2018). One in four (27%) reported that they rarely or never feel as though there were people who really understand them. Not only are people lonely but they are also anxious and depressed. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, forty million American adults (or 18.1% of the population) suffer from anxiety disorders, half of whom are also diagnosed with depression. Indeed, in 2017, 264 million people worldwide were living with depression. This makes me stop and question: Would people feel this lonely, anxious and depressed if they truly experience encountering one another?

Experiences of human encounter must be rare in workplaces as well given countless stories and reports on workplace loneliness and isolation (Murthy, September 2017). Compounding these issues are toxic organizational cultures that manifest in rampant distrust, resentment, harassment, discrimination and bullying, which are prevalent in today's workplaces (e.g., Business Wire, Nov. 20, 2019). In fact, Porath and Pearson found that workplace incivility is not only rampant but also on the rise; in their poll of thousands of workers about how they are treated on the job for 14 years, 98% reported experiencing uncivil behavior. What is more alarming is, "in 2011 half said they were treated rudely at least once a week—up from a quarter in 1998" (Porath & Pearson, January 2013, para. 1).

I argue that this presumed lack of human encounter in our life derives from our broken customs of engaging in exchange relationships where we treat each other as more or less like "objects" or "means to an end". And perhaps the place where exchange relationships are taken for granted the most is our workplaces. In the crudest sense, every organization has its own goals (e.g., survival, profit generation, etc.) and it recruits, selects and hires people to achieve its goals, promising to pay them financial rewards in return for their labor towards achieving the organizational goals. There is nothing inherently immoral or unethical about the formation of these exchange relationships in the workplace. However, being treated only in an objectifying way and seen as a mere "instrument" or a "tool," even in places where an exchange relationship is most justified, is still detrimental to our psychology and overall wellbeing. On top of that, as illustrated in the statistics and research studies on loneliness and anxiety in people's lives in general and at work cited earlier, people *are* hungry for human encounter experiences in which they *really* meet each other, with or without realizing that it *is* indeed a possibility. Therefore, how we can move beyond exchange relationships and experience human encounter with another being at work deeply matters and is worth some exploration.

Broadly speaking, my dissertation study originated from my deep desire to learn about what makes us fully human and the resulting humanity and inhumanity of work. With this curiosity in the background, the current dissertation specifically aims to explore the following as central research questions: First, ***(1) what is human encounter?*** Second, ***(2) how is human encounter experienced at work?*** And, ***(3) what difference does human encounter make at work?***

Here I will briefly explain how I have arrived at these research questions and how the process of finding these questions influenced how I approach them. This dissertation work

started when I was first introduced to my research setting, Reflection Point[3], with the help of Julia Lee Cunningham, a very special member of my dissertation committee. I gained an opportunity to read transcripts of interviews conducted with Reflection Point program participants in which they shared how the experience of reading and discussing narrative literature with their colleagues in workplaces impacted them and their relationships with colleagues. At the time, I did not have a specific set of research questions, but I was completely fascinated and mesmerized by what I saw in these interview transcripts as I was sure I was seeing something truly special. What especially struck me was how these participants shared that they got to know their work colleagues in a qualitatively different way that they had never imagined possible and the joy they experienced from developing such special relationships at work. However, I was not entirely sure how to call or even name what I observed in this research setting. It took endless back-and-forth conversations with my dissertation chair, Lance, before I finally came to call the observed phenomenon *human encounter* at work.

I soon sensed that human encounter as a phenomenon has a metaphysical quality to it. I often tried to denounce this very metaphysical dimension of the phenomenon since our usual empirical, scientific approach typically anticipated in doctoral dissertations within social sciences would be not only at odds with considering the metaphysical reality as well as limiting in capturing the essence of the metaphysical phenomenon. However, after years of reflection, I resolved that I want my dissertation to be an attempt at getting closer to the truth about human existence even if that meant that I need to not only acknowledge the metaphysical dimensions of our human existence in the social science dissertation but also bring this dimension into a central place in my scholarly engagement. Given the metaphysical and even spiritual dimension of my

[3] A detailed description of my research setting, Reflection Point, is provided in Section 4.1 of Chapter 4.

dissertation topic, I also resolved that through my dissertation I want to invite and engage readers in a holistic way beyond what is required in a mere intellectual inquiry. My reflection and the resulting rediscovered goal of writing this dissertation thus prompted me to embrace a more holistic and nuanced approach, including auto-ethnographic essay and metaphysical inquiry, beyond a typical scientific, empirical approach to a subject matter.

In this sense, the current dissertation as a whole is not a pure inductive study in which a set of truths are formed based only on my empirical observation of the phenomenon of interest, as in the grounded-theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Instead, it is closer to a study based on abductive reasoning (Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008) that "is concerned with the generation of ideas" (p. 907) through "an ampliative and conjectural mode of inquiry through which we engender and entertain hunches, explanatory propositions, ideas and theoretical elements" (p. 908). Thus, I also do not take a positivist attitude, the mainstream philosophy of science in my field, which tries to explain the variance within a variable. Instead, I intend to interpret, construct and suggest *the actual* in light of the possible (Alexander, 1990).

To fully acknowledge that the phenomenon I am exploring in this dissertation possesses a metaphysical quality that transcends our usual scientific ways of thinking and knowing, I have deviated from the typical scientific approach to structuring and building knowledge across the chapters. Typically, a dissertation follows a linear path: it begins with an introduction, followed by a literature review that culminates in hypotheses or propositions, which are then empirically tested or explored. My dissertation, however, adopts a different structure. It is not linear but radical or multidimensional. It consists of three separate, concurrent inquiries simply into the question of what encounter is through autoethnography, literature review and empirical study.

These inquiries do not build upon one another in the manner of a traditional sequential progression. Instead, I intend to encounter how the three concurrent inquiries into the subject matter come together to teach us about encounter.

Now, I briefly outline how this thinking motivated the final structure of my dissertation. My dissertation starts with an auto-ethnographic essay on my own experiences of human encounter and its absence (Chapter 2). Through sharing my own narratives on the topic of my dissertation, my aim was twofold: to let readers and I learn from my own lived experience on this topic and, more importantly, to invite readers to engage with the research topic in a way that transcends mere intellectual inquiry. Moreover, this approach intends to breathe life into a possibly abstract concept of human encounter before I delve into the topic conceptually and empirically in the following chapters.

Then in Chapter 3, I venture beyond my personal experiences of human encounter to explore how others have approached this profound idea. I first review how the field of social science has explored human relationality at work. Recognizing the limitations of confining the review solely within the realms of organizational studies and social science, I seek insights from diverse disciplines. Specifically, I delve into philosophical and theological perspectives, drawing from the depth of contemplation these disciplines offer on our metaphysical existence and human encounter. I outline how these perspectives, along with insights from social scientific studies, inform our understanding of what human encounter is, how it is experienced, and what difference it makes at work. In this chapter, by broadening the scope of inquiry, I aim to glean a deeper understanding of human encounter that transcends disciplinary boundaries, enriching the discourse with diverse perspectives and insights.

In Chapter 4, I embark on empirical investigations, immersing myself in a real-world setting to observe and learn firsthand about human encounter within organizational context. I describe what I have learned about human encounter from research setting where I had deemed it likely to observe human encounter.

In the concluding chapter, Chapter 5, I consolidate the learnings and insights gained from each preceding chapter to offer as comprehensive an overview of human encounter as possible. This synthesis serves as a culmination of the diverse modes of inquiry explored throughout the dissertation, aiming to provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

All in all, my dissertation represents a departure from traditional empirical studies within the social sciences, aiming instead to explore the profound concept of human encounter in a holistic and nuanced manner. Through auto-ethnographic reflection, interdisciplinary inquiry, and empirical investigation, I have endeavored to capture the essence of human encounter and learn about it through varying modes of inquiry. As you engage with the chapters of this dissertation, I want to invite you to adopt a mindset that transcends mere intellectual curiosity, embracing a deeper exploration of human existence. By approaching this work with openness and receptivity to the wonders of our existence, I hope you can more fully appreciate the idea of human encounter and its implications for our understanding of the world.

Chapter 2 Autoethnographic Essay on Human Encounter

The bird fights its way out of the egg. The egg is the world.
Who would be born first must destroy a world.

- From *Demian* by Hermann Hesse

As I embark on my dissertation journey, I feel compelled to begin with a deeply personal narrative. It is a confession of sorts—a glimpse into who I am, what I have become and who I yearn to become, and at the same time, why this dissertation holds such profound personal significance. In my quest for understanding human existence, I have chosen to unveil and explore my own experience of human encounter as well as that of its absence through the autoethnography. The famous lines by Hermann Hesse from *Demian* resonate with what I am about to expound in multiple layers: My story of encounter and its absence essentially comes down to a transformative process of realizing my spiritual entrapment of sorts and breaking free from it.

Through this autoethnographic essay, I hope that I can breathe life into the possibly abstract concept of human encounter and that this chapter invites readers to transcend mere intellectual inquiry and immerse themselves in the richness of lived experience. Lastly, I also acknowledge that this narrative is not just mine; I believe it contains a universal exploration of humanity—a journey toward discovering our interconnectedness and shared humanity. My hope is that you readers and I can encounter one another through this shared experience.

2.1 How it began - Being invited to a divine encounter

My story begins with the tale of my parents. Born in 1959, my parents come from the same rural town in South Korea—Na-Ju, nestled in the southernmost province of the country. They were childhood friends, and my father recounts how my mother harbored a crush on him since their middle school days. Despite their differences, they shared many similarities. Both come from economically disadvantaged families for whom affording food, let alone education, was a daily challenge. Yet, amidst this adversity, they were esteemed by peers and teachers alike for their intelligence and determination. Their journey took a significant turn at the age of fifteen when, facing financial hardships, they ventured from the south to Seoul to carve out their own paths. In Seoul, they were separated, each grappling with the demands of survival in a bustling city devoid of familial support. By day, my mother toiled as a factory laborer, while by night, she pursued education at a night school. Meanwhile, my father, with the aid of his older sister, managed to attend a regular high school during the day. Despite their fervent desire for higher education, the lack of financial support from their families thwarted their dreams of college. After years of striving in this new city, they found each other again and decided to marry in their mid-twenties. My mother opened a small snack shop and worked tirelessly day and night to fund my father's college tuition. It was a delayed journey for my father, who graduated from college in 1986 at the age of 28. Throughout their lives, the prevailing theme has been one of survival and an insatiable thirst for education—a pursuit fraught with challenges and periods of deferred longing.

Then I came into their lives, born as their first child on a cold spring day in March 1989. Even as a toddler, my father recalls my keen perceptiveness and intelligence, vividly recounting how, at just three years old, I confidently identified various company logos during our subway

trip. As a child, I displayed a scholarly inclination. Unlike many of my peers, I relished spending hours exploring and devouring books in the cozy corner of a small local bookstore, dreaming that I would someday be a poet. Like my parents, I, too, was admired for my intellect and tenacity. Revered by both peers and teachers for my outstanding academic performance in nearly every subject (excluding physical education!), I became a frequent recipient of awards throughout my elementary school years—an accomplishment that filled me with immense joy and a fervent zest for life.

Academic success became a defining aspect of my life. It was both a skill I excelled at and a source of pride, contributing significantly to my self-efficacy and self-esteem. I also found genuine pleasure in the journey of learning and growing as well as in pushing my boundaries to see how far I could go. However, what came together with my pursuit of academic excellence was the recognition and validation it garnered from those around me, including my family, especially my parents.

I can vividly recall the sheer joy and pride that lit up my parents' faces every time I brought home another award or another top-grade report card. It was evident to me that my academic achievements not only brought them immense happiness but also instilled a sense of hope—a hope for their continuing journey of economic survival and unrealized dreams of higher education. As their proud daughter, I felt a deep sense of responsibility to embody that hope, to be the beacon of possibility they longed for. Though my parents never explicitly placed these expectations upon me, I somehow internalized the belief that I needed to fulfill this role. Above all else, I wanted to be the daughter I thought they deserved. I desperately wanted to be their hope because I loved them so much.

At the age of fifteen, the same age at which my parents embarked on their own journey toward self-sufficiency, I delved even deeper into the pursuit of academic excellence. The initial tangible outcome of these efforts was gaining admission to South Korea's most esteemed private high school, which is coveted by parents for its prestige. Initially, the thrill of constantly pushing my own limits was exhilarating, as each success reaffirmed my capabilities and the facade of my self-worth. However, over time, I came to realize that my identity had become tightly intertwined with an aversion to failure—I had become someone who could not afford to falter, someone who believed failure was simply not an option. This fear of failure, though never voiced aloud, became a driving force in my life. I kept this fear hidden, particularly from my parents, unwilling to shatter the image of their steadfast, unfailing daughter who never disappointed. As a young adolescent, I may not have been consciously aware of this fear brewing within me, nor did anyone reassure me that it was okay to stumble along the way.

The culmination of my sustained academic excellence came with my acceptance to Dartmouth College, one of the Ivy League schools. The news of my admission felt surreal, both to me and my parents. It felt like the ultimate reward for years of hard work and dedication. I also understood the profound significance it held for my parents; my acceptance would have felt like their own unrealized dream fulfilled vicariously through me. It brought me immense joy and relief at the same time, knowing that I once again remained a source of pride and hope for my parents.

* * *

So I felt as though the world was ending

as I grappled with graduating from Dartmouth without a job.

Yes, without a job.

* * *

Having been a straight-A student all my life, I found myself quickly labeling myself as a "failure." Despite the countless accolades and achievements embellishing my resume, I felt a void—a profound emptiness that seemed to eclipse my entire existence. It was not just a sense of inadequacy; it was a feeling of insignificance, a suffocating weight of shame that made me want to retreat from the world, to hide from those whose approval I once sought. It was the onset of an existential crisis.

Amidst the depths of this existential crisis, I had to ask myself, *who am I without these badges of honor and trophies of success?* This deeply aching question led me to a profound period of soul-searching as if guided by some unseen force. I found myself sitting in the presence of God, though I cannot explain how I arrived there. Yet, there He was, beside me, speaking to my soul. I still remember how He told me I am loved and worthy for just who I am, not because of the long list of achievements and accolades. This was at first hard to even wrap my mind around because it was so contrary to what I have internalized ever since I was a small child. I have no doubt that my parents' love towards me had been unconditional but my heart had still been wounded by the explicit and implicit rules of the game that I have been good at playing– namely, the societal pressure to excel. But finally, God's love that knows no bound awakened me that this is not how He thinks of me. I felt as if I was invited to a fundamentally different way of seeing and relating to myself. It was as if I was once lost and found again in His love for the first time.

At the same time, God helped me understand that the way I had lived my life had been so far from the ways of His love. He helped me understand that I have mostly lived my life *as a*

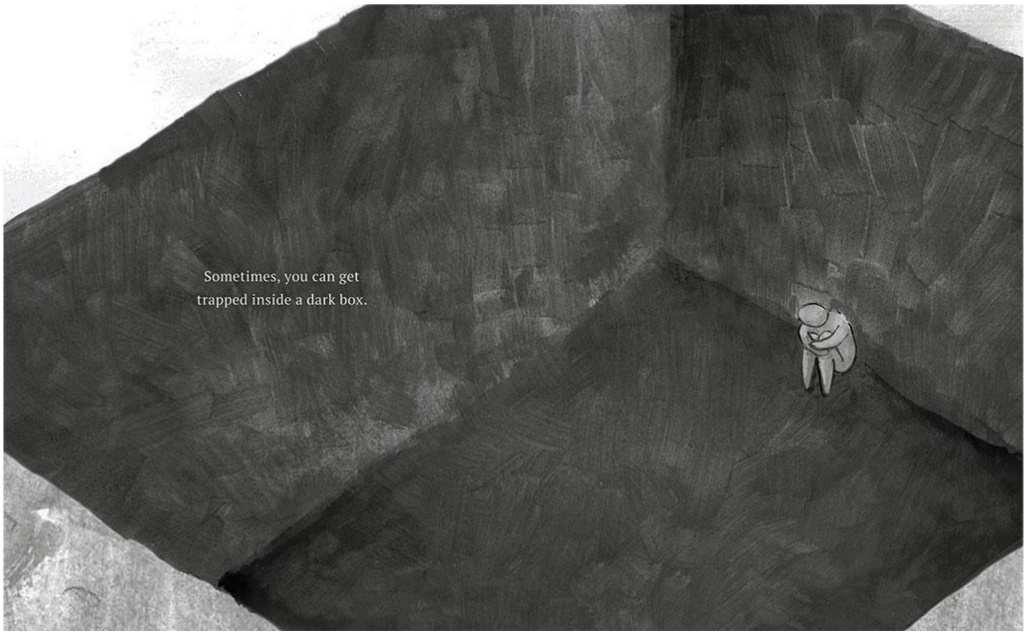
performer. All my life, I have done my best to *perform* as meticulously as possible *as* an excellent student and *as* a proud and dutiful daughter to my parents and I took pride in fulfilling these roles well. Yet, these two had been the roles I came to care about so much that they ultimately took over who I am. Another painful truth He helped me encounter was that, in trying to perform in these roles so well, I had unwittingly detached myself from the humanity God intended for in me. It was a sobering realization—that in my quest for validation through academic prowess and familial duty, I had lost sight of the vast expanse of my being. I had reduced myself to quantifiable metrics of success, measured by grades and accolades. My acts had been primarily out of fear or insecurity, a bound-to-fail attempt to grasp the intangible essence of my existence in tangible, manageable fragments. Unfortunately, in doing so, I had objectified myself; by carving myself out into tiny pieces I could handle and thinking those pieces were all of me, I have turned myself into an object I could measure and manage. I had not realized this had left a deep scar on the way I saw myself and the way I related to others and the world.

This divine encounter opened my eyes to how we confine ourselves within limiting labels, blinding us from seeing who we really are and how we were created to be. It also opened my eyes to how the typical rules of the game in this world for the pursuit of survival, security, money, status and fame–namely, everything that looks shiny and we chase after so fervently–are thoroughly against the rules of love, leading me to discover how we live our lives stripped away from our humanity, the true essence of who we really are. At that moment, this revealing invitation liberated me from the suffocating need to prove my worth. Then I realized that I had never really known true happiness before.

2.2 Still in the dark

It has now been almost twelve years since my profound encounter with God, which initially opened my eyes to a reality beyond the pursuit of achievements. Though I was spiritually awakened to the possibility of something greater, I recognize that behind most, if not all, of my enthusiastic pursuits—whether in my academic or professional endeavors or in the everyday aspects of life such as cooking, parenting, financial planning or whatever you name it—*still* lie my deep-rooted fear and anxiety. This way, fear and anxiety continue to drive much of my existence. And what is aching the most in all this is that I *still* cannot seem to love and accept myself for who I am. I thought I learned how to do it over the years but I *still* find myself utterly incapable of doing so, even after what I once thought to be a life-changing encounter that taught me how I am loved. I *still* find myself trapped in the dark.

Illustration 2.1 *Inside a dark box* by Ritu Vaishnav[4]



[4] Picture found at https://www.downtoearth.org.in/reviews/that-sinking-feeling-a-review-of-inside-a-dark-box-70444

At times, I feel as if I am confined within the narrow walls of a dark, suffocating box, constructed from societal expectations and my own insecurities. The walls press in on all sides, limiting my vision and stifling my spirit. The divine encounter served as a flicker of light, illuminating this reality of being trapped within the dark box. Yet, despite this revelation, I lacked the courage and understanding as to how to break free, clinging instead to the perceived safety of the familiar. Ironically, as much as I yearned to escape, I also felt a growing fear of the unknown world outside the box. Strangely, being in the box felt acceptable for the most part, as life appeared to progress smoothly without any major disruptions. As someone who always had valued and strived for higher education, I continued to receive acceptance letters from highly esteemed and selective graduate programs, gilding my life with these visible forms of success. In my personal life, I found someone with whom I wanted to spend the rest of my life and got married. Now happily married with a son, I realize my childhood dream of building my own family came true. Yes, my life appeared to progress smoothly without any major disruptions. In fact, I may not have even realized the extent of my entrapment. However, the inner voice within me grew louder with each passing day that I could no longer endure the confines of this dark enclosure.

2.3 Longing for human encounter

At last, I heard my inner voice saying I could no longer bear the confinement of this dark box. Its isolation, suffocation and dread had become unbearable. Yet, as I reflected further, I realized that my inner voice was expressing a deeper yearning, one that extended beyond simply escaping the confines of my enclosure. It was a longing *for* and *toward* something profound, not merely longing to be *away from* something, though I could not articulate it clearly.

After years of wrestling with this profound longing, its essence gradually unfurled before me like the petals of a blossoming flower. It was not merely a fleeting desire, but a deep-seated yearning echoing within the chambers of my soul—a yearning to align with my innate design and purpose of existence. It dawned on me that my longing was for an intimate intertwining of our beings, a merging of hearts and minds in a sacred dance of shared experiences. This longing, I realized, stemmed from a profound recognition of our interconnectedness, a primal understanding that our existence is not meant to be solitary, but communal. It was an ache to dissolve the boundaries that separate us, to immerse myself in the shared tapestry of human experience, where our joys and sorrows are woven together. In essence, it was a longing to transcend the confines of individuality and embrace the inherent relationality that defines our humanity.

It was not that I lacked people to enjoy such relationships with; I had a loving family and a circle of friends with whom I spent time and enjoyed companionship. Nor did I significantly lack any major social capabilities (or at least I want to believe so!), skills that are necessary to be able to enjoy such relationships such as empathy, emotional intelligence, trustworthiness or communication. However, I reckoned that I had not been able to experience much human encounter in my life likely because I had not left much mental and emotional space for genuine engagement with others. Simply put, I was full of myself; my life had been overwhelmingly dedicated to my own pursuits and endeavors for achievements, which always took precedence on my mental list. Despite feeling disconnected from my heart and soul's true desires to be truly present with others and become one with others, I could not bear the anxiety and fear of deviating from the familiar path I had followed for so long. This way, I started to understand that

my existence had been predominantly *self-centered*, not giving myself much chance to practice how to really be with others.

2.4 Lack of human encounter

As I grappled with the profound longing for genuine human encounter, I came to another sobering realization: Even when we are acutely aware of this longing, our lives can still feel devoid of such encounter. For me, this realization became all the more poignant in the context of my marriage. I married my elementary school sweetheart, whom I have known since the age of twelve. We were close friends for 18 years before we tied the knot. Marriage holds a unique significance when considering human encounter, as it is often viewed as the ultimate commitment in which two people pledge to spend their lives together, to be together. It is essentially a vow to be there for someone through thick and thin. However, reflecting on my five years of marriage, I have realized that even in a relationship I have chosen to commit to wholeheartedly, to be with that someone, there can still be a lack of genuine human encounter. Despite being married to a truly wonderful person, I have found myself lamenting the absence of encounter within our marriage.

I chose to marry my husband because I truly believed that there was no one better suited to spend my life with than him[5]. Our marriage began on a strong note, fueled by the anticipation of finally being together after enduring three years of long-distance dating between the US and South Korea and an additional year of long-distance marriage. In essence, our eagerness to be together was palpable. However, as time passed, I began to sense a void in our marriage.

[5] And I still believe so!

It probably started sometime after the arrival of our son. The presence of our son brought immense joy into our lives, a kind of happiness that we had never known before. What came together along with the joy of watching this wonderful little being grow and flourish was fear and pressure that we need to raise this child well. The newly imposed responsibilities of parenthood were mostly beautiful but also quickly became overwhelming, compounded by the physical absence of our own families who were far away in our home country and thus could not provide any tangible support. Juggling multiple roles – me as a mother, wife, daughter, and graduate student, and my husband as a father, husband, son, and researcher – left us with little physical, emotional, or mental energy to prioritize our relationship. Initially, I did not even notice that our marriage was taking a back seat. We were so absorbed in navigating our new roles and responsibilities that we unintentionally neglected to nurture our relationship. On the surface, we were a well-functioning, well-operating family; we got everything we had to get done (such as cooking and feeding, taking care of our son, cleaning and doing laundry) done. We effectively handled all the parenting duties quite successfully and our neighbors even commended us on our son's remarkable growth and development and the inviting ambiance of his play space. Despite the external validation and our ability to maintain a friendly demeanor with each other, I could not ignore the feeling that something vital was missing from our marriage. Even amidst our successful execution of parenting duties and professional obligations, I could not shake the absence of joy when I thought of my husband. I had never thought seriously before that the lack of joy in a relationship could be this distressing and it became increasingly evident to me that this lack of joy served as a poignant reminder of our profound disconnection.

Despite sharing the same space and engaging in day-to-day activities together, moments of human encounter seemed scarce in our marriage. Our conversations sometimes felt like mere

exchanges of information, lacking depth and emotional resonance. We may discuss schedules, chores, or practical matters, but rarely did we delve into our innermost thoughts and feelings. It was as if we were two ships passing in the night, each absorbed in our own world, unable to truly meet in the middle. This lack of encounter in our marriage left me feeling empty and lonely, making me long for deeper intimacy and understanding within our relationship. It felt emotionally more difficult to realize the lack of encounter in a relationship that I had thought I entered specifically for that purpose: to love and be present for each other. The sour part of my marriage taught me that even when we have intentions to encounter other beings, we can be utterly incapable of doing so.

2.5 Experiencing human encounter

The blank space preceding this text is not a mere oversight; rather, it serves as a symbol of silence, or more accurately, my struggle to re-enter my encounter experience and translate it into words comprehensible to others. To be honest, I found myself at a loss as to how to approach this section. Confronted with my inability to articulate my encounter experience, I initially questioned whether this meant I lacked such experiences to share. Yet upon reflection, I realized this was not the case. My heart whispered otherwise—I knew I had encountered my loved ones, both family and friends, and even my cherished pets who were like family to me. My encounter experience was not exclusive to those I had known for many years; it also unfolded with those I was just beginning to get to know. So, it was not a dearth of experiences that hindered me.

Instead, I pondered whether the challenge lay in the sacredness and vastness of the encounter experience itself. Perhaps it was so sacred that attempting to confine it within the bounds of language felt inadequate, or maybe its sheer magnitude surpassed the limits of my comprehension. I admit that it is conceivable that I am yet to fully grasp and internalize its essence. For now, "I don't quite understand" is the best response I can offer, and I have made peace with that.

2.6 Summary of key insights and puzzles

This brings us to the end of my autoethnographic essay, where I have shared my personal journey related to the topic of my dissertation. Now, I want to pause with my readers to examine the insights derived from this narrative and the puzzles that remain. In fact, I intend to do so at the end of each chapter to reflect on how our understanding of encounter deepens as we go through the dissertation. As mentioned at the end of Chapter 1, I do not intend each chapter to build upon one another in the traditional sequential manner typically present in a social science

dissertation. Instead, the summaries at the end of each chapter are presented to gather ideas about what has been learned from each inquiry into the topic so that a meaningful understanding of the subject can be reached by the end of this dissertation.

I recognize that much of my story revolved around my struggle to truly meet myself and others. In essence, it was a story about the lack of encounter, not the encounter itself. Consequently, I recognize that insights driven from this chapter do not directly answer my dissertation's research questions: What is human encounter? How is it experienced? And what difference does it make? However, the current chapter lays important groundwork and offers insights about human encounter that will be explored in the subsequent chapters.

First, my personal account highlights that understanding the lack of encounter is essential to grasping what human encounter is. When I set out to write this essay, I found myself focusing on the struggle of not being able to truly meet anyone, including myself and others. I wondered if this observation perhaps suggests that human encounter cannot be understood as an independent state of relationality but rather it is best approached in contrast to its absence. Indeed, this insight turned out to be crucial and my exploration of human encounter in subsequent chapters reflects this contrast.

Second, the essay illustrates that we may be unable to encounter one another despite a profound longing to do so. My story elucidates the deep struggle of not being able to truly meet my parents, husband, or even myself, despite a desperate desire to dwell in love and simply be with them. This points to the poignant reality that genuine encounter can be elusive, even when our intentions are otherwise.

Why is human encounter so elusive? Why can we not really meet one another, even when it is perhaps our ultimate longing and desire? My reflection suggests that self-centeredness

hinders encounter. Although not detailed in the chapter, my own experiences reveal how efforts to love and be with others can quickly turn into self-centered motives, resulting in a paradoxical inability to truly encounter them. Another insight discovered in my reflection that leads us astray from human encounter is that social conditioning distances us from our original desire to encounter and love one another. Society teaches us behaviors and expectations that distance us from the possibilities of genuine encounter. In this sense, we are not taught to truly meet anyone or anything, ever; in fact, we are often taught the opposite, to never encounter anyone or anything. And my story shows how this lack of real encounter creates a profound spiritual ache.

Lastly, my story underscores that encounter is a metaphysical and spiritual reality and that its absence—the lack of human encounter—can thus be experienced as spiritual darkness or entrapment of sort. And importantly, my story also shows that we are not equipped to break free from this spiritual darkness, even when our hearts long for encounter. This suggests that the lack of encounter is not something we can overcome by mere desire, and, at the same time, encounter is not something we can experience by mere longing either, affirming that human encounter is a mystery beyond human reason and comprehension.

So again, what is it about human encounter that makes it so elusive? And what is it about our human existence that makes us long for something we cannot obtain with our mere will? And lastly, can we ever understand what human encounter really is?

These insights and puzzles set the stage for a deeper exploration of human encounter in the subsequent chapters through literature review in Chapter 3 and empirical investigation in Chapter 4, in which I will delve further into the mystery and nuances of this profound aspect of human relationality.

Chapter 3 Literature Review on the Ideas of Human Encounter at Work

The previous chapter initiated my inquiry into human encounter through an autoethnographic lens. With the insights and puzzles about human encounter derived from the autoethnographic mode of inquiry, the current chapter expands beyond my personal experience and examines how others have approached and conceptualized this profound idea. Unlike a traditional social scientific dissertation, in which literature review aims to generate hypotheses or propositions to be tested or explored in a subsequent empirical chapter, the current literature review simply aims to deepen our understanding of human encounter at work by exploring diverse scholarly perspectives on encounter and human relationality.

I begin the literature review by reviewing how social science has explored human relationality in the workplace. To achieve a more comprehensive understanding, I then examine philosophical and theological perspectives on human relationality, drawing on their contemplations of human existence and metaphysical reality. I present how these philosophical and theological perspectives, combined with social scientific insights, enhance our understanding of what human encounter at work is, how it is experienced, and the difference it makes in the workplace. Finally, I explain how this literature review builds upon the insights and puzzles about human encounter I discussed at the end of Chapter 2.

3.1 The social science of human relationality at work

How we understand and think of people affects the nature of our relationships with them. Remarkably, these perceptions frequently adopt a suboptimal form, particularly within organizational contexts, as indicated by both historical (Marx, 1844; Weber, 2001) and

contemporary (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021) scholarship. This phenomenon, referred to as objectification, entails the unsettling reduction of a person with inherent humanity to the status of an object (Kant, 1797/1996) and has been documented as a default mode of human cognition (Waytz et al., 2014). Strikingly, this tendency is further exacerbated within work settings (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021), where people are often narrowly perceived through the lens of their work roles (Humphrey, 1985). In this objectifying perspective, they are reduced to mere "robotic" functions or "useful" instruments in economic exchange. Regrettably, this objectifying lens obscures the comprehensive human essence, fostering the dehumanized and instrumentally-driven relational landscape that typifies many workplace interactions. Likewise obscured is our understanding of how this reduction manifests in relationships as well as how the reductionist tendency might be reversed, the questions inspired by the insights and puzzles about human relationality that emerged in my autoethnographic inquiry in Chapter 2. Various streams of work in organizational studies address (sub)optimal forms of relational dynamics, sometimes with regard to how people view one another. However, the disjointed nature of the streams constrains their capacity to fully address the questions at hand. Of particular relevance are the discourses on objectification, humanization and positive relationships at work. In the rest of this section, I delve into each area of this social scientific research literature to examine how each has approached the questions at hand.

3.1.1 Objectification

Objectification refers to “a form of dehumanization that involves the perception of others as mere objects” (Baldissarri et al., 2014, p. 327). Nussbaum (1995, 1999) proposed that objectification has seven features: fungibility (a person is interchangeable with another person of the same category or type), ownership (a person is a property and can thus be bought or sold),

violability (harming a person is acceptable), inertness (a person lacks agency and thus cannot act, plan and exert self-control on their own), denial of autonomy (a person lacks self-determination) and denial of subjectivity (a person lacks feelings and experience). However, instrumentality—using a person solely to satisfy one's purpose or needs—is deemed as the most defining characteristic of objectification by many scholars (e.g., Orehek & Weaverling, 2017; Nussbaum, 1999). Indeed, Gruenfeld and colleagues (2008) described that "the process of objectification is thought to involve a kind of instrumental fragmentation in social perception, the splitting of a whole person into parts that serve specific goals and functions for the observer" (p. 111).

Major social psychology theories support a human's default tendency to classify and treat other humans as a detached thing. Research shows that categorization is one of the most basic and essential cognitive processes (e.g., Bruner, 1957; Doise, 1978; Eiser & Stroebe, 1972) and it operates on both non-social and social stimuli alike. For example, person perception theory, in its explanation of what information we extract when we see other people and how we process such social information, proposes that we constantly engage in categorization of others (i.e., social categorization; Devine, Hamilton & Ostrom, 1994; Fiske & Taylor, 1991) to make judgement on their traits and dispositions and to attribute their behaviors. Hogg (2001) suggests two possible motivations for social categorization. First, people place others in categories in order to reduce subjective uncertainty they experience in the social world. He elaborates that people categorize others "in order to render the social world a meaningful and predictable place in which [they] can act efficaciously" (p. 59). Indeed, empirical evidence supports that the more uncertainty people experience in general or in specific contexts, the stronger the tendency is for social categorization (e.g., Hogg, 2000; Hogg & Mullin, 1999). Another possible motivation is self-enhancement or self-esteem (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Turner, 1982). Hogg (2001) reasons

that social categorization is fundamentally an evaluative process in the sense that it almost always involves placing oneself into one of the categories and it might be that people engage in social categorization in order to make favorable self-evaluation. A critical consequence of social categorization is that people depersonalize and stereotype each other, viewing the other as an "interchangeable exemplar of [the] social category" rather than as "a unique person" (Turner et al., 1987, p. 50).

Research suggests that people tend to have an objectifying view towards others more in a work context than in a non-work context (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021). It has been documented particularly how the capitalistic working system has contributed to objectification in organizational contexts. For instance, Karl Marx (1844) argued that the goal in the capitalistic society is to produce wealth, and workers are valued for what they produce and the value of those products. In this way, human labor is turned into "a commodity utilized in a production process rather than as an essential part of their being" (Alienation, 2019) and human persons are deformed into something without spirit, value and dignity. In a similar vein, Max Weber (2001) also noted how a bureaucratic arrangement of work (e.g., division of labor, hierarchy and formal lines of authority) under a capitalistic rule is like an iron cage in which human factors are ignored and intentionally deprived for the sake of achieving organizational goals through seeking efficiency and rationalization. Coherently with Marx's and Weber's perspectives, Fromm (1956) also expounded that modern capitalism engenders social organizations in which workers become a simple "gear tooth." Taylor's scientific management theory (2004) is an illustrative example showing how people are objectified in organizational contexts. In his proposal of rationalizing the work process and increasing managerial control over employees by establishing standards,

workers were viewed as merely "a labor resource as opposed to human beings with personal needs and aspirations" (Green, 1986; Schwartz, 2007).

One important way organizational objectification is endorsed and manifested is through the enactment of work roles. The concept of role is one of the most popular ideas in the social sciences. Role theory concerns the ways human behaviors are affected by their social identities and particular social contexts. More specifically, the theory explains roles, characteristic behavior patterns, by assuming that "persons are members of social positions and hold expectations for their own behaviors and those of other persons" (Biddle, 1986, p. 67). Among five perspectives identified by Biddle (1986) within the umbrella of role theory, structural and organizational perspectives are of particular relevance to the current research. Structural role theory, which is at the heart of network theory (Burt 1976, 1982), concerns structured role relationships in which human persons are abstracted as "social positions" and their behaviors are presumed to be predictable and patterned based on their position in the structure. In other words, structural perspective of role theory does not consider the human element of a person's being by solely focusing on the social structure within the system.

Organizational role theory (Gross et al., 1958; Kahn et al., 1964), which has less focus on the structure, pays relatively more attention to the normative expectations people face for their social positions and explains people's behavior on social systems that are preplanned, task-oriented and hierarchical. Taking organizational role theory, Humphrey (1985) demonstrated how organizational members perceive and understand each other not primarily based on their actual unique human characteristics (e.g., abilities, talents and dispositions) but instead heavily based on the work roles they occupy. He explained that organizational factors, such as hierarchy, power structure and division or labor, systematically bias the information organizational

members have about each other primarily based on the work behaviors dictated by their work role, and they are unmotivated to correct for such biased sources of information due to their limited cognitive and motivational capacity to process excessive and extraneous information.

In line with this way of thinking about humans in organizational contexts, workplace relationships have been primarily viewed through a social exchange lens (e.g., Blau, 1964). Colbert et al. (2016) point out that the literature on workplace relationships (e.g., social support and mentoring relationships) primarily focused on how relationship partners exchange useful resources (e.g., money, advice, or support) that help individuals cope with adversity. Indeed, cultural anthropologist Alan Fiske (1992) proposes that one of the most dominantly observed categories of social relationships is characterized as market pricing, meaning "people's relationships are based around the utility they receive in an often monetary-based transaction as in the case of buyer and seller" (Fiske, 1992). Belmi and Schroeder (2021) observed how "even the language used in work settings is more transactional than the language used in non-work settings." For example, they note that social relationships at work are often called "connections" (e.g., LinkedIn) whereas they are called "friends" on Facebook. They also point out that meeting new people at work is called networking while meeting people outside of work is called socializing.

Not surprisingly, organizational objectification is associated with a wide range of detrimental consequences for organizations and the people within them. At the individual level, it has been shown to be associated with increased aggression (Poon et al., 2020), psychosomatic diseases (Caesens et al., 2017), reduced clarity of thought, emotional numbing and exhaustion (Bastian & Haslam, 2011; Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2019; Zhang et al, 2017). At the organizational level, it has been linked with increased counterproductive behaviors (Ahmed &

Khan, 2016), increased turnover intention (Bell & Khoury, 2016; Caesens et al., 2018) and decreased job satisfaction and commitment (Caesens et al., 2017, 2018). Furthermore, several works in this body of research have suggested that workplace objectification impacts relational experiences at work. For instance, the absence of humane treatment at work is associated with reduced sense of belonging (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021) and increased loneliness at work (Murthy, 2017; Wright & Silard, 2021).

Taken together, the literature on objectification has built some meaningful knowledge regarding its unique features, why it tends to be our default mode of social perception especially in work contexts, and its negative consequences on individual, relational and organizational levels. However, we still need to understand better how people can overcome objectifying tendencies in work contexts given the detrimental toll on organizations, people and their relationships.

3.1.2 Humanization

In direct contrast to objectification, literature on humanization documents how people perceive others as entities with human attributes. Humanization refers to the extent which an individual attributes distinctively human qualities (e.g., civility, refinement, sensibility, logic, maturity) and/or inherent human attributes (e.g., emotional reactivity, warmth, openness, individuality, depth) to others (Haslam, 2006). Notably, there is a suggestion that dehumanization might be the initial response when encountering others, necessitating conscious effort to overcome it (Waytz et al., 2014). The significance of humanization lies in the fact that individuals who are humanized are regarded as "moral agents worthy of empathic care and concern, deserving treatment that respects their capacity to suffer, to reason, and to have

conscious experience" (Gray et al., 2007, p. 619). Despite its critical role, the theoretical and empirical comprehension of this process is still in its infancy (Bain et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, the literature on humanization has so far identified two possible mechanisms for the occurrence of humanization: (a) mind perception and (b) personal knowledge. Mind perception stands as a pivotal cognitive mechanism that underpins the phenomenon of humanization. This cognitive process involves the intuitive assessment of other individuals' minds along two primary dimensions: (1) experience, encompassing the capability to sense and feel, and (2) agency, reflecting the capacity to plan and take action (Gray et al., 2007). In essence, when attributing minds to others, individuals consider their potential to 'feel,' 'act,' or both. The intricacies of mind perception, including its origins and implications, are well-summarized in the work of Waytz et al. (2010). Notably, this perception of other minds potentially constitutes a facet of a broader faculty for transcendence—a capacity to surpass the boundaries of one's immediate experiences (Buckner & Carroll, 2007). Engaging in the act of perceiving other individuals necessitates a cognitive leap beyond the confines of the present moment, akin to envisioning one's own mind in different temporal contexts, physical settings, or hypothetical scenarios (Waytz et al., 2010). Analogously, this very cognitive process might also underlie religious or spiritual encounter, enabling the perception of profound meaning in natural occurrences (Bering, 2002).

Another avenue through which humanization occurs is through personal knowledge. Personal knowledge refers to "an individual’s continuously updated, justified beliefs about the non-work life of a colleague" (Hardin, 2024, p. 3). This encompasses an array of information, including details about family, hobbies, relationships, activities, living arrangements, personal history, travel experiences, values, health, financial situations, personal challenges, and

aspirations. Hardin (2024) explores how the quantity, rather than the quality, of personal knowledge garnered across various aspects of a colleague's personal life affects the perception and treatment of the known individual.

While the humanization literature in our field is a great breakthrough that helps us think about people in organizational contexts beyond an objectifying perspective, I argue that humanization literature still does not appear to be truly free from an objectifying perspective towards people when it comes to perceiving human persons. I point this out because the underlying assumption in the humanization literature seems to be that we are still putting people at arm's length and deal with the qualities *about* the person that make them human, not suggesting or capturing how we might actually engage with them in their humanity. It would be as if we are still viewing people from afar through a telescope, but not actually engaging with them in any sense.

There are two reasons for this critique. First, there seems to be an implicit assumption that humanization is simply the opposite of dehumanization. This binary perspective is overly simplistic and misses the nuances of human experience. Humanization should be approached not just as a corrective to dehumanization, but as a dynamic process of engaging with people in their humanity in and of itself. Second, the humanization literature often overlooks the spiritual or metaphysical dimensions of human essence, leading to discussions that lack the intrinsic vitality or sense of life that defines what it means to be human. By ignoring these profound aspects, the literature still reduces people to a set of observable traits, stripping away the depth and richness of human existence.

3.1.3 Positive relationships at work

Research literature that gets at the experience of human encounter most closely is that regarding positive relationships at work and high-quality connections. Research on positive relationships at work has demonstrated that workplace relationships can be perceived and experienced in ways that go beyond the lens of objectification (e.g., Colbert et al., 2016; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1996). This body of work proposes that workplace relationships can serve as a "source of enrichment, vitality, and learning that helps individuals, groups, and organizations grow, thrive, and flourish" (Ragins & Dutton, 2007, p. 3). In this broad interest in understanding the foundations and impacts of positive interrelating at work lies a construct of high-quality connections, which focuses on "short-term, dyadic, positive interactions at work" (Stephens et al., 2011, Abstract).

Referring to human-to-human connections that lead organizational members to sense life or being more alive, high-quality connections are characterized by two clusters of indicators of connection quality (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). The first cluster centers on the positivity of the subjective and emotional experience of each individual in the connection. The second cluster features the structural aspects of the connection that strengthen the potentiality and responsiveness of the connection. Particularly pertinent to the present study are three subjective experiences that signify connection quality. First, the quality of a connection is felt through the vitality it brings. Individuals engaged in high-quality connections tend to experience positive arousal and an elevated sense of positive energy (Quinn & Dutton, 2005). Second, connection quality is also conveyed through a sense of positive regard (Rogers, 1951), which is a key aspect of the construct that is relevant to the phenomenon of interest in this empirical investigation. Being positively regarded signifies "a sense of feeling known and loved, or of being respected and cared for in the connection" (Stephens et al., 2011, Foundations of High-quality Connections

Research section, para. 4), which is in direct contrast to the objectifying interpersonal perception involving seeing others as an impersonal object. Lastly, connection quality is denoted by the extent of felt mutuality. Mutuality captures "the feeling of potential movement in the connection" (Stephens et al., 2011, Foundations of High-quality Connections Research section, para. 4), arising from shared vulnerability and responsiveness, as both individuals engage fully in the connection (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Stephens and his colleagues (2011) describe how these three subjective indicators help elucidate why high-quality connections are not only perceived as appealing and enjoyable, but also as life-giving and how these types of human-to-human connections evoke a sense of vitality and being more alive.

Notably, existing research on high-quality connections has also identified cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms that contribute to cultivating such connections between interacting individuals (Stephens et al., 2011). These mechanisms encompass *cognitive* aspects such as other-awareness, impressions of others, and perspective-taking; *emotional* facets such as positive emotions, emotional contagion, and empathy; and *behavioral* elements including respective engagement, task enabling, and play. In the next few paragraphs, I will briefly explain what each of these mechanisms refer to and how they contribute to the building of the high-quality connections.

With respect to cognitive contributors to high-quality connections, the first element is *other-awareness*, which entails being mindful of another individual's presence and behaviors, recognizing their importance within the environment (Davis & Holtgraves, 1984). The second factor is the *impressions we form of others*, which implies that the quick judgments we make about people can influence how connections evolve. In particular, initial perceptions of warmth and acceptance draw people to each other, affecting our choice of who to connect with and

increasing the chances of selecting someone willing and able to engage reciprocally. Another important cognitive aspect is *perspective taking*, often seen as the cognitive aspect of empathy. This involves imagining another person's experience as if it were your own (Epley et al., 2004; Galinsky et al., 2005). Research indicates that perspective-taking aids in predicting someone else's behavior and reactions (Davis, 1983) and in shaping one's actions to show care and concern, thereby encouraging positive responses from others.

The emotional mechanisms contributing to the establishment of high-quality connections include *positive emotions*, *emotional contagion* and *empathy*, explaining how emotions travel between people, building and strengthening connections in the process. First, *positive emotions* play a crucial role in building and strengthening high-quality connections as they build and broaden our thinking and help build durable, social resources (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001) that foster greater relational closeness (Waugh & Fredrickson, 2006) and enhance perceptions of intergroup similarity (Johnson & Fredrickson, 2005). Next, *emotional contagion* is another key pathway to the establishment of high-quality connections. Emotional contagion refers to the phenomenon where emotions are transferred between people (Elfenbein, 2007), or more specifically, how a person or group unwittingly or explicitly influences the emotions and attitudes of another person or group (Schoenewolf, 1990). Through this process, organizational members often share similar emotional experiences as they unconsciously imitate each other's facial expressions, movements and vocalizations (Hatfield et al., 1992). Such mimicry has been associated with increased liking and rapport (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Lakin et al., 2003). Another emotional mechanism concerns *empathy*, involving the vicarious experience of another person's emotions (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). This ability to emotionally resonate with others

is considered foundational to forming human connections (Miller & Stiver, 1997), thus serving as a critical emotional mechanism of high-quality connections.

Lastly, the mechanisms of high-quality connections are also identified at a behavioral level, considering *respectful engagement*, *task enabling* and *play* as critical means for the building of high-quality connections. *Respectful engagement* refers to interpersonal behaviors that show esteem, dignity and care for another person (e.g., Ramarajan et al., 2008) and it is foundational to fostering high-quality connections in several ways. First, the element of psychological presence that is conveyed in respectful engagement encourages continued interaction (Kahn, 1992). In addition, actions that convey affirmation and respect can potentially foster connections and imbue interactions with significant meaning. The second behavioral contributor to high-quality connections is *task enabling*, or interpersonal actions that assist someone accomplish or execute a task (Dutton, 2003b). Research on interpersonal helping (e.g. Lee, 1997), interpersonal citizenship (e.g., Podsakoff et al., 2000; Williams & Anderson, 1991) and prosocial motivation (e.g., Penner, 2002) all suggest that the interpersonal provision of information, emotional support and other resources can enhance connection quality. Lastly, another behavioral mechanism that builds and strengthens high-quality connections is *play*. High-quality connections literature acknowledges play as a distinctly human capacity that develops over a person's lifetime (Huizinga, 1950) and a direct expression of human community (Sandelands, 2010) and argues that it enables and strengthens connections at work in two important ways. First, play fosters a divergence in response patterns during interaction, facilitating insights into others that are often unattainable in a work or nonplay context (Dutton 2003a; Worline et al., 2009). Additionally, complete immersion in the rules that delineate play

from reality can spur greater interpersonal risk taking and a loss of self-consciousness (Czikszentmihalyi, 1975; Eisenberg, 1990).

Taken together, the literature on positive relationships at work, particularly high-quality connections, offers invaluable insights that it is possible to experience workplace human relationality characterized as "life-giving" (Stephens et al., 2011, Foundations of High-quality Connections Research section, para. 4). By offering an account of human relationality from which people can sense life, the literature starts to suggest and hint at the possibility of human relationality beyond what has been documented in the objectification and humanization literatures.

However, much about human relationality remains mysterious, especially regarding how such high-quality connections are indeed enabled and formed. While the literature identifies specific cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms that contribute to building and strengthening these connections, it leaves open the question of how people actually come to experience such life-giving relationships. This leads me to question whether these identified mechanisms truly drive positive human relationality at work, or if they are merely characteristics or markers associated with such experiences—signs that indicate positive interactions are taking place. In this sense, I wonder what the fundamental contributor is to these identified mechanisms on cognitive, emotional and behavioral levels. In other words, what is fundamentally underlying underneath these mechanisms of high-quality connections that would truly enable positive relationality at work? And importantly, where does the life-giving quality of such high-quality connections truly originate?

I wonder if what is missing in our current discourse on positive relationships at work and high-quality connections is the consideration of spiritual and metaphysical dimensions of human

existence and relationality. These dimensions provide a fundamental sense of life, as philosopher and theologian Buber (1958) once noted, “if they abjure spirit, they abjure life” (p. 48). Integrating these dimensions could open up new horizons for inquiry and enrich our understanding of human relationality in a profoundly meaningful way.

The importance of considering metaphysical and spiritual dimensions of human existence and relationality was also highlighted in my personal reflections in Chapter 2. My autoethnographic essay spoke to how the absence of encounter felt like a spiritual darkness and ache, prompting a longing for something beyond the physical realm of reality—something indescribable and inarticulate. With this recognition of the need to consider the metaphysical dimension of human relationality, I now invite my readers to explore this topic more deeply through the lenses of philosophy and theology beyond the boundary of social science. Before delving into these perspectives, let me illustrate why they might offer a richer exploration of our subject by introducing the words by C. S. Lewis (2012), a British writer, literary scholar and theologian:

> These, then, are the two points I wanted to make. First, that human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, they do not in fact behave that way. They know the Law of Nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in. (p.10)

I connect this insight offered by C. S. Lewis back to the fundamental puzzle I faced regarding human encounter in my autoethnographic inquiry in Chapter 2. As you may recall, one of the puzzles that emerged from my personal reflection was my inability to experience human encounter even when I desperately longed for it. How might we reconcile this fundamental gap

between what we long for and how we actually behave? What does this discrepancy reveal about human relationality and our existence?

3.2 Actuality and potentiality of human relationality at work

Aristotle spoke of the concept of actuality and potentiality, which helps us think through this puzzling discrepancy about human existence. Aristotle taught us that the question of human being is a dynamic one regarding "realization", not a settled fact. According to Aristotle, human being *is* what it *comes to be* (what it is in "act" or "actuality"), and what it *comes to be* depends on what it *can be* (what it is in "potency" or "potentiality"). In making such a distinction between actuality and potentiality of our being, Aristotle further noted that our being tends to move in the direction toward perfection or fulfillment of its potentiality and possibility in the fullest sense.

Considering the potentiality of human existence is intrinsically linked to its metaphysical dimension because metaphysics explores the deeper, underlying aspects of human nature and reality beyond what is observable and tangible. Metaphysics addresses fundamental questions about existence, including the invisible forces and energies that shape reality. It highlights the essence of human beings and the spiritual and existential aspects of existence. By contemplating the metaphysical dimension, we delve into the deeper layers of human potentiality that go beyond mere physicality and materiality. This approach enriches our understanding of potentiality by expanding our perspective beyond the physical realm, inviting us to explore the profound mysteries of human nature and existence.

To illustrate the idea of potentiality and its inherent connection to metaphysics, let me use a metaphor of a tree. Imagine a majestic tree standing tall in a forest. The tree's trunk, branches, and leaves are what we see—this is its actuality. It represents the current state of our relationships and interactions, the visible and tangible aspects of human relationality. However,

what we do not see, hidden beneath the surface, are the roots. These roots extend deep into the soil, drawing nutrients and water that nourish the tree and allow it to grow. They are the source of a tree's life.

These roots represent the metaphysical and spiritual dimensions of human existence. They symbolize what truly animates and gives life to the aspects of existence that we can see in its actuality. Just as the roots sustain and nurture the tree, the metaphysical and spiritual dimensions provide the underlying energy and essence that bring our potentiality to life, shaping and enriching our visible reality.

I argue that being open to our potentiality when exploring human relationality at work is crucial because organizational scholarship (and social science in general) typically focuses on describing how organizations are managed and governed in actuality (Melé, 2012). This descriptive approach, while valuable, often overlooks the potentiality of phenomena that are rare or not immediately visible, yet which are equally (or even more) real than the visible actuality of the matter. This is not to deny the importance and the value of the descriptive nature of our scholarship; rather, it is to underscore that relying solely on a descriptive approach can be limiting when seeking to reveal the truth of our existence. To fully grasp deeper truths of human existence, we must open ourselves to the potentialities that lie beyond what we can readily observe and measure since efforts to understand our actuality without understanding the potentiality is not going to get us where we need to go. Thus, exploring potentiality is essential for a more profound and comprehensive insight into human relationality in organizational life.

Therefore, in the rest of this chapter, I will delve into the disciplines of philosophy and theology whose metaphysical depth often concerns the potentiality of our existence as well as its actuality. Additionally, I will incorporate relevant social scientific literature to demonstrate how

diverse scholarly discourses on human relationality come together to provide critical insights about human encounter. The rest of the current chapter is organized around the three central research questions my dissertation work aims to answer: (1) *what is human encounter?* (2) *how is human encounter experienced?* and (3) *what difference does human encounter make at work?*

3.3 Philosophy and theology of human relationality

In the simplest term, the experience of encountering another being is fundamentally about "the experience of not being alone" (Fleming, 2016). Indeed, I will present how relationality is one of the most important, yet often overlooked, human essences and how human encounter is the only way to live out our true relationality and relate with others. Unless relationality is taken seriously as one of our most indispensable human essences—the fundamental nature or inherent qualities that constitute what it means to be human—in terms of both actuality and potentiality of our being, it is impossible to understand what human encounter is.

3.3.1 Relationality: The overlooked and forgotten essence of our humanness

The question of what it means to be human has occupied many great minds universally throughout the history of humankind. Different cultures have thought of our human essence in different terms, but in the Western world human essence and its existence have been understood in fundamentally individualistic terms over the last few centuries. For instance, the 6th century philosopher Boethius defined a human person as "an individual substance of a rational nature" (Singer, 1996). The individualistic understanding of human being is epitomized in the thinking of the 17th century French mathematician and philosopher Descartes (2008) who conceptualized human beings as autonomous, sovereign and fundamentally individualistic and separate from each other. His thinking has been influential and this individualistic notion of human essence is

still prevalent among our contemporary philosophers. For example, American philosopher Joel Feinberg, in his 1980 article on abortion, states, "persons are those beings who are conscious, have a concept and awareness of themselves, are capable of experiencing emotions, can reason and acquire understanding, can plan ahead, can act on their plans, and feel pleasure and pain" (Feinberg, 1980). This modernist perspective does admit that human beings are capable of relating to each other. However, it still presumes that being is an individual process. Mearns and Cooper (2017) effectively point this out in the quote below:

> From this modernist standpoint, … these relationships are seen as little more than the meeting between the two separate entities—like two billiard balls knocking together—within which, and from which, the two entities retain their individual status. (p. 2)

Relational theorist Carl Rogers is an example illustrating this point. In his classical theory of human development, Rogers (1959) talks about the importance of an interpersonal environment that provides genuineness (i.e., openness and self-disclosure), acceptance (i.e., receiving unconditional positive regard from others) and empathy (i.e., being listened to and understood) for the development of human being. Yet, he still portrays our being as a very much individual process. In his seminal writing, he argues that humans have one basic motive that is the desire to self-actualize. Rogers (1959) believes that humans are ultimately concerned with fulfilling their potential and achieving the highest level of "human-beingness" they can. In other words, he does not view human beings as fundamentally relational in their essence. Instead, he sees them as separate, independent and individual entities who are simply capable of relating to others. This perspective mirrors how I have viewed myself for most of my life, as described in my autoethnographic essay in Chapter 2.

However, over the course of the twentieth century, many philosophers and psychologists have challenged this modern individualistic notion and argued that our being and essence are fundamentally intertwined and interdependent. In other words, "we are first and foremost *being-in-relation*" (Mearns & Cooper, 2017, p. 3). William James (1909), who is considered the "father of American psychology" beautifully described this idea in a poetic metaphor:

> Our lives are like islands in the sea, or like trees in the forest. The maple and the pine may whisper to each other with their leaves… But the trees also commingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the islands also hang together through the ocean's bottom. Just so there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother-sea or reservoir. (p. 374)

Like William James, Van Zomeren (2016) points out that most social psychological research has ignored the relational essence of human beings, relying instead on traditional models of individualistic and atomizing psychology. Zomeren (2016) emphasizes the relational essence of human beings, arguing that "a human being without social relationships would no longer be a human being" (p. 34). However, this does not imply that human beings are incapable of autonomy. In fact, Bowlby (1969) shows that people often feel a sense of autonomy when they also feel securely *interdependent* on others. When autonomy is experienced in isolation from others, it is often referred to as "false" autonomy.

The concept of freedom is another example illustrating how a concept we usually understand in an independent and atomizing context turns out to be relational. Traditionally, freedom has been associated with autonomy, especially since the time of Descartes (Dauenhauer, 1982). However, the word *freedom* shares the same root as the word *friend*, an Indo-European

term meaning “dear” or “beloved.” It originally implied a sense of connection to other “free” people through bonds of kinship or affection, as opposed to being a slave (Fischer, 2005). Despite its contemporary interpretation, freedom is fundamentally a relational concept (Dauenhauer, 1982), further demonstrating the inherently relational nature of human beings, even in aspects we typically view as self-contained and independent.

Even setting aside these philosophical grounds, our own lived experience tells us that being related to one another is crucial for our origin and existence. Think about the origin of our being or how we come to exist in the world by looking at how a human being is made literally and comes into being. A man and a woman must engage in a sexual intercourse, the very act of being related to each other in the most intimate way. From that very intimate way of being in relation, a fetus is conceived. And then the fetus does not grow itself independently out in the world, but rather inside a mother’s womb, being connected and related to the mother in the most literal and physical sense for nine months. When the nine months is complete, the mother goes through labor and delivers the baby out to the world. However, even in the process of labor and delivery, the mother and the baby work intimately together to finally meet each other. After their first encounter, the baby continues to depend on the mother’s care in order to grow. All in all, through this brief illustration of how our being comes to exist in the world, we can see how our beings originate and continue to grow as a full being in relation to other beings. Simply speaking, our beings cannot exist alone and separated. We are and we must be *being-in-relation*.

3.3.2 Two qualitatively different modes of relating

Jewish existentialist philosopher and theologian Martin Buber helps us further our understanding of our relationality and thus what human encounter is through his philosophy of I-Thou. Buber (1958) maintains there are two qualitatively different modes of existence in which

humans relate to and engage with other people and the world.[6] The first mode is that of an "I" towards an "It," which he calls I-It relation. When engaging in I-It relation, a person experiences another human as a detached thing, which is fixed in space and time. In other words, a person stands apart from a particular "object" to use, manipulate or classify and thus to differentiate it from other objects. It is a detached and impersonal way of engaging with the world. The other form of engagement, that serves as a basis to understand what human encounter is, is that of an "I" towards a "Thou" (or "You"), which he calls I-Thou relation. When engaged in I-Thou relation, a person would meet another human in a much more personal way, as a "Thou" or "You" rather than "He," "She" or "It." This way of meeting others and engaging with the world does not try to define or classify an individual from a distance or consider whether and how that person might be useful as in exchange relations. Instead, it is about forming a relationship, while still acknowledging and appreciating the differences and uniqueness of the two parties. Instead of perceiving the other as an It and taking them as a classified and thus predictable and manipulable object, a person *participates* in the dynamic and living process of an "other."

To illustrate these two modes of relating, consider a scenario in an office setting where a manager approaches an employee. In one instance, the manager views the employee solely as a resource to extract information for a project. Here, the employee is perceived as an It, devoid of personal significance, and the interaction is transactional and detached. Now, imagine a different scenario where the same manager engages in a conversation with the employee, expressing genuine interest in their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. In this interaction, the manager participates in the being of the employee as in I-Thou relation, recognizing their inherent worth and humanity.

[6] Buber clarified later a person's inner life is not exhausted by these two modes of being. However, he pointed out that the person chooses one of them when he or she presents him or herself to the world.

Buber (1958) further explains that these two modes of existence concern not only how to treat and engage with others but also how a person treats and engages with one's self. In the I-It mode of existence, I is a self-enclosed, solitary individual that takes itself as the sum of its inherent attributes and acts. However, in the I-Thou mode of existence, I is a unitary, whole, and irreducible being which is beyond the sum of its reduced parts. From this distinction, Buber (1958) maintains that the self becomes either more fragmentary or more unified through its relationship to others. Specifically, a person becomes whole not in relation to him or herself but only through a relation to another self. This is because the I of the I-Thou relation develops in a dialogical relationship in which each partner is both active and passive and each is affirmed as a whole being. On the other hand, the I of the I-It relation engages in a monologue, which is not just a turning away from the other but also a turning back on oneself. Therefore, only in the I-Thou relation the I develop as a whole being and meet others as a whole being.

That being said, it is important to note that Buber does not deny the necessity and usefulness of the I-It mode. He acknowledges that I-It orientation is necessary for coordinating human activity in the world and thus we cannot "dispense with the world of It," especially in our communal life (i.e., politics and economics). Part of his aim was to warn his readers not to neglect the I-Thou mode as he felt the modern society was being dominated by I-It orientations (Ravenscroft, 2017). Specifically, Buber (1958) points out that such communal spheres as politics and economics can and must be oriented toward, rather than away from, deeper participation in the spirit of the I-Thou relation because humans truly find meaning in relations of the I-Thou kind. And it is detrimental when these spheres fail to orient toward the I-Thou relation. Buber (1958) says, "if they abjure spirit, they abjure life…Man's will to profit and to be powerful have their natural and proposed effect so long as they are linked with, and upheld by,

his will to enter into relation" (pp. 48-49). In other words, Buber stresses that despite the unavoidability and the necessity of I-It mode of relation, the I-Thou mode of engaging with other human beings is a way to live according to our true relationality and thus to live according to our very human essence. Buber's insightful proposition prompts me to revisit my own lived experiences of the lack of encounter described in Chapter 2. It has made me realize that I have spent most of my life in the I-It mode of relation, not only in my interactions with others but also in how I relate to myself.

3.3.3 Are the two modes of relating equally "substantial" and "real"?

Although Buber's insightful contrast between I-Thou and I-It relations indeed helps us move a step forward to conceptualizing what encounter is (and what it is not), American philosopher W. Norris Clarke criticized Buber's philosophical propositions on the grounds that Buber seems to suggest that the two different modes of relations that he describes (i.e., I-Thou and I-It) are equally *substantial* and thus *real* ways of human relating when it might not be.

Based on St. Thomas Aquinas' philosophy, Clarke (1993) proposes a dyadic structure of the human essence in which a person's *substantiality* and *relationality* go hand in hand. By *substantiality*, Clarke refers to the *in-itself* dimension of being, which allows every real being to "stand on its own as a unity-identity-whole in the midst of the community of existents, (i.e., not as a part of any other being (though it can certainly be related to others))" (p. 42). By *relationality*, Clarke refers to the *towards-others* aspect, which allows every real being to "naturally pour over into active self-communication with other real beings, generating relations, community, etc." (p. 42).

Proposing the indissoluble complementarity of substantiality and relationality, Clarke (1993) indeed admits that "relationality is an equally primordial aspect of the person as

substantiality" (p. 2), which has been missing in our Western understanding of what it means to be human as aforementioned. Clarke points out how his conceptualization of human person as a *relational* being differs from the majority of philosophical schools which have put forth mostly rational, individualistic and atomized notion of our being:

> This is the decisive advance over the Aristotelian substance, which was indeed, as nature, ordered toward action and reception, but, as form, was oriented primarily toward self-realization, the fulfillment of its own perfection as form, rather than sharing with others. (p. 71)

At the same time, Clarke also emphasizes that a person's relationality goes hand in hand with his or her substantiality. The quotes below illustrate how Clarke describes substantiality and relationality as two inseparable human essences that are related to each other:

> In all of this apparently total immersion in relations to others, there is actually an alternating rhythm (or spiral movement, if you will) going on. Relations come into us and call us outward first; then we (should, normally) return to our own center to reflect on the result and integrate it into the abiding center of the self, expanding it and enriching it in the process. This permits the enriched self to then reach out further to others, with a surer and more profound sense of self-possession and ability to communicate and share our own riches. (p. 68)

> Paradoxically, the more intensely I am present to myself at one pole, the more intensely I am present and open to others at the other. And reciprocally, the more I make myself truly present to the others as an "I" or self, the more I must also be present to myself, in order that it may be truly *I* that is present to them, not a mask. (p. 69-70)

Along the similar line, Buber (1958) does point out that the I's in I-Thou and I-It relations respectively are qualitatively different. The I in I-It relation is a self-enclosed, solitary individual that takes itself as the sum of its inherent attributes and acts, whereas the I in I-Thou relation is a unitary, whole, and irreducible being which is beyond the sum of its reduced parts.

However, it seems ambiguous whether Buber goes far enough to argue that only I-Thou relation is the *real* and *substantial* human relation while I-It relation is not. Indeed, Buber (1958) notes, "without *It*, man cannot live. But he who lives with *It* alone is not a man" (p. 34) As mentioned, Buber seems to emphasize that only the I-Thou mode of relation is a way to live according to our true relationality while pointing out the unavoidability and necessity of the I-It mode of relation. However, he does not make it clear whether both kinds of relations are equally *real* or *substantial* (in Norris Clarke's terms) way to engage with others and the world, although he gives some hints about that. In fact, one of Norris Clarke's criticisms of Buber's philosophy was that it only emphasized *relationality* but not *substantiality* in his attempt to understand what it means to be human. Borrowing Clarke's terms, one way to challenge Buber's philosophy of I-It vs. I-Thou is to question how Clarke's substantiality relates to these different modes of relation, which will help sharpen our understanding of what human encounter is (and what it is not).

Then, what gives substantiality to our relationality? To put it another way, what makes human relationships real and substantial?

3.3.4 What gives substantiality to our relationality?

Aristotle's philosophy on friendship hints that human relationships are real and substantial only when people in the relationships are united to strive together towards a *transcendent third* or something greater than themselves.

Aristotle posited that most friendships, or human relationships broadly speaking, are based on utility for their mutual usefulness to each other or on pleasure, both of which he described as self-regarding and selfishly motivated much like in Buber's description of I-It relation. Aristotle contrasted these self-centered relationships with the third type of friendship that is based on virtue. In this type of relationship, people fall in love, not so much with one another, but together with a *transcendent third* toward which they strive together even though it lies beyond their immediate grasp. It is a selfless association between and among people with a recognition that they belong to something greater than themselves (e.g., virtue) and with a (often inexpressible) desire and longing to reach near it together. According to Aristotle, it is this type of friendship that is fully developed so as to complete the intended purpose of friendship. In other words, this knowledge and appreciation that we belong together to something greater than ourselves is what gives a real substance to our relationship.

3.3.5 Then, what is human encounter? And what is it not?

It is a truly exciting moment to be able to finally say a few words about what human encounter is, something I have longed to do for quite some time, as described in my personal reflection in Chapter 2. As previously mentioned, human encounter is an ineffable mystery that eludes precise scientific definition. Hence, I do not aim to rigidly operationalize it in a scientific manner. Instead, I seek to describe what human encounter is and contrast it with the descriptions of exchange relations so that human encounter—despite its ethereal qualities—can be recognized and explored.

To start off, human encounter is *a profound meeting in humanity*. Much like in Buber's I-Thou relation, encounter is when a person meets another human in a way that does not try to define or classify that person or consider whether and how they might be useful. Encounter is

about forming a relationship in a real sense; it is about recognizing a person on their own terms and acknowledging the particular characteristics as well as the wholeness of that person. And it starts with the acknowledgement that there is a gift of life in the person that you face. Furthermore, it involves *the recognition and appreciation* that "we"—this another human and I—belong together to something greater than ourselves*,* although such acknowledgement and appreciation can sometimes rest beyond our ability to articulate and describe. This recognition and appreciation of belonging to something greater than one's own self is what gives a real substance to any true relationship. Therefore, putting these together, I describe human encounter as *a profound meeting in humanity, marked by the recognition and appreciation of a collective belonging to a greater whole*. In putting forth this description, I also recognize that it is often beyond our ability to articulate and describe such acknowledgement and appreciation. I argue that human encounter is the only real and substantial way of relating with others while exchange relations are not real and substantial ways of relating with others. Exchange relations, which we often mistakenly deem as one of the prevalent types of human relationships, are in fact a socially constructed charade that has nothing to do with our true relationality in essence.

To describe the contrast between human encounter and exchange relations with a purpose of understanding better what human encounter is, Aristotle helps us here again through his philosophy of four-fold causes. He showed that the actuality of a certain thing could be described by its four-fold causes: *final*, *material*, *formal* and *efficient* causes. First and foremost, *final cause* concerns its end or purpose; in other words, what is it for? What is its "telos" in Aristotle's term? Then there is *material cause*, which concerns its substance or matter; it concerns, what is it made of? Next, *formal cause* refers to its form or structure; it asks, how its matter or substance is arranged and ordered in what form and structure? Finally, *efficient cause* concerns how its

possibility is actualized; it asks, what brings it into being (that we are trying to understand)? Following this four-fold typology of the causes, I intend to illustrate below what human encounter is by contrasting its four causes with those of exchange (for summary, refer to Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Contrast between exchange relations and human encounter.

	Exchange relations	Human encounter
Final cause (What is it for?)	self, self-interest	uniting/being with something greater than self
Material cause (What is it made of?)	greed, fear, anxiety	love
Formal cause (What form does it take?)	a striving crowd of individuals	persons-in-communion
Efficient cause (What brings it to be?)	disease of competition	?

In exchange relations, people are atomized and spiritually disconnected and thus we see a striving crowd of individuals who are fearful and anxious. Words by anthropologist Ashley Montagu (1962) insightfully portray this world of exchange. He points out that "most persons in the civilized countries of the world are unhealthily fearful and anxious" (p. 47). He argues that the recent advances in civilization have caused humanity to suffer from "the absence of love and cooperation…and a disease of competition, a disease which is largely the effect of commercialism and industrialism" (p. 58). With the advent of capitalism, he argues, the cooperative organization—such as a feudal economic system which was based on the principle of cooperation deterring the spirit of competition—was replaced with more and more individualistic enterprise. In a capitalistic society in which free competition is the highly espoused value, "men strive against each other to achieve the goals upon which that society has

set the highest premiums" (p. 53). These goals tend to be of a material nature and about promoting one's self-interest such as money, property, prestige and power. Such a society consists of "a striving crowd of individuals, not a cooperative community of persons, interrelated and interdependent in which all are engaged in a common enterprise" (p. 54). In such a competitive society "every man is an island, essentially alone and afraid and anxious because he feels alone" (p. 54). Indeed, this depiction of the world of exchange marked by competition, isolation and anxiety deeply resonates with the narrative of disconnection I explored in my autoethnographic essay in Chapter 2.

Therefore, in exchange relations, the final cause (i.e., what is it for?) is self-interest, where individuals engage in interactions primarily to benefit themselves. Its material cause (i.e., what is it made of?) consists of greed, fear, and anxiety, which drive these interactions. Its formal cause (i.e., what form does it take?) is a striving crowd of individuals, highlighting the competitive and fragmented nature of such relationships. Finally, its efficient cause (i.e., what brings it to be?) is the disease of competition, which arises from the commercialism and industrialism inherent in a capitalistic society.

In contrast, human encounter represents a state in which people transcend the confines of isolated existence to become interconnected as persons-in-communion. Here, the boundaries between self and others dissolve, fostering a profound sense of unity and interconnectedness. This concept resonates with the principles of Ubuntu philosophy, an African humanist perspective that underscores the intrinsic interconnectedness of humanity. Central to this philosophy is the notion encapsulated in the phrase, "I am because you are; and since we are, therefore I am," highlighting the inherently relational nature of human existence discussed earlier. Reflecting on my autoethnographic essay in Chapter 2, I also realize that this inherently

relational aspect of our existence, beautifully captured in Ubuntu philosophy, is what I yearned to express when writing about my longing for human encounter. I now more clearly understand that it was a desire to be in communion with others, stemming from our essential nature as relational beings. As such, in the world of encounter, people are oriented towards something greater than themselves, transcending self-centered pursuits and material interests. Rather than existing in isolation, they form a cohesive community characterized by love and mutual regard, a stark contrast to the fragmentation and disconnection in exchange relations that breed fear and anxiety.

Hence, in human encounters, the final cause (i.e., what is it for?) is uniting with something greater than oneself, aiming for a deeper connection beyond individualistic pursuits. Its material cause (i.e., what is it made of?) is love, which serves as the foundational element fostering these genuine connections. Its formal cause (i.e., what form does it take?) is persons-in-communion, reflecting a state of profound interconnectedness.

While it is relatively well-documented that a disease of competition brings us to the world of exchange, it remains unclear what helps us to experience human encounter or its efficient cause. Therefore, I continue to seek what insights philosophical and theological perspectives, along with social scientific inquiries, can offer regarding the questions at hand: How is human encounter experienced? And what enables human encounter?

3.4 How is human encounter experienced? What enables it?

3.4.1 Human encounter experienced as a gradient phenomenon

Literature on *relational depth* (which is interchangeably called *relationally deep encounter*) in counselling psychology speaks closely to the idea of human encounter. Mearns and Cooper (2017) define *relationally deep encounter* as "a state of profound contact and

engagement between people" that is characterized by genuineness, empathy, openness and mutuality (p. xvii). They suggest that human encounter can refer to both particular *moments* of in-depth encounter and a *relationship* in which there is an ongoing in-depth connection, meaning that "it is possible to experience intense moments of connection with someone without ever forming a deep, ongoing closeness" (p. xvii). However, they point out that the experience of human encounter is probably close to a gradient phenomenon as people report a smooth continuum when asked to rate the depth of relating at particular moments from deeper to shallower ratings, rather than a discrete cut-off between in-depth moments and the rest of the relating (Cooper, 2012).

French philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1960) also speaks to the idea of human encounter as a potentially gradient experience:

> At the level of strictly human encounter, there is a whole scale of possible meetings that ranges from the quite trivial to the extremely significant. The nearer I get to the lower end of the scale…the nearer I get to an encounter that can be treated as an objective intersection of paths; humanly speaking it is nothing but a kind of elbowing. The nearer I get to the higher end of the scale the nearer I get to a meeting at the level of inwardness, a meeting of creative development. (Chapter 7 Being in a situation, pp. 169-170)

In his description of human encounter as a gradient experience (from low- to high-intensity) is found again the contrast between exchange relations, which Marcel describes as "the quite trivial…objective intersection of paths" and intense moments of human encounter that is "a meeting at the level of inwardness, a meeting of creative development." Wyatt (2012) also adds that human encounter is "often experienced as a sense of 'communion' or even 'love', enlivening

and profound, which is experienced as lifting the group into wiser, more effective and creative functioning" (p. 106).

3.4.2 Human encounter experienced as a genuine dialogue

A few philosophers have suggested that human encounter is experienced in the form of genuine dialogue, and Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire is among them. He describes dialogue as "a relation of co-constituted mutuality that exists in highly charged and experientially significant moments" (Cissna & Anderson, 2012, p. 173) and emphasizes that although dialogue involves unique persons, it is neither an individual process nor an atomistic experience. In other words, it does not happen *within individuals* but *between persons* who are willing to seek mutual engagement.

Buber (1958) also suggests that human encounter unfolds in the sphere of the between which he calls *interhuman* relationships. He argues that the interhuman relationship essentially takes the form of genuine dialogue in which each person happens to the other as the unique and particular person that he or she is. Buber (1965/2003) distinguishes genuine dialogue from two counterfeits, *technical dialogue* and *monologue disguised as dialogue*. In technical dialogue, an interaction is motivated solely by the need for objective understanding (e.g., a typical work conversation with a coworker on a work task). In monologue disguised as dialogue the focus is more on the self than on the reality of others as the purpose of such monologue is to deliver a predetermined kind of impression on the other. In contrast, genuine dialogue is in which "each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them" (1965, p. 19).

High-quality connections literature talks about a similar idea when it introduces felt *mutuality* as one of the markers of the connection quality (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Stephens et al., 2011). Drawing from the work of Miller and Stiver (1997) and a relational theory, with its focus on the human growth and development that can occur while in connection with—rather than separation from—others (Miller, 1976), the literature on high-quality connections introduces that mutuality, which captures "the sense that both people in a connection are engaged and actively participating" (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003, p. 267). By specifying mutuality as one of the indicators of high-quality connections, the literature suggests mutuality as an important indicator of human encounter.

3.4.3 Enablers of human encounter: Turning toward the other

Buber emphasizes that the life of genuine dialogue starts with a *turning toward the other*. The act of turning toward the other can mean, at the simplest level, that a person turns to face another being or a dialogic partner and attentively listens to what he or she has to say. At a fuller sense, it means turning toward the other with *openness* and *responsiveness*—being willing to share what is truly on one's mind as well as willing to hear the response of the other. As such, listening is critical in the life of genuine dialogue as it not only opens a person's world but also signals his or her deep respect for the being of the other.

3.4.4 Enablers of human encounter: Breaking away from self-centeredness

Buber further elaborates that breaking from self-centeredness paves the way for genuine dialogue, whereas holding onto such self-centeredness prevents the life of genuine dialogue from growing. This insight regarding the destructive impact of self-centeredness on human encounter was also discussed in Chapter 2, reflecting on my own experiences of the lack of human

encounter. In making this point, Buber introduces two important distinctions. First, he contrasts *being* with *seeming*, two different modes of human existence, and considered this duality the "essential problem of the sphere of the interhuman" (p. 75). He described a person characterized as *being* "proceeds from what one really is" (p. 76) while a person characterized as *seeming* proceeding from "what one wishes to seem" (p. 76). In other words, the person characterized by *being* engages with the other without worrying about how he or she looks to the other while the person characterized by *seeming* is constantly concerned with how he or she looks to the other and with the impression the other forms about him or herself. Buber considers the "invasion of *seeming*" (1965, p. 82) corrosive to the life of genuine dialogue and proposes that in order for genuine dialogue to happen people must communicate themselves to others as they really are without trying to make a predetermined kind of impression of oneself on others.

Next, Buber contrasts *imposing* with *unfolding*, two ways of attempting to influence the life and attitudes of others. When a person engages in *imposing*, he or she does not consider the being of the other, as the goal is to impose one's own thoughts, beliefs and values on the other, much like in a propagandistic scheme. In contrast, in *unfolding*, a person invites other being, helping to open the potentiality of the other. Whereas *imposing* tries to influence others through telling or one-way instruction, *unfolding* attempts to influence others simply through meeting. Not surprisingly, Buber notes that it is through an unfolding-oriented attitude that facilitates the life of a genuine dialogue, not that of an imposing attitude.

3.4.5 Enablers of human encounter: Openness and vulnerability

Yet, human encounter in the form of genuine dialogue is not only about influencing the life and attitudes of others but also about letting oneself be influenced by others, which naturally requires openness and vulnerability. Cissna and Anderson (2012) note that "change and the

potential for being changed seem to be at the core of most coherent conceptions of dialogue" (p. 174). This idea is also well-illustrated in a quote by philosopher Alphonso Lingis (1994):

> To enter into conversation with another is to lay down one's arms and one's defenses; to throw open the gates of one's own positions; to expose oneself to the other, the outsider; and to lay oneself open to surprises, contestation, and inculpation. It is to risk what one found or produced in common. To enter into conversation is to struggle against the noise, the interference, and the vested interests… One enters into conversation in order to become an other for the other. (p. 88)

Cissna and Anderson (2012) further explicate that such a change from dialogic experience is "not progressive, not a constant, but the result of often surprising and even epiphanous or sporadic insight" (p. 174). Dialogue does not require full understanding and complete mutuality for participants to experience that change; instead, it happens through "sparks of recognition across the gap of strangeness" (p. 174) which takes openness and vulnerability to others.

3.4.6 Enablers of human encounter: Structuring an inviting space

Cissna and Anderson (2012) also note the importance of structuring a space for dialogue. They propose that dialogue is "facilitated by structuring potentially dialogic spaces, both geographic and attitudinal, and not by arranging or mandating dialogue itself" (p. 175). They point out that while human encounter cannot be forced, it is not found merely by accident either. They elaborate that potential for dialogic moments and thus human encounter can be enhanced by carefully creating an inviting space in which participants are more likely to engage in genuine dialogue by sharing their authentic thoughts and emotions rather than to hold and defend them.

3.4.7 Enablers of human encounter: Conscious intention

Wyatt (2012) argues that such a space for human encounter needs to be initiated with conscious intention. He notes that in order for human encounter to be experienced, "intentions must be chosen and stated carefully so as to "aim" [the gathering] in a constructive direction from the start" (Wood, 1999, p. 158). These intentions, according to Wyatt (2012), are influenced by and communicated through the choice of not only venue, ambience, timing and duration but also identifying potential participants, how to publicize the gathering and, most importantly, the purpose of the group.

3.4.8 Enablers of human encounter: Loss of self-consciousness, trust and psychological safety

Additionally, Wyatt (2012) further proposes that the *unfolding* process that develops trust and psychological safety, which Buber also emphasized as important for the experience of human encounter, is central to creating an inviting space for human encounter. He notes that various themes describing the unfolding process essentially come down to the concept of "loss of conscious self-interest," which is again in line with what Buber suggests. Wyatt (2012) enumerates the description of how the unfolding process that is characterized as loss of conscious self-interest may actually look like in the space for human encounter, which again substantially mirrors Buber's philosophy on genuine dialogue:

> An individual's courage to take a risk, connect to deep experience and authentically express themselves; a group culture of empathic understanding, respectful acceptance and authenticity; a willingness to be unrehearsed, vulnerable, open, making space for the unknown and welcoming newness; the group being willing to face differences, explore any conflicts with the assumptions that created them. This is about 'suspending' certainty and the belief "I'm right"; a movement into "now," a slowing down and a letting go of the "conditioned self," with less concern for how one is received. (p. 107)

Despite its potentiality, this form of being, characterized by loss of self-consciousness and self-centeredness, is difficult to live out in modern organizations because a contemporary society is preoccupied with the concept of the "self" (Callero, 2003), as it was also poignantly illustrated in my personal narrative in Chapter 2. Indeed, such a preoccupation with the self is "characteristic generally of late modern cultures, where the individual's biography and identity… must be reflexively constructed" (Cameron, 2000, p. 153). Under such a cultural mandate, neoliberal ideology posits that workers must view themselves as an "entrepreneur of the self" (Du Gay, 1996, p. 182) in order to survive the competition. Under such a condition, work is often regarded as "a means of identity production" (Thompson, 2019) and workers cannot help but be concerned with the proper crafting and presentation of their self, ultimately leading to making it difficult to get beyond a self-conscious orientation at work. This speaks to one of the puzzles and insights I identified at the end of Chapter 2 that society teaches us behaviors and expectations that distance us from the possibilities of genuine encounter. By forging us to be self-focused, social conditioning at various levels teaches us to never encounter anyone or anything in a real sense.

However, in spite of the structurally and culturally inevitable difficulty of living out this form of being, modern workplaces more urgently need to move beyond self-consciousness and self-centeredness. Modern organizational environment increasingly requires people to work in teams for creativity and innovation and a team's success in creativity and innovation seems to be highly dependent on leaving behind self-centeredness and turning toward others. For instance, studies have shown that team creativity and innovation are mostly strongly predicted by team processes (e.g., communication style) rather than team composition or structure (see Hülsheger, Anderson & Salgado, 2009 for meta-analysis). Google's renowned research study Project

Aristotle (Duhigg, 2016) also found out that high-performing teams characteristically demonstrate psychological safety (i.e., whether members feel safe enough to communicate freely and take interpersonal risk; see Edmondson, 1999). The study found that psychological safety was promoted by the way team members treated each other, particularly by practicing equal participation in conversations and demonstrating social sensitivity. These study findings suggest that moving beyond the self-conscious orientation and turning toward others, which helps teams to engage in a communication style that creates psychological safety, is strongly associated with team's success and performance.

3.5 What difference does human encounter make?

The previous section proposed that human encounter takes a form of gradient experience in which the intensity and depth of meeting can vary. Since this may imply that there is no clear cut-off to definitively tell whether a certain set of interactions *is* human encounter or not, one might wonder whether we can still know *when* human encounter is. I argue that perhaps one way to know if human encounter is indeed experienced is through looking at the difference human encounter makes. Here I introduce again Gabriel Marcel (1950)'s quote:

> At the level of strictly human encounter, there is a whole scale of possible meetings that ranges from the quite trivial to the extremely significant. The nearer I get to the lower end of the scale…the nearer I get to an encounter that can be treated as an objective intersection of paths; humanly speaking it is nothing but a kind of elbowing. The nearer I get to the higher end of the scale the nearer I get to a meeting at the level of inwardness, a meeting of creative development.

As mentioned, it is notable that Marcel portrays experiences of human encounter as leading to some kind of "creative development." Wyatt (2012) also adds that human encounter is "often experienced as a sense of 'communion' or even 'love,' enlivening and profound, which is experienced as lifting the group into wiser, more effective and *creative functioning*" (p. 106). In this way, human encounter is not merely a deep meeting between our humanity. It does not just end there. As the life of our beings joins in communion with one another toward something greater than ourselves in the experience of human encounter, broader and larger life is created and generated.

Wyatt (2012) suggests that experiencing human encounter leads people to be transformed and experience spiritual awakening, often leading them to make changes in life's direction. It also makes them feel enlivened with renewed energy (Quinn & Dutton, 2005). Importantly, a person feels more whole as an individual while simultaneously feeling taken up into the group as a larger whole. At a group level, it allows the group to enjoy a greater degree of trust and cohesion by bringing people together and to experience a shared resonance as people's boundaries become more semi-permeable. Lastly, the experience of human encounter also allows the group to work more effectively as their ability to think together and collaborate improves. Although there is no systematic set of empirical evidence to support each difference human encounter is proposed to make, I introduce them as possible creative development human encounter brings about. The empirical study that is to be introduced in the next chapter aims to document the details of such creative development and differences human encounter makes that is listed here and beyond.

3.6 Summary of key insights and puzzles

As I conclude the current literature review, I want to pause with my readers again and examine the insights we have gathered so far on the topic of our inquiry as well as the puzzles that remain.

First and foremost, the current review highlights that humans are essentially relational beings, deeply embedded with a desire to be with others. This intrinsic longing is what defines our humanity. However, the structure of our society and social systems often do not support or prioritize this longing and desire that makes us human. This way, people gradually become unaware of this indispensable longing and miss opportunities to truly be present with others, ultimately becoming increasingly incapable of genuine encounter. This very insight discovered in the current chapter builds upon the insights found from my personal narrative in Chapter 2, which highlights that we are not taught to truly meet anyone or anything. In fact, we are taught to avoid encounter, distancing us from our humanity.

Next, the current chapter reaffirms that human encounter is a particular way of relating to others. It is a profound meeting in humanity, marked by the recognition and appreciation of a collective belonging to a greater whole, although it is sometimes beyond our ability to articulate and describe such recognition and appreciation. From this understanding, two key insights emerge. First, human encounter is the only real and substantial way of relating to others, a notion that prominently appeared in my personal narrative detailed in Chapter 2. As such, this chapter underscores that human encounter is best understood when juxtaposed with its absence, leading to a review of social scientific literature on humanization and positive relationships at work as well as literature addressing the antithesis of human encounter: objectification. This insight prompted me to contrast human encounter with exchange relations in the philosophical and

theological literature. Second, the realness and substantiality of human encounter as a relational experience involve striving towards transcendent third, or something greater than ourselves. The current chapter suggests that this element of transcendence seems to hold the key to understanding the essence of human encounter.

Another significant insight from this chapter is that human encounter is not inherently individual but is a mutuality of being that often manifests through genuine dialogue. This implies that human encounter requires a shift away from self-absorption, which often takes forms of self-centeredness and self-consciousness. This element of self-absorption, which isolates people in the world of exchange, was vividly depicted in my autoethnographic essay in Chapter 2, highlighting its importance in understanding human encounter. The current review shows that human encounter begins when people turn towards each other, prioritizing the other's needs over their own ego. While mutual understanding is not always reached, openness and vulnerability are likely essential for fostering human encounter. Additionally, intentionally creating a dialogic space can facilitate this process, helping participants transcend their individual boundaries. Ultimately, human encounter promotes creative development that makes a difference to the life of a person and of a group. Furthermore, human encounter, taking the form of dialogue, is not akin to a prescribed cure or fix with a recommended dosage. Rather, it embodies an ongoing attitude or way of being that continues.

Still another significant insight from this chapter is that human encounter exists not only in actuality but crucially also in possibility. It is the unfolding truth, beauty and goodness of real relationality coming to be. It is not an inert objective fact but a dynamic, living possibility. This resonates with and perhaps explains why I could not pin down my own encounter experiences in

Chapter 2. It seems that encounter itself is a dynamic living being, whose essence eludes capture within our mere consciousness and language.

While this literature review provides valuable insights into the central research questions of this dissertation, many questions and puzzles remain. We are still curious about some of the puzzles identified at the end of Chapter 2: What makes human encounter so elusive? Why do we long for something we cannot achieve through our mere will? Lastly, can we ever fully understand what human encounter truly is? Some of the philosophical perspectives introduced in the current chapter spoke to the depth of metaphysical reality and conundrum, which I believe helps us to try answering these questions. I plan to revisit these crucial questions in the final chapter of the dissertation.

In the meantime, another central puzzle emerging from both my autoethnographic exploration and the current literature review is how people can engage with one another in their humanity despite the objectifying tendency, which social scientific research literature has identified as our default mode of interpersonal perception especially in organizational contexts. This unresolved question will be the focus of the next chapter, where I will explore it empirically to further our understanding of human relationality at work.

Chapter 4 Empirical Investigation of Human Encounter at Work

In the journey of exploring human relationality throughout this dissertation, a pivotal puzzle has emerged: how can people truly engage with one another in their humanity amidst the objectifying tendencies prevalent in organizational contexts? As reviewed in Chapter 3, the existing research on objectification, humanization and positive relationships at work reveals a fragmented discourse on the intricate interplay between interpersonal perception and interactions, hindering our understanding of the profound complexities inherent in human relationality. Additionally, our typical social scientific approach to human relationality does not consider the *possibility* that it can exist on a metaphysical and spiritual plane, a perspective that extends beyond the physical and objective domains traditionally addressed by social scientific approach. Therefore, it is crucial to engage in an open inquiry that considers the potentiality of human relationality beyond its actuality to develop a more comprehensive understanding of human relationality in organizational contexts.

The present chapter marks a significant moment in this inquiry by empirically investigating human relationality at work. It explores this emerged puzzle as a research question: How do organizational members experience and perceive their workplace relationships when, in the midst of workplace objectification, they are invited to the possibility of human encounter at work? I explore this question using a qualitative, inductive approach to learn from organizational members' lived relational experiences in their real work settings.

In conducting the current empirical investigation, I strived to maintain an openness to honor the essence of human encounter, trying not to be confined by preconceived notions about encounter that may have appeared in previous chapters, although I acknowledge that my own lived experiences and literature review might have inevitably influenced my inquiry process. Throughout this empirical inquiry, my goal was to fully embrace and trust the curious idea that encounter involves potentiality beyond actuality and to allow the richness of people's experiences to guide the exploration.

Drawing from participant observations and interviews from an intervention that facilitated human encounter among organizational members and thus provided an unparalleled opportunity to inductively explore the question at hand, I discovered that the experience of human encounter exists on a continuum with varying levels: The *emergent*, the *personizing*, and the *transcendent*. These levels are characterized by different degrees of mutual engagement, awareness and relational building. In juxtaposition with objectifying exchange, this continuum reflects the ways organizational members interact with one another, ranging from mere utilization for work purposes to the establishment of a deeper, more personal engagement that transcends the professional context. Additionally, I illustrate how human encounter enhances a work group’s collaborative efforts and elevates their overall work dynamics.

4.1 Research setting

The research setting of the current work involves an initiative that entails reading and discussing narrative literature in workplaces. I have followed a program designed and delivered by a non-profit organization called Reflection Point.

Reflection Point has delivered its program to various organizational contexts, ranging from large Fortune 500 corporations to not-for-profit organizations (e.g., universities) and government groups across the United States and globally. As of May 2024, Reflection Point has delivered its program to over 17,000 participants in 143 organizations located in the United States and globally (Reflection Point, n.d.). Reflection Point changed its name from its former name Books@Work in 2021, but its mission and practices remain the same[7].

In a Reflection Point program, a group of up to twenty participants read literature or short stories and meet for regular discussions facilitated by a local university professor. The groups are created either within natural work teams or across different functions or levels within the organization depending on the needs of the organization. A typical group meets once a week for twelve one-hour sessions over three months, but the length of the session and its frequency varies depending on the needs of the organization. Most groups read several pieces of narrative literature or short stories and often have different facilitators for each piece that they read. That is, the participants have a chance to meet and interact with multiple facilitators over the course of the program.

Organizations learn of Reflection Point and implement the program through three primary ways. In some cases, organizations find the website of Reflection Point through an internet search and then request information about the program. Other times, the founder and executive director of Reflection Point, through her personal connections, makes an introduction to the decision makers of an organization who could bring the program to their organization. Still other organizations find out about Reflection Point when someone who has experienced the

[7] Reflection Point explains the reason for changing its name from Books@Work while maintaining the same mission and practices on its new website: https://www.reflectionpoint.org/post/whats-in-a-name

program at one company moves to a different company and then pitches the program to be implemented by their new employer. Although the motivations and needs of organizations that try the Reflection Point program can vary, most organizations seem primarily interested in the program for its potential to promote team building, improve team effectiveness, or foster relationships and social connection as a means of addressing particular topics of organizational interests, including but not limited to diversity and inclusion issues.

4.1.1 Why this setting

Reflection Point makes a rich setting to explore human encounter at work for several important reasons.

First and foremost, narrative literature, by nature of being a piece of art, invites us to the world of encounter by making us stop and pay attention to what is present but easily missed in our daily lives. Frederick Buechner, an American writer and theologian, eloquently states how literature invites readers to the world of encounter:

> An old silent pond. / Into the pond a frog jumps. / Splash! Silence again.
>
> It is perhaps the best known of all Japanese haiku[8]. No subject could be more humdrum. No language could be more pedestrian. Basho, the poet, makes no comment on what he is describing. He implies no meaning, message, or metaphor. He simply invites our attention to no more and no less than just this: the old pond in its watery stillness, the kerplunk of the frog, the gradual return of the stillness.

[8] Haiku is a type of short-form poetry originally from Japan.

> In effect he is putting a frame around the moment, and what the frame does is enable us to see not just something about the moment, but the moment itself in all its ineffable ordinariness and particularity. The chances are that if we had been passing by when the frog jumped, we wouldn't have noticed a thing or, noticing it, wouldn't have given it a second thought. But the frame sets it off from everything else that distracts us. That is the nature and purpose of frames. The frame does not change the moment, but it changes our way of perceiving the moment. It makes us notice the moment… it is what literature in general wants above all else too.
>
> From the simplest lyric to the most complex novel and densest drama, literature is asking us to pay attention. Pay attention to the frog. Pay attention to the west wind… In sum, pay attention to the world and all that dwells therein and thereby learn at last to pay attention to yourself and all that dwells therein. (Frederick Buechner Quote of the Day: Art, para. 1-4)

The quote elegantly captures how literature prompts us to engage with the world in a manner distinct from our usual approach. It encourages us to halt and recognize the opportunities for encounter that have always existed but often escape our notice. Literature, as a form of artistic expression and storytelling, encourages us to view the world with fresh eyes and heightened awareness. In contrast to our everyday routines, which tend to focus on practicalities and the familiar, literature prompts us to pause and explore the depths of human experience. It sheds light on aspects of life that we may have overlooked, inviting us to delve into the intricacies of human existence. Through its narratives, literature serves as a poignant reminder of the profound potential for meaningful encounters that permeate every facet of life.

Second, the act of engaging with narrative literature allows opportunities for human encounter as the act of reading literature is a deep and intense process of letting go of one's ego and meeting other human beings—although they are fictional. The *New Yorker* article by Ceridwen Dovey articulates this point elegantly:

> The insights [from reading fiction] themselves are still nebulous, as learning gained through reading fiction often is—but therein lies its power. In a secular age, I suspect that reading fiction is one of the few remaining paths to transcendence, that elusive state in which the distance between the self and the universe shrinks. Reading fiction makes me lose all sense of self, but at the same time makes me feel most uniquely myself. As Woolf, the most fervent of readers, wrote, a book "splits us into two parts as we read," for "the state of reading consists in the complete elimination of the ego," while promising "perpetual union" with another mind. (Dovey, June 9, 2015)

Unlike non-fiction that is typically expository in nature, fiction takes the form of a narrative that depicts the abstracted real world with intentional agents pursuing goals to form a plot. Therefore, "narratives are fundamentally social in nature in that almost all stories concern relationships between people" and thus understanding stories involves an understanding of people (Mar et al., 2006). Richard Gerrig (1993) explains that this parallel between processing narrative fiction and real-world events occurs through a mechanism of narrative engagement and uses a metaphor of travel to illustrate how a good work of narrative fiction can "transport" a reader to different times and places. Once transported, according to Gerrig (1993), readers experience thoughts and emotions drawn from and stimulated by the fictional context. Indeed, empirical evidence supports that readers understand a story by assuming the perspective of a character (Özyürek &

Trabasso, 1997; Rall & Harris, 2000) and they mentally represent their emotions (Gernsbacher et al., 1992). Furthermore, studies support that the thoughts and emotions experienced through narrative engagement are equivalent in type and magnitude to those occurring in real-world everyday events (László & Cupchik, 1995; Oatley, 1995, 1999). Gerrig (1993) further notes that the thoughts and emotions experienced through narrative engagement leave a lasting impact on readers' engagement with the real world by bolstering social abilities (Mar et al., 2005; see Dodell-Feder & Tamir (2018) for meta-analysis) and empathy (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Mar et al., 2005). In a nutshell, readers learn and practice how to engage with and encounter another being—although fictional—through the act of reading narrative fiction that can be transferred when the readers engage with and encounter other beings in the real world.

In addition to the inherently social aspect of reading fictional stories, the research setting in this study incorporates significant social and interpersonal components by facilitating participants to share their reactions to and interpretations of the story in a group setting. I observed firsthand through participant observation that this sharing goes beyond mere discussion; it often led participants to express their deepest emotions, personal experiences and backgrounds, prompted by the conversations about and around the stories they read. This process of sharing enabled encounters for two critical reasons.

First, the group discussions facilitated a safe space for vulnerability, enabling participants to reveal aspects of themselves that might otherwise remain concealed in typical organizational interactions. I observed that the presence of an outside facilitator significantly contributed to cultivating this secure environment, as their presence helped foster trust and promote openness. Notably, facilitators themselves often served as models for respectful communication and active listening, ensuring that all participants felt acknowledged and appreciated. Such attentive

presence of an outside facilitator established a sense of psychological safety, allowing participants to explore even the most sensitive topics with care and sensitivity. Through their adept use of thoughtful questioning and active listening, facilitators encouraged participants to delve into their emotions and experiences, further enhancing the sense of psychological safety within the group. As participants engaged in discussions about their personal reactions to the stories, I observed a remarkable depth of sharing, with individuals opening up about their values, fears, hopes, and life experiences. This level of candid sharing fostered a profound sense of empathy and understanding among group members, transforming their perceptions of one another from mere colleagues to dynamic being with rich inner lives.

Second, the shared narrative framework provided by the fictional stories acted as a transcendental third, creating a space that is beyond and above the participants themselves, something they collectively strived towards. This shared narrative served as a common ground, allowing participants to connect over themes and experiences that transcend their individual perspectives. The stories acted as catalysts for deeper conversations, fostering a shared understanding and mutual recognition that helped to dissolve barriers. This process not only made it easier for participants to relate to one another on a personal level but also gave them a sense of belonging to something greater than themselves. By engaging with these narratives, participants experienced a profound connection to a collective journey, reinforcing their bonds and enhancing their sense of community and shared purpose.

4.1.2 Text for discussion

In Reflection Point programs, participants read human stories in fiction and narrative nonfiction that provoke deep discussion and become windows to deeper reflection. Texts are

chosen based on the participants' preferences demonstrated in the entry survey or during the program. The format of chosen texts includes books, short stories, poems, plays or book excerpts. Notably, business or how-to books are never chosen as a text for reading and discussion. See *Appendix A* in Appendices section for examples of books and short stories that are read at Reflection Point programs.

4.1.3 Facilitators

Having local university professors as a session facilitator is what makes a Reflection Point program distinct from regular book clubs. Whereas participants of a typical book club may gather in an informal way and lack a group leader, Reflection Point sessions are led by facilitators. These facilitators are external to the work organizations who are being paid to guide discussions in Reflection Point sessions. They bring enthusiasm about the book the group reads and guide the conversation. One of the important roles of the facilitators is to ensure that discussion is not narrowly focused on the text, but rather that the book is used as a window to exploring broader ideas and having deeper discussion.

Deborah[9] likened her facilitating experience in Reflection Point sessions to a campfire:

> I like to think of Reflection Point discussion as a campfire. Try to think of my role as still occasionally adding the necessary log, you know, seeing where I might need to fan some embers, but otherwise really backing off because I've created such a sustainable campfire that I don't need to play such a huge role.

Rebecca shared her experience as a facilitator in the interview by Reflection Point:

[9] The names of the facilitators mentioned in this dissertation are pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes.

> At the college as a professor, my role is very much scripted. Reflection Point is the complete opposite. And that's one of the reasons why I love it, that you can throw out the rulebook and just kind of really just focus on not just the text, but what does the text say?... And that's what's fantastic about it, you don't have to be so intentional, and there is nothing to grade. Praise the Lord. Yes. So yes, you can just have a really great conversation about the book and just, you know, wherever the conversation leads you, you just go with it.

Facilitators manage the conversation by asking questions that are open-ended. Kyle shared in the interview that "I tend to avoid questions that imply that there is a specific right answer. So instead of what or who, I tend to the how and the why."

4.2 Methods

4.2.1 Data collection

The present study employs a qualitative methodology to explore and illuminate the landscape of human relationality in organizational contexts (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Aiming to understand the depth and richness of human experiences within organizational contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I opted to prioritize a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis (Locke, 2001).

Data collected for the current study comes from two sources: interviews and participant observations. As the research progressed, I established a strong rapport with the founder of Reflection Point (Feldman et al., 2004), who had been conducting interviews with program participants. This connection granted me access to an extensive collection of 414 participant interview transcripts, encompassing the entirety of interviews conducted since the program's

inception. This ample repository of transcripts facilitated immersion into the research context, serving as my primary source of data. As the analysis of interview transcripts progressed and thematic patterns emerged, I recognized the potential for a deeper and more nuanced comprehension of the research setting. Therefore, I engaged in participant observations with three distinct groups and conducted interviews with the participants and facilitators I met during my engagement in participant observations. Below I provide further details about my data collection process.

As aforementioned, I gained access to the transcripts of participant interviews Reflection Point personnel conducted, which served as a primary robust repository of data. After each course of sessions ends, Reflection Point invites their participants to share their experience in informal, semi-structured interviews in order to collect feedback from the participants with a purpose of understanding and improving their program and participant experience. An invitation to the post-program interview is sent out to all participants. Participation in the interview is voluntary and there is no compensation for participation. Most of the time, interviews happen over the phone. Sometimes, the interviews were conducted in-person when the participants lived or worked within a reasonable driving distance from the interviewers (i.e., founder/executive director or director of operations of Reflection Point). Each interview generally lasts for 20 to 30 minutes and is conducted mostly one-on-one between the participant and the Reflection Point personnel. Interviews are recorded with the consent of the interviewees and then transcribed by external transcription services.

I did not conduct these interviews myself. However, by reading the interview transcripts and talking to Reflection Point's founder and director of operations who conducted these interviews, I ensured that the interviews conform to the guidelines for a semi-structured

interview in that the interviewer mostly asked open-ended questions which allowed interviewees to answer in a variety of ways (Spradley, 1979). For example, the interviewer usually initiated the conversation by asking participant interviewees to introduce themselves (e.g., "Tell me a little about you. How long have you been there [at your current organization]? What do you do? Anything you want to tell me?"). Then, the interviewer shifted the conversation to their Reflection Point experience by asking broad and open-ended questions such as "tell me what your Reflection Point experience was like" or "what would you like to tell me about your Reflection Point experience?" In the interview transcripts, it is observed that the interviewer frequently tried to encourage interviewees to elaborate by using probing phrases/questions such as "tell me more about what you just said" or "can you think of any specific examples/interactions that made you feel/think that way?" Other questions that were often asked in the post-program participant interviews include "what surprised you most about the Reflection Point experience?", "over the time you've been doing Reflection Point, how has your relationship with other participants changed" and "tell me about books too. Is there one or two that have really stuck out to you as spurring the best kind of conversation?" Refer to *Appendix B Post-Program Interview* in the Appendices section for an interview protocol used by Reflection Point as well as the email Reflection Point sent out to invite participants to interview.

Admittedly, one potential limitation of these participant interview transcripts is that many of these interviews were conducted by the founder of Reflection Point and might have skewed interviewees to share only the positive and hide the negative in the interview. As I was mindful of this potential issue, I asked Reflection Point to explicitly pinpoint me to interview transcripts in which participants share their less-than-positive experiences in order to make sure that this potential limitation was not a systematic problem in my data set. Indeed, I observed interviewees

honestly sharing their less than positive experience (e.g., “If it was offered again, I probably wouldn’t [do it]”, “I know it was supposed to be more fun and engaging but it almost stressed me out more”, or “it felt like homework”). In such cases, interviewers expressed respect for their honest feedback (e.g., “Look, you know, feedback is feedback. There’s no real such thing as positive or negative. I just want to hear what you think”).

To address potential limitations arising from relying primarily on participant interview transcripts provided by Reflection Point as well as to gain a deeper understanding of the research context and emerging themes, I engaged in participant observations within three distinct groups. I also conducted interviews guided by the interview protocol in *Appendix C Follow-up Interview Protocol* in the Appendices section with participants and facilitators I met during these participant observations. The purpose of these follow-up interviews was twofold. First, I wanted to determine whether the responses from the participants about their program experiences aligned with those I had read in the interview transcripts provided by Reflection Point. Second, I sought the opportunity to ask follow-up questions to gain deeper insights into their program experiences. This endeavor resulted in collecting supplementary data, including 19 hours of participant observations, 28 participant interviews[10], and 2 facilitator interviews. This supplementary data collection allowed me to confirm that the overall tone and participant responses I observed firsthand aligned with what I had read in the interview transcripts provided by Reflection Point. Moreover, this supplementary data collection provided valuable insights into participants' program experiences. Engaging in this supplementary data collection was crucial during the subsequent data analysis and theory development phases.

[10] These interviews were conducted with 28 new participants whom I met through the participant observations. These were not follow-up interviews with the original participants whose program experiences had already been shared with Reflection Point personnel.

4.2.2 Full sample description

414 post-program participant interviews were conducted from the inception of the program in 2012 until the summer of 2018. These participant interviews were conducted from 72 different programs across 24 unique organizations in various industries ranging from manufacturing and technology to education, food services and healthcare. Per program, 5.75 interviews were conducted on average and each interview transcript contains approximately 10 pages.

Out of 414 interviewed participants, 66.7% were female (n = 276) while 32.9% were male (n = 136). Roughly half of the participant interviewees (n = 235, 56.8% of the sample) self-identified as "regular readers," describing that they like or love the act of reading in general or reading specifically the literary genre, while 30 participants (7.2% of the sample) specifically reported they do not like reading in general or this specific genre. Regardless of participants' fondness for reading, 92.5% of the interviewed participants (n = 383) reported that their program experience was positive (e.g., "I would do it again" or "I would recommend it to other colleagues") while 1% of them (n = 4) reported that they had a negative experience (e.g., "I would not do it again" or "I would not recommend to other colleagues")[11]. When describing the program experience, 93.2% of the participant interviewees (n = 386) spontaneously shared how the program had an impact on interpersonal relating even when this topic was not yet prompted by the interviewer while 30.6% of the entire sample (n = 126) gave a highly detailed account of

[11] I am aware that my sample is comprised of those who willingly participated in interviews, potentially leading to a positivity bias. For instance, individuals dissatisfied with the program might be less inclined to accept interview invitations. However, in my supplementary data collection, where I had the opportunity to interview all participants from a specific group, I noticed a comparable ratio of participants reporting positive and negative overall program experiences.

it with specific examples and substantial details; 6.8% of the participant interviewees (n = 28) did not talk about the interpersonal relating aspect during the interview. The full sample description detailed in this paragraph is summarized in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1 Full sample description summary

		Entire Sample
# of interviews		414
Gender composition		32.9% male 66.7% female
Positive overall experience		92.5%
Participants' self-identification as "readers		56.8%
Description of interpersonal relating	**Presence**	93.2%
	Substantial	30.6%

4.2.3 Level of analysis

In exploring my research question on how organizational members experience and perceive workplace relationships amidst workplace objectification when the possibility of human encounter arises, I chose to analyze individual participant interviews at a group level. This decision stemmed from a desire to honor the interconnectedness of participants and their experiences within the program setting. Given the group nature of the research context, analyzing the data at this level appeared the most holistic approach to capture the dynamics of human relationality. Conceptually, this choice aligns with insights from Chapter 3, where I introduced the concept of "persons-in-communion." This notion challenges traditional distinctions between individual, dyadic, or group levels, emphasizing the dissolution of boundaries between self and other. This perspective, central to the idea of human encounter, suggested that dissecting these experiences into discrete levels would undermine the participants' inherent interconnectedness. Instead, preserving the integrity of the group experience allowed me to remain faithful to the participants' lived experiences within the program.

4.2.4 Sampling

To meaningfully explore my research question within the extensive interview data, I chose to delve deeply into the relational experiences of selected groups. Initially, I aimed to identify groups that provided rich descriptions of relational aspects within the program experience or their organizational context in general, whether indicating a lack of human encounter or a rich encounter experience. To assess this richness, I employed two methods.

First, a quantitative approach involved coding the degree of interpersonal relating—the extent to which an individual participant described the relational aspects within the program experience or in their organizational context in general (classified as high, medium, or low) in individual interview transcripts. This coding yielded an average numerical value for each group, indicating how much participants from each group discussed interpersonal relating in the interviews. This served as a useful primary basis to assess the potential for richness of relational description in the data.

Additionally, for the groups with a high numerical value for the average degree of interpersonal relating, qualitative memos were created. These memos outlined the group's context, background and a brief summary of the group experience, focusing particularly on group dynamics and any observed convergence or divergence in sensemaking or reports of their relational experience shared among participants. Groups showing too much divergence were excluded, as it was challenging to delve deeper into the reasons for such divergence given that the interview data was not collected by me and the opportunity to conduct follow-up interviews with these participants was slim.

Using the described quantitative and qualitative markers, I selected a few groups that richly illuminated either the absence or presence of encounter experiences. Upon closer

examination of transcripts from these groups, I observed the variations in their levels of initial interpersonal familiarity across different groups—the extent to which participants in a certain group knew or felt familiar and comfortable with one another at the onset of the program experience. This variance in interpersonal familiarity was not something I initially intended to examine; rather, it naturally emerged as interview questions such as "Did you know anyone in the group?" or "How well did you know them?" were regularly asked in almost every interview, revealing differing levels of interpersonal familiarity across different groups. The presence of such variability became salient during the sampling procedure, which appeared to influence encounter experiences. As I pondered this variable further, its importance for understanding human encounter became more evident. I had a hunch that the enablers of human encounter identified in Chapter 3, such as openness, vulnerability, self-consciousness, trust, and psychological safety, should theoretically be related to the level of interpersonal familiarity. Consequently, I followed my intuition and selected three groups that demonstrated richness in their description of relational aspects but differed in their initial levels of interpersonal familiarity (e.g., low, medium, high) for closer data analysis. In the next few paragraphs, I describe each of the three groups and discuss the similarities and differences among them. Summary of each group and their comparison is summarized in Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2 Group comparison summary

		Entire Sample	Group 1: FoodCo	Group 2: BearCo	Group 3: PowerCo
# of interviews		414	16	31	15
# of interviewees		--	16	24	12
Industry		--	Food services	Manufacturing	Manufacturing
Nature of group	**Work team?**	--	No	No	Yes
	Interpersonal familiarity	--	Low	Medium	High
Gender composition		32.9% male 66.7% female	25% male 75% female	36% male 64% female	66.67% male 33.33% female

Positive overall experience		92.5%	93.75%	100%	100%
Participants' self-identification as "readers		56.8%	56.25%	68%	41.67%
Description of interpersonal relating	**Presence**	93.2%	100%	100%	100%
	Substantial	30.6%	31.25%	35.48%	40%

Group 1: FoodCo. The first group is a cross-functional, non-work group in a food services company FoodCo (pseudonym) based in the Midwest region of the United States. Departments and functions in which each participant was working widely varied, ranging from information technology, human resources, accounting, and payroll to equipment, graphic design and project management. Most of the participants reported that they did not know one another prior to joining the Reflection Point program. This group met weekly over the course of three months for facilitated book discussion. From this group, four male and twelve female participants were interviewed. Each of them was interviewed once, leading to a total of sixteen interviews from this group.

Group 2: BearCo. The second group is a cross-functional group in a bearing-producing manufacturing company BearCo (pseudonym) based in the Northeast region of the United States. The group consisted of the president of the company, office workers from various departments—such as human resources, accounting, research and development, and finance—and workers from factory shop floor such as machinists. Even though it was another cross-functional group, this group had a higher level of interpersonal familiarity and acquaintance when starting the program compared to the case of FoodCo. Many BearCo group participants often mentioned in the interviews they already knew some of their fellow participants and felt comfortable enough with one another to exchange greetings. The group met during the lunch hour over the course of two years with some breaks in between. From this group, nine male and fifteen female participants

were interviewed. Four of them were interviewed twice and one of them four times while the rest were interviewed once, leading to a total of thirty one interviews from this group.

Group 3: PowerCo. The third group is an executive work team in an engine-producing manufacturing company PowerCo (pseudonym) based in the Midwest of the United States. The group consisted of the president of the company and other members of the upper management such as chief financial officer and vice president of operations and supply chain. Given that this group was a natural work team within the company, most participants, except those who had recently joined the company, knew each other fairly well prior to the program. Many PowerCo group participants mentioned in the interviews that they had great relationships overall and felt comfortable with their fellow participants. Some even described the group as already having a little community. These factors made this group the highest in interpersonal familiarity among the three groups. This group incorporated the Reflection Point program as part of their monthly work meeting over the course of three years. From this group, eight male and four female participants were interviewed. Three of them were interviewed twice while the rest were interviewed once, leading to a total of fifteen interviews from this group.

Similarities and differences among groups. The three groups share similarities and differences at a group level that are important to consider. First, in terms of program duration, FoodCo ran the program for a relatively short period (i.e., three months) while BearCo and PowerCo implemented the program over an extended period (i.e., two or three years). With respect to the nature of group, FoodCo and BearCo groups were not a work team, and thus the participants had a relatively low sense of familiarity with one another when starting the program, and most of the participants did not have a chance to formally work together after the program was over. However, while both of them were cross-functional, non-work team groups, the

participants in these two groups had a varying sense of familiarity for one another on average. For example, the majority of the participants from FoodCo mentioned during the interview that they did not know anyone in the group, not even their faces and names, whereas many participants in the BearCo group mentioned they knew some of the fellow participants and some of them were already saying hi to each other when running across one another in the hallway prior to the program. On the other hand, the PowerCo group, the third group, was an executive work team that closely worked together on a regular basis and thus the participants had a relatively high sense of familiarity with one another on average. In the case of PowerCo, the program was embedded as the part of their monthly work meetings and the participants in the PowerCo group had a chance to continue to interact outside the context of the program. In terms of group gender composition, the two cross-functional, non-work team groups, FoodCo and BearCo, had a relatively similar gender composition to the average of the full sample (i.e., approximately two thirds of whom are female and a third, male) whereas for the PowerCo group, the executive work team, female participants comprised only a third of the group while the male participants made up of two thirds of the group.

Despite these differences, all three groups demonstrated some similarities to one another in that similar portion of their interviewed participants reported a positive program experience overall. Again, Table 4.2 introduced earlier on page 84 summarizes the characteristics of each group described above.

Across three groups, fifty-two participants were interviewed, six of whom were interviewed more than once, thus leading to a total of sixty-two interviews for the analysis. The basic demographic information of the participant interviewees is summarized in Table 4.3

presented at the end of this chapter on page 140. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for the names of the companies and individual participants.

4.2.5 Data analysis

My introduction to the Reflection Point program initially stemmed from my curiosity around how individuals share personal narratives in a professional setting. Originally seeking to understand the dynamics of personal sharing within organizational contexts, I requested 20 interview transcripts that would provide the richest account of participants' program experience. I soon noticed that these participants consistently expressed enthusiasm for the program, which was not surprising given how I framed my initial transcript request. This prompted me to broaden my perspective and I additionally requested interviews that captured less positive experiences to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research setting. Reflection Point generously provided five such transcripts. With this initial dataset of 25 participant interviews, each from different organizations, I began to distill emergent themes through open coding and descriptive memos with a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The process of open coding soon revealed that what was most striking about this program experience was a shift in how participants perceive and interact with one another. Indeed, one of the most frequently appearing descriptions in the interview transcripts included "getting to know their colleagues in a way that they would not have known" and "how the program helped participants form qualitatively different relationships." This insight spurred a redirection of my research focus to align with the data's resonance. In the spirit of collaborative inquiry, I shared these early insights with Reflection Point's founder and the director of operations, who had been conducting these participant interviews, and solicited their perspectives to validate and further

enrich my interpretations. Furthermore, I presented my nascent findings in various platforms to tap into a diverse range of viewpoints, enhancing my grasp of the unfolding narrative that emerged from the data.

As my grasp of the data deepened, I engaged with Reflection Point and negotiated access to their comprehensive archive of 414 participant interview transcripts in order to gain a more systematic understanding of the participant experience from a broader angle. To make the most of this extensive dataset, I hired and trained three research assistants to code all of the transcripts and produce more descriptive memos. Together with the research assistants, I coded each participant interviewee's demographic information such as their company name, department and the title of their work role, organizational tenure as well as gender to a degree that each transcript revealed this information. We could identify these sets of demographic information for 85% of the interviewed participants. Besides demographic information, we also coded a participant's self-evaluation of overall program experience (i.e.., positive, neutral, negative) in order to make meaningful sense of whether how much a participant enjoys the program is associated with some other indicators. One such indicator included whether a participant enjoys the act of reading (in general or literary genre, particularly), which we also coded for. Importantly, we coded whether and how much a participant describes program influenced interpersonal relating with his or her fellow participants. Coding the complete dataset offered a robust framework for navigating its expansiveness. Beyond shedding light on individual participants' identities and overarching program experiences, by aggregating information learned at an individual level, it provided a foundation for understanding the collective group experience. This transition from individual to group-level analysis marked a crucial juncture in my data analysis process, allowing me to delve

into participants' relational experiences in a way that honors the fundamental interconnectedness of their interactions.

Based on the coding and the memos my research assistants and I wrote on different groups, I selected three groups, FoodCo, BearCo and PowerCo whose descriptions and sampling rationale were described earlier, for in-depth analysis that seemed to promise the richest theoretical development (Locke, 2001). I read the individual interview transcripts from each group and tried to make sense of them collectively at a group level. As I read the transcripts at a group level, I engaged in axial coding (Charmaz, 2006) to identify how participants describe the shift in their perception of their colleagues as well as the shift in their relational dynamics. Simultaneously, I wrote descriptive memos to capture any relevant information to deepen my understanding of the organizational context in which each group is embedded (e.g., organizational culture, norms of interpersonal relating, etc.). The epitome of the current data analysis phase was synthesizing my reading of individual interview transcripts into group-level composite narratives (Willis, 2019). Based on individual interview transcripts within a given group, I crafted composite narratives for each group I was observing, by paying particular attention to where individual narratives within the group converge and diverge.

Writing group-level composite narratives let me see clearly that each group was at a different starting point prior to the intervention in terms of relationship building. Therefore, in the subsequent phase in my data analysis, I paid particular attention to how they described their daily interactions before the program and the degree of change in their interactions in another round of coding, this time on a more conceptual level. Examples of conceptual codes included "no acknowledgement of personhood," "starting to acknowledge personhood," "starting to realize the multidimensionality of personhood," etc. Simultaneously, I wrote a series of analytic

memos that focused on (1) how the shift in interpersonal perception changed the nature of interactions within each group (*i.e.*, *within group level)* as well as (2) how such emerging narratives of interpersonal shift from each group-level composite narrative compare and contrast (*i.e., between group level*). This process of writing analytical memos at both within and between group levels directly served as an informative foundation for understanding how groups experienced human relationality when the possibility of human encounter arose in the midst of workplace objectification, which led to the discovery of the continuum of human encounter. Lastly, I engaged in theoretical coding in which I related themes to one another and integrated them into a coherent theory.

4.3 Findings

The data described in this section stem from three distinct groups, each affiliated with different organizations referred to by pseudonyms: FoodCo, BearCo, and PowerCo. These groups collectively offer a vivid portrayal of how the collective engagement with narrative literature, through reading and discussion, precipitated transformations in interpersonal perceptions and interactions. It is noteworthy that each group embarked on this journey from a distinct starting point in terms of the degree of interpersonal familiarity, or lack thereof, prior to the intervention. The first group presented here, FoodCo, exhibited the least interpersonal familiarity among its members at the commencement of the intervention. In contrast, the final group discussed in this section, PowerCo, showcased the highest level of interpersonal familiarity before the intervention. I present these three groups in ascending order of pre-intervention interpersonal familiarity to highlight the different levels and forms of engagement possible in the human encounter experience. Within the narrative of each group, I first describe

their relational landscape before the intervention and subsequently provide a descriptive account of how this landscape evolved as a result of the program experience.

4.3.1 The story of FoodCo group: Opening the door to the possibility of human encounter at work—The emergent encounter

The FoodCo group is a cross-functional, non-work group in a food services company, FoodCo. FoodCo group's program experience shows how their program experience was like "opening the door" to the new possibility of relationality. Evelyn, an administrative assistant to the executive vice president of the company, said during the interview, "this *opened the door* to people you may or may not have ever talked to outside of work, or even if you both work here, you may never have had an actual conversation." The story of FoodCo shows the group's journey of *emergent* encounter in which organizational members began to notice and acknowledge one another's human presence.

4.3.1.1 Where the FoodCo group started

Primarily being a cross-functional, non-work group, the majority of the participants in the FoodCo group indicated that they did not know one another prior to the program, making the current group into the one with the lowest degree of interpersonal familiarity among the three groups presented in the current section. The participants in this group consistently admitted that they did not know one another regardless of their varying tenure at FoodCo, which ranged from 9 months to 20 years while its average being 7.25 years (sd = 5.52). Emily, an administrative assistant in information technology who joined FoodCo a year ago, shared, "there were so many people in the room that even though I've been here a year, I really didn't get to know them. It was like, wow." This sentiment of surprise at how they did not know any of their coworkers was

also shared by those who worked for FoodCo for more than 10 years. Charlotte, who worked in the payroll department for 14 years, said, “most of these people I couldn’t even tell you. I know them, I’ve seen them in the hallway, but I couldn’t tell you their names or anything about them” Ella, a project manager who has been at FoodCo for 12 years, also said, “I knew a few [of the participants]. I knew two. Most I didn’t even know their names and shame on me, having been here for 12 years.” Even John, a financial analyst who worked for FoodCo for 20 years and had the longest tenure at the company in the group, said “I see the people here, because I’ve been here a long time, but I didn’t know them personally at all.” The only participant who expressed familiarity with the program participants was Amelia, who worked in the human resources department: “Coming into the group, [I] knew mostly everyone, [but] not on a personal level, but from HR.”

Even though they were not asked to do so, participants also shared why they think they did not know one another prior to the program experience. First, Charlotte, an employee in payroll who has been at FoodCo for 14 years, said, “I don’t know whether it’s just me [but] it seems like it’s such a big building here. Unless you’re specifically talking to somebody or interacting with somebody, you really don’t know them.” Emily also added, “we’re all scattered throughout the building and we don’t really see each other except for, ‘hey, I need you to deal with this paper, that paper, whatever.’” Some other participants shared how they are not only “scattered” as in Emily’s words but also siloed in their own department. Olivia, a recruiting specialist in human resources, said “a lot of times, our department doesn’t necessarily go out in other departments who work in this building.” Ava, a creative services assistant in the graphic design department, said “we pretty much live in our departments. We don’t really have that department to department conversation.” Ella also shared, “you have tendency coming to work

and you go into your office and you keep working in your same circles." Another barrier to meeting and getting to know people at work mentioned during the interview was rank. Sophia, an accountant who has been at FoodCo for 10 years, described herself as "I am not real high in the company" and mentioned how people's rank intimidates and prevents her from connecting with others at work.

So many participants mentioned during the interview how people do not generally acknowledge one another other than for the purpose of getting the work done, which felt hurtful for many. Olivia, a recruiting specialist at FoodCo, was one of those who expressed this sentiment:

> There are a lot of people, I'd see them in the hallway and they would purposely look down or look away and they wouldn't say good morning. [I sometimes] take it personally that they didn't speak to me or they didn't acknowledge me.

As this sentiment was frequently shared among so many of the participants, I was surprised to learn later from Scarlett, a participant who has been at FoodCo for 4.5 years, that the company actually has something called the 5-10 philosophy. According to Scarlett, the 5-10 philosophy refers to, "if you are 5 feet away [from each other], you speak. If you are 10 feet away, you smile. They've always brought that up in discussions [here at FoodCo] when they train people and stuff." Scarlett went on to share how people do not practice this company philosophy and ignore each other when they run into one another:

> Typically, when I get close to somebody, if I see them coming, I'll make sure that as I pass them, I'll speak or say hi or whatever. Some of them, I'll be like, 'oh, hi' and it's

like oh, God, I know, I know her name, and you'll wait to get by somebody and they'll put their head down and that just infuriates me.

Besides non-work context, when they are working, they are mostly "emails" to each other. Emily, an administrative assistant in information technology, described how her day-to-day work interactions are, "I need you to get this signed, or I need you to, oh. Did you talk to your boss about this, or did you get this ordered and stuff." She mentioned how she realized she saw herself and others at work as "a robotic functioning."

4.3.1.2 Emergent encounter

The story of FoodCo group showed how the group broke free from the relational state of objectifying exchange and entered into the initial level within the continuum of human encounter—the *emergent* encounter in which the participants began to notice and acknowledge each other's human presence. Throughout a set of sixteen participant interviews from FoodCo, the sentiment that "work isn't a place to socialize" (Ella) was quite prevalent when the participants were describing how they thought about their workplace before the program experience, but when they were asked to share about their program experience, all of them mentioned that having an opportunity to meet and get to know other people at work was "nice" and "wonderful":

It was nice because we all got to know each other. It's neat because it gives you a little opportunity to interact with people you would never, in this building, have

> **interacted with as much**[12]. It was nice because it gave us a little connection that we may not have had prior. (Emily)
>
> **The real benefit [of the program] is just I'm in a room with 15 other people that I work with every week that I had never really talked to much because it's just not part of the ebb and flow of the week** to talk about things that happened in books with other people... Definitely it gives you more of a sense of connection with your coworkers. (James)

Participants also shared why it was nice and wonderful to have a chance to talk to and get to know one another through the program experience. Charlotte, an employee in payroll who mentioned how she feels intimidated by how big their building is, said:

> I found out a lot about some people who I'm close to actually in proximity, in the building, and just found out a little bit more about them. **It was kind of nice and it kind of makes it more *personal* rather than I don't know that person. It just makes you, I don't know what the word I'm looking for. It gives you more *personal* interaction with people.**

Amelia, an employee in human resources who mentioned how she knew of everyone in the group because of the nature of her work, shared how the program experience gave her more understanding of her coworkers:

[12] In this dissertation, I have used bold style in some quoted sentences to signify my added emphasis.

> I feel like I'm walking away having a better understanding of people. If somebody's short with me on the phone, I have an understanding as to why they might be a little bit short with me and not take it so personally, not that I did before. You get a sense of what makes people tick. It comes out.
>
> There were a few people in the book club that, I wouldn't say they were hostile, but they weren't as friendly. If you saw them in the hallways, they might not have said hi. I've heard feedback from different people, **"Wow, they say hi to me now" and I kind of understand why they weren't saying hi before. It really didn't have anything to do with me and I always took it so personally**. (Amelia)

For FoodCo group, the program experience was like "opening the door". Borrowing Evelyn's words again, "this opened the door to people you may or may not have ever talked to outside of work, or even if you both work here, you may never have had an actual conversation." Abigail, an administrative assistant to vice presidents, said "I never would have talked to them [prior to the program]", affirming the group's shared sentiment that FoodCo generally did not have a culture of personal interactions, and added "since we were all part of this, now when we would see each other in the hall, we would have a common interest. We'd stop and say hi and talk about this or talk about that." This was a huge change to their experience at work since even with the 5-10 philosophy that encouraged personal acknowledgement of one another at work, the culture of acknowledging one another personally was not there at the company. Abigail continued, "it opened up the opportunity." It is not just Abigail who mentioned how the participants started to say hi and strike up a conversation. Many participants mentioned that they were "more inclined to say hello or have a conversation because you've both been through the

same experience." (Evelyn) Mia, an administrative assistant to the executive vice president, shared an anecdote of how forming a personal connection with her coworkers through the program allowed her to have interactions that actually acknowledged one another:

> The thing that I did like were there were a few people here, that you see in the building, you say hello to and that was about it [before]. We would find ourselves talking, like in the lunch room, about ... You know, you go to heat up your lunch and you see somebody that was sitting across the table from you and you start talking about the book, and-... "Oh, I haven't gotten to that part." "Oh, wait till you do! You're going to love it," and this and that. The different perspectives on the book. **It was nice because you had something in common with somebody you saw all the time and had enough time to say, 'Hey, how are you?' and keep on going.**

Sophia in accounting also shared an example of how the program experience allowed her to have different interpersonal interactions in which there was personal acknowledgement even in brief and unexpected interactions at the restroom at work:

> There are definitely people that, even though you saw them everyday and you might have known their name and maybe the department they worked in… [but] **now there's actual conversation**. I ran into one of the ladies in the restroom this morning, there was something that we had to discuss. Last week she had hurt her back and I was coughing literally my head off during the last session so we were immediately, "oh are you feeling better? Are you?" **There's a conversation that would not have taken place before**.

4.3.2 The story of BearCo group: Continuing the journey of human encounter at work—The personizing encounter

The BearCo group, the second group I am presenting, demonstrated a higher level of interpersonal familiarity among its participants before the program although it was another cross-functional, non-work group like FoodCo. It could have been that the average of the BearCo group participants' organizational tenure was longer than that of the FoodCo group. The average organizational tenure of the BearCo group was 12.07 years (*sd* = 10.10), ranging from 6 months to 29 years whereas that of the FoodCo group was 7.25 years (*sd* = 5.52). It also seemed from reading the transcripts that BearCo had a more collegial and friendly organizational culture in which employees tended to have more interactions conveying personal acknowledgement (i.e., saying hi or knowing other's names, etc.), unlike in FoodCo. Many participants in the BearCo group shared they knew some or a lot of their fellow participants. Lily, who works in systems applications and products (SAP) application whose organizational tenure is unknown, said "I knew a lot of people [in the group]." Chloe, an environmental, health and safety engineer who has been at BearCo for 11 years, also mentioned "I am with these people all the time." Zoey, a production planner who has been at BearCo for 21 years, said "because I've been here a long time I know a lot of people and I have friendships with a lot of people [here]."

4.3.2.1 Where the BearCo group started

Even though the participants in the BearCo group demonstrated a higher level of interpersonal familiarity than those in the FoodCo group, they still admitted that "we know faces and names and jobs, but not persons" (Lucy).

Again, as in the case of FoodCo, BearCo participants mentioned that they are siloed and this bureaucratic structure prevents them from having opportunities to meet others at work. Zoey, a production planner, said "everybody's in their little silo. It's all about their world and what's going on and what their challenges are." Stella, an accounts payable specialist in finance also

mentioned, “my job, it’s not isolating but it’s isolated. I have my silo as I call it and I deal with certain people all the time. There’s a lot of people here I don’t deal with.”

On top of being siloed, busyness at work that comes from the pressure for meeting the goals and “numbers” seemed to deprive them of opportunities to get to know one another. Ethan, the operator who has been working at BearCo’s factory shop floor for 23 years, said:

> In many ways, the jobs we do require us to come in, do our job and go home. Yeah, I come in, I look at the machine all day and go home. **People that I've known, that have worked here as long or longer than I have** [Ethan had worked for BearCo for 23 years], **I don't know them**.

Reading interview transcripts of shop floor workers who are in charge of producing bearings, I learned that their job of working on the shop floor operates on three shifts and they only have 20 minutes for lunch and oftentimes work for 7 days a week because “it’s very important the machines run… [to] get bearings” (Benjamin). This was actually one of the reasons the program participation from shop floor workers, even with tremendous efforts to invite them to the program, was relatively low. Benjamin, a tooling specialist who works directly with shop floor workers and considers himself as “a good middleman, a good liaison between [the management and the shop floor]” shared an important insight:

> I think with the people on the floor, they would love to join in [the book discussion group], but they're afraid of repercussions of being off the floor for an hour. From the supervisors. It's very important the machines run. It's very important that we get bearings. That's how we make money. I think they're afraid that if they were to join and be off the floor for an hour and their machine's set or had a backup or they got back a little bit that

there would be a thing, "You're not going to the class today." I think they're just afraid of that.

This sentiment of busyness at work that comes from the pressure of having to meet the "numbers" was not only present among shop floor workers but also office workers. Lucy, a warehouse supervisor, said "we don't have the time… it's always crazy. Yeah, that's true. Crazy is the rule of the day." Aurora in accounting said her work is so busy and it is tough to even take a short break when at work. She even said "we don't often get a lunch. We should…" Nora, an administrative assistant to the president, shared that the management team was not supportive of their employees' taking an hour to participate in the program even though it was during their lunch hour. She shared:

> **They are so focused on what needs to get done for the day** that they think "oh, it's a fufu thing." We say that we [care about] work balance, but then in practice, sometimes that management team is not work balance with how they treat people.

4.3.2.2 Personizing encounter

The story of BearCo group illustrated a deeper level of human encounter than compared to that of FoodCo group. The BearCo group demonstrated a second level of human encounter within its continuum, the *personizing*[13] encounter, in which participants got to know one another substantially as a person beyond their role or titles within the organizational context. Like in the case of FoodCo, the most salient theme that emerged from the participant interviews

[13] The term *personizing* encounter is the one I created drawing from *personization*, a concept Schein and Schein (2018) coined, which refers to "the process of mutually building a working relationship with a fellow employee, teammate, boss, subordinate, or colleague based on trying to see that person as a whole, not just in the role that he or she may occupy at the moment" (p. 24-25).

with the BearCo group was again how the program provided opportunities to “learn more about [their] fellow employees” (Lily), yet with added nuance and depth beyond what was observed in the *emergent* encounter showcased in the story of FoodCo group. Chloe also elaborated on this point:

> I'm going to be honest, I was a little bit apprehensive at first because it was, you know, “Books at Work.” **I'm with these people all the time. But you really get to know somebody almost a different person.** Hearing everybody else's thoughts, it was like, "Wow, I never really thought of it that way. Oh, that's a good point. Yeah, I thought that too." And it was amazing how different people, we all had different responsibilities in different departments, and stuff. And it's like, you really get to know somebody and how their perception of the book can be similar to yours or even different. And it's okay to be different; that's what makes us individuals. (Chloe)

Stella, who works in finance, also provided a rich account elaborating on this theme:

> Yeah, well there was one woman actually is not at BearCo anymore. I knew her, I knew of her. We were always cordial in the hallway, what not. I used to be neighbors with her a long time ago. Put it this way, we weren't neighbors at the same time but I know the area she lives in. I know a lot of the same people, et cetera. Here I didn't know, we read the *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, that one I didn't realize that she was part Indian. She had been out west and done all these things with researching Indian life and all these things. **It really gave her another dimension**. **It was kind of like we know the same people, we say hi but it gave her more of a depth**. **It wasn't just we know the same people, hi, how're you doing. It was like there's more to her than the surface. I**

> **found that out through Reflection Point.** It isn't just you come here, you work 40 hours, you go home, yeah we know so and so, you know so and so. It gave me an opinion of her that **she's not just this two dimensional person. She was three dimensional**. She had a lot of interests and things that she liked and learned about.

Here we see some important signs indicating the participants in the BearCo group started to sense that the way they had known their colleagues were only on the "surface" and began to see different "dimensions" and "depth" in them which helped them meet one another on a completely "different" plane, using the actual words the two participants introduced above used in the interview. In the rest of this section, I present what the *personizing* encounter looked like and felt like to the BearCo participants.

First, a substantial number of participants shared how the program experience helped them move away from a "boxed" understanding of one another based on their work role or department. Aurora, who works in accounting, shared such an episode:

> **I think we stereotype as the accountants are very analytical and the engineers are very engineery**. We found that when you're sitting there talking about a book, **you're all just people**. That's what I love about books. Yeah, **it just brings you together**. You may have different views, but they're your personal views, not who your career makes you.

Zoey, a production manager, also shared her experience of gaining a personal understanding of her coworker and fellow participant, Elaine, beyond her previous understanding of her colleague's work role as an engineer:

> I think Elaine was a surprise. She's an applications engineer, she's very ... and **I've always known her as an applications engineer**, but she talked about some of her

> experience. She lived in China, right, or Japan? She was in Japan for a while. Going to school there, which I never knew, and she talked about some of the things that she's done. **Before this, I thought of her as your engineer, stuffy, you know what I mean? Now, I have a completely different opinion because underneath all that engineering, there's a personality and a life**, you know what I mean? You don't think about somebody's home life or their life experience when you're working with them, unless you get together with something like that and hear about what's going on in their head.

Chloe, a safety engineer, also shared her experience of getting to know Amy, a fellow participant of hers beyond her previous role-based understanding of her colleague:

> There's a girl in customer service, Amy. Amy is very fun loving but she's very to the point and she knows her job as well. But after being at 'Books at Work' with her and having some of the conversations with her it's like okay, you know what, **she actually knows more than just customer service stuff**. You know what I'm saying? You know how you look at somebody and go, "well they're customer service they can't really help [with something beyond customer service]." or "oh, she's just safety, she can't really help me." **You kind of put people in boxes**. **[But] you kind of get out of that and it's like...Amy and I have had some really good conversations**. She's not part of a safety team and she'll come to me, "Chloe, I have those issues how can you help me?" or "Hey, you know what? We have a customer with this issue. It's safety related but customer related [too] so how do I respond to the customer?" You know, **you kind of break out of those boxes**.

When the BearCo group participants experienced moving away from the narrower, boxed understanding of their colleagues, they often shared how they were surprised to keep learning new things about their colleagues, even when they have known some for many years. Ethan, the operator who has worked at BearCo's shop floor for 23 years, described how he got to learn more about his colleague Joshua through the program experience even after he had known Joshua for thirty years:

> I've known him probably thirty years because I worked with him at another place [too] and he was putting out some thoughts that I just never would have expected from him.

The beauty of realizing that we are never done knowing someone was also shared by Zoey, a production planner who has been at BearCo for more than 20 years:

> **It's so interesting what we don't know about people. you just don't know. Even with the core people, you learn different things about people each session that you never knew about them**. Because people always relate stories to their personal experience, in their own mind when they're reading it and it comes out in the discussion, and **there's always something that comes out that you just ever knew about somebody that you've known for 23 years**, you know?

The participants became more open to one another as they learned that their colleagues are more than their work roles and what they may know about them on the surface. The words "friend" or "friendship" were mentioned more frequently than in the case of FoodCo group. Some participants specifically mentioned how going through the program experience enabled them to make friends at work:

> Amy, I really didn't know her before. I knew her some, we knew each other by name, but being in a [program with her], sitting with her, **I have a friend in her**, **we talk a lot more than we ever would have before. We talk about different things now**. I know more about her, she knows more about me. To me, that's another great thing about Reflection Point. You build friendships through it and you understand. There's people that see things a little bit differently, but they open you up to so many other avenues to look at things. (Benjamin)
>
> William, I wouldn't really work with [him] generally, but because we were both part of Reflection Point, we've had a lot of cool conversations. I've learned about his family and about his life, and other ways in which we really connect. **He's someone that I would consider to be a friend if I saw him outside of work**. (Clara)

Clara's sharing that she would consider William as her friend is especially endearing given that Clara is a manufacturing engineer who works in the office while William is a machinist who works on the factory shop floor. Between office and management workers and shop floor workers, there was a physical separation (because they are located in different buildings) and a deep psychological division (i.e., us vs. them). Therefore, Clara's sharing that she thinks of William as her friend is quite significant considering this organizational context and history. Indeed, the emergence of friendship was observed in the increasing frequency and intensity among the three groups presented in this section, which culminated in the next group I am about to present: The PowerCo group.

4.3.3 The story of PowerCo group: Culminating in the journey of human encounter at work—The transcendent encounter

The last story to present is from the PowerCo group. The story of the PowerCo group is a special one in that this group was a work team, whereas the first two groups were non-work groups within the organization. The story from PowerCo group provides a rich account on how the journey of human encounter can unfold within a work team in which organizational members already have some interpersonal familiarity and how it affects their working relationships and dynamics.

To provide more context about this group, the PowerCo group was an executive work team at a manufacturing company producing industrial engines. The group is comprised of the president of the company and vice presidents, each directing human resources, operations, strategy, finance, research and development respectively, and other key members such as chief accounting officer and director of engineering department. This group incorporated Reflection Point sessions into their monthly meetings. Every month, they spent 1.5-2 hours participating in the program either before or after their regular work meetings that usually happened over two or three days each month. The group ran the program over the course of three years, thus making them the group with the longest program duration among the three groups presented in this section.

4.3.3.1 Where the PowerCo group started

Participants in the PowerCo executive group demonstrated the highest level of interpersonal familiarity overall among the three groups. Even though the group's average organizational tenure (4.55 years, *sd* = 3.19) was shorter than the other two groups, many participants from this group mentioned "we know each other" (Eleanor) primarily because of the nature of them being part of a work team that work together intensely on a regular basis. Reading the interview transcripts, I frequently got a sense that this group was already working quite

decently as a team. During the interview, many participants described how their relationships was before they started the program. Hannah who has been at PowerCo for 3.5 years (and whose work title was not shared during the interview) said “I think overall we do have great relationships… I've always been very comfortable with them.” Adam, the vice president, strategy who has been at PowerCo for 8.5 years, also mentioned, “we already [had] a little community… there was already that community established.” Eric, the president of the company, also mentioned, “I really thought the team was pretty unlocked before [the program]. I went in thinking that we really do hear pretty openly and we are pretty authentic.”

Even though there was a general agreement among interviewed participants that the executive team already had interpersonal familiarity and some stable working relationships, Nathan the director of business excellence who has been at PowerCo for 7 years, mentioned how they are still in a manufacturing world in which people do not see one another much as human beings:

> **I don't think people in the manufacturing world see each other as human beings. They don't look at them as personable people. They just look at them as, “All right. That's Joe. He does that. That's Bob. He does that, and he gets in my way**. **When he blows that thing over there, all the dust comes my way**, and I don't like…” You know what I mean? They get all these little things that they seem fairly petty at a time, but every day this is happening, and every hour maybe. **Now, this is wearing on me**. (Nathan)

Nathan sharing revealed that instrumental understanding of people was still present in PowerCo, although it might have been less salient in this particular executive work team, but he mentioned how that is "wearing on [him]."

For the PowerCo group participants who had been in this manufacturing and engineering world for years and years, the idea of reading literary narratives and discussing them especially with their coworkers, a majority of whom have engineering background as well, was a very foreign idea. And it was especially so to Eric, the president of the company. According to some of the participants, Eric had an engineering background and had never been exposed to liberal arts education and thus did not seem to have had appreciation for reading literary narratives especially in a business context. From an interview with Anthony, the vice president, I learned that Eric initially asked Reflection Point whether his group could read business related books instead of reading fiction. But according to Adam, VP, strategy, despite Eric's initial skepticism of reading fictional stories with his colleagues, Eric has evolved to "see and feel [the impact of this experience] in a real way" and has become a champion of this program.

4.3.3.2 Transcendent encounter

The story of PowerCo group illustrates the *transcendent* encounter within the continuum of human encounter, in which the participants engaged with one another as co-creating partners to jointly generate new possibilities. Like the first two groups, the participants in the PowerCo group also shared that the major takeaway from their program experience is how they got to know one another as a human person, but with even more added richness and nuance. The PowerCo group participants described, even though they felt quite close and comfortable to one another, they "really [started] to see the whole person" (Natalie) and "get to know and

understand each other more" (Eleanor). Justin, the director of engineering, elaborated on this point:

> You see different side of people, right? You learn a lot more about people as a person, not as an engineers at work just doing the final element or modeling work. **You see a real person and a place**. They share about activities at church, dealing with kids, and with classmates. I think it's a fantastic way to build a healthy relationship in the workplace… **You're more like a real person.** (Justin)

Notably, Justin here brings up the "realness" he experienced in the way he got to know and met his colleagues during his program experience, which came up frequently in the interviews with other PowerCo group participants. How could they get to experience the "realness" in their relating?

First, the participants mentioned during the interviews that they got to talk about topics that would not be brought up in a regular work setup but are crucial nonetheless to understand one another in a holistic manner, which was a central element in stories across the FoodCo, the BearCo and the PowerCo groups. Topics that prompted such holistic understanding included stories about their childhood, other life experiences and worldview. Even though this theme was observed in all groups, since its account was described in the most rich manner with vivid examples in the interviews with the PowerCo group participants, I share below several of such accounts.

Anthony, the VP of general management, shared one of the unforgettable moments in which he and his new colleague, Eleanor, a director of program management, created an

immediate bond when they found out that they share similar childhood while discussing one of the stories:

> **[Eleanor] was coming on to a team. We got her to direct our project management and I had not found a way to connect**. [And in one of the sessions] she was talking about Miami [and how] she grew up in Miami. And what it allowed me to… It was great. It happened instantaneously when I said **"That's exactly how I grew up with the plastic on my couch, or my grandmother's thing." She goes, "That's what I did too!" Immediately, something formed. I don't know what it was, but now I connect**. I was able to talk about a couple things. We spoke about Trinidad and how I'd been to Trinidad. I spoke about, yes, I went to somebody's house and sat with plastic things, but **that simple thing of the plastic on the couch. We just formed a bond. That's the whole thing.** (Anthony)

Eric, the president, also recalled during the interview how being there in the space at this moment in which Anthony and Eleanor formed a bond was special to him as well:

> I still remember the conversations between Eleanor and Anthony about how different they were, but how similar they are, in terms of their background and their upbringing. And "the plastic on the couch" is kinda funny, but you know ... **A crazy thing like "plastic on the couches" was powerful**. (Eric)

Eleanor shared a moment that remains in her as special in which she and Eric got a chance to talk about their immigration experience which then opened the group to discuss various cultural, religious and spiritual topics that really helped them get to know one another at a deeper level:

> It was really neat for people to share their own personal experiences, whether it was Samuel [the facilitator] sharing because he comes from a Jewish background, or someone sharing about how their families were religious, and just their belief [inaudible 00:09:48] and sharing it, relating it, or even, Eric and I emigrated when we were younger, so just sharing some perspectives on the immigrant experience that was being shared there and coming into another culture [helped us get to know who we all are]. (Eleanor)

Kevin, the VP of research and development, shared during the interview the particular moment that he remembers as unforgettable which allowed him and his colleagues to reveal their own world view on controversial topics:

> We've had discussions about, is it okay if women don't have babies or have babies? I mean it really got into a lot of... It was really interesting because the women that had a family have different perspective than the single women. And it got crazy interesting so that conversation. But I thought that was really interesting 'cause you don't like starting touching the ethical things, you know. Then people really start to expose how they view the world and stuff. And I always find that really interesting. (Kevin)

During the interviews, participants also shared particular moments from the sessions in which they got to know one another in a different light. Eric, the president, shared a moment when he came to see Sarah, the VP of human resources, in a completely different light. Eric shared how he has always thought of Sarah as a quiet person and Sarah admits that “I was one of those, that was probably the least voice in the room, because I'm an introvert” (Sarah). Eric continued:

> It was surprising for a lot of folks that Sarah likes science fiction. It was interesting. **It was almost like the field shifted, and everyone started to see her differently**. It was almost instantaneous. Everything just changed because in the "Blood Child" conversation, she dominated the conversation. Sarah doesn't dominate a conversation at all, no matter what. And it was sort of like, "Oh my god. It's kind of safe to do this. I can actually have some mind share for longer periods of time than I thought I could." And you could kind of tell, she was looking around and thinking, "This is cool. I can do more of this. I can speak up more." (Eric)

Eric again, along with Anthony, shared how he came to see Kevin, the chief accounting officer, in a different light. According to Anthony, Kevin had not been very open in his interactions with other colleagues and was "a little guarded" (Anthony). However, the participants have witnessed how he came to open himself up and "softened up a lot" (Anthony). Eric, when sharing about how powerful it was for him to see the deepening of their relationships through sharing personal stories during the sessions, recalled how Kevin's sharing of his knee injury from playing hockey helped him form a deeper relationship with him as Eric had a similar experience that he could relate to:

> Kevin talked about playing hockey and damaging his knees, and just what that's done for him as a person, and what that process is like. And that translated into some of the decision making around our children: "What should they play?", "What do they do?", "What's your point of view on this, what's your point of view on that?" I think that deepened the connection that I had with him personally; both athletes that hurt themselves and know that feeling, that pain. It hurts. (Eric)

Many participants also mentioned how the program allows different kinds of conversations with their colleagues and how those different kinds of conversations allow them to get to know one another in a qualitatively different way. Participants described how "the subject [of the conversation during the session] is the **real stuff of life**" (Adam) that is "difficult life conversations about race, religion, [socioeconomic] class and a lot of [our] perspectives" (Eric). Eleanor, the director of program management, said "you typically don't just bring up your religion or spiritual beliefs just out of nowhere, but again, the stories allow you the space to do that. It's [now] a common tale there" (Eleanor). Describing how the participants got to talk about "very sensitive things, at times, [such as] racial issues [and] religious issues" (Nathan), Nathan mentioned how they "talk about just the human element of work. You're not going to get the nuts and bolts of work through this. What you are getting [here] is this human piece, the human interactive piece" (Nathan). As illustrated in this set of quotes, the participants felt that the topic of the conversation was different from usual but Eric, the president, also pointed out that the way their conversation unfolded felt different to him:

> I went in thinking that we really do hear pretty openly and we are pretty authentic. But we weren't as open-minded and we weren't as heartfelt**, so the sharing was always a filtered sharing [before]. And now I realize a much deeper sharing and a much more heartfelt sharing**. **A much more human-like sharing**. I see that as a real win. (Eric)

Eric's insight that a different mode of sharing that involved emotional authenticity unfolded was also shared and elaborated by a few other participants. Adam elaborated on how Samuel, one of

the facilitators that the group worked with, helped the group to have more of a "human-like sharing" that involved emotional authenticity:

> When Samuel teaches, we start just by [the two questions that Samuel always poses which are] "what do you remember about the story?" and "what questions do you have?" And of course, those are two great questions, because what questions do you have? It's all up here [in our head], right. **So as business people, we get to work with our brain and answer Samuel intellectually. And so Samuel kind of takes those, and he'll capture them on paper. But then as soon as they're captured, okay so the brain stuff is up on the page, and it's there. Check. And then we can begin to connect with it more emotionally** and tie it together. [That] is what Samuel often does. (Adam)

It is important to note that emotions are not only elicited by reading and discussing literary narratives but also welcome to be shared during the session despite the fact that, as Adam mentioned, people in business contexts do not often engage in this way with one another. Anthony, the VP of general management, also shared how reading "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World" by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, one of the short stories they read, made him emotional and enabled him to open up more than usual:

> Some of us got a little emotional, I myself got emotional. The Gabriel Garcia Marquez, I think I told you about that. It was very emotional for me. [The story] allowed me to connect with my roots. What I tend, in business contexts, I tend to keep very neutral. [Interviewer: *You want to be professional*.] Yeah, I don't expose some of the bad habits of my culture. In this current environment I've opened up more, and that's really caused me

> to share things within, how I grew up, so it allowed me to share more. It was good. It was pretty good. (Anthony)

Adam, the VP of Strategy, again shared a very keen insight on the special nature of such open and human-like sharing and why they do not normally happen in a business context:

> I think it [meaning the open and human-like sharing] just wouldn't happen in normal work. **Because in normal work, we end up falling into these roles that we play.** I'm the finance guy, so I'm gonna be the loudest and talk the most at the finance conversations. **Reflection Point kind of levels the playing field**, I'll say that. It's a subject matter, **the subject is the stuff of life**, so there's not one person who's the expert at it, right. **So in matters of work and business**, **Eric's voice always weighs the most. Reflection Point takes that out of the equation.** And **so I feel like we're able to talk to Eric, and Eric's able to engage in a different way than he does in business. And so I think there's some magic to that, and that's maybe allowing us to find this new balancing, this new equilibrium among the team. Not as peers or as a hierarchy, but truly just as people**. (Adam)

Adam's insightful sharing illustrates once again how work roles get in the way of people relating to one another as real and whole persons and how getting beyond the role-based relationships and thus the "boxed" understanding of people opens the door to the possibility of human encounter and to the possibility of having different kinds of conversations.

When people start to connect truly on a human level, the journey of human encounter does not merely get contained in the physical, temporal and spatial boundary of the program and even their work, but it spills over. Here is Eric's recollection of the conversation he had with

Chris, another participant in the program, while he was driving:

> I still remember Chris calling me while I was in the car driving, making me pull over and saying, “Eric, I think I was a racist. I've been raised in an all white family, I've not had any black friends. And sitting here and going through this process is making me question, you know, where is my soul?”

Reading this anecdote from the transcript makes me dumbfounded and astonished. Will I ever have courage to internally admit as well as externally confess to the president of the company, who indeed is an African American person, that I am a racist? It is also remarkable to see that Chris is sharing about his soul searching with his colleague and direct report, not with his old friend from elementary school. What is going on here? What changes in their dynamic have happened?

Several important changes in the dynamic among participants are observed as a result of experiencing human encounter. In this section, I first describe several themes that emerged from the interview with the president, Eric, and then I describe themes emerging from the rest of his team.

(a) Friendship

One of the first things that caught my attention is that Eric, as the president of the company and a participant of the group, shared how he came to engage with his colleagues as friends, which he says he did not expect. Eric shared a powerful anecdote in which he dealt with Mia’s turnover intention:

> **One of the other things that I see that's come out of it, I think we've built genuine friendships. As crazy as it sounds I think we've built genuine friendships**. I use Mia as a perfect example. For a lot of personal reasons, Mia thought it was best to have a different work environment and she calls me and says, "**Hey, I'm thinking about what I think is best for me. And I know you're my boss, and I really want to wrestle with this with you**." And we went to a coffee shop and we went deep into the story of her life, very deep into the fact that she's single and how that really was a big deal; a real big problem for her right now emotionally. She's having difficulty dealing with not being able to find someone she can build a relationship with and so many decisions that she wants to make in her life to find the right partner. **I remember just having this weird, out-of-body experience that these are two friends, not coworkers. This is just two friends wrestling with a deep and sensitive issue**. **And talking through it openly, and it was beautiful**. I can honestly say that wouldn't have happened before. (Eric)

It is noteworthy to learn that Mia wanted to talk through this sensitive issue, especially when she still had to think it through, with her boss. From this, it is apparent that Mia found a friend in Eric for being capable of approaching him this way. This is surprising when considering that some participants described that "Eric tends to not get too close [emotionally with his colleagues]" and "does not express his emotions" (Anthony). The fact that Mia could bring up her professional issue, that was in fact deeply intertwined with her personal issue, to Eric and that Eric was there to listen and wrestle with her problem from her perspective, not as the president of the company, shows that their dynamic changed so that the realm of friendship became possible to them even though they were still in the business context.

(b) Love

Love was another theme that emerged from the interview with the president, Eric. When asked by the interviewer if he sees any downsides of having a team that is interpersonally too close in the broader context of discussing leadership, he answers, “I used to have the point of view that it might cloud, but I've sort of redefined love.” It was surprising to see that he chose the word “love” to describe his thoughts on leadership. He continued:

> I’ve sort of redefined love in a way in that **love for me now manifests in a unique way in my team members**. Because I love you, I will not allow you to use anything less than your best thinking. **That's out of love, that's not out of any other reason. It's out of love why I want you to explore whether this is the right place for you to work at. And that's a real thing**. It's out of love that I can engage with you on whether you are in fact performing on the level that I know you're capable of and you know you're capable of. And is there another issue behind the issue of what we're seeing? (Eric)

(c) Turning toward the other

Out of friendship and love, as it was elaborated above, Eric shared how he came to engage with his colleagues in a different manner. This new way of engaging was much like *turning toward the other*, a defining characteristic of human encounter suggested by Buber in Chapter 3 (see 3.4.3 Enablers of human encounter: Turning toward the other). As was also suggested by Buber, the first thing Eric mentioned was how he came to listen differently to his colleagues:

> So decisions are different when the heart is in the conversation, right? **I listen to you differently when I have an open heart. And I absolutely wasn't attuned to that before. I would listen to what you said, but I didn't listen to how you felt**. (Eric)

As illustrated in the quote, Eric shares how going through the program made him realize that having a "heart" towards the conversation partner is key to the act of listening and that he had not been truly listening to anyone especially in the work context. And such realizations made him pay more attention. He says, "**I listen differently now**."

Not only did Eric share how he listens to his colleagues differently but he also mentioned how he asks different kinds of questions to his colleagues as well as to himself. During the interview, he shared how a session in which the participants read and discussed "Bloodchild" by Octavia E. Butler made him start asking different kinds of questions for the employees at EnCo. "Bloodchild" is a science fiction story about a conflicted alien world where humans must maintain good relationships with insect-like lifeforms called the Tlic. The story describes the unusual bond between the Tlic and a colony of humans who have escaped Earth and settled on the Tlic planet. When the Tlic realize that humans make excellent hosts for Tlic eggs, they establish the Preserve to protect the humans, and in return require that every family choose a child for implantation[14] Eric shared:

> You know, **I think back to the deep conversation we had relative to what's the sort of contractual relationship that we establish with each other that is not said but required, right?** And so we got that from "Bloodchild." That story was powerful

[14] The description of "Bloodchild" is from the Wikipedia page: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloodchild_and_Other_Stories#%22Bloodchild%22

> because **the professor said, "Okay, let go of the story for a minute. And just ask yourself, where in your life have you ever not explored the contractual relationships that you're in?"** That's a necessity for both parties. Right? And **I had never thought about that**. What do you mean? But when I thought about it in the context of the story, the aliens needed the humans to carry their babies. And humans needed the aliens to lead them, to stay alive. And so it was like, "Oh my god, they're in this contractual relationship where they both need each other." And so then he asked a basic question, right? Another basic question. **How many of your employees are in a contractual relationship with the company? Are they just here to pay their bills, or are they really here? They need you to pay their bills, obviously, right? But if you weren't providing that value, that service for them, would they come in every day? Have you ever thought about that? Oh my gosh**. (Eric)

As illustrated in the quote, the program experience made Eric to stop and pose different kinds of questions—in this case, the questions that attempted to re-evaluate the basic assumptions about his relationships with his colleagues and other employees and why they show up at work every day, which sounded earth-shattering to Eric. Essentially, Eric could turn toward the other whereas he was facing and regarding only himself previously. Eric continued and shared how he started to ask different kinds of questions in his everyday work context, for example with regard to his one-on-one meetings with his colleagues:

> **Even my one on ones are different. My one on ones are what is the quality of our relationship? Are you still happy with our relationship? Are you still comfortable with how I'm treating you as a person and do you think I'm still listening to you and**

> **respecting your needs? I wouldn't have been asking questions like that before. My one on ones would have been, "Okay, here's what's in here for your plan. And here's how I think you're going against the plan**." (Eric)

As articulated by Eric here, he noticed that his previous engagement with his colleagues have been primarily focused on how to get things done and in that mode of engagement, his colleagues were deemed as an instrument that either gets the job done or gets in the way. However, now he engages with his colleagues in a way that involves a sense of respecting them and their relationship. Work is still important. But people came to matter more to him, as the possibility of human encounter was now open to him.

Change in dynamic was also observed in responses by the rest of the group. In the next few pages, I describe themes that emerged from interviews with the rest of the group participants.

(d) Less self-consciousness and more sense of community

One of the most noticeable changes among the rest of the group participants is that they shared how they noticed that their fellow participants and they themselves become less self-conscious. This empirically observed change aligns with Buber's distinction of *being* and *seeming,* discussed in Chapter 3 (see 3.4.4 Enablers of human encounter: Breaking away from self-centeredness). *Being* refers to acting from what one really is, while *seeming* refers to acting based on how one wishes to appear. Justin, the director of the engineering department, shared, "like when you are home, you probably drop your guard [when in the session]. There's no guard" (Justin). This comment illustrates that participants were able to enter into the mode of *being*, engaging with others without the usual concern for appearances in a context typically

dominated by the "invasion of *seeming*" (Buber, 1965, p. 82). Nathan, the director of business excellence, adds to this point that “because the fence comes down, I think you have the supervisors and everybody mingling together having the same discussion. [It] take[s] the rank off of everyone” (Nathan). Importantly, many participants mentioned that the program “levels the playing field” (Anthony) by taking off everyone’s rank and expertise that were probably necessary for an organizing purpose but nonetheless unhelpful (or even detrimental) for genuine encounter. Adam shared an important insight on this point in this following quote which was introduced earlier:

> So in matters of work and business, Eric's voice always weighs the most. Reflection Point takes that out of the equation. And so **I feel like we're able to talk to Eric, and Eric's able to engage in a different way than he does in business**. And so I think there's some magic to that, and that's maybe allowing us to find this new balancing, **this new equilibrium among the team. Not as peers or as a hierarchy, but truly just as people.** (Adam)

Sarah also shared an important insight on this point:

> One of the things, I think, about Reflection Point that's helpful is, you're automatically put on a level playing field with your peers, because none of us really know ... it's outside of work, there's no expertise required, so all of us are able to contribute, and I think that helped myself, being an introvert, even, kind of, dive in deeper, and really get excited about it. (Sarah)

Sarah mentions how discussion around stories requires no expertise in their sessions and how that felt liberating to an introvert like herself. Adam shared his observation on how going

through the program was especially helpful for his introverted colleagues to be less concerned about their self-image and practice expressing their honest thoughts and feelings:

> You've got the people who aren't shy, and then the people who are. And what I've seen is that the people who are shy are being, they're through this process, they've been encouraged to speak up more. And they are forced almost in a way to speak up, or even before their thoughts are fully formed just to say what's on their heart and how they're feeling, and how the story makes you feel, and abandon this idea of trying to have the right answer, which I think is often at the heart of the shyness, right. Sometimes it's just shy, and you need processing. Sometimes, but most of the time, it's 'I don't want to sound silly.' (Adam)

Interestingly, while the participants described how they could be less self-conscious, they also shared how a sense of community emerged. Justin, director of the engineering department, mentioned, "people have the community here and they have a place to share" (Justin). Eleanor, the director of program management, described how the program experience "create[d] that authentic community" (Eleanor), which was echoed in multiple interviews with the PowerCo group participants. Hannah also shared during the interview, "I would say Reflection Point and being included in this particular Reflection Point community with Eric and the rest of the team, the inclusion alone makes me feel very comfortable" (Hannah). It is probably not an accident that the participants experienced less self-consciousness as they felt an emerging sense of community in their work group.

4.3.3.3 Differences human encounter made to work dynamic: Better collaboration

As the PowerCo group was a work team unlike the two other groups, their interactions did not stop when the program hour was over but they continued interacting and engaging with one another in a regular work setup, which lends us a unique opportunity to learn how experiencing human encounter affects their work dynamics. Many participants shared that having opportunities for human encounter through the program helped them have qualitatively different work dynamics. Indeed, Adam, the VP in strategy, shared "when we go back to the work [after the Reflection Point session], there's a whole different kind of aura about the work" (Adam). Adam continued:

> **To start our staff meeting talking about these noble things, and the real stuff of life, suddenly it puts the next two days of staff meeting in a different perspective**. I think there's an extra measure of compassion, an extra measure of understanding, and extra measure of thought that comes to the rest of those days in staff meeting. **It's almost like a centering exercise**, in itself, **that sets the foundation for how we're going to relate to one another for those next two days. It's really special**. (Adam)

Participants further mentioned that getting to know one another more holistically as a person beyond their roles, ranks and any other pre-conceived ideas about them formed within the confines of the organizational structure facilitated their engagement in different kinds of working relationships. Brian, the VP in operations, mentioned "you see a different side of each person, and that helps to get you to know them better, and just by that, you're working with them differently, I think" (Brian). Eleanor, the director of program management, also shared how

having a chance to understand her colleagues on a personal level helped her with the work process:

> **I kind of understand or I think I know where this person may be coming from or how they may feel about [something]**. Whether it's a decision or a tough thing that we need to open up or discuss, I just think that that forum, creating the space for discussion, to share, to respect each other's ideas, difference of thoughts, opinions, or approaches is just another way for us to get to know each other better and to feel more comfortable in interactions, any tough decisions, or anything like that. **You just feel like you know someone better, so it's not just like you're terse with this individual that you may need to be terse with or your need to keep at arm's length. This is someone that we know**. At least that's how I feel. (Eleanor)

Through learning how to engage with work colleagues in a qualitatively different way, participants learned how to collaborate better at work. Eric, the president, shared during the interview how he did not anticipate that his group would improve the ability to collaborate but the change was remarkable for the team's enhanced work process and outcomes:

> **The ability to collaborate better I did not think would come out of this. It really is, quite frankly, surprising and strange. The way it's unlocked people was not an anticipated thing**. I really thought the team was pretty unlocked before. **It's a hard thing to quantify, [but] we're more collaborative**. We speak more with intentionality. We're connecting more at a human [level]... It's hard to quantify, but it helps with our decision quality, it helps with my confidence level to delegate and distribute power

> because I'm listening to the richness. **I know what everyone brings to the table now in a way that I didn't know before**. (Eric)

Reading the interview transcripts from the PowerCo participants, I identified the following four signs indicating better collaboration among them.

(a) Openness

The first manifestation of better work collaboration among the PowerCo group is the degree of openness, which is one of the defining characteristics associated with human encounter identified in Chapter 3 (see 3.4.5 Enablers of human encounter: Openness and vulnerability). As introduced previously, participants describe how they felt that the fellow participants (as well as they themselves) were less "guarded" and more open to share their thoughts and feelings during the book sessions. They went on and shared further that they noticed a greater degree of openness even when they went back to work. Eric, the president, shares his observation about Anthony, the VP in general management who is also in charge of the sales department:

> **Anthony is not as defensive as he used to be. He's not as closed-minded** as the way to go about selling. **He's not as protective** of his team members and **he is much more open to feedback from others who don't have expertise in the area of sales**. Before, it would be you need to have proven to Anthony that you were a commercial expert. **Now, he's like, 'Actually, what do you think?'** He's very open to whoever it comes from. He doesn't care who brings it up. And you see him taking copious notes and being very thoughtful about it. (Eric)

In Eric's sharing, it is noticeable to hear that Anthony, who is in charge of the sales area in the company, became much more open to feedback from others even when they do not necessarily have sales expertise whereas he previously pre-judged whose influence he was going to selectively accept. The way he presents himself in a work setting has become more inviting to others' input, which is likely indispensable for igniting the collaborative process.

(b) Co-creation

The next sign of better collaboration observed in the PowerCo group is that the participants started to co-create the processes that are essential for the team to function instead of simply prioritizing the delivery of the required outcome. Eric shared an example that effectively illustrates this theme:

> **In our financial review, you feel like you're listening to a lecture, but it's a collaborative lecture, where not only is Brandon [who is the chief accounting officer] talking about our DPO** [days payable outstanding], **but he's teaching Sarah** [the VP in human resources] **how to calculate DPO**. He's teaching Sarah how to really understand the elements that come [into play]. **It's a very different conversation than the conversation we used to have. It is sort of less about communicating the numbers and more about ensuring we understand how we get to these numbers**; to impact them effectively. (Eric)

Eric explains that the team previously focused on "getting the job done." He further shared that in that task-oriented mode of relating, it seemed sufficient to simply communicate the numbers the team members had to be aware. Here, the concept of DPO and its value probably stays the

same. However, the way the team approaches the process of discussing it is now completely different; instead of simply ensuring that this calculated number is communicated to the rest of the team, Brandon, the accounting expert in the room, is now concerned about whether the rest of the team is understanding where the number came from, which invites a co-created process that looks like a collaborative lecture, according to Eric. This empirically observed co-creating process connects back to Buber's distinction between *imposing* and *unfolding*, discussed in Chapter 3 (see 3.4.4 Enablers of human encounter: Breaking away from self-centeredness). In *imposing*, a person does not consider the being of the other and instead imposes their own thoughts, beliefs, and values. In *unfolding*, a person invites the other to help reveal their potential. The participants experienced and engaged in *unfolding* when they experienced human encounter, whereas previously, they often experienced *imposing*.

(c) Easier to challenge ideas

Another sign of improved ability to collaborate manifests in the participants' comfortability in challenging one another's ideas. Participants mentioned that they became much more comfortable challenging one another's ideas in a safe and professional manner. Natalie illustrated this point during the interview:

> I feel like the conversations we had at Reflection Point promote [the ability to challenge each other's ideas in a healthy way] more than if we didn't have it. **Because I'm more likely to challenge Justin or someone on how you interpret reading, and then it just promotes those communications and that comfort level of challenging somebody, in a completely professional, non-confrontational way**. You say, "Oh I didn't really see it that way." Well, if you say that about a book, because it's safe, cause it's like neither one

> of us are a subject matter expert here. Then you can say it more like, “Well really, I didn't see it that way.” So I've seen that… Even though I'm among equals, so to speak, on the Executive Council, you do speak up and you find it easier to challenge someone's opinion. So for me, that has helped us. (Natalie)

Eric, the president, added to this point and mentioned how practicing feeling comfortable with challenging one another’s ideas has improved the team’s ability to build on each other’s ideas, which he believes to have been essential for the team’s improved ability to collaborate:

> **I would say our collaboration is better because of it. I would say we build on ideas more now than we used to**. Much more now. **We hold everyone's point of view more lightly now, than we used to. Lightly in the sense that I think that both the transmitter and the receiver were transmitting without** ... With less force. And we're receiving the same. **The person is offering up his idea, his point of view, for open dialogue. And the person is no longer attached to the idea. Their body is not coming to the table with the idea. So I can speak openly about the idea without harming them personally**. And I can tell it's being offered up in that way now where before, Adam and Eleanor used to get in knock-down, drag-out battles because Adam's whole body was coming with- His idea. He wasn't battling that issue. (Eric)

In the quote, Eric insightfully points out that openness is required and observed on both ends: those who offer up the idea and those who build on it. He describes how his colleagues are now projecting less of their ego when they propose an idea on the table as well as when challenging it, which, according to Eric, was a key to the team’s improved collaboration.

(d) Easier to resolve conflicts

Conflicts are an inevitable part of teamwork. The last sign that indicated better collaboration in the PowerCo group is their comfortability with resolving conflicts among themselves. Participants in the PowerCo group shared how having opportunities to encounter their colleagues helped them resolve conflicts in a more constructive way. Adam shared an anecdote in which he got to handle his conflict with Eric:

> Well, just a very personal kind of experience, I was just having a bad staff meeting. We all have those bad staff meetings where I got kind of all up in my head, and **I was being combative**, not realizing I was being combative. But the Reflection Point, so that was kind of the morning. We had the Reflection Point that afternoon, and it just allowed to me to step away from all of the drama of the staff meeting, and **I got to see my coworker from a different perspective**, which helped me gain a little empathy. And **it also helped me reflect on my own issue, and how I was creating or causing some of that drama**. So just, I don't know if you want specifics, but **it was an experience with Eric where he and I just didn't see eye to eye on something.** And I hold Eric in very high regard, and any time he and I [are] unaligned, it's hard for me. I don't like being misaligned with Eric. And Reflection Point is one of those things that's not about being aligned if we're not aligned, it's just about perspective. And it's about seeing each other as people. **And so in that moment, I got to see Eric as different than the boss, right. I just got to see him as a person. And that just allowed me to take a step way from the drama and the conflict**. And I will say, I didn't resolve the conflict immediately, but later that night, I journaled about it and came back the next day, and **I think I was in a different space**. I

shared with Eric some of my learnings from that, and I think had we not taken that time to do the Reflection Point, [we might not have resolved conflict in this way]. [Reflection Point was] just this happy little break that allowed me to gain perspective. (Adam)

4.4 Continuum of human encounter at work: The *emergent*, the *personizing*, the *transcendent*

My inductive empirical work led to the discovery of the presence of continuum within the human encounter experience. This continuum highlights varying degrees of human encounter—the *emergent*, the *personizing*, and the *transcendent*. In contrast to the objectifying exchange paradigm, this continuum offers insight into the different levels of interactions among organizational members, from mere utilization for work-related purposes to the establishment of profound engagement that extends beyond the professional realm. In this section, I explain each of the different levels of human encounter within its continuum and their contrasting condition of objectifying exchange. A visual summary of these concepts is provided in Table 4.4 at the end of the current chapter on page 142.

4.4.1 Emergent encounter

The first level within the continuum of human encounter is the *emergent* encounter. The emergent encounter represents a significant departure from the objectifying exchange relational state, marking a pivotal leap in the way organizational members interact within the organizational context.

In the relational realm of objectifying exchange, organizational members approach interactions with a focus on extracting utility or functional value. Thus, the primary interpersonal

behavioral schema[15] in the objectifying exchange is *utilizing*, reflecting the prevalent tendency among organizational members to prioritize the extraction of practical benefits from their interactions. The mindset of utilizing often leads organizational members to view others through a lens of the ability of their interactional partners to be useful for accomplishing their own objectives, rather than appreciating them as holistic beings with unique thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The manifestation of utilizing within the data was vividly observed through various behavioral cues that underscored an objectifying exchange paradigm. Instances were noted where interactions lacked the fundamental niceties of a simple greeting or acknowledgment, further emphasized by organizational members purposefully averting eye contact or minimizing any non-essential engagement. These interactions often revolved exclusively around technical conversations centered on task-related matters, devoid of any personal or relational aspects. The data illuminated exchanges characterized by direct and concise communication, such as messages conveying specific demands or task progress updates, resembling functional "email-like" interactions. This distinct pattern in behaviors collectively showcased the prevalence of a utilization-oriented approach in the organizational landscape, where interactions primarily served instrumental purposes rather than fostering genuine interpersonal connections. In this level of relating, the felt psychological distance, which I define as the degree to which a person feels psychologically separate or detached from others, is the highest on the continuum.

In contrast, the emergent encounter introduces an intriguing leap, where organizational members begin to notice and acknowledge one another's human presence. Noteworthy instances from the data included the simple yet impactful gestures of saying "hi" and smiling at one

[15] I define primary interpersonal behavioral schema as a set of characteristic behavioral patterns and tendencies that are primarily observed and form the essence of interpersonal relations at each level of the human encounter continuum.

another, effectively conveying an acknowledgement of each other's human presence beyond the confines of task-related interactions. Engaging conversations, marked by inquiries like "how are you doing?" and extending into more casual contexts like hallways and bathrooms, further illuminated this shift in the primary interpersonal behavioral schema towards *noticing* and *acknowledging* the humanity of colleagues. These manifestations of emergent encounter, while seemingly subtle, painted a distinct contrast to the instrumental exchanges of objectifying encounter, offering glimpses of a relational dynamic that transcended mere utility and embraced the beginnings of genuine human interactions. Many of my informants described this experience as “opening the door to the possibility.” This newfound awareness fostered a nascent form of relationship-building that, although still in its infancy, held the promise of evolving into more profound and meaningful interactions characterized in the subsequent levels of personizing and transcendent encounter.

4.4.2 Personizing encounter

The next level in the human encounter continuum is the *personizing* encounter. The personizing encounter represents a further evolution from both objectifying exchange and emergent encounter. This level of engagement involves interactions where organizational members get to know each other substantially as people beyond their roles or titles in the organization. It reflects a deeper level of understanding of each other’s background, motivations, perspectives, and experiences. It entails a relational connection that goes beyond the superficial level of organizational roles or positions.

In the personizing encounter, interactions among organizational members are characterized by a notably reduced sense of felt psychological distance. While emergent

encounter represents a stage where organizational members begin to notice and acknowledge each other's presence, personizing encounter goes beyond this initial awareness. In the personizing encounter, interactions are marked by deliberate efforts to understand and personize colleagues. This means organizational members actively seek to grasp the unique attributes, experiences, and perspectives of others, resulting in a deeper understanding of their personhood. Unlike the emergent encounter, where interactions might still be relatively surface-level, the personizing encounter involves a genuine curiosity to go beyond preconceived notions and explore the multifaceted dimensions of their colleagues' lives. It is a stage in which relationships transition from simple recognition to a more profound recognition of shared humanity, fostering deeper empathy and connection.

In the personizing encounter, the primary interpersonal behavioral schema is characterized by genuine pursuits of *understanding*, *personizing*, and *empathizing* with fellow organizational members. In this relational state, interactions delved beyond the surface, as informants repeatedly emphasized their efforts to "get to know" colleagues in ways that surpassed previous limitations. Descriptions of "seeing colleagues in a different light" resonated throughout the narratives, signaling a departure from the boxed understanding imposed by roles and titles within the confines of an organizational context. This richer comprehension extended beyond work-related facets, as organizational members strived to appreciate the multi-dimensionality of their colleagues' lives, interests, and aspirations. Instances where people openly shared their vulnerabilities and personal stories became evident, highlighting the empathetic interactions present in the personizing encounter. These behaviors revealed a deeper level of relationships, reflecting the ways organizational members in this encounter strived to

move beyond objectifying and emergent interactions. This shift aimed to cultivate genuine interactions by prioritizing understanding and empathy.

4.4.3 Transcendent encounter

The last and the richest level within the continuum of human encounter is *transcendent* encounter. In the transcendent encounter, interactions take on a transformative quality that transcends the boundaries of conventional work relationships. The primary interpersonal behavioral schema is *co-creating*, signifying the most radical departure from mere task-oriented interactions in the objectifying exchange. Organizational members engage with one another as co-creating partners, not just to complete specific assignments but to jointly generate new ideas, perspectives, and possibilities. This co-creating essence was evident in the data, with informants sharing their experiences of forming friendships and bonds that resembled a sense of love within the organizational context. A distinctive trait of the transcendent encounter is the shift in the ways organizational members listen and communicate. They speak of asking different, often more profound questions that go beyond the surface level, revealing a shared commitment to exploring deeper aspects of their colleagues' lives and experiences. This process of co-creating fosters a sense of community, where the boundaries between personal and professional spheres blur, creating a space where organizational members actively contribute to one another's growth and well-being. This way, in the relational state of transcendent encounter, interactions among organizational members are characterized by a notable lack of felt psychological distance. Here, the boundaries between self and other blur as a collective sense of purpose emerges, fostering an atmosphere of mutual inspiration, collaboration, and a shared journey towards a higher ideal. Transcendent encounter is characterized by their ability to evoke a sense of awe and a shared

commitment to a purpose greater than the sum of individual aspirations. This level within the continuum of human encounter signifies the pinnacle of human relationality in the organizational context, a space where co-creation and interconnectedness flourish.

4.5 Summary of key insights and puzzles

The empirical exploration undertaken in this chapter breathes life into our comprehension of human encounter accumulated so far by delving into people's real life experiences of human relationality within a workplace setting.

The central empirical findings of this chapter reveal that human encounter unfolds along a continuum, exhibiting varying levels of depth and intensity. This discovery resonates with an insight derived from previous literature review, which depicted human encounter as a gradient experience. Notably, the continuum and different levels of human encounter experience empirically identified within it encompass key aspects of human encounter we have explored throughout this dissertation. These aspects include acknowledging the life and humanity in others, understanding people on their own terms and transcending personal boundaries. This alignment underscores how the insights accumulated throughout the dissertation journey converge to offer a profound understanding of what human encounter entails and how it manifests within workplace dynamics.

In addition to the central empirical finding, this investigation importantly confirms again that human relationality transcends mere actuality; it thrives within the realm of possibility. Through firsthand accounts from people within organizational contexts, the interplay between the actual and the potential aspects of human relationality became tangible and vivid. This

empirical exploration uncovered numerous layers of this interplay, offering new insights and puzzles surrounding human encounter.

One significant revelation from this investigation is the innate longing for human encounter present among organizational members. While some participants explicitly distanced themselves from interpersonal interactions at work, viewing the professional domain as distinct from the personal, the majority expressed a longing for such opportunities. However, many also indicated feeling constrained in embracing and honoring this longing, perceiving the workplace as an inappropriate setting for socialization. Through these accounts, I could not ignore the profound coexistence of actuality and possibility of human relationality, reaffirming the belief that disregarding the potentiality of human relationality is ultimately futile.

Another significant revelation from this investigation is the realization of how unlikely, or even impossible, it is to experience genuine human encounter in a typical working setting. Despite my eagerness to understand and learn about human encounter at work, I now ironically recognize how rare such experiences are, particularly within the natural flow of daily work life. Indeed, insights derived from the literature review emphasize the importance of a structured space to facilitate human encounter. However, beyond the significance of a structured environment, I also observed how the pervasive culture of busyness and self-absorption acts as a formidable barrier to human encounter within organizational settings.

In contemporary society, busyness is not only prevalent but often regarded as a badge of honor. However, the current investigation, along with my own lived experience detailed in Chapter 2, underscores that busyness poses a significant obstacle to human encounter. To truly experience human encounter, it is necessary to pause and set aside the constant demands of busyness. When consumed by busyness, genuine encounter finds no place in our lives.

Throughout the dissertation, we have explored how self-absorption also acts as a barrier to human encounter. This empirical investigation reaffirms the rarity of genuine encounter in workplace settings, where individual self-interest is often prioritized and intensified. The prevailing norms of self-promotion and competition within the workplace highlight the challenges of experiencing authentic human relationality in organizational contexts while emphasizing the significance of contemplating the potentiality of human relationality to transcend these current constraints.

Furthermore, my empirical investigation reiterated the elusive and inarticulate nature of human encounter experiences. When participants were prompted to share their encounter experience with others, I observed their frustration in attempting to articulate these experiences. Many expressed sentiments such as, "I don't know how to describe it, but I know it happened." Others paused, searching for the right words but ultimately failed to capture the essence of their encounter experience. These observations reaffirmed the universal challenge of expressing and communicating human encounter experiences.

Finally, I witnessed how the vastness of encounter experiences humbled those who underwent them. It was particularly impactful when some informants initially felt confident in their belief that they knew their colleagues well and were effectively collaborating as a team. However, during the interviews, these same informants shared a newfound recognition of the infinite layers possible for understanding others. They acknowledged that the process of truly knowing someone is never complete, even for those they believed they knew thoroughly. This realization revealed the humbling nature of encounter experiences, reminding their participants of their endless possibilities.

Table 4.3 Interviewee list

Transcript ID	Company	Industry	Pseudonym	Gender	Org Tenure (years)
4	Group 1: FoodCo	Food services	Emily	F	1
5			Olivia	F	1.5
6			Ava	F	0.75
7			James	M	7
8			Sophia	F	10
9			Mia	F	4
10			Charlotte	F	14
11			Amelia	F	N/A
12			Harper	F	7
13			Evelyn	F	8
14			John	M	20
15			Abigail	F	5
16			Ella	F	12
17			Scarlett	F	4.5
18			Robert	M	2
19			Michael	M	12
258	Group 2: BearCo	Manufacturing	William	M	N/A
259			Grace	F	20
260			Benjamin	M	4
261			Lily	F	N/A
262, 270			Chloe	F	11
263, 271, 277, 285			Zoey	F	21
264			Ara	F	29
265			Joseph	M	26
266			Layla	F	3
267			Riley	F	3
268			Lucy	F	17
269			Daniel	M	2
272			Nora	F	22
273, 288			Hazel	F	6
274, 280			Aurora	F	2
275			Christopher	M	2
276			Violet	F	7
278			Andrew	M	N/A
279, 287			Sharon	F	23
281			Joshua	M	25
282			Nicholas	M	6
283			Ethan	M	23
284			Clara	F	1
286			Lillian	F	0.5
227	Group 3: PowerCo	Manufacturing	Nathan	M	7
228, 234			Anthony	M	2

235			**Brandon**	M	11
229			**Justin**	M	N/A
236			**Kevin**	M	6
237			**Hannah**	F	3.5
230			**Eleanor**	F	1.5
238			**Eric**	M	3
239			**Sarah**	F	2.5
231, 240			**Brian**	M	4
232. 241			**Adam**	M	8.5
233			**Natalie**	F	1

Table 4.4 Continuum of human encounter at work

		Description	Primary interpersonal behavioral schema	Manifestations in Data	Felt psychological distance
Human Encounter	**Transcendent**	Engage with one another to co-create new possibilities	Co-creating	• Forming friendship and a sense of love • Asking profound questions • Listening empathetically • Less self-consciousness • Emerging sense of community and purpose	(Almost) Non-existent
	Personizing	Get to know one another beyond role or title	Understanding Personizing Empathizing	• Moving away from stereotypes based on roles and titles • Appreciating multi-dimensionality of colleagues' lives, interests, aspirations	Low
	Emergent	Begin to notice and acknowledge one another's human presence	Noticing Acknowledging	• Expressing gestures of personal acknowledgement • Inviting casual conversations • Extending into more non-work, casual contexts	Medium
Objectifying Exchange		Organizational members approach interactions with a focus on extracting utility or functional value	Utilizing	• Lack of simple greeting or personal acknowledgement • Purposefully averting eye contact • Minimizing non-essential engagement • Having only technical conversations on task-related matters	High

Chapter 5 Final Thoughts on Human Encounter at Work

When you know how to die, you know how to live.

- Mitch Albom, author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*

Writing this final chapter feels like practicing how to die as it compels me to reflect deeply on the words I would like to leave this dissertation with. As Mitch Albom, the author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, said as above, I hope this last chapter will provoke within me, and hopefully my readers, some thoughts on how to live. In this final chapter, I bring together the insights learned so far from my inquiries into human encounter in this dissertation and provide further reflections on the topic.

5.1 Inarticulability of human encounter

In this final chapter, I feel compelled to revisit the inarticulable nature of human encounter, an indispensable quality I have alluded to throughout this dissertation. Early in my journey to explore human encounter, as mentioned in Chapter 1, I sensed that this phenomenon pertains to a metaphysical quality. Initially, I tried to reject this reality, believing it to be fundamentally at odds with a social scientific way of thinking and knowing. However, over time, I came to accept and humbly submit to the metaphysical and spiritual dimensions of what I was trying to understand.

Intrigued by what makes human encounter so elusive, I have questioned throughout my dissertation journey whether human encounter can truly be known and understood. My answer at this end of the current dissertation journey is both yes and no. Yes, human encounter can be understood when it reveals itself to us, but no in the sense that its vastness exceeds our capacity for full comprehension and articulation. Its scope is immense, beyond what we can fully grasp, and its sacredness resists any attempt to conquer it. In this sense, to try to conquer it is not only futile but also presumptuous. For much of my dissertation journey, I found this elusiveness and inarticulability deeply frustrating to say the least. However, as I let go of my desire to conquer it, I began to see that the possibility of human encounter as a metaphysical reality is omnipresent yet hidden to those who are not attuned to perceive it. It is an elusive and mysterious reality, but it is the most real kind of reality that we can experience.

Despite the inarticulability of human encounter, my years of work have finally allowed me to convey some insights about it, which I will present in the remainder of this chapter. In respecting the ineffable nature of human encounter, I intend to use my language lightly and openly, refraining from trying to confine this concept into a form I can readily manage. To do otherwise would be to violate its vastness and sacredness, which I have learned to respect.

5.2 Still, some thoughts on human encounter

5.2.1 On multiple descriptions of human encounter

In my efforts to navigate the inarticulable nature of human encounter, I have included its multiple descriptions and definitions throughout this dissertation, some drawn from others' words and some offered by myself. Table 5.1 below summarizes the descriptions and definitions of human encounter presented throughout the dissertation.

Table 5.1 Summary of definitions and descriptions of human encounter

Definition #	Chapter #	Definition and description	Source
Definitions and descriptions from external source			
1	Chapter 1	The act of recognizing something–a person, a practice, a system–on its own terms in which "the particular character and wholeness of the other is acknowledged	Fleming (2016)
2	Chapter 1	The experience of not being alone	Fleming (2016)
3	Chapter 1	Encountering means really meeting something in a way that goes beyond one's intellectual process	Encountering another being (October, 2017)
4	Chapter 1	Encounter is when that conceptual structure vanishes. And you actually meet the being, as the being coming forth from itself as itself, revealing itself to you in a way that's beyond your intellect	Encountering another being (October, 2017)
5	Chapter 3	A state of profound contact and engagement between people that is characterized by genuineness, empathy, openness and mutuality	Mearns & Cooper (2017)
Definitions and descriptions generated by the author of the dissertation			
6	Chapter 3	A profound meeting in humanity, marked by recognition and appreciation of collective belonging to a greater whole	Generated by the author of the dissertation
7	Chapter 5	A form of genuine relational experience in which organizational members engage with one another in their humanity	Generated by the author of the dissertation

These varied descriptions listed in Table 5.1 above not only reflect the challenge of articulating the inarticulable but also illustrate my own journey of evolving and deepening my understanding of human encounter as I progressed through each chapter. For instance, Chapter 1 contains my early thoughts on human encounter, which evolved as I continued writing subsequent chapters, culminating in the most mature reflections in this final chapter.

In Chapter 1, I introduced the concept of human encounter by borrowing from external sources. I began with the words of Stephen Harding, an ecologist who recounted his experience of encountering a muntjac deer: "Encountering means *really meeting something* in a way that goes beyond one's intellectual process" (Encountering another being, October 2017).

This description resonated with me deeply, particularly the phrase *"really* meeting something," which suggested that we rarely meet anyone or anything truly. This idea intrigued me: What does it mean to not meet anyone or anything in a real sense? Although I could not fully articulate it at the time, the idea that we rarely meet anyone in a true sense resonated with my own life experiences and struggles, which I detailed in the autoethnographic essay in Chapter 2.

What I found also fascinating was that Harding's description also hinted at what obstructs encounter. In his quote introduced in Chapter 1, he continued: "Encountering means really meeting something in a way that *goes beyond one's intellectual process*… Encounter is when [the] *conceptual structure vanishes*" (Encountering another being, October 2017). This phrase sounded profoundly important because it seemed to suggest that we often do not meet anyone or anything truly because we construct conceptual ideas about them that may not reflect their true essence. This insight was pivotal early in my dissertation journey: We think we meet someone, but we only interact with our constructed ideas about them. This critical insight was further bolstered when writing Chapter 3, in which I introduced and reviewed Martin Buber's distinctions between I-It and I-Thou relations. Buber's distinction of these two different modes of relationality helped me understand that an I-Thou relation represents truly meeting someone—encounter—whereas an I-It relation, which characterizes most of our daily interactions, involves treating others as impersonal objects. Here, the word "object" loomed significant as I tried to understand what human encounter is in relation to what it is not. Reflecting on Harding's description of human encounter, I realized that creating conceptual ideas about a person and interacting through these constructs is akin to treating others as impersonal objects since this way of engaging with others is removed from the essence that makes them persons. From this

realization, I derived a pivotal insight that objectification as the antithesis of human encounter sheds light on what human encounter is by contrast.

I now understand that this contrasting approach was something that naturally emerged in the process of exploring what human encounter is as its vastness and sacredness does not allow itself to be directly known to us and it can also be best understood in the contrasting form. It is as the presence of light can only fully be sensed and appreciated when there is a presence of darkness. This contrast is presented in each chapter: Chapter 2 contrasts my experiences of human encounter with its desperate absence; Chapter 3 juxtaposes the description of human encounter with that of exchange relations on Aristotle's four-fold causes (summarized in Table 3.1 on page 53); and Chapter 4 presents a continuum of human encounter experience along with that of objectifying exchange (summarized in Table 4.4 on page 142).

5.2.2 Final description of human encounter at work

Having guided my readers through the fundamental inarticulability of human encounter (and its resulting elusiveness)—which I consider one of the most important discoveries about human relationality made in this dissertation—and my persistent search to understand it despite its elusive nature, I now feel compelled to convey the insights about human encounter accumulated and synthesized through an autoethnography, a literature review, and an empirical investigation. Even though I do not intend to operationalize human encounter in a rigid and scientific manner, the descriptions provided below reflect my most mature thoughts on the subject.

My dissertation uncovered two qualitatively distinct relational states observed within the organizational context: Objectifying exchange and human encounter. I define objectifying

exchange as a form of pseudo-relational experience in which organizational members treat one another as impersonal objects. Human encounter, defined as a form of genuine relational experience in which organizational members engage with one another in their humanity, stands in stark contrast to the more impersonal nature of objectifying exchange. While objectifying exchange is a prevalent relational state in organizational dynamics, human encounter is a rarer but deeply resonant form; I found that the ephemeral and enchanting qualities of human encounter hold a profound appeal for organizational members, often existing beyond explicit articulation. An exploration of these two relational states begins with understanding how they differ, in particular 1) why people relate; 2) how people see one another; and 3) how people interact in each of these relational states. Table 5.2 below summarizes these differences between objectifying exchange and human encounter, which are explained in detail in the rest of this section.

Table 5.2 Nature of human encounter in contrast to objectifying exchange

	Objectifying Exchange	**Human Encounter**
Definition	A form of pseudo-relational experience in which organizational members treat one another as impersonal objects	A form of genuine relational experience in which organizational members engage with one another in their humanity
Why People Relate	Utilitarian **Primary motive**: self-interest	Transcendent **Primary motive**: a sense of interconnectedness
How People See One Another	**Perspective**: Reductionist & categorizing lens **Portray partners as**: Predictable & manipulable impersonal entities (e.g., instruments, roles, functions)	**Perspective**: Holistic & appreciative lens **Portray partners as**: Beings with intrinsic humanity of an infinite magnitude (e.g., persons)

How People Interact	**Interaction orientation**: Task-oriented Goal-driven Efficiency-focused **Attitudinal approach to interaction**: Indifference Closed-minded Defensiveness	**Interaction orientation**: Relationally-oriented Process-driven Mutuality-focused **Attitudinal approach to interaction**: Curiosity Openness Vulnerability

5.2.2.1 Why people relate

First and foremost, people enter into objectifying exchange and human encounter for different reasons. These reasons capture the underlying mindset and intentions that guide their interactions and responses within the workplace. We can think of these mindsets and intentions as the lens through which they interpret their surroundings, make decisions, and navigate their interpersonal engagements.

In the objectifying exchange relational state, organizational members relate primarily for utilitarian reasons. They prioritize self-interest in their interactions and concern themselves primarily with maximizing their own interests, personal gains, and outcomes. They do so often at the expense of others and without necessarily considering the broader relational or emotional dimensions. In this way, they may approach their colleagues, tasks, and responsibilities with a focus on achieving predefined objectives, often at the expense of deeper connections or understanding.

On the other hand, in the human encounter relational state, organizational members relate for no other reason than to be with one another. Unlike the utilitarian relating above, which centers on narrow self-interested motives, this relating sets aside all functional or instrumental considerations and is marked by a heightened sense of interconnectedness. In this relating, organizational members do not see themselves as autonomous and distinct, but see themselves

and others as a greater whole. This perspective transcends immediate goals and objectives, inviting a more expansive understanding of the human experience.

5.2.2.2 How people see one another

Because people's underlying motivations are different, they see one another differently in the two relational states. In the objectifying exchange, people see one another simply as objects and without appreciation for one another's personhood. Sandelands (2017a, 2017b) describes this way of perceiving as *seeing people as objects*, where people regard others idealistically, with preconceived ideas already in mind. In effect, in this way of seeing, they reduce one another to mere instruments or roles within the organizational machinery. The emphasis on utilitarian objectives perpetuates this objectification, emphasizing the value of others primarily in terms of their functional contributions. Consequently, understanding of the interaction partners often becomes fixed in the narrow confines of their assigned categories, such as their work roles, titles, positions, and statuses in the organizational hierarchy and structure. This categorization fosters a boxed understanding of others, simplifying the complexity and the infinite magnitude of their being and rendering them into predictable and manipulable entities. Stereotyping becomes an unintended byproduct of this categorization, as interaction partners are often perceived through the lens of their organizational labels, hindering a genuine appreciation of their multifaceted humanity. Notably, there is a sense of psychological (and existential) detachment involved among interaction partners.

In stark contrast, in the relational state of human encounter, interactional partners are portrayed in a vastly different light—one that transcends reductionism and embraces the richness of their personhood. In contrast to seeing people as objects, Sandelands (2017a, 2017b) refers to this way of relating as *beholding people in being*, where people "regard [others] realistically by

taking them into themselves, allowing themselves to be conformed to them, and discerning the beings that they are. It is to hold their being to our own and experience them in the oneness of our body and mind" (2017a, p. 3). In this way of beholding, interaction partners are seen and embraced as holistic beings with unique experiences, emotions, and perspectives, unfettered by rigid roles or preconceived categories. Personhood takes center stage, as the emphasis shifts from instrumental utility to a holistic appreciation of each person's experiences, emotions, and aspirations. This portrayal is not confined to the visible surface; it delves into the depths of shared humanity. Importantly, there is a sense of self-transcendence that arises, blurring the lines between self and other. The emerging narrative is not merely "you" and "me," but a nuanced and evolving sense of "we."

5.2.2.3 How people interact

As people have different purposes and see one another differently in objectifying exchange and human encounter, people interact differently in these relational states. First, within the objectifying exchange relational state, interpersonal interactions are primarily shaped by *task-oriented*, *goal-driven* and *efficiency-focused* dynamics. Organizational members engage with one another with a specific goal in mind, often driven by the desire to complete a task, exchange resources, or achieve a predetermined outcome. These interactions are inherently utilitarian, emphasizing the efficient allocation of resources and the accomplishment of functional objectives. Participants approach these interactions as means to an end, with a primary focus on optimizing outcomes and minimizing time and effort expenditure. In the objectifying exchange relational state, communication tends to be straightforward and concise, aimed at conveying information relevant to the task at hand. As the primary concern is achieving the desired result, the relational dimensions often take a back seat. As such, organizational members may interact

primarily to exchange information, coordinate activities, or make decisions. The depth of interpersonal interaction is thus often limited to the scope of the task, and the interactions lack a sustained focus on building deeper connections or understanding the perspectives and emotions of others.

The interactions in the objectifying exchange paradigm are further characterized by *indifference*, *closed-mindedness* and *defensiveness*. The utilitarian orientation that prioritizes self-interests often manifests as indifference, where organizational members tend to overlook the concerns or aspirations of others if they do not align with their immediate goals. Moreover, this focus on self-interest reinforces a closed-minded approach, as organizational members are more inclined to dismiss viewpoints that do not directly serve their personal objectives. Furthermore, a utilitarian motive breeds defensiveness, a manifestation of safeguarding one's self-interest, and hampers open engagement by shielding oneself against vulnerability and preventing the potential for genuine interactions.

In contrast, interactions within the human encounter paradigm are *relationally-oriented*, *process-driven* and *mutuality-focused*. Rather than being solely focused on task completion, organizational members engage in interactions with an inherent interest in understanding and connecting with one another on a personal and human level. These interactions prioritize the richness of the relational process itself, emphasizing mutual understanding, shared experiences, and the exploration of shared meaning. As the interactions in the human encounter paradigm are more relationally-oriented, process-driven and mutuality-focused, organizational members invest time and attention in the unfolding conversation, valuing the exchange of perspectives, emotions, and personal narratives. The goal is not merely to accomplish a task, but to engage in a meaningful interaction that fosters a sense of shared humanity and interconnectedness. This

mutual focus on building relationships serves as a catalyst for building trust, empathy, and a sense of belonging among colleagues.

Interactions in the human encounter paradigm take on a transcendent quality, a radical leap from the realm of objectifying exchange. As such, *curiosity* replaces indifference, as organizational members become genuinely interested in the stories, experiences, and aspirations of their colleagues. *Openness* prevails over close-mindedness, encouraging a willingness to explore diverse viewpoints and engage in meaningful dialogues. *Vulnerability* replaces defensiveness, fostering an environment where authenticity and shared struggles are embraced. Overall, the interactions in this paradigm exhibit a sense of transcendence, where organizational members move beyond the limitations of utility-driven exchanges to engage in conversations that touch upon deeper aspects of human existence. Ultimately, human encounter invites organizational members to rise above the mundane and engage with one another in a manner that reflects a shared journey of discovery, growth, and mutual elevation.

In sum, people enter upon the objectifying exchange and human encounter relational states with different purposes, see one another in different terms, and interact with one another in different ways. The objectifying exchange relational state is utilitarian, driven by self-interest, oriented to task, and focused on efficiency. The interactions in this relational state are marked by indifference, closed-mindedness and defensiveness. Interaction partners are portrayed as objectified instruments devoid of personhood. This results in psychological and existential distance among organizational members and a lack of genuine and meaningful interactions. In contrast, the human encounter relational state embodies a self-transcendent state of being, characterized by a heightened sense of interconnectedness, and interpersonal interactions are primarily relationally-oriented, process-driven and mutuality-focused. The interactions in this

relational state are marked by curiosity, openness and vulnerability. Interaction partners are portrayed as beings with intrinsic humanity. Notably, when interaction partners are described, there is an emerging sense of "we," transcending the boundaries of individual roles and categories.

5.3 Contributions to management scholarship

The most significant contribution of this dissertation to management scholarship is its invitation to consider the metaphysical and spiritual dimensions of human existence and relationality in the workplace. Through an autoethnographic essay, an extensive literature review beyond the field of management, and a qualitative, inductive empirical investigation, my research reveals that acknowledging both the potentiality and actuality of human existence in organizational contexts leads to meaningful discoveries. This research identified qualitatively distinct relational states in organizational settings—objectifying exchange and human encounter—and highlighted that human encounter is the only real and substantial way of relating despite its inarticulable and elusive nature. These findings suggest that human existence and relationality encompass metaphysical and spiritual aspects that traditional social scientific approaches do not fully capture. The current dissertation underscores the importance of not only synthesizing existing literature but also encouraging an open inquiry that considers the metaphysical dimensions of human existence beyond conventional social scientific paradigms. Such an approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of human relationality in the workplace, encompassing both tangible and intangible dimensions.

Aside from the current dissertation's contribution to the field at a meta-level, it also contributes to the specific research literature within the management scholarship. First, the

current research contributes to the scholarly discourse on workplace objectification. Existing research in this area highlights how objectification—as a form of interpersonal perception—brings about negative consequences at the levels of individual (e,g,, Baldissarri et al., 2014; Bastian & Haslam, 2011; Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2019; Caesens et al., 2017; Poon et al., 2020; Zhang et al, 2017) and organization (e.g., Ahmed & Khan, 2016; Bell & Khoury, 2016; Belmi & Schroeder, 2021; Caesens et al., 2017, 2018). The current research deepens our understanding of how an objectifying interpersonal perception manifests at an interpersonal level. Centralizing the inquiry into the motives and dynamics that govern human interactions, the current dissertation illuminates that when organizational members harbor an objectifying interpersonal perception, their engagements with others revolve around utilitarian motives driven by self-interest and their interactions predominantly assume a task-oriented, goal-driven, and efficiency-focused character. By elucidating how an objectifying interpersonal perception shapes interactional dynamics, this research not only deepens our understanding of interpersonal phenomena that pervade contemporary workplaces, such as diminishing senses of belonging (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021) and increased workplace loneliness (Murthy, 2017; Wright & Silard, 2021), but also casts light on prospective interpersonal mechanisms that underlie the link between objectification and its consequences at individual and organizational levels.

The current research also contributes to the scholarly discourse on humanization. Prior research in this area highlights that humanization—as a form of interpersonal perception—is consequential for interpersonal interactions (Hardin, 2024; Gray et al., 2007). However, a systematic understanding of the underlying mechanisms facilitating such positive changes in interactional dynamics, particularly within organizational contexts, remains significantly under-explored. The current research deepens our understanding of this mechanism, particularly

showing why and how organizational members relate with others when holding an appreciative interpersonal perception. The current study suggests that when organizational members hold an appreciative interpersonal perception, their engagements with others are likely to rest on transcendent motives rooted in interconnectedness, and their interactions are likely be relationally-oriented, process-driven, and focused on mutuality. Furthermore, the current dissertation deepens our understanding of varying levels of humanization that occur in the organizational context and their implications for interpersonal interactions. The continuum of human encounter discovered in the current research proposes that organizational members may engage in varying degrees of humanization of others at work, which is in turn associated with varying depth of interpersonal interactions and engagement.

Moreover, the present research contributes to the literature on positive relationships at work and high-quality connections in two important ways. First, it suggests that the life-giving quality of high-quality connections may stem from the potentiality of relationality that embraces the metaphysical reality of human existence. By recognizing the metaphysical aspects of human existence, such as spirituality, interconnectedness and existential meaning, my dissertation acknowledges that human relationality transcends mere physical interactions. This perspective implies that genuine relationality has the capacity to tap into a transcendent source of vitality and meaning, which enriches the human experience and fosters a sense of aliveness. Thus, by embracing the potentiality of relationality that encompasses the metaphysical reality of human existence, my dissertation recognizes that the life-giving quality of high-quality connections emerges from their alignment with deeper truths and higher aspects of being. Second, by highlighting how human encounter fundamentally diverges from objectifying exchange in terms of why organizational members relate, how they see one another and how they interact, the

current dissertation offers a more intricate and refined insight into the nature and the essence of positive relationships at work and the what and the how of high-quality connections.

5.4 Reflections on human encounter

5.4.1 Reflection on objectification

As I approach the conclusion of my dissertation, I want to emphasize that understanding human encounter requires taking seriously the problem of objectification. Objectification is a broader phenomenon than we often realize, extending far beyond its most severe and extreme forms. Many people assume that objectification only occurs in obvious and egregious scenarios, such as sexual harassment or exploitation. However, the insights gained through this dissertation demonstrate that we frequently engage in subtler forms of objectification in our daily interactions with those around us, regardless of the context.

Examples of this are plentiful. My autoethnographic essay in Chapter 2 highlighted my own experience with self-objectification in the process of prioritizing achieving successful performance. The chapter also illustrated that we even unwittingly objectify family members by reducing them to the roles they play in our lives. This included viewing a spouse merely as a partner who provides certain comforts or seeing a child as a source of pride or worry. I want to say it is not by our conscious choice when it comes to these subtler forms of objectification; we do not intentionally decide to objectify others, but we just so easily slip into this state of interacting with others. In Chapter 4, I described numerous incidents where the informants from my empirical research setting felt reduced to mere “emails” or robotic functions in their interactions at work. Beyond these examples presented in the dissertation, objectification permeates many areas of our lives. A physician might see patients primarily as a collection of

symptoms to diagnose and treat. A politician might view constituents merely as votes to secure or as means to achieve policy goals. A teacher might see students as grades or test scores. And the list goes on.

My dissertation journey taught me that objectification is closer to our daily lives than we often realize, infiltrating many aspects of our daily interactions. It is pervasive and insidious.

5.4.2 Reflection on civility

Because objectification is a form of incivility, we might naturally assume that civility is what we need to cure the problem of prevalent objectification. Of course, most would agree that civility is beneficial for individuals and society. However, the insights I have gained from this dissertation journey reveal that civility does not necessarily fix the problem of objectification; it does not get us to where we truly need to reach. In fact, I would suggest the provocative idea that certain forms of civility can fall under the scope of objectification when it becomes a rigid set of superficial behaviors. Civility typically focuses on adhering to social norms, maintaining decorum and avoiding conflict. It can involve polite gestures, formalities, and surface-level politeness. While these behaviors are important for establishing a baseline of respect in social interactions, they may not necessarily cure the disease of rampant objectification.

In fact, civility can sometimes perpetuate objectification. Imagine a workplace scenario in which a manager consistently maintains a polite and civil demeanor with their subordinates. They use courteous language, follow proper protocols, and ensure that everyone adheres to the rules and regulations. On the surface, this may seem like a respectful and civil approach to management. However, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that the manager's interactions are primarily focused on maintaining control, enforcing compliance and preserving

their authority. The politeness and adherence to formalities serve as a facade, disguising a power dynamic that objectifies the employees. In this case, the manager is more concerned with maintaining a sense of order and control rather than genuinely engaging with the employees and understanding their needs, aspirations and unique contributions they make to the team.

Despite the outward appearance of civility, the manager's actions and behaviors still reflect an objectification of the employees, seeing them as objects to control. Their interactions prioritize maintaining the hierarchy and power structure, rather than fostering an environment of genuine engagement and mutual respect. Importantly, under these circumstances, the employees may feel reduced to mere roles or positions within the organization, lacking the opportunity to fully engage, participate or be valued for their humanity.

This example again illustrates how insidiously objectification infiltrates our daily interactions and how civility, in the form of maintaining surface-level decorum, niceties or politeness, does not free us from the problem of objectification. Human encounter, therefore, goes beyond the scope of civility. So then, what does it look like?

5.4.3 Reflection on love

Human encounter reaches its fullest expression in the realm of love. Love, in this context, is not limited to romantic affection but encompasses a broader, deeper sense of engagement. Where civility maintains a polite yet indifferent distance, love bridges that distance, creating a space where people can truly meet in their humanity.

Love transforms an interaction from objectification and mere politeness—as in the case of civility—to profound and genuine engagement. Under the realm of civility, the primary goal is to avoid conflict and ensure smooth social functioning. Love, on the other hand, seeks to truly

turn toward others. It involves a willingness to be vulnerable and to embrace the other person's vulnerability. It involves openness and curiosity towards others. It is about being truly present with and for others. It is simply about being.

Human encounter, at its core, is essentially about loving. It is through love that we can experience the fullness of humanity. It is love that we encounter.

5.5 Meta-reflection on objectifying human encounter

I want to conclude my dissertation by offering an apologetic confession: For the most part of my dissertation journey, my approach to studying encounter itself has been objectifying on multiple levels, failing to truly embody the essence of what I have been trying to understand. In this final section, I feel compelled to reflect on this paradox and the insights it has taught me on the nature of human encounter.

First, I was always impatient and self-absorbed in my approach to encounter. Throughout this dissertation, I have repeatedly mentioned my long-standing resistance or conscious neglect of the metaphysical quality of human encounter, the most defining attribute of it that I eventually came to respect. Frustrated by my inability to articulate its definition and boundaries, which I now understand to be an inevitable process, I tried desperately to capture, own and even conquer its essence rather than waiting for it to reveal itself to me. This impatience was aggravated by the pressure of academic timelines, a real issue for any doctoral student or researcher. Impatient to wait for the encounter to reveal itself, I imposed my own timeline, dictating that things should happen exactly when I thought they should. How presumptuous of me to have thought so! In my quest to define and own it in a way that suited my schedule, I feel as though I had committed a kind of violence against the concept.

At the same time, I now realize I often approached encounter with my own preconceived ideas, not fully open to its possibilities or vulnerable to its revelations. I see now that this objectification stemmed from a fear of the unknown. I felt the need to control and grasp it because staying in the zone of the unknown felt too scary to me. Objectifying encounter was a way to create an illusion of control, but it was only that—an illusion. True wisdom about encounter did not come through this approach.

This objectification occurred at every stage of the research process, from conducting the literature review to engaging with my data, theorizing and even writing. At each step, my focus was always on, "what am *I* going to see?" and "what am *I* going to say about this?" My self-absorbed focus on my own perspectives made me constantly anxious and fearful whenever I approached my work. This fixation on my own insights and statements hindered a genuine engagement with encounter.

Despite the fear and anxiety I felt before beginning my dissertation work each day, I found that when I actually engaged with the process of encountering encounter, I experienced moments of creative development that brought me joy and even a sense of awe. There were many instances when I had to admit, "I don't know how and where that thought came from" or "I don't know how and where that sentence came to me" during my writing process. This way, even when I approached encounter in an objectifying, self-absorbed way, encounter still patiently taught me its way, and I am grateful for that. Through this experience, I learned at yet another level that human encounter is about quieting our relentlessly loud ego and just listening—truly listening to the speaker in the dialogue, in this case, the encounter itself—rather than merely interrogating it for the sake of my own purposes and agendas.

Second, I realized that I constantly objectified human encounter by trying to encapsulate its essence in language, particularly scientific language. I realize now even the language we use to describe human encounter, no matter how inviting we try to be, inherently objectifies. Scientific language, in particular, turns a sacred, vast living spirit into a concept or an idea, which then becomes an object created in our minds. In this sense, I understand that conducting a social scientific study on any topic is inherently an objectifying way of knowing the world. As a student undergoing academic training to become a social scientific researcher, I felt pressured to frame human encounter in terms that social scientists could understand and relate to. In doing so, I realize I missed the mark entirely in truly encountering encounter by trying to be faithful to the social scientific approach.

My objectification of encounter was also driven by my motivation to publish my work on human encounter in a top-tier scholarly journal. Since entering the doctoral program, I received constant messages, both explicit and implicit, that publication in a top-tier journal is the currency of the academic world and thus essential for survival in the field. This pressure was real and constant, making me anxious and fearful all the time. This pressure exacerbated my impatience and frustration with the inarticulability and elusiveness of human encounter. The more fearful I became about this academic reality, the more driven I was to conquer the idea of human encounter and claim it as my own idea. In trying to claim and own something that does not belong to me, I objectified it and failed to truly encounter it. It was only when I decided to release the pressure of having to produce something publishable in a top-tier management journal that encounter began to reveal itself to me. Letting go of this pressure was a deeply transformative experience that taught me a different way of being in the world. This shift in

perspective led me to realize that in my attempt to utilize human encounter for my self-centered purposes, I had horribly objectified it and never truly encountered encounter.

If there is one insight I have learned about human encounter from this dissertation journey, it is this daunting realization: Encounter is elusive and it is not something we can achieve with our willful efforts. Rather, it is something that is graciously bestowed upon us as a gift when we relinquish the confines of our habitual selves. I admit that this process can be very scary at times. However, what I have learned in my own journey described so far is that human encounter is essentially about surrendering to the moment and opening ourselves to the possibility. And you become free in it. This has been a humbling journey, reminding me—and hopefully my readers—of our fundamental interconnectedness and the beauty of embracing the unknown.

This realization has been one of the greatest lessons from my dissertation journey. Despite writing over fifty thousand words in this dissertation over the years, I only recently began to feel like I am truly encountering encounter. Since then, it has started to teach me what it truly is in a completely new way. Above anything, I know it because peace resides in my heart more often when I think about it and when I write it. In this sense, this dissertation may only serve as a preface to this journey towards truly experiencing encounter.

5.6 What is there to life without encounter?

At the end of my dissertation journey, I am discovering that encounter is all I yearn for the rest of my life as I now truly believe encounter is what we are called to do while we are lucky enough to be alive on this Earth. This discovery leads me to write down a few words about what my engagement in this dissertation taught me on how to live.

First and foremost, I want to fully enjoy encountering my beloved family: my husband, my son, and the ever-expanding circles of my family. I yearn to be fully present in our ordinary moments, not just when urgent needs arise. I seek to cherish their presence in my life and to offer them the gift of my own presence in return. This way, I hope we all can learn the true essence of our being—a gift enjoyed in the simple act of being together.

Extending beyond the walls of my home, I also aspire to encounter my old and new friends and my neighbors anew. Equally significant is my desire to view my work realm as an opportunity for encountering my colleagues and students. I do not want the rest of my life to be about chasing after my own pursuits and success again to prove my self-worth and seek external validation, which has been an ache in my soul.

Instead, I want to keep encountering God, day and night, and hear from Him that I am beautiful and so we all are. I want to encounter Mother Nature more often, finding solace and joy in the beauty of every flower and bird that visits our little garden and embrace the interconnectedness of all living things. I long to learn even more how wise She is and how we are an inevitable part of Her wonder.

Above all else, I look forward to not making myself too busy so that I have physical, emotional and mental room for encounter. I do not want to live a life that is full of myself again. At the end of the day, I want to spend the rest of my life loving.

So here I end with a rhetorical question: What is there to life without encounter?

Appendices

Appendix A Examples of Books and Short Stories Read at Reflection Point

(*These examples and descriptions were provided by Reflection Point via email upon my request.)

Below is a list of our top **6 short stories** with descriptions of what happens in the story as well as the kinds of conversations they provoke. As you can see, they all bring up really important, human questions that are rich for discussion. But these stories are not the only stories we use by any stretch. We tailor the stories/books to the program.

(a) Dead Men's Path, Chinua Achebe
An eager new schoolmaster seeking to modernize his village school refuses to permit villagers to use an ancestral path on the school grounds. This story encourages conversation about the push and pull between tradition and innovation, the challenges of communicating between vastly different points of view, and the difficulty of wielding authority with sensitivity.

(b) The Color Master, Aimee Bender
Growing in role, an apprentice to an ailing color master meets increasingly difficult orders from an important customer. The story examines mentorship, succession, mastery and the struggle to achieve excellence in the face of emotions and ethical challenges.

(c) Kwoon, Charles Johnson
An experienced student challenges his young martial arts teacher at their kwoon in a struggling urban neighborhood. This story encourages conversation about what's required to be a good teacher or leader, how we can learn from the people we serve, how to recover from an exposure of weakness, and how to build trust and belonging.

(d) The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World, Gabriel Garcia Marquez
The body of a large, drowned man washes ashore in a small South American village. As they prepare to bury him, the townspeople begin to see their own village through his eyes and discover they have much more to give to their community than they realized. This story encourages us to explore the meaning of caring, responsibility, identity and community while also raising questions about inspiration and culture change.

(e) St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves, Karen Russell
This somewhat fantastical story is about human girls, previously raised by their werewolf parents, who are brought to a special home run by nuns to be educated and civilized. Both funny and poignant, it raises questions about mentoring, policy enforcement, assimilation and about what we lose when we join a new culture.

(f) The Hardware Man, John O'Hara
A young man becomes the owner of a hardware store where he worked for many years. In growing the business, he sets a new standard of competition that forever changes his own store and the other local store in town. The story tees up the human cost of commercial success and the lengths we go to win in competition, even over non-competitive rivals. It also raises questions of rewarding the loudest person in the room and asks us to consider the value of other forms and styles of contribution.

Below is a list of **6 representational books** we have used with the descriptions we use when we offer these books as a choice to a Reflection Point group. They represent a range of genres and deal with a number of different perspectives and themes. In book programs, we survey for genre preferences at the outset.

(a) The Color of Water, James McBride (non-fiction, memoir)
The Color of Water is a memoir on race and identity by the noted journalist, musician and novelist, James McBride. One of twelve children, he convinces his eccentric mother to tell the story of her past. In learning about Ruth McBride's upbringing as an Orthodox Jew, disowned by her family for marrying a Black man, James discovers not only who his mother is, but who he is as well. Ruth is tenacious, insisting that all her children get the best possible education, sending them to free cultural events and on long bus rides to the best possible schools. Growing up in the projects of Red Hook, Brooklyn, McBride shares his candid recollections of his own experiences as a mixed-race child of poverty, his flirtations with drugs and violence and his eventual self-realization and professional success. The Color of Water tees up discussions of race, identity and family, in inclusive and engaging ways.

(b) The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Rebecca Skloot (narrative nonfiction)
Lacks was a poor Southern tobacco farmer whose cells—taken without her knowledge or consent—became one of the most important tools in modern medicine. The first "immortal" HeLa cells grown in culture, are still alive today, and they are bought and sold by the billions, yet she remains virtually unknown, and her family can't afford health insurance. The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks captures the beauty and drama of scientific discovery, as well as its human consequences, as it explores the story of the Lacks family and their connection to the dark history of experimentation on African Americans. The book is a timely window into the inequality of American healthcare still playing out today.

(c) Never Let Me Go, Kazu Ishiguro (Dystopian Sci-Fi, fiction)
As children, Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy were students at Hailsham, an exclusive boarding school secluded in the English countryside. It was a place of mysterious rules where teachers were constantly reminding their charges of how special they were. Now, years later, the three have

reconnected and for the first time Kathy is looking back at their shared past to understand just what it is that makes them special. Although the novel deals with very real and relevant technological and psychological issues, Ishiguro does not write like a realist. The emotional element of Never Let Me Go makes it rich for discussion about childhood, privilege, love and more.

(d) A Gentleman in Moscow, Amor Towles (historical fiction)

In 1922, Count Alexander Rostov is deemed an unrepentant aristocrat by a Bolshevik tribunal, and is sentenced to house arrest in the Metropol, a grand hotel across the street from the Kremlin. From his small attic room, the Count attracts and cultivates a lively social circle including friends from his youth as well as selected residents, staff and customers of the hotel, all while some of the most tumultuous decades in Russian history are unfolding outside the hotel's doors. Unexpectedly, his reduced circumstances provide him entry into a much larger world of emotional discovery, including a magical view through the eyes of a child. Brimming with humor, and a glittering cast of characters, this singular novel casts a spell as it relates the count's endeavor to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be a man of Purpose.

(e) Widows of Malabar Hill, Sujata Massey (fiction, mystery)

Perveen Mistry, the daughter of a respected Zoroastrian family, has just joined her father's law firm, becoming one of the first female lawyers in India. With a legal education from Oxford, and a personal history that makes women's legal rights especially important to her, Perveen examines the will of a wealthy Muslim mill owner who left behind three widows. She notices all three of the wives have signed over their full inheritance to a charity. What will they live on? Perveen is suspicious and investigates the widows who live in full purdah—in strict seclusion, never leaving the women's quarters or speaking to any men. The situation escalates as she makes it her responsibility to figure out what really happened on Malabar Hill, and to ensure that no innocent women or children are in danger.

(f) Silver Sparrow, Tayari Jones (realist fiction)

"My father, James Witherspoon, is a bigamist," so begins a breathtaking story about a man's deception, a family's complicity, and two teenage girls caught in the middle. Set in a middle-class neighborhood in Atlanta in the 1980s, the novel revolves around James Witherspoon's two families—the public one and the secret one. When the daughters from each family meet and form a friendship, only one of them knows they are sisters. It is a relationship destined to explode when secrets are revealed and illusions shattered.

Appendix B Post-program Interview

(a) Interview invitation/recruiting email:

[Subject] Please sign up to tell us about your Reflection Point experience at [your organization]

Hello everyone,

Thank you so much for participating in Reflection Point.

Now that the program has ended we really want to hear from YOU!

[Executive director] and I will be conducting 1:1 phone conversations with anyone who is willing to share their feedback about the program. Regardless of how much or how little you were able to participate, ALL of your feedback is valuable to us. It is really important for us to know what Reflection Point is like for those experiencing it.

PICK A TIME
Please choose a 30 minute time slot in the google sheet linked below and one of us will call you on that day/time. Please provide:
-Your name
-Your email address
-Your phone number

[google spreadsheet link]

If you cannot make any of the offered times, please email me directly and I will work with you to find a suitable time that is good for your calendar.

Thank you so much and please feel free to reach out with questions or concerns!

(b) Post-program participant interview protocol used by Reflection Point:

- I'm definitely eager to hear your thoughts about the program, but before you tell me your thoughts about Reflection Point, can you just tell me a little bit about yourself? How long you've been X? What you do? Anything you'd like to tell me.

- So tell me about Reflection Point? What would you like me to know about your experience with Reflection Point?

- If you reflect back on the whole, all the sessions that you participated in, anything jump out at you as being particularly powerful or that has stuck with you?

- Did you know everyone around the table pretty well?

- Any surprises in things you learned about your colleagues or any surprises in interactions because of the fact that it's not the kind of conversations you normally have at work?

- Do you think it had an impact then when you went back to work on your mindset or on your workplace relationships or anything like that?

- Anybody you think you got to know better as a result of this that you might not have connected with the same way?

- Tell me about the professors. What was your sense of them? Were they helpful? Did they let you guys talk?

- Would you do it if we offered it again?

- How would you describe the program to a friend?

- This whole idea of bringing a group of people together to talk about something that really on its face doesn't have anything to do with work, what would you say, makes that good for the company to do if at all, for you guys to do?

- Is it beneficial to the company to be able to have people have that degree of comfort with each other?

- Anything else we should know about as we work to improve and refine the program?

Appendix C Follow-up Interview Protocol

Learning about the participant

- What do you do at [organization]?
- How long have you been here?
- How would you describe the culture where you work?

General experience with Reflection Point

- How did you hear about this program?
- What made you want to sign up? (For returning participants, what made you want to come back?)
- Tell me how Reflection Point went for you!
- How would you describe your Reflection Point experience in a couple of sentences?
    - And tell me more about that.
- What is Reflection Point to you?
- What is it like to spare an hour of your work time—and probably your busy time—every week and sit and talk to people in the room? Why would you want to do that?

How Reflection Point builds relationship

- Did you know anyone in the group before? If so, how did you get to know them?
- Do you work with any of them?
- How did the program help you get to know them better? Do you have any specific examples of the conversation or discussion that was particularly unforgettable or impactful to you?
- How does that learning (or better relationship) help you in general and also at work?
- What are other ways at work that you get to know each other better?
- Are there any other activities that you do at work that help you get to know each other better?
    - How is Reflection Point similar and different from those activities?
- How is this group different from other groups you have at work?
- Do you interact with people differently while you are at Reflection Point?
    - Or are you different?

Engagement with the book

- Did you get to read the books you voted for?
- How did you like reading them?
- What was your favorite book? And why?
- Did you identify with any of the characters in the book? Why?

More questions about Reflection Point

- Do you know anyone at work who considered signing up for the program but ended up not signing up? Why didn't they sign up?
- Do you ever talk about Reflection Point with those who are not in the program?

    - How do you get to talk about it with them?
    - What are their reactions?
- Do you feel like you've grown any way?
- Has it changed how you see your workplace? If so, in what way?
- Have you ever come to the meeting without finishing reading?
- How do you think your colleagues are seeing you because you are part of this book club?
- What do you think you will remember most about Reflection Point experience? And why?
- Is there anything else you wanted to share that you didn't get to share so far?

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